INTRODUCTION

ALAKA WALI

THE INSTALLATION OF *Native Truths: Our Voices Our Stories* represented a major departure from the normative practices of new exhibition creation at the Field Museum. The paradigm shift it represented had been years in the making. This book is both an account of the process of making the exhibition at an institution attempting to move past its colonial roots and an account of the diverse perspectives of Native Americans on fundamental concepts told through stories in the exhibition that deepen our understanding of the concerns, philosophies, and cultural practices of Native Americans today. The exhibition represented the first time that the Field Museum had systematically placed collaboration with the communities whose stories would be told at the center of the development and design process for an exhibition. Although there have been collaborations before, there had been nothing of this magnitude or depth. The collaborations started with an 11-member advisory committee and ultimately included over 130 artists, community members, Tribal historic preservation officers, and Tribal authorities from 105 Tribes and First Nations in the United States and Canada. This book brings together chapters and statements from the Advisory Committee members, many of the contributors to the stories told in the exhibition, and chapters from Field Museum staff on the ways the exhibition process changed practices at the Field Museum.

Antecedents to the Renovation of the Native North America Hall

Understanding the process of change at the Field Museum provides an opportunity to reflect on the factors that have influenced the trajectories of change in museum practices. It also provides the opportunity to reflect on the particularity of circumstances at the Field Museum that impacted its specific trajectory. To quote Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina:* "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." In other words, while all museums were finding pathways to change at a tumultuous time, each was doing it in a different way. Understanding the similarities of factors underlying change and the specificities of difference helps to illuminate the complexities of the challenge of changing institutions.

At the Field Museum, the changes that ultimately resulted in the transformation of the exhibition process used in creating *Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories* were incremental and episodic, stimulated both by individuals and by the forces of change that were impacting all museums. Although one might argue that change in museum practice has been a constant feature since these institutions came into being, museum scholars generally describe major changes as coming in waves. The first wave, sometimes dubbed the "new museology," began sometime in the 1960s, as civil rights protests in the United States and global struggles for independence from colonial regimes provoked museums to rethink their missions and offer more community-oriented programs and exhibitions and address current issues (Kreps 2020). During this time, the Field Museum undertook some innovative programming, such as the construction of the Pawnee Earth Lodge in collaboration with Pawnee elders (1971), and a major exhibition of Maori art (*Te Maori* in 1986), which was accompanied by the renovation of Ruatepupuke II with the collaboration of the Tokomaru Bay community (www.pacificanthropology.org/ruatepupuke-ii and cf. Mercurio, Hogan, and Garland 2019).

The second wave began sometime in the 1990s, when museums started confronting the reality of declining visitors, mounting protests from those who were being represented in displays without their direct involvement, and innovations in technologies of communication (Phillips 2007; Karp et al. 1991). Natural history museums also continued to expand their emphasis on addressing social and environmental concerns. In 1993, the Field Museum reached 100 years since its establishment, and the leadership, heeding the critiques that were emerging about museum "fossilization," and driven also by internal debates about how the Field Museum could distinguish itself from other major natural history museums, set forth a strategic plan that emphasized both elevating cross-disciplinary research and increasing the Museum's contributions to global concerns about protection for biological diversity and promoting cultural diversity. These two topics are the foundations of natural history disciplines within museums that contain biological and cultural collections. The new direction for the Field Museum led to the establishment of two initiatives to implement the more activist agenda and put the Museum's research expertise and collections to use (Boyd 2019; Wali 2015). The initiative for direct action on environmental conservation (Environment and Conservation Programs (ECP)) was led by Dr. Debra Moskovits, an ecologist who had been working in the Exhibitions Department. I was hired in 1994 to lead the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change (CCUC), focused on engaging local Chicago-based community organizations and promoting programs for bringing anthropological perspectives on cultural diversity to the Museum's audiences.

