

Unsettling Nature, Culture and History: Layers of Meaning and Conversation at the Royal BC Museum

Caitlin Gordon-Walker*

Abstract:

This paper examines the implications of the categorical separation between Nature, Culture and History that is common in Western museums. It focuses on the Royal British Columbia Museum's (RBCM) configuration of galleries, which separates, first, the human from the natural world, and, second, First Peoples from modern history. With the basic structure of its galleries remaining largely unchanged since the 1970s, but with significant alterations and additions, the RBCM is a palimpsest whose layers can be read in relation to the changing socio-political contexts and hegemonic ideals through which British Columbia has been imagined and represented. Its division of Nature, Culture and History represents a perspective entangled with European colonialism, but also offers opportunities for contesting colonial legacies and rethinking what these categories might mean. By adding new layers that engage with the earlier interpretive strategies, the Museum both contributes to and acts as a site for ongoing conversations that connect past and present.

Key words: Colonialism and decolonization; natural history; national history; Indigenous history

Museums are exemplary sites in which to explore the dynamics of the societies in which they exist, especially through their expressions of identity and difference in colonial and national contexts. They are both authoritative institutions, backed by the state and hierarchies of established academic and scientific knowledge, and places of dialogue (often created and maintained by critically minded individuals who are not just intent on promoting the status quo), sometimes engaging in collaborative processes and practices of cultural production and at times becoming sites of private or even open public contestation.¹ As such, they both reflect and reinforce existing political frameworks of power and inequality and offer opportunities and provocations for dialogue and action intent on shaping—or reshaping—the political terrain.

In Canada, this terrain is both colonial and national. In affirming its legitimacy, the state continually reasserts its claims over national territory initially claimed through colonization and promotes the appearance and idea of a cohesive national community. Yet, its authority over territory has always been contested. Moreover, Canada's ability to declare that authority openly has become increasingly complicated in the wake of legal and other challenges asserting Indigenous sovereignty within the same territory, especially in British Columbia where the Crown largely neglected to negotiate treaties with local First Nations. In 1997, the Supreme Court ruled in the appeal of *Delgamuukw v. the Queen*, confirming that the Royal Proclamation of 1763 applies in British Columbia and thus that this failure to sign treaties means that Aboriginal title was never extinguished throughout most of the province. The ruling questioned Canada's legal right to this territory even according to its own laws (Roth 2002). In ongoing treaty negotiations, court cases and other land-based contestations, even where treaties were signed, Canada is increasingly being required to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty in traditional territories. At the same time, representations of national history and identity have become more dynamic. The right of the state or state-supported institutions to speak for a diverse populace is more frequently challenged and these institutions' representations exist alongside a proliferation of expressions of self-representation articulated by diverse groups and individuals.² These politics—the contestations and dialogues—are played out on many fields, including within public

cultural institutions. The Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM), situated across the street from the provincial Parliament Buildings, is a particularly visible example.

The Royal British Columbia Museum

Once located inside the Parliament Buildings, the RBCM was founded in 1886 with a mandate focused on British Columbia's natural history and the history of Indigenous peoples in the province. In 1968, it moved to its current location in purpose-built facilities and its mandate was expanded to include the European history of the province (Corley-Smith 1989). The long-term galleries, created in the late 1960s and early 1970s, are structured on the basis of two categorical schemata that separate, first, the human from the natural world, and, second, Indigenous from non-Indigenous history. These are represented in the natural history galleries on the Museum's second floor, and the First Peoples galleries and modern history galleries on the third floor, separated—or joined—by an open multipurpose foyer that is often used as a temporary exhibition space. The conjunction of these two divisions—separating the human and natural worlds and Indigenous and modern history—presumes and reproduces distinctions between nature and culture and between culture and civilization.

