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ABSTRACT

Dialogue provides the space for groups to learn from one another by sharing stories and experiences with the potential outcome of collaboration. This article argues that there are limited opportunities for dialogue between Aboriginal peoples and the public throughout the First Peoples Hall exhibit, which has important implications for the Canadian Museum of History. Specifically utilizing a case study of the Nisga’a Treaty (2000), this article critically analyses the exclusion of Nisga’a and government perspectives from the one sentence description of the Treaty in the First Peoples Hall. I will suggest that through this representation, the exhibit does not conform to its intention to challenge stereotypes, assumes that the visitor possesses a certain level of knowledge, discourages critical thinking, and silences Aboriginal peoples’ perspectives by imposing a dominant narrative of national progress.

KEYWORDS

Nisga’a, First Peoples Hall, Canada, Land claim, Representation, Aboriginal, Dialogue
The 1992 Canadian Task Force on Museums and First Peoples’ Report challenged prior understandings of the relationship between museums and Aboriginal communities. The report concluded that Aboriginal communities should be involved in the creation and refinement of exhibits that present their culture, lifestyles, and art to the public (Phillips, 14). These principles were then applied to the formation of the First Peoples Hall at the Canadian Museum of Civilization\(^1\) during the 1990s. An Aboriginal Advisory Group, consisting of 30 individuals with pre-existing affiliations to the institution or a strong connection to their culture, worked with Museum staff to design four themes to structure the exhibit and provide recommendations throughout the developmental stages of the Hall (Harrison, 293-294).

This article argues that despite the efforts of the Task Force, there are limited opportunities for dialogue between Aboriginal Peoples and/or the public throughout the First Peoples Hall exhibit. The example of comprehensive land claims in Canada, whose representation has never been academically evaluated within the museum context, will be central to this analysis. Specifically utilizing a case study of the Nisga’a Treaty (2000), this article identifies the mostly conflicting perspectives of the objectives of the comprehensive land claims process between the Nisga’a people and the Government of Canada/the Government of British Columbia (hereafter referred to as the government perspective). The government perspective emphasizes certainty to land title and natural resources with the objective of avoiding litigation. The Nisga’a perspective rejects the colonial control embedded in the Indian Act (1876) and seeks self-determination.

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\(^{1}\) In 2012, the Museum was renamed the Canadian Museum of History.
The exclusion of Nisga’a and government perspectives from the one sentence description of the Nisga’a Treaty in the First Peoples Hall does not create a space for dialogue between these groups, which has important implications for the Museum. In my view, the exhibit does not conform to its intention to challenge stereotypes, assumes that the visitor possesses a certain level of knowledge, discourages critical thinking, and silences Aboriginal peoples’ perspectives by imposing a dominant narrative of national progress.

Post-colonialism is a body of academic theory attempting to redefine history from the viewpoints of indigenous peoples and others who were colonized (Young, 4). This theoretical framework was omnipresent throughout the intellectual world during the 1990s (Phillips, 93) and the 1992 Task Force findings represented the influence of these academic theories within the museum context (Phillips 156, 205-208). Scholarly publications on museums became increasingly focussed on interrogating and reframing the relationship between curators and communities. As Ruth Phillips notes, post-colonialism provides the opportunity for museums to become uniting spaces where groups can attain a shared understanding, engage in dialogue, and address challenges (157). Authors who have written about the First Peoples Hall have not evaluated whether or not the exhibit provides the opportunity for Aboriginal peoples to engage in dialogue, among themselves and with the public, to address the challenges they face in Canada.

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Through analysis of the representation of comprehensive land claims in the First Peoples Hall, this article addresses a gap in the literature by assessing whether informed dialogue and cooperation between the public and Aboriginal peoples is possible throughout the exhibit.

This article is interested in providing a clear articulation of how dialogue is defined and can proceed through collaboration. Dialogue provides the opportunity and space for groups to learn from one another by sharing stories and experiences. Collaboration is a possible outcome, which can ensure that stereotypes of Aboriginal Peoples are demystified by Aboriginal voices presenting their perspectives to Canadians. This may result in support for Aboriginal Peoples’ political causes that require public pressure on governments and stakeholders to resolve issues facing their communities. Trust between the parties is an essential part of this endeavour, as its absence can fundamentally limit the effectiveness and meaning of the dialogue. This understanding of dialogue will be utilized throughout the paper to discuss the representation of comprehensive land claims throughout the First Peoples Hall. To provide essential context required for these arguments, this article will begin with a brief overview of the comprehensive land claims process and the Nisga’a Treaty.

