

# **“RIGHTING” AND EXPANDING THE NATION AND NARRATIONS:**

**RESEARCH ON CULTURAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF  
FIRST NATIONS IN CANADIAN MUSEUMS**



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# CONCEPTS

## FIRST NATIONS

Canada has many minority nations and ethnicities including the First Nations, who are the native people in Canadian land. There are 634 First Nations in Canada and they comprise about 3% of the Canadian population. First Nations people have been living in North America for over ten thousand years, but have been displaced from their original villages and greatly reduced in population due to the European Canadian colonial government and policies. Records of First Nation women being slaughtered and kidnapped continue until the 1970s. As many other colonial rulers did, the Canadian government tried to erase First Nation histories and diminish their cultural identities. They banned potlatches and community ceremonies and built English-speaking community schools with mandatory dormitories. Such policies scattered villagers and separated children from their families and communities. Many First Nation artifacts including traditional, spiritual objects have been forcefully removed by anthropologists and politicians under the name of “salvation of a culture in decline.”

As a minority group, First Nations have been stressing cultural repatriation and representation in Canadian institutions and academia more than anything else, trying to build their own narratives about post-trauma and survival instead of being told as ‘beings of the past.’ In this research, I talk about museums and First Nations on the Northwest Coast of Canada, such as the Haida, Nisga’a, Musqueam, and Songhees.





## **TASK FORCE REPORT ON MUSEUMS AND FIRST NATIONS, 1992**

The Task Force Report 1992 is a collaborative report that guides Canadian museum practices regarding First Nations. It was written together by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association after the Lubicon Cree boycott of the *The Spirit Sings*, a First Nation exhibition opened in Glenbow Museum, Calgary, designed for the 1988 Winter Olympics. This Task Force Report analyzes previous successful repatriation projects that were conducted separately between individual museums and different First Nation groups. Then, it gives general guidance for museums on how to repatriate First Nation artifacts and to work together with different First Nation communities. This Task Force Report has effectively changed Canadian museology.

Canada does not yet have legislation related to repatriation and compensation for objects that were stolen from First Nations, but most Canadian museums have been following this Task Force Report ever since it was published. Repatriation and reconciliation have now become necessary goals and duties for every Canadian cultural institution that contains First Nation artifacts. Also, the largest and most renowned museums in Canada are renewing their indigenous galleries or building First Nation Halls into their main galleries under consultation and curation by First Nation members who have or have not been educated in museology.

# RESEARCH SUMMARY

## RESEARCH GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

In this research, I criticize existing 'official narratives' of history and also museums that have displayed single official narratives as the only 'truths' to the public. I focus on the continuous cultural battles by the Canadian First Nations in their everyday lives and especially in cultural institutions. Such cultural renovation has involved re-writing history so that it can include 'alternative experiences and previously silenced narratives' as part of the official narrative of Canada. "Righting" histories has involved sharing the politics and histories of history with the public. I attempt to examine not only how changes in cultural representation have played a significant role in repatriation and restoration of minority cultures, but also how such recognition of different narratives has helped the Canadian society imagine and re-define a broader and more complex form of 'nation' and 'narrations.' Through this research, I hope to suggest a new way of narrating and displaying history, so that different timelines and experiences – especially those of minority groups – can be put together with the narratives of power and be equally valued as the 'truths' of a society.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How much have the museums been indigenized?

What are the effects of writing a multilayered official history with many perspectives/narrators?

Are there significances in the way First Nation exhibitions are composed and written compared to other exhibitions with different themes?

Are traditional roles and views on 'history', 'museums', and 'states' changed through the collaboration between museums and First Nations?

Are these changes applied to other exhibitions as well?



# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

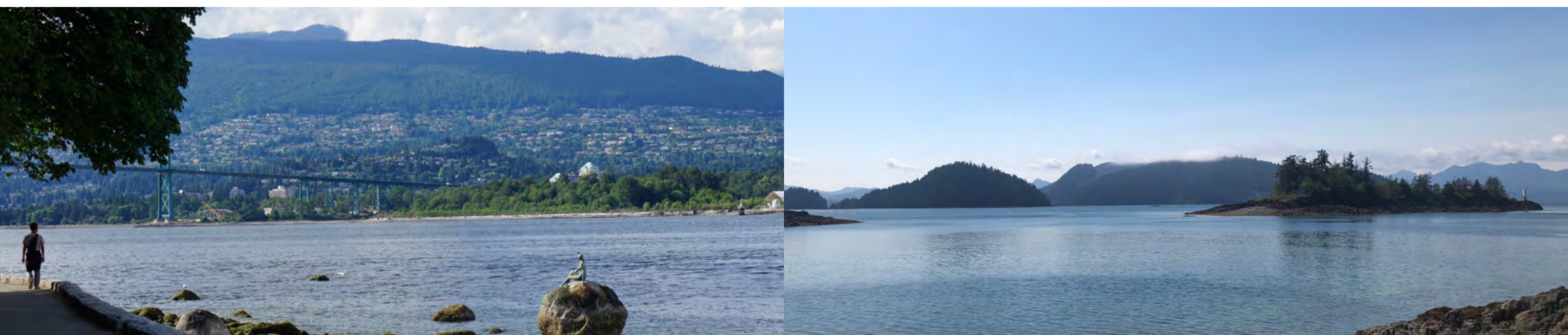
My research centers on qualitative methodologies. I examined and analyzed First Nation exhibition narratives in Canadian cultural institutions and interviewed people related to those scenes such as docents, curators, and professors.





# FIELD

British Columbia has the second largest First Nation population in Canada and some of the most famous Canadian museums and academic institutions. BC is also home to some of the largest First Nation communities such as Skidegate and Massett in Haida Gwaii island. My research was conducted in three regions in BC - [Vancouver, Victoria, and Haida Gwaii.](#)

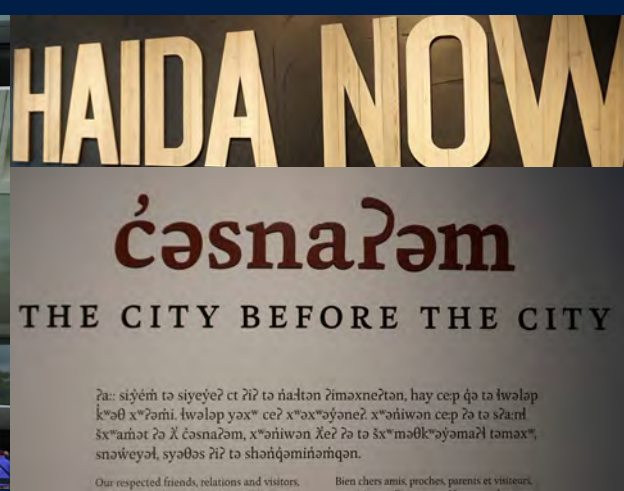


# MUSEUMS

Out of the nine museums and art galleries that I visited, I chose four as my main sites of research.

## MUSEUM OF VANCOUVER, VANCOUVER

MOV is the largest civic history museum in Canada and the oldest museum in Vancouver. Its exhibitions and events are closely connected to the citizens of Vancouver. I analyzed three exhibitions in MOV. *Haida Now* is an exhibition about the Haida people and was co-curated with Haida curators and community members. In front of the exhibit, there is an introduction that says the exhibit carries the story of "spirit survival" of the Haida people, "who are living." The exhibition starts by explaining Haida origins and mythologies. It also shows artifacts used in old trades and negotiations between the Haida and other First Nations. Then follows the oral histories section. Professionalism and apprenticeship systems of the Haida oral historians are explained and the most famous tales such as 'bear mother' are written on

