



The Ethnograph

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The University of British Columbia Vancouver campus is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam) People. These lands have been sites of knowledge production and shared learning through storytelling for many generations before UBC. At *The Ethnograph*, we recognize our obligations as scholars, researchers, learners, and people in ensuring that our work upholds and acknowledges the people, learning, and work that came before, and continues to come forth from Indigenous communities. We also recognize the multitude of ways that Anthropology as a discipline has been informed, shaped, and challenged by colonizing violence and decolonial commitment, and that these complexities continue to influence our work and research. Our team is committed to working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of our community to support anticolonial research and publication, while also acknowledging our various situated privileges and positionalities.

Colonialism is not a thing of the past, and must never be treated as such. It is existing all around us, in forms of land occupation of Turtle Island, continuous neglect of Indigenous communities in Canada and worldwide, the ongoing genocide in Palestine, exploitation in Sudan, humanitarian disasters in Congo, the denial of repatriating belongings to descent communities, and many more. We take this time to ask for your reflection on your role in this ongoing process, as occupiers of this land, efforts for change can always be made, and the first step is acknowledging our privilege and role in colonialism. This journal continually works towards dismantling colonial powers and this process starts with the decolonization and decapitalization of knowledge.

Artist Statement

This cover represents the ways in which people work individually and collectively to nourish the cultures to which they are connected. From left to right, people from around the world stand together: Hindi, Latvian, Yoruba, Japanese, Palestinian, Maori, and Haida. They all wear articles of clothing indicative of their heritage. Only women have been illustrated to challenge the colonial assumption that men are the driving force behind cultural continuity. The women pour water that flows out of the golden frame and onto the surrounding exterior, bringing colour and diversity into an otherwise lifeless world. This is to directly parallel the manner in which neocolonial powers have attempted to blot out the existence of non-dominant (read: non-colonizer) societies and cultures. Diversity of life and thought are vital to the survival of humankind and ensure that future generations get to flourish in their own right.

About the Artist: Emilija Vītols Harrison is a UBC anthropology student from East Vancouver. She is passionate about being Deaf, disability rights, and feminism, feeling that the impact of all of these subjects are drastically underrepresented. Above anything else, she is most interested in design and illustration, which have consumed her life since childhood. In her free time, she loves to do crosswords, watch *M*A*S*H* (1973-1982), and edit essays for her friends.

Dear reader,

Our 10th edition of *The Ethnograph* (2026) has been an incredible work of collaboration, cooperation, and unwavering perseverance. We aim to showcase the incredible talents, perspectives, and voices of the undergraduate students of UBC. Our team has accomplished this goal with our 10th edition, and it is important to acknowledge where this passion comes from and what we aim to do with it.

These 12 selected papers contribute to a journal-wide mission to unsettle normative, hegemonic ways of knowing and showcase the complexity encompassed within the realms of, and beyond, UBC's Anthropology Department. Through an intricate revision and peer-review process, we are excited to share inspiring papers that range from problematising conceptions of what constitutes "pre-historical" writing to questioning the implications of arising AI technologies in university classrooms, among other amazing pieces. When reading these works, we ask that you take the time to thoughtfully engage with the contributions of each author and allow yourself time to reflect upon the greater implications each work carries with it. We hope this is an opportunity for you to question your own perspectives by engaging with the ideas of those that you may not otherwise consider. Through our platform as an official undergraduate research journal, our team hopes to promote the salience of collaborative efforts, reciprocal research, and provide a platform to share inspiring topics that may otherwise fall between the cracks of institutional pedagogy.

We would also like to express our immense gratitude for those who participated in the creation of this year's publication. While *The Ethnograph* is student-based, our work would not be possible without the support of our incredible Anthropology department and faculty. Likewise, we offer a heartfelt thanks to you, our readers. Without your interest in our voices, we would be without an audience with whom to share.

Finally, our team would like to encourage all readers to consider being a part of *The Ethnograph* for next year's 11th edition. The journal is a project that heavily relies on the community, and is only as good as our contributors allow it to be. You can stay up-to-date with position openings and calls for submissions on our Instagram @ubcethnograph. Questions can be directed to our email at asajournal.ubc@gmail.com. We are always open to and encouraging of new ideas, members, and perspectives that will help the journal grow to its full potential.

"Each one of us matters, has a role to play, and makes a difference. Each one of us must take responsibility for our own lives, and above all, show respect and love for living things around us, especially each other" - Jane Goodall

Best,

Sean Herring, Maile Kilen, Ellie Craig, and Aliyah Fisher

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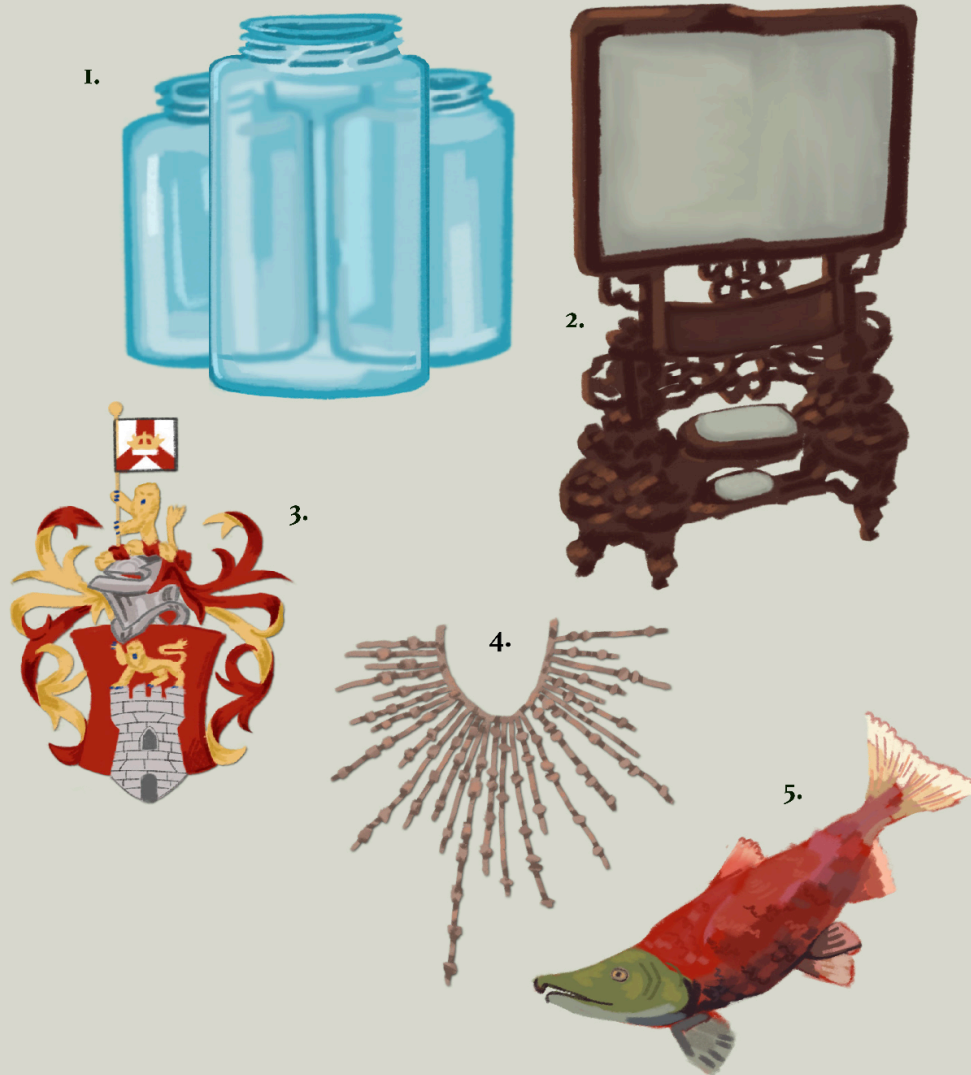
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MUSEOLOGY



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‘Absent Objects’: How Displaying Absence Creates Opportunities For Storytelling and Engagement

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Abstract

As institutions that hold the power to shape the stories that we tell, anthropology museums must increasingly face the presence of absence within their collections and how best to work with this absence. This paper explores the possibilities of exhibiting absence for storytelling and engagement by analyzing several museum case studies. It examines how different methods of displaying absent objects, stories, and voices can lead to varying impacts on museum visitors, community members, and museums themselves. This article proposes that meaningful collaboration with community members and museum visitors can positively shape a museum’s display of absence, creating opportunities for more intentional reflection and engagement. It concludes by asserting that the display of absent objects calls attention to the messages that a museum hopes to convey and also reflects the larger outcomes that the museum seeks to achieve through its display practices.

Introduction

As institutions that have historically been defined by their plentiful collections, anthropology museums have a history rooted in colonial understandings of non-Western/European peoples and their material culture. Developed in the late nineteenth century, these museums often displayed and classified non-Western/European objects in a way that positioned the cultures to which they belonged as exotic, primitive, lesser than, or a thing of the distant past. However, anthropology museums have changed substantially in their museum practices over the last few decades due to growing self-awareness of the knowledge, assumptions, and political relations that inform the work that museums do (Herle 2023, 6). Increasingly, museums are shifting their focus towards people, rather than the objects that they hold, considering the various stakeholders in their collections and building and maintaining meaningful relations with communities. This relational work is partly reflected in how museums choose to display the objects within their collections. In a magazine article titled “Exhibiting Absence”, Steven Lubar (2018) explains that museums display objects to tell stories. He further calls attention to the question of how museums are able to tell stories when the objects that they need are absent. These objects may be absent due to various reasons: they could have been stolen, returned or removed, destroyed, are unavailable, lost, censored, or simply do not exist (i.e., portraits of people who were never painted). As museums hold the power to shape the stories that are told to audiences through their exhibitions, they must increasingly face the presence of absence within their collections and how best to work with this absence. This paper seeks to explore the question

of how absence may be displayed in museum exhibitions, and the potential of displaying absence for storytelling and engagement. It also considers how the concept of absence itself may be understood differently across contexts, namely as emptiness or silence, depending on how those involved with its display would like the audience to engage.

Displaying Absence

By analyzing several different museum case studies, this article offers unique perspectives on how museums may choose to engage with the absence of objects, and explores nuanced interpretations of what this “absence” is or can be. It examines not only the actions of museums themselves but also considers how community members and museum visitors can become involved in the process. Each case study highlights a form of collaboration between museums, communities, and visitors and how this process may differ across contexts and lead to varying impacts or outcomes. The analysis of each case study is guided by the following questions: One, what is the “absence” that the museum is engaging with and how did it come about? Is there a more appropriate term for describing this absence (i.e., emptiness or silence)? Two, how did the museum choose to display this absence? Three, how have museums, community members, and/or visitors reflected on and engaged with this absence? Four, what changes have occurred for visitors, community members, and/or the museum given the chosen display method(s)? By engaging with these questions, this paper proposes that meaningful collaboration with community members and museum visitors can positively shape a museum’s display of absence, creating opportunities for more intentional reflection and engagement. It further argues that the ways in which a museum chooses to display absent objects calls attention to the messages that it hopes to convey and also reflects the larger outcomes that the museum seeks to achieve through its display practices.

The New Tibet Museum

We first begin with the New Tibet Museum (NTM), which is located in the heart of Gangchen Kyishong, Dharamshala, India, where the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) is based (Martin 2024). In this case study, we examine absence as both a multilayered concept and a methodology that gives voice to individuals, objects, and ideas that have been silenced, as presented by Emma Martin (2024), then curator and advisor for the NTM. To provide some context, Martin (2024) explains that the NTM was meant to replicate many of the curatorial practices and strategies of the Original Tibet Museum (OTM), with one key difference: it would also center the display of cultural and historical objects. While to most museums, the practice of displaying objects is considered the obvious norm, this was not the case with the OTM, which was never conceptualized as a museum that centered objects in the first place. The reason for this absence of objects, Martin explains, is twofold. One, Tibet has a tragic history of material loss tied to Britain and China, both of which house many Tibetan objects. Two, the OTM decided in 1998 to exclude objects, specifically historical and religious ones, from display at the museum. Rather than objects, the OTM had displayed photographs, text, film, and “architectonics”,

holding disproportionately more photographs (over 40,000) than objects (less than a hundred) within the museum's collections. Yet with objects now becoming a central part of discussion at the NTM, the museum staff had to face the absence of the very objects that they were meant to display.

In the case of the New Tibet Museum, the “absence” that the museum staff had to deal with was more than just the literal absence of Tibetan objects. Martin believes that this absence, when recognized rather than hidden, becomes “a deeply political act of resistance” (Martin 2024, 251). What she means is that by giving presence to this absence, the NTM engages in an act of resistance against the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) control over how Tibet is represented, bringing to light the stories and voices that CCP representations have made absent. She explores this concept through the “object authority and subject authority model” that the museum has employed in its new displays (Martin 2024, 259), highlighting a particular section of the museum titled “Escape”. This section is organized into a four-stage narrative that details the experiences of Tibetans' escape from their homeland into exile, prioritizing personal testimonies and individual voices and actions through its exhibition methods. One of the features of “Escape” belongs to Nyima Lhamo, a Tibetan individual who escaped into exile in 2016, arriving in India with only the clothes on her back - a *chuba*, shoes, and a backpack - which are on display next to her video testimony. Importantly, surrounding these items are several empty plinths that mirror the plinth upon which Nyima Lhamo's objects are presented. These empty plinths serve to give presence to the Tibetans that were unable to reach exile, as well as the material items that were left behind in these journeys of escaping. In this space, Tibetan visitors are also invited to share their own stories of escape in relation to objects and materiality.

Engaging with absence has allowed the museum staff at the NTM to think more critically about how the museum should represent Tibetan experiences related to exile, and to explore ways of making this absence present through their display practices. From the “Escape” example, we are able to catch a glimpse of how the museum has chosen to highlight the authority of individual objects and subjects (people) by showcasing personal narratives and inviting visitors to share their own. Here, absence has been conceptualized as more than a lack of physical objects, but further as a method of curation that supports Tibetans' self-representation of their own stories.

The Conflictorium - Museum of Conflict

While the NTM centers absence in its curatorial practice, this next case study, which explores the Conflictorium - Museum of Conflict, proposes a separate examination of “emptiness” instead. Landau-Donnelly and Sethi define emptiness as “a more empirical, tangible, sensible (and thus adaptable) force in museum practice”, as opposed to absence, which they see as “a more structural dimension in museum and exhibition space” (2021, 172). They paint the concept of emptiness as being in a paradoxical relationship with absence, where the two concepts are intimately connected to and interact with one another. In this case study, we explore

how emptiness, as an adaptable force in museum practice, is highlighted and used at the Conflictorium to bring visitors' voices to the forefront of the museum's displays.

Founded by Avni Sethi in 2013, the Conflictorium is a self-defined "activist museum" that can be described as unconventional in its curatorial methods as it hopes to turn visitors into participants in the museum space (Landau-Donnelly and Sethi 2021). Situated in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India, the Conflictorium exists in an area of inter-religious, spatial, and social conflicts and was designed to be a museum that "exhibits visitor-produced everyday objects, narratives, memories and feelings that [are] related to conflict" (Landau-Donnelly and Sethi 2021, 173). The museum is unique in that it does not hold a collection of "historical artefacts", but rather exhibits everyday objects, memories, narratives, and feelings offered by visitors themselves, as well as by guest curators and artists-in-residence. In doing so, it invites visitors to take part in the co-production of their own stories as well as collective histories within a museum space that is negotiable, rather than rigidly structured. Thus, the Conflictorium does not necessarily "lack" certain objects but is rather inherently "empty" until it is filled with contributions from museum audiences, artists, and curators. Landau-Donnelly and Sethi (2021) further explain how the Conflictorium works with emptiness to make marginalized voices heard by highlighting two exhibition pieces, *Memory Lab* and *Sorry Tree*.

The first piece is an installation of glass jars that remain empty until visitors fill them with their own individual, often emotionally charged memories, stories, and thoughts. While *Memory Lab* is full of written thoughts, the jars that do remain empty can function to "document the testimonies of left-out or dismissed voices" (Landau-Donnelly and Sethi 2021, 175), allowing emptiness to speak. Similarly, *Sorry Tree* is a literal tree in the museum's courtyard that allows visitors to express feelings related to conflict through small messages tied to its branches. Aside from exhibiting the presence of visitors' feelings, they also invoke the absences of untold stories and unexpressed feelings. Landau-Donnelly and Sethi argue that emptiness is a powerful tool that can be utilized by activist museums such as the Conflictorium to bring silenced voices and stories to the foreground. The Conflictorium thus engages with emptiness in its everyday curatorial practice by creating a space that visitors can fill with their own stories and feelings, or choose to leave empty. This practice reflects the museum's goal to act as a place of care and allows visitors to become actively involved in the museum-making process.

