

Collaborative Exhibitions and Visitor Reactions: The Case of Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life

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ABSTRACT Collaborative exhibitions built by aboriginal communities and museums often seek to reposition aboriginal peoples as the authors and experts of their cultures, and to assert their active and continued presence in the contemporary world. This article explores the impact of collaborative exhibitions on museum visitors' experiences and their potential to reshape the public's perception of aboriginal peoples. Interviews conducted with visitors to *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life*, a permanent exhibition created by Blackfoot Elders and museum staff at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, demonstrate that museum visitors rarely recognized the extent of the collaboration, and thus rarely equated *Nitsitapiisinni* with concepts of self-representation or self-determination. However, other messages were successfully communicated to museum visitors, namely the impact of colonialism, the efforts to revitalize Blackfoot culture, and the importance of Blackfoot spirituality. This study provides some interesting insights about public perceptions that will help promote deeper reflection on the issues surrounding collaboratively developed exhibitions and the first-person authorship of First Nations cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative exhibitions built by aboriginal communities and museums often seek to reposition aboriginal peoples as the authors and experts of their cultures, and assert their active and continued presence in the contemporary world. In Canada, when the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and Canadian Museums Association (CMA) Task Force reported on the future of indigenous and museum relations, these organizations targeted collaborative exhibitions because of their potential to “become forums for discussions of relevant contemporary issues” and to invoke positive changes in the public's perception of aboriginal peoples (AFN/CMA 1994, 4).¹ Although the task force's report was not the beginning of collaboration, the report has become a common reference point in Canadian professional and academic literature.

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The task force believed that “a great deal remains to be done to set the record straight for a museum-going public accustomed to the old-style presentations” which “reinforced a public perception that aboriginal cultures existed only in the past and that they were incapable of change.” Furthermore, “[s]uch perceptions continue to support the mistaken notion that aboriginal cultures are inferior” (AFN/CMA 1994, 7). Throughout the 1990s, Canadian museums increasingly responded to the call from communities and scholars alike to engage in collaborative projects.

In the United States, museums were responding not only to calls for collaboration, but also to the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990. Most recently, the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian represents a nation-wide effort to incorporate collaboration at an institutional level.² In Australia, *Previous Possessions, New Obligations* was a national initiative to encourage collaborative working relationships with Indigenous peoples as museum policy (Museums Australia, Inc. 1993). Examples of collaborative partnerships include the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Centre at the Melbourne Museum (Museum Victoria Australia 2003), and *We're Here*, an exhibition within the First Australians Gallery of the National Museum of Australia, focusing on the continued presence of Tasmanian aboriginal communities (National Museum of Australia 2004).

“Collaboration” has been generally defined as “the sharing of knowledge and power to meet the needs of both parties” (Peers and Brown 2003, 1). The intention is that “both sides should be able to define and gain the benefits they deem appropriate” (Phillips 2003, 159). In terms of museum exhibitions, Ames has qualified “full collaboration” as occurring only when the partnering non-museum group is able to negotiate and introduce their own agendas into the exhibition process. This collaborative style “typically includes articulating a theme or exhibition thesis, collecting research information, developing a story line, establishing a budget, selecting objects to be included, reviewing and recording the condition of all the objects, preparing loan and insurance forms . . . drafting and editing labels, designing and fabricating object mounts and display furnishings, installing the exhibit, opening and marketing, and probably other steps . . .” (Ames 1999, 41).

More recently, Phillips posited that we must consider collaboration within its place in the larger contexts of postmodernism and the indigenous rights movement (2003, 158). Phillips credits collaborative exhibitions with materializing concepts such as multivocality, self-representation and self-determination, though she suggests that the realization of these concepts in the museum may be only a small achievement compared with the larger struggles for enfranchisement, land claims, treaty, or sovereignty.

Nicks has argued that the recognition of collaboration as a museum practice is the basis of encouraging social change through the museum. She writes, “If museums are to be agents of social change, as many argue they must . . . then they need to translate their contact work into effective means of replacing colonial representations of passive indigenous peoples with representations that make explicit the agency with which these peoples have always engaged their own and other worlds” (2003, 27). In other words, if recognized by museum-goers, collaboration within the museum can act as a metaphor for self-representation and self-determination in social, political, and economic spheres.

Despite the expectation that museums can be locations for social change, little

research has been conducted to determine whether the public-oriented goals of the task force or individual exhibitions are being fulfilled by collaborative exhibitions.³ Are visitors recognizing collaboration as a method of exhibit production? If so, are they interpreting self-representation and self-determination as driving forces behind collaboration? If collaboration is not being recognized by visitors, are they still receiving and appreciating at least a part of the intended messages of such exhibits? Are they hearing different voices—indigenous voices—within the museum?

THE STUDY OBJECTIVES

To better understand how the public is engaging with collaborative exhibitions, this study considered visitor responses to *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life*, the permanent Blackfoot Gallery at Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta. *Nitsitapiisinni* was one of the first permanent galleries in Canada to be built using a fully collaborative approach. It makes varied attempts to communicate the collaborative nature of the exhibition to visitors through advertising, museum maps, signage and the exhibition's narrative.⁴ An exploratory evaluation of visitors' responses to the gallery was undertaken to determine a) how successful the exhibition is at communicating key messages—including that of collaboration—to visitors, and b) to better understand the breadth of experiences visitors had in the gallery, independent of the goals expressed by the exhibition team. Concurrently, Glenbow staff and Blackfoot collaborators were interviewed to understand the goals for the exhibition, the role of collaboration, and the relationships between communities and museum staff.

THE GLENBOW MUSEUM AND BLACKFOOT TRIBES

Over the years, the Glenbow Museum has moved from being the controversial center of the museum profession, to a leader of the collaborative model (see Peers and Brown 2003). In 1988, the Glenbow Museum drew attention when the exhibition it had prepared for the winter Olympics, *The Spirit Sings*, was boycotted by various First Nations and museums. This event spurred the formation of the AFN/CMA Task Force.⁵ In 1989–90, the Glenbow began formalizing its working relationship with local Blackfoot communities, arranging for the loan of sacred bundles, and ultimately agreeing that the bundles should be repatriated permanently.

The term “Blackfoot” was not an indigenous categorization used by this group to identify themselves. They recognized themselves by their tribal names: the Peigan, which includes the Amsskaapipikani or Blackfeet in Montana and the Apatohsipikani or Pikani in Alberta; the Kainai, or Blood, in Alberta; and Siksika, also in Alberta. Each group is distinct, having their own societies and political leaders. They share cultural practices such as the *ookaan* and speak dialects of the same language. More recently, they have joined as a political body, adopting the Western term “The Blackfoot Confederacy” (Blackfoot Gallery Committee 2001).



In *Nitsitapiisinni*, the section called *Our World* looks at the relationship of the Blackfoot to the world around them. Photo courtesy of the Glenbow Museum.