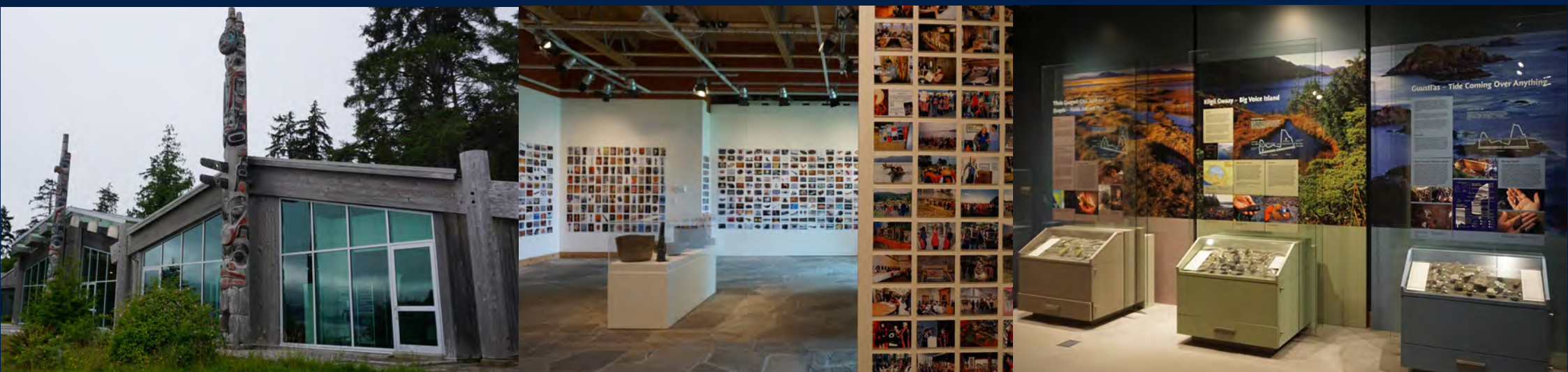




the walls, quoted directly from oral historians that still live in Haida Gwaii. The next room shows 'art as a social technology,' such as baskets that have historical events woven in their design and potlatch items that project beliefs and hierarchies of the people. Every object holds a memory. The next section shows the Haida relation with nature and land, and the final section contains over 10 sets of videos that show Haida people living, talking, working, studying together either in their communities or in Vancouver. There are many motion graphics and videos used throughout the gallery, and these successfully deliver the liveliness and vitality of the Haida people to the visitors. Also, there are explanations about artistic forms of resistance and many other ways in which Haida traditions adapted and survived. The exhibition also stresses that the current repatriation wave in Canada "provides mainstream museums the opportunity to become voluntary agents of change rather than the physical evidence of Canada's genocide against Indigenous people" (Nika Collison).

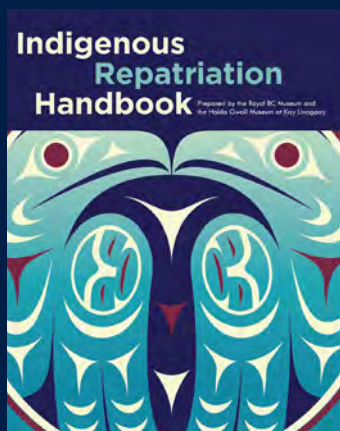
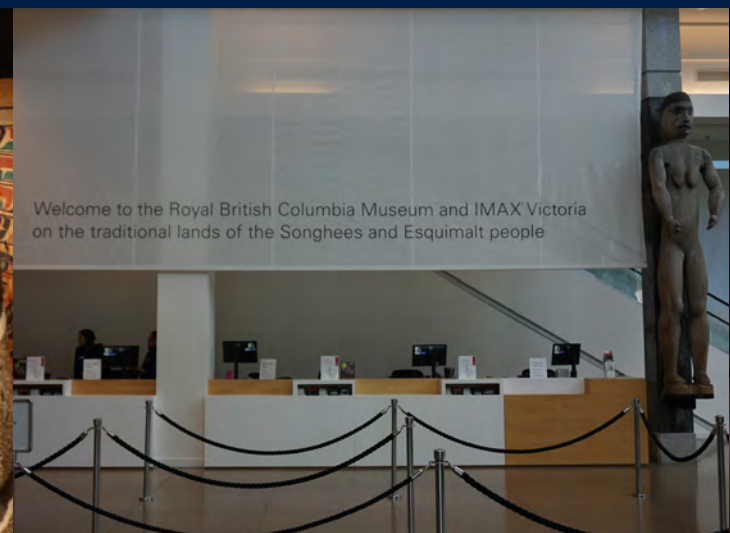
Since the city of Vancouver is on the Musqueam nation's territory, MOV is having a long-term special exhibition about Musqueam culture and territorial identity too. This exhibition included a long timeline comparing the history of colonial, settler Vancouver and the history of Musqueam genocide and displacement that happened together in the same locations. There was also a section about the wrongdoings of colonial anthropologists that ended with a Musqueam elder's bitter yet relieved comment that "anthropologists don't work like that anymore."