There is Truth Here

Adding onto the theme of silenced voices and untold stories, we examine the next case study, which uses the concept of silence, rather than absence, to refer to the artworks and artists' voices that were not on display. Curated by Andrea Walsh, the 2017 exhibition *There is Truth Here: Creativity and Resilience in Children's Art from Indian Residential and Day Schools* featured artworks that were created by Indian residential school Survivors (a term the group uses to refer to themselves) during their time at the Alberni Indian Residential School (AIRS). In this exhibition, which was held at the University of Victoria's Legacy Art Gallery, certain paintings

created by Survivors were withheld from display. This was due to the fact that they did not have the painters' or their direct family's informed consent to exhibit the images publicly (Walsh 2023). In this case, Walsh explains that the voices and images of these Survivors are *silent* but not absent.

By offering this distinction, Walsh (2023) seems to be making the point that although the artworks are not physically present in the exhibition, the voices of the Survivors and their art are still present in the space, and are merely inaudible. These undisplayed artworks and voices are thus understood not as the presence of absence, but as silences to be listened to in the same way that we listen to stories that are told and witness art that is displayed, with attention and care. Walsh compares this to the way we think about a diagonal, straight black line drawn across a piece of paper. Just as the positive black line becomes visible because of the negative white space around it, the paintings and stories that are presented in the gallery are partly informed by the art and stories that are not presented (Walsh 2023, 122). Considering both allows audiences to engage more deeply with the histories and legacies of residential schools and the act of truth-telling by the Survivors and their artworks. What this example highlights is the relationality that exists between what is displayed and not displayed in an exhibition and how they may inform one another. In recognizing the chosen silence of certain Survivors, this exhibition also recognizes the stories that can be told and engagement that can be had through items not on display.

Museum of Ethnography and the G'psgolox Pole

So far, the case studies that have been analyzed were situated in the context of exhibitions. This next example however, focuses on the absence of just one object: the G'psgolox totem pole. It recounts the story of the repatriation of the G'psgolox pole from the Museum of Ethnography to the Haisla Nation and examines the impacts of this process on the museum, Haisla community members, and museum visitors. In this paper, repatriation is defined as “the return of cultural property to the originating country, community, family, or individual” (UBC MOA 2008, 3). The repatriation of the G'psgolox totem pole to Kitimaat Village and the Haisla Nation, B.C., Canada was a long and difficult process that required much negotiation between the Museum of Ethnography (Stockholm, Sweden) and Haisla community members. The Haisla delegation had offered to make a replica pole for the museum so that they would still have a totem pole to display after the original pole was returned. In March 2006, a ceremony was conducted for the raising of this new replica pole, which became a pivotal point for the museum, as visitor rates to the Museum of Ethnography skyrocketed after the totem pole's raising. Museum director Anders Björklund even admitted, “If we had the old one [G'psgolox pole], I am not sure it would have been as useful and I think we made a good bargain actually” (Jessiman 2011, 377). This case study provides a clear example of how the return of an object and display of a replica in its place may lead to an unexpectedly positive reaction by the public. However, one must note that in this case, it is not the fact that the totem pole was a replica that garnered increased public attention. Rather, it was the presence of Haisla community members at the

museum, carving the replica pole in real time, and later holding a ceremony for the pole's raising that led to the pole's media coverage and the subsequent inflow of visitors to the museum.

This story is also an example of how the repatriation process can strengthen relationships within communities as well as between communities and museums, leading to new collaborative projects and exchanges (Herle 2023, 12). Although the museum ultimately insisted on the condition that the original pole needed to be preserved for the future, it did take steps to learn about the Haisla's history and culture, such as when previous museum director Per Kaks made a trip to Kitimaat village to speak with members of the Haisla community and deepen his understanding of the pole's importance. Anders Björklund expressed that in repatriating the G'psgolox pole, the museum made history and built a friendship between the people of Sweden and the Haisla Nation (Jessiman 2011, 380–81). However, from the perspective of the Haisla community, the outcome of this repatriation cannot be viewed as a complete “win-win” situation due to the financial strain that it imposed on the Haisla, as well as the difficult decisions that had to be made about the pole. The repatriation story of the G'psgolox pole highlights how the effectiveness of an object's display in capturing the attention and engagement of visitors may have less to do with the object itself than it does with the stories that it represents. With the replica pole's display, visitors were prompted to reflect on the origins of objects within a museum and the people, places, and stories that they are tied to.

The Power of Language

An important aspect that has yet to be discussed is the use of language by museums to exhibit absence and its impacts. In a conversation between curators Jisgang Nika Collison and Nicola Levell (2018), Collison mentions the flexible nature of Haida curatorial practice, which allows for personal items to be taken out of the Haida Gwaii Museum's exhibitions and returned after use. She expresses that her favourite sign to put up is one that says, “Away for ceremony” to communicate the reason for an object's temporary absence, rather than one that reads “temporarily off exhibit” or apologizes for any “inconvenience” (Collison and Levell 2018, 6). This draws attention to the cruciality behind how museums choose to label absence, as the language that they utilize can produce very different effects on the visitor's perception of a missing object. Signs such as “temporarily off exhibit” or “apologies for any inconvenience” do not convey any real information about why the object is absent and will likely leave visitors with feelings of confusion and/or disappointment. While the “traditional” museum standard is to create labels with as few words as possible, Collison explains that “You can't do that with Haida!” (Collison and Levell 2018, 6). She describes the labels in the textile section alone as adding up to over five thousand words in total, people actually spending hours just reading the texts. Collison made sure to add that it was “not just our people [Haida], but visitors as well” (6) who took such great care and intention to engage with these written labels. What this reflects, perhaps, is the intention of museum visitors to engage with stories and histories, as well as the authority that words can hold.

Conclusion

One of the limitations of this paper is that it has engaged with the presented case studies mainly from the point of view of museums and curators, and so minimizes the perspectives of community members and museum visitors. Future studies would benefit from engaging in these perspectives to gain a more nuanced picture of how museum displays of absence may actually impact museum audiences and community members on a more personal level. This paper has explored the concept of absence in its varying, layered interpretations and examined how museums have engaged with absence in their curatorial practices. Whether it is working with the absence of specific objects from an exhibition, or the absence of objects altogether, there exists strong opportunities for storytelling and engagement in the display of absence. In exploring various methods used by museums and individuals to exhibit absence, this paper has highlighted the vital importance of centering individual and collective stories. This allows museums, visitors, and community members to connect to museum exhibitions on a deeper level. Rather than being a practice that should be undertaken solely by museum curatorial teams, the display of absent objects, stories, or voices benefits greatly from meaningful community and visitor involvement. This practice calls our attention to the kinds of messages that museums are hoping to convey (or not convey) through their methods of display.

However, the case studies of the Conflictorium and the exhibition *There is Truth Here* have offered alternative perspectives of viewing “absence” as emptiness or silence when assigned to specific contexts in order to communicate certain powerful messages. As such, this article concludes that there is no single definition of absence that can be universally applied to all museum contexts, and that whether the absence of objects should be defined as such depends on the work that a museum is hoping to accomplish.

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The Authority of Aesthetics: A Translation of Power

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Abstract

This paper examines how aesthetics function as a mechanism of political authority through the case study of a Qing Dynasty jade plaque, inscribed with a poem by the Emperor Qianlong and now held in the Museum of Anthropology (MOA). Using a socio-cultural anthropological lens, the study analyzes how imperial authorship and material choice naturalize hierarchy. Referencing Jacques Rancière's distribution of the sensible, the paper argues that the plaque operates not just as a decorative object but as a political aesthetic medium. Expanding on this, this paper explores how this authority is reconfigured when an object enters the museum and is influenced by curatorial ranging and classification systems. As the plaque enters the museum, its position shifts from representing imperial sovereignty to cultural heritage, contributing to a broader debate in the study of material culture and critical museology.

Introduction

Aesthetics and Authority

Power is often imagined as loud and provocative, asserting itself through acts of dominance. However, sovereignty does not depend on those spectacles alone. Rather, it can also be enforced through aesthetic arrangements that shape perceptions, allowing authority to stand its ground without asserting force. In understanding that, this argument draws significantly on the distribution of the sensible, the visible and voiced which establishes that anthropological spaces are inherently political, offering a framework to determine what is visible through political power (Rancière et al. 2004; Lampert 2017, 184).

In this paper, power refers to the capacity in which meaning is able to become visible and authoritative. Through the lens of anthropology, power is not limited to overt acts of domination; it also operates through cultural and aesthetic systems that shape how people interpret the world. One such subtle yet powerful object is held in the Museum of Anthropology (MOA), located at the University of British Columbia's Vancouver campus in BC, Canada. N1/237 a-b, a jade plaque mounted in a carved wooden stand and inscribed with a poem authored by Emperor Qianlong, initially appears as a decorative piece of art or calligraphy. However, this study will examine its function historically as a political aesthetic apparatus, positioning perception in ways that render imperial authority unquestionable. Authority, in turn, refers to the socially recognized legitimacy of power. Through its materiality and placement within palaces of high symbolic and ceremonial importance, this object does not merely decorate the space but structures visibility and authority. By distinguishing between power as a broader analytical concept and imperial authority as one of its historical manifestations, this paper situates the jade plaque within a wider

anthropological discussion of how authority can be produced and maintained through aesthetic forms.

Research Perspective

In contemporary museum practice, when objects enter museum collections, qualities such as political power are reconfigured through curatorial choices. While the museum produces a new distribution of the sensible, rendering imperial authority visible as heritage and art, it often obscures the object's original role in structuring hierarchy and exclusion. This transformation raises an anthropological question: how does authority persist or change when political objects are reframed as museum artifacts? Museums do not transmit meaning transparently but actively construct it through interpretive and visual frameworks (Hooper-Greenhill 2020). Within this process, authority is neither erased nor preserved, but reconfigured in ways that remain contingent, open to reinterpretation. While this discussion captures museums in a much broader context, this study examines these dynamics through a specific case of a jade plaque currently held in the Museum of Anthropology at UBC. This paper argues that aesthetic forms do not merely represent authority but actively mediate it in accordance with the context in which they are situated.

Drawing on the archival record, archival documentation, as well as other institutional materials from MOA, this analysis approaches the plaque with attention to both its historical context within the Qing Dynasty as well as its contemporary interpretation within museum practices. In understanding that, it is also important to examine this from a few different perspectives, including:

In the case of the plaque, how is political authority embedded and translated when the object is catalogued and displayed in a contemporary museum setting?

Who was historically permitted to possess or read imperial writing, and how does the museum address this historical exclusivity?

Why was jade chosen as the medium for imperial poetry, and how does its material symbolism reinforce the authority and permanence of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912)?

By examining from different angles, this research will give insight into how power operates through aesthetic perception rather than solely through the formal qualities of political institutions. All of which supports anthropological arguments that material objects do not only passively reflect social relations, but also participate in their formation. In doing so, this research contributes to broader debates on the materiality and the power of interpretations, demonstrating

how authority is able to persist through objects even after the political systems that produced them have formally come to an end.

Such a debate is relevant because it fundamentally goes beyond the history of the Qing Dynasty and dives into how power becomes authoritative. Authority is sustained through perception and intentional design. The jade plaque provides a historical case study of how authority can be embedded in objects and interpreted by the public and institutions. Understanding this process is relevant to contemporary life because similar mechanisms shape how people encounter museums and educational institutions. By demonstrating that perception itself is political, this research helps explain why certain historical narratives appear visible while others remain marginalized.

Object Description

According to the original MOA accession record, the object is described as a “mutton-fat jade inscribed plaque, possibly by Emperor Ch’ien-lung (Qianlong), framed in carved wood” (Kilborn, 1966). The record further notes that beneath the jade plaque is a small ivory scroll with a painted inscription, “may this go on for ten thousand years,” a phrase traditionally associated with longevity and imperial aspiration.

The use of the term mutton-fat jade in the accession record reflects a classification employed to describe a highly refined jade and its association with elite and imperial use. This terminology foregrounds material quality. More specifically, the upper part of the jade is semi-transparent with a tint of blue and green. It is inscribed and engraved with, supposedly, the handwriting of Emperor Qianlong. The poem inscription reads from the top of the plaque down from right to left, accompanied by two red seal stamps. The jade piece is secured by a wooden frame carved with traditional Chinese geometric patterns. Centered on the plaque, below the jade screen, is a piece of ivory carved into a scroll-like shape featuring red and blue decorative clouds painted alongside the inscription. The jade screen sits atop a wooden base with four decoratively carved legs and two smaller attached pieces of jade. Drawing on my own translation of the inscription and other literature produced during the Qing Dynasty, it's evident that the poem describes the Hui Mountain Springs. It transforms the Hui Mountain Spring from a natural site into a moral and political metaphor, linking the purity of water to clarity of mind and cultural authority.

Significantly, the jade plaque is inscribed with two carved seals, which provide important contextual evidence supporting the attribution noted in the accession record. The seal positioned on top corresponds to a type historically reserved for formal imperial use, as it is inscribed with Emperor Qianlong's name. Within the Qing Dynasty, the use of imperial seals was strictly regulated. They were markers of authorship and authority, authenticating texts and objects that were associated with the emperor (Ma 2024, 78–80). Furthermore, access to jade of this quality and scale was controlled through imperial institutions, making private production highly unlikely

(Finlay 2007, 160–162). Taken together, these legal prohibitions lend strong support to the plausibility that the inscription reflects imperial authorship. The second seal is inscribed with a phrase expressing continuity and endurance, commonly understood as an aspiration that the object be passed down for ten thousand generations. This seal introduces a temporal dimension to the plaque's meaning, aligning it with the Qing Dynasty's imperial practices of projecting sovereignty beyond the present moment. This is further reinforced by the ivory scroll below the plaque, which is inscribed with “may this continue for ten thousand generations”. The presence of this transforms the object into a vision of imperial authority that extends symbolically into the future. Its inclusion frames the object not only as a moral or political statement within a specific imperial context but also as a material method of transmitting authority and values across generations.

Provenance

Following its acquisition by MOA, the object's role has shifted from an instrument of imperial sovereignty to a museum-collected object and cultural artifact. While the object's physical form remains unchanged, its function has been reoriented. MOA's accession report identifies the object as originating from the Qing Dynasty. Its documented movement to MOA can be traced through the personal collection of Leslie G. Kilborn during his time in Hong Kong (Kilborn, 1966). This provenance is significant because it situates the object's circulation within the context of mid-twentieth-century Hong Kong, a colonial port city that served as a key hub for the movement of Chinese cultural objects during periods of political uncertainty (Chan 2021, 6–8). Unlike objects transferred directly between institutions, the plaque's initial displacement from China occurred through individual collecting practices. This understanding raises important questions regarding legality and export. As mentioned in the interview of Mr. L. E. Willmott conducted by Reva Robinson, on August 15th, 1974, within the accession files, Chinese cultural heritage law demonstrates that objects of this age and status were increasingly subject to state protection and export restrictions, especially following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Chai and Li 2019, 132–133; Lau 2011, 2–3). Under emerging cultural relic protection regimes, such objects were technically not permitted to leave China without official authorization (Lau 2011, 2–3). The presence of the plaque in Kilborn's personal collection, therefore, suggests that it may have circulated during a period of legal ambiguity, uneven enforcement, or before the full institutionalization of export controls. Being based in Hong Kong, it also raises other questions to which the policies extend.

Kilborn's role as a collector also underscores the importance of individual agency in object circulation. Periods of political change often result in the dispersal of historically significant objects through private sales or informal acquisition (Zhang et al. 2025, 372–373). In the decades following the fall of the Qing Dynasty and during revolutionary transformations, many individuals sought to divest themselves of objects associated with imperial power. The jade plaque's presence in a private collection reflects this broader pattern of displacement, in which

objects that once symbolized imperial sovereignty are recontextualized into collectable property. The plaque's subsequent donation or transfer from Kilborn's collection to MOA marks a second phase in its social biography. At this point, the object underwent a process of institutional selection and reclassification, shifting from a privately held artifact to a museum-collected object. This transition reflects the active role that museums play in legitimizing and stabilizing object histories through accession, cataloguing, and scholarly framing.

Taken together, the plaque's provenance illustrates how imperial objects undergo successive reclassifications: from instruments of sovereign authority to privately held possessions shaped by political instability, to museum artifacts stabilized through institutional frameworks. Examining these conditions foregrounds provenance as a site where power, legality, and knowledge intersect. In the case of the plaque, what was once an expression of imperial sovereignty, as it enters the museum, is re-positioned through institutional frameworks of heritage and knowledge.

Methods

Physical Examination

To examine how this jade plaque functioned as an aesthetic mechanism of authority, situating power through perception, it requires not only the physical examination of the object itself but a dive into the archival and museum practices that have shaped its meaning over time. Analysis began with a physical accession report, which enabled close examination of the plaque's material composition and condition. Museum documentation, including accession files, catalogue records, and condition reports, was analyzed as institutional knowledge rather than neutral descriptions (Mohan and Rodgers 2021). This included correspondence to related acquisition, valuation, insurance, and institutional decision-making. Comparative research drew on scholarly publications about the Qing imperial inscriptions and symbolism, situating the plaque within a broader perspective that looks into the imperial authority embedded within material culture. Additionally, texts surrounding the roles of museum and museum anthropology add to the conversation, allowing the plaque to be interpreted within historical and curatorial contexts.