In our interviews with two Blackfoot exhibition team members, they recalled their own elders' plans to influence museum practices.⁶ (All quotes otherwise unidentified in this paper come from personal communications with the authors during interviews for this article.) They reasoned that if the Blackfoot invited museum staff to ceremonies, staff members would witness firsthand the important role of bundles in the community, and would appreciate the need for the bundles to be returned.⁷ Glenbow staff worked closely with the Mookaakin Foundation, a not-for-profit group of Kainai, whose goals are to repatriate sacred objects and influence interpretations of Blackfoot culture.⁸ A First Nations Advisory Council was also formed in 1991 to provide direction to staff working with indigenous materials and to support aboriginal involvement in the museum.⁹

Work on the exhibition *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life* began in the mid-1990s, when Glenbow decided to renovate its First Nations exhibitions that had been installed nearly 30 years earlier. Gerry Conaty (senior curator of ethnology and a *Nitsitapiisinni* team member) recommended to Robert Janes, then-director of Glenbow, that the renovated exhibition focus on the Blackfoot, who should be active participants in the construction of the gallery. He proposed that the exhibition pay keen attention to one culture:

Then people can learn from that. Take that lesson away and start thinking about other First Nations issues when they come across them in the media or elsewhere.... By then we had a pretty strong relationship [with the Blackfoot], and if you're going to do something collaboratively you have to have that relationship and it takes years to develop. And I knew who to talk to. That's also key. . . . We had that relationship.¹⁰

Conaty first approached Frank Weasel Head from the Mookaakin Foundation because of the commitment between the foundation and the museum to work together on the interpretation of Blackfoot culture. Social networks were then employed to identify spiritual leaders, caretakers of bundles, or members of Blackfoot Societies to work on the exhibition. Thus the individuals who became “community team members” not only possessed extensive cultural knowledge, they were also authorized within their own communities to teach about Blackfoot ceremonies, sacred objects and spirituality. Reflecting upon their role as members of Blackfoot Societies, one community team member noted, “our job, almost like the museum’s, we have to preserve our culture through ceremonies.” During ceremonies, he reported, knowledge “that prepares you for your life” is transferred from one generation to the next. Mirroring this process, community team members frequently spoke of *Nitsitapiisinni* as a means of sharing much-needed knowledge with their youth.

The community team members set the parameters of collaboration for the project. For example, the Canadian participants insisted that Blackfeet from Browning, Montana be represented on the exhibition team. They also determined the themes, what information would be shared (and what could not be shared), and what artifacts, images and works of art would be used to illustrate the content. Every Glenbow exhibition team member spent significant time in Blackfoot communities at exhibition meetings, ceremonies, and local events to ensure that every element—design, conservation, scripting of text—embodied Blackfoot perspectives and respected cultural protocol.

A WALK THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

After five years of collaborative work, *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life* opened in November of 2001, to share Blackfoot culture, history, and contemporary realities with Glenbow’s visitors. Its earthen-like pathway spills out into the foyer, inviting visitors to travel its route. The left side of the entrance describes the different tribes and where they live; the right side has a panel entitled “A Unique Collaboration,” detailing the Blackfoot and Glenbow responsibilities in the exhibition and a welcoming message: “Oki Nikso-ko-wa, Hello Our Relatives.”

Inside the gallery, one finds animal figures amidst large stretched skins featuring images of the land. Text panels and artifacts illustrate the interconnectedness of land and spirit, people and nature, and the Blackfoot worldview. Visitors may listen to a story, in Blackfoot or English, at one of the many interpretive stations that appear throughout the gallery.



“A Unique Collaboration” introductory panel. Photo courtesy of Cara Krmpotich.

High above is the Wolf Trail, or Milky Way, where illuminated constellations are navigated by a voice-over. Below the night sky is a tipi that visitors can enter. A recording (triggered by motion sensors) describes the living quarters of the tipi. Outside, low rock walls contain Plexiglas cases with artifacts and small boxes with medicinal and domestic plants.

Moving further into the gallery, visitors can select a story to watch in the small, round theater, or can view the artifacts displayed along its exterior walls, including a decorated buffalo robe with a pictorial account of its owner's history.

Rounding a corner, the exhibition explores family dynamics and daily living. There is a particular focus here on children. Daily living is captured in the procuring of food, the tanning of hides, the division of labor, clan structure, and the making, erecting and dismantling of tipis. The tradition of the powwow is celebrated, as well. A wooden arbor frames life-size images of modern powwows, dresses used in dances, and contemporary giveaway items such as tea towels, blankets and Tupperware.

A smaller, rounded room with triangular doorways presents the *ookaan*, or Sun Dance. Leaving this tipi-like space, visitors come out onto "the land" where prairie scenes and sounds are projected onto two walls. A full-sized buffalo perched on the edge of a cliff attracts visitors to a display on the role of buffalo in Blackfoot culture. Visitors learn about seasonal movements through the land.

The gallery begins to narrow as it reports the impacts of Euro-Canadian decisions on Blackfoot life. Conaty has written of the shifting design principles that occur in this area, where open spaces are cordoned off by walls reminiscent of trading posts and settler cabins (2003). Trade, bootleg alcohol, treaties, and resistance to colonial measures are described. Blackfoot counts record the number lost to smallpox and other epidemics. The visitor is informed, "The devil can corner you in a house, but not in a tipi," just as he or she is made to pass through a cabin, signaling the implementation of the reservation system.

The severe impacts of a sedentary reserve system, agriculture and residential schooling are presented in an institutional, hermetic space with two-dimensional photographs, right angles, tile floors, bright lights and no view to the exterior world (Conaty 2003). A look at the recent creation of community colleges in this section suggests one of the ways the Blackfoot have adapted to the imposed systems.

A penultimate section examines representations of Blackfoot in European and North American artwork, tourism, fairs and expositions. The visitor is confronted by a number of images, including the "stoic and noble Native" in works of art, and photographs of Blackfoot on show at resorts and the Calgary Stampede. Text panels draw attention to the incongruity between assimilationist policies, a popular desire to see "authentic" and "traditional" Natives, and the continuous role of the Blackfoot in shaping the identity of the West.

The exhibition ends in a circular space, where the visitor is again able to see the large tipi under the Wolf Trail. Here are flags of each tribe; books and community newsletters; and a Blackfoot artist's work. Multiple television screens present Blackfoot people speaking about the challenges and successes in their own lives, the changes in



Blackfoot seasonal movements through the land. *Photo courtesy of Glenbow Museum.*

their communities, and the future of their culture. Text panels and photographs document the creation of Blackfoot schools and healthcare services, and Native success in repatriating sacred bundles from museums. As the text panel on repatriation concludes, the message here is that “These changes are important. These changes will keep our culture alive. These changes mean that we will survive.”

As visitors leave the exhibition, they encounter a deep blue wall featuring color portraits of each community team member involved in the creation of the galleries, with their names, tribe, and goal for the exhibition.¹¹ All of the exhibition text is written in the first-person and first-person plural.

THE AIMS OF THE EXHIBITION

During the course of this study, Glenbow staff and Blackfoot community members who had participated in developing *Nitsitapiisinni* were individually interviewed by the authors about their experiences of collaboratively creating the exhibition. The interviews covered a variety of subjects: the individual’s role in the collaboration; reflections on the role of public museums; and the changing relationship between the Glenbow and Blackfoot community, among other things. Exhibition team members were encouraged to elaborate upon their aims for the exhibition, and how they hoped the public would interact with the space. The interviews probed members’ perceptions of how important they felt it was that visitors see collaboration in the exhibition.

A difference in perspective emerged between Glenbow museum exhibition team members and Blackfoot community team members concerning goals and intended audiences. Glenbow exhibition team members directed the goals of the exhibition towards a more general audience. Conaty felt that although different audiences existed, the message was the same for all visitors. He saw the gallery as an introduction to Blackfoot culture; a space that helps all people connect the past with the present. For Blackfoot team members, on the other hand, the exhibition goals were targeted first and foremost towards a Blackfoot audience, and secondly towards a non-Native audience. Blackfoot team members saw the possibilities for their own communities. They imagined the positive outcomes of visiting the exhibition; recognized that the collaboration was creating a new climate within the museum; and saw opportunities to engage with Blackfoot youth in new ways.