## HAIDA GWAII MUSEUM AT KAY LLNAGAAY, SKIDEGATE



The Haida Gwaii Museum is located in the Haida city of Skidegate and is operated by a majority of Haida community members and a minority of outsider 'friends.' Exhibits contain hundreds of artifacts that have been repatriated or donated in recent years. Each gallery shows a different aspect of Haida culture - recent accomplishments in repatriation and restoration, spiritual masks and mythologies or rituals related to them, and also archeological research or scientific data that prove that Haida oral histories and mythologies stretch back to a million years and that they contain historical truths and wisdoms in them.

# ROYAL BC MUSEUM, VICTORIA



The Royal BC Museum was one of the first Canadian museums to initiate repatriation projects even before the Task Force Report. The museum recently published the *Indigenous Repatriation Handbook*, which was written together with the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay (2019). The museum has permanent *First Peoples Galleries* that are separate from the *Becoming BC* gallery which centers on the European settler history of British Columbia. Both galleries were made decades ago. However, in the large main hallway in between these two galleries, there is a new special exhibition going on, named *Our Living Languages*. It is composed of many screens and interactive maps that show historical and currently used First Nation languages and information related to each language. You can hear different people speaking different Indigenous languages by pressing buttons or wearing headphones in front of the language names. The gallery also contains explanations of how colonial Canada led these languages into the danger of extinction. It is stressed that the loss of language is the loss of a culture and legacy. The galleries also show projects going on in BC to preserve these Northwest Coast languages. Although the old history galleries are concretely divided, such smart display and placement of the language exhibition in between the First Nation section and the BC 'European' history section seems to naturally bridge the two divided narratives of the past together into a one co-existing and interacting present.



# MUSEUMS

## MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AT UBC, VANCOUVER



MOA is an institution under the University of British Columbia and its main purpose is to provide research material for anthropologists. There are currently four exhibitions that contain First Nation artifacts and stories in them. Most First Nation artifacts have labels explaining how the museum obtained them. These labels make clear that the First Nation objects were ethically donated or loaned long-term after being repatriated to their original owner communities. There are also many direct quotes by First Nation members around the artifacts. The speakers were able to explain their own creations and histories or values related to such creations. In the permanent galleries, modern art works by First Nation artists are placed at the beginnings and endings of each column and near the main pathways of the galleries, so that the contemporary works would be seen before the traditional ones on the sides. There are blank spaces intentionally left with labels saying that the spiritual or "culturally sensitive" objects such as ancestral masks that were once displayed there were put down or returned to owner communities according to the owners' wishes. Everywhere, repatriation of objects and the survival of First Nation legacies were greatly emphasized. Meanwhile, the *Shake Up!* exhibition was especially interesting for me. It was about MOA's long term project regarding Northwest Coast earthquakes that have regularly threatened MOA and its holdings. Not only will the whole MOA building go under construction for a seismic design starting from next year, but the exhibition showed that MOA is also working together with natural scientists and technicians to protect First Nation historical sites and traditional objects that have been repatriated to individual communities. The exhibit placed First Nation traditions and oral histories together with contemporary scientific knowledge and technologies related to earthquakes in order to show their connections and the value of First Nation traditional understandings.

