Rebuilding the City of Political Depression

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Abstract

Drawing from Billy Ray Belcourt's (2020) A History of My Brief Body, this article draws an analogy between the City of Victoria, B.C., located on unceded Lekwungen territory, and a museum to explore the affective nature of settler colonialism within the urban landscape. Like a museum, cities are curated. Each piece of art in a museum is collected and positioned relative to each other to tell a story. Likewise, the relationships between the people, objects, and spaces that make up the city denote the place's meaning. This article considers how the ubiquity of Coast Salish symbols and imagery in the public art of Victoria's built environment stands in comparison to the resurgent stewardship of the kwetlal (camas) system on Lekwungen traditional territories. Examining these elements through the lens of place, affect, and materiality, this article subverts the notion of "public art" in a critical examination of how different creative expressions of Indigenous presence are accentuated or made invisible in the built landscape. Illuminating the stories that have been hidden in urban spaces highlights the transformative power of collective expressions of Indigenous creativity.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Picture a museum where artifacts and art pieces are curated to create an exhibit. The exhibit creates a narrative—each piece situated next to the other to tell a story or to generate an emotional response. Any item taken out of context becomes void of this broader meaning. The exhibit is not created by each isolated piece but by the relationships between each piece. Now imagine that this museum is a city. In order to construct the city, each element, the roads, the streets, the houses, and the people, is also curated. Likewise, it is not just the physical structures or people occupying it that turns a space into a city. The relationships between all of these give the space its meaning. If the city is a museum, then you can think of the state as a curator. In Canada, cities are more than a built landscape but a constructed system embedded with layers of political subjectivities. Consequently, settler colonialism is built into the physical infrastructure of the city. Colonialism is encoded in the physicality of the city and felt by the bodies that walk through it. However, urban Indigenous peoples have always existed in Canadian cities, creating communities and a sense of Indigenous place within the city.

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between the aesthetics of the colonial city and the political subjectivity that demands settler colonial continuity. Through contrasting the presence of Kwakwaka 'wakw imagery with the erasure of Lekwungen presence in downtown Victoria, this paper describes Lekwungen kwetlal (camas) stewardship as a form of creative Indigenous resurgence to disrupt the reconciliatory appropriation of Indigenous symbols through public art. Drawing from Billy Ray Belcourt, this paper illustrates the transformative power of collective expressions of Indigenous creativity in urban spaces. Building a city that allows for the recognition of the wholeness of the Indigenous peoples within it requires the celebration, rather than denial, of indeterminacy. In subverting what is seen as art, the revitalization of the kwetlal system illuminates the containment through which the city was built to the observer. Re-storying the city through collective expressions of Indigenous creativity is not about making Indigenous resurgence legible to the colonial gaze—Indigenous resurgence exists whether the settler sees it or not—it is about confronting categorical containment with enactments of care.

Damage-Centered Narratives of Urban Indigeneity

Over half of the Indigenous population in Canada lives in urban centers.[1] However, contemporary urban Indigeneity is tied to the colonial context of the historic removal of Indigenous peoples from urban settlements and the spatial demarcation of Indigenous bodies and spaces. This has alienated urban Indigenous populations from the (white) Western mainstream.[2] Indigenous culture was viewed as incompatible with and a significant barrier to success in the city. Those who migrated to cities were thought to have rejected their traditional cultures to integrate within Canadian settler society.[3] Federal Indian policy imposed spatial restrictions on Indigenous peoples and the reserve system functioned to racialize Indigenous peoples to render urban Indigeneity as unnatural. Under this system, Indigenous political orders and land-based practices are only legitimized in rural and reserve spaces.[4] Moreover, damage-centered research, "research that operates…from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation," pathologizes pain in urban Indigenous communities and marks those existing in these urban spaces as deficient.[5] As this type of research narrative has gained popularity since the turn of the century, trauma and cultural loss has been used to define Indigenous communities within the city.[6] This paper begins with this short overview of damage-centered narratives of urban Indigeneity to contextualize what stories are built into the Canadian city. In the following section, I will consider the presence of Indigenous symbolism in Victoria, British Columbia (BC) to illustrate how urban Indigeneity has been categorically foreclosed in the city of Victoria.

