



**FINDING DIRECTIONS WEST:
READINGS THAT LOCATE AND DISLOCATE
WESTERN CANADA'S PAST**
Edited by George Colpitts and Heather Devine

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Spatial Deployments to Synchronic Witnessing: Reiterations of Contact in Museum Spaces

Kimberly Mair

James Clifford argues that the processes of research and consultation between museum staff and the communities whose history, culture, and artifacts are to be represented constitute a contact zone characterized by asymmetrical relationships.¹ Extending Clifford's observation from the realm of consultation to the spatial arrangements in museums, this chapter aims to illustrate the power of spatial elements in the design of built environments. Spatial arrangements are neither more silent nor more neutral than the textual messages crafted for didactic panels in museum displays. Since they often pose as authentic reconstructions of historical phenomena, spatial productions have a communicative force that is no less effective than textual discourse in producing a message that unwittingly resonates with hegemonic assumptions. A significant aspect of reconstructed sites is that they tend to "build the observer into the structure of events."² Therefore, the relative location of visitors and objects of representation is productive at the level of identification in crucial respects. Spatial arrangements of objects and visitors produce scenes of address that implicate visitors by enabling particular vantage points, animating relationships between the visitor and historical events, and sometimes interpellating visitors as witnesses.

In this chapter I will interpret two constructed sites that provide key moments in their respective exhibitions with respect to the spatial scenes of address that they produce: the *First Contact* in situ display, which was located in the Syncrude Gallery of Aboriginal Culture (SGAC) at the former site of the Royal Alberta Museum (RAM);³ and *Chief Kwakwabalasami's House* in the First Peoples Gallery at the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM). I am primarily interested in the spatialization of these exhibition sites and the relative distribution of objects and visitors within and surrounding them. I will consider how both sites spatially deploy scenes of address between the visitor, the reconstructed site, and its contents with consideration of the reiterative production of contact zones, since Mary Louise Pratt insists that contact “emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other ... often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.”⁴ Further, the discussion considers the implicit tendency – particularly with respect to in situ display practices – to situate the gallery visitor as a witness to the past.

The aim of this project is to draw attention to the power of spatial formations in cultural institutions that play a vital role in the presentation of politically subordinated cultures. This is a propitious time to give attention to the politics of museum display. As the 150th anniversary of Canada approaches, one-time funds will be directed at heritage projects. This poses an exigent opportunity to address concerns raised about the presentation of Indigenous cultures. The RBCM plans to rescript the First Peoples Gallery but is in an early stage of this process. The RAM is undergoing a major redevelopment project. At the time of writing, it has closed its exhibits as it prepares to move to a new building under construction, which is expected to open in 2017.

The Museums in Context

The two museums and their collections are vastly different in scope, method, and tone, with the RBCM having a greater emphasis on aesthetics and culture and the RAM placing a stronger accent on scientific, particularly ethnological, approaches. The audiences of the two museums are also quite different from each other, which is in part a function of location. The RBCM is situated in a destination location near Victoria's inner harbor. Hence, it

attracts a far greater number of visitors, many of whom are tourists. Until recently, the RAM was located on the periphery of Edmonton's city centre and isolated from other points of interest, limiting the potential for casual "walk-in" visits. Its new building is in the downtown "arts core." The RAM resides in the capital city of one of the most politically and environmentally debated places globally: the province of Alberta. The debate revolves in part around the activities of what was the SGAC's corporate funder: Syncrude Canada Limited. It has been argued that Syncrude's projects in the oil sands are inextricably intertwined with the continuing material oppression of Indigenous peoples in the province.⁵ While the SGAC gave comparatively far greater attention to the brutalities of colonial oppression than does the First Peoples Gallery at the RBCM, the conspicuous silences with respect to contemporary challenges linked to land and material ways of life may have an implicit relationship to the gallery's funding.