# INTERVIEWS



## MARTHA BLACK

- Curator of Indigenous Collections at the Royal BC Museum.
- Co-writer of the Indigenous Repatriation Handbook

Martha Black is a curator at the Royal BC Museum. Since the Royal BC Museum has been a leading institution in First Nation repatriation movements and Martha worked there for over 30 years, she had much experience working together with different First Nation groups.

*"It's all about style! Now we can do things without videos breaking and... yes, [videos] are the main ways people want to show [themselves]. Before videos came, there was a Nuchatlaht exhibition.... I wrote it based on numerous quotes [by the Nuchatlaht] and worked with a senior guy from that community... I was very worried about writing it and choosing the content myself because it was a partnership exhibition with the Nuchatlaht tribal council! But he said "no no, you do it. That's your job. You're the curator. You can put this together" and he always monitored it. (...) The interesting part was that they wanted all the interpretations to be done by the Nuchatlaht young people. (...) So there were indigenous people in the galleries all the time during that exhibition. There were explanations coming from real people!"*

She told me that curators and First Nation people have their own roles in creating an exhibition and narrative, and added that this process of working together always created different exhibition styles. Throughout the interview, she greatly stressed that each First Nation has different contexts, needs, and wants.



## JENNIFER KRAMER

- Anthropology Professor at the University of British Columbia, Research area is Northwest Coast First Nations
- Curator at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC (Co-curator of the Shake Up! exhibition)

*"(About MOA's decisions to put down "culturally sensitive" First Nation objects) It's all about relationship building. The museum is not really about finding all the unknown, new knowledge and sharing it, but rather.. learning about people, how they use their arts and material cultures to expand their own identities and lives."*

*"There is definitely a power in representation and I would love to be a part of correcting that. I think we have made a lot of progress over the last 15 years. I'm proud of MOA. (...) None of the objects in MOA were forcefully taken and yet we still are very [active] in repatriation projects. We understand that even though religious masks have been directly sold or donated to us, the power and hereditary rights still lie in the original families. [and that the owners often sold them because of economic hardships of their family or community,] (...) We protect some masks in private rooms where not even staff members have regular access to. We pull out the masks and let the First Nation councils take the ceremonial masks during potlatches."*

*"We made Musqueam 101, which is an educational and cultural program designed with the Musqueam Nation. Every Wednesday during the academic calender, we host a dinner. Sometimes the talker would be a Musqueam council member, sometimes a community member, sometimes just people talking about the Musqueam...."*



# VIVIANE GOSSELIN

- Curator at the Museum of Vancouver

Viviane Gosselin is the co-curator of all the First Nation temporary exhibitions that I saw in MOV. On the day of the interview, she was busy preparing for an important private repatriation ceremony with Haida band members. During the short interview, she talked about recent experiences of working together with the Haida and Musqueam nations. Since MOV is the oldest museum in Vancouver, she seemed to ponder most on how to enrich the Vancouverian narratives and showed the ambition to hold more projects related to Vancouver 'local' indigenous groups.



*"It's all about conversation and mostly me learning. I have to learn about specific experiences and at the same time, [First Nations] accept that they do not know about the mechanisms of the museums. I can explain what I see is problematic or suggest what should be done. Then they accept the aspects that work with their goals. The word counts [of quotes or explanations in the exhibitions] have always been a problem (haha)."*

*"The thing here (in MOV) is to recognize that we are on the territories of some First Nations such as the Musqueam. In the Haida Now, we originally planned to put a section about territorial matters but it eventually got eliminated. The Musqueam exhibition has more information about territorial displacement and dispute. Not many people in Vancouver may know that the Haida are actually not natives of Vancouver while they might not even know that this museum is on Musqueam territory. (...) So we need to make sure these are known and communicated. The experiences in indigenous communities are collective yet very individual and distinct. [In each collaboration or repatriation, the strategies and messages change accordingly.] (...)"*

*"We cannot talk about everything, so we chose to focus on the "local" nations and talk about them."*

## SEAN YOUNG + KWIAHWAAH JONES

Sean and Kwiahwaah are both Haida Gwaii locals. Sean majored archeology and learned museology in Victoria. He returned to Haida Gwaii and became a staff in the Haida Gwaii Museum. Kwiahwaah was trained in the Haida Gwaii Museum and now works a lot on the 'mainland,' trying to find objects and ancestral remains that are kept in "dusty basements" of Canadian museums. She attempts to return them home or give them voices in the galleries.