I have visited this museum since I was a young child, and my critical analysis of its exhibitions is inevitably tinged by nostalgic fondness for their immersive environments dominated by full-scale dioramas that engage all of the senses. I adored the woolly mammoth in the natural history galleries, a massive and life-like behemoth standing in a cold, bleak landscape. The kitchen in the Museum's Old Town exhibition in the modern history galleries was another favourite spot. The scent of cinnamon and cloves filled the air, giving life and warmth to the replica apple pies that seemed to have been taken freshly from the cast iron woodburning oven. In the First Peoples galleries, the darkness of the Big House and its crackling, glowing red electric 'fire' scared me, but the masks and poles in the central hall were impressive and beautiful.

Today, these exhibitions remain largely the same as they were in my childhood, and indeed as they were in the 1960s and 1970s when they were first installed. That being said, significant changes have been made, reflecting new directions in museum practice as well as an altered social and political context within which the Museum must operate. The bleak landscape of the mammoth exhibition is now filled with the sound of a cold, howling wind. For a short time, a simulated thunderstorm periodically raged through the exhibition as well, but this was changed because it frightened young visitors. A new exhibition about climate and weather was added to the natural history galleries in 2005, introducing the subject of contemporary environmental concerns. In 1992, a Chinatown was built into the modern history galleries, just below the cozy kitchen in Old Town, an addition that began to acknowledge the variety in British Columbia's historical population. This variety is further emphasized in Century Hall, an addition to the modern history galleries opened in 1999, which details a decade-by-decade history of the province throughout the twentieth century. These newer exhibitions describe the development of an increasingly diverse and inclusive province.³ In the First Peoples galleries, the Big House no longer seems dark and mysterious, but appears more brightly lit. An exhibition explaining the negotiation of the Final Agreement between the Nisga'a Nation and the provincial and federal governments, the first modern-day treaty negotiated in British Columbia, was opened in 2002, shortly after the treaty was signed in 2000. This exhibition reflects the RBCM's more visible acknowledgement of contemporary Indigenous peoples. It further demonstrates the changing relations between museums and Indigenous peoples in Canada more broadly, especially following the work of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁴ This change in relations, as well as Indigenous people's increased control over how their material culture is displayed and how they are represented, is also evident in recent interventions within the main galleries and in temporary exhibitions created explicitly in collaboration with Indigenous individuals and organizations.⁵ These alter the ways in which the First Peoples galleries may be read, not least by challenging typical assumptions about target audiences.

Social and political pressures continue to shape the Museum as it undertakes a renewal project under the leadership of the director, Dr. Jack Lohman. Lohman is a seasoned museum

professional. Prior to his appointment at the RBCM in 2012, he supervised the redevelopment of the Museum of London, England, where he was director for ten years. In addition, he was CEO of the Iziko Museums of Cape Town, South Africa. He remains an adviser to the Museum of Slavery in Qatar and the Institute for National Museums in Rwanda and serves as editor-in-chief of the UNESCO publication series *Museums and Diversity*.

Further alterations in each of the RBCM's main galleries can be expected under Lohman's direction, although the basic structure of the exhibitions will likely remain unchanged. The dioramas in these galleries are not only exemplary of a certain kind of museological practice, which their creators helped pioneer in the early 1970s, but also beloved by locals. 'I wouldn't dare touch the dioramas,' said Lohman; 'they're too good. They're the best dioramas on our planet' (Amos 2012: 1). Keeping the basic structure of the galleries and dioramas intact, however, Lohman envisions major changes to the stories that these galleries tell. This paper was initially inspired by one potential change that Lohman proposed, which I came across in an article about the director in a local arts and events magazine shortly after his appointment. As recounted by the article's author, Lohman suggested 'combining the natural history (the non-human world of plants and animals) and the history displays of First Nations,' believing that 'actually it's sort of strange to separate the two. Everything is made of wood here—the totems, the houses, the canoes. You can't tell the story of British Columbia without talking about wood' (Griffith 2012).