The recognition of collaboration was considered by museum staff and community team members to be equally important for both Blackfoot and non-Blackfoot audiences. First, if Blackfoot visitors to the exhibition literally recognized community members (identified them as family members or neighbors), they could approach these people outside the museum for knowledge, support and guidance. Furthermore, if Blackfoot or non-Blackfoot visitors recognized the community team members as the providers, interpreters and authors of the exhibition content, it was felt this would authenticate the content. With regard to the latter point, “recognizing collaboration” entails more than seeing Blackfoot faces or words in the exhibition—it requires a cognizance of the intrinsic role community team members played in the development of *Nitsitapiisinni*.

In terms of the differences in who was being targeted—Blackfoot youth or a wider public—Conaty recognized that collaboration did not occur for the museum’s benefit. The collaboration more aptly reflects the Blackfoot Elders’ desire to expand their teaching tools:

We [Blackfoot Elders] all agreed to one thing: we were working on this project to preserve the culture, the history, the stories and pass it on to our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren. When they need to learn something they can come here, tour the Blackfoot Gallery and learn their history. A lot of it isn’t being taught the proper way—the information ain’t being passed down the way it’s supposed to be. I think here’s the place to go for school kids, it develops their curiosity where they can go and inquire more into ceremonies. Once that process starts, they start learning and understanding the ways.

Both the Glenbow and Blackfoot organizing groups supported an exhibition narrative that articulated Blackfoot experiences from Blackfoot perspectives and in Blackfoot voices. Blackfoot history, therefore, begins with an introduction to the Blackfoot worldview and the stories that teach the origins of Blackfoot culture and its connections to the land. As one community team member offered:

Previous [to *Nitsitapiisinni*] when you came to view the Blackfoot material, you only heard it from a person observing. You didn’t hear it from the person living it, the person developing it. It’s a real big difference now that you come into the Blackfoot

Gallery, being totally designed by the Blackfoot people rather than someone with a camera, asking questions, observing.

This shift in voice is reflected in the use of first-person and first-person plural in the text. It should be clarified that the exhibition does not articulate a homogenous Blackfoot experience or singular Blackfoot voice. Rather, tribal variations, accomplishments of noted Blackfoot chiefs, and experiences of contemporary Blackfoot individuals are featured throughout the gallery. Still, each story in the gallery is there to illustrate what it was and is to be Blackfoot during periods of independence, colonization, and cultural revitalization.

There was also a specific desire, particularly among Blackfoot community team members, that visitors recognize collaboration as fundamental to the exhibition. The gallery's viewpoint is meant to be distinct from the multiple interpretations and "misinterpretations" originating from non-Blackfoot sources. With its shift in voice—from that of the museum to that of the Blackfoot—the gallery seeks to communicate that, as one team member said, "this is our story, this is our way, the real people, telling our story, how it happened." Herman Yellow Old Woman, a community team member, felt that if the collaborative nature was visible, then Blackfoot visitors would feel more comfortable in the museum, knowing that "what is there is coming from the ancestors, from the communities."

Conaty spoke of attempts to strike a balance between emphasizing the collaborative nature of the exhibition and its overall intent, which is not to tell visitors how it was made, but rather to share information about Blackfoot culture:

I hope that people see that it's Blackfoot people telling their story and not just another museum talking about culture. That there's people talking about themselves and something really to be learned here. But short of doing a whole section in the gallery on collaboration, you can't do that other than through text and some audio-visual where people are talking about collaborating. I left little clips in of Frank [Weasel Head] talking about being proud of Glenbow and his evaluation that this is taking control. But we sure didn't want to do a whole text panel or section on the collaboration.

Community team members' expectations that collaboration would be central to and apparent within the exhibition appear, in fact, to have been easily reconciled with this preference for minimizing the exhibition-making process. As Yellow Old Woman noted, for Blackfoot visitors, recognizing the presence of the ancestors was the key to rec-



Powwow Interpretive Station. Photo courtesy of Cara Krmpotich.

ognizing collaboration. This is achieved through the wording, accuracy, and types of information provided, and through the repeated use of photographs and names to identify the Blackfoot individuals speaking in the many films, interpretive stations, and text panels. Personal relationships, or at least familiarity with the communities and Blackfoot culture, could improve one's potential to intuit collaboration in the exhibition.

Rooting the exhibition in individual experiences, social relationships, and storytelling changes the focus from objects to people. Consequently, the exhibition highlights the intangible qualities of a culture (ideology, values, history). *Nitsitapiisinni* still seeks to make these intangible qualities more concrete—not through artifacts, however, but through personal stories. Barbara Franco (1994) notes three particular outcomes of using personal experience as a communication device: First, audiences generally prefer history that deals with everyday life rather than prominent figures, so the inclusion of personal experiences and anecdotes tends to make history more engaging. Second, grandparents were noted as highly trustworthy sources of information about families and human experiences. Third, personal experiences can help visitors bridge unfamiliar topics by using their own experiences or knowledge. On the latter point, Franco emphasizes how visitors' "empathic identification" with others' personal experiences increases the likelihood that visitors will take an interest in and critically analyze the material.

Most importantly for the research presented here (given that the majority of visitors interviewed were not Blackfoot) is the potential for *Nitsitapiisinni* to repeatedly engage non-Blackfoot visitors through the exhibit medium with community members, the tellers of the story. The story represented in *Nitsitapiisinni* is important for how it is told—through self-representation and collaboration—but also for what is being said. One of the goals expressed for *Nitsitapiisinni* is that visitors understand both the positive and negative aspects of contemporary Blackfoot life. By providing a cultural-historical context, the exhibition attempts to convey to visitors not only a sequence of events leading up to the present, but also how these events were experienced by Blackfoot tribes. Another goal is that visitors recognize the efficacy of Blackfoot cultural systems in the past (such as land management or education), and the ability of these systems to play a continuing and instrumental role in the present. A community team member felt that if visitors could see how these systems were disabled by Euro-Canadians, the damage that ensued, and the positive effects of maintaining and reintroducing these systems, visitors would respect Blackfoot attempts to preserve and keep their traditions. Conaty has characterized *Nitsitapiisinni* as "a firm resistance to assimilation" from the Blackfoot and "a statement of their right to exist as a unique cultural political entity within the larger Canadian society" (2003, 240).

Community team members believed that a more accurate depiction of Blackfoot culture was possible and desirable. The exhibition narrative is built upon key cultural concepts—spirituality and a connection to the land—that serve as the framework for talking about other stories such as kinship and family, ceremonies, or the buffalo hunt. An effort was made to ensure that Blackfoot notions of spirituality permeated the narrative—to convey that understanding Blackfoot culture, and how decisions are made and acted upon, requires an understanding of Blackfoot spirituality.¹²



Community Team Members featured at end of *Nitsitapiisinni*. Photo courtesy of Cara Krmpotich.

Community team members were determined that the exhibition serve as a place where Blackfoot youth learn about their culture and history. Herman Yellow Old Woman said that if their youth recognized the nature of this collaboration, the learning could continue outside the museum: “It is very important for people to understand that this was collaborative. It opens the door for youth to ask questions. They can connect with the images and people in the exhibition and know who to ask. They can ask questions at home. Knowledge isn’t hidden anymore.”