They showed me around the repatriation gallery and explained where each repatriated object came from or background stories related to its return. They also explained to me about the overwhelming feelings they get everytime an object is returned to the community.



- Curator at the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay



- Co-curator of *Haida Now* (MOV) and *Shake Up!* (MOA)  
- Haida Gwaii local

# CONCLUSION

The Task Force Report 1992 suggests that museums should repatriate objects stolen and taken from the First Nations and that exhibits should be held after consultation with First Nation communities. I noticed many differences that naturally followed as the 'penholders' that can write the narrative diversified. For example, the exhibitions used 1st person nouns like "we" or "my ancestors." Through using 1st person perspectives, mixing of contemporary art works with traditional artifacts, and thoroughly calculating placings of exhibitions such as the *Our Living Languages* exhibit in the Royal BC Museum, it was naturally delivered that these First Nation people are not mere historical beings of the past, but rather living, contemporary people just like us. First Nation rituals and lifestyles were re-evaluated as well. Oral histories and everyday artifacts of First Nation communities were most valued and referred to in the exhibitions while "written" histories – which are the core of Western historical understanding – were diminished. As First Nation narrators wrote about their own experiences and cultures, many distinctive aspects of their cultures were no longer simply objectified or mystified, but rather thoroughly explained. Also, in order to value these narratives and to recognize them as part of Canadian history, it seemed inevitable to talk about the ways colonial policies killed and silenced First Nations and how Canada's cultural institutions and official histories used to contribute to objectifying First Nations as well. In all the exhibitions I visited, the 'narrative's history' was explained thoroughly. The exhibits also had to explain how anthropologists and museums have grown compared to the colonial past. Displaying such reflections of the past and recent revisions of history enables viewers to deviate from the perception that history is objective and unchangeable, and allows them to witness the on-going production of history that involves endless discussions and agreements.

Another interesting aspect was how the range of "shared knowledge" has changed through collaborations and repatriation projects. As I mentioned earlier, some objects in MOA were pulled down from the glass cases because they are "culturally sensitive objects." The museums and First Nations were gradually coming to agreement that some artifacts do not have to be shared with community outsiders. Some owner nations wanted their ceremonial objects or ancestral remains to be kept in large museums and protected well with museum technologies, but did not want them to be shared with the public. That was the form of repatriation they wanted. Respecting such community values and sensitivities is a method of breaking away from colonial, invasive museology. The museum was traditionally an area that held dead things that were displaced from their original usage and context. It was also a place where knowledge was actively shared with the public. Both of these traditional characteristics were changing. Museums no longer held absolute power to talk about 'the Other' in the ways they wanted to. They could no longer exhibit every interesting aspect about a different culture. Sharing the historic pen meant accepting new values, power relations, and privacies as well.