Indigeneity in the Urban Landscape

Kwakwaka 'wakw Art and the Aesthetics of Reconciliation

1 National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC), *Urbanization and Indigenous Peoples in Canada*, (Ottawa: NAFC, 2021), 3, https://nafc.ca/downloads/un-questionnaire-from-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples-2021.pdf.
2 Dallas Hunt. "The Place Where the Hearts Gather": Against Damage- Centered Narratives of Urban Indigeneity." In *Visions of the Heart: Issues Involving Indigenous Peoples in Canada* (5th Ed.), eds. Starblanket, Long and Dickason, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 96.
3 Mary Jane Norris, Stewart Clatworthy, and Evelyn Peters. "The Urbanization of Aboriginal Populations in Canada: A Half Century in Review." In *Indigenous in the city: contemporary identities and cultural innovation, ed.* Evelyn J. Peters & C. Andersen. (UBC Press, 2013), 29-31.
4 Hunt, "The Place Where the Hearts Gather," 98.
5 Eve Tuck "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 413, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15.
6 Hunt, "The Place Where the Hearts Gather," 99; Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 413.

In Thunderbird Park, located in downtown Victoria, a Kwakwaka
’wakw big house, Wawadiƚła (Mungo Martin House), and several totem
poles stand proudly between the B.C.'s provincial legislature and the Royal
B.C. Museum. Less than a kilometre away stands the Story Pole in Beacon
Hill Park. Both the House and the Story Pole were erected in the 1950s,
carved by the late Chief Mungo Martin, also known as Nakapankam, an
acclaimed Kwagu'ł carver.[7] On the city of Victoria's website, these struc-
tures are characterized as symbols that celebrate traditional Kwakwaka
’wakw knowledge and history. They are praised for the authenticity of both
the carving process as well as their details and are advertised as a tourist
attraction.[8] Kwakwaka'wakw imagery is part of downtown Victoria's urban
landscape, Indigenous symbolism becomes part of a prominent public site.
At the same time, these landmarks bear little reference to the Lekwungen
territory in which they have been erected. Visual markers of Indigeneity
are detached from referent to local nations and art, perpetuating a form of
erasure that abstracts both the land and these structures from their specific
contexts.

Following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) 2015 '94
Calls to Action,' the promotion and display of Indigenous art has become
a significant channel for reconciliatory dialogue.[9] However, the presence of
these types of Indigenous symbols in the urban landscape reflects a type of
cultural recognition critiqued by Indigenous thinkers and activists such as
Glen Coulthard.[10] The politics of recognition, as described by Coulthard,
describes how the Canadian state recognizes and accommodates Indige-
nous nations to uphold colonial power relations.[11] Cultural recognition,
under liberal multiculturalism, functions to organize Indigeneity as a cul-
tural identity as opposed to a political land-based identity. Coulthard also
criticizes state-sanctioned approaches to reconciliation for situating settler
colonial violence in the past, therefore absolving the state's responsibili-
ties for ongoing structures of settler colonial dispossession. Moreover, the
emphasis on Indigenous cultural recognition and accommodation domes-
ticates Indigenous identities as part of the Canadian nation to maintain

7 Jacknis, Ira. "Authenticity and the Mungo Martin House, Victoria, B.C.: Visual and Verbal Sources." *Arctic Anthropology* 27, no. 2 (1990): 1–12.
8 "Mungo Martin House - Historical Places of Victoria, B.C.," *Discover Victoria BC, International City of Adventure.* (blog), accessed April 9, 2023, https://www.victoriabc.ca/historical-buildings/mungo-martin-house/.
9 Gabrielle L'Hindolle Hill and Sophie McCall. "Introduction." In *The Land We Are: Artists and Writers Unsettle the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Gabrielle L'Hindolle Hill and Sophie McCall (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2015), 2.
10 L'Hindolle Hill and McCall. "Introduction," 2.
11 Glen S. Coulthard, "Introduction" in Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition, (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1-24 b, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt9qh3cv.7.

colonial state power.[12]