In summary, Glenbow and community team members desired that visitors recognize four primary messages in the exhibition. First, the story has come from, and is being told by, the Blackfoot. Second, the origins of the story make it more accurate and more meaningful than representations of Blackfoot history and culture produced by non-Blackfoot. Third, the challenges faced by the Blackfoot need to be considered within the context of colonialism, while solutions to these challenges lie in cultural revitalization. And lastly, Blackfoot spirituality forms the basis of the culture.

VISITORS’ RESPONSES

Methodology—An exploratory evaluation of visitors’ responses was undertaken to investigate how effectively *Nitsitapiisinni* is communicating the four primary messages that embodied the essence of collaboration and aboriginal authorship and to determine the scope of messages visitors interpreted in the gallery. Exploratory approaches seek to determine the multiple impacts an exhibition may have, whether or not those impacts

correspond with the goals expressed by the curator, exhibition team, or museum (Loomis 1987, 212).

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researchers to understand how visitors were interacting with and responding to the gallery. The semi-structured interviews enabled data to be collected that indicated not only how frequently visitors were interpreting the messages as intended by the exhibition team, but also the qualitative richness of these interpretations and what additional or alternative messages visitors were interpreting. Silverman (1995), Falk and Dierking (2000) and Anderson (2003) indicate that visitors' experiences are shaped largely by personal factors, including their past experiences, their personal interests, and the social context of their visit: for instance, is the visitor traveling alone, with peers, or with a family; are they visiting from another country; do they have an interest in aboriginal cultures? Thus, interviews afforded the opportunity to investigate how personal interests or circumstances may have influenced visitors' experiences in the gallery. (For interview methods, see the endnote).¹³ In almost every case the same questions were asked of visitors in roughly the same order. Initial interviews resulted in minor changes to the interview protocol to ensure questions and concepts were being communicated effectively. Where visitors seemed willing to engage in a conversation on any given topic, this was encouraged as a means of eliciting the same responses provided by a straightforward question-and-answer session. Frequently, additional questions, tailored to visitors' responses, were posed to clarify meanings and elicit further information. Where relevant, participants were allowed to provide multiple answers to a question, with all responses being recorded. Participants were also free to decline to answer any question. The core questions included:

- How long were you in *Nitsitapiisinni*? How long have you been in the museum?
- Did you know about the Blackfoot Gallery before coming to the museum, and if so, what/how did you hear about it?
- What are your positive/negative impressions of the gallery, and what might you change?
- What do you think are the main messages the gallery is trying to communicate?
- What did you gain from your visit today?
- How does the information in the exhibition compare with your prior knowledge of Blackfoot people, or First Nations in general?
- Have you heard the word "collaboration" used in the museum-context before?
- What do you think the word "collaboration" means?

At this point in the interview, visitors were informed that *Nitsitapiisinni* was chosen as a research site because of the collaborative effort between museum staff and the community team members. Further, it was imparted that the Glenbow worked as equal part-

ners with 17 Blackfoot Elders to produce the exhibition. The interview continued with the following questions:

- Did you see any evidence of collaboration in the exhibition?
- Why do you think museums would want to collaborate with First Nations?
- What do you think the benefits of collaboration are?
- Would you like to see information about the collaborative process in an exhibition?

The final questions posed to visitors were:

- Where are you from?
- Do you visit museums often?
- Why did you come to Glenbow today?
- On a scale of one (low) to 10 (high), how would you rate your knowledge of First Nations in Canada?

Evaluative analysis of visitor interviews—The analysis was based upon interviews conducted with 62 visitors to the Blackfoot Gallery. Sixteen participants (26 percent) were from the Calgary area, while the remaining 46 (74 percent) were visitors to the area. Ten visitors were from elsewhere in Alberta; 17 came from other Canadian provinces and territories; five were from the United States, 11 from Europe, two from the United Kingdom, and one from South America. Nine people (14 percent) identified themselves as First Nations during the interviews. Most of the participants were visiting the museum with their partner or spouse, family members, or with a group of friends (one couple indicated they were there as part of a tour group). Only six visitors who participated were there alone. Exactly one-half of the visitors interviewed had known about the Blackfoot Gallery before coming to the museum that day, and 12 visitors indicated they came to Glenbow specifically to see *Nitsitapiisinni*. Twenty-five people (40 percent) said they visited museums often, while 21 participants (34 percent) said they tended to visit museums when traveling or when entertaining out-of-town guests. The gender and approximate age of participants was noted, though these characteristics do not produce any trends in the data.¹⁴

The interviews were coded using emergent categories that reflected the interview questions and that were similar to the themes that emerged during conversations with exhibition team members. The categories were: a) their awareness and perceptions of collaboration; b) the gains associated with visiting the gallery; c) the messages visitors felt were dominant in the gallery; d) their assessment of the quality and types of information in *Nitsitapiisinni*; e) plus additional categories to record positive and negative critiques of the gallery. A second level of coding further distinguished specific responses within each of these larger thematic categories as a means of uncovering patterns, consensus, or disagreement in visitors' comments.

Visitors' concepts of collaboration and process—Predominantly, visitors imagined collaboration as the museum “cooperating” or “working together.” More specifically, they characterized this cooperation as occurring between the museum and artists, other museums, or sponsors such as industry and government. Working with the Blackfoot was noted as a collaborative partnership by only 10 visitors (16 percent).¹⁵ (A family of four from Bavaria were unfamiliar with the term “collaboration” though they suspected this was due to language barriers; their interview demonstrates an awareness of the Blackfoot’s role in the exhibition.) While the ideas of “working together” or “cooperating” are not wrong, neither are they synonymous with concepts such as “self-representation” or “self-determination.” It is interesting to note that except for those visitors who specifically mentioned the Blackfoot, no other visitors included ethnic communities or cultural groups as a potential partner with the museum. This suggests that most visitors in this sample are not envisioning self-representation or self-determination as a primary goal or outcome of collaboration.

Adult visitors who identified themselves as First Nations were all aware the Blackfoot played a significant role in the production of the gallery. This was the result of being socially connected to community team members, learning about the exhibition in their own communities, and prior visits to the museum. The responses from the three First Nations youth are not explicit as to whether they knew of the extent of the Blackfoot participation. However, one young girl from Calgary said she was familiar with the people in the exhibition, and two Dene Cree siblings had been brought to the exhibition by their father specifically because the exhibition was a place where the children could learn about the cultural life and history of a First Nation from the appropriate teachers—elders—an outcome specifically envisaged by the Blackfoot team members.¹⁶

When asked why the museum would want to engage in collaborative projects with communities, the vast majority of visitors believed using collaboration “just makes sense.” Nineteen people (31 percent) said that by using collaboration, the museum is able to obtain the perspective of the people they are portraying. In this scenario, however, it is still the museum that is responsible for the representation. These same visitors often saw collaboration as a means of accessing cultural knowledge the museum would not otherwise have. Nine people (14 percent) said the result of collaboration is that a more realistic or balanced story can be told. The Blackfoot, for instance, could speak about their own experiences directly, address particular issues, and counter Euro-Canadian versions of events. In this case, visitors are recognizing the Blackfoot account as equally valid compared to mainstream histories, though they are not necessarily conceptualizing it as more accurate or more meaningful than non-Blackfoot sources. In contrast, 10 visitors (16 percent) said the result of collaboration is that *multiple* perspectives can be included in an exhibition. The end product would reflect not just the museum’s values; neither would it reflect just the values or perspectives of the collaborative partner (the Blackfoot). “Balance,” for these visitors, comes from having multiple perspectives: the museum’s, the Blackfoot’s, plus the voices of any other stakeholders. The degree of control the museum wields over the interpretation of artifacts and knowledge is alternately increased, diluted, or made relative in each of these scenarios.