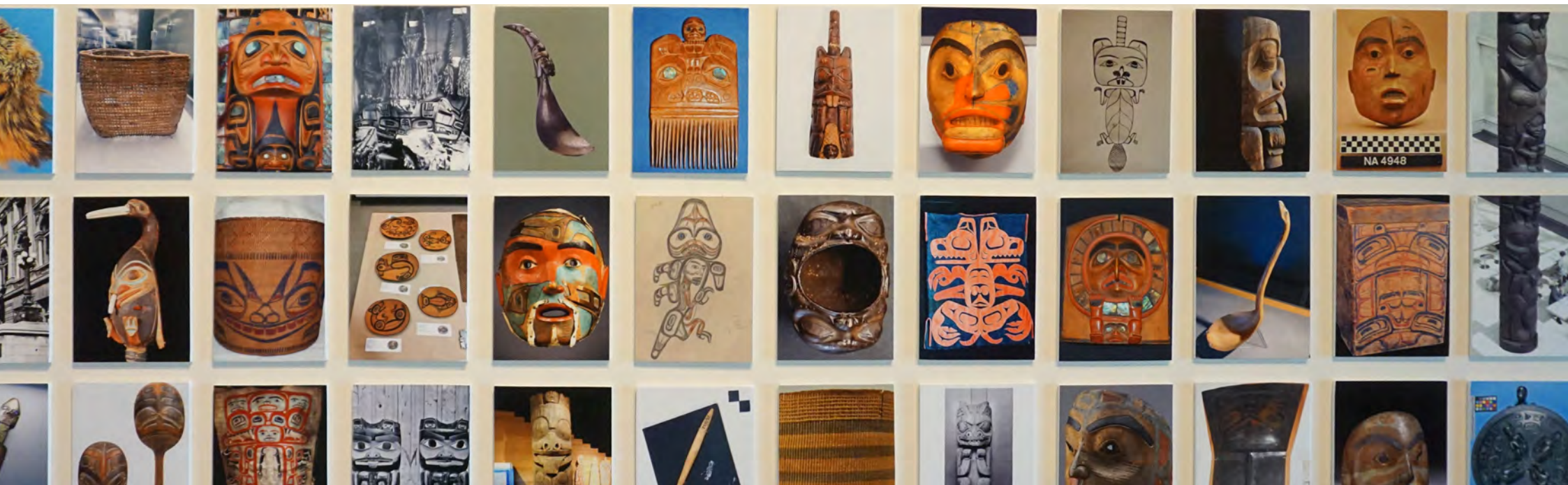
Such changes in narration were also applied to other exhibitions in these Canadian museums. I saw Mayan exhibitions before in two or three different cities. When I visited the Royal BC, the museum was having a special Mayan exhibition so I went there after examining the First Nation galleries. The exhibition had many videos and 1st person narrations that held the voices of the actual Mayan descendants. They talked of long colonial trauma, the fear of extinction, and also about Mayan traditional value systems, life styles, and community histories. Screens and walls surrounding the old artifacts were not designed mysterically or in a merely traditional way, but were rather vivid and modern. Some traditional Mayan drawings and patterns were carefully recreated in modern ways as well. I was also impressed by how the MOV history galleries had sections dedicated just to Chinese and Japanese immigrant communities and the hate crimes or adaptations that they went through in Vancouver. I felt that the new thoughtful approaches to the domestic indigenous people were affecting the ways museums treated other minority cultures as well.



# LIMITATIONS

During the field research, I noticed some aspects that I should keep in mind in order to develop my research into an actual academic paper. For example, I realized that the Haida are very well-represented compared to other First Nations. The Haida have their own territory on the island of Haida Gwaii, they have many connections with museums because they have been the leading First Nation group in repatriation projects for decades, and they also have a lot of governmental and institutional fundings. These conditions make their situation better than most. Even in academia, I was able to find numerous literature about the Haida. When I contacted other First Nation groups such as the Songhees or Musqueam, I did not get a single reply and their community-visit reservations were fully booked for the next three months. Representatives were being overstretched. When I mentioned this to my interviewees, they also commented that “it is almost impossible for even the local PhD students to meet other First Nations, because they are busy handling more important things than museum work.” Meanwhile, when I went to small galleries in Gastown, Vancouver or other gift shops in BC, I noticed that most times what Canadians called a “Northwest Coast art collection” meant a Haida collection. Although the local First Nations in Vancouver are the Musqueam and Squamish Lil-wat, not the Haida, not many Vancouverians know that. I do not want to generalize the Haida experiences as the First Nation experiences. In reality, many others such as the Nisga’a nation are also making remarkable repatriation achievements. Most of all, each First Nation wants and needs different forms of representation and repatriation.

