Inclusion and Exclusion: Exploring Indigenous Under Representation at the Canadian Museum of History

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Inclusion and Exclusion: Exploring Indigenous Under-Representation at the Canadian Museum of History

ABSTRACT
This article examines Indigenous representations in Canadian society, and how cultural institutions such as the Museum of History have helped shape people’s understandings of Indigenous cultures. Representations in education and in the media are analyzed, and provide context for the ways in which Indigenous peoples continue to be marginalized. The Museum of History is then used as a case study, and allows readers to explore the lack of Indigenous voices within the space. Specific exhibits such as the Great Hall and the First Peoples Hall are examined in order to display that this lack of Indigenous voices is a problem that exists throughout the museum. The museum could potentially bridge the gap between Western methods of display and Indigenous curatorial practices, and to help Indigenous peoples reclaim their cultural representations at the same time. They have already integrated an Aboriginal Training Program in Museum Practices, and by getting involved in curatorial practices, Indigenous peoples can then include themselves in Canada’s national narrative. This article seeks to promote the inclusion of Indigenous voices and curatorial practices in the Museum of History, and to demonstrate how they could function as decolonization tools that would benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

KEYWORDS
Decolonization, Canadian Museum of History, representation, Indigenous curation
The sun shines through the glass windows of the Museum of History, as visitors tour through exhibits that demonstrate the museum’s chosen Canadian narratives. The totem poles of the Great Hall are illuminated, and the beauty of the cultures of the Northwest Coast First Peoples is revealed. However, what is not highlighted in this space is what these totem poles represent, their cultural significances, and how they are interpreted by the museum’s visitors. The mainstream media, films and television, education systems, and cultural institutions play a key role in the shaping of our minds and beliefs. It is also within these spaces that the ideas, images and stereotypes that many have about Indigenous peoples and their cultures have been created and perpetuated. These portrayals create a disconnection between their traditional ways of life, and the presence of Indigenous peoples in modern society. This is a technique of assimilation because “as the source form is dislocated from its initial cultural context, specific meanings are erased and cultural significance shift and slide” (Haig-Brown, 2010), thus allowing for the re-inscription and re-imagining of Indigenous cultural symbols and artifacts. This has a powerful influence on all those being exposed to these representations, for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. Daniel Francis argues that “native people live within a world of imagery that isn’t their own” (2010), and that this makes understanding their places within society difficult. For non-Indigenous peoples, this stereotyping and invisibility of Indigenous peoples and their cultures is how many imagine them. This is problematic, and raises important questions that are relevant to this research such as who is creating these representations? What say do Indigenous peoples have in the use of their symbols and the telling of their stories? Lastly, and perhaps the biggest concern for Indigenous peoples, “who shall speak for me” (Mackey, 1999)?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the representations of Indigenous peoples within Canadian society, and particularly the inclusion or exclusion of their voices at the Canadian Museum of History. It will be argued that the Canadian Museum of History provides Indigenous peoples with the perfect space to reclaim their voices, and to include them in the history of Canada. This will be proven by first examining how representations in education and in the media influence many people’s understandings of Indigenous peoples and their cultures. Next, Indigenous representations that exist in the Museum of History and how they contribute to the national narrative will be analyzed. Lastly, Indigenous agency within the museum is limited by predominantly non-Indigenous curatorial practices. Both the museum and First Peoples would benefit from improving on the lack of Indigenous voices within the space. The work of Eva Mackey, Daniel Francis, Joy Hendry, and Minelle Mahtani are just a few of the scholars who have helped shape this research.

After years of being overshadowed by the notion that the French and the English make up the two founding nations of Canada, it is time that the true First Nations of this country and their diverse histories finally be recognized in the national narrative. As Mackey argues, “the lack of cultural ‘rudder’ has made ‘the Indian’ exist ‘helplessly and aimlessly.’ This failure to define

1 The understanding of Indigenous peoples, their cultures, their representations, and the use of these terms in this paper, is similar to the sentiments expressed by Jessiman: “I also want to make clear that when I use the terms “Aboriginal culture” and “Aboriginal identity”...I mean for those terms to encompass the rich cultures and traditions of the many distinct Indigenous peoples in Canada as well as their personal formations of identity” (2014). It is important to recognize that Indigenous experiences are not homogenous, but are looked at from a wide lens in order to respond to the framework of this case study.
their own cultures means that they do not fit into any group in Canadian society, either the two “founding races” of Canada (the French and the English), or the ‘third area’ (immigrant/ethnic groups)” (1999). This means that by forcing Indigenous cultures into these unknown and undefined positions within Canadian society, we have contributed to the invisibility of Indigenous peoples. The role of the Canadian Museum of History, then, is to prove that Indigenous peoples are doing more than just existing; they are thriving and actively reviving their cultures.