Table 1. Visitors' suggestions of why museums participate in collaborative exhibitions.

| Reason provided | Number of responses |
|---|----------------------------|
| Increased perspective and cultural knowledge of the people being portrayed | 19 |
| Inclusion of multiple perspectives | 10 |
| A more realistic or balanced story | 9 |
| Access to better or more artifacts | 5 |
| Museum becomes better educated | 3 |
| Makes the story more personal, more interesting | 3 |
| Community volunteers have motivation | 2 |
| Museum engages in social activism (raising public awareness of land claims) | 1 |
| Pressure coming from First Nations | 1 |
| Other | 3 |
| Total | 56 |

Number of visitors interviewed = 62.

Only one person, an Algonquin woman, said collaboration was a response to pressure coming from First Nations. One man (non-Native) suggested the museum engaged in collaboration in order to be politically and socially active. He saw it as a way to raise awareness of land claim issues and prevent the public from harboring unfair attitudes towards the Blackfoot. Table 1 describes the breadth of suggestions supplied by visitors as to why the museum would participate in collaboration. The majority of these responses reflect visitors' perceptions that the use of collaboration will improve museums' abilities to operate and produce high-quality exhibitions.

Visitors' impressions of collaboration as a tool for building better and more accurate exhibitions and their overall impressions of the Blackfoot Gallery as highly informative, truthful and in-depth, however, were not necessarily recognized in a cause-and-effect relationship. This separation was quite evident in an interview with a man and woman from Fort McMurray, Alberta. During the initial questioning, the man described the gallery as a "very fair, very honest portrayal." He felt as though the exhibition was "holding a mirror up to the past and quietly influencing people." Neither he nor his partner had heard the term collaboration before. When the collaborative nature of *Nitsitapisinni* was explained, both he and his partner were shocked. "I assumed some professional museum people had put this together," he responded. A disconnect occurs, however, between this visitor's notion of the exhibition as being fair and honest, his assumption that the museum was responsible for this knowledge, and why he thought museums would use collaboration: "Without it [collaboration]," he asked, "how could museum professionals really understand other peoples' ways of life?"

Many visitors made a similar assumption: that the exhibition was the work of the museum. When asked to consider if they saw evidence of collaboration, visitors' responses often began with: "I hadn't thought of it as collaboration at the time, but . . ." Only four

Table 2. Exhibition elements perceived as evidence of collaboration.

| Form of evidence | Number of responses |
|---|----------------------------|
| Video presentations of personal and cultural stories | 17 |
| First-person or Blackfoot perspective of the text | 13 |
| Artifacts (“authentic”; on loan from individuals; diverse sample) | 8 |
| Interpretive stations (stories) | 7 |
| Inclusion of Blackfoot language | 4 |
| Culture presented with intimate, “authentic” knowledge | 4 |
| Community members’ statements and portraits | 4 |
| No evidence of collaboration | 3 |
| Quotations | 2 |
| Stories (in any format) | 2 |
| The tipi and animals | 2 |
| Other | 5 |
| Total | 71 |

Number of visitors interviewed = 62.

visitors recalled the explicit indications of collaboration within the exhibition, such as the panel at the entrance that reads “A Unique Collaboration” or the blue wall at the end that features portraits and statements from the 17 community team members. The elements of the exhibition visitors identified with collaboration are recorded in table 2.

The audio-visual components in which people tell personal and traditional stories and the first-person text were most often identified as evidence for collaboration.¹⁷ Seventeen visitors noted the video installations, seven noted the interpretive stations, and 13 noted the Blackfoot perspective (the “first-person”) in which the text was written. Thus, those elements of the exhibition that succeeded in communicating a Blackfoot voice to visitors were most often seen as evidence for collaboration. The specific elements visitors perceived as indications of collaboration impacted their sense of the partnership between Glenbow and the Blackfoot. For example, visitors who identified the stories as a sign of collaboration tended to equate Blackfoot participation with making appearances in the films. Other visitors imagined the contribution of the Blackfoot to be the donation of artifacts or information. Thus, even though a Blackfoot voice was frequently heard by visitors, it would be premature to equate voice with self-representation or self-determination in a political sense. As the community team member quoted above made clear, an exhibition “totally designed by the Blackfoot people” is substantially different than having “someone with a camera, asking questions, observing.”

A smaller number of visitors recognized a dominant Blackfoot voice that shaped the exhibition’s narrative. Four visitors characterized the information in the exhibition as “authentic,” and more extensive than what is available in books. They speculated that the museum must have had the help of the Blackfoot. Expanding upon this idea, a woman

from England recalled a notice in the exhibition that only limited information would be provided about sacred rites because this knowledge was protected within the Blackfoot culture. For her, this was a strong indication that the information came directly from the Blackfoot (though—she clarified—not necessarily as a result of exhibition-wide collaboration). In contrast, a local visitor reported that he found the conceptual layout of the exhibition to reflect the worldviews as expressed in the exhibition. For him, the non-chronological order in which the story was told was the strongest indication of Blackfoot involvement.

Twenty-two people (35 percent) said they would be interested in seeing the collaborative process discussed—particularly if it was done in a “low-key” manner. Visitors suggested a two-minute movie clip or a small panel as good ways to present collaboration. Ironically, the vast majority of these 22 people did not mention the large sign, movie clip, and bright blue wall as evidence of collaboration. Thus, even those visitors who reported an interest in collaboration did not register the explicit signs used by the exhibition team to communicate collaboration. Eleven visitors (18 percent) did not want to see the collaborative process in an exhibition. These visitors were most interested in the final product, or had a specific interest in the artifacts as opposed to the narrative. Ten visitors (16 percent) did not mind if the process of collaboration was included in an exhibition, though they also had no particular desire to see it, either.

Visitors’ overall interpretations of *Nitsitapiisinni*—Prior to discussing collaboration, the visitor interviews addressed community team members’ concerns that: a) the exhibition be seen as more accurate than non-Blackfoot productions, b) the impacts of colonialism be recognized in the past and present, and c) spirituality be recognized as essential to Blackfoot culture.

When asked to compare the information in *Nitsitapiisinni* with their prior knowledge or impressions of the Blackfoot, visitors’ replies were often less descriptive than predicted. A critical reading of the gallery may have been uncommon among visitors because, as Ostrowitz suggests, “viewers are accustomed to equating museum displays, particularly elaborate scenes or installations, with earnest and accurate attempts at historical representation” (1999, 81). Still, one might have expected that more visitors would make comparisons with “the Wild West,” as did one woman from England who noted that because she was able to see the “real” story (as opposed to the movies and tall tales of her youth), she now respected Blackfoot attempts to maintain their culture. Only seven visitors (11 percent) made comparisons with film or television, usually after these media were suggested as a point of comparison.¹⁸

Two visitors found the Blackfoot voice to be so dominant in the gallery that they questioned the accuracy of the information presented. One man from Argentina and one man from Switzerland expressed interest in hearing the Euro-Canadian perspective. Each man believed “both sides of the story” needed to be told in order for visitors to understand the situation. They both felt having only the Blackfoot tell the story was just as biased as having only the colonizers tell the story. One of the men felt the gallery communicated the message that:

[A]nything coming from outside—Europe, the American Government—isn't fair. As a result, I do not know if it is completely truthful or not... the exhibit only tells the Blackfoot side of the story—it lacks the other side. I would like to see the other side as well. I recognize it was unfair to take their land, but I don't think it was 100 percent the fault of the other people.

