Indian Act or Acting Indian:
The Canadian Museum of History, Colonial Amnesia and Re-
Membering Indigenous Identities

Geraldine King
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ABSTRACT
For many Canadians, museums - as sites of national memory - are the most trustworthy tellers of “truth”. While it is arguably impossible to accurately display all aspects of a nation’s history, an exploration of what is missing from the national narrative is crucial, especially when it pertains to the representation Indigenous identities. This essay examines the Canadian Museum of History’s incomplete representation of Indigenous identities as influenced by historic and continued encounters with the Indian Act. The Indian Act has been a pervasive arbitrator of Indigenous identity since the Act’s inception in 1876, yet its near exclusion in the Museum is, at best an incomplete national narrative and at worst, a deliberate attempt to obscure one of Canada’s most egregious policies pertaining to Indigenous (primarily First Nation and Métis) peoples in Canada as a means to uphold an unfractured and cohesive national identity.

KEYWORDS
Indian Act, museums, identity politics, re-membering
The primary function of Indian status is as a boundary marker - a clear indicator of who is Indian and who is not, and it is only by retaining this power to include some and exclude others that Indian status has any meaning. (Lawrence “Entitlement” 225)

As institutions primarily dedicated to the display of cultures, ethnology museums have long been sites for the invention of essentialized indigenous identities. (Trofanenko 309)

One of my first memories of the Indian Act took place in the spring of 1990. I distinctly recall my grandfather driving from Thunder Bay, Ontario to Edmonton, Alberta where my mother, brother and I were living at the time, in order to take us to the local Indian Affairs office to acquire our status cards that had been reconstituted following Bill C-31. As it would turn out, this moment represented the culmination of decades of political action that my grandfather undertook to have his own status reinstated so that it could be passed down to his children and their children.

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1 Passed in 1985, Bill C-31 was an amendment to the Indian Act that attempted to redress the instances where Indian status was lost; it was also intended to reverse the gendered discrimination that caused women to lose their status upon marrying non-status men. Despite this monumental amendment, there are still problems with the way the formula is laid out, most notably that the children of reinstated status women did not receive status, but the children of men did. This is something that was revisited with Bill C-3, passed in 2010 and is still in the process of being implemented and unpacked. For a clear breakdown of Indian status, Bill C-31 and the hierarchies of Indian status, see: http://apihtawikosisan.com/2011/12/14/got-status-indian-status-in-canada-sort-of-explained/. 
My grandfather lost his Indian\textsuperscript{2} status at the age of sixteen, when he walked twenty-five miles and enlisted in the Canadian Army to help with the war effort during the Second World War. According to the Canadian government, my grandfather’s participation in state military activities enfranchised\textsuperscript{3} him into the broader Canadian public as its acceptable, productive citizenry. Despite this, my grandfather felt that regaining his Indian status was an important aspect of his political, social and cultural identity. However, although for many years my grandfather did not possess Indian status, he did not allow this to prevent him from carrying out his life as an Ojibwe man. For my grandfather, it was important to define the Indian Act, without being defined by it.

If Indian status is a state-sanctioned marker of Indian identity, what does it mean when a site of national memory fails to expose its own legislative history and present? In other words, by obscuring the Indian Act\textsuperscript{4} as an arbitrator of historical and

\textsuperscript{2} Terminology used to describe the original inhabitants of what is now called Canada varies depending on who is employing the term. For the purpose of this essay, ‘Indigenous’ is used when speaking generally and referring to modern identities. ‘Aboriginal’ is used when referencing government policies and some author’s writings. ‘Indian’ is only used when referring specifically to government policies. ‘Native’ is used where is has been employed by the author being cited; and finally, where appropriate nation-specific terms, such as ‘Algonquin’ is used.

\textsuperscript{3} Enfranchisement refers to the assimilationist spectre of the Indian Act. The Canadian Encyclopedia asserts that “by enfranchising, a person was supposed to be consenting to abandon native identity and communal society (with its artificial legal disabilities) in order to merge with the “free”, individualistic and non-native majority” (http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/en/article/enfranchisement/). It is important to note that when looking at Indian status, enfranchisement does not refer to a common understanding of the term of groups being afforded the right to vote, or other such elements of participatory citizenry that were previously withheld from marginalized groups. The specific goal of enfranchisement was to bring Indians into the fold of broader society by preventing access to their cultures, language and other aspects of their Indian identity through the most fundamental of denials: membership in their communities and proximity to their families, both immediate and extended.