Similarly, there was a greater effort to engage local communities in the creation of exhibition content and educational programming (Boyd 2019, 205–09). The then-new Hall of Africa (opened in 1994), for example, included elements about the local Chicago African American community, and exhibition staff consulted both African Americans and African scholars in the development of the content. The Education Department initiated a number of innovative programs to reach local schools and under-resourced communities that had been historically excluded from Museum programs. In 1997, an exhibition titled *Living Together: Common Concerns, Different Responses* opened and featured stories from Chicago communities in tandem with stories from societies whose material culture was represented in the Museum's collections.

However, by the early 2000s, many of these efforts on the public side of the Museum were discontinued as the Museum faced budgetary problems due to the global economic recession and shifting priorities of a new administration. Exhibition programs focused more on efforts to bring in temporary exhibitions from other museums and "blockbusters" with the hope of increasing revenue. Although momentum was lost on the public side, efforts to increase collaboration and work toward environmental conservation and promoting cultural understanding continued. The two action-focused initiatives—ECP and CCUC—had successfully raised funds for programmatic work and outreach, and decided to join forces to better create synergies and focus efforts for greater impact. Between 2006 and 2010, the two units started to merge, and in 2006 they became "Environment, Culture and Conservation"—ECCO, a department within the Scientific Affairs Division. Eventually, Moskovits was successful in raising an endowment for ECCO, and a major gift led to the renaming of ECCO to the Keller Science Action Center (KSAC). The KSAC focused its efforts on building relationships with non-governmental organizations, including Indigenous organizations in the Northwestern Amazon region of South America and with Chicago-based community organizations to collaborate on environmental concerns (Wali 2016). Collaboration was at the core of KSAC's programmatic efforts. The actual staff of the Center was small, but through collaboration, the Center was able to effect transformative change for environmental protection and promoting greater inclusion of community voice to improve quality of life for the two regions (Wali et al. 2017). During this time as well, in 2010, I assumed curatorial responsibility for the North American collection. I brought collaborative approaches that I was using for research and programmatic efforts to my curatorial practice.

By 2012, the Museum's leadership had again changed, and under the new president a renewed interest was sparked in community engagement in the public museum. Curator John Terrell obtained a major grant to begin a co-curation project with Philippine scholars and community members both in the Philippines and in Chicago, which resulted in a website where Filipinos could provide information and stories about cultural items from the Museum's collection. An exhibition curated by Filipino scholars and artists was also installed. These types of experimental exhibitions co-curated with community representatives and artists were installed in small gallery spaces and were successful in attracting visitors and helping to build positive relationships with community organizations. Three of these experiments involved my working with contemporary Native American artists in installations housed in a 500-square-foot gallery named after a former president of the Museum—the Weber Gallery. This space was at the front of the old "Native North American Hall." As curator of the Native North American collection, I invited the artists to select pieces from the historical collection and incorporate them into an exhibition that featured their own works (Wali 2020). This strategy—weaving together the collections with contemporary work—opened the door to a different kind of collaboration, one in which living artists were empowered to develop and install exhibitions that reflected their relationship to the collection and