The RBCM First Peoples Gallery was designed in the 1970s, when the Kwakwaka'wakw (a.k.a. Kwahkiutl) were actively lobbying for the release of potlatch items seized from their villages in 1921. Confiscations resulting from the outlawing of the potlatch from 1884 to 1951 represented only part of the massive removal of artifacts from communities. Since the late 1800s, ongoing competition between rival collectors, ethnologists, merchants, and missionaries facilitated a heavy flow of objects out of the province of British Columbia to populate emerging museums in Eastern Canada, the United States, and Europe.⁶ The outflow of objects eventually led to calls for the province to build a representative collection of its own.⁷ The design of the current First Peoples Gallery began after the National Museum of Canada introduced a policy of democracy and decentralization in the late 1960s that coincided with local efforts of the Kwakwaka'wakw to bring material objects back home to be housed in Indigenous museums.⁸ The establishment of local cultural centres, such as the U'mista Cultural Centre at Alert Bay in 1980, were already taking place during the period when the current provincial gallery was under development. This context may have necessitated a more co-operative approach from the provincial museum.⁹ Despite this, as Gloria Jean Frank's observations show, the RBCM's First Peoples Gallery is fraught with curatorial practices that support a European worldview, such as: linear organization that presents active practices as though they are dead; failure to acknowledge and draw upon existing

knowledges within local Indigenous communities; and the use of Edward Curtis's sensationally staged photographs as factual documents.¹⁰

The RAM's SGAC was designed in the 1990s and in the wake of *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* exhibition, curated at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary for the 1988 Winter Olympics. *The Spirit Sings* stands as a key marker of heightened consciousness of the fraught relationship between museums and Indigenous communities in Canada owing to the Lubicon Lake Cree's boycott of the event.¹¹ The boycott prompted the International Council of Museums to pass a resolution urging museums not to exhibit cultural materials without the consent of the Aboriginal groups to whom the objects belong,¹² as well as the establishment of a National Task Force, jointly undertaken between the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association, that sought collaborative strategies to present and interpret Aboriginal cultures.¹³

One might assume that the many confrontations between Indigenous communities and museums between 1988 and 1990, the Canadian National Task Force conference recommendations later that year, the Oka Crisis of 1990, and negotiations for the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the United States might have brought about a radically collaborative approach in the planning of the SGAC in Alberta. Heather Devine observes, however, that Alberta's provincial museum more aggressively pursued acquisition of Indigenous material culture and applied a policy that was resistant to repatriation during this time.¹⁴ The acquisition of the Scriver Blackfoot collection in 1989 is illustrative of the institution's unyielding approach to relations with Indigenous communities. The museum represented its purchase from the Montana-based collector Robert Scriver as an act of "repatriation,"¹⁵ crudely subsuming Blackfoot communities under the province's patrimonial domain and reinforcing the Canada–U.S. border as the geopolitical demarcation of significance. Opposing the museum's purchase of the collection, George Kipp insisted that the museum should return the collection's sacred bundles "so that in 10 years an Indian won't be hanging next to the bundles."¹⁶

The failure to consider Indigenous artists for the production of SGAC murals during the gallery's planning offered another astonishing marker of the relationship between the museum and Indigenous communities. Four murals were awarded to artists without even extending invitations to Indigenous artists to bid on the murals. Given the international renown

of Canadian Indigenous artists such as Jane Ash Poitras, the failure to consider Indigenous artists was widely perceived as having demonstrated a lack of respect and recognition. The museum director then dismissed reactions as “stereotypical.”¹⁷ Hence, the indifference of the museum served to heighten already tense relations with Indigenous groups during the planning of the SGAC. This seems to stand in contrast to what was happening in southern Alberta at the Glenbow where, after *The Spirit Sings*, new relationships were being fostered between the museum and Indigenous groups that led to a fully collaborative partnership of museum professionals and Blackfoot ceremonial leaders and teachers to plan a permanent Blackfoot gallery, named *Niitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life*. Glenbow’s gallery, which opened in 2001, was oriented to tell a story in the words of the Blackfoot and to affirm co-existence over assimilation.¹⁸ Despite consultation processes in the planning of the SGAC, consideration of cultural property and collaboration in gallery design appear to have been more superficial at Alberta’s provincial museum than at the RBCM and the Glenbow, respectively.

The above points provide some general contours of context for the comparison of two very different Western Canadian provincial museums, the RAM and the RBCM, with respect to their treatment of Indigenous cultures. This chapter analyzes the spatialization of the respective galleries, in particular, by focusing metonymically on the two key sites of address mentioned at the outset in terms of the relative arrangement of objects and texts and the diachronic spatial distribution of objects and visitors in the respective sites.

