OUR STORY IN OUR WORDS: DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY IN THE GLENBOW MUSEUM

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A NEW APPROACH

On November 3, 2001, *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life* opened as a permanent exhibit at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. This 800 square metre (ca. 8,000 square foot) gallery presents the culture and history of the Blackfoot-speaking[1] people, as they know and understand it. It is the first significant modification to Glenbow's First Nations exhibits in over twenty-five years, and represents a change in both our curatorial knowledge and our approach to exhibit design. The project also represents an important evolutionary development in the museum's approach to community inclusion and participation in our exhibit and program-planning process. For the first time, a community was included as full partners in the development of an exhibit.

FIRST NATIONS AND MUSEUMS IN CANADA

By the late 1980s, many Canadian museums were inviting First Nations peoples to advise in the development of exhibits and programs. The Royal British Columbia Museum and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia have had long-standing programs in which West Coast First Nations carvers were brought to these institutions to demonstrate their art and help interpret their culture (Ames

1992b, 1992d). The Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump archaeological site in southwestern Alberta was developed into an important Alberta Historic Site and tourist destination, and researchers consulted Peigan and Kainai elders about the past uses of the site (Brink 1992). In Regina, Saskatchewan, a Native Advisory Committee helped shape the development of the First Nations Gallery (Conaty 1989). The Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec has brought together First Nations people from across the country as they develop their First Peoples Hall. The Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (Janes 1982, 1987) and the Wanuskewin Heritage Park, near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan stand apart from these other examples; at these sites, the First Nations were included as major partners with museum personnel in the formulation of exhibit content and program development.

The late 1980s was also a time of a significant clash between First Nations and museums. The Glenbow presented *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* as part of the cultural events accompanying the 1988 Winter Olympics. It was targeted for a protest and boycott by the Lubicon Cree of northern Alberta, as these people were frustrated with a lack of progress in treaty negotiations with the federal government. Moreover, Shell Canada Ltd., the major corporate sponsor of the exhibit, was drilling for oil on land that the Lubicon claimed as part of their traditional territory. Linking these issues proved to be a successful strategy and captured the media's attention (Harrison, Trigger & Ames 1988; Harrison 1988; Ames 1992c). In a separate legal action, Mohawk individuals sought a court injunction for the removal of a False Face mask from *The Spirit Sings* exhibit. The court decided in favour of Glenbow, allowing the mask to remain part of the exhibit.

Museums suddenly found themselves to be the foci of political issues. In response, the Assembly of First Nations[2] and the Canadian Museums Association[3] struck the Task Force on First Peoples and Museums. After three years of deliberation, the Task Force, which included both museum professionals and representatives of First Nations communities from across Canada, presented a suite of guidelines that were intended to create institutions that are more inclusive and more welcoming (Hill & Nicks 1992; Nicks 1992). Among the key points was the recommendation that First Nations people be part of the planning process for the interpretation and exhibition of their heritage.

Despite the recommendations of the Task Force, it has been difficult for museums to move from consulting with First Nations to including them in full partnerships. In part, this is because our values and assumptions in the museum community give priority to scientific process and to the knowledge that follows from that process. We rely on historical documents and scholarly discourse for our information, and it is not easy to give equal value to traditional knowledge. (See Nadasdy 1999 for a discussion of the use of traditional knowledge in resource management.)

Just as modern museums reflect the structure and values of the societies that create them (Bennett 1996; Grasset 1996; Weschler 1995; Ames 1992a; Smith 1997), the relationship between Canadian museums and First Nations reflects the relationship within the larger society. Canadian writer and historian Michael Ignatieff provides an insightful discussion of this relationship:

> An imperial proclamation of 1763 recognized their (First Peoples') treaty rights, and hence their identity as separate nations, so bringing these people into a political confederation should have meant giving them equality as citizens while protecting their communal rights to be different. But that is not what happened.... Their preexisting treaty relationships with settler peoples were ignored and their status as nations was dismissed.
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> In retrospect, it is clear why this happened.... Rights were conceded when power was equal; rights were taken away when power flowed to the settler side.... When power relations changed, so did images of the aboriginal.... Racial ideology legitimized what sheer force had achieved. Expropriation and the denial of rights were then defended on the grounds that aboriginals were inferior....
>
> Thanks to the extraordinary historical tenacity with which aboriginal peoples have defended the memory of their nationhood and their treaty rights, the meaning they draw from the failure to assimilate them is clear: they must reacquire their rights of self-government and take responsibility at the individual and the collective level, for their destiny.
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> This fundamental lesson, however, is still not accepted by the majority community in Canada. You could blame this on simple racism, but that would be to ignore the real problem. Assimilationist

> policies would never have been pursued … had settlers not believed that a political community must be composed of people who share the same values, culture, and assumptions, and that political equality can be accorded only to those who are recognizably the same. Shedding this belief is hard, for it is an ideal, not just a prejudice. (Ignatieff 2000: 58–62)

This presents two competing models of Canadian society. The one, held by the majority community, considers all citizens to be equal and that no group should hold special rights. The First Nations, on the other hand, posit that they have special aboriginal rights and privileges by virtue of their indigenous presence on the continent.