Archival Records and Comparative Research

MOA archival records, while containing specific terminologies including object classification, period, attribution, and so on, were not treated as the absolute truth. Instead, they served as a starting point for future investigation. For example, by translating and analyzing the inscription on the plaque itself, it was possible to accept the catalogue's attribution and confirm that the plaque was inscribed with an Emperor Qianlong poem, which in the original report was attributed as only "possibly" his poem.

To fully understand how the object ended up in MOA, correspondence between Leslie G. Kilborn and Audrey Hawthorn, as well as interviews and institutional letters concerning the acquisition of Chinese objects, were important points of research. The interview transcript noted export restrictions on artifacts of a certain age, which were not legally permitted to leave China. This prompted further research into cultural property regulations, suggesting that the plaque may have circulated during a period of legal ambiguity. Additionally, the MOA Archive's Fonds 35 Subseries E File 15 mentioned that in later years, "Chinese jade and ivories [were] not accepted on loan." This shift suggests changing institutional policies as well as broader political sensitivities surrounding the acquisition of Chinese artifacts. The mail correspondence documenting practical processes of shipment, insurance, valuation, and acquisition offers insight into the logistical pathways through which the plaque traveled to the museum. At the same time, these records reveal that objects entering MOA were not neutral arrivals but were actively selected and assessed according to institutional priorities. In this way, the archives not only help reconstruct the object's social biography but also the narrative-making processes through which certain objects are deemed collectable and suitable for MOA's purpose of knowledge production.

Analysis

Content of the Poem

The content of the poem itself continues to reinforce authority. In the inscription, the Hui Mountain Spring is valued not only for its aesthetic purposes but also for its relationship to purity and truth. Within the context of the imperial court, this understanding and quality extend beyond reflecting upon the natural landscape. By inscribing the poem onto the jade plaque, Emperor Qianlong asserts his imperial authorship and positions himself as the authoritative interpreter of the landscape. This thus transforms the spring for a neutral site into one with politically charged meanings. The use of poetic language allows the imperial court to mediate how it is being understood, as well as who is able to understand. In doing all this, the poem does not merely describe the spring but asserts imperial authority over its presence, reinforcing a broader and deeper relationship between authorship, knowledge, and the power within the imperial court.

Bureaucratic Control

Additionally, this authority is further enforced through the plaque's materiality and mode of production. In Chinese cosmology, jade signifies incorruptibility, virtue, and permanence (Huang and Lu 2014, 559–561). Inscribing imperial words into this medium renders sovereignty durable and seemingly timeless. Crucially, such objects were produced under the supervision of highly centralized and controlled systems responsible for manufacturing objects for court use (Finlay 2007, 160–162). They function not merely as a craft center but as a bureaucratic extension of imperial power, regulating materials and labor, in standards that were in accordance with court ideology (Chiang 2019, 10–18). Within this system, creative agency was subjected to sovereign dictatorship. The plaque thus materialized imperial authority not only through

inscription but through the institutional control of its making. The distribution of the sensible operated at the level of production itself, ensuring that moral clarity and political legitimacy were standardized and made durable. Such an understanding is not only translated through the material culture but also through its linguistic form from the text inscribed on the plaque. In the museum, the jade plaque enters a state of needed translation. The classical Chinese inscription is placed into a space with a predominantly English-speaking audience. Even translated, the text risks being reframed as philosophy or aesthetic expression rather than political authorship. Simultaneously, the relocation of the plaque from an imperial palace to a museum gallery constitutes a second translation, from instrument of governance to cultural artifact. In both contexts, access to meaning is mediated through systems that determine who may interpret and who must simply observe (Mohan and Rodgers 2021).

Archival Disruption

Beyond the plaque's physical qualities, archival research into MOA's collections disrupts its narrative of timeless sovereignty. Correspondence, acquisition records, and interviews indicate that the plaque's entry into the museum was shaped by the political ruptures of the mid-twentieth century. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, cultural relics were subjected to increasing legal restrictions, which include an increased prohibition on the export of goods without official authorization (Lau 2011, 2–3). References in MOA archives to objects of a certain age being prohibited from leaving China highlight the tension of imperial objects acting as a symbol of enduring sovereignty and the political realities that are associated with and placed into them. In their original context, objects like these function as an extension of imperial sovereignty. Authority is not only represented but also enforced through physical elements such as inscriptions and material. Rather than remaining as a fixed image of imperial authority, objects like this plaque were subjected to uncertainties, revealing the fragmented nature of historical transformations. This also suggests that authority is no longer anchored to its original use, but rather is continuously redefined through the systems that interpret it today.

Emergent Themes

Several key themes emerged from the analysis of the plaque. Central to most is the aestheticization of power. The plaque demonstrates that imperial authority was enacted not only through law or force but through material and aesthetic arrangements that structured perception. By replacing visual access to landscape with imperial text, regulating production through a central system, and embedding moral discourse in jade, the plaque functioned as a technology of governance that naturalized hierarchy. Additionally, it also calls for the reassessment of authorized interpretation and restricted agency. Historically, access to the plaque's meaning was limited. In the museum, though displayed, this exclusivity persists in altered form through curatorial framing and translation. This highlights how agency over interpretation remains unevenly distributed, contributing to broader anthropological debates on authority and knowledge production. Linguistic translation and institutional reframing transform sovereign

speech into cultural heritage, often softening histories of exclusion. This aligns with critical museology and decolonial scholarship by revealing how museums redistribute the sensible, not only through what objects are on display but also through the exhibition label, catalogues, and narrative that guide how the audience encounters them. Together, these themes show that the jade plaque continues to participate in systems of power across contexts, offering a case study of how authority persists through material culture.

Control of Perception

This plaque appears not only as a representation of power but as an active mechanism that organizes perception to naturalize imperial authority. As the plaque moved from China through the Qing Dynasty to MOA, a regime of sovereign morality was dismantled and reassembled into the cultural heritage that it functions as today. In its original imperial context, the jade plaque functioned as a political aesthetic rather than a decorative object. Chinese inscriptions on material culture do not simply record text but actively produce meaning and social order. Epigraphic approaches to imperial history highlight how inscriptions on objects were used to assert authority and structure the interpretation of place and power. Unlike traditional Chinese landscape paintings or screens, which are regularly used to mediate interior–exterior relations through spatial framing, the plaque substitutes poetic language for visual viewing. This motif is often used to link the enclosed space (interior) with the natural world (exterior), reimagining how individuals encounter space. In this sense, instead of visually depicting the Hui Mountain Spring, the Emperor writes about it. Through the inscription, Emperor Qianlong substitutes the direct sensory experience of nature with an authoritative mode of legibility. This reflects broader aesthetic and political practices within the imperial court in which writing and materiality intersect to create political meaning, allowing the emperor to claim interpretive authority over things such as landscapes. By determining what may be perceived and who may speak, Qianlong positions himself as the authoritative interpreter of nature, converting the interior into a site of discipline rather than open contemplation. Authority was sustained not through force, but through an aesthetic arrangement that rendered hierarchy inevitable.

Critique of Data

The majority of the research done draws on museum accession records, archival correspondence, scholarly publications, and comparative visual research, all of which, though accredited, require critical evaluation. The MOA record, after cross-referencing with other sources, proved to be a strong foundation. Its careful use of qualifying language, such as “possibly,” demonstrates the curatorial awareness of uncertainty and strengthens their reliability as a starting point rather than a source of absolute authority. However, it needs to be understood that neither museum documentation nor academic research can be treated as fully definitive. Records such as these related to imperial China are often not a complete record. Rather, such knowledge is often constructed through the interpretation and assembly of partial evidence, shaped by an institutional framework (Hooper-Greenhill 2020). China’s long history, marked by

political repression and periods of information suppression, has resulted in the loss or fragmentation of historical documentation. As a result, even well-supported interpretations remain provisional and open to revision. Recognizing these constraints is not a weakness but an anthropologically meaningful condition. Working with primary sources that are collected through the MOA archives and records, it's important to also acknowledge that my interpretation of the plaque is also possibly shaped and mediated by the museum's cataloguing system and framework. By treating all sources as situated and contingent, this research aligns with critical museology's emphasis on reflexivity and transparency, acknowledging that knowledge about historical objects is always partial and subject to reinterpretation.

Conclusion

Examining the transformation of the jade plaque from an instrument of imperial sovereignty to a museum artifact aligns closely with critical museology, which emphasizes reflexivity, institutional accountability, and the politics of interpretation (Shelton 2013). Rather than treating museums as neutral containers of culture, this research approaches them as active producers of meaning that shape public understanding. Museums act as sites that redistribute the sensible, determining what becomes visible and how authority is framed. In the case of this jade plaque, imperial sovereignty risks being reframed as artistic or philosophical culture, potentially obscuring the object's original role (Shelton 2013). Situating this analysis within MOA's own institutional history and values allows the critique to remain grounded, positioning the museum within inherited epistemic frameworks that critical museum anthropology seeks to question and transform. This makes it important to acknowledge historical exclusions embedded in objects, providing visitors with tools to critically engage with authority, and resisting the aesthetic neutralization of political histories.

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Curating Progress: Coloniality and the State-Crafted Transition Narrative in Singapore's National Museums

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Abstract

This paper examines how Singapore's national museums function as political assemblages through their curation of a state-crafted transition narrative, which positions colonialism and contemporary authoritarian governance as foundations of progress. I argue that exhibitions at the National Museum of Singapore construct a linear developmentalist storyline in which precolonial Singapore is rendered fragmented or insignificant. British colonial rule and technocratic state leadership, however, appear as civilizing and modernizing forces. Through the analysis of permanent and temporary exhibitions, including *Singapore Odyssey* and *Once Upon a Tide*, this paper shows how exhibition design, selective inclusion, and narrative silences reproduce colonial temporalities and legitimize strong-state developmentalism. Even when precolonial histories are acknowledged, they remain subordinate to narratives of national cohesion, economic achievement, and global-city branding. Thus, these markers reflect how museums actively shape historical consciousness, reinforce colonial epistemologies, and constrain alternative understandings of Singapore's past and present-day political possibilities.

Introduction

Positioned at the southern edge of the Malay Peninsula, Singapore has transformed from an Orang Laut settlement into one of the world's most prosperous nations. The young and tiny island city-state has been consistently ranked as having the highest GDP per capita within all of Asia, even clinching the title of the world's top port for twelve consecutive years (The Strait Times 2025). Throughout its post-colonial history, Singapore has meticulously crafted a state-sanctioned national identity through institutions like museums—often utilizing an “underdog/rags-to-riches” narrative that frames the nation as vulnerable yet redeemed through disciplined perseverance. This socialization is reinforced across all facets of Singaporean society, legitimizing its authoritarian agenda through the narrative of strong-state leadership as historically necessary. The country's political formation is deeply intertwined with external powers, most notably British colonial rule, whose arrival in 1819 cemented a 144-year colonial presence that continues to anchor national narratives to the British moment of “founding” (Ken 1978). Despite evidence stretching back more than seven centuries documenting precolonial history (Colless 1969), 1819 is often treated as the moment Singapore was “actualized,” serving as the temporal framework through which national identity is curated and displayed.

This paper argues that Singapore's national museums collectively construct a state-crafted transition narrative (Chakrabarty 1992) which casts precolonial Singapore as

fragmented and insignificant, while depicting British colonialism and contemporary authoritarian governance as forces that bring order, development and modernity. A transition narrative, as theorized by Chakrabarty, describes how colonial historiography frames a society's precolonial past as incomplete or undeveloped. Simultaneously, colonial intervention is positioned as the moment through which modernity and progress become possible. Rather than treating history as multidirectional, it constructs a linear narrative from backwardness to civilization, rendering certain histories illegible unless in contact with colonial power. Even when exhibitions incorporate precolonial or community histories, they still remain tethered to a developmentalist storyline which prioritises national cohesion, economic achievement and global-city branding. Focusing on the National Museum of Singapore (NMS), this paper shows how museums function as political assemblages that manage multiculturalism, legitimize state power, shape historical consciousness, and package the past for consumption. Drawing from assemblage theory, a political assemblage refers to a configuration of heterogeneous elements, such as institutions, discourses, material objects, and practices, whose arrangement produces specific political effects (Shelton and Yahgulanaas 2025). Therefore, framing museums as political assemblages reveals how their authority is not inherent, but constructed through ongoing curatorial decisions, funding structures, and state mandates that support particular ideologies.

Colonial Logics in Singapore

As Chakrabarty notes, colonial histories often position themselves as the beginning of “progress”, shaping how modernity is imagined (Chakrabarty 1992). Within Singapore, such temporal frameworks were first solidified under British rule, and subsequently, adopted by the post-independence People's Action Party (PAP) to serve its motive for authoritarian developmentalism and technocratic governance. Authoritarian developmentalism describes a governing logic in which civil and political freedoms are subordinated to economic growth, with the state justifying its concentration of power with the guarantee of development and national stability. Correspondingly, technocratic governance positions policy as an administrative function rather than a site of political contestation (Lau 2010). Together, these conditions form not only how Singapore acts to narrate its past, but also how it structures population in present as well. A substantial colonial inheritance exists in the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) racial classification system (Purushotam 1995), continuing to govern everyday life—be it through housing ethnic quotas or military conscription. Although framed as essential to multicultural harmony, CMIO compresses fluid and diverse communities into administratively convenient categories. As Lau notes, concerns that the historical inquiry might inflame ethnic tensions have led the state to suppress deeper, precolonial, and migrant histories in favour of a simplified, harmonious narrative of unity (Velayutham 2007). This logic structures museum practice as well. Instead of foregrounding the region's interconnected Malay and Chinese worlds, exhibitions reinforce civilizational identities aligned with CMIO and state narratives.

These colonial logics extend to the very structures of governance that organize contemporary Singapore. The nation's reputation for order and efficiency—frequently

encapsulated in the phrase “a fine city” (Koh 1980)—is grounded in British administrative models: English common law, the Westminster parliamentary system and bureaucratic rationalism (Lau 2010). Museums operate within and legitimize these frameworks by narrating colonial rule as modernizing and foundational. *Our Heritage Plan 2.0* (2023-2027) by the National Heritage Board (NHB) claims to foreground identity, community, industry, and innovation (National Heritage Board, “Our Heritage Plan 2.0”), as national priorities but remains notably silent on decolonization, precolonial histories, and non-state narratives. Without sustained engagement with these histories, Singapore’s national identity will remain tethered to colonial epistemologies and colonially-curated state narratives.



Figure 1. Sir Stamford Raffles statue “disappearance” for the Singapore Bicentennial installation, Boat Quay. Photograph by Jasmine Choong. The Straits Times. “Statue of Sir Stamford Raffles at Boat Quay ‘Disappears’ for Singapore Bicentennial.”

The 2019 Bicentennial illustrates Singapore’s inconsistent engagement with its precolonial past. Although it briefly adopted a “700-year” narrative, the shift remained symbolic. The temporary visual “removal” of the Stamford Raffles statue—achieved by painting it to blend into the background, rendering it visually absent from its prominent location at Boat Quay—and accompanying commemorative exhibitions were framed as corrective gestures toward the island’s longer, pre-1819 history (Liu 2019). However, it did not reshape curatorial practice nor did it encourage deeper public engagement. The subsequent unveiling of yet another Raffles statue (Yong 2024), five years later, only reaffirmed the primacy of 1819 as a founding point. Rather than signalling decolonial transformation, the Bicentennial performed a “decolonial aesthetic,” creating visible engagement with pre-colonial histories without altering the colonial epistemic frameworks that structure museum narratives and wider Singaporean governing logics.

The Museum as Political Assemblage

Museums are co-producers of historical consciousness, and thus, self-understanding. As Treier shows, museums are not passive repositories of heritage but institutions embedded in

structures of power and knowledge, whose displays function as “latent political statements” (Trier 2021, 92). The silences and absences within museum records are not simply neutral omissions, but rather, the direct result of institutional practices that privilege certain forms of knowledge whilst actively erasing others (Bruchac 2014). In Singapore’s case, the histories most consequentially suppressed are those of precolonial Malay polities, left-wing political movements, and migrant labour communities. Histories that would complicate the state-sanctioned narrative of colonial arrival as foundational and necessary (Colless 1969; Curless 2015; Velayutham 2007). NMS exhibits foreground trade routes, colonial-era infrastructure, and national development milestones (National Heritage Board, “Singapore Odyssey”), while systematically excluding the political complexity of the precolonial Malay world, the conditions of migrant and indentured labour, and the resistance of communities. These omissions are structurally necessary for the transition narrative to hold. Consequently, museums also have the capability to mobilize narrative authority and advance political agendas by actively shaping what is remembered, forgotten, and ultimately understood as legitimate history. These dynamics underscore the ways in which national and ethnological museums have long operated as instruments for state-building. As MacDonald (2023) notes, museums consolidate complex, multidirectional histories into tidy narratives oriented around a preferred national subject—at the Humboldt Forum, the white German self. In Singapore, this takes the form of the harmonious, disciplined, and multicultural national self.

