PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND FIRST-PERSON INTERPRETATION AT THE CANADIAN MUSEUM OF HISTORY

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PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND FIRST-PERSON INTERPRETATION AT THE CANADIAN MUSEUM OF HISTORY

Stephanie Elliott

ABSTRACT
The Canadian Museum of History (CMH) offers the visitor a potentially active experience in Canada Hall, which features an elaborate series of spaces designed to follow “1000 Years of Canadian History” (CMH “Floor Plan”) from East to West. In this exhibit, the visitor enters a simulated reality with life-sized houses, ships, churches and streetscapes which frame the museum’s collection. The result is an immersive atmosphere, creating a sense of travelling through time and making visitors feel as though they are, in fact, standing outside in a New France square, for example. There is, however, something missing from this “virtual reality”: people. There is no one buying goods in the New France Square, Ontario Street is a ghost town, and the Vancouver International Airport is eerily still. This void breaks the “compensatory illusion” (Delaney 141) of the exhibit by omitting an essential aspect of the Canadian landscape, and in doing so causes visitors to relinquish their suspension of disbelief, and return, even briefly, to the present. Lacking too are human stories. Visitors are left with the sense that the places in the Canadian landscape and history are far more important than the people occupying them, and as a result they don’t see any version of themselves represented in it. First-person interpretation as a museum technique is able to bridge the gaps in the CMH’s Canada Hall, due to its ability to entertain while educating, effectively transmit human emotions and experiences, and to its ability to engagingly offer more substantial information than placards or mobile applications ever could.

KEYWORDS
First-person interpretation; Canadian Museum of History; Education; personal narrative.

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Is this the real life?

The Canadian Museum of History (CMH) offers the visitor a potentially active experience in Canada Hall, which features an elaborate series of spaces designed to follow “1000 Years of Canadian History” (CMH “Floor Plan”) from East to West. In this exhibit, the visitor enters a simulated reality with life-sized houses, ships, churches and streetscapes which frame the museum’s collection. The result is an immersive atmosphere, creating a sense of travelling through time and making visitors feel as though they are, in fact, standing outside in a New France square, for example.

There is, however, something missing from this “virtual reality”: people. There is no one buying goods in the New France Square, Ontario Street is a ghost town, and the Vancouver International Airport is eerily still. This void breaks the “compensatory illusion” (Delaney 141) of the exhibit by omitting an essential aspect of the Canadian landscape, and in doing so, causes visitors to relinquish their suspension of disbelief, and return, even briefly, to the present. Lacking too are human stories. Visitors are left with the sense that the places in the Canadian landscape and history are far more important than the people occupying them, and as a result, they do not see any version of themselves represented in it. Personal narratives make it easier for the public to connect and engage with history – the innkeeper’s journal description of her typical guests is far more interesting than the opening and closing dates of her establishment, for example. One way to introduce personal stories to museum or historic site visitors is through the use of first-person interpreters who, in portraying the story of a historical figure, make meaningful connections with the visitor. In the
case of Canada Hall at the CMH, first-person interpreters relating personal history would automatically humanize the exhibit.

What I am proposing is not, however, the first time a form of first-person interpretation has been utilized in the Canada Hall setting. If the Canada Hall exhibit seems more like a set than a museum gallery, that is because it actually is a set—a theatre set.

On opening day of the museum, June 29, 1989, Dramamuse, the CMH’s very own theatre troupe performed their first skit in Canada Hall. According to their website, “The group engages visitors through short plays and interactive theatre…combining content-rich scripted scenes with improvised interaction. Dramamuse is History in Action” (Canadian Museum of History). Dramamuse was disbanded in 2011 when all eight members were laid off after budget cuts (CBC News). This space, Canada Hall, was meant to be experienced with the presence of real human beings. This feature has now been lost, but there is no reason why it should not be regained, as I will demonstrate below.