Understanding the Comprehensive Land Claims Process

A comprehensive land claims agreement, or modern treaty, concerns lands in which Aboriginal rights have not been delimited through a treaty, court case, or other form of legislation. Negotiations generally involve three main parties: the federal government (represented by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, although sometimes including other departments when required),
the provincial or territorial government, and the Aboriginal community (“Treaty Negotiation”). The development of this process was a direct result of the 1973 Supreme Court decision in Calder, which confirmed the existence of Aboriginal title even though the Nisga’a claimants lost on a technicality. This case forced the creation of the comprehensive land claims policy developed in 1976 which, since its inception, has retained its original structure in spite of small changes made to accommodate legislative or policy alterations (Miller, 254-255, 265).

The Lengthy Struggle for the Nisga’a Treaty

The Nisga’a People in Northern British Columbia had spent over 100 years pushing for a treaty to affirm their rights to their traditional territory located near the Nass River Valley. Initial forms of resistance began in the late 1800s when the Nisga’a petitioned the Queen of England to recognize their claim to the land (Blackburn, 66; Harper, 14). These events challenge the dominant historical narrative that characterizes Aboriginal Peoples as passive victims who often accept their fate and do not protest the seizure of their lands (Thornton, 20). At many times, the persistence of the Nisga’a People was inhibited by colonial processes meant to prevent liability, such as the 1920s amendment to the Indian Act which forbid the Nisga’a and other Aboriginal Peoples from hiring a lawyer to pursue claims in Canadian courts. When the comprehensive land claims policy came into existence in 1976, the Nisga’a eagerly prepared and submitted an Aboriginal title claim concerning their traditional territory (Hurley).
The Nisga’a claim was accepted and negotiations with the Government of Canada began in 1976. However, the framework agreement outlining the issues to be discussed during the negotiations was not agreed upon until 1989. Although the land fell under British Columbia’s jurisdiction and their participation in the negotiations was required, they had not yet joined the table. British Columbia’s title to the land was conferred by the federal government when the province entered Confederation in 1871. However in the comprehensive land claims process, this provision was complicated by section 91(24) of the Constitution Act of 1867, which granted the federal government responsibility over “Indians and lands reserved for Indians.” (Hurley; Constitution Act). Regardless of this legislative conflict, the Province had demonstrated their reluctance to partake in the negotiations on numerous occasions, consistently denying the existence of Aboriginal title. In 1990, British Columbia finally joined the negotiating table, as they recognized the adverse impacts on economic investment if Aboriginal claims to the land remained unresolved. In 1992, the Province acknowledged the existence of Aboriginal title and developed the British Columbia Treaty Process to facilitate claim negotiations throughout the province (Miller, 273-274, Hurley).

In 1998, the Nisga’a Final Agreement was signed by the parties, and subsequently ratified by the community, the Province, and the Government of Canada (Blackburn, 67). The Final Agreement became law in 2000, including provisions such as: the development of the Nisga’a Lisims Government with jurisdiction over health care, education, and social services; approximately 2000 km² of land; financial compensation amounting to $196.1 million; and an agreed-upon portion of salmon from the commercial fishery in the region (Nisga’a Final Agreement). As the first comprehensive land claim agreement in British Columbia, it was a precedent for other Aboriginal Peoples in the province.
This overview provides essential background information required to understand the comprehensive land claims process and the Nisga’a treaty negotiations. Below, I focus on the distinct and often conflicting interpretations of the objectives of the process between government and the Nisga’a People. These contrasting visions have the potential to result in delays for Aboriginal peoples in an already lengthy negotiation process (which for the Nisga’a spanned almost 30 years) and contribute to unfulfilled expectations after the signing of the Treaty (Miller, 264-265, 272-274, 281).

The Government’s Perspective of the Outcomes

The comprehensive land claims process has changed only slightly over time through minimal policy amendments (Miller, 265), inferring the consistency of government objectives in the past and present. The 1998 Auditor General’s Report assessing the comprehensive land claims process outlines the federal government’s aim to resolve land title uncertainty to facilitate economic investment which limits risk by avoiding litigation. These dual objectives are attained through the incorporation of ‘certainty clauses’ in comprehensive land claims settlements which confine Aboriginal rights to the content of the agreement, while also ensuring that no further claims can be brought against the Government of Canada (1998 September Report of the Auditor General of Canada). An examination of the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada’s website reveals identical aims for comprehensive land claims. Since the late 1990s, there has been minor evolution in the government’s position as certainty and economic development/investment are highlighted as beneficial to all Canadians, therefore justifying the continued existence of the process (“Fact Sheet: Comprehensive Land Claims”).
The Government of British Columbia lists similar goals, noting the importance of economic investment and job creation in Aboriginal communities and throughout the province more generally ("Why We Are Negotiating Treaties"). As a result, both levels of government work to persuade the general public of the economic and legal importance of these agreements.