\textsuperscript{4} Established in 1867, the Indian Act started out as an assimilationist policy and fundamentally provides the government with control over aspects of Aboriginal life such as Indian status, lands, education and even band governance structures. Previous incarnations of the Act dictated who was federally recognized as ‘Indian’, and in light of its assimilationist tendency, status Indians would lose status for instance if they attended university, joined the military, voluntarily enfranchised, or if a status woman married a non-status (or non-Aboriginal) man. Notably, the same was not so for a CAPSTONE SEMINAR SERIES (Re)Negotiating Artifacts of Canadian Narratives of Identity, Volume 4, Number 1, Spring 2014.
contemporaneous Indigenous identity, does the Canadian Museum of History suffer from some sort of colonial amnesia? Further, what does near absence of the Indian Act in its halls tell us about the museum? Is it a state-sanctioned apparatus mandated to (re)construct national identity based on misleading facts, intentional omissions, and the negotiation of Canadian public consciousness and national memory? At the core of this research essay is the question of whether the Canadian Museum of History constructs an Indian act through the exclusion of the Indian Act. If so, what visitors see is not historically and socially accurate. Rather, the Museum’s incomplete reconstruction appears to be an attempt to re-construct national memory through forgetfulness. By bringing the specter of “encounters” outside the realm of physical and into the socio-political, this essay is ultimately about the absence of legislative colonial encounters that have affected the lives of countless Indigenous peoples - and will continue to do so - until the problems of the Indian Act are resolved through the reconciliation of Indigenous nationhood, the parameters of constitutional jurisdiction and meaningful engagement with Indigenous peoples, many of whom are impacted by this pervasive piece of federal legislation.

It could be argued that there are two fundamental meanings to the Indian Act: legal definitions, and the significance that this Act has had on the lives of scores of Indigenous (primarily First Nation and Métis) peoples. As such, this essay briefly describes the etymology and purpose of the Act as envisioned and legislated by successive Canadian governments. Following this, an investigation of the diverse,

status Indian man who married a non-status woman: in that case, the non-status woman would gain Indian status. The Indian Act remains in effect to this day, and although some of the most egregious sections have been amended, the Act continues to impact Aboriginal peoples in negative and devastating ways. The Act does not pertain to Inuit peoples, and although it does not directly relate to Métis peoples, it has impacted them in many ways. For more information including a breakdown of each of the sections of the Act, see:

http://www.ubcic.bc.ca/files/PDF/TheIndianAct_WhatItMeans.pdf
http://mapleleafweb.com/features/the-indian-act-historical-overview
complex, and sometimes conflicting experiences with the Indian Act is conducted as a means of making sense of this sometimes-senseless government policy. The purpose of these two exercises is not to simply chronicle the Act on its socio-political trajectory, but to illustrate how its exclusion in the Museum tells us more about Canadian national memory than it does about the lives of Indigenous peoples as they are attempted to be represented within the Museum’s halls.

This essay attempts to make sense of incongruities pertaining to being identified (or not) as an Indian under the Indian Act. This is not done as a means of assigning a common identity to Indigenous peoples, but to suggest that the Museum forgets this aspect of Canadian history as a means of remembering and imagining an un-fractured Canadian national identity. Consider that the propagation of a strong, unfettered, unified identity relies on obscuring the cracks in the foundations of nationhood vis-à-vis institutions of national memory. According to Pierre Nora, sites of memory, such as museums, work "to stop time, to block the work of forgetting"; museums possess "a will to remember" (19). In the process of remembering, it is important to recognize what is being forgotten in the process. As such, this essay intends to help us to re-member\(^5\) Indigenous identity through the process of identifying what the Canadian Museum of History has perhaps unintentionally neglected to include in its exposition of Indigeneity. The purpose is not to render the Indian Act as meaningless or arbitrary (through unpacking it), but to illustrate the threads that are often woven together to create the fabric of an accurate national identity. The goal is not to unravel this fabric, but to identify areas where national identity can and should

\(^5\) In "Indian Country: Essays on Contemporary Native Culture", Gail Guthrie Valaskakis conjures post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha’s transformative process of remembering: “Remembering is never quite an act of introspection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (Bhabha, qtd. in Valaskakis 80). For the purpose of this essay, re-membering takes on a dual-meaning. The first reconciles with Bhabha’s notion of putting back together a dismembered past. And the second puts an emphasis on reuniting membership within the social, cultural and political group of ‘Indianness’.