This idea initially appears to threaten a return to the practice of representing Indigenous peoples within the category of natural history. It seems to reinforce the stereotype that Indigenous peoples are closer to nature than others, demonstrating the ongoing influence of ideas about cultural evolution. However, Lohman would clearly be aware of the harmful implications of conceptualizing Indigenous peoples as part of natural history, and thus closer to nature than to civilization, given his experience and the legacies of the classificatory hierarchies of colonial exhibitions and museums.⁶ Moreover, integrating the categories of Indigenous peoples and natural history might allow for the acknowledgement of connections not between Indigenous peoples and *nature*, but rather between Indigenous peoples and the *land*. The connection between Indigenous peoples and nature has frequently been romanticized to produce an image of the noble savage, thereby contributing to the colonial project and legitimizing territorial appropriation. However, recognizing the connection between Indigenous peoples and land requires a critical engagement with the history and ongoing implications of such appropriation. Correspondingly this approach might encourage museum visitors to move beyond celebrating Indigenous culture, to also acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty and claims to traditional territory, a prerequisite for any attempt at decolonization (Mackey 2016; Manuel 2015; Tuck and Yang 2012).

In the following pages, I examine the historical context and contemporary implications of the structural separation between nature and culture and between culture and civilization that is reflected in and reproduced not only in the RBCM's main exhibition halls but also throughout museums in Canada, in other settler-colonial nation-states and in former imperial centres. I then consider what the two categorizations enable and legitimize at the RBCM, and how the Museum works to unsettle these classifications. Maintaining the distinctions between these categories as they are currently articulated risks perpetuating a perception that these three elements of British Columbia's past and present are in fact distinct. It suggests that the physical environment can be understood through the paradigms of natural history and environmental resource management; Indigenous peoples can be understood through the paradigms of ethnography and Indigenous art/culture; and the rest of the province's population can be understood through the paradigms of history and modern civilization. Combining the categories of Indigenous peoples and natural history without similarly looking at the connections between natural history and modern history would do little to challenge this primary structure and might perpetuate nineteenth-century ideas and contemporary stereotypes about an inherent and romanticized association between Indigenous peoples and nature. Undermining the categorical legacies that museums must work with requires not only recognizing the interconnectedness of all three categories, but also unsettling the categories themselves—especially their framing of both nature and culture as national resources.

The Division of Nature and Culture, Culture and Civilization

The precursors to modern museums, Renaissance and Baroque cabinets of curiosities and the increasingly systematized collections of gentlemen scholars during the Enlightenment, generally encompassed both natural wonders and artefacts of human construction (Daston and Park 1998). The same was true for many of the early public museums. The later distinction between nature and culture is standard in Western philosophical tradition, traceable at least to the Enlightenment in Europe and the work of Rene Descartes, but becoming even more firmly established throughout the nineteenth century (Berger 1980). Museums, which emerged during this same time frame, were instrumental in producing this distinction through their material collections and exhibitions.

As museum collections were expanded and strategies for their care and interpretation became more formalized, they came to be split into separate departments, or even separate institutions, devoted respectively to natural history and human culture, paralleling the emergence of academic disciplines. For some, the division of natural and cultural objects was supported by a religious belief that there should be a distinction between 'things made by the hand of God and things made by the hand of man' (Yanni 1999: 15). Yet, this division also corresponded with a shift to an increasingly scientific comprehension and organization of the natural world (Yanni 1999; Daston and Park 1998). Understood through taxonomic systems of those such as Carl Linnaeus, an evolutionary trajectory or geographical and ecological regions, nature became more knowable and could be mobilized for various ends. Scientific mastery of the natural world also coincided with the escalation of technological and physical mastery over what came to be constructed as natural resources to be exploited or, with the emergence of the conservation movement, protected. Museums again played a role, creating and legitimizing scientific frameworks for understanding nature and representing nature in such a way as to support ideals of empire, nation, gender, industry and conservation (see, for example, Bennett 2004; Haraway 1984; Yanni 1999).

The demarcation between nature and culture was not always as clear, however, when it came to the representation of Indigenous peoples within colonized territories. Reflecting earlier beliefs that such people were perhaps not fully human, Indigenous peoples were sometimes categorized as belonging to the realm of natural history (Yanni 1999; Bal 1992). This classification helped to legitimize practices such as the colonial appropriation of territory, slavery and the establishment of laws and institutions intended to 'civilize' Indigenous populations.