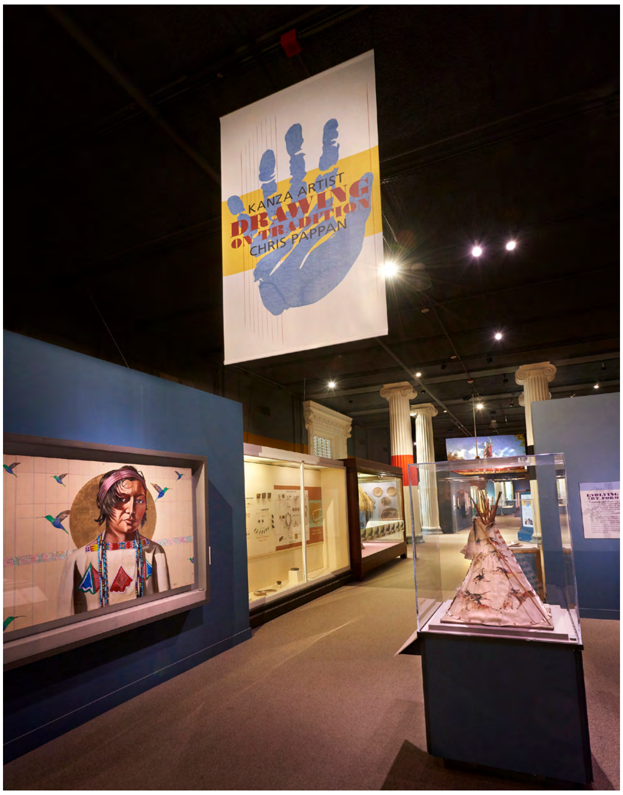

FIGURE 1 | *Chris Pappan: Drawing on Tradition*, 2016 | © The Field Museum, Photograph by John Weinstein, GN92360_128d

their own concerns about art, identity, and community. The Museum staff who worked with the Native American co-curators were intellectually and emotionally impacted by the collaboration.

One exhibition in particular, co-curated by Chris Pappan (Kanza and Osage), who calls himself a "21st century ledger artist," also had a significant impact on the Museum's administration. Pappan's exhibition, titled *Chris Pappan: Drawing on Tradition*, was installed as an intervention in the old North American Hall, rather than in the Weber Gallery, and brought direct attention to the deficiencies of the Hall, its inherent racism, and its dire neglect of the items on display (detailed in later chapters). The Museum leadership (especially the president), on seeing Pappan's exhibition, became convinced of the urgency of renovating this hall. The decision to undertake the renovation, in 2017, came at a time when the "third wave" of changing museum practice was well underway.

This third wave has elevated efforts to decolonize museum practice (Wali and Collins 2023). Since the early twenty-first century, museum practitioners and scholars of Museum Studies have been documenting the ways in which museums are changing curatorial and collections care practices to more equitably and expansively include perspectives and scholarship of descendants of source communities who have been historically excluded from responsibilities and authority in museums. At universities, there has been an expansion of Native American Studies departments, and there has been more visibility for contemporary Native American artists. This has created opportunities for more collaboration and inclusion of Native American scholarship and creativity in museums. Museums are also building stronger relationships with Tribal cultural experts, including Historic Preservation Officers and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (responsible for relations with governments) as well as knowledge-keepers. Furthermore, there has been an expansion of Tribal museums and cultural centers (Wali and Collins 2023). The Field Museum was thus well positioned to take advantage of these developments to build a deeper collaborative approach to the construction of the new Hall.

Construction of the New Hall

The Field Museum's administration approved the renovation of the Native North American Hall at the beginning of 2018, after a significant portion of the needed funds had been raised as part of a strategic campaign for overall endowment and programmatic expansion. According to then president, Richard Lariviere, the Museum was able to raise close to $15 million of the budgeted $17 million in record time. Under the leadership of Debra Moskovits, who had been promoted to Vice President of the Science and Education Division, a task force drawn from across all departments of the Museum had been meeting for two years prior to the "green light" for the exhibition to discuss how the renovation of the exhibition would impact the collections and whether funds could be raised to properly meet the needs of caring for the collection, including increased access for Native American community members, repatriation efforts, and collaborative conservation practices. I chaired the task force, which met monthly and discussed the priorities for investments. Each department identified specific needs and created a budget. For example, the Museum's Facilities Department determined that the HVAC infrastructure for the whole east side of the Museum would need to be renovated, the Repatriation Office realized that demands for repatriation would increase and requested more staff support, the Anthropology Collections Department investigated options for digitizing the collections and for supporting more heritage visits, and the Exhibitions Department calculated the cost of renovating the Hall, including complete deinstallation and new construction.