He also characterized the information as misleading because it “favored” the Blackfoot.

These two cases contradict the exhibitors' desire for the exhibition to be perceived as more accurate and truthful. They were, however, a minority. A university student visiting from Toronto interpreted an equally strong Blackfoot perspective in the gallery. He had no desire for the Blackfoot and Euro-Canadian perspectives to be juxtaposed; rather, by displaying the Blackfoot perspective on its own, *Nitsitapiisinni* emphasized how distinct the Blackfoot perspective was from the Euro-Canadian history he had been taught. During a later question, he reflected that while he believed his knowledge of Canada's First Nations to be thorough, it was only so from a Euro-Canadian perspective; his understanding of aboriginal culture and history from a Native perspective, he reported, would be negligible.

Eleven visitors (18 percent) characterized the information as more complex or more detailed than their prior knowledge. Acquisition of knowledge was identified by a significant number of people as the primary benefit of visiting *Nitsitapiisinni*. In response to the question “What do you think you have gained from your visit today?” 17 visitors (27 percent) replied that the general knowledge they acquired about the Blackfoot was a beneficial outcome. An additional 17 visitors felt the acquisition of particular pieces of information about the Blackfoot was the primary gain of their visit. They reported learning of such things as the centrality of children in Blackfoot culture, the extensive effects of diseases such as small pox and influenza, the impact of treaties and the amount of land lost by the Blackfoot, the fact that four different tribes make up “the Blackfoot,” that each tribe had its own dialect, and even that the term “First Nations” was used in Canada. Four more visitors felt their sense of local history and culture was improved from their experience in *Nitsitapiisinni*, while another five felt they gained a better sense of Canadian history and culture. In contrast, only five visitors identified the opportunity to “see new things” or view the artifacts as a primary gain of their visit. The full range of benefits visitors attributed to their experience in the gallery is provided in table 3.

One notable exception came from a local First Nations woman who reported she had not learned very much during her visit because she was already familiar with most of the content in the exhibition. Similarly, a Cree woman reported that since she had seen the old exhibitions at Glenbow, she didn't feel she gained much out of seeing this exhibition. In contrast to these examples are the Dene Cree family for whom education was the primary reason for their visit, another First Nations woman who enjoyed the opportunity to learn about another aboriginal group, and a man who reported a better understanding of Blackfoot design as a result of the exhibition. Among two of the four groups of First Nations visitors, one member of the group had intentionally brought their companion(s) as a means of enhancing their companion's knowledge of Blackfoot culture.

Table 3. Perceived gains of visiting *Nitsitapiisinni*.

| Perceived gain | Number of responses |
|---|---------------------|
| Increased general knowledge | 17 |
| Learned specific knowledge | 17 |
| Respect and/or admiration for Blackfoot people and culture | 6 |
| Increased understanding of Canadian history and culture | 5 |
| Able to see new things | 5 |
| Increased understanding of local or western history | 4 |
| Appreciation for tools and resourcefulness | 3 |
| Admiration for craftsmanship and artistry | 3 |
| Appreciation for Blackfoot attempts to preserve their culture | 1 |
| Other | 5 |
| Total | 66 |

Number of visitors interviewed = 62.

During each interview, visitors were asked to relay what messages they thought the gallery was trying to communicate. Three distinct general categories emerged from the interviews as visitors identified dominant messages that were: 1) primarily about Blackfoot culture; 2) primarily about the interactions between Blackfoot and Euro-Canadian cultures; or 3) primarily about history.

The visitors who became aware of the disastrous effects of disease, the conditions under which treaties were signed, or the extreme duration of residential schooling indicate that a portion of the public is witnessing the struggles faced by the Blackfoot and that these struggles were a result of colonial interactions (the third goal expressed by exhibition team members). This is further supported by the 18 responses (29 percent) that identified struggles between Blackfoot and Euro-Canadians as a dominant message in the gallery (see table 4). Nine of the visitors saw the continuation of the culture from the past to the present as the most important message in the gallery, while five more specifically commented that the focus of the exhibition was the efforts being made to preserve the culture today. Four people felt *Nitsitapiisinni* demonstrated the importance of the Blackfoot in local history or how they contributed to the contemporary social, political or cultural landscape today. A total of ten people identified a key message as the strength and abilities of the Blackfoot people and culture, plus an additional four people felt the gallery asserted the validity of Blackfoot cultural practices independent of Euro-Canadian practices.

Visitors' responses to this question also related to the fourth exhibition goal: the recognition of spirituality as central to Blackfoot culture. Six visitors saw ideas of co-existence as the focus of the exhibition. These visitors identified themes such as "living in harmony" with the land and other peoples, or balancing the natural, cultural and spiritual realms. A family visiting Canada from Bavaria, for example, collectively answered that the main messages the gallery communicated were: "working together, understanding

Table 4 Main messages of the exhibition as identified by visitors.

| Message interpreted | Number of responses |
|---|----------------------------|
| <i>Primarily about Blackfoot culture</i> | |
| As it existed in the past and as it is today | 9 |
| Is connected to the land | 8 |
| As it existed in the past | 7 |
| Is strong, persistent, complex | 7 |
| Co-existence with other beings | 6 |
| People working to rebuild and preserve their culture | 5 |
| Integral to local history and present activities | 4 |
| Life was harder in the past | 4 |
| Bears witness to Blackfoot intelligence | 3 |
| Is peaceful | 1 |
| Knew how to teach their children | 1 |
| <i>Primarily about struggles between Blackfoot and Euro-Canadians</i> | |
| Unfair treatment of Blackfoot | 6 |
| Legitimacy of Blackfoot independent of Western cultures (different but equal) | 4 |
| Loss of land and/or culture | 3 |
| The arrival of Europeans changed the Blackfoot (both helped and hindered) | 2 |
| Blackfoot beholden to Canadian government | 1 |
| Cultural differences led to misunderstandings | 1 |
| Uncertainty of Blackfoot future | 1 |
| <i>Primarily About History</i> | |
| Canadian heritage | 2 |
| Trying to influence visitors' perceptions of the past | 2 |
| Total | 77 |

Number of visitors interviewed = 62.

nature and spirit, and living with nature." An additional eight visitors perceived the main message of the gallery to be that Blackfoot culture is connected to, integrated with, and respectful of the land. According to the Blackfoot explanation, the exhibition informs visitors that "[i]n order to understand who we are it is first necessary to understand the world around us," and then proceeds to explain "how we became so closely connected to all the beings with whom we share the earth" (Blackfoot Gallery Committee 2001, 8). Those visitors remarking on the bond between Blackfoot culture and the land arguably received equally strong messages about Blackfoot spirituality, since co-existing with one's surroundings is an important element of Blackfoot culture.

