Paper: Telling Indigenous Stories: An Exploration of Narrative Structures in an Indigenous Exhibition

Abstract: This paper relies on an innovative theoretical framework, namely the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse, to explore the narrative structures at work in an ethnographic exhibition designed by indigenous curators at the National Museum of the American Indian.

Résumé:

The present paper explores one aspect of the ongoing doctoral project of the author, which focuses on discursive constructions of indigenous knowledge among indigenous curators working in major museums in Canada and the United States.

The paper is built on two main ideas. First, it suggests that narratives play a special role in the work of these information professionals. On one hand, narratives represent an object of professional interest for indigenous curators, because storytelling constitutes the medium through which knowledge has traditionally been conveyed within indigenous communities (for a brief mention of the narrative dimension of indigenous knowledge, see Castellano, 2000, 31). On the other hand, narratives represent the means that indigenous curators employ extensively in order to express their artistic vision and convey emotions (in the case of art curators), or to portray aspects of indigenous peoples and cultures (in the case of ethnology curators).

Second, the present paper suggests that, in order to capture the narrative aspects of exhibitions with an indigenous content (in both senses described above), the researcher must employ appropriate qualitative/interpretative research methods.

In order to substantiate these claims, the present paper focuses on a specific exhibition and employs an integrative interpretative approach to capture its narrative structures. The exhibition is titled “A Song for the Horse Nation.” It was designed by three Native American curators (Emil Her Many Horses, George Horse Capture, and Herman Viola) and was hosted by the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in New York between November 14, 2009 and July 7, 2011. During five visits of the exhibition in Spring 2010, the researcher recorded digitally all the objects on exhibit and the texts accompanying them. The author also conducted a non-structured in-depth interview on site with the main curator of the exhibition (Emil Her Many Horses). The interview lasted about 120 minutes and elicited the curator’s insights into the design and components of the exhibition. Along with the official album of the exhibition, the author analyzed these data within an integrative theoretical framework called the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (Keller, 2005, 2011). This framework allows the researcher to capture narrative structures at work in this exhibition as part of a larger goal of reconstructing the “interpretative repertoires” on which indigenous curators rely in dealing with indigenous knowledge. More specifically, the paper suggests that narratives refer to (1) sequences of events (e.g., episodes, processes, etc.); (2) actors / agents (who display motivations and have specific roles or positions in these events), and (3) settings (i.e., spatial and temporal structures within which the events occur). Taken together, these
three narrative structures describe the basic dramaturgy of a story line to which we can assign a tag (Keller, 2011).

The analysis of narrative structures, which the researcher employs in analyzing the “Song for the Horse Nation” exhibition, has led to the following two major findings. On one hand, the exhibition puts a strong emphasis on the presence and agency of indigenous selves. It conveys the message that their perspectives should no longer be mediated through ethnocentric representations produced by non-indigenous observers (i.e., the traditional curator who presents Native Americans and their ways of life as curiosities to be gazed upon and marveled at in museums); rather, the indigenous perspectives informing the exhibition pertain to active agents who speak to their “others” (i.e., non-indigenous visitors) by employing vocabularies of their own. There are two important features of the indigenous selves that the researcher was able to identify in this exhibition. First, there is an obvious praising attitude toward the horse, and to non-human beings in general (indigenous selves not only see themselves as being integrated with the world of horses, and of animals more broadly, but also express admiration and a deep gratitude for a meaningful, sacred, and heartfelt companionship). However, by being built around the horse symbol, the exhibition obscures as much as it reveals: while it sheds light on the horse culture produced by many indigenous communities across North America, it also leaves aside those groups that did not rely on horses in their everyday lives. Second, the exhibition conveys the desire of indigenous selves to share their experiences with “others” (i.e., non-indigenous selves), thereby opening up the possibility of a fruitful, non-oppressive exchange where difference is recognized, understood, and appreciated.

On the other hand, the exhibition also places a strong emphasis on indigenous views of history. In this case too, the researcher was able to identify two main aspects which illustrate the event and setting aspects of any narrative. First, the exhibition privileges stories of continuity and revival: it claims that indigenous cultures are not a thing of the past; instead, they have demonstrated resilience through their continued existence and are flourishing in the present. Second, the exhibition also claims that continuity and revival of indigenous cultures are made possible by the Natives’ ability to identify and nurture what was worthwhile in the otherwise traumatic historical moment of the European colonization of America.

By retelling and, thus, by emphasizing - in the public sphere - the indigenous narratives of war and trauma, of the indigenous resilience and survival, indigenous curators manage to present themselves as key dynamic agents who mediate the interactions of various discourses of indigenous identities and indigenous knowledge (in this respect, the academic-scientific and the heritage discourses of indigenous knowledge are the most obvious).

(Partial) List of References