Even when Indigenous people were not categorized as part of natural history, they were not commonly recognized as subjects of modern history and civilization. The ongoing collection of Indigenous objects became increasingly systematic and scientific, guided by criteria such as those proposed by the Royal Anthropological Institute in its 1874 *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* with museums aiming to develop collections that could be seen to represent particular cultures, although individuals were often also inspired by personal collecting interests and the imperatives of a paradigm that rendered them intent on saving the material remains of what were perceived to be vanishing cultures (Lawson 1994; McMullen 2009; O'Hanlon 2000). These objects were curated in ethnographic museums or similar institutions devoted primarily to the study of non-Western peoples and cultures.

The classification of Indigenous people as scientific specimens, whether as part of natural history or ethnography, and whether classified according to physiognomic characteristics, presumed evolutionary stage or cultural-geographic area, normalized an objectifying gaze. The cultures of colonized subjects could then be viewed as resources, to be exploited or, in the guise of salvage anthropology, protected. Mined as such for numerous academic endeavours and careers, Indigenous cultures also became a source of inspiration for artists and art collectors, which led to the development of a new market for these cultural resources. While the late nineteenth century witnessed a shift in the perception of non-European cultural artefacts from curiosities to ethnographic specimens, James Clifford (1988: 228) points out that,

as Picasso and others began to visit the 'Troca' [the Musée de l'Homme at the Trocadero Palace in Paris] and to accord its tribal objects a nonethnographic admiration, the proper place of non-Western objects was again thrown in question. In the eyes of a triumphant modernism some of these artifacts at least could be seen as universal masterpieces. The category of 'primitive art' emerged.

The promotion of such works, now more commonly referred to collectively as Indigenous art or individually according to more specific Indigenous identities, continued throughout the twentieth century. In Canada, institutions like the RBCM and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, as well as exhibitions such as the controversial *The Spirit Sings* exhibition held at the Glenbow Museum for the 1988 Olympic Games and the smaller-scale *Across Borders: Bead Work in Iroquois Life* not only encouraged appreciation for the aesthetic value of historical objects but also promoted the work of contemporary Indigenous artists and broadened the range of what was considered to be art to include objects initially produced for domestic use and the tourist market (Ames 1992; Clifford 1997; Harrison 1993; Phillips 2002; McCaffrey 2002; Townsend-Gault, Kramer and Ki-ke-in 2013). Yet Indigenous art has still often been considered separately from Western art and its value as a resource has often continued to be defined in part by its authenticity and adherence to, or at least engagement with, tradition (Clifford 1988; McLoughlin 1999; Townsend-Gault, Kramer and Ki-ke-in 2013; Roth 2018).⁷

Indigenous Agency

Today, Indigenous people are active and engaged in contemporary metropolitan societies. Besides maintaining their own traditions and histories, they have claimed a space in the histories and cultures that have grown from colonial encounters, gained (or refused)⁸ recognition as historical subjects in mainstream museums and cultures and operate within the larger contemporary art world. However, while acknowledged as part of current civilization, they are still commonly perceived to be more in tune with the natural world than are non-Indigenous people (Magubane 2009).

It is important to acknowledge the strategic usefulness for Indigenous people to claim a closer relationship with the natural world, especially in their struggles against environmentally destructive incursions into their lands, as well as to look at the character of this relationship in Indigenous histories and philosophies. In this sense museums can act as allies. For instance, in 2017 carvers from the Lummi Nation (in Washington state) collaborated with The Natural History Museum, an organization started in 2014 that operates as a mobile and pop-up museum.⁹ They created *Kwel'Hoy: We Draw the Line*, described in a promotional e-mail as 'a cross-country tour, museum exhibition, and series of public programs uplifting Indigenous leadership in struggles to protect water, land, public health, and our collective future'. In advertising this project, the Museum wrote that while