Ultimately, however, the Museum leadership determined that they would only be able to raise funds for the construction of the exhibition and set the budget at $17 million, which would include an endowment not just for the regular maintenance of the Hall, but for continually changing the content—a first for a permanent exhibition at the Field Museum. With the budget determined, the task force disbanded and the exhibition team took leadership of the project. There was a general consensus that if collaboration was to be central to the design and development of the exhibition, nothing could proceed until a Native American advisory committee was in place. Additionally, we made a commitment to hire more Native American staff in the Collections and Conservation Department, and, crucially, a community engagement coordinator. Fortunately, we were able to bring on Debra Yepa-Pappan (Jemez Pueblo and Korean) who had been volunteering with me since 2016 in this role. We also were able to hire a postdoctoral fellow (Meranda Roberts (Paiute and Chicana)) and a research scientist (Eli Suzukovich (Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa/Cree)) as "co-curators" to work on development of content. In this way, the new exhibition project led to the hiring of eight Native American staff at a time when none were present at the Field Museum. I worked with Dr. Helen Robbins, Director of Repatriation, and Debra Yepa-Pappan to create a potential pool of advisors from our existing networks of scholars, museum professionals, artists, and community leaders. Ultimately, we were able to form the committee with 11 members, many of whom are authors of chapters in this book. Their biographies are included in the Appendix.

The Advisory Committee held their first meeting in March of 2018 and agreed to a schedule of quarterly meetings of two days each. Over the course of that first year and a half, the discussions centered on selecting the main conceptual messages for the exhibition, how to structure the process of collaboration, and the physical design of the exhibition. Some of the key "guideposts" that emerged from these discussions were:

- The focus of the exhibition should be on the resilience and strength of Native American communities today—how they are addressing their concerns and the broader worldviews that have guided their actions. The exhibition could include accounts of historical traumas and injuries caused by the history of displacement and attempts at erasure by European settler populations, but only as necessary to explain the response to these efforts.
- The diversity of Native Americans should be made visible. The Advisory Committee recognized the need to counter the stereotypes of Native Americans—conveyed in media portrayals, educational curricula, and old museum representations—that all Native Americans were "the same" (mostly based on images of Plains Tribes).

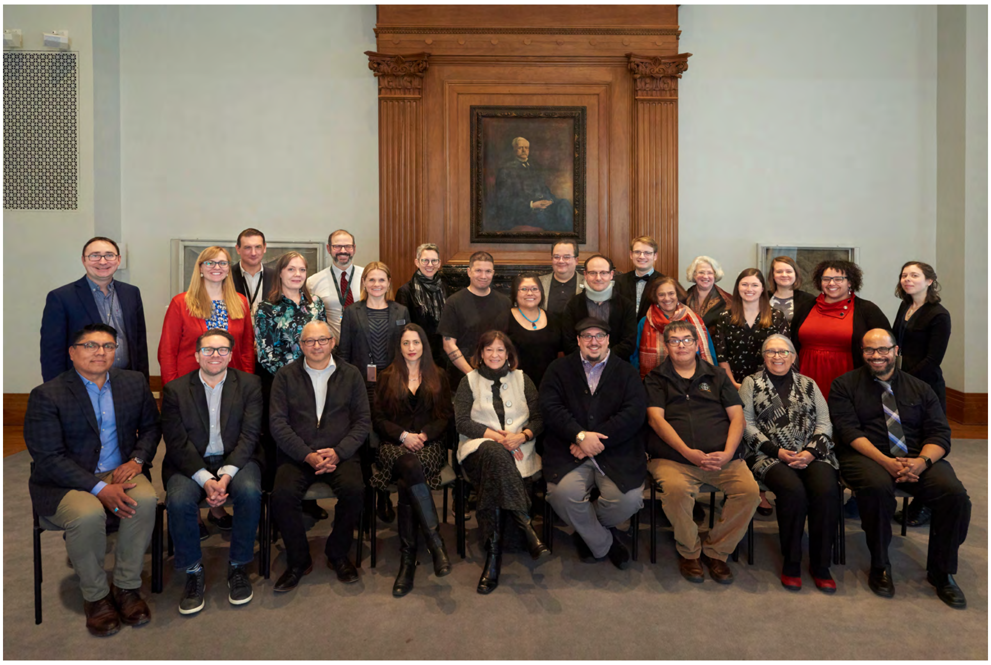

FIGURE 2 | The first meeting of the Native American Advisory Committee, March 2018 | Seated left to right: Brian Vallo, Scott Shoemaker, Joe Horse Capture, Elizabeth Hoover, Patty Loew, Doug Kiel, Stewart B. Koyiyumptewa, Bibiane Courtois, Robert Collins (Antonio Chavarria, absent) | © The Field Museum, Photograph by John Weinstein, GN92506_006B