Prior to the establishment of the Museum of Civilization in 1989 (Taylor, 2013), Canada was in the midst of a new political awakening. With policies of bilingualism and multiculturalism having been recently enacted, Pierre Trudeau’s Liberal government developed the National Museum’s policy (Jessiman, 2014) as they saw an increased need for a national museum. These are the conditions out of which the Museum of History, as it is now known, developed. Today, it continues to be a major cultural institution in Canada as it works to educate visitors about our past and present. This “display hall has wielded, and continues to wield, tremendous power with respect to forming societal views of Aboriginal peoples’ culture and identity” (Jessiman, 2014) and will serve as the primary case study through which we will attempt to understand how Indigenous representations and images can be harmful, and how we should be actively making efforts to decolonize them. After examining some of the Indigenous representations and displays within the museum, the next step will be to look at the tools that can be used in order to create a more inclusive space, one that uses Indigenous voices as a means to reclaim cultural identities. It would be to the benefit of both the curators and Indigenous cultures to, in the current renovation of the museums exhibits, include the voices and the stories of the First Peoples who continue to contribute to the success of the nation. The Indigenous peoples of Canada can then use the Canadian Museum of History, and especially the First Peoples Hall, to announce to the world that they continue to exist, and that they have a very unique cultural knowledge that they are ready to share with others.

Understanding Indigenous Representations

Before we can begin with the case study of the Canadian Museum of History, we must first understand the ways in which representations have affected, and continue to impact Indigenous cultural identities and identity formations. Indigenous artifacts and symbols have been exchanged between nations since the first European settlements, allowing for new meanings to be re-inscribed and for their intended meanings to be completely lost. It was by “defining Native peoples, and accounting for their difference and marginalization, (that this) became part of a process of managing them” (Mackey, 1999). Managing minority groups, or groups that are not a part of the mainstream, is a tool of colonization that has been used for hundreds of years and that continues to be used to this day. Mahtani argues that “minority groups are regularly excluded and marginalized, and the dominant culture is reinforced as the norm” (2001), an important colonization tool because it creates a structure of power that places one culture above the rest. Anyone who does not fit into this image of “the norm” is instead forced into opposition, and into this place of otherness. It is this sense of otherness that has kept Indigenous peoples in the margins of Canadian society, and by “treating Native people as a special group based on the...
recognition of their poverty and marginalization from mainstream society, and (contributed to) their inability to construct a world of their own” (Mackey, 1999).

Marginalization, “othering,” and problematic representation are some of the experiences and realities of Indigenous peoples today. For many years now Indigenous peoples have been actively revitalizing their cultures. With or without the acknowledgement of non-Indigenous populations, Indigenous peoples are attempting to reclaim the representations of their cultures. Previously, the media and other cultural institutions controlled Indigenous representations, and contributed to “the portrayal of Indigenous peoples (that) has also perpetuated stereotypes... a smattering of media representation of First Nations people, including “the noble savage,” “the savage Indian,” “blood-thirsty Barbarians,” and “the drunken Native,” among other damaging stereotypes” (Mahtani, 2001). These images have shaped many peoples’ understandings of Indigenous cultures. So what is it about these stereotypes that have made them so powerful, and why have so many people been so willing to buy into them as the truth about Indigenous peoples?

**Colonial Education**

One of the reasons that these representations are so widely believed is because this is what Canadians have exposed to them from an early age. The education system plays a major role in shaping our understandings of Indigenous cultures. The story and the history that is told is one sided and has resulted in the fact that “they have taken hostage the voices of “others,” especially the Indian voice, so only their voice can be heard” (Despain, 2003). A good example of this is that most Canadians are not exposed to the residential school legacy in grade school, which has caused a misunderstanding of the policy and undermines the effects that it has had on generations of Indigenous peoples and their cultures. This teaching of a specific portrayal of Indigenous peoples makes it so that, as Francis argues, in school “they were savage people, the Indians we learned about in the social studies class” (2010). It is not surprising that if these are the representations that one is exposed to as a child, that this is what influences the adult's perceptions.