Public museums take their fiduciary responsibility to care for their collections on behalf of all of society very seriously. Special interest groups are rarely given privileged access to artifacts and the information about them. Similarly, we believe ourselves to be fora for open and equitable debate in which all sides of an issue are presented and explored (Cameron 1971) and we recoil when this debate is censored (e.g., Gibb 1997; Casey 2001). Whenever we do invite a *community* to join in the exhibit-development process, they are most often asked to participate as advisors, as their special knowledge contributes to the veracity of the content. Their individual stories add richness and meaning to the subject and bring connectedness to the visitor. But, in the end, the exhibit's content and the development process is defined by the museum as representative of society's majority community.

The First Nations' challenge to this model argues that the aboriginal rights, which put them in a special relationship with regard to such legal issues as land and resource use, also imply a unique position with museums as representatives of the larger society. They argue, as well, that their view of history has never been adequately presented to the public and that their understanding of their own cultures has been replaced by that of the anthropologist. In short, to equitably include First Nations within an exhibit requires a participatory model that goes beyond that of advisors or consultants.

We began the development of *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life* by explicitly recognizing these issues and focussing our discussions around them. Some of our museum colleagues, both within and outside Glenbow,

suggested that to present only the First Nations' perspective is to abandon our ethical responsibility to present a balanced *truth* (see McGhee 1989 for an earlier discussion of this issue). However, we believed that the museum should take the opportunity to move away from a safe, neutral position if, by so doing, we could raise awareness and enhance the human rights debate. We knew from past experience the process by which communities could act as advisors; we did not know the process of involving people as full partners with the museum staff in the conceptualization and development of an exhibit. We did not know how, or even if, elements of Blackfoot culture could interact with elements of our museum culture to produce an intelligible result. Glenbow's senior management understood the social importance of the project and supported our experimental process.

The following discusses how we approached these issues as we sought a new way of working with a community.

Learning to Coexist

Quite soon after we began to meet, Rosie Day Rider (Kainai) shared her knowledge of Makoi-yohsokoyi – the Wolf Trail. It is summarized in the gallery:

> *Makoiyi*, the wolves, were the first *Ksahkomi-tapiksi* (Earth Beings) to help us. One winter, when our people were starving, a young man and his family camped by themselves as they searched for food. The wolves found the family and appeared to them as young men bringing fresh meat to their tipi. The wolves took this family with them, showing the man how to cooperate with other people when he hunted buffalo and other animals. The wolves told our ancestors that animals with hoofs and horns were all right to eat, but that animals with paws and claws should be left alone. The wolves disappeared in the spring, but we still see them in the sky as *makoi-yohsokoyi*, the Wolf Trail (the Milky Way). These stars constantly remind us of how we should live together.

Just as this ancient story taught Blackfoot people how to relate to one another and work together for survival, it stressed to us that the concepts of coexistence and respect must be key to both the content and the

development of the *Nitsitapiisinni* gallery. From the beginning, all the participants were clear in their desire to see the development process as a true team partnership. At the very first meeting, community members stated that they were unwilling to participate if they were only to be considered advisors. Instead, they wanted to participate as full team members in all aspects of the story development, text and artifact selection, design, and installation of the exhibit.

For the purposes of this paper, the Blackfoot Gallery Team will sometimes be defined by the two components, the Community team and the Glenbow team. This division is useful to help distinguish the various roles of the team members, but in fact, we all worked together as partners. The community members were identified as content providers, building on traditional knowledge and rights to share that knowledge, and Glenbow staff agreed, as experts in exhibit development, to facilitate the translation of this knowledge into an exhibit. Together, the two groups formed a single Blackfoot Gallery Team with a common goal.