Building on Shelton and Yahgulanaas’ analysis of the museum as an assemblage (Shelton and Yahgulanaas 2025), Singapore’s national museums must be understood not simply as galleries but as state-managed cultural infrastructures. Ones influenced by bureaucratic structures, funding priorities, and political mandates. Within the Singaporean context, these national museums reinforce CMIO-based multiculturalism, promote ultra-developmental ideology, and portray the nation as a globally connected yet tightly governed city-state. Despite the symbolic gestures of the 2019 Bicentennial, sustained curatorial engagement with precolonial complexity or alternative historical perspectives remained absent. Instead, Singaporean national museums have continued to set forth a transition narrative in which the island only becomes meaningful through colonial modernity and development. The NMS reinforces this logic by depicting the past as a landscape of hardship only redeemed by present-day progress. The following case study illustrates how such exhibitions reproduce the transition narrative—curating the state-desired global identity while suppressing histories that fall outside state-approved accounts.

Case Studies: Singapore Odyssey and Once Upon a Tide

The NMS exists as the country’s oldest museum, presenting itself as a “steadfast custodian of Singapore’s history and stories” (National Heritage Board, “About Us”). Yet only one permanent exhibition, *Singapore Odyssey: A Journey Through Time*, is devoted to a telling of national history. Surrounding permanent installations include, a LED Swarovski crystal chandelier and an intergenerational playground. In addition, recent and ongoing temporary

exhibitions — such as *SKULLPANDA CAGE-UNCAGE Singapore* and *Museum of U & Me* — illustrate the museum’s growing shift toward immersive design, brand collaborations and cultural consumption. Among its many installations, *Singapore Odyssey* and *Once Upon a Tide* stand out as key sites where the museum constructs and performs the state-crafted transition narrative.



Figure 2. Installation view of *Singapore Odyssey* at the National Museum of Singapore. Photograph by Ng Sor Luan. *The Straits Times*. “First look: National Museum of Singapore’s new immersive display *Singapore Odyssey*.”

Singapore Odyssey, a permanent, technology-driven exhibition, guides visitors through Singapore’s past via RFID wristbands, panoramic LED screens, and staged environments. Viewers are guided by a virtual “magical companion” through a sequence of immersive zones that include an introduction, animated historical “episodes”, a simulated waterfall space, and a concluding performance (Syahiran 2025). These segments re-narrate Singapore’s history through a maritime lens: visuals of historical trade routes, a 700-year journey told through the perspective of the sea, animations of rickshaw coolies, and an episode dedicated to precolonial Singapore. As promotional materials describe it, the exhibition invites visitors to “rediscover Singapore’s history and the importance of the sea in shaping our past, present, and future” (National Heritage Board, “Singapore Odyssey”). Despite this broad framing, the exhibition remains largely detached from actual communities whose labour, migrations, and cultural worlds shaped Singapore’s formation.

In episode four: *Shores of Singapura*, precolonial Singapore is rendered as an untamed tropical wilderness of forests and swamps (National Heritage Board, “Singapore Odyssey”)—an image that reinforces the notion of pre-1819 “underdevelopment” despite evidence of a thriving port polity linked to Malay and Chinese networks (Colless 1969). Spectacle dominates substance. LED globes, dramatic soundscapes, and Instagram-ready environments foreground development as the central lesson—hardship in the past contrasts with polished prosperity in the

present. The exhibition literalizes the transition narrative: precolonial wilderness to British modernity and eventually, technocratic success. In doing so, it reinforces the civilizing logic that underpins both colonial rule and contemporary governance. Although aligned with the National Heritage Board's priorities of "industry" and "innovation" (National Heritage Board, "Our Heritage Plan 2.0"), the exhibition offers little engagement with "identity" or "community"; specifically, community histories, regional networks and political complexity are ignored. Hence, multiculturalism is represented aesthetically rather than substantively. This results in an experience designed to be consumed, captured, and shared, rather than one that invites questions or deeper historical understanding.



Figure 3. Promotional image for *Once Upon a Tide: Singapore's Journey from Settlement to Global City*. National Museum of Singapore. "Once Upon a Tide".

What *Singapore Odyssey* fails to achieve is handled somewhat more effectively in the temporary exhibition *Once Upon a Tide*. While still relying on immersive design and interactive installations, it places greater emphasis on lived experiences and everyday actors. Visitors navigate the exhibition with RFID wristbands that generate avatars reflecting their values; they "sail" through models of the Singapore River; and they encounter ethnographic artefacts linked to precolonial trade and early migration. Crucially, the exhibition includes a wider range of precolonial material than *Singapore Odyssey*, situating Singapore within the Malay world and Chinese maritime networks. A dedicated section on migration highlights letters, photographs, and personal stories, humanizing Singapore's early communities. Audiovisual testimonials foreground the labour, care, and contributions of diverse groups (National Heritage Board, "Once Upon a Tide"), shifting away from the colonial notion that order came only with British intervention. Yet despite these strengths, the exhibition primarily remains anchored to the developmentalist transition narrative. It still culminates in nation-building, progress, and Singapore's rise to global-city status. Even in its reflexive moments, the structure of the

exhibition guides visitors toward reaffirming national cohesion with forward-looking optimism. Complexity is acknowledged but contained within a familiar, state-aligned narrative arc.

Coloniality, Commodification, and the Limits of Heritage

Singapore's national museums, therefore, function as key sites where coloniality, national identity, and contemporary authoritarian governance intersect. Across exhibitions, colonial rule is framed as a stabilizing, modernizing force that brought about global connectivity and order. This framing reinforces the state's developmentalist ideology: the story that Singapore's success stems from strong leadership, disciplined citizenship and the ability to overcome perpetual vulnerability. Notably absent are histories of dissatisfaction or political contestation. This is evident in the case of the Barisan Sosialis—one of the most significant opposition movements in the 1960s—whose leadership was detained and prosecuted during Operation Coldstore in 1963 (Curless 2015). While colonial administrators and PAP leaders are prominently commemorated, the Barisan Sosialis is largely absent from museum narratives. Yet dissent has not disappeared from Singapore's history, rather, it disappears from its museums, along with any suggestions that alternative political futures once existed. Instead, people living in Singapore are often depicted as politically passive and in need of external guidance or civilizing intervention. As a whole, dissenting voices are systematically silenced and omitted from the Singaporean imagination because they do not align with the state-crafted Singaporean self. This curated positivity narrows the imaginary boundaries of national identity, by presenting political alternatives as nonexistent, dangerous, and in disagreement with Singapore's developmentalist ideals. As a result, developmentalism elevates into a political rationale, rather than remaining merely as a narrative. By portraying precolonial Singapore as fragmented and colonial intervention as civilizing, museums legitimize strong-state governance as historically proven and necessary.

Beyond internal political goals, Singapore's museums also participate in heritage commodification. Exhibitions are curated to attract global audiences by positioning Singapore as both culturally sophisticated and technologically advanced. Immersive media, Instagram-friendly installations, and brand collaborations highlight how heritage becomes both spectacle and soft power. This strategy aligns with Singapore's global-city project, in which culture functions as a resource for international branding. Singaporean museums translate national identity into a globally palatable image: harmonious multiculturalism, technological modernity, and disciplined progress. Creating a tightly managed national-site assemblage in which architecture, exhibition design, state policy, and international audiences coincide to produce a unified political project.

Conclusion

Singapore's museums do far more than narrate the past. They actively shape the boundaries of what counts as Singaporean history and identity. Through spectacular design, strategic inclusion and omission, they produce a state-crafted transition narrative in which colonialism becomes the catalyst for development and contemporary strong-state governance

appears historically justified. Even exhibitions that gesture toward precoloniality complexity remain anchored to developmentalist progress and global-city branding. By situating museums within broader colonial legacies, governance structures, and soft-power agendas, this paper has shown that these institutions function as political assemblages rather than neutral custodians of heritage. They construct a historical consciousness that privileges national cohesion over multiplicity, spectacle over depth, and progress over complexity.

However, identifying the limitations of the transition narrative is not sufficient on its own. The challenge lies in imagining how alternative curatorial practices could be implemented within Singapore's institutional and political constraints. This would not require dismantling the NMS or abandoning national history altogether, but rather rethinking how that history is framed. Exhibitions, for example, could foreground the Malay world as a primary context as opposed to a transitional backdrop. Thus, situating Singapore within the broader context of maritime Southeast Asia rather than anchoring its story to 1819. Community-driven curatorial processes—ones in which migrant, working-class, and diasporic communities help shape historical narratives rather than simply illustrate them—could also begin to shift how the museum understands its own role. As Bruchac (2014) and MacDonald (2023) show in other national contexts, museums that are transparent about their political positioning are better able to invite genuine historical inquiry rather than simply reinforce consensus. Within Singapore, even partial steps in this direction, such as explicitly naming historical absences or allowing contradictions to remain unresolved, would already mark a meaningful departure from the transition narrative. Hence, as long as the transition narrative remains the organizing framework of museum practice, Singapore's past will continue to be curated not as a site of inquiry, but as a carefully managed resource for nation-building and global recognition.

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Untangling the Past: Inkan Khipus, Writing, and the Problematic Prominence of “Prehistory”

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Abstract

Despite arguments against different interpretations, all common interpretations of the recording ability of the Inkan khipu can and should be considered writing. Whether the knotted strands hold an alphabetical structure, narrative or narrative memory aids, or a numerical recording, they were an effective communication device and should assert the Inka as a historical people, not a prehistoric one. The debate over this distinction reveals how entrenched the Western value of writing is in archaeological theory, and brings to light the complications in using the advent of writing as the pivotal factor that determines a society moving from prehistory into history. This paper uses the Inkan khipu as a case study for the limited scope of writing as a definition, prehistory as a temporal distinction, and challenges the foundational nature of both in the field of archaeology.

Introduction

It is a powerful statement to claim that, while the Spanish conquistadors were situated in “history,” the Inka they were in interaction with remained in “pre-history.” It separates the two peoples in time, propelling the Spanish while burying the Inka. The pervasion of this divide in Archaeology is due to the foundation of the historical age on the advent of writing. The Inka have often been described as “the only major Bronze Age civilization without a written language,” cementing their place in prehistory, as other global nations began their historical period (Mann 2003, 1650). However, since contact with the Andes, “South American indigenous groups [have] often denied that writing is new to them. They say they ‘already’ had it, because they could ‘already read’ various things” (Saloman 2004, 23). One of these was the khipu, a recording device woven from cotton or wool fibers (Ascher and Ascher 1975, 331). The debate surrounding whether or not khipus represent a “writing in the true sense” has largely focused on the proposed potential contents of the strands (Niles 2007, 97). Scholars argue over whether the khipu could hold a familiar alphabetic structure, Andean narratives, or solely numerical accounts of topics like census or crop control. However, as I will go on to argue in this essay, all of these interpretations should be considered a form of writing.

Striking deeper, the fact that this debate exists exemplifies how entrenched the Western view of writing is in scholarship and reveals the deep-seated drive in archaeologists to value writing as a “fundamental change” in the human condition (Souvatzi, Baysal, and Baysal 2019, 5). Using this to categorize communities into the prehistory-history binary, founded on a narrow definition of writing, pushes non-Western societies further back in time, making them less

palpable to contemporary communities and perpetuating the notion of European-style progress as a necessary step on the path to history. While khipus can and should be considered a “writing in the true sense,” regardless of which popular interpretation one ascribes to them, they can also be used as a case study in the broader inspection of the “prehistory” designation and its place in archaeological studies.

The Khipu as a Form of Writing

Much of the debate around whether or not khipus can be accurately taken as a form of writing centers around whether or not it can be “read” in a similar way to the alphabetic systems that are primarily used today. Scholars squabble over what benchmark the khipu must match to be considered writing, whether an encoded narrative is enough to place it among Western historical accounts, or whether it requires a direct symbol-phoneme system. Interpretations of the khipu as a mnemonic aid, or as a numerical record system, are rarely, if ever, believed to allow it a place in history. However, I argue that whichever interpretation one chooses, khipus in any form can and should be considered as a form of writing.

First, it is important to make it clear that there is no reason khipu knots could not function in a similar way to an alphabet, as the sheer number of variable combinations when creating a knot on a khipu could allow “each...secondary cord [to] theoretically hold...8 million differing combinations or states”(Salomon 2013, 17). With this level of complexity, it is entirely possible that certain combinations were directly linked to a phoneme, much as in modern-day technology, “eight-bit bundles of 0s and 1s can be programmed to stand for alphabetic characters.” (Salomon 2013, 20). However, there would have been good reason for the Inkas to resist encoding direct units of speech, as the empire was multilingual and contained highly linguistically diverse communities (Allen 2005, 985). In that sort of varied landscape, it would have been far more useful “to employ a system that (1) did not rely on the speech sounds of any particular language, and (2) was nevertheless usable across ethnic groups as a tool of state administration.”(Allen 2005, 985). For this reason, and because, as yet, scholars of the khipu have not found evidence of a code-based alphabet in Inkan khipus, the knots are widely believed not to hide a direct symbol-phoneme connection. However, “to pursue only a model of writing that encodes speech sounds is to disregard the power of structured, formatted communication,” so let us turn to the other potential contents of the khipu, and examine their bid for inclusion in the world of “true writing” (Ascher 2002, 99).

When scholars reject an alphabetic form of the khipu, but still desire to assert it as a form of writing, they often put forward theories of the khipu’s ability to transcribe narratives, rather than simply numerical values. It is important to remember, when examining khipus as potential narrative devices, that “larger patterns of the logical relationships of objects, actions, and actors were important to the Incas”(Niles 2007, 97). Many scholars have discussed how Inkan accounts of the past, through oral histories and Spanish written recordings, seem to feature fairly regular episodic structures (Saloman 2004, 19). For example, a report of a war campaign would appear

“‘preformatted’ with predictable ‘slots’ open to contain data about the protagonists, the enemy force, the day of battle, the fate of the captives, and so on.” (Saloman 2004, 19). This is further subdivided based on “discernible patterns of sequencing of actions or personages based on Inka prestige categories” (Niles 2007, 96). As in the example of a military campaign, “victorious soldiers first recount the deeds of the kings, then recount the deeds of the captains, then recount their own deeds.” (Niles 2007, 96). Due to this segmented and ordered style of recounting narrative, Andean stories and histories “could be matched to the linear, segmented, discrete format of khipu,” (Saloman 2004, 39). If Inkan khipus can be believed to hold narratives, akin to the historical works we so prize in the Western world, it would be absurd to deny them the status of “true writing” based on the lack of an alphabetic comparison. If it can effectively communicate the same information, whether or not they contain a symbol-phoneme connection, why should we deny the khipu as a form of writing?

Another theory, closely tied to narrative khipus, is the use of khipus as memory aids in the recitation and performance of Andean Narratives. It is possible that, rather than using conventionalized units and structures of information, the indications on the khipu were used “to recall a specific body of memorized information” (Beyersdorff 2005, 309). There is ethnographic evidence that implies “that khipukamayuc [keepers of the khipu] relied on memory to aid in recall of encoded data” (Beyersdorff 2005, 299). Were this the case, then khipukamayuc would rely on the khipu to provide prompts while they recited narratives, in order to recall all pieces of the oration (Beyersdorff 2005, 299–300). Scholars who are adamant about the narrative potential of khipus, such as Gary Urton, argue vehemently against this interpretation, believing that if the khipus hold notes or indicators, rather than a complete narrative, they would not be able to be considered writing (Niles 2007, 97–98). I assert that whether the khipus held memory aids for the telling of narratives or the complete narratives themselves should not impact the extent to which they are considered a form of writing. If we consider this sort of performance in a more familiar context, say, a formal presentation, this becomes quite obvious. It is a regular practice for orators today, when presenting, to carry speech notes. These notes do not typically contain the entirety of the message the orator is intending to communicate, but usually a brief note, allowing them to recall a broader wealth of information that they are hoping to impart. If strange for them to deny them the distinction of “writing” based on the fact that they are fragmentary. If khipus are to be understood as holding specific reminders correlating to sections of narrative for the aid of khipukamauq presenters should in no way be considered less of a form of writing than that of the interpretation of the strands holding complete, legible stories.