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be reinforced through fragmented narratives, as opposed to dissemination a unified and uncontested national consciousness. By bringing public policy into the periphery of national identity, this article illustrates how national identity is constructed through the negotiation of other identities. Indian Status is assigned based on a legislative formula and not the lived and real associations that Indigenous people possess when it comes to their identity. In some ways, the Museum assigns an imagined Indigenous identity by failing to highlight one of Canada’s most impactful and harmful Indian policies.

**Indian Status, Indian Identity, Land and Their Place in National Identity**

To be federally recognized as an Indian in either Canada or the United States, an individual must be able to comply with very distinct standards of government regulation. (Lawrence “Regulation” 3)

In her article “Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States: An Overview”, Bonita Lawrence calls upon Michel Foucault’s framing of discourse to unpack how Native identity in Canada (and the United States) is oftentimes understood through formulaic government standards of what it means to be ‘Indian’ (3-4). Lawrence is careful to point out that although Native identity is very much influenced by federal policies, identity is not entirely determined by legislation, and to suggest so would be to take agency away from Indigenous people. In light of this, Lawrence suggests that by uncovering the roots of discourses around Native identity, a new way forward can be offered when thinking about identity, the politics surrounding identity, and issues of self-determination (4). In other words, although the Indian Act in Canada has contributed in substantial ways to how Indian
identity is perceived (by Indigenous people and others), there are ways to undo its detrimental impacts, but one must first acknowledge how the Indian Act came to be so perverse and intertwined in expressions/understanding of self and others.

According to Lawrence, Indian status sits at three primary sites of meaning for urban Indigenous peoples (and arguably all Indigenous peoples): 1) Indian status provides one with an affiliation to a reserve; 2) status Indians can stake claim to increased cultural knowledge; and 3) Indian status presupposes the presence of Indian blood (220). Further, Lawrence states that in urban settings Indian status provides “an official seal of Indianness (“Entitlement” 222”). Having Indian status usually means having a physical and cultural connection to a reserve (220). Because there is a physical connection to a reserve, one possesses the ability to stake claim to a particular nation or cultural heritage, which may be denied to those without status. Lawrence states, “Status is then equated quite openly with cultural knowledge or heritage (221).” In other words, Indian status is implicitly linked to the land, land is linked to cultural heritage, and cultural heritage is linked to apparent ‘Indianness’. As a hierarchical system of identity politics, Indian status is an incredibly complex structure that relies upon legislative reification and self-regulation in order to exist and continue to negotiate identities. A major part of this negotiation is deciding who is assigned status, and who is not.

In 1869 Gradual Enfranchisement Act came into effect, which took away the status of any Indian woman who married a white man (Lawrence “Regulation” 7). This meant that Indian women and their children had no right to their homes and lands on Indian reserves; this would prove to be devastating to many families who, for instance in the event of martial breakdown, would lose their ties to their communities, extended families, traditions, languages, and social and economic support systems. This gendered stipulation remained in effect until 1985 with the amendment of the
Indian Act, otherwise known was Bill C-31 (Lawrence “Regulation” 8, 13). The scope of this essay does not allow for a more nuanced unpacking of the gendered implications of the Indian Act (both historically and in its present form). However, it is important to highlight how Indigenous women and men experience(d) the Indian Act in varying ways, which ultimately contributes to gendered identities and experience in and with the broader Canadian society. By highlighting the gendered incongruence of the Indian Act, we see how the Act has been constructed in order to meet the needs of Canadian nation building, while at the same time highlighting how patriarchy, as a general mode of governance, is firmly embedded and entrenched in political and social consciousness.