Scene of Address 1: Visitor always arrives just in time

The *First Contact* in situ display in the former SGAC at the RAM was a key site that Philip Stepney, former director of the museum, called “a turning point in the gallery storyline” that depicted “the historic meeting that set the stage for all that followed.”¹⁹ It is at this turning point in the gallery, where display shifts from a heavily linear and ethnological emphasis on ancient artifacts to dioramas, that the visitor would encounter the *First Contact* site. This complex in situ display, through which the visitor was



1.1 First Contact mural image, Syncrude Gallery of Aboriginal Culture. Courtesy of the Royal Alberta Museum, Ethnology Program.

required to pass in order to access the rest of the gallery, served to prescribe the positioning of the visitor in the gallery through the strategic arrangement of objects that gave privileged sightlines only in very specified locations.

The visitor's encounter was a museological recreation of an event described in Anthony Henday's journal, a 1754 meeting between Henday and what some historians have assumed to be a Blackfoot chief.²⁰ Directly across from the reconstructed meeting site was a large mural depicting the view of the presumed Blackfoot camp from the Henday party's point of view. An elaboration of the latter in relation to the dynamics of identification will follow, but I would like to begin with the constructed tipi meeting site.

Henday was a Hudson's Bay Company employee sent to persuade people of the prairies to participate in the fur trade. In his meeting with a presumed leader of the Blackfoot Nation, as depicted in this exhibit, he is accompanied by Cree guide and interpreter, Attickasish, to facilitate communications, and a Cree woman whose role is not specified. In Henday's journal, he referred to the people he met using the Cree word *Archithinue*, which means "stranger." The temporal period of the reconstruction is intended to represent negotiations between Henday and a presumed Blackfoot leader after a shared feast, the smoking of pipes, and the exchange of gifts. The arrangement of the tableau in the *First Contact* tipi site was accompanied by a soundscape that attempted to depict aurally what might have been conveyed at this first meeting. In addition to the reconstructed tipi environment and soundscape, the display included didactic panels, the mural, and a "copy" of Henday's journal.

All of the site's elements were carefully combined to deliver a coherent story line intended to neutralize the significance of this meeting in the context of colonial history. The display text, entitled "A Journey Inland," asserted: "The encounter was played by their [the Blackfoot Nation's] rules, not his [Anthony Henday's]," and invited the visitor to feel empathy for Henday as "other." The constructed scene had the figure of Henday seated next to that of the tribe's leader on the ground in the tipi, ostensibly conforming to "the rules" of the Blackfoot people. The constructed tableau of the first meeting, hence, illustrated the accompanying didactic panel "A Journey Inland," rather than the text on the panel providing context for the display as a visitor might expect.

The depiction of Henday's initial meeting with the Blackfoot was intended to represent the beginnings of the historical process that would eventually dissolve the buffalo economy that for a time sustained the Indigenous peoples of the plains in relative autonomy from the market expansion carried out by the Hudson's Bay Company. The portrayal of Henday as a passive "guest" of the Blackfoot operated also as a neutralization of this colonial process. The gallery display panels then inform museum visitors that the leader of the Archithinue did not agree to send members of his camp with furs to Hudson Bay and that Henday returned to Hudson Bay, "his mission a failure."²¹ Participation in the fur trade was presented as a choice to be freely taken or refused between mutually respecting agents.



1.2 Henday fur trade diorama, Syncrude Gallery of Aboriginal Culture. Courtesy of the Royal Alberta Museum, Ethnology Program.