It is tempting to envision the khipu in this way, as being able to chronicle myths and histories in a way we today understand as a written story, but “no one has empirically demonstrated that non-numerical Inka khipu signs were of a particular type”: phonetic, narrative, or otherwise (Clindaniel 2019, 2). Through the collision of mathematical and anthropological interpretations of khipus, scholars have been able to decode the knots of many khipus as being part of a base ten counting system (Ascher and Ascher 1975, 337). Knot types and their positions

create the numbers themselves, while their position on pendant or subsidiary strings, as well as the colour of the cords further subdivide and classify the numbers and their meaning (Ascher and Ascher 1975, 341). When the khipus are interpreted as a base ten system, and the end cord, that is found on many record-keeping khipus, is interpreted the same way, it is found that “the end cord number is the sum of all the other numbers” on the string (Ascher and Ascher 1975, 341).

Today, this way of interpreting khipus is the only interpretation that is widely accepted in archaeology. However, in this numerical interpretation, it is worthwhile to look at how the information would be referenced. For instance, if khipu were accounting devices, how would it be known to the Inka what the numbers pertained to? When the khipus reached the elite from the periphery of the Inkan empire, how could they know whether the recording was census numbers or the log of food that the region had stored and ready to use? Scholars such as Martti Parssinen suggest that “colors combined with numbers to signal categorized nonnumerical referents. (For example, if black cords signify provinces, a black cord knotted ‘6’ would mean the sixth in a standard list of provinces),” (Saloman 2004, 17). This type of coding information seems to be necessarily embedded in the khipu, as on Spanish translations that are believed to have been read from khipus, such as the 1549 tribute list discussed by John Murra, where “we find consecutive repetitively patterned statements such as: And they gave so and so many men to do such and such; And they gave so and so many men to do something else; And they gave 500 men to go; And they gave 500 men to plant...” (Ascher 2002, 94). In that passage, the number of tributes, where they came from, who “they” refers to, and their assigned role would all need to be coded. It is hard to believe that this level of communication would not require a set index of significant codes.

This begs the question, if that information is being successfully communicated, solely through numbers and colours, why should it not be considered a written record? Why do we look at it as a deficient attempt to represent speech, due to the lack of sound-based language, and not a successful attempt “to represent knowledge expressed in forms other than verbal sentences?” (Saloman 2004, 29). Instead of ascribing to a language syntax, khipus seem to match “the nonverbal ‘syntax’ of fixed social performances” such as taking inventory, allocating workers, or recording census (Saloman 2004, 37). Once this syntax had been created in the khipu, it would have been “susceptible to verbalization” and translation (Saloman 2004, 37). Mathematician and khipu scholar Marcia Ascher uses a grade slip to emphasize this format, where the student, the course, the teacher, and the grade are often all represented by numbers, but they can still be read and understood (2002, 92–93). Why should 78767639, 84 be considered in “prehistory” while Eliana Wallace, eighty-four percent, be considered history? It is especially ridiculous to look at this divide with khipus and translations of khipus, such as the tribute list discussed above, where we take the Spanish translation of the khipu to be writing, and the khipu itself as something else entirely.

Regardless of whether the khipu hides an alphabetic structure, a narrative form, functioned as a memory aide, or took on the form of the numerical recording system we have

evidence for today, they should be considered writing. Their ability to communicate information and record their own history should be characterized among Western alphabetic systems. If “history” is characterized by the arrival of writing, “primarily allowing people to record their lives, thoughts, victories and enmities,” then it is clear that the Inka should be pulled out of the deep past they have been pushed back into (Souvatzi, Baysal, and Baysal 2019, 5). They should be recognized as a historical player, in line and developmentally equal with the Spanish conquistadors they interacted with. But now the broader question must be asked. Why is the advent of writing the fundamental change that launches a distant, foreign, prehistorical state into the familiar world of historical societies? In short: why do we care about writing? Why do we need “prehistory?”

The Prehistory Distinction: Is Writing *That* Important?

Evidently, the question of writing and its definitions in history is a complex one. Whether or not I have convinced you that the khipu should be considered a true writing, and that the arguments surrounding what information it must contain to be called writing are arbitrary and largely unhelpful, the debate points to a larger archaeological question. Namely, why do we use writing as the primary distinction between history and prehistory? What does this division benefit, and why is it upheld?

As Souvatzi, Baysal, and Baysal discuss, “the identification of prehistory as the time before writing implies that the arrival of writing fundamentally changed several variables in the human condition” (2019, 5). It presents the advent of writing as a pivotal moment in the development of the species, and therefore, necessary in the process of becoming modernized, recognizable societies. This condenses perceptions of writing, portraying it as an instant of enlightenment, rather than a long, drawn-out process relying on earlier developments like “proto-languages” and notation devices. Doing this allows two contemporary societies, like the Spanish and the Inka, to be held as separate in time, even as they coexist. The Spanish become like time travellers, thrown back into an interaction with a people group that should have been long gone. Or rather, long destroyed in the progression of humanity towards a European pinnacle. Using an inherently Western construct as the catalyst for this dramatic shift in human nature makes it even more difficult for a non-Western community to achieve this enlightenment, placing non-Westerners temporally before and eternally below their European counterparts (Simonetti 2019, 52–53).

This also damages archaeologists’ ability to look back on the past, as using prehistory as a label not only separates the past from itself, but also separates it from us, the viewers. Viewing some events and people as features of “deep time” (as opposed to “shallow time” or “near time”) is “dependent on detachment from first-person experience” (Simonetti 2019, 43). Prehistory separates the past into relatable and familiar, and foreign and unknown. This creates an “irreversible transition from ordinary perception to detached observation” (Simonetti 2019, 50). As inquisitors, archaeologists become more akin to people at the zoo, studying past societies

through thick glass and emotional distance, than dinner guests, who enter into a relationship and dialogue with the people they study. If the Spanish can be compared to time-travellers, our study and interaction with the Inka and other prehistoric societies becomes more similar to uncovering a hidden world, completely divorced from the present in which we now exist.

This sort of detachment is something we cannot continue to tolerate in the discipline of archaeology. Prehistory may have been a helpful designation in the past, but today it continues and strengthens Western superiority biases in our studies, and diminishes equally complex societies by pushing them back temporally. Prehistory denies familiarity with past people groups and makes them appear foreign or, even worse, as early stages in the development of Westernized thought and behaviour. Without deconstructing prehistory and untangling its pervasive hold in the discipline, archaeologists will not be able to create meaningful attachments with the past and will continue to perpetuate the omnipresent Western bias in our studies of the past.

Conclusion

For too long, to align challenge, or attempt to expand “western historical interpretations [of writing] is to risk undermining one’s authority as a historian,” because the historical method at present “requires the rejection of any conception [...] that conflicts” with the rigid divides set long ago by Western scholars (Schmidt 2019, 58). Though it claims to be moving past colonial, European, progress-oriented views of the past, the field of archaeology perpetuates these very biases by clinging to the history-prehistory divide. The Inkan khipu is an excellent case study to counter prehistory, as it challenges and expands upon the current conception of “writing.” Though archaeologists argue over whether the khipus contain an alphabet, narrative, mnemonic devices or a numerical accounting system, nuances of each form prove that they are indeed a method of writing, regardless of their contents. The lengthy debate on this issue inherently reveals the set inclination in archaeologists to value “true writing” as a “fundamental change” in the human condition, allowing them to be considered contemporary with the great Western powers. Archaeologists use “pre-history,” founded on a narrow and ill-defined conception of writing, to push non-Western societies further in consciousness from the present, making them less tangible to modern communities and situating the righteousness and domination of European progress in history. They make atypical written forms like the khipu meet amorphous benchmarks, like an alphabetic structure or complete narratives, in order to be elevated to the status of “true writing.” This is an approach that we can no longer allow. To move forward from this point, archaeologists and historians must work together to create a more sensory, holistic view of the past. That must necessarily start by incorporating and scholarly validating other forms of recorded history, and permanently excising the concept of a pre-historical period.

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Rethinking the Norse Pantheon: Sámi Influence in Old Norse Mythology

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Abstract

What shaped Old Norse mythology and its associated pantheon? Scholarship has traditionally attributed its development to the Proto-Germanic peoples who migrated into Scandinavia during the Bronze and Iron Ages. Far less attention has been given to the Sámi, an Indigenous people whose religious traditions both predated and overlapped with the emergence of Norse religion in northern Scandinavia. This paper argues that the Norse pantheon should not be understood as a purely Germanic system, but as one shaped through intercultural interaction with the Sámi. It develops this argument through case studies of Loki and Skaði. Drawing on a targeted literature review and close analysis of primary mythological sources, the paper examines each deity's cultural and geographical foundations, genealogy and position within the pantheon, and recurring narrative motifs. In doing so, it is informed by Eric Wolf's view of societies as historically interconnected. Across these dimensions, Loki and Skaði display patterns that align more closely with Sámi religious traditions than with Proto-Germanic origins, including their strong association with northern Scandinavia, outsider genealogies linked to Jötunheimr, and narrative elements that parallel Sámi noaidi practices and cosmological frameworks. Taken together, these findings suggest that Sámi–Norse interaction played a meaningful role in shaping certain figures within the Old Norse pantheon. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of incorporating Indigenous Sámi perspectives into future studies of Norse mythology.

Introduction

Old Norse mythology has been commonly understood as a religious system that originated among the Proto-Germanic peoples who migrated northward into Scandinavia during the late Bronze and early Iron Ages (Koch 2019, 80–81). Within this model, the Old Norse pantheon has historically been situated within a broader Germanic sphere shaped by linguistic continuity, shared religious themes, and long-standing cultural interaction with southern European societies (Turville-Petre 1964). Less central to this model has been the long-standing presence of the Sámi in northern Scandinavia, an Indigenous circumpolar people whose traditions both predated and overlapped with the emergence of Old Norse mythology (Dubois 1999). Historical evidence indicates that Norse and Sámi communities maintained regular and mutually beneficial contact, including trade, intermarriage, and exchanges of ritual and magical knowledge (Zachrisson 2008). While contact with southern European societies has long been acknowledged as formative in shaping Old Norse mythology, sustained cultural interaction with the Sámi has received comparatively little scholarly attention.

Previous scholarship has largely treated Old Norse mythology as a distinct branch of a wider Germanic religious system. Gabriel Turville-Petre's work, for example, attributes its development to Proto-Germanic continuities as well as to later Christianization in Scandinavia, without addressing the possibility of sustained Sámi cultural interaction (Turville-Petre 1964). Similarly, in his study of Loki, Jan de Vries interprets the deity's ambiguity primarily through comparative Germanic sources rather than in relation to Sámi religious traditions (Jan de Vries 1933). This narrow focus began to shift in the early twenty-first century with the work of Neil Price and Clive Tolley (2002), whose research on shamanic practices, *seiðr*, and related circumpolar traditions identified meaningful parallels between Old Norse mythology and Sámi religion. Their contributions suggested that Sámi traditions may have informed the development of certain Norse gods and associated narrative motifs. From an anthropological perspective, this shift reflects the insight, emphasized by Eric Wolf (1982), that cultural traditions do not develop in isolation but within wider systems of historical interaction. While subsequent studies have expanded this line of inquiry by examining individual deities or specific ritual practices (Feldman 2012), scholarship that brings multiple deities and Sámi religious traditions into direct conversation remains comparatively rare.

This paper argues that the Old Norse pantheon should be understood not as a purely Germanic system, but as one shaped through sustained cultural interaction with the Sámi peoples. Drawing on Wolf's insight that cultural traditions develop within interconnected social systems, the paper approaches Old Norse mythology as the product of historical exchange between neighbouring societies. It advances a comparative analysis of the deities Loki and Skaði by reading Old Norse mythological sources alongside scholarship on Sámi religion and circumpolar shamanic traditions. The discussion proceeds through case studies of Loki and Skaði and ends with a broader synthesis of how Sámi–Norse interaction complicates conventional interpretations of the Old Norse pantheon.

Loki as a Case Study

A. Cultural & Geographical Foundations

To examine how sustained interaction between Norse and Sámi communities may have shaped certain members of the Old Norse pantheon, this section begins with the figure of Loki and considers the cultural and geographical context of his emergence in Old Norse mythology. Unlike most of the *Æsir*, the principal group of gods in Norse mythology, Loki lacks clear connections to Proto-Germanic tradition and is notably absent from Central European archaeological and place-name evidence, suggesting that he was largely unknown in these southern regions (Laidoner 2012). His sporadic appearance in early sources, alongside his regional concentration in northern Scandinavia, further distinguishes him from other gods of the pantheon (Laidoner 2012). Given this absence, attention must turn to the Sámi, the earliest known inhabitants of northern Scandinavia, whose long-standing coexistence with Norse communities created conditions for sustained interaction. As Wolf emphasizes, societies develop

within interconnected social systems, and regular contact through trade, mobility, and ritual practice provides opportunities for exchange that can shape religious ideas on both sides (Zachrisson 2008).

B. Genealogy & Place Among the Gods

An absence of Germanic cultural and geographical foundations, by itself, is insufficient to establish Sámi influence on Loki. Instead, we must consider how the Old Norse understood and perceived the Sámi during the period when these myths developed, and how those perceptions are reflected in Loki's genealogy and his place among the gods. Triin Laidoner (2012) notes that medieval Norse and missionary sources portray the Sámi as mysterious neighbours who were feared and respected for their knowledge of seiðr and trance-based ritual practices. Such perceptions were often projected onto the landscape itself. The northeastern regions of Scandinavia, areas associated with Sámi habitation, were cast as dangerous or liminal spaces (Laidoner 2012). In Old Norse mythology, the same peripheral regions forms the mythological domain of the jötnar, a race of giants frequently depicted as powerful outsiders who exist beyond the ordered world of the gods. Loki fits squarely within this pattern. As the son of Jötunn and Laufey, giants from Jötunheimr, Loki's parentage does not follow the usual pattern by which the Æsir trace their lineage, leaving him genealogically aligned with the mythological periphery rather than the world of the gods (Crossley-Holland 1980; Sturluson 2005). His partial inclusion among the pantheon does not erase this origin, leaving him permanently marked as an outsider. In this way, Loki's status mirrors Norse conceptions of Sámi "otherness," which similarly framed the northeastern periphery as powerful yet marginal (Laidoner 2012).

C. Narrative Motifs Parallel to Sámi Tradition

Lastly, we examine Loki's recurring narrative motifs and their correspondence to Sámi religious practices. In Sámi tradition, ritual activity was often associated with the noaidi, spiritual specialists who acted as healers, diviners, and mediators between the human and supernatural worlds (Laidoner 2012). A central feature of noaidi practice involved trance states in which the soul was believed to temporarily leave the body, often accompanied by transformation into animal form or symbolic flight to other realms (Laidoner 2012). As Mircea Eliade notes, Sámi shamanic traditions commonly describe the practitioner's soul assuming the form of birds, fish, or other animals during ecstatic journeys beyond the human world (Eliade 1964). Loki displays a striking parallel within Norse myth. In his narratives, he transforms into a hawk, a mare, a salmon, a seal, and a fly, and also adopts female form as both a maiden and an old woman (Crossley-Holland 1980; Laidoner 2012). While Loki's shape-shifting alone is noteworthy, a more compelling parallel emerges in his role as a birth-giver. In *Gylfaginning*, Loki transforms into a mare and later gives birth to the eight-legged horse Sleipnir (Crossley-Holland 1980; Laidoner 2012). Laidoner observes that although Sámi noaidit are not recorded as undergoing gender transformation, symbolic animal births and soul journeys during trances are well documented in related circumpolar shamanic traditions (Crossley-Holland 1980; Laidoner 2012).

Loki's repeated association with animal transformation, gender ambiguity, and birth, therefore, reflects patterns consistent with Sámi noaidi traditions rather than with central Germanic mythology. Taken together, Loki's cultural and geographical foundations, genealogy and position among the gods, and recurring narrative motifs all suggest that his character developed within a context of sustained Sámi–Norse interaction.

Skaði as a Case Study

A. Cultural & Geographical Foundations

We now turn to our second deity, Skaði, whose position within the Old Norse pantheon reflects strong ties to northern Scandinavian traditions and possible Sámi religious influence. In contrast to the previous discussion of Loki, this section places particular emphasis on Skaði's linguistic and geographical foundations within the cultural landscape of northern Scandinavia. Current scholarship has not identified any Proto-Germanic evidence, place-names, or archaeological material associated with Skaði outside this region, suggesting that she developed as a locally rooted figure rather than as part of a wider pan-Germanic tradition (Feldman 2015).

Skaði's name itself reinforces this northern association. In Old Norse, her name can be translated as “harm,” “injury,” or “shadow,” meanings that resonate with winter, cold, and the harsh environment of the far north (Feldman 2015). Several scholars have further proposed a linguistic connection between Skaði's name and the term *Scandinavia*, drawing on early forms such as *Skaðin-awjō*, often interpreted as “the island of Skaði” (Dumézil 1973). Taken together, these linguistic and geographical associations situate Skaði firmly within northern Scandinavia and reinforce her position at the margins of Old Norse mythology rather than at its Germanic core (Feldman 2015), a pattern consistent with Wolf's account of the development of cultural traditions through connectivity.