Indigenous Peoples can be viewed in dioramas at our nation's museums, their histories depicted through such artifacts as carved spoons and fishing tools... they are also very much alive. Today, Indigenous communities steward 80 percent of the planet's remaining biological diversity, and recognize a sacred obligation to protect the gifts of the Earth.¹⁰

In addition to respecting Indigenous people's agency in their ability to mobilize the idea that they are closer to nature than non-Indigenous people, it is necessary to consider the ways in which Indigenous people have worked to subvert Western classification systems, both historically and in the present, by articulating their own forms of relationship with the natural world. They have used museums to achieve their objectives and employed their culture as a resource, whether as individual artists seeking to earn a living from their work or as community members aiming to revitalize Indigenous societies.

Unsettling the Categories of Nature, Culture, and Civilization at the RBCM

The RBCM staff is aware of the colonial origins and current limitations of the institution's categorical schemata.¹¹ The Museum's longstanding dedication of significant space and resources to Indigenous collections and exhibitions shows a commitment to respecting and valuing Indigenous cultures. Temporary exhibitions, new additions to the long-term galleries and ongoing collaborative projects also engage with contemporary Indigenous populations. These activities are not always visible to the public but include repatriation projects and the

incorporation of Indigenous methodologies into managing collections and archives—as well as hiring full-time Indigenous staff members. All of these strategies demonstrate the Museum's willingness and desire to respect Indigenous perspectives, philosophies and methodologies; to honour the ongoing existence and vitality of Indigenous people in the province; and to engage in contemporary political dialogues about colonialism and reconciliation.

For many, reconciliation, and certainly decolonization, requires more than a celebration of culture and acknowledgement of past violence; it also requires the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and rights within traditional territories (Alfred 2005; Mackey 2016; Manuel 2015; Tuck and Yang 2012). While earlier work at the Museum significantly recognized Indigenous sovereignty and law,¹² acknowledgement of connections to traditional territories has become increasingly common, at least at a formal level. At the RBCM, a statement in the foyer announces the Museum's location on the traditional territory of the Lekwungen peoples, specifically the Songhees and Xwsepsum (Esquimalt) Nations, and a video at the entrance to the human history galleries provides an opportunity for these Nations to welcome visitors and thus assert their ongoing connections to this land. Acknowledging residence in traditional Indigenous territories can easily become tokenistic and re-enact the appropriation of territory through an apologetic or even grateful discourse. Yet the Museum offers much deeper conversations about Indigenous sovereignty, territory and the past and future of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Unlike much of the province, the land the Museum occupies is covered by a historic treaty (specifically the Fort Victoria and Other Vancouver Island Treaties, 1850–1854, more commonly referred to as the Douglas Treaties), held in the BC Archives at the Museum. The Museum's presentation of this document and its exhibition of the Nisga'a Final Agreement are currently the most obvious stimuli for discussion about contemporary Indigenous land rights.

Numerous obstacles stand in the way of rethinking the categories represented at the RBCM, including practical ones. Like most public cultural institutions, the Museum faces challenges of limited staff time, funding and resources. Moreover, the current organization and management of collections is based on ingrained disciplinary knowledge and the abilities of staff trained in the natural and human sciences or art and cultural history. The categorical distinctions are also built into the architecture and structure of the long-term exhibitions, which are integral to the Museum's appeal and popular success. Such practical difficulties should not be downplayed; however, they are being addressed through interdisciplinary collaborations and interventions between and within the current long-term galleries, as well as in new and temporary exhibitions, including an upcoming exhibition on orcas.¹³ Work within single curatorial disciplines can also undermine disciplinary divisions. In the long-term galleries, interventions include the integration of new objects and contemporary interpretive media. Some involve local artists, authors or other community members. Others seek to engage the public through low- or high-tech interactive installations and programming.