In this paper, I propose to determine how first-person interpretation of personal narratives could be used in Canada Hall to create a more active and more relatable visitor experience. I will begin by defining key terms relevant to this paper. I will then debate the value of entertainment in education-based museum exhibits, pinpoint what parts of history Canadians are interested in, and explain how first-person interpretation is the ideal technique to address both. I will then examine two reviews of the CMH and highlight first-person interpretation as a solution to the concerns raised therein. Finally, I will propose potential figures, themes and scenarios, which would be appropriate for the CMH’s Canada Hall.
Definitions

Before examining surveys and studies, I will first define some key terms for this paper: Naming in the CMH; interpretation; first-person interpretation; personal narratives/stories.

Because of the varying publication dates of my main sources, there may be some confusion regarding the names of certain aspects of the Canadian Museum of History itself. The title of the CMH has recently been changed from the Canadian Museum of Civilization, a name that replaced the 1980s title, The National Museum of Man. As well, Canada Hall was first called History Hall, changed in the 1990s after many critiques of its historical completeness. Throughout this paper I will refer to the museum and the exhibit by their current names, regardless of which source I am citing (in square brackets when amending a citation).

Interpretation is the central theme in this paper – it is the action of using informal techniques to clearly convey historical messages. Freeman Tilden defines interpretation as “[a]n educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (8). Here, links between the intangible and the tangible – stories and meanings linked with objects or places – are evident and essential, as is the importance of avoiding a strict relation of facts.
First-person interpretation is the main subject of this paper. According to Stacy Roth, “[t]he goal of first-person interpretation is to relate the past and relate to the past in a way that personalizes and humanizes it” (20).

First-person interpretation uses personal narratives to engage with visitors in a familiar way – i.e. the daily occurrence of telling stories – in order to spark interest and transmit a memorable message. Roth also states that,

[...]first-person is particularly suited to the depiction of human feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and social interactions. Presented as an unfolding of events, emotions and processes, rather than as a lecture full of facts, it promotes understanding rather than memorization, empathy rather than detachment (20).

It is difficult to portray these fundamental human emotions with a static display of text, artifacts and detached video. However, a real person expressing these emotions (although a representation of a past reality) lends credence to the stories and allows for a more relatable experience.

By ‘personal narratives’ I mean to identify stories and anecdotes of the people who used/lived in/worked at the space throughout its history; how they lived, how they interacted with the space, whether it is a building, a natural space, a monument, or a disappeared space (i.e. the Fortress of Louisbourg ruins). Van Dijck’s definition, “[t]he acts and products of remembering in which individuals engage to make sense of themselves in time and place” (6), pertains to her concept of “personal cultural memory”. This is very similar my concept of personal narratives, however the use of “narrative” instead of “cultural memory” is essential in the context of this paper, because it implies a story to be told. Personal narratives are the intangible values between a space and the people who used to be there, in any capacity.
**Education versus Entertainment**

History, and particularly Canadian history, is a subject often assumed to be unutterably boring, and not worth the time it takes to read a placard or to pay attention in class. So, especially in a museum focused on Canadian history, visitors need to be shown why it is, in fact, interesting. Entertainment value can and should be a huge tool for inciting interest in the visitor. In the museum world, however, there is a gulf between education and entertainment, which seems impossible to traverse.

Most heritage attractions see their purpose as primarily educational, and there is much debate about the need for and appropriateness of entertainment. … Even those pleading for this more rational approach refer to education and entertainment as separate rather than seeing them as part of the same process: “There has always been a fundamental problem in knowing when the entertainment stops, and the education starts”[Walsh 105] (Malcolm-Davies 278).

But eschewing entertainment in any form for the sake of education will only result in empty museums and a loss of knowledge.

Jane Malcolm-Davies, the director of a consulting firm for museums, begins her article by discussing this debate. She questions whether entertainment and education can be separated in a museum or historic site setting, or if the former could potentially enhance the latter (278). Although there are proponents for either understanding, Malcolm-Davies states that none have substantiated their claims with
visitor opinion statistics (278). Visitors possess the most important opinion in this debate. Malcolm-Davies conducted her own survey of 340 sites worldwide, focusing on 12 sites in the UK, Sweden, Canada and the USA.

By contrasting visitor priorities with how interpreters contribute to those priorities, she determines that “education and entertainment cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive; both are required for visitors to feel their visits are worthwhile” (286).