The Nisga’a’s Perspective of the Outcomes

The Nisga’a perspective concerning the objectives of the comprehensive land claims process emphasizes community aspirations. The Nisga’a recognized that the Indian Act administration’s authority over their governance structure had contributed to the development of nepotism, dependency, and unemployment within their communities (Harper, 12; Quesnel and Winn, 5-6). Although the Nisga’a unanimously expressed a desire for self-determination, including control over community governance, they disagreed on how to attain these goals (Quesnel and Winn, 5-6). This becomes apparent upon examination of the ratification vote for the final agreement. For example, Frank Calder who filed the court case resulting in the Supreme Court’s recognition of Aboriginal title and the subsequent creation of the comprehensive land claims process, voted against the agreement. Calder had fought for the Nisga’a on several occasions, and while supporting the initiative to begin negotiations with the Government of Canada and the Province of British Columbia, his vision for the community was not met through certain aspects of the final agreement. Calder expressed concern over the centralization of power within the proposed governance structure and the amount of land granted to the Nisga’a (only 8% of what was initially claimed) (Harper, 157-159). These perspectives on the agreement were ultimately reflected in the results of the ratification vote, which
passed with 61% support, 23% opposition and 15% abstentions (Hurley). This example illustrates the community divide over the agreement as a result of the 30 years of negotiations.

However the Nisga’a’ aspirations for a self-determining future remained, regardless of disagreement over how to achieve this vision (Quesnel and Winn, 4-17).

The Nisga’a and government perspectives fundamentally conflict regarding issues experienced by Aboriginal communities in Canada. As many scholars have documented, Aboriginal communities face challenges related to educational attainment, health, the residential school legacy, and housing. The government sees the comprehensive land claims process as a potential solution to these issues, providing economic development opportunities to ensure self-sufficiency in Aboriginal communities (“Fact Sheet: Comprehensive Land Claims”). However, colonization continues to affect Aboriginal communities, foreshadowing the multifaceted nature of any proposed solutions. Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox supports this view using interviews with members of the Dehcho First Nations to argue that comprehensive land claims are merely one possible option to approach challenges. She notes that experiences of colonization and “social suffering” remain unaddressed during the negotiations which often lead to community dissatisfaction with the agreements (27, 164, 169). The government perspective pushes an economic development agenda focussed on the future with minimal acknowledgement of past wrongs. The Nisga’a position emphasizes the community’s capacity to initiate their own solutions through a self-determining framework. This tension is relevant as part of an analysis of the implications of the omission of the government and Nisga’a perspectives from the First Peoples Hall.

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Consequences of Limited Representation of the Nisga’a Treaty in the First Peoples Hall

Visitors to the First Peoples Hall likely overlook the brief comprehensive land claims portion of the exhibit, situated between two displays on the economy of Aboriginal peoples. Copies of the agreements are presented in a glass case with other pieces of legislation, creating a physical separation between the visitors and the documents. A catalogue located in front of the case prompts the visitor to learn more about each agreement by flipping through to search for the appropriate section. The page concerning the Nisga’a Treaty is thoroughly disappointing. The sentence reads: “The Nisga’a Final Agreement initialled on August 4, 1998, and implemented in 2000, is the first modern treaty signed in the Province of British Columbia” (Canadian Museum of History). This representation of the Nisga’a Treaty is incomplete as the context for the signing of the agreement, the challenges for the Nisga’a, the provisions of the agreement and the government perspective, are all missing. With this oversimplification of Aboriginal land claims, the Museum suggests that they are anomalies within the context of Aboriginal politics. The Nisga’a Treaty, along with other land claims, is included as part of the “We Are Still Here” theme incorporating a series of other events, including the Oka Crisis, and the World Wars; yet, they lose their significance when outlined in general and vague terms. If the coverage of topics such as the economy of Aboriginal people (which consumes approximately half of the exhibit) is compared with the small section on comprehensive land claims, there is an obvious lack of emphasis on this political issue. Ultimately, the possibility for dialogue and collaboration is limited through such a portrayal as the parties are not offered the opportunity to exchange visions and learn from one another. The Nisga’a Treaty’s
one sentence description does not adequately conform with the intention of the First Peoples Hall exhibit to challenge stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples.