The integration into the natural history galleries of exhibitions on climate and weather, discussing the impacts of humans on the natural environment and vice versa, is one example of how the Museum has disrupted the categorical demarcations of its main exhibition spaces. Given the galleries' ecological rather than taxonomic focus, these additions fit well with the original dioramic displays. Temporary exhibitions such as *Aliens Among Us* (2015), looking at invasive species in the province, as well as museum research and educational programs and resources, also show connections between humans and nature.¹⁴ In focusing its natural history interpretation, at least in part, on interactions between humans and the natural environment, thus connecting nature to culture, the RBCM is in company with many natural history museums that have sought to make their exhibitions more relevant and engaging primarily by addressing pressing issues of climate change and environmental degradation or responsibility (Janes 2009; Carnall, Ashby and Ross 2013). However, as Mark Carnall, Jack Ashby and Claire Ross (2013: 57) point out, there 'seems to be an assumption that the social and scientific categories can only coexist with one category as dominant and the other as marginalised or totally absent' and, like many museums, the RBCM continues to prioritize a Western scientific discourse in the natural history galleries. Future interdisciplinary collaborations and interventions in this part of the Museum might transgress this distinction and offer alternative conceptualizations of the natural environment, expanding the range of conversations possible within these

galleries. Bringing together diverse Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives of what is now framed as the natural world might direct those conversations toward issues of contemporary environmental conflicts and other contestations over land and land-use or to alternative ways of conceptualizing human-environment relationships and environmental stewardship.

Interdisciplinary collaborations can also unsettle the narratives of history and culture presented in the human history galleries. In the modern history galleries, the natural environment is explicitly represented as a resource. The majority of the exhibitions are focused on the historical exploitation of British Columbia as a resource frontier through mining, logging, fishing and farming (Gallacher 1979). These extractive industries are still a central part of British Columbia's economy and social fabric. Along with industries related to oil and gas exploitation and transportation, they continue to be a source of conflict within—and extending beyond—the province, involving both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people on every side. Curatorial interventions might address these debates, linking the past to the present and connecting with broader discussions about how understanding the environment as a natural resource has shaped, and continues to shape, the province. Rather than taking the natural resource paradigm for granted, such programs might work to unsettle this discourse and provoke alternative ways of imagining the relationships between humans and the land.

In the First Peoples galleries, exhibitions already encompass all three categories of natural history, First Peoples culture and modern history, but the divisions between these largely remain. Natural history is again represented as a resource, in this case through exhibits of resource use and subsistence. As noted above, Indigenous culture is also framed as a resource through its mobilization within a provincial-cum-national narrative, as well as through interpretive strategies developed from anthropological and art historical disciplines. Modern history and civilization are evident primarily through exhibits about the impact of colonization on Indigenous societies. However, they are also apparent in the exhibition about the Nisga'a Final Agreement, in the incorporation of contemporary art into the regionally organized art exhibits in the central hall and in two more recent additions to the gallery, coordinated by curator of ethnology Martha Black, that foreground individual Indigenous perspectives and articulate different connections to history and land—the first, a new weaving and video installation of Tsimshian weaver and teacher Tsamiianbaan (Willy White); the second, a textual and audiovisual reinterpretation of the model of the Haida village of K'uuna Lnagaay (Skedans) by Guujaw, a Haida carver and leader who holds the hereditary title Gidansda. Expanding such interventions into the original galleries' narrative to stimulate more difficult discussions and include more provocative examples of contemporary art, including those that push the boundaries of what is typically understood to define Indigenous art, might undermine the Museum's narrative and expand possibilities for thinking about land and culture as something other than a national resource.

Larger opportunities to unsettle the categorical legacies that structure the Museum's long-term exhibitions might arise as it continues to work toward fulfilling its master plan, developed in 2013. For instance, a promotional document from 2016, titled *Treasures for Generations*, proposed a new ground floor gallery, provisionally titled the Pacific Worlds gallery, which would draw together the three current divisions of the Museum (Royal BC Museum 2016). For me, however, the unsettling power of the RBCM does not lie in the potential for it to create new exhibitions that rewrite the histories of the province—or the Museum—in a manner that suits the contemporary socio-political context. Rather, it is the contradictory position of the Museum as both a colonial institution and a site of decolonizing work that allows it to remain a potent actor with a vital role to play in shaping—and questioning—that context.

