

# The Impossibility of Representation: A Semiotic Museological Reading of Aboriginal Cultural Diversity

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## Welcome to the Museum: Confronting the Impossible

To semiotically read – especially reading a (post)colonial cultural context like the vast Aboriginal cultural landscape in Canada – is to come face-to-face with the impossible. The impossibility of re/presentation, the impossibility of language and the impossibility of speaking as an insider. So we come clean: we are outsiders to Aboriginal culture. The first author is a young, middle-class, White woman and the second is a working-class, Black man of African descent. What we are attempting to do here is not a “cultural voyeurism” (Clifford & Marcus, 2010), but a reading wrapped with humility. It is actually not a ‘reading’ in the Lyotardian (1993) sense of “infinite language game,” where what Melanie Klein (1964) calls “the real” becomes another language, where there is nothing but language. Our contention is: there are no ‘games’ in (post)colonial contexts; “the real” is too excruciating to be simply a “language game.” Fully conscious of this ethics of impossibility, therefore, we can only attempt to pay homage to that which is overwhelmingly humanizing when read with humility.

Yet, language is all we have. In this context, genuinely we want to ask: doesn’t language cheat us? Does it *really* say what we want to say? That is, as soon as we start a description of the *First Peoples Hall* of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Ottawa, Canada’s national capital), as we do later, at exactly that moment, isn’t there something “left-over” (Kristeva, 1982; Lacan, 1977)? Are we not in a never-ending moment of slippage? That is, are we not “almost-there” in our (full?) description of what Lacan (1977) calls “*das Ding*” (the ‘object’ of description), but as soon we start describing it, something of and about it slips away? So, we are left not necessarily frustrated, but humbly in a constant state of puzzlement, with a desire to simply describe and pedagogically learn from that description. This, we hope, will be our attempt here.

But the nagging and ever present voice in our heads stays: *What business do you have here, and what do you really know about that which you speak?* In truth, we know very little, but at the same time, very much. In this paper we step into a museum gallery that celebrates the diversity of Aboriginal cultures in Canada. It is filled with colour and texture, image and sound, word and artifacts – all of which convey messages in and of themselves, and together as a whole. Every element of this gallery would seem to represent Aboriginal cultural diversity. But, we are asking, can it really? While we may not know the



TO CITE THIS ARTICLE PLEASE INCLUDE ALL OF THE FOLLOWING DETAILS:

Furo, Annette & Awad, Ibrahim. (2011). The Impossibility of Representation: A Semiotic Museological Reading of Aboriginal Cultural Diversity. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 8(1)  
<http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci> <access date>

stories weaved intricately into beaded fabrics, the techniques used to stretch and stitch animal hides into useful items, or the reasons for crafting and carving in particular ways and patterns, we write about what we do know: through a semiotic analysis of this museum gallery we can identify key messages that encourage us-visitors to attach the notion of Aboriginal diversity to the texts therein. In other words, we hope to show how the selection of objects and images in this gallery take on a connoted meaning which enables them to stand in for or represent an abstract concept of diversity. Whether or not we know a detailed cultural history of each cultural art-e-fact, we argue that a true representation of Aboriginal cultural diversity in this way is impossible, and that attending to those processes of representation and impossibility is a crucial task for curriculum studies and educators to take up.

The site of our research is more than a collection of objects or ‘objectively’ written texts. It is a museum. At least in its modernist formation and conception, museums, Bourdieu (1984) argues, are about ‘distinction’: that which is to be seen and not touched, that which is to be looked at from afar. Museums, Bourdieu adds, are also about ‘taste’: that which is insidiously cultivated, thus making us-museum-viewers predisposed to certain likings and dislikings. In many cases, these predispositions, these psychic events guide and make us ‘read’ a museum exhibition with “disgust,” “love” or “indifference.” In other words, it is our mostly unconscious internalized preferences for objects (be it representations or otherwise) that ‘govern’ (Foucault, 1977) our ‘relation’ with an object (or the lack thereof).