Julia Harrison’s article “Listening for the Conversation: the First Peoples Hall at the Canadian Museum of Civilization,” explores the formation of the Aboriginal Advisory Committee and their contributions to the development of the First Peoples Hall exhibit. During the initial stages, the Aboriginal Advisory Committee prepared a series of guiding principles for the creation of the exhibit, including the necessity to challenge stereotypes and validate Aboriginal experiences (294). Traces of this proposition are found in the four main themes of the Hall which are: “We Are Still Here,” “We Contribute,” “We Are Diverse,” and “We Have an Ancient and Ongoing Relationship with the Land.” These themes are contrary to commonly held perceptions of Aboriginal people in media and popular culture. For example, one can suggest that the idea of “We Are Still Here” disputes the representation of antiquated Aboriginal peoples and cultures. These stereotypes are disrupted in the exhibit through references to prominent Aboriginal people, current issues such as land claims, and contemporary Aboriginal art. The second theme, “We Are Diverse,” aims to demystify stereotypes in film and media that present homogenous Aboriginal Peoples wearing headdresses, riding horses, and practicing ancient cultures. Within the exhibit, diversity is showcased through the inclusion of groups including Métis, First Nations, and Inuit. The theme “We Contribute” addresses misconceptions that Aboriginal people are lazy, unemployed, and dependent on welfare cheques. Numerous exhibit sections on the economy highlight the productivity of Aboriginal peoples within the Canadian state. The final theme “We Have an Ancient and Ongoing Relationship with the Land” deconstructs stereotypes that situate Aboriginal cultural connections to the land in the past. Through video interviews with Elders and a section on creation stories, this misconception is disrupted throughout the exhibit. These four themes
reinforce the original intention of the First Peoples Hall to challenge stereotypes through education.

Demystifying stereotypes throughout the exhibit conforms to the goals of a national museum. According to section 8 of the *Museums Act*, the Canadian Museum of History should provide education about Canada to promote national unity. Confronting stereotypes in the First Peoples Hall exhibit is logical within this framework. If there are tensions between groups because they do not understand one another, how would this promote Canadian unity? In consideration of the legal mandate of the Canadian Museum of History and the themes of the First Peoples Hall exhibit, the intention can be understood as challenging stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples.

The main themes of the exhibit illustrated on large panels intend to debunk stereotypes. However, the representation of the Nisga’a Treaty within the First Peoples Hall does not conform to this goal. The exhibit component on comprehensive land claims is not currently a space where divergent groups participate in dialogue and collaboration, as there is no attempt to deconstruct preconceived notions of the agreements as merely land and financial transactions. The Nisga’a Treaty’s one sentence description ignores the Government and Nisga’a perspectives of the outcomes of the agreement. Nor is the context surrounding the negotiations, the political implications, and content of the agreement included in this portrayal. By omitting these perspectives, there is no opportunity for the visitor to think critically beyond the single sentence that is presented in the catalogue. Dialogue and collaboration are suppressed, as missing information prevents the development of common understanding and trust between the parties. The intention to challenge

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As seen in Widdowson and Howard and Missiner.
stereotypes is lost as the context of the Nisga’a Treaty is unattainable to an individual without prior knowledge of the subject.

In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Ivan Karp argues that visitors attending a museum exhibit never have the necessary knowledge to fully grasp the material. As a result, he suggests that they will either: understand the exhibit through background knowledge; or reformulate their understanding of the world in response to the information (Lavine and Karp, “Culture and Representation,” 22). The majority of visitors would likely interpret the land claims portion of the First Peoples Hall exhibit according to the first category. Aboriginal land claims are currently a contentious issue and opinions that the Canadian Government is granting special privileges to Aboriginal people through financial payments and land grants are omnipresent in media and literature (Widdowson and Howard; Messiner). These representations contribute to the public’s incomplete understanding of the claims, by presenting a narrow point of view that does not encourage critical thought beyond stereotypes (Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples, 93). Exposed to these perspectives, the Canadian public will likely enter the First Peoples Hall with a series of assumptions about Aboriginal peoples in mind. The Museum’s presentation of the Nisga’a Treaty without the required context alienates the visitors, while failing to challenge any of the stereotypes concerning comprehensive land claims circulating in the public domain. This limits the possibility for productive dialogue between Aboriginal peoples and the public, as within the exhibit space the ability to move beyond these stereotypes is constrained through these representations. Ultimately, without clear representation of the issues and perspectives, a visitor will not be able to participate in dialogue or understand comprehensive land claims in a nuanced manner.
By representing comprehensive land claims such as the Nisga’a Treaty in a generic way, the Museum is maintaining the illusion of being apolitical.