Institutionally, given museums' emergence in conjunction with European colonialism, it is difficult for them to simply become tools of decolonization. Many museums, in British Columbia and elsewhere, try to decolonize their practices, collections and representations, responding to the challenges of individuals and communities (see, for example, conversations in Gordon-Walker and Black 2018, as well as Krmpotich et al. 2013; Lonetree 2012; Sleeper-Smith 2009). Work done to repatriate ancestral remains and cultural material, revise collections management and conservation policies, develop collaborative partnerships and encourage intervention and dialogue within exhibitions have had positive results, and the RBCM has completed significant work in this direction. But museums remain shaped by their colonial past and the settler colonial logic of the present, and the RBCM is still a provincial institution, with

a mandate that presumes and must uphold the legitimacy of the province. Its position as, and within, a colonial institution is evident in the language used in *Treasures for Generations*, which describes how an installation like the proposed Pacific Worlds gallery would connect 'us all to our First Nations roots and to our wider region—earth, sky and water' (Royal BC Museum 2016: 14). While suggesting that such a gallery would allow visitors to 'experience the centrepiece of our evolving understanding of our relations to First Nations peoples' (12), the allusion to it connecting to 'our' First Nations roots and to 'our' wider region presumes a non-Indigenous speaker and audience (despite Indigenous people being part of the staff and acknowledged stakeholders of the Museum). It also enacts an erasure of historical and ongoing conflict and rearticulates claims over both Indigenous territory and Indigenous culture, appropriating these as national resources.

The existence of this superficially innocuous repetition that appropriates both land and culture offers a productive site of encounter. Rather than representing reconciliation as an easily or already achieved ideal, the juxtaposition of different, in some cases conflicting, perspectives that are layered into the Museum's exhibitions and other public spaces illustrates the ongoing tensions and contestations that exist within the province and the nation. When rendered visible, it enables a richer understanding of the diverse ways in which 'our relationship with First Peoples' has been construed in the past and how it is being renegotiated in the present. By adding layers that engage with the earlier interpretive strategies, the Museum acts as a site for ongoing conversations between the past and present, and about the past, present and future.

Conclusion

The challenges of unsettling systems of classification and ways of understanding natural and cultural resources that grew out of European colonialism extend beyond the Royal BC Museum. The separations between nature and culture and between culture and civilization are pervasive in Western museums. They are also present in academic and other institutions. Increasingly, the boundaries between these categories are being challenged by curators, artists and scholars, among others. The idea that both nature and culture can be understood as resources—to be exploited or protected—also has purchase within and far beyond the wider world of museums.

While museums have contributed significantly to the development of these perspectives, they also offer opportunities to imagine and enact other ways of engaging with culture and the natural environment. With their unique ability to connect visitors with material objects and multisensory environments, museums supply both authoritative accounts of historical, cultural and scientific knowledge and a space for conversations that might question that knowledge. The changes that have already been made at the RBCM, as well as other museums, show the potential for those working within museums to challenge the colonial legacies that they must work with—collections, classification systems, disciplinary knowledges, institutional structures. Rather than undertaking a complete overhaul of existing exhibitions to erase fraught histories, working both within and against previous representational frameworks can create a palimpsest of changing socio-political contexts and hegemonic ideals through which those legacies were created. Bringing alternative perspectives into dialogue with dominant narratives and past interpretations into dialogue with those of the present can provoke visitors to question the categories and narratives that are often taken for granted.