Museums, Stuart Hall (1997) expounds further, do not simply re-present (in its structuralist sense), where representations are a mirror of reality. In a poststructural sense, representations “produce” and “create” the object they assume to represent. That is, objects gain their meaning in and within representations. This is why, for Foucault (1977), “there is nothing outside language.” Here, Foucault is not referring us back to a Lyotardian ‘language game’; instead, he is referring us to the notion of ‘gaining meaning’ or ‘becoming meaningful.’ Without being a zero-sum game, Foucault argues, of course objects do exist outside language, but they ‘become meaningful’ only within discourses or discursive frameworks. It is therefore hard to talk about what we do not have a language for yet. For example, as we shall see later, Aboriginal culture is not simply re-presented in the Canadian Museum of Civilization (which we sometimes refer to as the ‘Museum’), thus creating a faithful correspondence between ‘representation’ and ‘reality.’ There, we are arguing, Aboriginal culture is framed and discursively produced and introduced in particular ways, and it is this framing that gives it a particular semiotic meaning. Aboriginal culture is a living entity, of course, and does not live in a museum, and its meaning is infinite. However, museums intervene and close that infinite meaning in framing it in a particular discursive way. In a very complex and complicated way, much like language and identity (Ibrahim, 2011), we are arguing, the Canadian Museum of Civilization both *forms* and *performs* Aboriginal culture.

When entering the Museum, the space is historically constituted and motivated to guide viewers towards an interpretation through carefully chosen representations and classifications (see also Lidchi, 1997, in a different context). Pedagogically learning in this space, we are contending, is guided by the messages and materials encountered (Ibrahim, 2004), and what we encounter is a collection of messages that come to *represent* the exhibited cultures. A coherent story is told about Aboriginal cultural diversity – a story that becomes representative of all that is present and all that is absent. Ultimately, Stuart

Hall (1997) would have argued, ‘representation’ is turned into a process that produces culturally shared meanings. Semiotically framed (Barthes, 1967), representations use ‘signifiers’ (words and images) and ‘signified’ (the meaning that is made out these words and images). Roland Barthes (1967) refers to the code that combines these two as ‘signs.’ We thus have a semiotic ‘language’ of fashion, traffic and, in our case, museum. Our attempt in this article is to see which signifiers (texts and images) are used and for what purpose, the intended meaning (signified). Henrietta Lidchi (1997) had shown that, in museums, especially ethnographic museums, the process of representation is the manner in which meaning is constructed and conveyed through signifiers (re. actual objects). In a given exhibition, she continues, there are likely to be several systems of representation (language) can be observed communicating messages to visitors. We interpret the messages in ways that are meaningful to us based on our cultural understandings (re. ‘taste’ and ‘distinction’). In other words, museums “construct spaces or slots of meaning inside which other cultures can be made intelligible to the museum visitor” (Sturge, 2007, p. 129). Thus, we concur, encountering something culturally unfamiliar in a museum exhibition can make it seem more familiar to the visitor through the process of representation, i.e., framing.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, if all readings are historically, socially, culturally and linguistically located and situated, as Barthes (1977) and Bourdieu (1984) have argued, then a visitor’s reading is dependent on the reader’s knowledge, predisposition, taste, distinction and cultural situation. Stuart Hall (1997) refers to this as “preferred reading.” In a preferred reading a visitor interprets messages within a dominant discursive frame and accepts the meanings according to dominant codes and definitions, which both conceal and reproduce hegemony. Of course, the suggestion of a ‘preferred reading’ or ‘intended meaning’ may not correspond with every visitor’s reading which, for Hall (1997), grow from personal biography as well as from sharing in communities of meaning or communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

### **The Ethnographic Museum: (Re)Creating (Re)Presentations**

The exhibition in which we situate our study can be considered ethnographic, in that it “seek[s] to describe nations of people with their customs, habits and points of difference” through cultural objects and artifacts (Lidchi, 1997, p. 160). More than a place of description, the museum is a places of the ethnographic translation of cultures, where meanings are re-framed from one set of cultural categories to another (Sturge, 2007). We must keep in mind that the meanings produced in ethnographic museum representations of another culture are “complex, unstable and hybrid; they are born of the contingencies of the receiving system rather than those of the source” (Sturge, 2007, p. 2). As the “author and circumscriber of meaning” (Lidchi, 1997, p. 183) the museum maintains a powerful role as collector, categorizer and exhibitor – doing the representing while other cultures are being represented, willingly or not. With such authority comes the perception of creating authentic cultural representations, which in the context of Canadian Aboriginal cultures, is extremely problematic.

In the ethnographic museum, the way a museum’s collection is made accessible to visitors influences how cultural texts are encountered. As Hendry (2002) reminds us, the *appropriation* of cultural objects and Aboriginal histories (sometimes by force) by ‘flagship’ colonial museums has left a legacy of distrust in Indigenous peoples and presented colonized peoples as curiosities to be displayed and discovered, rather than as people with their own stories to tell. Moreover, the objects that are chosen for display



become necessarily *decontextualized*, translated across time and space only to be re-contextualized in museum galleries in ways that can essentialize and legitimize representations of the cultural Other (Sturge, 2007; McLoughlin, 1999). From their placement in often static displays, cultural artifacts are *organized* and *classified* in ways that reflect the cultural values and themes underpinning the creation of an exhibition, thus creating cultural distinctions rather than reflecting natural ones (Lidchi, 1997). The values, ideas and purposes of the cultural group who created the object must compete with the added/omitted/shifting/overwritten meanings bound up in the process of exhibiting such that only the object's physical presence remains constant (Jonaitis, 2002). So we enter a space of (re)created (re)presentations where there are different layers of meaning to read and interpret.