In Vancouver and Victoria, located on the respective unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), and the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, Coast Salish visual imagery is a familiar part of the cities' urban landscapes. The visually striking patterns and designs, often depicting animals native to the Pacific Northwest, are found in the cities' universities, office buildings, street art and even police cars.[13] Despite the presence of Indigenous markers, these displays do little to acknowledge the position of these cities on unceded territories. This tells a story of multicultural cities that accept and celebrate Indigeneity through visual markers of Indigenous symbolism that are detached from the physical violence embedded in the cities' structures. This illustrates a city that has successfully integrated Indigenous life into the Canadian mainstream. Erecting Indigenous symbolism in this way can be understood as aestheticization that "engenders a sanitization of history."[14] For example, in 1923, the Vancouver Parks Board purchased and erected a collection of totem poles in Stanley Park with the eventual goal of constructing a "replica First Nations Village."[15] These totem poles were displayed directly after the forcible removal of the last Indigenous residents from the park. Those who inhabited the area were replaced by importing Indigenous imagery not local to the region. In other words, this act facilitated erasure by replacing "… indigenous Indigeneity [with]… a sanitized Indigeneity got from elsewhere." Indigenous symbols are placed on the urban landscape as public art is a measure of control. Here, the settler government creates the illusion that the city welcomes Indigeneity without acknowledging the coloniality of its presence.

Kwakwaka ʼwakw structures, such as a big house or totem pole, hold political agency. Totem poles tell a story. They embody knowledge that is tied to the context of their creation.[16] When totem poles, which are also understood to be entities or have spirit, are brought into the urban landscape in Victoria, they are, in a sense, curated. Curation becomes a dialectical tool. To curate public art means to bring something into the attention of the public's view. The curator has power to designate value, they present

12 Coulthard, "Introduction."

13 Dylan Robinson and Karen Zaiontz. "Public Art in Vancouver and the Civic Infrastructure of Redress." In *The Land We Are* (See Note 8), 22.

14 Dylan Robinson, "Intergenerational Sense, Intergeneration Responsibility," In *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, ed. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2016), 57.

15 "Totem Poles," accessed April 9, 2023, https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/totem_poles/.

16 *Totem: The Return of the G'psgolox* Pole, 2003, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05C5Ub19exM.

the public with certain stories and narratives.[17] The public of the public Indigenous art that has been curated by the state, are settlers. Public Indigenous art becomes part of a settled landscape.[18] The colonial desire to control begins with "refusing the living, relational value of these entities."[19] Categorizing these as "art" takes a complex relational structure and turns it into an object that can be knowable for the colonial gaze.[20] This curation of public Indigenous art can displace this relational and symbolic value held in a physical object. In the city, it is not just Indigenous objects and symbols that are categorically contained, but Indigenous bodies through racialization. Indigenous bodies themselves are contained as something knowable to the settler.[21] The Canadian city was built as part of an empire. For Indigenous land to become a city, it must be defined as distinct—creating a set of differences between settler spaces and native spaces and settler bodies and native bodies.[22] Knowledge is a critical facet of the settler state's ability to govern such spaces. Thus, categorical distinctions are embedded in infrastructure and language, coercing emotional responses within urban spaces. This categorization fragments people, objects and sites that contain multitudes of meanings to be knowable for the colonial gaze.[23] Indigeneity itself becomes a type of categorical marker, something that must be proven and performed to be measured on the basis of cultural recognition.[24] Distinction and difference build the city.

The Wawadiƛa frontal totem pole bears Nakapankam's own family's crest, as well as crests to represent several Kwakwaka'wakw clans. Wawadiƛa itself was modelled after the big house built in Fort Rupert by the chief who Nakapankam had inherited his name and position.[25] A large potlatch, the first legal and public one since the 1889 government ban,

17 Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation," *E-Flux Journal*, no. 2 (January 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/.

18 Dylan Robinson, "Reparative Interpellation: Public Art's Indigenous and Non-Human Publics," *Journal of Visual Culture* 21, no. 1 (April 1, 2022): 69–84, https://doi.org/10.1177/14704129221088299.

19 David Garneau. "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation and Healing." In *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, ed. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2016), 25.