Despite its divisive function, Indian status is a colonial control apparatus: its current impacts are not a result of how Native people fundamentally view and relate to each other. Rather, modern identity politics⁶ have been born out of the inequitable and egregious colonial policies as regulated by the federal government. Indian status has in fact denied the treaty rights of tens of thousands of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Lawrence “Entitlement” 223). In this sense, Indian status is less about affording ‘benefits’ to status Indians, and more about benefitting colonial structures vis-à-vis a codified dissolution of Aboriginal and Treaty rights⁷, which include inherent freedoms. Because of pervasive disbanding of rights to the reserve with respect to various incarnations of the Indian Act, many Indigenous peoples have found themselves building lives and communities in urban areas (Lawrence “Entitlement” 208). Certainly, not all of the impacts of urban migration have been negative – many

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⁶ Bonita Lawrence argues that “identity is understood as being neither neutral and passive, nor fixed” (“Regulation” 4) and although it is individualistic, it is also relational - how we understand ourselves and each other is often based on personal and group identifications. Identities are constantly in flux, sometimes assigned by others, and often taken up by individuals as a means of belonging to a collective. This is where the notion of politics comes into play; identities are not ‘naturally’ occurring, they are constructed - it is by whom and for what reason that sits at the core of understanding the politics of identity.

⁷ This essay addresses land and identity in later sections.
Indigenous people have accessed work and educational opportunities, and indeed consider cities and towns as their homes. In other words, there are complex reasons for why Indigenous peoples end up in urban centres: for some, they were forced while for others, it was a choice.

A Truthful Memorialization of Indigenous Identities: A Reconciliatory Responsibility

According to Ruth Phillips and Mark Phillips, one of the first mandates of the Museum – driven by its anthropological stance – was to collect elements of Indigenous culture as these cultures were perceived to be disappearing (696). At the same time, museums often act as sites of nation building and are commonly agents in promoting a national agenda - national identity is formed through the propagation of museums and heritage sites (Kaplan 2). A self-regulating cycle of identity is at play here; in order to have a strong sense of identity, nations require sites of national memory, but in the same moment, sites of national memory require an identity built on the collection and preservation of cultural artefacts and memories. Museums and identities cannot be disentangled from one another, and indeed this relationship is one of co-dependence – without one, the other cannot arguably exist. In Canada, national identity has been built largely based on its encounters with Indigenous nations and peoples, making it crucial that narratives of national memory actively engage with accurate, relevant and meaningful representations of Indigenous peoples, including their diverse identities.
The reality of multiple Indigenous identities is not sufficiently accounted for within the Canadian Museum of History. This is not to say that the Indian Act is not addressed in any way within the Museum. In the section on Arrival of Strangers – The Last 500 Years, in essence, there is not much mention of the Act against the social backdrop of Indigenousness in Canada. When positioned this way within the Museum, then, the Indian Act is seen largely from its legislative standpoint and not its social standpoint. Indeed, there is a chronological timeline to the Act, however, the First People’s Hall takes on thematic form, unlike other parts of the Museum where chronology is key. So while the existing etymology of the Act is key to understanding Canada and its relationship with Indigenous peoples, it is important to acknowledge that socio-political and cultural themes transcend chronological viewpoints. For many Indigenous peoples, the legislative meaning of the Indian Act permeates the social realm in deep and profound ways; because of this, it is critical that the Museum engage with these realities in order to offer a complete narrative that satisfies the complexities of national memory.

Adding a contradictory nature to the exhibits concerning Indigenous peoples in Canada, Ruth B. Phillips states that the Canadian Museum of History (known as Civilization at the time of Phillips’ article) focusses a heavy lens on the issues of land claims, Indigenous connections to the land, and identity as linked to the land, albeit in an inconsistent way (Phillips 78). The lands in question, however, do not directly link to urban landscapes. Rather much of the focus relies upon reserve lands and land claims to otherwise ‘invisible’ areas that are commonly obscured from the periphery of public consciousness. In this way, from a representational perspective, the continual process of Canadian nation building is insulated from the Indigenous stakes to cities and towns and cosmopolitan identities. These inconsistencies within the spectre of representation within the Museum are driven by its location as a site of
national memory. It is crucial to identify these contradictions in order to call into question the legitimacy of these institutions, and perhaps ways to make them more complete and “truthful”. One of the first steps in the process of unpacking colonial baggage is to explore the purpose of museums, and how they came to be institutionalized arbitrators of historical accuracy, seen by many as an incontrovertible “truth”. According to Flora Kaplan:

Museums appear to be unique public institutions that have emerged in western nation-states of democratic bent. They are spaces in which elites and competing social groups express their ideas and world views. (2)

The museum thus becomes a site of public education. On the educative goals of the state, Stuart Hall argues that, “[t]hrough its power to preserve and represent culture, the state has assumed some responsibility for educating its citizenry in those forms of ‘really useful knowledge’ (24).” Hall argues that even when museums make concerted efforts to take universal approaches to defining achievements of culture, they remain intricately linked into “national story” (25). Museums are, thus, not neutral sites of heritage conservation. They are wholly implicated in identity politics, whether national identity or meta-identities of those who are represented within the walls of institutions of national memory. It is important to remember that curatorial work is about deciding on the collection to be displayed, and just as importantly, what not to display. Whether such decisions are based on personal preference, academic literature, social pressure, or institutional policy, elements of national identity play an

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8 It is interesting to note that in Canadian and their Pasts, a research project lead by Jocelyn Létourneau, surveys indicate that by and large Canadians view museums as truth holders, sometimes even more than teachers and books. Canadians put the onus and trust on museum officials to conduct thorough and accurate research. What is more, because museums are supported by governments, Canadians often view this as an important element of trustworthiness. To see a brief explanation of the report’s findings and subsequent publication as book, see: http://blogs.canoe.ca/davidakin/history-2/clip-understanding-historical-thinking-with-canadians-and-their-pasts/

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important role in the decision-making process: “Like personal memory, social memory is highly selective (Hall 26)”

In the case of museums, the personal becomes social, and therefore the cultural becomes political, whether it has been intended through institutional policy, the expectations of academic inquiry, or perhaps unintentional oversight.

Borrowing from Benedict Anderson’s theory of the ‘imagined community’, Hall asserts that although we are strangers to one another, the idea of ‘nation’ is often shared by the citizenry, but in order to prop up the notion of the nation, the regulation of cultural meanings must occur (24). That is, the nation is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, rather, its legitimacy and existence relies on the culmination of cultural meta-narratives that are assembled to infuse meaning into the ‘nation’. While the nation is an imagined community, it must also be consistently and regulatory re-imagined and re-configured in order to remain a constant system of social, political, economic, territorial and cultural cohesion. The question then becomes how the nation relates to other nations with stakes to the same lands upon which political legitimacy relies? As mentioned previously, major elements of First Peoples Hall indicate an Indigenous connection to the land as being integral to Indigenous identity in Canada (Phillips and Phillips 699).

Certainly, it is important to highlight the resilience, resurgence, and cultural continuity of Indigenous peoples in Canada (a cadre of Indigenous people directed the Museum to do so in the planning stages). However, in a way, by illustrating the perseverance of Indigenous peoples in a public institution, there is an underlying presumption that this process of cultural continuity was somehow mutually facilitated – there is no indication of how Indigenous peoples have persevered despite policies of assimilation and enfranchisement, such as the Indian Act. Certainly, the purpose of the Museum is not to shame the Canadian state – it is quite the opposite. However, if the Museum is thought to be situated within a ‘post-colonial’ state of cultural respect
and multiplicity (Phillips and Phillips 694), then there is a moment of reckoning that should take place if the Museum is to meaningfully move past its complicity in building Canadian national identity vis-à-vis codified misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples.

The Indian Act notwithstanding, the Museum does attempt to engage with some of the tensions that have occurred between the state and Indigenous peoples, such as the Oka Crisis and the confrontations in Burnt Church, Nova Scotia, which later prompted the Supreme Court to hold up Mi’kmaq fishing rights (Phillips and Phillips 701). It could be said, then, that not everything represented in the Museum frames the state in a positive light. However, the important distinction in these two cases is that Indigenous peoples are framed as being partially culpable – these two examples are presented as conflicts, and conflicts generally require two parties to be actively engaged, power imbalances notwithstanding. Indigenous people are seen as resisters, which imply agency and social cohesion. However, their identity is still mired by flashpoint events that come to embody what visitors might perceive Indigenous peoples to be – troublemakers and reactive as opposed to proactive. What is important to note here is that both of these events are linked to the dispossession of land, which seems to contradict a common message throughout the Museum that the identities of Indigenous peoples continue to be linked to a deep and enduring connection to the land, despite being oftentimes disconnected from homelands due to the Indian Act.