The *First Peoples Hall* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa was formally opened in January 2003. As a permanent exhibition, it “occupies several galleries and presents more than 2,000 artifacts and images illustrating the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2008). It depicts a history of cultural contributions, beliefs and ways of life, as well as the impact of European settlers, economic change and colonial policies. Our case study will focus on the first gallery in particular, titled *An Aboriginal Presence*, which welcomes visitors by introducing them to a diversity of Aboriginal cultures. Analysis of the gallery, *An Aboriginal Presence*, was undertaken on two different occasions. The first visit was brief, resembling as much as possible a visit to the museum for pure enjoyment. The second visit was more in depth and looked carefully at how the parts of this exhibition made a whole that contributed to the initial impression. Photos were taken and notes made throughout this process. The paper's ultimate contention is that a true representation of Aboriginal cultures is impossible. We thus ask: if the museum is not representing Aboriginal cultures, overall, what is it doing?; and when it comes to history, which history did it choose to ‘frame’ and how?

## **A History of Aboriginal Representation: Confronting What We Thought We Knew**

If we recall our early memories of learning history as students who went through the Canadian school system, we can probably recall who the victors and founding nations were, and how they were portrayed. We can probably tell whether our recollections reflect a dominant version of history when we consider the ways various groups represented or not represented. Narratives of Canadian history have been shown to under-represent marginalized groups, particularly Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Schick & St. Denis, 2005; Strong-Boag, 2004; McLoughlin, 1999; Cruikshank, 1994). In a ‘banal’ (Billing, 1995) yet calculated way, Canadian history has been presented in unified (White, Eurocentric) narratives, which ignore the ‘contingent’ (Rorty, 1989), complex histories of Aboriginal people in particular, and marginalized groups in general (Stanley, 2000, 2011; McLoughlin, 1999; Schick & St. Denis, 2005; Cruikshank, 1992, 1994). It has certainly excluded alternate views or interpretations (Donald, 2010; Montgomery, 2005; Werner, 2000). Such an approach does not account for the significance of social categories (be it gender, race, class, among many others) that are central to peoples’ history, cultural and linguistic formation, and it fails to address power relations, oppression and injustice (Strong-Boag, 2004; Schick & St. Denis, 2005). Historical discourses of cultural difference, multiculturalism and nationalism, Michael Billing (1995) has shown, tend to celebrate role

models and heroism while masking the power relations that promote continued racial privilege and inequality, and ignoring the salience of race between Aboriginal and White Canadians (see especially Haig-Brown, 2003; Schick & St. Denis, 2005). The effect of such accounts has constructed a national mythology of innocence, egalitarianism and diversity that depends on forgetting that relations of racial inequality exist in the past and present (Stanley, 2000).

There is widespread recognition that Indigenous voices (globally) have been marginalized, knowledge has been ignored, and oral histories devalued in comparison to written accounts (Cruikshank, 1994; Battiste, 2004). Taking Canada as an example, for Marie Battiste (2004), the privileging of written historical accounts overshadows ideographic and symbolic indigenous literacies, which comes at the expense of rich spiritual and practical value in these ways of knowing. This, for Julie Cruikshank (1994), limits opportunities for Indigenous voices to author their own histories and control their publicly recorded images and representations in museums. This is problematic as meaning, for Celia Haig-Brown (2003), is constructed through dominant worldviews that stand outside indigenous ways of knowing. These notions are directly relevant to our study in that the gallery we analyze claims (in writing) to exhibit Aboriginal cultural diversity among historically marginalized cultural groups in Canada. As Dwayne Donald (2010) notes, however, representations of Aboriginal groups that focus on culture can heighten the idea of difference by making these groups look intensely saturated in culture by comparison with seemingly cultureless or culture-neutral White Canadians. When we see such representations in the museum, as a curriculum site, educators must think about how representations of intensely cultured Aboriginal peoples are connected to the way current social and political relationships between Aboriginals and the rest of Canadians are conceptualized. How do such representations fit into the logic and the narratives we do or do not buy into?

