

BC Studies: Special Issue

Museums on the Edge: Conversations in BC's Public Cultural Institutions

Edited by Caitlin Gordon-Walker and Martha Black

British Columbia offers a unique context in which to examine public cultural institutions – museums, cultural centres, art galleries, archives – and the ways in which they both contribute to and challenge prevailing structures of power and inequality shaped by colonization. Many museums around the world hold extensive collections of objects from Indigenous communities in BC, a region that was popular among collectors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that continues to be highly valued in the current global art market. In BC, this has meant that museums must work closely with the traditional owners to determine how these objects should be cared for and how they should be displayed and interpreted. At the same time, the repatriation of materials from museums to Indigenous communities in BC has spurred the development of Indigenous museums and similar institutions throughout the province that care for and interpret these objects within their communities and also to a broader audience. Museums have been shaped by the colonial contexts in which they developed, but simplistic interpretations of their colonial character do little credit to those either working or represented within them; the work of museums and the relationships they have fostered have reflected, and continue to reflect, the complexities of colonial power dynamics and the agency of all those involved. The experiences of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous public cultural institutions in BC, and the approaches they have taken in their work, tell us much about the past and present cultural and political terrain of the province, especially with regard to relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and institutions. They also offer opportunities and provocations for dialogue and action intent on shaping that terrain. The conversations that have happened – and that continue to happen – in BC's public cultural institutions are part of a broader political landscape in which the negotiation of Indigenous and Canadian sovereignties is taking place.

For this special issue of *BC Studies*, we solicit papers, reviews, and more informal reflections on specific exhibitions and projects within BC's public cultural institutions exploring some of the conversations taking place in and around BC. Contributors might address one or more of the following questions or any other related topic:

- What opportunities and challenges exist for fostering conversation and respectful relationships between Indigenous peoples and others within museums, cultural centres, and/or art galleries throughout British Columbia? And how might museum narratives provoke constructive dialogue on difficult topics?
- What conversations are taking place within BC's public cultural institutions in relation to ideas about decolonization, Indigenous sovereignty, or reconciliation, and how can museums contribute to these conversations?
- How are conversations that are taking place in BC's cultural institutions shaped by – and how do they contribute to – the broader political landscape of the province? For example, what effect have new treaties and recent legal decisions had on museum practice? How do museums contribute to discussions of contemporary land claims and treaty

negotiations? How do they contribute to conversations about resource development and Indigenous sovereignty and environmental stewardship? How do they relate to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

- What role do cultural institutions in BC play in challenging colonial structures of power and inequality and what might be learned from the experiences of BC institutions about the role museums might play in in this regard elsewhere?
- What challenges and obstacles persist, and what can be learned from situations of conflict and disagreement?
- How are Indigenous artists, scholars, activists, politicians, and others using museums as a way to assert claims to sovereignty, both in mainstream museums and Indigenous institutions?
- How are people engaging with the spaces and representations that museums produce?

We particularly want to solicit papers that are collaborative and conversational in their approach, bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous museum scholars and professionals, artists, writers, activists, and others. Our aim is to provide a forum for an updated critical conversation about what is going on in BC's public cultural institutions and to provoke further conversation in BC and beyond about museums in the 21st century and attempts to engage in more than tokenistic forms of reconciliation.

Submissions

Those interested in contributing full-length papers should submit a 500-word abstract and 50-word bio to caitlin.gordon-walker@ubc.ca by **May 1, 2017**. Those interested in making shorter contributions should submit a 200-word proposal and 50-word bio.

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The Editors

Caitlin Gordon-Walker holds a PhD in Canadian Studies from Trent University. Her research draws together anthropology, political theory, history, geography, literature, museology, and visual and material culture studies to examine the politics of museums and other forms of public cultural representation in relation to nationalism, colonialism, and difference. Her recent book, *Exhibiting Nation* (2016) examines Canadian multicultural nationalism within public museums.

Martha Black has been Curator of Ethnology at the Royal British Columbia Museum since 1997. She has worked on many collaborative projects with First Nations, most recently *Our Living Languages: First Peoples' Voices in British Columbia* (2014), a partnership of the Royal British Columbia Museum and First Peoples' Cultural Council. Her publications include two books, *Huupukwanum • Tupaat: Out of the Mist, Treasures of the Nuu-chah-nulth Chiefs* (1999) and *Bella Bella: A Season of Heiltsuk Art* (1997). Martha is an art historian specializing in Northwest Coast arts and cultures, museum collections and collectors, repatriation theory and practice.