Francis describes this early separation in schools as: “we didn’t want to be there, and it was pretty clear the white kids didn’t want us to be there either” (2010). This establishes and promotes a sense “difference” and “otherness” for those who are not a part of the norm, and a hierarchy even amongst children. This education continues into adulthood and creates further problems of discrimination and racism. This quote from a personal experience dealing with discrimination is very telling about the tensions that exist within society: “I was twenty years old when I woke up in a hospital bed in Jasper, Alberta, and heard a doctor say: “These Indians don’t know how to take care of themselves.” I had a job, I had a good wage, I had insurance. But there was nothing I could say” (Francis, 2010). Despite Canada’s reputation as a tolerant nation, this type of exclusion has become a part of the everyday reality of Indigenous peoples. The media is another one of these locations where the stereotypes about Indigenous peoples are especially pervasive.
Media, Museums & Misrepresentations

The mainstream media “provides an important source of information through which citizens gain knowledge about their nation, and our attitudes and beliefs are shaped by what the media discerns as public knowledge” (Mahtani, 2001). In summary, the media can quite literally control representations. It has the ability to decide which stories are told and which stories are not. For example, media outlets immediately respond to amber alerts, however we seldom hear about the hundreds of missing and murdered Indigenous women. This fact demonstrates that Indigenous representations are not constructed by Indigenous peoples themselves. Gatekeepers also control the representations that we are exposed to on the big screens, and that play an important role in the identity formations of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youths. Francis argues that Indigenous peoples “saw the same movies in school that white kids did: westerns’ and, like them, we cheered on the cowboys or the cavalry. We too played cowboys and Indians - and we all wanted to be cowboys” (Francis, 2010). This is a powerful statement that reveals how Indigenous people are unable to relate to the representations of their own cultures, so much so that they would rather cheer on the people trying to assimilate them.

For years now, “the power to control representations of Indigenous peoples lies in the need for dominant society to maintain its power and misuse authority to control society” (Danard & Iseke-Barnes, 2007). The power to control representations is an important and effective colonization tool, as has been demonstrated in the control of representations in education and in the media. The last factor that will be discussed, and that plays a key role in this, is museum spaces. This is where people go to actively seek out knowledge about the history of the nation, and for Canadians, the Museum of History is the most trustworthy. Del Guise argues that “history/heritage institutions such as museums, archives, or historic sites were seen to be the most trustworthy and interesting locations for finding out about the past. When probed about this matter, many people cited the "authenticity" of existing documents and other artifacts as carriers of historical truth” (2008). It is an educational space, but it is crucial that we examine it from a more critical perspective. Museums are an old invention, and it could be argued, “museums actually exemplify an older and more comprehensive example of the power of cultural displays in the way they formed a crucial part of nation-building projects” (Hendry, 2005). If museums contribute to nation-building projects, then it is even more important that we examine the current exhibits within the museum with regards to what is being depicted about Indigenous peoples and the accuracy of the information that is being displayed. Is the past the framework through which the Canadian majority understands the artifacts, and does this keep the cultures they belong to in the past?

The Case of the Canadian Museum of History

The Museum of History is Canada’s national museum, and serves as the case study through which we will explore the lack of Indigenous voices in the national narrative. Indigenous curatorial practices could function as decolonization tools and set the standard for Indigenous inclusion in the national narrative across the country. “Situated across the Ottawa River from the federal Parliament Buildings, the Museum was receiving over 1.2 million visitors annually”
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(Jessiman, 2014), and is a space where the histories of diverse peoples are explained to citizens and tourists alike. Whether or not these histories are accurately depicted is another question, and one that should play a key role in the renovations currently taking place at the museum. According to the museum’s website, archaeologist David Morrison is one of the directors of research and content for the updated Canada History Hall project (Canadian Museum of History Research Staff, n.d.). Morrison was also one of the lead curators of the First Peoples Hall that still exists today. Nettelbeck argues that “although anxiety about the meaning of settler national identity is not new, it has taken on a new kind of intensity at a time when remembering national heritage has equally entailed a growing imperative to acknowledge historical injustices against Indigenous peoples” (2012). This refers to the recent push by Harper’s Conservative government to reconnect to our militant past, while at the same time there is an increased demand to acknowledge the injustices that have been committed against Indigenous peoples.