As others have noted (notably, Ng-A-Fook, 2007; Hendry, 2002; Smith, 1999), the tension of writing about Aboriginal cultures, without writing and speaking 'for' is always of a delicate concern, given the privileged position from which the writing occurs and the history of silencing and marginalizing Aboriginal accounts and knowledge. With this in mind, we move forward attempting not to reproduce that which we critique, but rather to open up the ways we approach learning about Aboriginal cultures.

### **Inside the Gallery: *An Aboriginal Presence***

Welcome (in)to the frame! "Typically Canadian," to use Sharmaine Nelson's (2010) terms, we-visitors are invited to enter into an 'economy of conditional hospitality' (Ibrahim, 2005); where one is hospitably invited into the space, peacefully welcomed, but where meanings were written and signs were set. These signs are there to be consumed not struggled over, and the infinite possibilities of meaning are 'framed' in such a way that their meaning is explained in text. One is actually told what they mean. As a 'frame,' the Canadian Museum of Civilization is an architecturally massive building (a 'socius,' to use Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) term)<sup>4</sup> that dominates the riverbank in Gatineau, Quebec, directly across the Ottawa River from Canada's Parliament Building in Ottawa, Ontario. The unique design of Canadian architect Douglas Cardinal curves majestically and fluidly, intended to depict Canada's natural and cultural landscape through clean lines that reflect Cardinal's Aboriginal heritage (CMC, 2010).



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian\\_Museum\\_of\\_Civilization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Museum_of_Civilization)

Its history, dating back to 1856, makes the Museum one of the oldest museums in North America and one of the most visited in Canada (see Vodden & Dyck, 2006). What began as an exhibit for archaeological and ethnological collections of the Geological Survey of Canada grew to include several branches for natural history, human history and technology. It is the human history branch, known until the 1980s as the Museum of Man, that would become the present day Canadian Museum of Civilization. Since the opening of its present location in 1989 the Museum houses the Canadian Postal Museum, the Canadian Children's Museum and an ever-changing program of temporary exhibitions. In addition, there are several permanent exhibitions, boasting more than 3.75 million artifacts and, which explore 20,000 years of Canada's human history: ancient archaeological collections (housed in *From Time Immemorial: Tsimshian Prehistory* hall), an indigenous cultural history of the Northwest Pacific coast (in *Grand Hall*), the cultural and social highlights of Aboriginal peoples in Canada (in *First Peoples Hall*), early European presence in Canada (in *Canada Hall*), and a close up of 27 influential individuals who are "behind Canadian history" (in *Face to Face: Canadian Personalities Hall*).

Practicing "museological excellence," the mission of the Museum is to promote "a greater understanding of Canadian identity, history and culture" and disseminate "its knowledge throughout Canada and the world" ([www.civilization.ca](http://www.civilization.ca)). Put otherwise, the Museum's primary purpose is to collect, research and study, preserve and present these artifacts and material objects that shed lights on the human history of Canada and the cultural diversity of its people.

Entering through the Museum's main entrance, we-visitors are invited into the massive tranquility of the Grand Hall, the architectural centerpiece of the interior and the permanent exhibition that introduces visitors to the first inhabitants of what is now known as Canada. The Hall is a juxtaposition of the modern and the postmodern. The modern is accentuated through the artifacts' original shape and form in which they are preserved, tilting to being dusty, crumbling, and cloths that are more reminiscence of *Oliver Twist* than the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The postmodern is mirrored in the container, the very hall itself, which brings natural sunlight indoors through a dramatic glass wall and illuminates a recreated setting: a quiet seaside village, wooden houses lined up to face the shore and a lush forest canopy towering skyward in behind.

We-visitors are immersed in this majestic expanse until the Grand Hall curves and gives way to a transition space where there are minimal objects and artifacts. Then lying ahead is a collection of photographs that show people young and old, smiling and serious, some in casual clothing, many traditional dress. With that iconic (photographic) language comes indexical (written) language. The written words state the name and starting point of the upcoming exhibition: “First Peoples Hall” “Entrance.” These words tell visitors how to read the accompanying visual component of the text, the photos. Visitors can assume that each person fits into the category of ‘First Peoples’ and that their smiles bear invitation. Ahead, there is another mural comprised of written and visual signs. In trilingual large bold lettering the title sets a personal tone for the exhibition: “Welcome.” The rest of the writing states:

You have arrived on Algonquin Land. The Creator put the Algonquin people here to occupy this land. The Creator also gave the Algonquin a language to communicate with.

It was told to our ancestors that:

“As long as the sun will shine, As long as the rivers will flow, As long as the grass will grow”

The Anishinabe way of life would continue forever. This is what was given to the Anishinabe. And this is as it should be.