20 Garneau, 26.

21 Audra Simpson, "Ethnographic Refusal: Anthropological Need," in *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014), 96, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822376781-004.

22 Cole Harris, "Native Space," in *Making Native Space Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* by Eric Leinberger, Brenda and David McLean Canadian Studies Series (Vancouver, B.C: UBC Press, 2002), 268, https://doi.org/10.59962/9780774850230.

23 Simpson, 102; Deborah Cowen, "Following the Infrastructures of Empire: Notes on Cities, Settler Colonialism, and Method," *Urban Geography* 41, no. 4 (April 20, 2020): 479–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2019.1677990.

24 Arvin Maile. "Indigeneity." In *Native Studies Keywords*, eds. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle H. Raheja. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 121.

25 Jacknis, "Authenticity and the Mungo Martin House, Victoria, B.C.: Visual and Verbal Sources."

commemorated the houses opening.[26] The stories at this potlatch stressed the significance of the continuity of Kwakwaka'wakw histories, as one speaker explained, "This house has a story."[27] Wawadiťła is a storied structure, built to ensure the passing of traditions and knowledge at a time when cultural practices had been banned.[28] However, displayed as "public art" in downtown Victoria, Wawadiťła is stripped from this meaning, becoming an object for settler consumption. The Story Pole in Beacon Hill Park, which features ancestors from the Gitxsan clan of the Kwagu'ł, is displayed on the urban landscape as an attraction in a public park.[29] The slope where the Story Pole stands was not only a popular place for leisure and rest for Lekwungen people but was once "the most productive camas territories on Vancouver Island."[30] This land is called míqən in Lekwungen, which means "warmed by the sun."[31] However, curating and displaying Indigenous symbols detached from the stories of both these structures themselves and the lands on which they stand, perpetuates a kind of dual erasure. Both Lekwungen, and Kwakwaka'wakw histories are hidden.

Kwetlal as Presence

Kwetlal, the Lekwungen word for Camas, is a flowering plant with small starchy edible bulbs that is a central component of Vancouver Island's Garry Oak ecosystems.[32] These bulbs have been central food and trade items for the Lekwungen people for generations. Cultivating the kwetlal meadows was a lengthy process involving careful preparation. Before the arrival of settlers to the area, Lekwungen women cleared the meadows of debris and weeds through prescribed annual burns. Kwetlal is both an integral food source and a central actor in a complex economic and cultural relational network.[33] For the Lekwungen People, the value of kwetlal is diverse, stemming from both the practical significance of a food and trade resource as well as its cultural centrality. Following the arrival of settlers, land development and the encroachment of several invasive species have posed a physical threat to these ecosystems, while the categorical contain-

26 "Mungo Martin House - Historical Places of Victoria, B.C.," *Discover Victoria BC, International City of Adventure.* (blog), accessed April 15, 2024, https://www.victoriabc.ca/historical-buildings/mungo-martin-house/.
27 Jacknis, "Authenticity and the Mungo Martin House," 12.
28 Jacknis, "Authenticity and the Mungo Martin House."
29 Charles James Nowell, *Smoke from Their Fires: The Life of a Kwakiutl Chief* (Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, Inc., 1996).
30 Janis Ringuette, "Camas Country," accessed April 9, 2023, https://beaconhillparkhistory.org/articles/120_camas_country.htm.; "Lək̓ʷəŋən Traditional Territory," Songhees Nation, accessed April 15, 2024, https://songheesnation.ca/community/l-k-ng-n-traditional-territory.
31 Janis Ringuette, "Camas Country."
32 Ringuette, "Camas Country."
33 Ringuette.

ment of the land inhibits Indigenous land-based practices. Cheryl Bryce, a Songhees knowledge keeper recounts being with her grandmother on her ancestral homelands harvesting kwetlal and being told by city authorities that they were not allowed to harvest in 'city parks.'[34]

Camas, or kwetlal (depending on the observer's perspective), is part of Victoria's urban landscape. However, its presence affects its observer differently when taken out of its cultural context. Suppose you know this story of the significance of the kwetlal system and the consequences of its erasure. In that case, the kwetlal bloom in the park reflects Lekwungen presence. However, this story is invisible to the unknowing settler observer. The plant is not a site for knowledge production and community—it becomes a pretty flower in a city park. What gives kwetlal such significant value for the Lekwungen is invisible to the unknowing eye; it sits beneath the ground. Nonetheless, just because this cannot be seen does not mean it has not existed. This meaning continues to exist, regardless of if it can be seen.