B. Genealogy & Place Among the Gods

Beyond these foundations, Skaði's genealogy and position within the Old Norse pantheon further highlight her correlation with the Sámi. This relationship is most clearly articulated in two central narratives: the theft of Iðunn's apples and the marriage of Njörðr and Skaði, (Crossley-Holland 1980) Skaði is initially counted among the giants as the daughter of Þjazi, a figure firmly situated outside the Æsir, the principal group of Norse gods, and ultimately slain by them. Following her father's death, Skaði demands compensation from the gods and, as part of this settlement, marries the Vanir god Njörðr (Crossley-Holland 1980), a member of a second group of deities associated with fertility, the sea, and older regional traditions, distinct from but later integrated with the Æsir. Through this marriage, she formally enters the realm of the gods, transitioning away from her status as an outsider (Feldman 2015). Feldman argues that this transformation reflects a broader Norse conception of how culturally distinct northern societies could be incorporated into the Scandinavian sphere. In this sense, Skaði's transition from jötunn

to goddess not only mirrors Norse perceptions of Sámi communities as powerful yet marginal, but also reflects a broader pattern in which figures associated with the northern periphery become integrated into the mythological order.

C. Narrative Motifs Parallel to Sámi Tradition

Lastly, we turn to Skaði's narrative motifs in Old Norse mythology, which display notable parallels with Sámi religious traditions. In the account of the marriage of Njörðr and Skaði, Óðinn takes the eyes of Skaði's slain father, Þjazi, and casts them into the sky, where they become stars, directly linking Skaði to the heavens (Crossley-Holland 1980). Feldman notes that this act moves the narrative beyond issues of compensation or marriage and instead situates Skaði within a broader cosmic framework (Feldman 2015). This motif closely resembles Sámi narrative traditions, in which the sky is understood as an active and meaningful realm shaped by spiritual forces and ancestral presence. As DuBois (2014) observes, Sámi cosmology frequently places mythic action in the heavens, making the transformation of Þjazi's eyes into stars a meaningful parallel rather than a symbolic coincidence. Taken together, Skaði's northern foundations, her genealogy as a giantess incorporated into the gods, and these shared narrative motifs support the interpretation that her character developed within a context of sustained Sámi–Norse interaction in northern Scandinavia.

Key Findings

When Loki and Skaði are examined side by side, clear structural similarities emerge that suggest both figures developed within the same northern cultural context rather than as purely Germanic deities. At the linguistic, geographical, and archaeological levels, neither Loki nor Skaði displays strong Proto-Germanic roots; available evidence instead situates both figures primarily in northern Scandinavia (Feldman 2015). Their genealogy and position within the pantheon further reinforce this pattern. Both originate as figures associated with the mythological periphery, as Loki is born to a giantess of Jötunheimr and Skaði as the daughter of the giant Þjazi (Crossley-Holland 1980). In Old Norse mythology, such peripheral figures occupy a liminal position as powerful but dangerous outsiders, a status that closely parallels Norse perceptions of Sámi communities as both feared and respected, yet capable of incorporation into the Scandinavian sphere. These similarities extend to narrative motifs as well. Loki's repeated animal transformations, gender ambiguity, and role as a birth giver align with circumpolar shamanic traditions associated with noaidi practices (Laidoner 2012). Skaði's connection to the heavens, reflected in the transformation of Þjazi's eyes into stars, parallels Sámi cosmological traditions that treat the sky as an active spiritual domain (Feldman 2015). Taken together, these linguistic, genealogical, and narrative correspondences suggest that the development of both Loki and Skaði occurred within an interconnected northern social field shaped by sustained Norse–Sámi interaction rather than within an isolated Germanic tradition.

This interpretation reflects the anthropological perspective advanced by Wolf (1982), who cautioned against treating societies as isolated or self-contained. Wolf argues that many groups historically described as marginal or peripheral were in fact part of wider systems of exchange, interaction, and cultural transformation. He further notes that such communities are often understood as “secondary” societies, shaped through long-standing contact with neighbouring peoples rather than developing in isolation. The Sámi, who have frequently been portrayed in both historical sources and earlier scholarship as separate from the Scandinavian world, fit this description closely. Archaeological, linguistic, and textual evidence instead points to sustained coexistence between Norse and Sámi communities in northern Scandinavia, including trade, mobility, and the exchange of ritual knowledge. Seen in this light, the similarities between the figures of Loki and Skaði do not represent isolated coincidences but rather reflect the development of Norse mythology within an interconnected northern social field, where cultural boundaries were fluid and religious traditions emerged through ongoing contact.

Conclusion

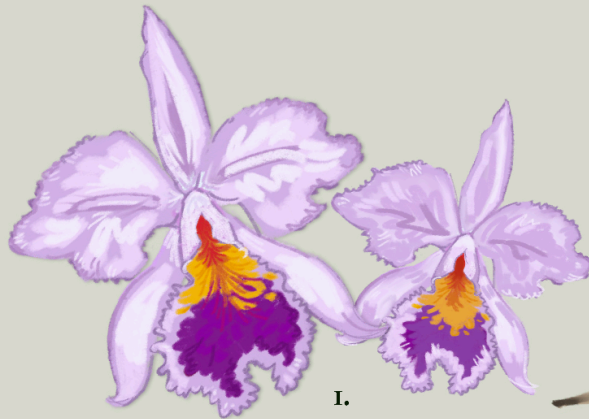
This paper argued that the Old Norse pantheon should be understood not as a purely Germanic religious system, but as one shaped through sustained interaction with Sámi communities in northern Scandinavia. A comparative analysis of Loki and Skaði demonstrates that cultural and geographical foundations, outsider genealogies, and shared narrative motifs align more closely with Sámi religious traditions than with strictly Proto-Germanic origins. Taken together, these patterns suggest that Norse mythology developed within an interconnected northern social field, rather than in isolation. Future research on the Norse pantheon would therefore benefit from greater incorporation of Indigenous Sámi presence and perspectives, particularly when examining figures and motifs associated with northern Scandinavia.

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ARTIVISM



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1. Cattleya Moissae orchid, Después del ayuno: After the Fast. 2. Meerkat, More-than-Human Children: An Ethnographic Analysis of Multispecies Childhoods in Documentary Film. 3. DTES graffiti, on the Shaldon Hotel at 52 East Hastings St., Reclaiming Space, Creating Place, and Affirming Identity: Graffiti in the Downtown Eastside. 4. Couch from Vanessa Dion Fletcher's *Colonial Comfort* (2017), Queer Indigenous Menstruation, Embodied Sovereignty, and the Art of Vanessa Dion Fletcher. 5. Orange T-shirt, Reconciliation Graphics for Positionality-based Solidarity: Melaney Gleeson-Lyall and Chinatown Wonders's Multilingual Thunderbird the Protector.

Después del ayuno: After the Fast

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Abstract

This digital illustration explores the Venezuelan diaspora's identity-making practices and politics following the 2014 crisis. By drawing from symbols encountered in childhood memories and visits to other Venezuelan diasporic homes, as well as analyzing symbol activation and identity negotiation through an academic research perspective, the warm kitchen scene becomes a powerful site to understand Venezuelan diasporic resilience through a focus on nationalism, food, music, and digital politics. Visual elements such as a seven-starred flag, plants, and magnets imbue the scene with references to a mythologized 'lost' homeland, grounded in a rejection of Chavismo. The setting of breakfast carries memory and belonging through food substitutions, preparation, and communal consumption, and musical elements evoke an idealized return to rurality and independence-era heroes. Digital politics lie always present in the every-day. Visual symbols as such become a way to articulate the Venezuelan diasporic experience, express political myths, and idealize anti-Chavismo.



Introduction

Though imaginaries of a great and independent Venezuela are often associated with nation-building practices of Chavismo (Wulff 2018; Delpino 2011), the anti-Chavista Venezuelan diaspora in North America often displays and clings to key national symbols—whether the seven-star flag or the four-string cuatro—in their intimate, domestic spaces. My childhood memories are filled with artifacts that recall a great nation, yet discussions with family and friends around meals would invariably reinforce disenchantment with the present political state of the country. With the home as a place to express national identity, the anti-Chavista diaspora consistently reinforces nostalgic myths of a Venezuela before Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution in ways that directly juxtapose Chavista nationalism. The illustration, “Después del ayuno: After the Fast,” visually represents how the Venezuelan diaspora maintains an ideologically-mediated identity based upon appropriated national symbols. Rendered digitally in Procreate, the piece combines anecdotal elements from my childhood home and visits to anti-Chavista Venezuelan friends and family in North America, culminating in a symbolic breakfast scene. But how, precisely, do these symbols work in diaspora to create unity based upon a hard-line rejection of Chavismo? I find that Venezuelan diasporic expressions of nationalism create unity under the narrative of resilience and constructing political myths of a free, pre-Chavismo past—alarmingly equating disparity to Chavismo and hope to a change in administration. I begin by introducing the necessary context on Venezuelan diasporic nationalism as it is enacted in intimate spaces. I then explore particular nationalistic symbols—food and community, rural music, and digitized political activism—from an autoethnographic perspective. Lastly, though this piece was illustrated before the US kidnapping of president Nicolás Maduro on January 3rd, 2026, I conclude by briefly discussing the role of US intervention in Venezuela and how the idealization of all that is anti-Chavista justifies imperialism.

The title, “Después del ayuno: After the Fast,” represents both the physical space of breakfast as an intimate site to construct identity, and the prominent conception of Venezuela as a state under prolonged duress. By enacting a metaphor that equates the scarcity of resources in the region (Cadenas 2018; Cañizalez 2018) as a long ‘fast’ resulting from Chavismo, I invite the reader to reflect on how geographical and temporal distance—the ‘after’ the fast—as experienced through diasporic movement that reinforces narratives of blame and the need for change at any cost.

A Note On Multimodality

Multimodality in anthropology, in this case in the form of digital illustration as a way to present research, has allowed me to explore sensorial and autoethnographic aspects through the visual expression of memory. Putting pencil on paper becomes a way to study and understand culture that goes beyond the usual emphasis on written mediums. This arrangement of visual elements and symbols into a cohesive scene is not just a way to recall my past, but positions autoethnographic material alongside formal research to create visual stories that are accessible

and intimate. Particularly in the case of Venezuelan diasporic nationalism, visual representations are powerful ways to display and understand how national symbols are activated in the diaspora. My written analysis will directly complement and reference the visual choices of the illustration.

Venezuelan Diasporic Nationalism

In the illustration's kitchen scene, national identity is present in the daily rhythm of breakfast, transforming the everyday domestic space into a key site of diasporic nation building. The kitchen as a physical space is recognized as an "identity [marker] that [accompanies] the immigrant, strengthening their sense of belonging and helping them negotiate their place in the host society," (Chalen Moreano et al. 2025, 952). For the anti-Chavista diaspora, it proves to be a key site to discuss myths of the past and articulate understandings of place and belonging. The Venezuelan diasporic nationalism that is debated, developed, and displayed in the kitchens of my childhood bases itself on the context of the 2014 crisis in Venezuela.

Observers widely describe this period as one of the country's most severe crises, understood through a "weakened purchasing power, scarcity of food and medicine, growing inflation, and widespread hunger and malnutrition," (Cadenas 2018, 215) that is attributed to economic mismanagement, declining oil prices, and failing democracy (212-215). In the diaspora, blame is directly associated with Chavismo, starting with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1999, and following his death in 2013, the presidency of Nicolás Maduro. As noted by Wulff (2018), Venezuelans largely understand their displacement for the material conditions "related directly or indirectly" to Chavista governance (Wulff 2018, 12). At the same time, critics emphasize the role of US efforts to restrict the distribution of food, medicine, and toiletries as a means to overthrow Venezuelan sovereignty and facilitate US interests (Antonopoulos and Cottle 2018, 50). For anti-Chavistas, however, these competing perspectives simplify into a rejection of Chavista national symbols (Wulff 2018, 12) through narratives of loss and resilience.

Resilience plays a key role in the development of unity and agency in the face of displacement, with scholars finding that forced migrants develop resilience through a dynamic process of identity reconstruction and meaning-making (Shahimi, Block, and Alisic 2025). With 25% of Venezuelan migrants expressing their reason for leaving as a 'lack of hope' (Cañizález 2018, 194), the diaspora may use the kitchen to intimately express and fortify narratives of blame, reinforcing them through diasporic expressions of hope and resilience against an overarching evil.

Symbols of Diasporic Nationalism

Flags and Glorious Pasts

The Venezuelan flag above the breakfast table—intentionally displayed with seven stars rather than eight—calls to a sense of belonging that is dependent upon an anti-Chavista political identity. In the homes I visited through my childhood, the Venezuelan flag often appeared in

intimate spaces; bedroom walls, refrigerator magnets, or decorative plates. These felt anything but neutral—the seven-star flag symbolically rejected Hugo Chávez’s addition of an eighth star into the official design. Chavismo justified the change from seven to eight stars by invoking national history, arguing that Simón Bolívar proposed this very addition back in 1818 to honour the province of Guayana in the fight for independence (Maggi Wulff 2018, 47). As described by Maggi Wulff, these symbolic changes sought to link the Chavista movement—adequately named the Bolivarian Revolution—to the legacy of independence heroes aligned against imperialism (47–48). The diasporic community as such activates the seven star flag to oppose Chavista visions of national history. A significant aspect of my encounters with seven-star flags included conversations on the best way to acquire them, often complemented by discussion on the ‘true’ meaning of the eighth star, resulting in feelings of worry over Chavista control. Historical activation as such marks the boundaries for identity.

When a Venezuelan in diaspora chooses to display the former, seven-star flag, they in hand indicate a rejection of Chavismo itself and the associated blame for the 2014 crisis through a reimagining of identity through time and distance. This simple flag on a kitchen wall is one representation of how the Venezuelan middle-class diaspora constructs a political identity grounded in nostalgia for a pre-Chávez—and as such, pre-crisis—Venezuelan identity. The kitchen, as an intimate space where identity can be rearticulated, becomes a stage for Venezuelans to develop a sense of political agency that invariably rejects Chavismo and legitimizes the production of new national symbols.

Alongside the flag, the illustration includes a photo of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), a tropical postcard of Margarita, the national orchid, and a guacamaya magnet that mirror the objects I often found in Venezuelan diasporic homes. My father, for example, always displayed a large framed photograph of UCV, insisting that it remains tasteful but always visible. Similarly, my grandfather’s refrigerator was covered in magnets of tropical fruits—a reminder of abundance that cannot be found either in Venezuela under duress, nor while far from home. These iconic markers of an educated, vibrant, united Venezuela thought to thrive before perceived political collapse exist in a perceived limbo; not quite attainable, but creating a sense of continuity and greatness.

Venezuelans abroad cultivate a non-territorial sense of identity rooted not in physical presence but rather affective and symbolic continuities. This sense of diasporic nationness is grounded in Jorge Duany’s (2000) description of cultural nationalism as a process that relies on “shared memories...of a glorious past,” (Duany 2020, 5) and the continuous, everyday reaffirmation of the nation through symbolic acts. These objects operate as anchors that stabilize the feeling of alternate nationhood amid displacement while opposing nationalism as enacted by Chávez and Maduro. Venezuelan diasporic nationalism works as a resilience practice—by upholding a perhaps idealized image of Venezuela, the diaspora cultivates agency and emotional coherence in the face of prolonged uncertainty. Ultimately, the illustration evokes a national

identity that, rather than fade with distance, is intensified through the activation of symbols that mourn and mythologize a ‘lost’ or otherwise ‘taken’ homeland.

Food and Community

The kitchen surface in the illustration—filled with arepas, plantains, and struck with a warm, morning light—works as a symbolic map of how the Venezuelan diaspora recreates home in intimate spaces through food acquisition, preparation, and consumption. Food may in fact serve as “...a privileged way to explore the migratory experience from a cultural and emotional perspective,” (Chalen et al. 2025, 952) as it carries memory, identity, and the emotional weight of displacement. For Venezuelan diasporic constructions of national identity, this can be a central way to collectively express connection to politicized visions of home through emotionally affective processes. In the illustration as in my encounters, food preparation becomes an act of cultural continuity, the many plates on the table giving a warm and inviting feeling to the scene. Plates of food and morning light often created a feeling of familiarity that opened the room for discussions about Venezuela’s political situation. In this culturally and communally crafted space, the comfort of food was linked to discussions that normalized strong anti-Chavista ideology. The intertwining of connection and political discourse produced a unique sense of unity that recalled a nostalgic past while renegotiating the present.

The grocery list taped on the fridge is a callout to the adaptive strategies characteristic of diasporic cooking that are deeply grounded on a communally negotiated sense of belonging and nationalism. Feta cheese, which is more common abroad, stands in for queso llanero. Energetic debates over which cheese most closely replicates the original spark questions of the nature of authenticity as a communally decided conclusion. Terms such as plátano and cambur—as opposed to plátano macho, banana, or guineo—affirm the specifics of Venezuelan dialect and play a role in the nature of belonging based on shared language and practice.