…indigenous identities in public museums remain essentialized, rendered ahistorical, and devoid of subjectivities and dynamism…ignoring the centuries of social, domestic, and economic challenges facing indigenous groups themselves. (Trofanenko 309)
Brenda Trofanenko argues that while museums engage with Indigenous material objects as a means of affirming the cultural and physical presence of Indigenous peoples, oftentimes the Museum obscures the way that Indigenous identities have come to be defined by such objects. According to Trafanenko, it is easier for museums to display cultural objects as works of art, which imbues a fascination with Indigenous peoples, as opposed to addressing the socio-political meaning of a state institution putting subjugated peoples on display (310). In other words, by drawing attention to the beauty and resilience of Indigenous peoples, museums effectively obscure the assimilationist intentions of the state and the instruments through which the subjugation and oppression of Indigenous peoples prevails. When framed in this light, the absence of the Indian Act makes political and aesthetic sense, at least from the point of view of national memory. It is perhaps easier to forget the past than to re-member the present and future. But it is neither historically, nor contemporaneously, accurate, and for that reason, truth is evaded.

Indigenous Views on the Memorialization of Indigenous Identities

The focus of this essay has thus far been on how the Museum remembers and forgets Indigenous identities, but it is also important to explore how Indigenous peoples perceive museums and indeed what can be done to subvert and reinstate more accurate reflections of Indigenous identities in modern nation-states. Miriam Clavir acknowledges that there is a range of Indigenous perspectives when it comes to considering museums. Certainly, there are a wide range of Indigenous professionals who work with and in museums. There are many Indigenous cultural centres (quasi-museums), as well and others who work closely with museums to preserve and conserve Indigenous cultural elements within the realm of museums (69). This is an important distinction to make, for a couple of reasons: 1) this statement works to de-
homogenize dominant understandings of Indigenous cultures as global and indistinct(ive); and 2) it is crucial to highlight how Indigenous peoples are not passive victims in the propagation of institutes of cultural memory. Of course, the historical representation has been carried out without the consent of Indigenous peoples, and has negatively impacted Indigenous lives in countless ways. However, by painting museums as simply a site of cultural decimation would take away the significance of nation-specific contributions to museums such as the Canadian Museum of History’s welcome message at the entrance to the Great Hall. The message includes words from the Algonquin language, the Indigenous nation upon whose territory the museum sits – this has been widely celebrated as a positive step forward in the relationship between museums and Indigenous peoples (Phillips and Phillips 694).

While it is important to acknowledge the contributions of Indigenous peoples to museums, however, it is equally as important to illustrate the limitations of working within paradigms of national memory. Adding to the challenge of working within such a paradigm, the identity of the Museum itself is constantly in flux. Since Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been in office, the Museum has seen a colossal shift in its mandate, including changing its name from Civilization to History. To many, this move marks a deliberate re-framing that involves upholding, instilling and appropriating cultural symbols to perhaps suggest a certain Canadian indigeneity (Delacourt n.p.). What will happen to the indigenous identities within the Museum as a result of the Harper Government’s shifting focus on Canadian military, economic and social histories’ remains to be seen. What is important to note here is how national memory is interrupted, or redesigned, depending on the national agendas and envisioning of the state. National memory is not based in truth, but rather on what the nation wishes to remember – an important distinction to make when examining the role(s) of museums in national memory.