Interpersonal relationships are important in Blackfoot culture. Although they have adapted to working with Western bureaucracy, they prefer to develop personal relationships before initiating any business. This ancient tradition was reflected in pre-Contact and fur trading ceremonies in which gift-giving and feasting cemented personal relationships before barter and commerce proceeded. Glenbow began developing such a relationship in 1990 when we returned a Thunder Medicine Pipe bundle to members of the Kainai. Glenbow staff, in turn, were invited to ceremonies involving this sacred bundle. Ensuing years saw the connections with the Blackfoot deepen as more bundles were returned. This contact was primarily with Gerald Conaty, the senior curator of ethnology, who has also been asked to help facilitate the return of sacred bundles from other museums. With the formation of the *Nitsitapiisinni* Gallery Team, we recognized that it would be important for all members of the team to become personally acquainted with each other. Fundraisers, photographers, management, as well as curators, designers, and programmers attended our meetings with representatives from the four Blackfoot communities. Sometimes we had over twenty-five people at a meeting.

We often met in Fort Macleod, Alberta, a small town 150 km south of Calgary, where the Fort Museum kindly offered a basement meeting room as the venue for our meetings. Community members come from

Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life has brought together museum staff and Blackfoot-speaking people together in a spirit of equality and mutual respect.

four reserves in southern Alberta and Montana, and Fort Macleod was central to their homes. Many people had to drive several hours to the day-long meetings, and it was often difficult to get everyone together in the same place. A cold basement in the Fort Museum would not seem to be the location most conducive to developing a vibrant and exciting story about the history and culture of the Nitsitapii, and their relationship to their territory. However, this was neutral territory for all of us. Glenbow staff were removed from our museum, from phones and other distractions. To reach the meeting, we drove through the plains of southern Alberta, often admiring the sun as it rose and warmed the beautiful countryside. Community members were still in the middle of Blackfoot territory but outside of their own reserves, where politics could be an issue.

Humour has a place in everything the Blackfoot people do, and our meetings were no exception. As we all became more comfortable with each other, there was much laughter and teasing mixed in with the serious discussions. Laughter takes away tensions, makes the work easier, and makes hard times more bearable. It also helps to cement friendships. Through much sharing and laughter, our team learned to work together, and in the process we have developed many lasting friendships.

Respecting Spirituality

Most of the Community team members are leaders in traditional sacred ceremonial activities. Their spirituality is intertwined with everything in their lives, including this exhibit project. Every team meeting started with a prayer to ask *Itsipaitapiyopa* (The Essence of All Life), the Above Beings, the Earth Beings, and the Water Beings to assist us with the meeting and, at the end of the day, another prayer was said to give thanks for the success of the meeting and to send everyone home safely. Glenbow team members were invited to many ceremonies during the exhibit development and attending these ceremonial occasions on the reserves was another way that team members could show support and learn to respect each other. The prayers, actions, songs, and protocols of ceremonies reinforced what the Community team members were sharing with us during our meetings. These ceremonies brought their ideas and stories alive.

Early in the process, Gerald Conaty and Frank Weasel Head (Kainai) suggested that the team sponsor a *Kano'tsisisin* (an All Night Smoke ceremony) to start our project off correctly. These ceremonies are held in the winter months, and pipe holders pray and sing sacred songs for guidance, success, and well-being. The ceremony starts at sundown and goes for most of the night, and includes a feast provided by the person sponsoring the Smoke. Arrangements were made to hold the ceremony in February 1999 in a hall on the Kainai reserve. Glenbow team members grouped together to cook roasts, ribs, potatoes, carrots, hard boiled eggs, and bannock, and to bring other food and drink. We asked Mae Tallow, a Kainai woman who is known for her spirituality and humility, to make the Saskatoon-berry soup, and Community team members provided the ceremonial tongue and ritual offerings. The president and CEO of the Glenbow Museum at the time, Robert R. Janes, sat as the sponsor, and

two staff members, Gerry Conaty and Clifford Crane Bear, the Treaty 7 Community Liaison, acted as the ceremonial helpers, filling the pipes and serving tea and food. Cooking food and working for a holy event are acts of prayer.

Over twenty bundle keepers came to the ceremony to support our project, with about fifty spectators. To Glenbow staff, sponsoring a ceremony was a huge amount of work. But, as the wolves taught us, the team members worked together for the ceremony's success. It was also an amazing way to bring the essence of the Blackfoot Gallery to life.

Coming to Consensus

The goal for all decision-making was consensus. We quickly learned that we needed to run our team meetings in a very different manner. We could not pack the agenda. Sometimes we needed to spend the entire day on just one topic so it could be discussed thoroughly. We learned to listen to the silences. In the Blackfoot way, silence does not automatically mean *Yes*. It may mean, *I need to think about this for a while*. We learned to specifically ask each person for their opinion. It could take more than one round of asking, or one meeting, to reach consensus.