I would like to turn to the mural that was situated across from the tipi construction, noting that the visitor would be positioned under the tipi in this section of the gallery. While I am treating the two aspects of the *First Contact* site in reverse chronology, given that the mural depicted the scene upon Henday's approach and the tipi site depicted a formal meeting that occurred sometime following initial greetings and introductions, visitors tended to observe the tipi first and the mural second. Authority for the account of this first meeting was granted by the institutionalized cultural preference for textual documentation and its inclusion in official records. Phil Stepney observed with respect to the *First Contact* diorama

that museum planners made “a conscious decision to bring elements of non-Aboriginal culture into the story at critical points.”²² While this makes sense, it remains unclear why this decision would be made in this particular instance and in a way that so heavily invites visitor identification with a non-Aboriginal protagonist, although it may reflect an institutional preference for written documents. If so, it is worthwhile to give attention to the ways in which underlying epistemological assumptions and preferences can operate over and above the explicit and careful intentions of curators, which may be at odds with the concrete power effects of disciplinary practices. The planners of this gallery did articulate care for the present in their production of the past. However, the central object that was deployed to hold the *First Contact* diorama together was a facsimile of Anthony Henday’s journal, which rested on a stand that was centrally located in the foreground of the mural. The document was opened to an excerpt that described the scene that Henday reportedly saw as he approached the Archithinue camp. Yet, drawing from Barbara Belyea’s study of the Henday journal, the document raises further questions regarding the coherency of the First Contact story, as given in the SGAC.

First, while Henday reportedly sent his journal to the London office of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the current location of the original is not known. Second, there are four different manuscript versions of Henday’s journal, and these different iterations contradict each other in significant ways.²³ Belyea observes that “the four extant texts are rife with differences and contradictions. Even entries which record the same details – for example, the entries for 26 and 27 June; 2–4, 14, 26–28 July; 6–7, 15 August; 17–18 September [1754] – differ from each other in terms of vocabulary, proper names, turns of phrase and ‘accidentals’ (dating, capitalization, punctuation).”²⁴

Third, Henday’s journal describes two hundred tents in two rows, and yet this description is not consistent with the traditional way in which tipis are understood to have been arranged. The gallery’s supporting text acknowledges this perplexing discrepancy and offers a few hypotheses (e.g., trade and defence purposes) as to why these particular tents did not conform to traditional placement, which is described in plains oral culture as circular.²⁵ The accuracy of Henday’s account, or even his authorship of this text, was not seriously questioned, even though the descriptions within it seem to be inconsistent with European cultural standards of

documentation. For instance, the gallery's documentation observes that Henday did not record any of the names of the people he met on his journey. Despite all of this, the mural astonishingly reproduced the arrangement of tipis on the camp of the Archithinue in rows according to the Henday journal description. Hence, Henday's journal as an instance of simulacra – a copy of an original that is missing, fragmented, or fictional – played a key role in establishing not only the authority and discursive script of First Contact, but that of the whole of the gallery to the extent that First Contact was understood by the gallery planners as a pivotal point in consideration of post-colonial Aboriginal culture.²⁶

With respect to identification, I want to highlight the significance of the *First Contact* site in terms of how it served to order visitors in relation to display elements and to co-opt visitors in specific ways. In particular, the mural played a crucial role in visitor identification. In order to see the mural fully, the visitor not only had to stand centrally in front of it but had to stand directly in front of Henday's journal. The journal and the mural jointly positioned the visitor in Henday's place of arrival, standing before the people he came to meet. This positioning implicates the visitor by inviting identification with Henday rather than with the Archithinue. Thus presented from Henday's point of view, First Contact in the former SGAC was the story of a white protagonist, who attempted to entreat the "strangers" into the economy of the fur trade. In this way, the relative locations of visitor and representation of the other, as determined by placement, were instrumental at the level of identification in a crucial way. Notably, what Alison Griffiths refers to as the "interpellation of historical witnesses"²⁷ was relevant to the processes of identification and contact in the SGAC, especially at the key location of First Contact. The gallery visitor always arrives just in time not only to witness this event as an amicable exchange that ends with the uncompromised agency of the Archithinue but to witness it from the place – both literal and figural – in which Anthony Henday stood.

The act of witnessing, or bearing witness, is a recurring theme in discussions of museums and memorials that deal with extraordinary and painful histories. This sentiment is noted in the following quotation:

The presentation of one's heritage in a museum can provide an emotional opportunity for self-realization; it can provide an enduring, vivid, public testimonial to historical truths. If these historical truths are then used to foster healing, weaken stereotypical thinking and promote cross-cultural understanding, then we have truly learned from our past. If we don't, our two cultures will continue to collide and walk separate paths. Our attempt to encapsulate these aspects of our shared experience and articulate them in an exhibit was seen as one way to give *witness* and assist with the healing process.²⁸

Witnessing has its major significance when the events being depicted are not yet concluded, yet willfully forgotten, and this is why we must give attention to such enactments and not just to the event that is constructed for witnessing.