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Although the vast majority of national memory has been constructed by the state-sanctioned nationalist discourse, museums are not strictly one-sided enterprises. Indeed, there exists substantial contributions to museums from First Nations people and organizations, however, Miriam Clavir asserts that despite such contributions, “[m]useum and First Nations perspectives differ not only intellectually, but emotionally (77).” In other words, it is not the museums that are necessarily the problem; it is the seemingly oppositional sites of meaning that conflict when it comes to understanding Indigenous peoples and their place in museums. Nancy Marie Mithlo appears to echo this statement through her assertion that, “[t]ypically, Indigenous knowledge is perceived as subjective and restricted while Western knowledge is seen as scientific, objective and free of restrictions (743).” Mithlo presupposes then, that interactions between Western and Indigenous cultures are not so much ‘post-colonial’ as they are ‘late imperial’ (743). When seen through this theoretical framework, intellectual pragmatism on the part of the state overrides the supposed need to tell an accurate historical story. The Museum can thus be seen as less concerned with authenticity as it is with upholding a colonial fantasy driven by the needs of the nation in its continual efforts to affirm its own constructed identity by way of misrepresenting and obscuring Indigenous identities.
Nancy Marie Mithlo calls upon museums to *meaningfully* incorporate Indigenous knowledge through the implementation of Indigenous methodologies, decision-making control and the honouring of Indigenous theoretical aims – anything less will fail to connect the museum in any relevant way to the nations and peoples whose cultures are represented within (759-760). Adding to this, I would suggest that museums reconsider not only what to *include* but to examine what they may have excluded from their nationalist narratives. As demonstrated throughout this essay, the *Indian Act* has had such a profound and lasting impact on the lives of many Indigenous peoples, it is assumed that the impacts of the *Indian Act* will endure for generations to come. Identities have been altered at the hands of this *Act*; access to lands and culture has been limited due to the assimilatory spectre of the *Act*; Canadian nation-building has relied heavily on the propagation of the *Act*. Considering that the Canadian Museum of History focuses heavily on Indigenous identities, lands, and the process of building national memory, it would only make sense to portray the mechanisms that arbitrate meaning between cultural objects and political subjects.

At the core, this essay has endeavored to answer the questions: what is an Indian and according to whom? The answer, if there is one at all, is incredibly complex, nuanced, varied, contested, in flux and extremely difficult to summarize because the Indian Act has plural meanings for many different people. As it stands, the Museum acknowledges the *Indian Act* almost as a standalone piece, the majority of

*Incorporation of Native bodies do not necessarily indicate incorporation of Native thought. (Clavir 744)*
its presence accompanying other legislation in a small portion of the First People’s Hall. In this way, the Indian Act becomes more of a noun, and not a verb; the Act’s meaning is then reduced to a legislative role, and does little to acknowledge the social ramifications of the Act. In reality, there is not a clear separation of the Act and Indigenous social strata; when the two are mixed they cannot be separated into constituent parts. Instead of relegating information on the Indian Act to a small portion of the Museum, efforts should be made to intertwine the Act and its impacts into all the themes that currently exist in the First People’s Hall. If we imagine the Museum as a tapestry woven of cultural memory, then when it comes to Indigenous identities, the Indian Act should be a common and binding thread. Such an endeavor could be accomplished by:

1) Developing and installing an interactive activity (or activities) that meaningfully engage with Indigenous identities, with an emphasis on how identities are impacted by the Indian Act;

2) Creating a standalone exhibit that illustrate narratives and testimonies of people impacted by the Indian Act; as an enriched form of truth-telling; and,

3) Engaging with Indigenous-driven pedagogical frameworks to develop educational programming that will provide visitors with a more nuanced and relevant understanding of Indigenous identities, and its interlocutors.

This essay has attempted to make sense of the incomplete portrayal of the Indian Act in the halls of the Canadian Museum of History. This was done, in part, to demonstrate that the Museum obscures (perhaps unintentionally) the lived reality of Indigenous peoples as negotiated by their encounters with ongoing colonial policy and, arguably, unconstitutional, archaic, and aggressive legislation. Looking at it this way, we see how the Museum puts on an Indian act by excluding the Indian Act. By infusing the Indian Act and its implications more fully into its exhibits, the Museum
could present a more fulsome, relevant and accurate portrayal of how Canadian history relates to modern Indigenous identities and societies. With the assistance of this approach, perhaps then collective consciousness will awake to the undeniable reality that the Indian Act ought to be seen, in many ways, as an enabler of state-sanctioned identity, and not what it really means to be Indigenous in Canada.

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