It took a long time to determine the title for the exhibit. Many titles were suggested over time and the team was keen to use their own language. However, the term *Blackfoot*, which is a direct translation of the word *Siksika*, was very controversial for some team members who felt it did not refer to the entire group. The term *Blackfoot Confederacy* has often been used, but the group wished instead to use their own name for themselves, which also has several variations. Much discussion ensued. We decided to focus on the term *Nitsitapii*, which means real people. However, the team did agree to the use of the term *Blackfoot* for marketing purposes, since they are commonly known by that name. Finally, the day came when we needed to make a decision for the full title. All possible titles were brought together, and team members brought some additional possibilities. As we went around the table, each person gave their ideas about the pros and cons of the suggested titles. Gradually some titles were rejected, and the entire team was comfortable with our final decision, *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life*.

In the traditional Blackfoot way, everything is taught through stories. Stories are for everyone, not only children. The lessons from stories can

change as a person grows throughout life. Often, older people who are asked for advice will tell a story to put the issue in a bigger context. This gives direction without giving specific instructions.

For a long time, community team members presented their ideas for the exhibit by telling stories. It took many tries for the Glenbow team members to pull the key messages from these stories that could be used to build the gallery. (See Conaty 2003 for a discussion of this process.)

We learned to be patient as the Blackfoot-speaking team members had extensive discussions in their own language. This usually occurred when issues arose that concerned Blackfoot spirituality. Sometimes these matters involved information that is formally transferred through a ceremony and, therefore, could not be shared with the uninitiated museum people who were present at the meeting. In other instances, it was simply impossible to find English words for Blackfoot cultural concepts. English and Blackfoot linguistic structures are culturally based, and it is not always possible to find ways of expressing the abstract ideas of one culture in the language of the other. Once consensus had been achieved, museum team members were given a synopsis of the discussion and its conclusion. It is a measure of our mutual respect that these Blackfoot discussions were accepted by everyone as a matter of course. This process also shed light on the problems that must have arisen at the time of treaty negotiations between the Blackfoot and the governments of the United States and Canada.

BUILDING A CONTINUUM

Most Glenbow exhibits require about two years for completion. *Nitsitapiisinni* took nearly four years. We are glad we built in lots of time, as we found that our concepts of goals, process, and content were continually challenged and reshaped by the Blackfoot members of the team.

We initially thought we would meet with a few Community members at a time. But the team requested that we all meet together, so all people could hear the different ideas and approaches. Some of the team members had participated in projects with other museums and not been satisfied with the end results. They felt that their information was modified or edited. They felt they had not been brought into the project early

enough. Meeting as a large group, although not as efficient, meant that team members were always aware of the information that was being shared.

Most museums develop exhibits by setting goals, defining an audience, then developing a storyline. For this project, the two teams started with quite different goals. Glenbow wished to have a gallery that would attract visitors, primarily non-Native, and teach them about the history and traditions of Blackfoot people. We wished to display our rich collections and use the gallery for educational activities. On the other hand, the Blackfoot Community team wanted to share an authentic and accurate story of their history and heritage with their young people. They were very unhappy with how academics had treated them in the past, and took every opportunity to set us right. They saw this exhibit as a chance to correct misconceptions about their history for both Native and non-Native people. In the end, the two goals were combined and reworked into two new goals: to tell the Blackfoot story from their own point of view, and to focus the gallery on people who have little understanding of the Blackfoot, whether they are Native or non-Native.

As part of the goal setting process, Glenbow staff undertook front-end evaluations with museum visitors to the old First Nations galleries. We wanted to try to understand visitor expectations for the First Nations exhibits, and gain an understanding of visitors' existing knowledge. This evaluation was done through *knowledge mapping* (Derbyshire, Graham & Falk 2000; Falk & Dierking 2000). However, the process was not relevant to the Blackfoot community members. They were uncomfortable with tearing their culture apart for analysis, and instead preferred to think of every theme and idea as part of an interconnected whole.

Museum exhibits are designed to tell a linear story, which starts at one place and moves through time as the visitor walks through the gallery. Although everything is taught through stories in Blackfoot culture, these stories stress interrelationships of all things in Creation. Everything relates to everything else. Initially, Glenbow staff struggled to transform the stories and concepts being presented by the team into a linear storyline. The community members continually resisted this pressure, and through their great patience helped us to understand their approach. The exhibit became a series of non-linear themes and concepts, and repetition was accepted.

