

THE MOSAIC CULTURE PROJECT - S1 E1: REPATRIATION OR TOKENISM?

Danae Biln

Dr. Kasim Husain

ASTU 100 MO1

February 2021

INTRO

EXTERNAL AUDIO CLIPS - [Blend] High School cafeteria (high school canteen.wav, June 30th, 2013) and indigenous ambiance(Central District, Seattle, WA MLK Day March, 2018-01-15)

AUDIO FADE TO: NARRATOR AND ART WALK AMBIENT SOUND

NARRATOR

Welcome to The Mosaic Culture Project, an academic podcast series that examines diverse cultural representation in Vancouver, Canada. I am Danae Biln, a UBC Media Studies undergraduate student, and alumnus of Kitsilano Secondary School. In this episode, I will examine Kitsilano Secondary's Indigenous art installations to determine if they are acts of repatriation... or tokenism. For deeper insight into the philosophy of repatriation as well as information on the narratives behind the school's indigenous art displays, I will refer to Associate Professor of Anthropology, Jennifer Kramer's article in the Journal of Material Culture, as well as Kitsilano alumnus and current teacher, Mr. Craig Brumwell's essay, *An Examination of Native and Native-Referenced Art at Kitsilano Secondary School*.

First thing's first, what is repatriation?

NARRATOR

Repatriation is the physical or figurative act of representing a cultural narrative that was originally silenced by dominant culture. Physical repatriation, defined by Kramer, implies that an item is returned to a physical space of origin and cultural significance, thus, reinstating ownership to its true guardian.

Figurative repatriation does not require a space of traditional historical value, but rather acts as a catalyst for cultural intersections to re-establish a diverse presence in spaces that are often dominated by one narrative. When describing figurative repatriation, Kramer states "...[T]hat First Nations artists can regain control of their material cultural objects by locating political artworks in western spaces as metaphorical acts of self-definition." (Kramer 172). (In Appendix 1) here is an excerpt of Kramer's assertion in using these spaces as 'crossroads' for indigenous representation. This recording is from her curated tour of The Museum of Anthropology's exhibit of the Indigenous artist and Drag Queen Kent Monkman's series *Shame and Prejudice*.

CUT TO: RECORDING - JENNIFER KRAMER - interview recording -
Curator Tour of *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*
44:50 - 45:18

NARRATOR

Vancouver buildings are progressively adopting this form of reconciliation. A space that demonstrates efforts in this area is Kitsilano Secondary School. The historical portrayal of this heritage building is based on Western perspectives that highlight its architectural significance and perpetual use as a school since its establishment in 1917. Despite eurocentricity being the site's dominant narrative, Indigenous art decorates a significant part of the school's spaces with little context as to why they are there.

SFX EXTERNAL AUDIO CLIPS - High School cafeteria with Bell
(11-1_people_walking.wav), (school bell.wav)
FADE IN:

NARRATOR

As a student at Kitsilano, for 4 years, I walked by Indigenous art installations, never considering the stories behind them let-alone the origin of the name Kitsilano, a title that honours Chief August Jack Khatsahlano, a significant Indigenous figure during the school's establishment. In grade 12, I took First Peoples English Studies where I expected to learn about my school's indigenous connections, displayed by its totems, masks, and artwork. However, the course curriculum didn't touch on any of this. The dominant Western culture seems to have dictated student values, education, and ideology.

NARRATOR

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to do a site visit. However, through the support of Mr. Craig Brumwell, I have extensive information regarding the cultural narratives behind the Indigenous art displays and the school's ownership of a western-indigenous identity. In Brumwell's writing, he states that the school's relationship is "...constructed by the school itself, not between real people, but toward an idea of "Indianness" that is reinforced whenever the school needs to affirm its identity." (Brumwell 3).

NARRATOR

An example of this is the Tanu Interior House Pole located in the school's atrium carved by Don Yeomans and directed by Bill Reid in 1986. For the school, the Tanu totem pole stands as a reminder of Kitsilano's connection to Indigenous roots that are founded on a romanticized concept of western-indigenous harmony. For the artists involved in the totem

pole's production, Brumwell suggests the possibility of the project being a political statement underscoring issues regarding land and resource ownership during the time. In any case, the ambiguity around its purpose illustrates that this attempt of repatriation borders on tokenism. Brumwell comments that "...perhaps because Reid was still regarded by the public in the early 80's as an apolitical artist, or because of a lack of desire, the school had no organized program that focused on the Tanu pole as an opportunity to create a dialogue on Native issues and Native art." (Brumwell 34). Both Kramer and Brumwell suggest that figurative repatriation does not come from one culture absorbing another, it requires recognition of diversity and conversations that are not censored and dominated by one culture.

Kramer outlines this in the following statement (located in Appendix 2):

CUT TO: RECORDING - JENNIFER KRAMER - interview recording - Curator Tour of Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience - reconciliation requires recognition 57:03 - 57:29

NARRATOR

Displaying Indigenous art in Western-dominant spaces is not enough to be labeled as an act of repatriation. Brumwell elaborates on this being a form of tokenism, stating: "With no dialogue informing its meaning, and little inclination to use it as entry points for broader discussions of Native issues, students and staff are left to glean meaning from old attitudes and stereotypes." (Brumwell 47). Maintaining the narratives behind these displays and integrating them into school

curriculum, space ownership, and cultural heritage is essential in forming a true connection between indigenous and non-indigenous communities. This leads us to conclude that although Kitsilano's displays may be a progressive step towards diverse cultural representation they don't meaningfully achieve figurative repatriation.

OUTRO:

NARRATOR

Thank you for listening to this episode of The Mosaic Culture Project.

Change starts with conversation.

EXTERNAL AUDIO CLIPS - [Blend] High School cafeteria (high school canteen.wav, June 30th, 2013) and indigenous ambiance(Central District, Seattle, WA MLK Day March, 2018-01-15)

Appendix 1 - Excerpt from Curator Tour of Shame and Prejudice: "A Story of Resilience"

- "Museums, as we all know, were birthed out of colonialism and were originally national spaces for showing the spoils of colonization, but he's using the power of museums -and I'm really glad he is- to speak to across the country to Canadian audiences about these important messages and saying, well, we need to get indigenous representations of our experiences of this history onto the walls of the museums in Canada." - Jennifer Kramer

Appendix 2 - Excerpt from Curator Tour of Shame and Prejudice: "A Story of Resilience"

- "restitution has to happen if there's going to be reconciliation. So it isn't enough just to say you're right. Horrible history. We're really sorry. Can we move ahead now being, sorry. Isn't enough. I really see this exhibit as a call to activism on all of our parts to say, what can we do to correct these wrongs?" - Jennifer Kramer

Works Cited

- Brumwell, Craig. "An Examination of Native and Native-Referenced Art at Kitsilano Secondary School", 2006
- Kramer, Jennifer. "Figurative Repatriation: First Nations 'Artist-Warriors' Recover, Reclaim, and Return Cultural Property through Self-Definition." *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2004, pp. 161-182.
<http://mcu.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/9/2/161>
- Kramer, Jennifer. *Curator Tour of Shame and Prejudice: "A Story of Resilience"*, Oct, 2020
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mACqPVUXzk8&feature=emb_title