Scene of Address 2: Visitor always arrives out of time

Chief Kwakwabalasami's House is located in the First Peoples Gallery at the RBCM. The Chief's House, a setting for ceremonial dance, is a relatively open space, with few structural elements. There is a simulated fire in the centre of the room and an accompanying opening in the ceiling to free the smoke, which amplifies the openness of the space. Near the fire lie two ceremonial masks. On either side of the interior of the entrance, there are story poles; at the opposite wall, which is the focal point of the house, there is a dance screen. To the left of the dance screen are two carved benches at the corner.

The Chief's House is accompanied by very little text. There is only a small plate on the wall, which would be encountered upon one's exit of the room (to the right of the dance screen), assuming visitors are moving through the space as encouraged by the overarching museum design.²⁹ The plate gives only the most basic contours of the house's status. Visitors are told that this house is a replica built by the chief's son and grandson; that it, and not just the house it replicates, is the site of important ceremonies.



1.3 Inside of Jonathan Hunt's House. Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

It indicates that there are dancers who come out from behind the screen. Nothing within the space is labelled, described, or named. The story poles are not interpreted. The visitor is not instructed about who sits in which seat. What one understands when coming upon this house is that, unless one has participated in ceremonies like the ones that are practised here, one does not *understand* it – more importantly, one does not know it. Although the visitor is invited here for a time – welcomed even – this place is not necessarily for all visitors *to know*. Instead, visitors without experiential understanding are invited to wonder, question, and imagine, but not to know.

The instructive imperative that accompanies some curatorial practices involving the description of objects for public audiences is suspended

somewhat here, with significant potential for visitor interpellation. I am not suggesting that there is a politically oppositional and transformative promise in what appears to be a relatively hands-off approach in this aspect of the First Peoples Gallery. Rather, I suggest that the Chief's House stands for itself, with neither "expert" analysis (with its sense of cutting up) imposed from some external position nor explanation, and is without the imposition of nodal points of completion as to its constitutive meaning. Hence, the Chief's House invokes a sense of reverence and reflection from the visitor that was not achieved in the RAM's SGAC.

The reverential and reflective characteristics of the Chief's House, however, are not produced only by virtue of the lack of textual anchoring but also by the openness of the space and the way in which visitors can and do occupy and move through the space in multiple ways.³⁰ The space produces a complex site of identification, due largely to the lack of prescribed positioning of its visitors and structural constraints on their movements. The Chief's House also refrains from assuming the identity of its visitors. In observing the heterogeneous ways in which people take up this space relative to the spaces on either side of the Chief's House – with either hesitancy or appropriation, but usually sequentially both – there is a clear demarcation of spatial possibility in the Chief's House. People tend to pause once they have entered it, and then they start to move around it. The initial hesitation is noteworthy – there is a palpable sense that this is a different sort of space, one in which the institutional museum ethos is suspended. This suspension is highlighted in the immediacy of its contents and the lack of didactic panels. The ceremonial masks are neither encased in glass nor surrounded in rope. This has paradoxical effects on visitors. On the one hand, visitors initially appear to be uncertain as to how to take up the space, and exercise restraint on their movements. On the other hand, visitors do tend to relax in the space after a brief stasis in their movement. This stasis is more pronounced for visitors who arrive when the house is relatively empty. Many visitors do sit down in the space. Commonly, visitors take photographs, either of friends and family or of the space vacant of others. Some visitors try to contextualize the space, aided by the one plate, but this is not the most frequent reaction. The achievement of distance, whether spatial, temporal, or epistemological, seems to be an undesirable aim for museums. Within colonial contexts, however, aura can operate against the violences inherent in hegemonic curatorial practices

that too often produce technical “experts” and then “christen” visitors who are imagined to have had something imparted to them as *knowing* subjects, while producing represented peoples as *known* subjects.³¹