The gulf between education and entertainment, as perceived by museum professionals, does not necessarily exist for visitors, as Malcolm-Davies’ study shows. There is no reason why this gulf should exist to the extent that it does. Visitors do not believe that education can only happen when there is no entertainment value; most people do not actively absorb information from subjects in which they have little interest. In any other academic endeavour, having interest in the study topic only spurs the student on. Where an innate interest does not already exist, it has to be planted. An entertaining and engaging topic is more likely to result in retained information because the topic has gained the student’s attention. This is equally true in a museum setting. While museum professionals fear that to be entertaining requires a sacrifice of knowledge and teaching moments, how much more knowledge will be lost if no one is interested?

*Canadians want Personal Narratives*

If visitors must be interested in the exhibitions, and if interpreters must be committed to understanding visitors’ interests, how are those interests determined? In light of studies done in the US, Australia and Europe, an investigation into Canadians’ historical interest was launched in 2003. *Canadians and Their Pasts*, by The Pasts Collective (Margaret Conrad, Kadriye Ercikan, Gerald Friesen, Jocelyn
Létourneau, Delphine Muise, David Northrup, and Peter Seixas), summarizes its findings after conducting telephone interviews with 3,419 people in Canada.

They surveyed a mix of people from across Canada, focusing special groups in the Peel region of the Greater Toronto Area, New Brunswick and Aboriginal communities near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and taking a separate sampling from five major Canadian cities: Montreal, Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver (Conrad, Ercikan and Friesen 7). They determined that Canadians are primarily interested in family history over all other historical categories.

The Pasts Collective asked seven categories of questions, designed to assess Canadians’ interest and attachment to history – history being a wide representation from family to international – and compiling data to show preferences, activities, and opinions on various aspects of history or the past. “[T]he majority of Canadians rely primarily on family history to anchor themselves in time and place …. The history of Canada and of the respondents’ religion tied as distant seconds as interesting and important pasts” (10). The survey found that Canadians are far more interested in family history than in more general, Canadian national history (34). In most areas of the study, participants found it easier to relate to family history, including history of the “extended family” of their culture – such as Acadian history for New Brunswick residents (95). Based on the Past Collective’s findings on Canadians’ historical interests,

[c]h[ie]ib[its and programs that link personal and community pasts to larger national and international stories may not only draw the largest crowds but also perform a key educational function by promoting understanding of links between the local and the global, the personal and the public. The popularity of these institutions lies in their
power to influence Canadians’ reflections on the past, and thus on their identities (157).

This is an important recommendation to keep in mind, since it is derived directly from a sampling of Canadians themselves, many of whom find value in visiting museums and historic sites. This statement demonstrates exactly where that value is located – relatable personal narratives.

First-Person Interpretation

In today’s fast-paced world, however, relatable personal narratives are beginning to be replaced in museums with impersonal technological devises such as touchscreen activities, mobile applications, and audio-guides. How can a visitor feel empathy for a puzzle piece on a screen? Or be in awe of a long journey when it takes two swipes on a phone? Technological exhibits draw visitors not for the information they can transmit, but for the novelty and excitement that comes from a new mobile experience. What is this but another form of entertainment? This form, however, reduces the museum experience to the size and scope of a smartphone, eliminating any actual interaction with the exhibit. It almost negates the necessity of an exhibit when the visitor can gain what information they need from the application. A more traditional form of museum activity is much better suited to the revelation of personal narratives while allowing visitors to remain engaged in the museum space: first-person interpretation. Roth says that,

it is low tech, yet highly interactive, a perfect escape from the wired world of computers and television. It stimulates the imagination and the senses. It brings the abstract concepts of formal study to life. It creates an emotional and personal involvement with the past unlike that of television or films because it is unpredictable. It talks back. Asks questions. Surprises listeners with something...
they never knew before. Relates to personal interests. Adapts to young and old. It might even encourage a trip to the library (178).

First-person interpretation is the most dynamic and adaptable form of museum interpretation. The interpreter can synthesize more information than a panel; they are not restricted by a word count or what information will fit into a three minute video. Interpreters are able to present the information and storylines in a way that is familiar and quotidian for the visitor, making it seem as though it is a conversation instead of a lecture.