In 2012, it was announced that the Museum of Civilization would be receiving $25 million in renovations (Jessiman, 2014) and that it would be renamed as the Museum of History. The primary motivation for these updates, according to Conservative member of parliament, Rick Norlock, was that “in our country, which is so rich in its heritage yet is young compared to European countries... we need to better remember, appreciate and understand some of the trials and tribulations our forefathers went through to create this wonderful country” (Jessiman, 2014). This relates to representation, and how it has been used to construct a specific Canadian narrative. Placing importance on the “trials and tribulations of our forefathers” excludes Indigenous peoples who are not a part of this Eurocentric construct of the nation. This is why New Democratic Party Member of Parliament, Dennis Beavington, was quick to remind the House that “in the history of the Canada that I represent in the Northwest Territories, people have lived for 30,000 years. Large Indigenous populations roamed and took care of the land for thousands of years before immigrants” (Jessiman, 2014). This is a powerful statement, and should be addressed in a number of ways. First, Beavington’s emphasis on the presence of Indigenous people well before settlement is a (not so) gentle reminder that this is overlooked in our history books and in the national narrative. Secondly, it reminds us that Indigenous peoples were connected to the land before the arrival of any “immigrants” and still very much are. Lastly, referring to the mainstream as “immigrants” is shocking for many non-Indigenous because it not how they tend to think of themselves.

A Closer Look at the Exhibits

It is impossible not to notice the beauty of the Great Hall when visiting the Museum of History. Designed by Metis architect Douglas Cardinal in the shape of a canoe (Jessiman, 2014), it displays the traditional totem poles of the West Coast Indigenous peoples. What is most interesting about this space is that it represents a small section of the Indigenous peoples living in Canada, each with their own unique cultural practices, traditions, and ways of life. Yet somehow, this space seems as though it is meant to represent all Indigenous peoples. It is little wonder that “there are still many Indigenous people who have little time for museums. They too have picked up on the association between museums and cultures long gone, and they prefer to keep their memories in different kinds of places” (Hendry, 2005). The apprehensions that Indigenous peoples have about displaying their cultural artifacts and knowledge in museums are exactly
what the museum should be trying to remedy. Diversity needs to be celebrated instead of homogenized, and we need to make efforts to situate Indigenous peoples in the present instead of in the past. The museum and its visitors would benefit from being exposed to Indigenous knowledge, which could only enhance the museum’s ability to tell the Canadian national narrative. Hendry argues that “the whole layout of the museum is designed to tell a story, and it offers the visitor the experience of traveling through time, as they follow the trail” (2005). However, without a tour guide, the museum’s design choices and the fact that an Indigenous architect designed it, would never be known or understood for there is little to no explanation of this fact. This seems to be a reoccurring problem when it comes to the current displays of Indigenous artifacts. The exhibit designers seem to have difficulty telling the stories that are associated with the artifacts, but if done effectively, the “transformation of cultural understandings through the sharing of Indigenous stories in a powerful way in which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can begin to unravel the complex debates about identity, culture, commerce, art, and technology” (Danard & Iseke-Barnes, 2007) could occur. Opening up the debates and encouraging people to think about Indigenous representation is crucial to the decolonization of these images, especially at a time when we are seeing an increase in the appropriation of these images. This is why we are seeing an increase in the number of “Indigenous peoples retrieving their history and reclaiming control of their identity” (Hendry, 2005).