The suspension of linear temporality in particular is an attribute that roughly characterizes many of the didactic panels in the other sections of the First Peoples Gallery, as artifacts are often not dated in this gallery. A gallery interpreter noted that amongst the masks, art, clothing, and other displayed items, there are often contemporary artifacts alongside the ancient ones – yet these are not denoted as such. This practice stands in sharp opposition to that of the RAM, where dating was highly privileged toward showing a cultural evolution and a technical prowess. At times, the attention to dating was so pronounced that it threatened to subsume Aboriginal cultures under the showcasing of archeological mastery. With respect to archeological practices, Heather Devine observes the influential predominance of Lewis Binford’s processual archeology in the latter part of the twentieth century. Binford’s approach appeals to the cultural evolutionism of his mentor, cultural anthropologist Leslie White. Devine credits First Nations protest movements – for example, the Lubicon boycott of *The Spirit Sings* exhibition – for providing the impetus for a move toward “post-processual” approaches that more readily embrace community-based and dialogically based research. Devine notes that this is significant because “[the Binford philosophy] ignored the fact that research conceived and carried out within the social and intellectual context of colonialism is fundamentally biased.”³²

Therefore, in sharp contrast to the attention to temporal precision that was expressed in the processual techniques deployed in parts of the SGAC, one finds that in the Chief’s House at the First Peoples Gallery the temporality of the visitor’s arrival imposes a productive distance or “aura,” in part because the visitor’s arrival is always out of time. That is, there is a sense that an event has just occurred. It is an event that was missed and has not been witnessed. Thus, for many visitors, the spatial operation of the Chief’s House invokes a visitor subject who did not see and does not know.

The Contact Zone and the Witness

While I acknowledge that there was extensive consultation with Indigenous peoples in the design and planning of the SGAC, on the one hand, it must be noted that Clifford's work on museums focuses directly on the consultation process as a contact zone, as Pratt conceives it, one that is "usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict."³³ Further, consultation is not the same thing as collaboration. On the other hand, consideration of the spatialization of the in situ display of *First Contact* that was in the SGAC illustrates that it derived its testimony from Henday's journal as witness and then, through largely spatial mechanisms combined with a linguistic supplement, attempted to transfer the status of witness to the visitor through a dramatic scene of address and interpellation into Henday's place. This spatial deployment involves what could be called a synchronic form of witnessing, similar to the "imperialist spectatorship" that Julia Emberley finds deployed by the colonial archive's classificatory and normalizing strategies onto photographs of Indigenous peoples.³⁴

What I am calling synchronic witnessing is quite different from the kind of witnessing that Emberley calls for, which is illustrated in the following quotation: "To unlearn and to learn as a non-Native to be a witness to colonial history and to speak to that history of representational violence means to make visible the *mechanisms* (i.e., the technologies and classificatory techniques of representation) that produce and reproduce its violence."³⁵ While accepting the full and crucial force of Emberley's stress on making mechanisms of violence visible and her appeal to an active, historical engagement, I would like to see a move away from the concept of witnessing altogether in addressing contact and identification in the gallery. To be clear, the kind of synchronic witnessing deployed at the Anthony Henday diorama was of quite a different order than the witnessing that Emberley invokes in her work, which can only come from a place external to the kinds of disciplinary practices that produced the First Contact site. What is striking here, given the reliance on the Henday journal to underpin the authority of this testament, is that Belyea, in her extensive work with the Henday manuscripts, seems to identify a similar mechanism in the production of these documents when she writes of the Henday entries:

The very strictness with which the empirical categories are accounted for is an indication of the degree to which the journal *prescribed* what the explorer was to observe. Its conformity with [Hudson's Bay Company factor, James] Isham's instructions shows the extent to which initial expectations guided the explorer's [Henday's] comportment as scientific explorer and trading agent. There is very little descriptive variance or spontaneous action, except perhaps in details of Henday's hunting adventures.³⁶

Emberley's notion of the witness is one that is inextricably tied to the kinds of inheritance that can be hoped for from an a-disciplinary mode of address. Too often, consultation with source communities results in applying museum techniques to Indigenous contributions that are inherently coercive, even violent. The Question is: Do curatorial practices that require the visitor to act as a third-party "witness" to the event being staged result in the visitor making value judgments on the meaning of contact? Or, does the visitor become a participant? The position of witness grants authority in the first place, and it grants this authority over a fragmented, detached, and hyperreal event in the second place for which very real social formations and practices will be substituted and judged outside of the gallery. The readiness to invoke and to produce visitors as witnesses of displays that bear witness is tied to the mechanism of reiterative contact zones that redeploy and continually enact the relations of coercion and inequality that Pratt identifies with contact zones.