Responses suggest that the majority of visitors sampled in this study are obtaining many of the intended messages articulated by the exhibition team. However, some main messages perceived by visitors actually contradict the intentions of the exhibition makers. A total of 11 visitors conceptualized the exhibition as historical in nature (either as general Canadian history or more specifically Blackfoot history). Whether this response is a direct result of the visitor's experience in *Nisitapiisinni* (they did not recognize the present in the narrative), a reflection of a general attitude that museums display history, or a personal interest in history is not possible to say with the information collected during the interviews. It is worth considering the impact such perceptions may have on the exhibition's voice. Our use of "voice" is similar to that of Haas (1996). The notion that "[v]oice and power are inextricably intertwined in museums and both are subjects of intense and sometimes disconcerting dialogue" is particularly apt for the case of *Nisitapiisinni*, where the exhibition includes an explicit Blackfoot voice and an implicit museum voice. Additional research could illuminate whether the voices heard in exhibitions are perceived as belonging to historic or contemporary people.

The woman who felt the main message was that the Blackfoot were beholden to the Canadian government was from Montreal and had vivid recollections of the standoff at Kanesatake, near Quebec.¹⁹ She admitted she hadn't read much of the text in the exhibition, partly because it was not in French, but largely because she already knew about aboriginal people from the events at Kanesatake. In her opinion, aboriginal people were reliant upon the government for hand-outs. "The Blackfoot lost the fight" she told me, whereas "the Quebecois—they love the fight! The Quebecois don't need the Canadian government."

The visitor who replied that the message was one of future uncertainty was from Germany. During the interview he reported that he did not learn anything that day from his visit to the gallery. Instead, he "saw with [his] own eyes what [he] read in books back in Germany." He was referring to Karl May's fictional adventure stories, which he qualified as his sole source of information on the Blackfoot.²⁰ He believed the future of the Blackfoot culture was uncertain because he felt that—although they were trying to maintain their culture—it would be very difficult for them because it was an oral rather than a written history. Paradoxically, *Nisitapiisinni* attempts to tackle this very problem: it acts as a place to record and centralize the words of the elders and the stories of Blackfoot history. These two accounts were perhaps the most explicit responses indicating how a visitor's own personal experiences act as a filter through which an exhibition is viewed (Anderson 2003).²¹

In summary, the visitor interviews indicate that while not every visitor is interpreting the wealth of primary messages in the exhibition, most visitors are interpreting at least one of the intended messages. The legacy of colonialism was interpreted by one-third of the visitors as the primary message in the gallery, while another third interpreted the continuing presence of the Blackfoot and the survival of their culture as the primary message. One-quarter of the visitors identified themes associated with spirituality as central to the gallery. Visitors rarely connected their estimation that this was an informative, truthful, and in-depth telling of Blackfoot culture, and their impression of collaboration as a tool for building better-informed exhibitions. Few visitors recalled the explicit indications of collaboration within the exhibition, and many considered collaboration as an element of

the exhibition only when encouraged to. Interviews in this study suggest that about one-fifth of visitors sampled recognized the collaborative nature of the exhibition. A compelling finding, however, is that the majority of visitors did hear a Blackfoot voice within the exhibition, particularly as a result of the storytelling and the text. It was these aspects of *Nitsitapiisinni* that visitors most frequently associated with collaboration. This indicates a greater need to understand the associations visitors make with the different “voices” they “hear” in exhibitions. It further advises us not to conflate the presence of multiple voices—from the public’s point of view—with concepts such as self-representation or self-determination, without thorough investigation. There is no doubt that the community team members perceive *Nitsitapiisinni* as a vehicle for presenting their own stories and history. However, we are not yet able to say that the public perceives a political overtone to the voices represented in museums.

Unfortunately, an assessment of future impact is missing from our research. Falk and Dierking suggest that prior and future experiences will both affect a visitor’s museum experience (2000, 7). All the visitors who participated in this study have now seen an exhibition with a dominant indigenous voice, and have all engaged in a specific conversation about collaboration. (One visitor joked during the interview that he was now going to “look for collaboration” when he went to other museums.) How will they remember *Nitsitapiisinni* as they go on to see other exhibitions, hear other versions of western history, or read about land claims or aboriginal rights in the newspaper?

Similarly, investigations by Anderson suggest that visitors’ long-term memory of exhibitions is “overwhelmingly dominated and mediated by the culture and the identity of the individual... at the time of their visit” (2003). Follow-up interviews with visitors could serve to expand our understanding of how personal experiences and visitors’ social identities (i.e. as a parent, adolescent, member of a group, tourist) interact with the content of exhibitions and how people recall exhibitions through time. Follow-up interviews with visitors to *Indigenous Australians*, for example, showed that visitors began to think more critically about the information they received through various media as a result of the exhibition (Kelly and Gordon 2002, 162–3).

It is also unfortunate that Blackfoot youth are unrepresented in our sample, given that Blackfoot community team members had Blackfoot youth as their target audience. A research strategy that enabled Blackfoot youth to be exposed to the exhibition and to discuss their experiences would round out the findings presented here. The museum and Blackfoot communities have been working together to produce an on-line version of the exhibition for use in Blackfoot schools. So there are multiple opportunities for future research along these lines.

CONCLUSION

Elaine Heumann Gurian suggested that: “While visitors expect to see the authors of works of art, music and fiction identified, they are not used to perceiving exhibitions as the personal work of identifiable individuals” (1991, 187). The visitor-oriented goals for *Nitsitapi-*

isinni, and particularly those expressed by the community team members, however, were often reliant upon visitors recognizing the role of Blackfoot cultural and spiritual leaders in the exhibition. Community team members believed *Nitsitapiisinni* would be seen as a more accurate and realistic account of Blackfoot history and culture if visitors understood the story came from the ancestors, the communities, the people living the story.

Nitsitapiisinni was successful in communicating the legacy of colonialism in Blackfoot culture and how spirituality shapes Blackfoot beliefs and actions. It was less successful in communicating that the Blackfoot community team members were the authors of their culture in this exhibition or that they worked in a truly collaborative fashion with the museum to develop the exhibition. This was despite the exhibition's voice being overtly one of self-representation. The result is that visitors are learning about struggles over land, the impacts of disease and residential schooling, community attempts to improve health and education, but these messages are infrequently contextualized by visitors as statements of self-representation or self-determination.

The place of self-representation and self-determination in the museum has been developing in the minds of museum professionals, scholars and indigenous communities increasingly over the last decade. The testimonies from community team members assert that self-representation and self-determination are more than concepts to be thought about intellectually. *Nitsitapiisinni* activates these concepts by inviting the Blackfoot to record their history, to teach their own youth, to improve relations between Blackfoot and non-Blackfoot, and to emphasize their right to live as a distinct culture. Conaty has also expressed a hope that the gallery can initiate action by serving as a forum where the policies and practices of assimilation can be debated and juxtaposed against models of co-existence in contemporary Canadian society (2003, 240).

The results of the interviews conducted with visitors to *Nitsitapiisinni* reveal that museum visitors may still be unprepared to see exhibitions as the result of individuals' efforts, despite concerted attempts to showcase the Blackfoot collaborators. Yet the outcomes also indicate that visitors were attuned to those elements of the exhibition that feature a Blackfoot voice (the "first-person" text) and, even more so, to individuals' stories (in the video installations and interpretive stations). The interviews also suggest strong correlations between voice and collaboration. Despite this, many visitors perceived museum staff—or more generally "the museum"—to be largely responsible for the exhibition, perhaps receiving assistance from Blackfoot people in order to make the audio-visual segments or to discuss more private aspects of the culture. If visitors are not accustomed to thinking critically about who is creating exhibitions in the first place, they are unlikely to consider the processes of exhibition building and hence not fully appreciate the cultural representations embodied in collaborative exhibitions.

Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life is a successful exhibition in many regards. It arguably represents the best example of collaborative exhibition development and representation of aboriginal authorship in Canada today. Yet the hopes embodied in the Task Force Report and current museum discourse—that collaboration can signify political and social change to the public—require more direct investigation. Despite the strong visual, textual, and aural representation of community team members within the exhibition (and

the virtual absence of museum staff), visitors were still imagining museum staff as the primary creators of the exhibition, and Blackfoot as more peripheral to the process. In the up-coming years, we may be able to gain important insights from the National Museum of the American Indian, as it both challenges and develops the roles of museums for indigenous and non-indigenous audiences. However, our findings also suggest that we return to Phillips' recognition of the limitations of the museum in embodying social change. Although the introduction of indigenous voices in museum exhibitions adds alternative and important narratives to the national history, concepts such as self-determination and self-representation may best be communicated to the public through the negotiation and settlement of larger issues such as land claims, sovereignty and enfranchisement. Self-representation needs to happen in museums, but this is not the only place it must occur in order for the public to recognize its features and significance. The onus cannot be just on indigenous communities to raise their voices, or exhibition developers to incorporate new voices. Perhaps when a greater number of public institutions incorporate collaborative working relationships and reinforce self-representation and self-determination, we may be able to speak with more certainty about social change.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Harrison (1993), Doxtator (1996), Ames (1999), Hanna (1999), Holm and Pokotylo (1997), Phillips and Johnson (2003).
2. For American examples of collaborative exhibition and collection practices, see West (2000), Kahn (2000), Dunstan (1999), Merrill, Ladd, and Ferguson (1993), Rosoff (2003).
3. Ames (2000) has emphasized that changes reflecting Task Force recommendations are occurring, albeit slowly. Sullivan, Kelly and Gordon (2003) have surveyed Australian museum workers to understand how Australia's policy guidelines, *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*, have been incorporated into museum structures and programs. Kelly and Gordon (2002) conducted research with visitors to Sydney's Australian Museum on the collaboratively-produced exhibition *Indigenous Australians*. Our thanks to Lynda Kelly for these two references.
- 4 In Canada, other permanent collaborative exhibitions include the First Nations

Gallery, which opened at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum in 1993; and the First Peoples Hall, which opened at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec in January 2003. The Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, B.C. and the Nuuchahnulth of Vancouver Island produced a major temporary traveling exhibition, *Huupuk^wanum Tupaat: Out of the Mist*. Elsewhere, *African Worlds* opened in March 1999 at the Horniman Museum in London, England, and in September of 2004 the National Museum of the American Indian opened its doors in Washington, D.C.

5. To strengthen their land claim efforts, the Lubicon Cree, along with other First Nations and museums, boycotted the Olympics, and particularly *The Spirit Sings*, since it was funded by Shell, which was conducting operations on the contested lands (Harrison, Trigger, and Ames 1988). *Nitsitapiisinni* also received funding from Shell. In this case, community team members were involved in securing funds for the exhibition and used this as an opportunity to teach people at Shell about Blackfoot culture and encourage culturally-sensitive work practices (Beth Carter, March 24, 2005, e-mail communication).
6. Conaty and Janes (1997); confirmed by personal communication with Gerry Conaty, Aug. 25, 2003.
7. Among exhibition team members who were interviewed, two requested their names not be used.
8. Personal communication with Conaty, Aug. 25, 2003, and Frank Weasel Head, Aug. 26, 2003.
9. Janes (1994); personal communication with Beth Carter, April 29, 2004.
10. Conaty, Aug. 25, 2003, personal communication.
11. It is Glenbow's policy not to include staff members in such a manner on acknowledgment panels within museum exhibitions. The work of Glenbow staff is noted in a smaller panel near the exit. See Phillips (2003, 165–6) for a discussion of this choice within *Nitsitapiisinni* and how authority and plurality should be communicated in collaborative exhibitions more generally.
12. Vitebsky (1995) has challenged the use of idealized notions of spirituality and environmentalism by indigenous groups to promote political agendas, and also by the groups that consume these idealized notions. When these idealized notions are used to appeal to a broader and often-non local audience, Vitebsky fears indigenous knowledge loses its holistic nature. The community team members I spoke with were equally concerned that a sense of holistic unity be communicated and, thus, that spirituality not be separated from routine activities nor ceremonial events. Additionally, their target audience was a local one, which reinforced for them the importance and necessity of teaching their cosmology.
13. Interviews with visitors were conducted over a four-day period, including weekdays and the weekend, during August. The Glenbow Museum was open to the public during these days from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Visitor research ran the full duration of these hours. Visitors were approached when they appeared to be leaving the gallery, and were invited to sit around a table, just outside the exit to *Nitsitapiisinni*.

Interviews were about 20 minutes in duration on average and at times up to 35 minutes. When permitted, a tape recorder was used to document the interview. Handwritten notes were recorded for every interview.

14. The main concern here, perhaps, is the case of younger children. Responses from youth were, in some cases, brief and not always related to the question asked; however, other youth provided lengthy and articulate accounts of their experience in the gallery. Thus, youth responses remain integrated into the overall body of data.
15. Kahn reports that one-third of visitors to the exhibition *Pacific Voices* recognized the collaborative nature of that exhibition (2000, 70).
16. A Cree man said that he found it difficult to “rate his knowledge” of First Nations in Canada because he had been raised to be humble in such matters. Brief responses from children could be interpreted through this lens, or simply as being shy in general. (Many other First Nations participants found “rating their knowledge” difficult because they did not know how to gauge their knowledge in comparison to a non-Native public or to their elders.)
17. Kelly and Gordon found similar results in their study of visitors to the Indigenous Australians gallery at the Australian Museum (2002). The exhibition drew upon indigenous voices to interpret artifacts and experiences for museum-goers. Seventy-five percent of the visitors they surveyed responded that indigenous people rather than curators were telling the stories in the exhibition. Our data suggests that visitors may see Blackfoot as the narrators of specific stories *within* an exhibition without seeing Blackfoot as the authors of *the* exhibition.
18. Gallery interpreter Sandra Crazy Bull reports that in her guided tours of the gallery there is, inevitably, one person in the group who will raise one hand and respond “How!” when the topic of stereotypes is broached. The summer session of guided tours ended just before this study began at Glenbow, though future research into tour-group responses would provide a valuable comparison to the interviews reported upon here.
19. Disagreements over land ownership and use have persisted between aboriginal communities and France, Britain and Canada near Oka, Quebec, for nearly 300 years (Dickason 2002, 326–331; Obomsawin 1993). In 1990, road blockades escalated into an armed stand-off over the proposed construction of a golf course on the disputed land, pitting Mohawk residents of Kanasatake and nearby communities against local police and the Canadian army (MacLaine and Baxendale 1990).
20. May (1842–1912) wrote popular novels whose protagonists—chiefs and warriors of Plains tribes—were frequently caricatures of “the noble savage.” The apparent authenticity of his work convinced many readers and scholars that he had traveled to North America (Cracroft 1999).
21. Other examples include a man who expected to see totem poles because of his visit to the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, B.C.; the memories visitors had of seeing similar artifacts in a relative’s collections; and an Argentine’s association of North American with South American struggles between indigenous peoples and settlers.

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