I also realized it is hard to solely critique about ‘exhibitions.’ Renewing exhibitions is a long-term project that requires money and time. Many of the museums I visited were continuously doing small renewals and planning long-term reconstructions, patiently waiting for their budget plans to be passed. My curator interviewees were very aware of the limitations and problems of current exhibition narratives which were created decades ago and empathized with my criticisms. They were not only concerned about the content of each exhibition but also about the general role-change and future of museums as well, which is an inseparable factor from forms of representation and communication. Meanwhile, I also felt that behind-the-scene discussions, cooperation, and new imaginations that the First Nations and museum staff members are producing, or the visions and ideologies that each museum holds are much more important than what is simply shown as a result in the short-term exhibitions. I do not want to treat exhibitions as if they are separate from the people actually running them or the places they are held in. I wish I had more time to meet participants who have planned and drove changes in the museum scenes so that I could write about the ‘backstage.’





ETC.





The UIC Research Project has provided me with a rare opportunity to conduct my own anthropological research in a different country as an undergraduate. I greatly enjoyed the energy of the 'field' and the people that I met as interviewees or friends during my research. The people of Vancouver, Victoria, and Haida Gwaii were warm-hearted and welcoming.

I will especially remember my three day trip to Haida Gwaii island for a long time. My interviewee, Sean, invited me to the opening event of a new repatriation exhibition in the Haida Gwaii Museum. I was able to listen to speeches of Haida elders and community leaders there. I also met a lot of curators and scholars from all over Canada that came just for the ceremony, and was moved to listen to their life-long dedications to make the museum into an inclusive space that could embrace more memories, bodies, and voices.

Haida Gwaii does not have public transportations, and villages are far apart from each other. One day, I hopped on a bicycle and rode for an hour to the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay. After walking through the museum for a couple hours, I rode thirty minutes further to see the old village sites, current community centers, and art studios of Haida artists. Then it took me another hour and thirty minutes to get back to my airbnb. Though my legs became numb, I felt extremely free and peaceful. I loved the salty winds that ran through my hair, the strong scent of wild flowers and old trees mixed with the fishy smell, and the feeling of my warm body being touched by the clear icy air.

I met girls who talked about their mothers and grandmothers with beautiful words. Haida people have multiple gods and most of them are genderless or gender fluid. However, three out of the four most important gods are female, and the communities are still quite maternal. Children still carry their mothers' crests. Although the Haida girls were well educated and international enough to love Justin Bieber or BTS, Haida traditions and nationalism seemed to be a strong part of their lives. Who cares about a little nationalism? Nationalism is often dangerous, but for minorities who are repeatedly denied of their histories and legacies, nationalism and strong cultural identity can act as strong and valuable weapons or shields.

Not every villager in Haida Gwaii is 'native.' The 'new' settler community that immigrated decades ago comprises about half of the Haida Gwaii population. They are settlers who chose to move there based on some level of interest or respect to the Haida, years after the colonial conquests and genocides. Despite the long history of colonial rule and harm, the Haida have accepted these 'outsiders' as friends according to their tradition of welcoming strangers, and the new dynamics and harmony that these immigrants and Haida natives have produced together are quite special and beautiful. In fact, many Haida people moved to 'mainland' Canada for survival or married 'white' Canadians, and their descendants moved back to Haida Gwaii only recently, so the boundary between native and foreigner have been blurred over the years. The roots of the two distinct groups have bound and crossed for so long, they became inseparable. It was great to talk with people who have survived unexpected tragedies and those who have learned to love parts of themselves that came from those that they once hated.

I will thankfully carry these stories and people in me for a long time.



Written and Designed by Ajung Ryoo

Drawings

Cover / *Haida Grizzly Drum* (1990) - Bill Reid, Haida Nation

pg 2 / *Salmon* (2003) - Mervin Windsor, Haisla-Heiltsuk

pg 11 / *Becoming Worthy* (2013) - Marika Echachis Swan, Tla-o-qui-aht Nation

This research was funded by Underwood International College (UIC) through the 2019 UIC Research Program. This program provides UIC undergraduates with the opportunity to plan and execute a self-directed research project anywhere around the world. Selected students are granted monetary awards of up to 3,500,000 KRW each and are given the privilege to showcase and publish their research under UIC supervision. For further inquiries about the program, please contact UIC academic advisor Professor Mihyun Kim (mk918@yonsei.ac.kr) or refer to the UIC official website (<http://uic.yonsei.ac.kr>).



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