Circle of Elders. Kitigan Zibi Anishinab

The mural on which the words are printed presents a curious picture of the Ottawa River. The present day Parliament buildings and city skyline are shown high on a cliff and in the foreground several traditionally dressed Aboriginal people are seen at an encampment near the shore.

We pass through a doorway and into the actual gallery: a burst of colour and texture, filled from floor to ceiling with artifacts, photos and panels of written text. Displays of artifacts are set on each side. A broad, meandering path leads down the centre and is bordered on each side by hip level panels on which written texts are printed ‘indexing’ different information to visitors about First Nations peoples and histories.<sup>5</sup> In the distance a wall of narrow trees stand together marking the end of the space. Above the artifacts the gallery is draped with colourful banners. Some banners are covered in photographs, old and more recent, of people sitting, working, many of them outdoors. Other banners contain a phrase that can be read in sequence as we move along:

An Aboriginal Presence

We celebrate our long history in this land;

We celebrate our work, our creativity and our contributions;

We celebrate our differences, similarities and our survival as Aboriginal people;

We have not forgotten the land;

We have an ancient bond with the land;



[www.civilization.ca/cmcc/plan-your-visit/planning-your-visit/what-to-see-and-do/first-peoples-hall](http://www.civilization.ca/cmcc/plan-your-visit/planning-your-visit/what-to-see-and-do/first-peoples-hall)

As we take in this scene (shown in the picture above) we become aware that someone is speaking to us. We-visitors-to-this-land are addressed by a voice, a collective We-belonging-to-this-land. This address leaves us we-visitors either belonging (or not) to the land or testing our knowledge (or the lack thereof) of Canadian First Nations peoples and histories. As part of this address, looking immediately to our left is a large video screen that plays on a loop so at any given time one of several Aboriginal people is saying hello, introducing themselves, talking about where they come from, what they do for a living and why their cultural heritage is important. Apart from the sound, gesture and movement in the video everything else is completely still in the gallery. As we look more closely at the displays we see that objects are displayed at staggered heights with large objects at the back, smaller ones toward the front. Those within reaching distance are protected inside glass cases. All of the objects are set behind the reading panel at hip level where the written descriptions of each item are located. This reading panel borders the entire walking path like a wide railing and makes a distinct separation between visitors and the actual objects.

Moving several paces forward, we find ourselves in front of the nearest display. There are two types of text: visual texts in the form of objects, and written texts in the form of words on the reading panel. The panels have two types of indexical text: headings, which are the largest, and labels, which are smaller. Not by chance, one of two headings is located immediately in front of us after simply moving forward from the entrance. The heading is raised above the rest of the panel and the font is printed in vibrant green. It states, “We are diverse” and in smaller print, “We inscribe our creativity, our histories and our identities through the work of our hands, and the work of our minds.” As we look up, we-visitors see a collection of various objects: rough ulus, a child’s one piece suit, a bonnet, moccasins, masks and a wooden chest. A small-scale image of each artifact is found next to its description on the reading panel so visitors can look straight up and view the corresponding artifact. For each artifact we learn the object name, date of origin, place of origin, catalog number.

As we cross to the opposite display area, objects are interspersed with short biographies of notable Aboriginal people whose contributions in areas such as art, sport, media and literature are highlighted. And finally, as we near the end of the gallery, the biographies give way to short quotes – stories or explanations? – that tell us a few sentences more about some of the objects we see, what the materials are made from, and how they are used. Then the reading panel and display cases end at the row of narrow trees, marking the end of this section in the gallery. The lazy, soft blue light from overhead fades into the intermittent glow of yellow bulbs that would draw us-visitors onward toward areas in the exhibition that tell us of naming the land and origin stories.

## A Semiotic Reading of Origin: Interpreting the Gallery

Semiotics provides us-visitors and scholars with terminology that is useful for analyzing the production of meaning through the arrangement (classification and display) and relation of the various components of an exhibition (Lidchi, 1997). The analysis of these components, or texts, will begin with a description of the sign systems (language) used and then identify how the different sign systems are ordered together, which ones are predominant, and how written sign systems provide (or do not provide) groundwork for interpreting other sign systems in the display. Because this gallery uses written (indexical) and visual (iconic) sign systems most heavily, we identify a literal denoted meaning of a visual text before considering how that text is encoded through the accompanying written text or label, and in order to decipher the intended message(s) which guide(s) visitors toward in a preferred reading.