- Stories, not the objects from the collections, should drive the narrative. The stories should be told by individuals or community groups who best know their communities' experiences. In other words, the advisors did not want to speak for "all" Native Americans. They encouraged the team to reach out to a diverse array of communities and individuals.
- Special attention should be given to the Chicago Native American community. This would make visible the substantial presence of Native Americans in cities and the unique characteristics of Chicago's long history as a thriving hub for regional Tribes.

The process of following these guideposts as we developed the exhibition concept was in the form of dialogue between the advisors and the staff. Between the quarterly meetings, the exhibition developers and the curators would discuss the advisors' suggestions and return to them with further ideas on how to construct the narratives. A major turning point occurred when, at the insistence of the Director of Exhibitions (Jaap Hoogstraten), everyone agreed on a physical structure for the exhibition: a "backbone" or spine of core permanent content and four or five rotating galleries. Initially, the idea had been to have all rotating stories, but the budget and the space of the Hall made this impractical. Settling on the core permanent messages helped define the way in which we could highlight the principal "messages" the advisors wanted to convey, and then use the rotating gallery spaces to tell diverse stories that would amplify or complement the main messages.

Once the structure of the Hall was decided, the advisors and the Museum team decided on the main messages for the permanent portion of the exhibition. These highlighted some of the fundamental "truths" that have been at the heart of Native American worldviews and resistance strategies over time. The truths took the form of statements and were crafted in consensus by the advisors with input from the exhibition developers on museum-friendly wording. The stories for the initial set of rotating galleries were also collaboratively decided. The idea here was to showcase diverse aspects of cultural practices, lifeways, and resistance efforts. One rotating gallery, we decided, would always feature a Chicago story. The advisors recommended