Imported Harina Pan, used both in North America as in Venezuela to make arepas, bridges the distance between host country and homeland. Venezuelans far apart are connected by this same key ingredient, arepa dough recipes carried through time and space, and the commonality of arepas as a quick, cheap, and culturally significant breakfast food. This fervent attempt to reconstruct Venezuelan food practices becomes “an act of emotional resistance in the face of displacement,” (Chalen et al. 2025, 955) that continues to build a sense of home and intimacy while reflecting conceptions of identity with deep relations to nationalism. As a national symbol, these ingredients and dishes are iconic to Venezuelan people for whom “preparing and consuming traditional foods such as arepas, pabellón criollo, hallacas, or cachapas has become an act of emotional resistance in the face of displacement.” (Chalen et al. 2025, 955). Cooking becomes a way to remember the homeland while reconstructing a new sense of home and belonging (Chalen et al. 2025, 955–56).

The glow of the morning light atop the dining table visually emphasizes the central role of food in transforming unfamiliar places into collectively crafted emotional safe spaces. The Venezuelan diaspora in this way uses food as a resilience strategy that connects the individual to the nation, to family, to others in the diaspora. Even far from Venezuela, the same flavours distinguish breakfast.

Music and El Llano

As with food traditions, the musical symbols in the illustration—a cuatro magnet, the maracas hanging on the wall—signify the deep connection of music as a national symbol set upon rural imaginaries of independence. Adriana Ponce (2024) notes that in Venezuela, music is a central medium through which communities “forge, protect, defend, and revise their identities,” (6). The national four-string guitar, el cuatro, as well as maracas and the joropo tradition, evoke el llano; the plains region mythologized as the key site of Venezuelan bravery, rurality, and independence-era heroes (Ponce 2024, 17). Through these rural soundscapes, historical narratives are addressed as cultural markers.

The cuatro, as described in “El Cuatro Venezolano,” serves as a globalized “ambassador of Venezuela’s culture and customs,” (Chacin 2025, 32) carried abroad by migrants and musicians who keep its symbolism alive. Its increased presence in diasporic households reflects its expanding role as a marker of tradition and pride—its presence in the illustration calls to this function in North America as musical tradition travels abroad with Venezuelan families. To me, cuatros and their distinctly sharp sound recall gatherings of Venezuelan families abroad, where its acoustics background conversations, food, and shared memories.

Duany’s (2000) analysis of Puerto Rican nationalism also significantly supports the role of cuatros and llaneros as rural symbols of national identity. His study notes an idealized rural past as a key marker of diasporic nationalism, a romanticized memory of a pre-industrial homeland that represents stability, purity, and authenticity. Though Chavismo is often thought to appropriate independence-era narratives for the sake of cultural and national coherence (Chacin 2025, 41), these same musical and rural symbols invoke the anti-Chavista sentiment. Llaneros made their way in my home during family gatherings, where conversations circled the idea of ‘being able to’ return back home to reunite the whole family. Music served as a way to remember and to introduce ideas of hope that hinged on the abolition of Chavismo to facilitate movement to and from the homeland. Venezuelans, as such, take these musical gatherings to reminisce on the past, community, and articulate desires for the future dependent on political change.

Venezuelans abroad mirror Chavista nationalists as they both activate llanero music to reconstruct a coherent national identity rooted in its association with independence fighters and the symbolism of pastoral simplicity. This rural nostalgia is another point of cultural and national continuity among feelings of displacement, particularly for those who feel victimized by Chavismo and the economic crisis—llanero music that was once evoked to distinguish a

Venezuela free from Spanish rule is now evoked in the context of Chavismo and the unstable quality of life back in Venezuela, perhaps as a way to similarly call upon independence from the current administration and invoke sentiments of unified resistance.

Digitized Politics

Lastly, the illustration's depiction of digital elements—the television broadcasting a speech by Juan Guaidó and the smartphone screen showing a social media post of María Corina Machado accepting the Nobel Peace Prize—centers digital politics in Venezuelan diasporic life. The prevalence of Machado is one I felt most in the digital space, as Venezuelan friends expressed their allegiance with her anti-Chavista organization through the circulation of social media posts. As Londoño, Niño and Devia-Acevedo (2025) argue through their study of the Venezuelan diaspora on TikTok, digital platforms allow migrants to maintain political participation even when they are geographically barred from physical political actions, including marches and protests against the Maduro government (331). Digital spaces in this way become transnational political areas where Venezuelans abroad are able to articulate dissent, circulate news, and further ground Chavismo as the antithesis to peace and hope.

The illustration captures this dynamic by placing Machado—a current symbol of anti-Maduro opposition for her efforts to “transition from dictatorship to democracy” (Nobel Prize Outreach, 2026)—directly into the intimate breakfast scene. Her presence in the open face of the smartphone suggests how political hope is mediated through screens, though not separate from the functions of the everyday. I recall my grandparents and their phone at the kitchen table, sharing and circulating news with the rest of the family to discuss. Similarly, Guaidó's speech on the television evokes his frequent framing as a figure of ‘hope’ for Venezuela's future (Scarpinelli 2019). Screens become a symbol of political dissent, the platforms through which anti-Chavismo is analogous to possible returns to prosperity. Their background yet looming position in the illustration represents how diasporic households remain deeply connected to Venezuelan political happenings despite physical distance.

Duany's (2000) concept of non-territorial nationalism, which conceptualizes national identity as sustained through symbolic systems rather than geographic presence, may fit well in the digital landscape. Social media bypasses distance, allowing Venezuelans to feel present in national struggles and to reaffirm their belonging through online activism. By liking posts, sharing political videos, and participating in online discourse, youth and elders of the diaspora utilize social media to enact their visions of Venezuela when physical participation is impossible.

Conclusion: Visions of the Future

Diasporic nationalism for anti-Chavista Venezuelans proves to be repeatedly symbolically enacted through idealized myths of the past that manage distance through ideas of political resilience. In maintaining these symbolic practices, space is made to negotiate a future rooted in a hard-line end to Chavismo. Whether through adapted food traditions, emotional safe

spaces, or politically engaged digital lives, Venezuelans express a desire to remain engaged with the fate of Venezuela, its conceptions of identity, and the maintenance of traditions. This enactment of desires for the homeland reveals itself in the intimate space of the home, but also in the public social media arena. There forms a link between the private and the public, where the home serves as a mediating space where one can practice for and deliberate the future, and social media platforms allow those private deliberations to be shared and dispersed in a wider community. The past, as such, may serve as a starting point for anti-Chavista Venezuelans—with its nostalgia for times of economic greatness—but in enacting visions of the past through the interplay between the private and the public, new negotiations of the future begin.

Keeping in mind the recent events from January 3rd, 2026, when the United States military bombed Caracas and detained Nicolás Maduro, I want to emphasize the means by which nostalgia for a pre-Chavismo past constructs coherence. Though communities in diaspora express desires for political agency, the tendency to equate prosperity with any form of removal of Chavismo may obscure the consequences of US intervention and their interests in the area (Antonopoulos and Cottle 2018, 50). Through the removal of Maduro, anti-Chavistas may feel renewed hope and joy rooted in culturally reinforced nationalism that is developed in diaspora. However, I pose the question of whether external intervention aligns with desires for sovereignty and political self-determination. As all Venezuelans gather for breakfast, I urge us to consider how the idealization of all that is anti-Chavista legitimizes imperialist ventures that not only prioritize external interests, but undermine the sovereignty of nations and their people.

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More-than-Human Children: An Ethnographic Analysis of Multispecies Childhoods in Documentary Film

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Abstract

This article explores the overlooked concept of more-than-human childhoods within the intersecting fields of childhood and animal studies. While childhood is widely recognised as a human right, policy and academic discourse often exclude other-than-human animals from this framework, denying their children the status of ‘child’ and, consequently, the legislative right to a childhood. Drawing on post-humanist developments in multispecies anthropology and the notion of more-than-human personhood, this speculative work reconsiders what it means to experience childhood beyond the human. Through a multispecies ethnographic approach to documentary film, this article analyses *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022) and *Wild Babies* (2022) to identify two key social framings of other-than-human childhood: animals as children of humans ontologically, and animals as children of other animals, described as ‘animal-led’ childhoods. Supported by visual anthropological and ethnographic theory, this work highlights how childhood is co-constructed across species boundaries. Ultimately, it calls for the recognition and protection of other-than-human childhoods, challenging dominant humanist assumptions and expanding the ethical reach of childhood rights.

Introduction

Childhood and animal studies, both separately and entwined, are underpinned by adult-centred, humanist perspectives and narratives. Within animal studies, there exists an ignorance toward the lived-experiences of childhood for more-than-human actors. In a human context, ‘child’ is an age-related category, i.e someone under the age of eighteen (UNICEF 2024), whereas non-human mammals and primates are understood to follow a pattern of development across three pre-adult stages—infancy, juvenility, and pre-adulthood—which focus on reproductive maturity rather than age (Hochberg, 2011). This demonstrates the biological, rather than experiential, focus of being a ‘child’ in more-than-human beings. Excluded from both contexts are the experiences of what it means to live as a child, or ‘*be*’ as a child. Instead, the experience of being a child, or of being the way a child ought to be (from an adult-perspective), is described as a *childhood*; this notion of ‘child’ and ‘being a child’ as separate is demonstrated in cases of children that are ‘forced to be adults’ (parentification) (PsychCentral, 2020; Refugee Council, 2024; The Guardian, 2022).

To ensure that human children experience a childhood, deemed a *human* right, the United Nations devised the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 2024). Article Two of the Convention puts forth that the right of the child to have a childhood be respected and upheld by all formal bodies “irrespective of... race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other

opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or *other status*” (UNICEF 2024, italics added). Despite the ‘other status’ remark, the Rights of the Child policy excludes the childhoods of other-than-human children. Rather than protecting the rights of those children in line with human ones, the dominant voices in policy fail to advocate for the other-than-human childhood experience. Instead, such bodies choose to describe other-than-human children as ‘young’, ‘juveniles’ and ‘offspring’ rather than using terminology that would imply their personhood (Leconte et al. 2011; Shimomura 2011). This asserts there to be something different about the childhoods of animals, so that their childhood is not a *right* because they are not a ‘child’. In the sense that concepts and ideas shape policy, policy also shapes concepts and ideas; such policy, and parallel approaches in the scientific animal studies discipline, have denied more-than-human beings the personhood that may allow them to be understood as experiencing childhood.

In the wake of post-humanist developments in multispecies anthropology, acknowledging more-than-human personhood (Locke 2017) and destabilising the human-animal divide (Melson, 2001), I argue that what constitutes a childhood (worth upholding in policy and law) requires a revisit. This article pushes understandings of childhood in childhood and animal studies towards those of other-than-human children. Acknowledging the existence of an other-than-human childhood is arguably the first step in the advocacy and protection of such experiences. Primarily, one must question, what does the childhood of an other-than-human actor look like? To answer this, I use multispecies ethnography and visual documentary sources to argue that animal childhoods materialise in two prominent forms. From here on, I gloss ‘other-than-human animals’ as ‘animals’, to be more concise.

Through an analysis of two nature documentary films—*The Elephant Whisperers* (2022) and *Wild Babies* (2022)—this article understands the animal childhood experience through two distinct lenses: (i) animals framed as children of humans (ontologically), and (ii) animal-led childhood experiences. With brief mention of plant children (Miller 2019), the actors discussed in this article are Raghu, a baby elephant (*The Elephant Whisperers* 2022), and Tabo, a Cape fur seal (*Wild Babies* 2022), along with the more-than-human assemblage surrounding them.

First, this article sets up the animal childhood experience as a type of treatment shaped by the various actors present in a child’s life. Then, I draw upon the work of visual anthropologist Mariagiulia Grassilli (2007) and multispecies ethnographer Matei Candea (2010) to illustrate the ethnographic potential for nature documentary films in a multispecies inquiry of other-than-human childhoods. The participatory methods used in such documentaries speak to a co-construction of knowledge between humans and animals, a key aim of multispecies work (Lien and Pålsson 2021). In all, this speculative work hopes to bring to the fore the more-than-human childhoods often dismissed in childhood, animal and multispecies studies.

Childhood

From a multispecies perspective, ‘childhood’ is an inter-species experience co-constructed by differing agentive and social beings—from human children living in homes with mould and pets (Endenburg and Van Lith 2011; Feng et al. 2021; Lindström Nilsson 2020; Power 1999; Wish 2002), and working in stables with foals (Tammi and Hohti 2023), to human and animal children sharing spaces with insects (Hohti and MacLure 2019) and a myriad of entanglements with street animals (Bhan and Bose 2020; Nadal 2020). Within these relationships exist complex negotiations of kinship, shaped by reciprocity, care and violence. Childhood is a lived-experience of these negotiations - a type of ‘treatment’ constructed by the child and the beings around them. Being born into a complex social world means there are wide ranging ideas of childhood situated in varying cultural contexts and thus materialising in various forms (King 2007). Gittens (2004) writes that ‘being a child’ is a physiological and biological state, but the meanings given to particular *ages* come to fruition through the minds of those surrounding the child, usually brought into discourse by adults (human or other-than-human). Such meanings materialise as treatments towards the child, and the child then experiences this treatment and embodies the meanings ascribed to them, acting in particular ways as a result (Gittens 2004). In this sense, childhood is a construction, constructed by the direct social world around the subject and can be understood as both the ‘treatments’ and ‘experiences’ of the individual.

Documentary Films as Ethnographic Sites

To supplement limited written ethnographic material on this topic, I offer a reading of nature documentaries from a multispecies lens. The documentaries, *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022) and *Wild Babies* (2022), were not intended for anthropological or ethnographic purposes. Using storylines and characters, animal ‘docu-soaps’ such as these - marketed as ‘documentary realism’ - aim to foster an audience’s interest in ‘the natural world’ but use the style and language of soaps to single out (and create) heroes and villains within their narratives (Pierson 2009). Television programmes make up a large percentage of material produced about baby animals due to the culture of adult-centrism in science limiting studies in biology and ecology to adult animals (Tammi and Hohti 2023). Usually baby animals appear as ‘cute cartoons’ in children’s books and films, but in ‘academic spaces’ (classrooms and formal research) animals are always adults (Tammi et al. 2020). Tammi and Hohti (2023, 149) write that classrooms reduce animals to measurements and numbers through compartmentalisation into categories like weight, size and speed. In contrast, the documentaries drawn upon in this article, while designed to increase audience interest in ‘natural history’, are narrations of animal childhood experiences, rather than cartoons or adult-centred educational content. For this very reason, there exists a rising pattern of academics using documentaries as evidence in post-humanist work. Post-humanist scholars had a particularly positive response to ‘My Octopus Teacher’, a documentary film about human-octopus connection in South Africa, informing a variety of multispecies works (Martins Felix 2024; Ross 2021; Simmonds 2024).

The participatory methods used to create nature documentaries speak to a co-construction of knowledge that textual multispecies and childhood works aspire to (Asselin and Doirin 2016; Tammi and Hohti 2023). Visual anthropologists, like Trinh T. Minh-ha (quoted in an interview with Balsom 2018) who claims that “there is no such thing as a documentary”, criticise engagement with documentaries marketed as ‘realism’ and ‘factual’ for reasons that speak to the discipline’s colonial past. Contemporary anthropologists recognise that claiming ‘fact’ in a material produced about an ‘other’ ignores the influence of the positionality of a researcher when researching, writing and producing knowledge. However, as Grassilli (2007) suggests, documentary films that claim to be ‘real’ should not be dismissed as ethnographic sites. Documentaries and films can be read as both ‘text’ and ‘context’ (Grassilli 2007, 222). Documentaries are produced in particular situated contexts and thus reflect on these contexts, and indeed the scenes being filmed. In Grassilli’s (2007) work on Lionel Rogosin’s ‘cinema verite’ approach to filmmaking in South Africa, she argues that films made using ‘participatory methods’ provide content that can be analysed in a range of ways: “for what they say for the study of culture, in terms of their content and the representations that these visual texts offer for one culture, and for the study of these contexts” (221-222). Although some may presume animals to be passive in nature documentary production, Matei Candea (2010) highlights the active, agentive role that animals take in filmmaking alongside human counterparts, speaking to Grassilli’s (2007) suggestion about the ethnographic potential of visual sources that use participatory methods.