It ought to be noted that Clifford critiques the First Peoples Gallery at the RBCM as one that offers an overarching and "nonoppositional completeness," noting that "to identify an object as 'used in the potlatch' is not the same as showing it to be property from a specific potlatch and part of an ongoing cultural struggle."³⁷ The force of his critique is of political significance, and it signals the silences imposed onto the gallery. Yet this discussion suggests that some of the spatial gaps and silences found in the RBCM offer openings rather than hegemonic closures that interpellate knowing visitors or witnesses. Instead, the subversion of disciplinary practices and the edifying museum imperative can contribute to the possibilities of testament that Roger Simon has addressed, which are consistent with Emberley's conception of the witness.

Simon calls for a testament as a gift such that “no single beneficiary can be said to be capable of rendering the full meaning and significance of this testament” so that its inheritance demands “affirming its receipt through our non-indifference and reassessing its significance by reading, sifting, judging, and sorting out its possible meanings.”³⁸ The signifying potential of the unique conditions presented by the Chief’s House, given that the original’s ceremonial attributes are transferred to this in situ display so that the house is in fact used for ceremonial purposes, retains a special and paradoxical status that potentially unhinges it from the overarching regimes of hegemonic representation within the hegemony of the institution, and forecloses the possibility of synchronic witnessing.

Notes

- 1 I would like to express appreciation to this volume’s editors and readers, as well as acknowledge support from the University of Lethbridge Research Fund for the spatial studies of galleries upon which this essay is based.
James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- 2 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 47.
- 3 “Syncrude Gallery of Aboriginal Culture,” Royal Alberta Museum. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. This chapter is informed by mappings of the former SGAC in December 1999 and observations of visitors’ movements 14–17 June, 2011.
- 4 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, [1992] 2008).
- 5 Concerning the relationship between tar sands development and material well-being see, for instance, Jennifer Huseman and Damien Short, “‘A Slow Industrial Genocide’: Tar Sands and the Indigenous People of Northern Alberta,” *International Journal of Human Rights* 16, no. 1 (2012): 216–37, esp. 230. Also see Clinton N. Westman, “Social Impact Assessment and the Anthropology of the Future in Canada’s Tar Sands,” *Human Organization* 72, no. 2 (2013): 111–20.
- 6 Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1995); Gloria Jean Frank, “That’s My Dinner on Display: A First Nations Reflection on Museum Culture,” *BC Studies* 125/126 (2000): 163–78; Aldona Jonatis, *Art of the Northwest Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).
- 7 Cole, *Captured Heritage*, 227.
- 8 Ira Jacknis, “Repatriation as Social Drama: The Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia, 1922–1980,” in *Repatriation Reader: Who Owns American Indian Remains?*, ed. Devon Mihesuah (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 266–81.