A City of Political Depression

Let us return to our museum metaphor. Curating a museum involves categorizing different pieces of art or objects to convey meaning. The final product, and exhibition, tell a story relationally. When taken out of context, the meaning of each piece becomes altered. An exhibit becomes meaningful through the relationship of each piece next to the other. Likewise, a city is physically constructed in the existing landscape. The city's materiality, the roads, houses, hospitals, etc., are built, marking the land for urban settlement. It is not the people that create the city, the land, or the physical infrastructure— it is the relationships between each element.[35] A city is curated like a museum, but instead of art and artifacts, it is people, land, and structures that are chosen, categorized, and contained, to create a narrative.[36] This narrative becomes powerful and consuming through its portrayed objectivity—the city is seen as sure, stable and final. Fiction can be built into the urban landscape to create a sense of fact.

In the first chapter of A History of My Brief Body, Billy-Ray Belcourt

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34 Jeff Corntassel and Cheryl Bryce, "Practicing Sustainable Self-Determination: Indigenous Approaches to Cultural Restoration and Revitalization Indigenous Political Actors," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2011): 151–66.
35 Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 329, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522.
36 Billy-Ray Belcourt, "Introduction: A Short Theoretical Note," in *A History of My Brief Body* (Penguin, 2020), 7-10.

paints an image of himself as "…both native to and an exile in a museum [of political depression]."[37] If we consider the city as a museum of political depression, and urban Indigenous peoples narrated as an exhibit of this museum, Belcourt's words recount how living Indigeneity is denied in the city. In the museum of political depression, Belcourt is born into a world that denies both his life and existence as a queer Indigenous person. Born into a colonial world, Belcourt must prove that he is deserving of something of which he has always possessed the right, that is, the right to exist as his whole self. In the museum of political depression, Indigenous bodies are made into "vessels for a vengeful past."[38] The city is not built for the people who live within it. In the city as a kind of museum of political depression, Indigenous people are forced to live up to a measure of Indigeneity, proving their deservingness and presence, all while being beholden to a narrative of their trauma. However, there are gaps in this logic. The damage-centered narratives that reproduce stories of erasure and loss, do not represent the ways that urban Indigenous life refuses containment.[39] In this museum, Belcourt learns to walk along the ceiling, spotting breaks in the clouds of misery where hope disappears. In this museum, Belcourt learns to subvert this story.

For Belcourt, joy is the mechanism that disrupts embedded systemic oppression. Joy is "caught up in an ancestral art of world-making in the most asphyxiating of conditions."[40] When urban Indigeneity is tied to damage, trauma, and deficit, joy is an impossible desire. As such, finding joy reveals the flaws of colonial logic. Joy disrupts the finality of a city built on Indigenous exclusion, revealing the fiction that foregrounds fact. Belcourt finishes this chapter by asking the reader to join him:

> I have to tell my story properly, and to do this I need to guide you through a cacophony of things that could break a heart without negating the sociological import of our enactments of care. I'm up against decades and perhaps centuries of a literary history that extracted from our declarations of pain evidence of our inability to locate joy at the centre of our desire to exist. With you, I can rally against this parasitic way of reading, this time-worn liberal sensibility. Together we can detonate the glass walls of Canadian habit that entrap us all in compressed forms of subjectivity.[41]

37 Belcourt, 8.
38 Belcourt, "Introduction," 9.
39 Hunt, "Where the Hearts Gather," 103.
40 Belcourt, 9.
41 Belcourt, 10.

Belcourt addresses the reader directly. Building a new world, creating a city that celebrates its multiplicities rather than attempting to contain them, is a shared project. Indigenous peoples have lived and built worlds in cities for as long as they have existed. Resurgent acts of Indigenous creativity, such as the tending to the kwetlal system, demonstrates the continuity of urban Indigenous place-making in refusal of colonial containment.