The First Peoples Hall also requires some critical thought. It is hidden behind the Great Hall, and could be missed by any museumgoers that do not actively seek it out. Artifacts from other Indigenous groups in Canada are housed here, once again in a very homogenizing and Western way. One of the museum’s problems is that “they still often exemplify Western methods of display” (Hendry, 2005), and for Indigenous peoples, their knowledge is not necessarily transmitted in the same way. Western methods of display such as glass display cases are used to put distance between visitors and the objects that they are interpreting. The ability to interact and to engage would allow visitors to understand the purpose of these objects, and would open them up to new forms of knowledge. It is a privilege to be able to interact “with Aboriginal people for whom persisting deeply held beliefs and knowledge structures continue to shape their discourse, non-Aboriginal people may begin the process of learning what for them are secondary discourses, even eventually finding their fundamental views affected” (Haig-Brown, 2010). Marie Battiste argues that “it should be stressed that Aboriginal consciousness cannot be maintained without first challenging the assumptions of modern society” (2000), and only by challenging the views and beliefs that have been constructed by the mainstream can decolonization take place.

Because Canada Hall is currently under renovation, the only other exhibit that was opened at the time of visiting in January 2015 was Rebellion & Confederation 1867. This exhibit very much excludes the important roles of Indigenous peoples and other minority groups in the creation of this country. It portrays and features the elite as those who were making the major decisions about the future at the time of confederation. This exclusion from the national narrative creates problems for Indigenous peoples who then become invisible to those learning about Canada. Mackey argues that “the ‘problematic of invisibility and namelessness,’ and what has been for
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native peoples, until recently, been their mythic presence but real absence in contemporary consciousness. Now... a discourse is emerging in which First Nations individuals are telling it their way” (1999). The emergence of this discourse poses the question of whether or not the museum, already in the midst of renovations, intends “to continue or counteract colonial injustices” (Jessiman, 2014) in its displays.

Working with Indigenous Curators

How then do we improve the museum and create a space within Canada that is open to the inclusion of Indigenous peoples? In recent years, there has been increased cooperation between Indigenous groups and the museums presenting their cultural artifacts. In fact, the Museum of History is currently operating an Aboriginal Training Program in Museum Practices as they seek to “develop ways for Aboriginal Nations across Canada to represent their own history and culture in concert with cultural institutions” (Canadian Museum of History Research Collections, n.d). This cooperation is key to the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the Museum of History. Indigenous peoples should have a say in the stories and displays that are shared about their cultures, and this is perhaps the most important hurdle to overcome in the decolonization of this space. Marie Battiste is not alone when she says that “story-telling is very much a part of the tradition I was raised in” (2013), and so it has become increasingly important for Indigenous peoples to tell their stories in their own ways. Indigenous peoples “have been not only resisting colonization in thought and actions but also attempting to restore Indigenous knowledge and heritage” (Battiste, 2000), and the reclamation of their representations and identities is the next major step.

The museum gives Indigenous peoples a space through which this reclamation can take place, but there are improvements that need to happen in order for decolonization to occur. One of the issues that need to be addressed is that of “increased involvement of Aboriginal people in the interpretation of their culture and history” (Hendry, 2005), and an increase in the number of Indigenous peoples who are telling these stories. Upon examination of the museum’s website, there was a distinct lack of Indigenous curators or staff whose backgrounds were anchored in Indigenous thought. As was mentioned previously, one of the co-curators of the First Peoples Hall was a non-Indigenous archaeologist. Museums “are still largely directed and curated by non-Native people” (Hendry, 2005), and so the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in this process would benefit many. It would also demonstrate that Indigenous peoples and their cultures “have survived, and unsurprisingly, they now want to do their own representation” (Hendry, 2005). “Illustrating the continuity of the people” (Hendry, 2005) should be a key feature of the museums renovations.

One of the purposes of this paper has been to understand that “reclaiming worldview is a complex task because hegemonic narratives are deeply rooted in history. Hegemonic narratives define others in the process of establishing identity through difference” (Danard & Iseke-Barnes, 2007). The Indigenous peoples of Canada have been isolated from the mainstream because they have been excluded from the national narrative. We looked at the effects of representation, explored the lack of Indigenous voices in the exhibits of the Museum of History, and looked at what needs to be adjusted in the upcoming renovations of the space.
We need to be empowering Indigenous identity reclamation “by harmonizing Indigenous knowledge with (the dominant) Eurocentric knowledge, (as) they are attempting to heal their people, restore their inherent dignity, and apply fundamental human rights to their communities” (Battiste, 2000). It is not an easy task, and will require some time and a great deal of hard work, but the decolonization of museum spaces will benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

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