### *Creating a presence*

The exhibition entrance is crucial to the framing of the gallery and establishes the themes that will guide visitors toward a preferred reading. This is accomplished through a series of iconic and indexical texts – the words serving to interpret the photographs. The first photographs we see are the collection of photos of Aboriginal people, young and old, in traditional and/or non-traditional clothes, and before we realize that continuity is an underpinning theme, we see it. Through its close proximity, the first text is necessarily read with the adjacent text – the mural of an urban skyline featuring Canada’s Parliament perched high on a cliff contrasted with a small first peoples encampment in the foreground. When we read this image it could mean several things: sharing of the land between two different cultures, urban and colonial encroachment, among others. These readings are not incorrect, however, they are not the preferred reading. To grasp the intended meaning of the photos we turn to the accompanying written words, which are most prominently an Anishinabe welcome to Algonquin land. To the side of the mural is an explanation of this curious photo: “As if to tell us of the ongoing importance of this artist’s perch to First Nations, he included a small native encampment at the very spot where similar dwellings had stood centuries before and where the Canadian Museum of Civilization would eventually be located.” This panel of written text encourages visitors to read the image in terms of continuity and change and indicates that the digital editing of this photo is intended to convey a message about the continued presence of Aboriginal peoples today. Hence, the title of the whole exhibition: An Aboriginal Presence.



<http://www.algonquinsopikwakanagan.com/History%20introduction%202004.htm>  
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Canada-Ottawa-Panorama.jpg>

In this text we-as-Anishinabe-speakers address you-as-guests (visitors) drawing on the authority of ‘our’ long Anishinabe presence on “this land” and ‘our’ position as cultural insiders, which legitimizes the introduction on behalf of many Aboriginal groups. The seemingly ‘natural(ized)’ Anishinabe presence encourages visitors, in fact does it purposefully, to forget that the exhibition is a carefully constructed space where words are edited and photos cropped (if not Photoshopped), and seduces visitors in reading the exhibition as a truthful account of Aboriginal culture.

Let us not forget the video which, of the texts in this space, is the pinnacle of how the museum *creates* an Aboriginal presence. Without a single human being required in the gallery, this moving picture brings Aboriginal people to life, speaking to us, moving, gesturing and smiling. Semiotically, these iconic and indexical texts serve as technologies of forgetting, forgetting that we are in a space of hyper-representation, where nothing is left for chance and everything is meant to authenticate. We-visitors are told, authentically: we-Aboriginal-peoples will tell you-visitors about ourselves. In the context of Aboriginal peoples whose histories have been underrepresented, first person accounts, or collections of quotations and accounts easily become the solution to underrepresentation. It is a brilliant yet exceptionally problematic solution and strategy. The voice(s) represented are perceived as *authentic* voice(s), revealing a history that has been previously unaccounted for in public institutions, and at once liberating a group of people who have been suppressed by unequal power relations (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009). We-visitors are drawn in by the impression these introductory texts create about what kind of people Aboriginal people are. They are young and old, smiling and serious ‘everyday nice folks’ that a visitor would feel comfortable getting to know. Reading the texts in this way, as the preferred reading, compels visitors to forget that the exhibition has cropped, constructed and created *a* reality as it attempts to represent it (Hall, 1997); *a* reality (not *of* but) *about* Aboriginal cultural identity through its choices of texts and editing, its decisions of inclusion and exclusion. Representation, Roland Barthes (1967) has shown, absents, inscribes and creates as it attempts to represent; and romanticizing Aboriginal peoples as ‘nice people’ does no justice to the diversity of their humanity.

### **Inscribing Diversity: A Semiotic Reading of *We Are Diverse***

The prominence of the indexical text ‘We Are Diverse’ is particularly effective in communicating the intended message of this particular display and guiding our interpretation of the objects therein. As the words stand out in large font, we read these words and in turn read the objects in the display: rough ulus, the child’s one piece suit, the bonnet, the moccasins, mask and a wooden chest. Their cropping (framing), leaves an undoubted feeling that they are handcraft and handmade pieces. We-visitors see this collection of objects as corresponding, first, with the written text immediately in front of it because each item is handcrafted and, second, with the previous thematic messages of continuity and change. The gloves that are so intricately embroidered are a mosaic of beaded creativity, and the colourful patterns on the bonnet circa 1982 next to the colourfully patterned moccasins circa 1865-1940 are evidence of the overarching narrative - continuity - of histories, people and traditions. When we read the handcrafted (iconic) objects in connection with the written (indexical) texts they take on connoted meaning. It is not what the traditional looking objects denote or the function of the object that is most important. It is what they connote, which are themes of Aboriginal cultural diversity, and more subtly, continuity and change.



In a preferred reading of this display the objects become pieces of evidence attesting to the diversity of Aboriginal cultures, rather than having their own cultural meanings and histories. Moreover, Aboriginal diversity becomes exemplified through handmade craft. Diversity is less exemplified through the habits, customs, and social communities that characterize the contexts in which these items were made and used. As such there is limited substantiation for diversity beyond the physical presence of the objects.