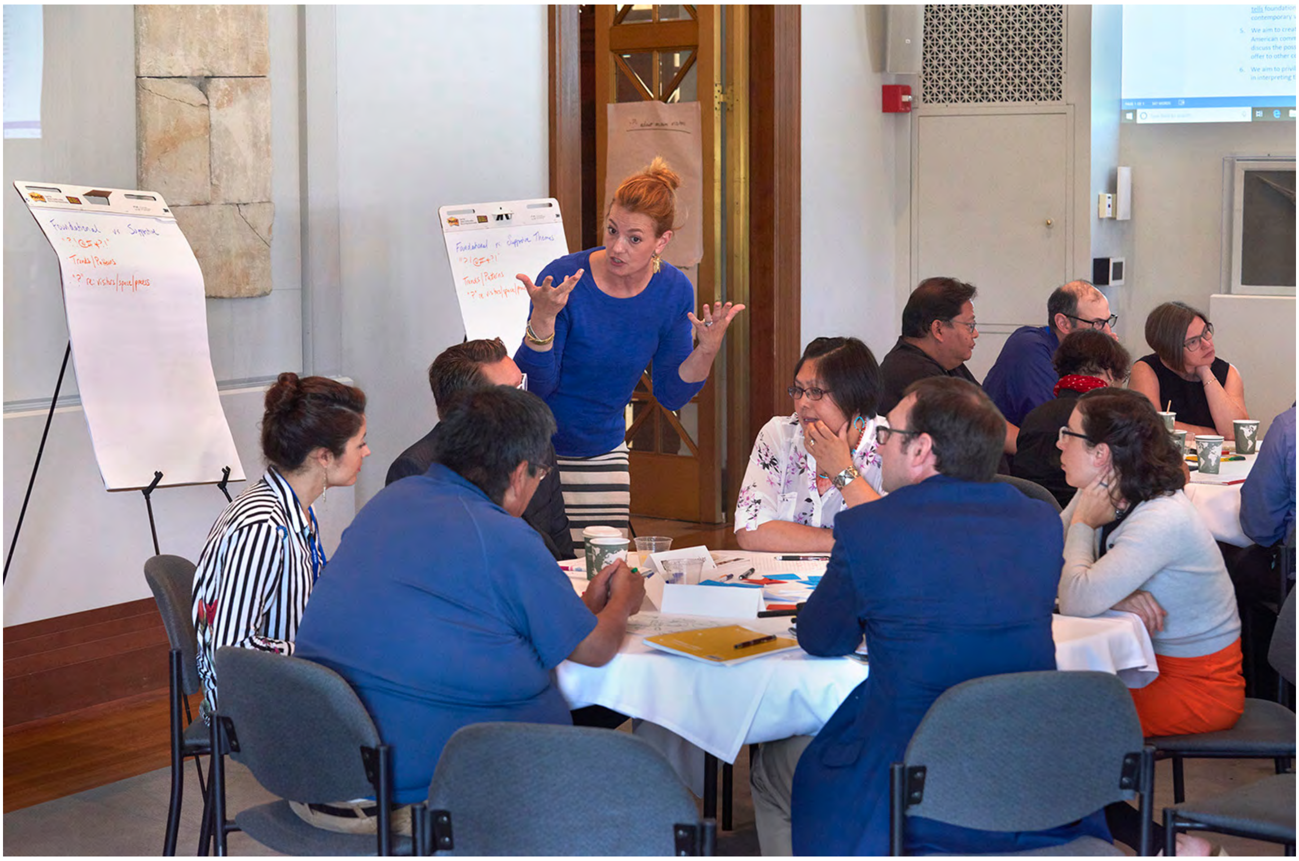

FIGURE 3 | One of the early meetings of the Advisory Committee establishing the main messages for the exhibition | © The Field Museum, Photograph by John Weinstein, GN92550_074d

that the Chicago Native Americans guide the development of this gallery, and subsequently we recruited a separate Chicago Advisory Committee to co-curate this gallery. Four other rotating galleries took shape through the same collaborative dialogue between the advisors and the staff. As the permanent core stories and the rotating galleries were determined, the advisors took on co-curatorial roles for specific displays. For example, the three advisors from Southwestern Pueblos co-curated the rotating gallery about the Pueblo peoples' relationships to the sacred sites of Chaco Canyon (see Part IV).

Over the course of the next three years, the conversations with the Advisory Committee continued and deepened as we worked to choose the stories that would illustrate the core truths and the rotating galleries. This involved finding people and communities who wanted to work with us to include their perspectives on the core truths or the rotating gallery stories. The advisors provided connections to individuals in their networks, and staff also reached out to their network connections. In some instances, we identified an individual artist or knowledge-bearer, and in other instances, a small group of community members worked together to create a display. Ultimately, we were able to include a total of 31 individual displays (each a story) in the core truths sections. Each of the five rotating galleries were allotted about 500 square feet for displays. Additionally, we commissioned artists to create the "transition" installations to the Hall—one on either end. We also worked with the Pawnee Nation Cultural Resources Committee to reinterpret the Pawnee Earth Lodge (described in Part IV). In total, we worked with 130 collaborators and were able to feature stories, cultural items, or artwork from 105 Tribes in the inaugural exhibition. The exhibition contains 300 items from the collections, 50 new commissioned pieces which were accessioned over the course of the five years, and over 90 items loaned from other museums or from private collections.

The process of developing the stories began just as the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the museum and precluded travel. At first, this presented a severe hardship, as Native communities were especially hard-hit by the pandemic and our collaborators were dealing with the illness in their communities. However, with the help of Zoom technology, we were able to establish a regular working schedule, meeting every two weeks with the storyteller (see Part III for details of the story development process).

