

The Contact Zone as a Feast for the Senses: Multicultural Nationalism at the Royal British Columbia Museum

(Abstract)

This paper considers the representational practices of Canadian museums and their relationship to a particularly Canadian form of multicultural nationalism. The underlying premise of my investigation is that, although multicultural nationalism claims to be—and in many ways is—particularly inclusive of a wide range of differences, it will, like any nationalism, always place restrictions on both the quantity and quality of differences that it will accommodate and on the ways in which it will accommodate them. It will thus encourage a certain form of tolerance, and even celebration of difference, but only within certain limits. These limits, although always open to negotiation, will be defined by the caveat that the inclusion of difference must not challenge the unity, authority or legitimacy of the nation itself. My argument is that the representational practices of Canadian museums are significantly shaped by negotiations over these limits, and that these museums in turn both shape and provide legitimation for the limits of cultural differentiation in the broader society.

Museums, however, are never only disciplinary, but are simultaneously dialogical. They exist as contact zones: as arenas in which various structures of power, authority and discipline are incredibly influential but in which they are also simultaneously contested, ignored and resisted. The contact zone of the museum can be thought of as analogous to a feast, a physical and metaphorical place in which and with which people engage from their own positions and in keeping with their own perspectives, ideals and agendas.

In this study, I examine how the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM) in Victoria, B.C. attempts to host a very particular kind of feast that emphasizes a perception of the province's success in achieving unity in diversity. I argue that, by doing so, it largely reiterates hegemonic accounts of a benevolently inclusive national state and affirms the relationships that multicultural nationalism establishes between the nation and its citizens, and within the nation between its citizens. I further argue that it does so not only, or even primarily through the narratives that it tells, but also through how it tells them, focussing on how the museum's exhibitions are intended to engage visitors' senses in a manner that encourages particular practices of remembering the nation. On the other hand, drawing on the idea of the contact zone and the metaphor of the feast, I also consider how the RBCM simultaneously challenges standard nationalist narratives and provides space for multicultural nationalism to be disrupted and its limits to be questioned.