Re-storying the City

A city is more than it's built environment, cities are made up of different elements brought together in alignment. In this sense, cities are not fixed spaces, but relational places that are not fixed in time nor meaning.[42] Cities are places where the physical (buildings, objects, monuments) meet the expressive (affect, language, ideas).[43] The bodies within these cities become and embodied space, where human experiences "take on material and spatial form."[44] In her conversation with Robyn Maynard, Rehearsals for Living, Leanne Simpson recounts the affective or emotional response triggered in her body while standing next to a statue of Egerton Ryerson, an architect of the residential school system.[45] Simpson feels horror, trauma, and shame. She then considers how this statue would affect her if it was of a "young, queer Indigenous and Black activist"— how would this change the narrative?[46] While standing next to this statue, erected on her people's traditional territories, Simpson's body becomes a site of interaction between a colonial symbol, intergenerational trauma, and Indigenous resistance and resurgence. This embodied response leads us to the question: How can a city recognize the humanity of the Indigenous body in consideration of the context of colonial violence, without entrapping them in the subjectivities of the colonial world? In Victoria, the built environment is felt by those who walk through it. The city itself however is constructed by a broader process of negotiation and storytelling that signals both belonging and erasure.

42 Colin McFarlane, "The City as Assemblage: Dwelling and Urban Space," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 4 (August 1, 2011): 649–71, https://doi.org/10.1068/d4710.
43 The Re-Arrangements Collective et al., "ON URBAN RE-ARRANGEMENTS: A Suite in Five Movements," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 47, no. 3 (2023): 461–70, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.13160.
44 Arijit Sen, Lisa Silverman, and EBSCOhost, *Making Place: Space and Embodiment in the City*, 21st Century Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 20.
45 Egerton Ryerson was a former Chief Superintendent of the Ontario Public School System. In this position, Ryerson played an instrumental role in the design of the Residential School System. He is the namesake for Ryerson University. See Robin Maynard and Leanne Simpson, "We Are Peoples of The Lands, of More Lands Than Could Ever be Counted," in Rehearsals for Living (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2022), 222.
46 Maynard and Simpson, "We Are Peoples of The Land," 224.

The use of public Indigenous art in settler cities can reflect a type of appropriation that tells a story of reconciliation and integration. When placed out of context, a structure that is a site of converging relationships and layers of meaning can be made into an object that can be knowable and containable. Turning storied structures such as big houses and totem poles into public art not only functions as a form of containment, but it also tells the story of a settled city. Indigenous symbolism becomes a facet for cultural celebration, naturalizing the colonial politics of recognition on the urban landscape.[47] The colonial containment of Indigeneity becomes a site for embodiment. However, if art is a categorical indicator, what happens if this category is subverted? What if the city thought of the kwetlal meadows as public art, and of the Lekwungen stewards of the kwetlal system as the caregivers for this art? What makes kwetlal so significant for the Lekwungen people is not the aesthetic value of the flower but rather what is hidden under the earth. However, cultivating and caring for the kwetlal meadows brings beauty to the landscape through a field of delicate flowers—if kwetlal is art, caring for it is an act of creativity. To consider kwetlal as living art, not just as an object of beauty or a site of collective knowledge production but both, reveals more than one assigned value. In acknowledging and celebrating this indeterminacy and what has seemed to be layers of relations, knowledge, and stories, kwetlal is held as a whole, not by its parts.

Cheryl Bryce organizes events to restore the kwetlal meadows in Victoria and educate young Lekwungen individuals and settlers on the significance and history of the kwetlal system. Bryce describes the kwetlal meadows as "…always taken care of. The [meadows] are really living artifacts of my ancestors that require constant interaction."[48] These restoration efforts bring settlers and Indigenous people together in the community to care for a network that ties together Indigenous resurgence from the past, present and future. This action, an expression of care and togetherness, does not attempt to ignore the colonial political subjectivities that shape the different lived experiences of settlers and Indigenous peoples. Through this process, the affect of the kwetlal's presence becomes something completely different. While the aesthetic quality of the flower remains the same, these collective acts of stewardship signify the complex relationality that is held by the plant. Suddenly, the fields full of flowers in Beacon Hill Park are no longer simply sites for public recreation or aesthetic appreciation. The land itself, míqən, is more than a public park, but a storied place of great meaning