For each display or rotating gallery story, the staff assigned a lead exhibition developer and curator. We met with the storyteller about every two weeks. Often, other members of the team joined the meetings. These included the conservator and collections staff member (who also divided up the stories they worked on) and other developers and curators. Debra Yepa-Pappan, in addition to acting as coordinator, often contributed her artistic and cultural expertise to the conversation. Generally, the process started with the exhibition developer giving an overview of the exhibition and the context for the specific display. The storyteller would start suggesting ideas for how their perspective could fit into the context. At some point, as the story took shape, the collections staff member arranged a "virtual visit" of the relevant collection, and the storyteller selected potential items for the display. The storyteller also decided which contemporary items they wanted to include—whether their own work or that of others in their community. After the story had come together and the items for display were selected, the exhibition designers (three-dimensional and graphics) joined the conversations to work with the storyteller on the placement of items in the case, the color schemes, and graphic design. The conservator talked through ideas for conservation treatments of the items, and the exhibition developers crafted the label text based on transcripts of the conversations with the storyteller.

While the work with the storytellers was ongoing, so too was the work with the Advisory Committee. Attention turned to the look and feel of the whole exhibition—the layout of the displays, and the décor or ambiance. The advisors also weighed in on the type and number of multimedia and interactive elements. The lead designer of the exhibition, Eric Manabat, proposed various options for all of these elements, and the lead graphics designer, Lori Walsh, similarly proposed colors and fonts for the texts and other visual elements. The advisors requested that we use materials common to Native Tribes of the Great Lakes region, such as birch bark and copper. Dr. Eli Suzukovich had an existing relationship with the Menominee Nation, and they gifted the Museum maple flooring and pine benches for use throughout the exhibition. The Menominee Nation operates their own forestry enterprise and had won awards for their sustainable management and had sold flooring to university athletic facilities and to international Olympic venues.

To create an ambiance that conveyed the contemporary vibrant dimensions of Native American life, the team researched potential Native American photographers and, with the Advisory Committee's agreement, reached out to selected artists to include their work in large displays above

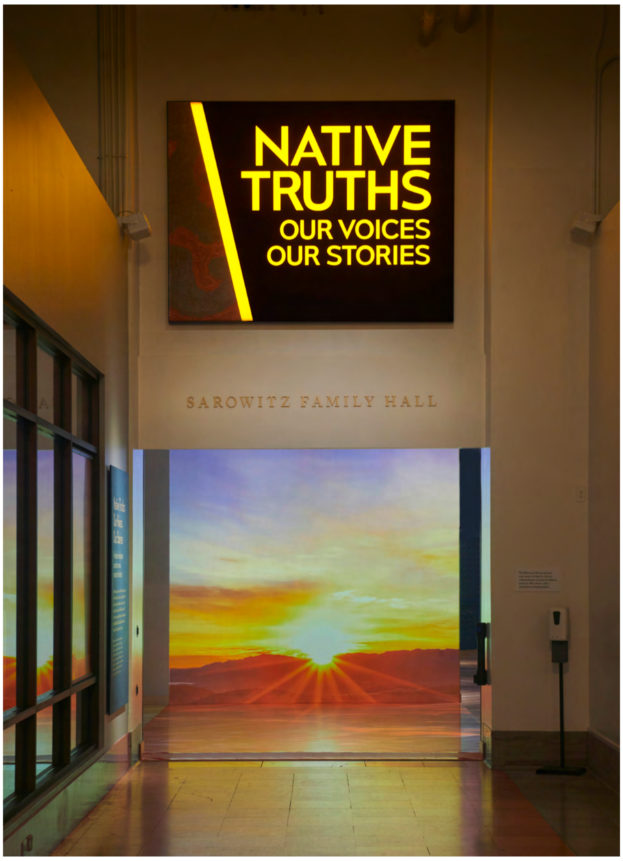

FIGURE 4 | *Our Return*, signaling to visitors that "You Are on Native Land" through landscape imagery created by X, forms the transition from Stanley Field Hall into *Native Truths*, 2022 | © The Field Museum, Photograph by John Weinstein

the cases and the rotating galleries. In the final stages of production, the advisors reviewed all the label texts and the media elements.