It is worth, at this point, to look more closely at one object described by its label as: “CHEST Haida British Columbia Before 1910 Cedar wood, metal, iron and paint CMCC, VII-V-1284.” As an indexical text, the label provides 6 pieces of information, which serve to classify it based on age, materials and origin. For a visitor that has no further background knowledge about this Chest and its significance to the Haida people, the museum provides the six presumably most important things one should know about this object. It is not explained that the sides were crafted and painted in ways rich with meaning and story. This raises a philosophical and an essential cultural studies question: For those who do not have more background knowledge, what story and history does the chest invoke? How does the museum encourage visitors to draw meaning from this Chest? To explain: the indexical text on the label reads as “Chest.” The corresponding iconic text, a six-sided hollow object denotes ‘chest’ but as an object it remains static.

However, seeing the chest as a mere object is not the preferred reading of this ‘Chest.’ The preferred reading is drawn from the central message of the exhibition “We are Diverse.” The “Chest” is encoded with a general meaning of Aboriginal cultural identity and diversity, even though there is nothing to explain what makes this object diverse. As such, the museum uses this object to create a representation of Aboriginal cultural diversity. Unfortunately, the ‘diversity’ represented, in our judgment, can only be described as superficial because that which makes the chest or the Haida ‘diverse’ is missing from the description – unless it is possible to reduce diversity to the information on the label. Having limited knowledge of Aboriginal cultures makes it difficult for the reader to decode or read these objects in ways other than the ‘intended’ or preferred reading. Limited knowledge is here compounded by years of marginalization of Aboriginal voices in dominant accounts of Canadian history. For us, this can only serve as an assertion confirming our contention of the impossibility of representation of the complexity and diversity of Aboriginal peoples, histories and traditions; an impossibility heightened by/in a context of historical domination and marginalization.

Moreover, there is very little else these objects are able to convey, in and of themselves, from their static positions in the display and as such they become representations of an abstract idea of Aboriginal culture. Each artifact is placed in an aesthetically pleasing manner to maximize its visibility. This arrangement is a *rearrangement* that decontextualizes the objects from their historical setting and their use. They become re-presented, numbered evidence of cultural diversity. The display as a whole becomes an act of encoding that has over/written some existing meanings and re-inscribed these objects with new meaning. Reading the Haida chest as something more than a marker of Aboriginal diversity is not wrong per se, but it moves beyond what the central messages in this display intend to convey.

The labels in this display support Barthes’ (1977) suggestion that the closeness of a label to its object makes the label ‘innocent’ by appearing more in line with the denoted meaning in the object. Each label gives a brief name for its object: chest, necklace, moccasins. The only other information is a date and place or group of origin, name of the

person who made it, and a cataloguing number. From their labels alone objects are read without diverging far from their denoted meanings. However, the innocence of the labels is short-lived given an *oppositional reading* (Hall, 1996) that sees them as a mark of colonization produced by a particular system of knowledge. Two pieces of information on the labels give this away: the geographic place of origin is named according to present day political boundaries, and the cataloguing number of each item is prominent. If labels tell visitors a maximum of six things about each Aboriginal object in a gallery that showcases Aboriginal culture, why is the inclusion of a series of numbers and letters that is unintelligible to many visitors so important? This is not such a mystifying question if one considers the superiority of Western knowledge to be built around systems of organizing, classifying and storing knowledge (Smith, 1999). The cataloguing numbers remind us that it is important for the objects of 'another' culture to be catalogued, classified and numbered in the ways of the dominant culture. When the entire display is read as one large text these readers see the labels attached to each item as a sign of colonialism that lurks throughout the processes of exhibiting - collecting, recontextualizing, categorizing, arranging, numbering and labeling.

It is worth noting the display opposite the Chest. Unlike the objects in the previous display, these ones have a story that is told through the written text. Their arrangement in a static display is still decontextualizing, but here they are encoded with more than just messages of cultural diversity. These objects appear to keep their original, cultural meanings because they are explained with quotes from named Aboriginal people. This naturalizes an object's presence in the display because the message is coming from Aboriginal narrators - as though the objects were not there by a choice of the museum, as though the processes of exhibiting have not re-arranged or re-inscribed the objects with new meaning(s).

### **A Semiotic Pedagogy: Concluding Remarks**

One might point out the obvious and note that a museum cannot possibly fit all information about *all* Aboriginal cultures into the space of one exhibition. We would not expect it to, nor would we wish to be charged with the task of deciding which details to include in a limited space. We analyze the process of meaning making in the museum as more than accepting a preferred reading in the hopes that it will reinvigorate the fluidity of our interpretations, just as the curves of the museum building itself remind us of the fluidity in our natural and cultural landscape.