The gallery designers, Terry Gunvordahl and Irene Kerr, played a very important role in bringing the team's ideas to life. The final gallery design supports and furthers the themes and concepts by creating an environment which surrounds the visitor and which moves in a clockwise circle around the large, central tipi. Each theme area is connected to one another visually. Naturalistic flooring, warm colours, large photographs, large video screens and the use of wood, canvas, plants and animals bring the environment of the Blackfoot World into the museum in a tactile way. Artifacts are displayed in cases nestled into these environments. Stories are told in a circular, tipi-like room where the visitor can sit on curved benches or on a buffalo-fur robe on the floor. Trees, bushes, wall murals and soundscapes bring the family camp to life. Audio stations are scattered throughout the gallery, where Blackfoot team members tell anecdotes or stories in their own words and in their own language. The only area where you feel separated from the environment is in the historical period, starting with the formation of reserves. The isolation of the Blackfoot from their land into square houses and residential schools is dramatically reinforced by claustrophobic square rooms with low ceilings. In the final room, a circular space that is visually connected to the beginning of the gallery, the team looks to the future and stresses how the Blackfoot are taking control of their own destinies by combining traditional values and beliefs with contemporary life-skills.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life opened to the public on November 3, 2001, and the relationships we built with our team members continue. This is not the end of a project, but the beginning of a new phase in our relationships with the community, the team, and the public who will learn from our story.

Glenbow acknowledged several cultural, political, and historical issues of concern to the Blackfoot in developing *Nitsitapisinni: Our Way of Life*. Our harsher critics might see these as unreasonable concessions. First, we recognized that what has been written by historians and archaeologists largely represents a non-Native understanding of Blackfoot history. The Blackfoot have their own traditions about the past, which deserve to be heard. Second, anthropological discourse is not always an accurate

portrayal of Blackfoot culture. Third, we accommodated the Blackfoot process of decision-making and adjusted our schedules as much as possible to allow enough time for adequate discussions of important issues. Fourth, we respected the Blackfoot protocol for establishing personal relationships alongside business partnerships. Fifth, we acknowledged the importance that spirituality plays in the culture and incorporated it into our gallery process.

These acknowledgments go beyond the level of any previous community involvement with the museum. We have shown this model to be workable and capable of producing a profoundly enriched view of the complexity of the historical and contemporary relationships between First Nations and the larger society. In the first year of the gallery, over six thousand students encountered the Blackfoot culture through our instructor-led programs. In responses to surveys, teachers have been overwhelmingly supportive. Visitors' comments, recorded in books at several locations in the museum, echo this positive experience. Over thirty-four hundred people from First Nations communities have visited the gallery.[4] Their comments indicate a strong pride in finding a museum exhibit expressed in a First Nations voice, and emphasize the importance of this exhibit in developing self-esteem for First Nations youth. We are all proud to have met one of the major goals of our community team members: to develop a place where First Nations youth can find cultural meaning and pride.

It is a joy to visit the gallery and see school children and visitors of all ages and cultural backgrounds interacting with the exhibit. We have had a wonderful response to the stories, and many people comment on how powerful they find the voices of the Blackfoot team members. The collaborative nature of the Blackfoot Gallery Team is very apparent to visitors. *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life* is an example of how traditional authority can and should have a place in contemporary Canadian museums.

It is clear that as cultural communities in our society learn to coexist, we all benefit as we begin to understand ourselves and our world in new and different ways. This can only benefit future generations in their struggle to find meaningful paradigms for their world.

Glenbow has redefined the fundamental nature of our working relationship with First Nations. This project, therefore, acknowledges the claim to special rights and a position of privilege voiced by First Nations.

If we accept the premise that museums reflect the larger society, then we can argue that Glenbow has addressed the issue of accommodating First Nations claims for special rights within the larger Canadian confederation.

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ENDNOTES

1 *Blackfoot* is an Euro-American term which encompasses the Kainai (Blood), Siksika (Blackfoot), Amskaapipikanii (South Peigan or Blackfeet), and Apatohsipikanii (North Peigan) people who share a common language and other cultural practices. Each group has a unique identity, and there is no word in their language for the general term *Blackfoot*.

2 The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) is a political organization that represents the majority of Status Indians (that is, people whom the Government of Canada recognizes as of Indian descent) in Canada.

3 The Canadian Museums Association (CMA) is the professional organization which represents museums and museum workers in Canada.
4 A generous grant from Shell Canada Ltd. enabled First Nations people to visit the exhibit without paying museum admission fees for 2002 and 2003. This program has created greater awareness in the First Nations community within Calgary of the resources that Glenbow has to offer (Wright and Carter 2002).

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