As a national museum aiming to avoid controversy while complying with its mandate to present Canadian collective identity, political positions are not explicitly incorporated into exhibits (Phillips, 207-210). However, the decision to exclude certain information is political, as specific perspectives are privileged throughout the narrative. The Museum does not highlight the Nisga’a’s struggle for the treaty, the importance of the outcome to the community, the vision of government for the agreement, and its relevance to Canadians. According to the Museum’s representation, the Nisga’a Treaty exists in a particular moment in time, when the final agreement became law in 2000. There is no attempt to conceptualize the Treaty beyond this period, which creates the impression that the agreement does not evolve. This is problematic as through implementation and monitoring, an ongoing relationship with the government, key stakeholders, and Canadians more generally is formed from the agreement. A perspective that situates the Treaty historically no doubt coincides with the recent name change of the institution. As the Canadian Museum of History, visitors likely envision the entire First Peoples Hall as a space where the past is reinterpreted reflecting the needs of the present. This contradicts the intention of themes such as “We Are Still Here” which showcases the contemporary presence of Aboriginal peoples. This representation is political as narratives of progress are privileged over Aboriginal perspectives on the agreements.

Excluding the Nisga’a’s struggle to reach the final agreement limits the importance of their resistance within the overall narrative of comprehensive land claims in Canada. The government focuses on results and economic development for Aboriginal communities as key outcomes of the process (“Fact Sheet: Comprehensive
Land Claims”). This viewpoint is emphasized within the First Peoples Hall exhibit as comprehensive land claims are not described in great detail. Ensuring that representations of the agreements are similar legitimizes a results-focussed narrative that disregards the Aboriginal perspective.

The imposing glass case containing numerous agreements and legislative documents reinforces a dominant narrative of progress by accentuating the Government of Canada’s success in resolving these claims. The number of government documents suggests that political action is the ultimate solution to challenges facing Aboriginal peoples. In this instance, progress is equated with written documents displacing oral interpretations, and understandings of treaties by Aboriginal communities. These representations are not disputed throughout the exhibit, and ultimately constrain the possibility for dialogue, as the one sentence description of the Nisga’a Treaty limits the ability of the community to publicly share their perspectives. Ultimately, a results-based approach is legitimized through the presentation of the Nisga’a Treaty and other comprehensive land claims throughout the First Peoples Hall.

Including perspectives from government and Aboriginal groups on the objectives of the process would encourage the visitor to think critically about comprehensive land claim agreements, while still portraying a narrative of national identity as outlined in the Museum’s mandate. Different understandings of the outcomes of the agreements ultimately outline themes important for a national narrative, including overcoming obstacles to reach a final agreement, and the importance of partnerships. Canadians are unified in resolving the claims and acknowledging the unique relationships that some groups possess with the state. Representation of opposing perspectives would create a dialogue by providing the
opportunity for the public and Aboriginal Peoples to communicate in the exhibit space. This would challenge stereotypes by providing significant opportunities for critical thinking and visitor engagement throughout the exhibit. A nuanced representation could help the museum to avoid controversy by incorporating different viewpoints on comprehensive land claims.

The insertion of additional information (including the challenges throughout the negotiation process, Aboriginal communities’ and government perspectives, and the content of the agreements) would facilitate visitor comprehension and potentially an awareness of the challenges associated with the process. All of these benefits could provide the opportunity for effective dialogue and collaboration between Aboriginal peoples and the public related to comprehensive land claims.

The Canadian Museum of History’s representation of the Nisga’a Treaty does not provide the possibility to facilitate mutual understanding and unity through dialogue in the exhibit space. The post-colonial shift in academia has increased Aboriginal participation in the development of Museum exhibits, yet as the case study of the Nisga’a Treaty indicates, there are still additional obstacles to attain a critical dialogue within the museum space. The different perspectives of the outcomes of the Nisga’a Treaty are omitted from the First Peoples Hall, which privileges narratives of progress instead of meeting the exhibit’s intention to challenge stereotypes through education. The representation of agreements, such as the Nisga’a Treaty, should be reframed within the exhibit to provide a nuanced version inclusive of different viewpoints. These suggestions would greatly improve the visitor experience while corresponding with the objectives of the First Peoples Hall to debunk stereotypes.
Works Cited