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Notes

- 1 There is an extensive literature on the authoritative and/or dialogical character of museums (e.g., Bennett 1995; Cameron 1971; Clifford 1997; Message 2006, 2010; Witcomb 2003), on the successes and challenges of museum collaboration (e.g., Black 2013; Boast 2011; Golding and Modest 2013; Harrison 2005a; Haviland 2017; Krmpotich et al. 2013; Lonetree 2012) and on museum controversies and conflicts (e.g., Harrison 1993; Luke 2002; Phillips 2006, 2011; Sleeper-Smith 2009).
- 2 Such expressions of self-representation include both individual and collective projects in art, literature, community-run events, memorials and museums, among other places.
- 3 I have written more extensively elsewhere on the modern history galleries and their relation to Canadian multicultural nationalism (Gordon-Walker 2016).
- 4 This task force was established after the controversy surrounding the exhibition *The Spirit Sings*, held at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, during the 1988 Olympic Games (Conaty 2006; Harrison 1988, 1993; Harrison and Trigger 1988). While the relationships between museums and Indigenous people in Canada has shifted in response to critiques of earlier practices and the work of this task force, collaborative and mutually beneficial work of Indigenous people and museums occurred before this time (see, for example, Ames 1992; Black 2013; Conaty 1989, 2006). For critiques of the continued limitations of museums and their neocolonial practices, see, for example, Boast 2011; Wrightson 2017.
- 5 These exhibitions include *Huupukʷanum/Tupaat: Treasures of the Nuu-chah-nulth Chiefs* (1999) and *Our Living Languages: First Peoples' Voices in British Columbia* (2014–ongoing). Indigenous people have always represented themselves within their own communities and since at least the nineteenth century in mainstream Western media and institutions (see, for example, Raibmon 2000; Peers 2007; Black 2013; Ki-ke-in 2000; Thrush 2016). However, the contexts and character of such representations have changed (see Gordon-Walker and Black 2018, especially articles by Jordan Coble; Jisgaang Nika Collison and Nicola Levell; Karen Duffek and Tania Willard; and Leona Sparrow, Jordan Wilson and Susan Rowley).
- 6 Scott Cooper, the Museum's former vice president, Collections, Knowledge and Engagement, confirmed this when I met with him on 23 May 2017, as did Lohman, indirectly, in conversations during the past few years. Some of Lohman's thoughts about the Royal BC Museum, and museums in general, are recorded in his *Museums at the Crossroads? Essays on Cultural Institutions in a Time of Change* (2013).
- 7 As discussed later, Indigenous artists have worked both with and against—or otherwise outside—this framework (Simpson and Martineau 2017).
- 8 See Simpson (2014); Coulthard (2014); Wrightson (2017).
- 9 The Natural History Museum develops exhibitions and projects with and for natural history, science, and art museums. It focuses on the relationships between humans and nature, engaging with the idea that we are living in the Anthropocene and highlighting socio-political forces that impact the environment, thus challenging the categorical demarcations between nature and culture more broadly. See, <http://thenaturalhistorymuseum.org/about/>.
- 10 The Natural History Museum, email, 'New Traveling Exhibition Announced on Indigenous Peoples Day', 9 October 2017.
- 11 This has been emphasized in personal conversations with Jack Lohman, former vice president Scott Cooper, curator of ethnology Martha Black, as well as other curators and staff.
- 12 I discuss this at greater length in an article in the special issue of *BC Studies* (Gordon-Walker 2018). See also Duff (1959).

- ¹³ Scott Cooper, personal communication, 23 May 2017.
- ¹⁴ In addition to exhibitions, research, programs, and resources directed at environmental conservation, the Museum also has an official sustainability program. According to the Museum's website, 'At the Royal BC Museum we consider ourselves a leader in our sustainability initiatives. But this isn't new thinking: around here we've been practicing good environmental stewardship for decades. As the keeper of BC's environmental history, it's our business.' <https://www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/about/museum-information/sustainability-programs>.

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***Dr. Caitlin Gordon Walker** is an interdisciplinary scholar, whose work draws together perspectives from the fields of museum studies, anthropology, political theory, history, geography, literature and visual and material culture studies. Her research explores the politics of museums and other forms of public cultural representation in relation to nationalism, colonialism and difference, focusing on the representation of difficult and contested histories.

Department of Anthropology
 University of British Columbia
 2329 West Mall
 Vancouver, BC
 Canada V6T 1Z4
caitlin.gordon-walker@ubc.ca
 +1 (604) 928-6252