Given the historical context in which we write, the marginalization of Aboriginal histories in Canada, and we submit in most countries where Aboriginal people are present, and the limited background knowledge visitors might have about Aboriginal cultures, it is ever more important to read these spaces not as accurate representations, but as spaces in which the museum produces and performs that which it exhibits. When we think of museums as sites of curriculum it is important for educators consider how these spaces are approached. We believe our semiotic approach to reading ethnographic museum galleries in this respect, is quite useful. Visitors have an opportunity to ask themselves how the representations they encounter do or do not fit in with their previously held notions of the culture being depicted. This is a question about attentiveness to one's own expectations, taste and predispositions, which invites further contemplation of the narratives that influence one's own perspectives. At the same time it invites one to consider perspectives



that are unexpected and explore different marginalized perspectives and alternative ways of narrating cultural histories. A place to start is by reading the museum on different levels - as we read the Haida Chest that wants to contextualize its presence in the display but cannot, as the woman who is quoted briefly but has a lifetime of knowledge of share, or as the visitor who is unfamiliar with the cultural representations they glimpse and is aware of their own susceptibility to be taken in by the beauty of the space and the persuasive logic of its key messages. There are insights to be taken from the way galleries are arranged, made to include certain pieces of information and follow certain narratives. Visitors will find that a gallery reveals much about the exhibiting culture and the exhibited culture, and the relationship between.

We are calling the pedagogical approach we took in this article 'semiotic pedagogy.' For us, semiotic pedagogy is a pedagogy that doesn't seek 'authentic' or 'full' representation of Aboriginal peoples, histories and traditions. They are too complex to be 're-presented.' So, to answer our own question of 'what is the Museum doing?' we are suggesting this as a pedagogical approach. The first premise of this pedagogy is that, representations are not there to be consumed as 'truth' but as a technology that frames, accentuates and crops certain realities usually at the expense of others. Second, our role as educators is precisely to highlight, work through and wonder about that which is here-and-present and that which is there-and-absent. Ultimately, finally, the Canadian Museum of Civilization left us-visitors with an on-going, never ending series of interpretations of First Nations peoples, histories and traditions. Here, even though we-visitors were enriched by our visit, this is the only thing that we are left with: interpretation. A semiotic pedagogy, therefore, is deeply historical, contingent and meaning and interpretation are never ending, always in-process and on-going. When we-teachers take our students to the Museum, we should emphasize not 'truth' but semiotic interpretation, not easy reading but socius, where contingent of meaning is the essence of what it means to visit a museum. We desperately need to decolonize ourselves and our students from machines of truth, where meaning is closed and told; and celebrate with them, and in turn with Aboriginal peoples, the contingency of life, history, tradition, culture, meaning and interpretation. Our visit to the Museum should not be another hegemonic moment of imposition, colonization and silencing. It should, instead, be a humbling moment of understanding of both the contingency and the complexity of Aboriginal peoples, histories and traditions. Only in moments like these can we talk about a transformative (semiotic) pedagogy and pay homage to that which is deeply humanizing when 'read' with humility.

## Notes

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<sup>3</sup> In *Frames of war: When is life grievable?*, Judith Butler (2009) contends that how an event is 'framed' determines its meaning and thus our reaction to it. She gives the example of Abu Ghraib's horrid pictures, among others, and argues, first, by 'framing' those bodies within a 'war zone' and, second, by envisioning the violence at Abu Ghraib as torture tailored for Muslims, the media not only caricatured them as members of a backward culture, their lives as non-grievable, but they are thus zoned for war. This, for Butler, might

explain the West's different reaction (at best, quiet outrage, if at all) as opposed to the Muslim world (at minimum, visceral and violent reaction).

<sup>4</sup> A *socius* is a metaphor of/for a machine or society where attractors and opposites can and do co-exist. Their co-existence means a permanent presence of tension, a tug of war and on-going struggle. There are no simple resolutions with the *socius*, so we are left with the peace of living (with)in tension.

<sup>5</sup> We use 'Aboriginals,' 'Indigenous' and 'First Nations' interchangeably. In Canada, First Nations refers to the original people of the land. This was invoked because in 1970s, the then Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau talked about English and French as the 'founding nations' of Canada, that is, the people who 'discovered' and built Canada. In protest, our Indigenous and Aboriginals proposed 'First Nations' in the plural.

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**Submitted: January, 12<sup>nd</sup>, 2011**

**Approved: June, 01<sup>st</sup>, 2011**