The effectiveness of first-person interpretation in museums has been affirmed by many scholars, based on personal experience and visitor surveys. Stacy Flora Roth’s monograph, Past into Present: Effective Techniques for First-Person Interpretation directly speaks to first-person interpretation, and while her findings are based on personal and professional experience instead of on survey results, she still offers some valuable insights into the effectiveness of first-person interpretation. Her work reads as a conversational how-to for first-person interpreters, with some analysis of how first-person interpretation works in various settings. Despite first-person interpretation requiring a larger commitment on the part of the interpreter and the public, Roth says “it harbours special rewards for the inquisitive, imaginative, and willing player, akin to the thrill of achieving the higher levels of a virtual-reality game” (13). These rewards include gaining knowledge, entertainment, and a personal connection to the stories told.

Malcolm-Davies addressed costumed interpreters in her survey and found that “visitors do not use models and panels as much and believe costumed interpreters to be more informative” (281). First-person interpreters, a type of costumed interpreter,
are therefore trusted sources in the museum setting, to be consulted for a complete picture of the information presented in the exhibit.

Particularly in a setting like the CMH, because it was intended to make use of the in-house theatre troupe, first-person interpretation is a necessary component of the exhibit. “The interface between an institution and its visitors is what makes or breaks a program, no matter how well conceived or thoroughly researched” (Roth 181). The interface in the CMH now is merely the set, stripped of its players, and therefore stripped of the opportunity for a complete and clear message.

_Critiquing Canada Hall_

When launching a new programme or exhibit, every museum faces the possibility of criticism – from museum reviewers, historians, visitors, other curators, and newspapers, just to name a few sources. These critiques may come before, directly following, or many years after the opening of the new element. For the Canadian Museum of History (CMH), a critical review of its Canada Hall exhibit came a decade after the opening of the exhibit.

The 1999 review of Canada Hall highlighted the absence of political history in the exhibition, and attempted to recommend ways to fill these gaps. “The Canada Hall reports were written by four historians who worked independently of each other and who were given a very specific task generated by the debate over the absence of political history in the hall’s exhibits. They reported to a team internal to the museum” (Dean and Rider, Museums, Nation and Political History in the Australian National Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization 39).
According to Dean and Rider, the CMH review addressed five main issues: national unity, quality of the exhibitions, additions to exhibits, linking exhibits, and specific goals. Three of the four reviewers wanted more emphasis on the uniting aspects of Canadian life – “the institutions and values that Canadians share,…the work of nation-building…[and] reference to Canada’s two ‘historic founding peoples’” (Dean and Rider, Museums, Nation and Political History in the Australian National Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization 40).

The reviewers assessed the quality of the exhibitions to evaluate what was missing in the CMH. All four shared the sentiment that Canada Hall was “lacking in linkages,” and that the “individual …modules provided ‘no idea of interdependent development’” (41). The presence of people was identified as an element that would improve the overall connectivity within the exhibit (42). The four reviewers offered some suggestions for additions to the existing exhibits – most of them, as encouraged in their mandate, concerning the addition of political history. Their suggestions included new major exhibits, featuring political events and topics such “the Conquest, Confederation, creation of new provinces…Quebec separatism” (42). Some reviewers called for more controversial topics, such as Americanization and globalization, as well. An overarching theme throughout their reviews, “[a]ll of the reports recommended that the Canada Hall be populated with real personages, not fictional representations” (42), referencing Dramamuse (operational at the time) as purveyors of these figures. In order to create more explicit connections between modules in Canada Hall, the reviewers suggested using well-known figures that could be linked to multiple sections, in addition to using “audioguides, maps, …films…[and] text
panels” (42) to facilitate the transition between modules and to cross-reference interdependent modules.

As for the subject of these resources, political history and events were cited as the best topic to bring Canada Hall exhibitions into conversation with one another (42-3). The reviewers were advocating for more first-person interpretation, assessing it as an integral and effective way to make connections with the exhibit and with the visitors.