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47 Dylan Robinson, "Reparative Interpellation: Public Art's Indigenous and Non-Human Publics."
48 Cheryl Bryce, as quoted in Maleea Acker, "Caring for Kwetlal in Meegan," Focus on Victoria, June 16, 2020, https://www.focusonvictoria.ca/earthrise/caring-for-kwetlal-in-meegan-r20/.

for the Lekwungen people. Kwetlal is not just and object for public consumption but is a site for embodied knowledge that has been passed down through generations.

Untangling the city's materiality is part of a project of understanding the past and tending to the future. When the multiple meanings, values, and relationships of kwetlal are made visible, the different histories that tie together the past to the present are made visible as well.[49] In a similar way, when the stories told by Wawadiƚa and the Story Pole are made visible, these structures become more than objects for public consumption. The kwetlal, Wawadiƚa and the Story Pole are all physical manifestations of Indigenous creativity, of embodied knowledge that has been passed down through generations, and of urban Indigenous place-making. Through subverting the curatorial containment of art, practices of joy, community, and knowledge production illuminate the multitudes of histories within the city that have been silenced. Acts of Indigenous care and creation transform the urban landscape to signal Indigenous belonging. Furthermore, when these acts engage with settlers, they reveal different stories of urban Indigeneity that have been silenced in the settler city. A settler living on unceded territories holds certain obligations to the peoples of the land on which they reside. Collective expressions of Indigenous creativity engage settlers to think about these obligations through their body by changing how they perceive the physical landscape. Obligations of care become embodied. This togetherness, this celebration of difference, indeterminacy, and multiplicity, confounds difference, illuminating what is categorically obscured. "Subversive imaginations of collective art practices" disrupt the colonial narrative of the city that simultaneously contains and excludes Indigenous bodies.[50] Indigenous presence in a city is not something that has to be proven by Indigenous peoples. It has always existed, even when rendered invisible. While cities have been curated by the colonial state to control Indigeneity, creative acts of urban Indigenous place-making transform the city, challenging this curatorial containment. The root meaning of the word "curate" however, is actually, to "care for."[51] In this sense, curating the city becomes an intimate and responsive act. Subverting this idea of public Indigenous art illuminates a world where it is Indigenous peoples, not the colonial state, who curate the city.

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49 Gayatri Gopinath, "Archive, Affect, and the Everyday," in *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (2018), 125, https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478002161.
50 Olivia Casagrande, "Introduction: Ethnographic scenario, emplaced imaginations and a political aesthetic," in *Performing the jumbled city: Subversive aesthetics and anticolonial indigeneity in Santiago de Chile* (Manchester University Press, 2022), 5, muse.jhu.edu/book/102623.
51 Gayatri Gopinath, "Introduction: Archive, Region, Affect, Aesthetics," 4.

Conclusion

The Canadian city is constructed by defining, sorting, and containing. In Victoria, BC, a city built on Lekwungen territories, Coast Salish visual imagery is naturalized onto the urban landscape, celebrating diversity while obfuscating violence. Through illustrating the dialectical tensions surrounding public Indigenous art, this paper challenges the use of Kwakwaka'wakw structures as public art and invokes the kwetlal system as an alternate form of art to subvert the appropriation and categorical containment of Indigenous symbols. The presence of kwetlal on the urban landscape speaks to both a history of colonial violence and Indigenous resurgence. By caring for the kwetlal system, Lekwungen peoples are in a sense, acting as curators. Urban Indigenous place-making transforms the settler city into a place that signals Indigenous belonging. Collective expressions of Indigenous creativity distort the colonial narrative that forecloses urban Indigenous presence. In subverting the categories that sort and define the physical world, the contradictions and limitations of this colonial story are made apparent, and the affective role of Indigenous presence in the urban landscape no longer upholds colonial continuity. The roots of a new world rest in the shared spaces composed of difference.

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