In addition to directly advising on the exhibition, the advisors were also consulted on conservation, collections care, and proper treatment of the cultural items. A subcommittee of the advisors met regularly over the five years with the collections and conservation teams to discuss these issues and institute Indigenous methodologies for care (see Part III for details of this collaboration, and also Smith 2012). At later stages of the project, another subcommittee of advisors worked with the Museum's marketing and public relations department to ensure that the publicity campaigns were informed by Indigenous perspectives.

To summarize, the installation of the new exhibition happened as a continuous dialogue between the staff, the advisors, and the storytellers. The collaborative process had an emotional as well as intellectual impact on the staff that worked on the exhibition. Throughout the book, we have tried to capture the experience and how it transformed us, not just as professionals but also as individuals.

The fundamental 'truths':

- **Our Ancestors Connect Us to the Past, Present, and Future**
- **Native People are Everywhere**
- **The Land Shapes Who We Are**
- **We Have the Right to Govern Ourselves**
- **Museum Collecting and Exhibition Practices Have Deeply Harmed Native Communities**

Outline of Volume Content

The chapters and shorter pieces that comprise this book elaborate on the major theme of the exhibition: the ways in which Native Americans have maintained autonomy and found sources of resilience in the face of continuous efforts to erase their cultural and social life and in some instances their entire existence. Most are written by members of the Advisory Committee and our story collaborators. Field Museum staff have also contributed chapters on the ways in which museum practices changed as a result of the collaborative processes.

The book is divided into four parts, each dealing with major aspects of the exhibition content. Each part contains multiple chapters and shorter "sidebars." Throughout, there are edited versions of the label texts which feature the storytellers' perspectives and commentaries. Photographs used in the exhibition as well as photos of selected cultural items and exhibition installations are included throughout the book.

We begin with a section on Chicago's Native American presence and history, as this story is central to the Field Museum's home place and because we wanted to privilege accounts of urban Native American experiences, which are sorely underrepresented in most museums.

The second section of the book contains chapters on the five fundamental "Truths" or concepts that the Advisory Committee felt were essential for the public audiences to know (see above).

Multiple essays for each chapter elaborate on the meanings of these truths and how they guide Native American community life and actions.

The third part of the book focuses on the changes in practices that the exhibition provoked at the Field Museum. There are six chapters written by Field Museum staff that were involved in the process of deinstallation of the old Native North America Hall and the installation of the new Hall. The accounts in this section provide first-hand accounts of the transformation in approach and practice of the development of the exhibition and treatment of the collections.

The final part of the book contains four chapters on the themes and stories for each of the inaugural rotating galleries. These stories are meant to illustrate the broader "Truths" through specific examples of activism, resilience, and creativity. The stories are:

- Frank Waln's Journey Home;
- The Revitalization of California Basket Making;
- The Pueblo Peoples' Relationship to Chaco Canyon;
- The Reclaiming of Food Sovereignty by the Meskwaki of Tama, Iowa.

Two additional chapters in this part document the changes made to the interpretation of the Pawnee Earth Lodge.

Following these parts, the Conclusion contains a chapter by Advisory Committee member Dr. Doug Kiel that provides an overview of the "transition" installation at the far east end of the exhibition, titled "We Speak for Ourselves." This is a small gallery featuring commissioned contemporary artwork. Kiel's chapter discusses the diversity of intersections of identity reflected in the artists' works. The statements by the artists that are in the exhibition are also included here. The final two chapters look to the future of collaborations with Native American communities. In the first of these chapters Dr. Blaire Morseau provides a general context for how the Field Museum can look forward in building relationships with Native American communities, placing this within the context of Indigenous futurism. The concluding chapter, by Jaap Hoogstraten and Alaka Wali, sums up the lessons learned in the course of the project and discusses the future of collaborative work at the Field Museum. The authors also discuss the reactions of the public to the new Hall after its opening from Native and non-Native visitors.

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