As a result of these four reports, some recommendations have been carried out, such as the supplementary text panels and maps, and the inclusion of short historical biographies throughout the exhibition. The “Canadian Personalities Hall” also opened shortly after these reports, featuring political figures and other noteworthy Canadians (44). Dramamuse began performing significantly more critical and complex scenes than their previous works (National Council on Public History 58-9), although only on weekends and special event days. Evidently, these four reviews were well received by the museum and many recommendations were implemented. This may be because the CMH wanted to go in a more political direction, and asked for reviews about adding political content (Dean and Rider, Museums, Nation and Political History in the Australian National Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization 39). Thus, museum directors and curators may have been predisposed to approve of recommendations like this.

There have been, however, more diverse and unsolicited critiques of the CMH’s Canada Hall. An article by Jill Delaney in 1992 (perhaps one of the reviews that led to the 1999 reports), “Ritual Space in the Canadian Museum of Civilization: Consuming Canadian Identity,” discusses the consumerism intrinsic in the “Disneyfied” Canada Hall. She says the hall imitates the recreated townscape present in Disneyland – creating a false, idealized reality. Delaney explains that Canada hall
creates a passive experience for visitors, during which there is only the opportunity for absorbing the nationalist, consumerist ideals promoted by this exhibit (Delaney 144). She expresses concern that because the Hall is promoted as a “rite of passage” for Canadians (144), and because it is set up as a “Disneyfied” exhibit, which, in presenting a reality without context, becomes a space that is devoid of substance and meaning.

Delaney’s “Disney” comparison to the CMH is based on the fact that the entire Canada Hall is a construction of near to life-size reproductions, to house an exhibition that presents a mostly-rosy version of Canadian history. The lack of human presence in the exhibit (except for those weekend performances) only emphasizes the disconnect between real life and that exhibit. Delaney quotes an essay by the first CMH museum director himself, George MacDonald, which demonstrates his proclivity for an Epcot-like experience in his new museum:

I can only say that my very best slides of the Temple of Heaven were taken under sunny Florida skies, and I show them in preference to those I took of the real thing later in Beijing under leaden skies and years of neglect during the cultural revolution. My Epcot slides portray the Temple of Heaven as Emperors would have dreamed it (Delaney 145).

MacDonald would rather portray an idealized version of a real location or event than offer the reality, which may be aesthetically and physically displeasing.

Based on these two critiques of the CMH, we can identity a few key shortcomings of Canada Hall. Firstly, there is the lack of connection between sections of the exhibit. Linked to this idea is Delaney’s critique of the fact that the Canada Hall is made up of reproductions of cultural buildings and settings.
“This creates a distanciation, both physically (as the spaces are removed from their original settings) and intellectually (as the spaces are interpretive recreations of original creations)” (137). The disconnections between the sections of the exhibit are felt more strongly because the sections, as well as the exhibit itself, are intrinsically artificial. Secondly, there is a lack of specific, high profile events and people highlighted in the exhibit. Admittedly, this is what the 1999 report was slated to investigate; however, this issue follows from the question of connection within the exhibit. The places represented in the exhibit carry little meaning when there are no events or people to anchor them. Since most significant events are to do with people and not the natural world, this speaks to the importance of human presence in the exhibit.

The 1999 reviews of the CMH’s Canada Hall highlight issues the museum already knew existed. It is encouraging that some of the recommendations were carried out. Unfortunately, fifteen years later, many of the concerns raised in these reports remain as concerns. Although national unity is expressed in the geographical progression of the exhibit, it is undermined by the sustained lack of connection between regions. Major historical figures are only acknowledged in the bottom quarter of small placards, and are easily missed. The theatre troupe is now disbanded, effectively stripping Canada Hall of the opportunity to connect with visitors on a personal level and to clarify the connections between sections of the exhibit. Based on these reviews, the human aspect is what is really missing from Canada Hall, because human presence informs the issues of connection, context, and political events.
Making Connections