- 9 Jacknis, "Repatriation as Social Drama," 270; Catherine Bell and Val Napoleon, eds., *First Nations Cultural Heritage and Law: Case Studies, Voices and Perspectives* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 75.
- 10 Frank, "That's My Dinner on Display," 163–78.
- 11 Heather Devine, "After The Spirit Sang: Aboriginal Canadians and Museum Policy in the New Millennium," in *How Canadians Communicate III: Contexts of Canadian Popular Culture*, ed. Bart Beaty, Derek Briton, Gloria Filax, and Rebecca Sullivan (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2010), 218; Frances W. Kaye, *Hiding the Audience: Viewing Arts & Arts Institutions on the Prairies* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2003), particularly chapter 5, which meticulously unpacks and situates the struggles surrounding the exhibition as it was still in preparation, within a broader analysis of the shift that has occurred in the Glenbow Museum's audience over the institution's history.
- 12 Moira McLoughlin, *Museums and the Representations of Native Canadians: Negotiating the Borders of Culture* (New York: Garland, 1999), 11.
- 13 Tom Hill and Trudy Nicks, eds., *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association, 1992).
- 14 Devine, "After the Spirit Sang," 229.
- 15 Philip H.R. Stepney and David J. Goa, eds., *The Scriver Blackfoot Collection: Repatriation of Canada's Heritage* (Edmonton: Provincial Museum of Alberta, 1990).
- 16 Quoted in Rocky Woodward, "Scriver Accused of Violating Trust," *Windspeaker* 8, no. 7 (1990), <http://www.ammsa.com/publications/windspeaker/scriver-accused-violating-trust> (accessed 20 June 2013).
- 17 Duncan Thorne, "Native Anger Rising over Murals," *Edmonton Journal*, 19 February 1997.
- 18 Gerry Conaty, "Glenbow's Blackfoot Gallery: Working Towards Coexistence," in *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Laura Peers and Alison Brown (London: Routledge, 2003), 240. Also, Kaye points to the exhibition *Reclaiming History: Ledger Drawings by the Assiniboine Artist Hongoeyesa* as a signal of the Glenbow's changing perception of audience and growing interest in addressing Indigenous audiences: *Hiding the Audience*, 179–83.
- 19 Philip H.R. Stepney, "Development of the Syncrude Canada Aboriginal Peoples Gallery," *Alberta Museums Review* 23, no. 3 (1997): 36.
- 20 The implication of witnessing this meeting is crucial and will be addressed later in the discussion.
- 21 Susan Berry and Jack Brink, *Aboriginal Cultures in Alberta: Five Hundred Generations* (Edmonton: Provincial Museum of Alberta, 2004), 32.
- 22 Stepney, "Development of the Syncrude Canada Aboriginal Peoples Gallery," 36
- 23 Barbara, Belyea, ed., *A Year Inland: The Journal of a Hudson's Bay Company Winterer* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 20.
- 24 Ibid., 21.
- 25 Berry and Brink, *Aboriginal Cultures in Alberta*, 32.
- 26 My objection to the use of a "copy" of an absent original in this case has little to do with the strength of evidence that it provides. Rather, the point is that this story joins forces with the heavily scientific discourse of the ethnological exhibits in the gallery

- that lends it the authorization of Western science and undermines, for instance, the Indigenous creation stories that were given at the entry of the gallery. For an analysis of the “500 Generations” video presentation in the former SGAC, see Kimberly Mair, “Putting Things in their Place: The Syncrude Gallery of Aboriginal Culture at the Royal Alberta Museum and the Idiom of Majority History,” in *Canadian Literature and Cultural Memory*, ed. Cynthia Sugars and Eleanor Ty (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2014), 39–52. Related to the struggle between epistemological assumptions and evidence surrounding material objects, such as clovis points (which were used to grant authority in the SGAC), see Vine Deloria, Jr. *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 108–10.
- 27 Alison Griffiths, “*Shivers Down Your Spine*”: *Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 50.
 - 28 Stepney, “Development of the Syncrude Canada Aboriginal Peoples Gallery,” 36. Emphasis added.
 - 29 Although the Chief’s House is frequently approached from the exit, the plate is located behind the visitor and is rarely observed by those visitors entering through the exit.
 - 30 I observed this space specifically over a period of four consecutive days (12–15 June 2012).
 - 31 Contrasted with the hierarchical and one-directional models of “knowledge” exchange are Indigenous ways of knowing that are relational, story-based, and acknowledge the significance of silence. See Julia V. Emberley, “Epistemic Heterogeneity: Indigenous Storytelling, Testimonial Practices, and the Question of Violence in Indian Residential Schools,” in *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, ed. Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 149.
 - 32 Devine, “After the Spirit Sang,” 225.
 - 33 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 8.
 - 34 Emberley addresses photographs in a digitized archive associated with the RBCM. In part, she shows that captions are used to impose normalizing familial orderings on those who have been photographed. Julia V. Emberley, *Defamiliarizing the Aboriginal: Cultural Practices and Decolonization in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 178.
 - 35 Ibid., 179.
 - 36 Belyea, *A Year Inland*, 371.
 - 37 Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 137.
 - 38 Roger I. Simon, “The Terrible Gift: Museums and the Possibility of Hope without Consolation,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21 (2006): 195.