If the CMH were to re-implement and use a successful first-person program in Canada Hall, many factors would have to cooperate. As Malcolm-Davies stated, CMH would need to invest significant money and time in preliminary and ongoing research, the hiring of passionate employees, the careful training of the interpreters, and the compilation of a coherent and compelling storyline. As pointed out by many scholars, personal narratives and family histories must be a main source of knowledge during the research stages, because these types of stories are naturally relatable to the visitor. Taking into account the 1999 reports and Delaney’s review, human presence and political events should not be omitted from the CMH Canada Hall, and first-person interpretation using historical figures and storylines around certain major events would be effective in ensuring these two critical aspects are incorporated. To build and add depth to the interpretive scene, Woods’ concepts of thick interpretation and artifact reading should be applied by the interpreters and by visitors. Finally, ensuring the storylines are adaptable and relatable enough to engage visitors’ emotions from different sides of an issue is important in the quest to find a coherent, interesting, educational, active and fun museum experience.

Storylines, figures and events featuring personal narratives are endlessly abundant in Canadian history. Countless combinations and themes could be picked out and explored through a first-person interpretive program at the CMH. I will use two examples from Canada Hall at the CMH to demonstrate missed opportunities for first-person interpretation.
The first example is located in the “Eastern Timber Trade” section of Canada Hall. In this section, there is a rough camp shelter, a firepit, some benches and a few artefacts such as blankets, pots and pans, and clothing.

A pile of planed wood forms part of this section, across the corridor from the camp. Most visitors will not, of their own volition, get very enthusiastic about this un-interpreted pile of wood; there is only a video explaining the context, which not many people watch. But, if it were to be explained by an interpreter or tour guide that piles of wood several storeys high used to sit on the very land occupied by the museum, and that log drivers rode the river just outside, the wood pile in the museum becomes a little more interesting. If the interpreter is portraying a 19th century log driver, he explains that every few weeks he makes a raft from the wood on those piles, loads more of it on top, and rides the raft down to Montreal where he sells the wood and hitches a ride back to Wrightsville (Gatineau, today) on a steamer. Now the wood pile becomes an educational moment where a story is relayed, which is relatable because of its physical relationship to the audience, and which is entertaining because of the interpreter’s enthusiasm and character. This effect is compounded when the visitor steps outside and sees the river that leads to Montreal.

The lack of personal narratives is strongly felt in an earlier section of the museum, “Early Acadia.” This section focuses more on dyke construction and operation than on the deportation and subsequent return of Acadian people. While visiting the museum recently, I witnessed several other visitors stop to briefly examine the enormous dyke display, and walk right by the much smaller placard describing the deportation. I almost missed it myself when actively looking for an interpretation of the event.
This, like the wood pile, is another opportunity for first-person interpretation to portray human emotions, as Roth highlights. The deportation needs no embellishment – it is already tragic, moving, and exciting. It only needs a delivery to suit its significance.

Using resources like journals and letters, a real historical person’s emotions and life story are accessible to the interpreter, and with sufficient research and commitment, could be used very effectively to tell the deportation story based on that person’s experiences. The dykes, while an “exceptional testimony to a traditional farming settlement” (UNESCO), are not the point of interest in Acadian life for most visitors. It is the human emotion and experience, the personal narrative, of being uprooted and forcibly exiled that draws the audience’s attention, and which enables connections to be made between the past and the visitor’s present.

First-person interpretation is a valid and valuable resource for museums, particularly history museums. It deftly combines entertainment and education – something that is, in fact, possible, as demonstrated by Malcolm-Davies’ and Roth’s articles. It offers more information than other traditional museum interpretive techniques in a manner which is not formally academic and which is easily accessible. First-person interpretation can be adapted and changed based on audience knowledge, interest and time constraints, while providing an essential perspective of Canadian history. This perspective is that of the Canadian people, portrayed from many unique points of view, as is the result of first-person interpretation’s adaptability. This form of interpretation has enormous potential for the CMH, given that it was conceived with a first-person interpretation programme in mind. While the plans for the new CMH History Hall have not been revealed, first-person interpretation remains a
strongly recommended inclusion, due to its ability to make emotional and intellectual connections with visitors. These connections are nearly impossible to the same degree when using non-human interpretive tools. While there may still be hesitation in using a theatre-like technique, the benefits far outweigh the costs in knowledge, interest and museum attendance.

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