During fieldwork on the set of British-made animal docu-soap ‘Meerkat Manor’, Candea (2010) found that the creators of the show perceived meerkats as integral team members in the creation and production of the series. Much like human actors in Rogosin’s films (Grassilli, 2007), the meerkats engaged directly with human filmmakers to “deliver story after story” (Candea 2010, 252). According to producers, the meerkats “were so good at eliciting human engagement,” and so to maintain relationships with meerkat cast members, filmmakers found themselves “being polite” and “giving space” to the meerkats (Candea 2010, 252, 255). Candea (2010) writes that “being polite” was shown by a slow, reciprocal engagement in the co-production of meaning and knowledge-making in the series, rather than “merely extracting data” (255). In this example, the production of Meerkat Manor entailed an interweaving of humans and animals, and exemplifies multispecies collaboration that disrupts human-essentialist claims of humans as the only intentionally social beings. Thus, animal documentaries signal “a shift from a concern with culture and sociality as a strictly human attribute,” an essential part of multispecies ethnography and anthropologies of ‘holism’ that seek to look past the human-animal divide (Lien and Pålsson 2021, 6).

In previous works, the agency of animals was overlooked by a long history of human-centred framings translating the raw experiences of more-than-human beings into something else: sheep into calories and power (Barth 1986), cockerels into masculinity (Geertz 2000), and foxes as symbols of performance and challenge (Marvin 2003). Unlike those

framings, nature documentaries can allow other-than-human animals to exercise agency and autonomy in relationships with filmmakers and appear as whole-selves rather than compartmentalised scientific subjects, symbols or totems. Although a researcher could not assume that *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022) and *Wild Babies* (2022) were produced with the same methods as *Meerkat Manor*, Candea (2010) shows that nature documentaries can be a particularly informative source for theorising animal experiences. And in the case of this article, the other-than-human childhood.

Ontological Childhoods

The first type of more-than-human childhood experience is of animals understood ontologically *as* children by humans. In this, animals become loving and loved members of interspecies families through joint interaction, and live a childhood at the imposition of their human counterparts. Animal children and human parents form ‘families of choice’, where kin relations are chosen and constructed (Shir-Vertesh 2012, 423). The boundary between human and animal kin is blurred when animals *are* child (ontologically) rather than understood to be *like* a child. To be ‘like’ a child is different than to be a child. To be ‘like’ a child is to reflect a child from the inside outwards, whereas to ‘be’ a child is to be in a state that commands a certain type of outward-inward interaction from one’s surroundings. When non-humans *are* child persons, they receive child treatment and thus a particular childhood, formed over the boundary of species and language. While this is rooted and starts in the human, a childhood manifests itself in the ontology of the other-than-human child.

The documentary film *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022), directed by Indian filmmaker Kartiki Gonsalves, depicts the childhood experience of a baby elephant named Raghu who is a child to a human couple assigned to his care. The film was made in 2019 in the Theppakadu Elephant Camp in Tamil Nadu, established one-hundred and forty years ago as the oldest elephant camp in Asia. Over a documented three year period, Bomman and Bellie care for Raghu as his parents after Raghu was orphaned and had arrived to them in a ‘bad state’ (*The Elephant Whisperers* 2022). The process of filming the 40-minute documentary took six years, using traditional ethnographic methods like living within the community to build trust and relationships with both humans and elephants (India Currents 2023). In an interview with the executive producer and director of *The Elephant Whisperers* about the filming process, Gonsalves said that they “spent hours scrubbing Raghu and patting his tongue” and “we would stick our tongues out at each other” (Alpha Universe 2023). This approach, and the resulting relationships formed between the documentary team and Raghu (fig.1), speaks to Candea’s (2010) notion of multispecies co-creation and collaboration in nature documentaries where both humans and other-than-human animals participate in creation.



Figure 1. (India Currents 2023) Cinematographer Karan Thapliyal with baby Raghu during filming.

Raghu starts his time with Bomman and Bellie as ‘like a child’, although his ontological child status develops over the course of the documentary. Bellie recalls that when she “first met the baby, he was tugging at my clothes like a child and I felt his love” (The Elephant Whisperers 2022, 00:02:59). For Bellie to feel Raghu’s love is to understand him as communicative, feeling, and engaged in sociality. Three years on from their first meeting, the audience is shown Bomman waking Raghu, calling out to him: “did you sleep, my child? Come closer, my dear! Raghu, my baby” (The Elephant Whisperers 2022, 00:03:27). Bellie states ‘we have been looking after our baby Raghu for three years now’, and the documentary features shots of Raghu washing himself in a stream, washing Bomman and Bomman washing him in return (fig.2). They play together in the water and joke about Raghu losing his bell (which protects him from getting lost) in the river. Bomman also feeds Raghu milk and cleans his room, much like a human baby. All of these interactions point to an understanding of Raghu as an important, active member of the family of whom Bomman and Bellie care and receive care from. For Bomman and Bellie, looking after elephants is inherently linked to kin - Bomman’s family had been elephant carers for three generations (The Elephant Whisperers 2022). As an unmarried couple (who later get married at the end of the film), Bomman and Bellie step into a parent role for their child Raghu, and shape his childhood experience through providing care, laughter and safety.



Figure 2. Bomman washing baby Raghu.

As an other-than-human child of theirs, Raghu is encouraged by Bomman and Bellie to socialise with ‘friends’ like a fellow elephant named Krishna, and to take part in events alongside his multispecies kin. When Bomman and Bellie get married near the end of the film, Raghu and his elephant friends are a key part of the celebration (The Elephant Whisperers 2022). Traditionally, elephants appear in Hindu wedding marches as a groom’s ride to the bride’s house - a signal of wealth to the bride’s family (Simigh 2021). In Tamil Nadu in particular, elephants are a common display of richness in weddings (Simigh 2021). Despite engaging in many traditional aspects of their religion —Bomman and Bellie wear traditional Hindu dress, bhindis and have shrines to deities in their home —Raghu is not ridden into the wedding march, but is decorated in the same way as the human attendees and accompanies Bellie down the aisle to stand with Bomman (fig.3) (The Elephant Whisperers 2022).



Figure 3. Krishna, Bomman, Raghu and Bellie at the wedding (left to right).

The presence of Raghu in the wedding ceremony indicates his inclusion into the family as Bomman and Bellie’s child, demonstrating an other-than-human childhood within a traditional family structure usually occupied by human kin. Following their wedding, Bomman states “we

are a family now” and “we are [Raghu’s] parents” (The Elephant Whisperers 2022, 00:28:12). Discussing what it means to be a parent, Bomman asserts “we do whatever it takes to provide for them in all their needs” (The Elephant Whisperers 2022, 00:28:17). Washing, bathing, providing milk and cleaning out his children’s rooms, “it’s just like human babies” (The Elephant Whisperers 2022, 00:29:18). Alongside the function of parenthood, Bomman outlines the meaning of childhood for Raghu; a childhood experienced as inclusion in family celebrations, rights of passage, along with friends, and in being provided for by his parents.

More-than-Human Childhood and Personhood

Baby elephant Raghu exercises a growing sense of personhood in his interactions with Bomman, Bellie and other elephants throughout *Elephant Whisperers* (2022). As discussed in the introduction of this article, the language used to describe other-than-human children often serves to deny their personhood and thus their experiences of childhood. More-than-human childhood exists in parallel with more-than-human personhood (Tammi and Hohti 2023). Despite the common use of ‘person’ as synonym for ‘human’, personhood is not a human trait, and manifests itself in complex interactions between humans and other-than-human beings (Locke 2017, 361). In exchanges of “mutuality, comfort, touch, communication, caring, [and] being cared for” (Locke 2017, 361), Shir-Vertesh (2012) argues that the “flexible personhood” of animals is brought to the fore (420). Shir-Vertesh (2012) makes the case for “flexible personhood” through an ethnographic work dealing with companion animals of ‘prechild’, ‘child substitute’, ‘semichild’ or ‘significantly different from child’ status (423). Each category is distinct from animals that exist ontologically as a child, and for this reason I argue Shir-Vertesh does not take the personhood of animals far enough.

Shir-Vertesh’s (2012) deals with animals that are seen as ‘like’ children, and *The Elephant Whisperers*’ (2022) display of childhood highlights the difference between Raghu’s experience and those in Shir-Vertesh’s (2012) work. The families that Shir-Vertesh engages with are childless, so the narrative that companion animals stand in for children when humans desire a nuclear family fits the context. However, Bellie has human children of her own, and Raghu stands next to them in the wedding procession as an equal child. Raghu engages in mutual sociality with his human parents, communicating with them through gestures of touch and play (The Elephant Whisperers 2022). As Locke (2017) states, it is in these interactions that more-than-human personhood comes to the fore. Therefore, for Bomman and Bellie, Raghu *is* their child and a person, and it is through this that he experiences his childhood, rather than standing in for a lack of human ones.

Raghu's childhood experiences are similar to other more-than-human beings that are ontologically understood as children and persons, in terms of care and acceptance as an agentive being within a family dynamic. For some Latin American Indigenous communities, for example the Canela of the Brazilian Cerrado (Miller 2019), ‘non-human persons’ is a long-held conception written about extensively by anthropologists of the region (Haber 2009; Halbmeyer

2012; Latour 2009). In these contexts, personhood usually stems from animism, a concept suggesting the existence of alive, animate, “other-than-human persons” (Hallowell 1960 quoted in Willerslev 2013, 41). In the Canela ‘life-world’, consisting of three-thousand humans and three-hundred types of plants, plants are understood by humans as “children with agentive capacities” (Miller 2019, 93). The Canela are subsistence farmers, facing a myriad of social and environmental challenges in continuing their traditional gardening techniques, such as illegal logging, violence, deforestation and sociopolitical instability (Miller 2019, 2). Despite internal tensions and strains in the community, there is a softness in the human-plant care dynamics of the group - women and men are (or as Miller says: “consider themselves”) gardener parents to plant children (Miller 2019, 93).

Within Canela human-plant relationships, parents acknowledge their plant child’s right to emotion and agency to leave the garden if they become unhappy. To avoid this, parents, like Miller’s interlocutor Fernando, sing and dance with plant children, so they do not “become sad and weak” (Miller 2019, 102). Fernando recognises his human and plant children are *different*, but only in the amount of care that they require; if plant children are not looked after for their *entire* life span, “they become very angry and sad” (Miller 2019, 93). This is because “crop children are emotional, intentional actors” (Miller 2019, 94). The dedication involved in raising and caring for plant children forges a happy childhood for them, emphasising the existence of a childhood experience for plants. Fernando’s tellings ring to notions of a good versus bad childhood for plants, similar to the UN’s conception of human childhoods (UNICEF 2024).

Miller’s (2019) ethnography, while valuable in establishing plant children as emotional beings, is constrained by a human and adult-centred methodology. Unlike *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022), Miller, as researcher and knowledge-producer, does not approach plants as children, instead approaching them from her own conceptual perspective, and her writing appears almost sceptical of plant children. Some anthropologists, particularly advocates of the ontological turn, might argue this implies a limit to Miller’s “conceptual repertoire” (Carrithers et al. 2010, 184). Rather than involving plants as active research informants, Miller bypasses their experiences by solely engaging with human Canela parents (Miller 2019). Just as Miller’s ethnography is human-centred, it is also therefore adult-centred in its origins, by resting on the experiences of plant parents rather than theorising engagements with plant children themselves.

Direct interaction with other-than-human children, which Miller fails to achieve in *Plant Kin*, is a benefit of using documentaries with collaborative methods (Candea 2010; *The Elephant Whisperers* 2022; *Wild Babies* 2022). Miller exists within her own valid positionality, however she denies plant children a role in an ethnography which otherwise would have appealed to multispecies “holism” and interspecies co-creation of knowledge (Lien and Pålsson, 2021). Despite the limitations of Miller’s (2019) methodology and writing style, when taken together with *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022), both sources illustrate childhood experiences resulting from ontological understandings of other-than-human children.

Animal-led Childhoods

Not all animal childhoods involve human actors, and to centre the human in every account risks reproducing the very adult-and-human-centrism this article seeks to dismantle. Despite this claim, the evidence I give stems from human *presence* - animal childhoods are often visible to humans as a result of situations observed and interpreted by other humans, for example into nature documentaries and journal articles.

As stated, childhood is a type of treatment, imposed on children by other actors. Similar to a large portion of the work in childhood studies (Asselin and Doirin 2016; Britto et al. 2017; Woodhead 2009), sources that document animal-*led* childhoods theorise childhood as a developmental stage rather than one experienced and lived in the present (Gazzano 2008; Gurdon 1992; Hargrave 2013; Urrutia et al. 2022). These accounts deny the existence of animal childhoods by presenting the animal child as static until adulthood, or only acting in preparation of adulthood. With this in mind, I turn to episode one of *Wild Babies* (2022) and the childhood of Cape fur seal Tabo, whose story offers a particularly rich account of an animal-led childhood co-constructed through relationships with his mother, his colony, and the dangers of the Namibian coast.

It is important to note that the language used in actress Helena Bonham Carter's narration of the *Wild Babies* (2022) series *could* be understood as an act of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism is defined as: "the tendency to imbue the real or imagined behaviour of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics" (Epley et al. 2007, 864), and is taken for granted in much of the psychological and behavioural work done on human-animal relationships (Eddy et al. 1993; Epley et al. 2007; Milton 2020; Mota-Rojas 2021). While some scholars wonder "why humans anthropomorphise certain animals" (Epley et al. 2007, 864), I argue that anthropomorphism itself, in the base of its concept, supports human exceptionalism by assuming that emotions, character and personality are solely human traits. Much like personhood, more-than-human agents exhibit behaviour that demonstrates the multiple cognitive states anthropomorphism claims only belong to the human (Locke 2017; Tammi and Hohti 2023). In a move away from understanding animal emotions as inherently 'humanised', Massumi (2014) writes that "the act of imagining oneself in another, or another in oneself, is a ludic, inventive gesture, a form of sympathy that refuses to be... governed categorically" (quoted in Dave 2019, 221). In line with this, I take the emotive experiences of animals seriously and the narrator's description of animal encounters as part of the "universal disposition to personification [that] could actually be a default mode of relating to non-humans" (Sahlins 2014, quoted in Chamel 2023, 240).

In the British-made Netflix docu-series *Wild Babies* (2022), narrator Helena Bonham Carter opens episode one with the statement "every life begins as a baby" (00:00:23), contradicting works describing animal babies and children as 'young' and 'juveniles' (Leconte, et al., 2011; Shimomura, 2011). The Netflix series, consisting of eight episodes, captures

moments from the lives of seventeen animal babies, including orangutans, elephants, seals, bottlenose dolphins and lions. As Helena Bonham Carter (or the script writer) says, the focus of the series is ‘babies born wild’. Filmed across sixteen countries, the show is said to be a “factual natural history documentary” with “heartwarming stories... that will follow the animals from birth, through their developmental milestones and on to pivotal coming-of-age moments” (Anderson for RealScreen 2022). By putting a lens on Tabo’s individual experience, episode one of *Wild Babies* ‘documents’ the lived experience of *being* a seal baby. Tabo’s childhood experience is one co-constructed by himself, the immediate seal colony (predominantly his mother), outside predator actors like hyenas, and the crew (Wild Babies 2022). Through exchanges of interaction within his multispecies community, Tabo is simultaneously cared for and in danger, creating a mesh of nuanced childhood experiences; he presents distress, but also playfulness, through his vocal and body language (Wild Babies 2022).

Wild Babies (2022) shows animal parental and child relationships forming a childhood of fondness and care. In an introductory clip of seals lounging on a rocky beach, Bonham-Carter states “there will be joy and friendship... and challenges, but most importantly: love” (Wild Babies 2022, 00:00:35). The documentary shows clips of Tabo receiving his first wash and meals, provided by his mother. Tabo “laps up all his mum's attention” and looks healthy at one week old (fig.4) (Wild Babies 2022, 00:15:38). When clips of Tabo’s birth are shown, the narration says: “for his mum, it was love at first sight” (Wild Babies 2022, 00:04:36). While the show inadvertently focuses on joy, friendship and love as ‘steps along the way to adulthood’, Tabo’s interactions with his mother highlight his childhood *experience*, in the present, as one of love.

Tabo and his mother exhibit parent-child communicative behaviours that are ignored by the narratives of the documentary. The narration states Tabo is ‘blissfully unaware’ his mother will eventually leave in search of food, despite many clips of them communicating through squeaky intonations (Wild Babies 2022). In other examples of animal child-parent relationships, parents are found to use ‘baby voice’ or ‘babbling’ to communicate messages of both care and risk to their children (Fernandez and Knörnschild 2020), although this has not been explored with Cape fur Seals. In Tabo’s case, childhood is formed through his relationship with his mum, who is seen feeding him, washing him, and importantly, speaking with him.



Figure 4. (*Wild Babies*, 2022) Week-old Tabo and his mother.

Through danger and vulnerability, a result of interactions with brown hyenas, larger seals and desert foxes after his mother's disappearance, Tabo forms friendships with other seals and overcome risks within the multispecies community (*Wild Babies* 2022). As Haraway (2008) puts it, such interactions are a “dance of encounters” (4). In episode two, Tabo has been left alone, solves problems by avoiding hyena threats on the beach and trappings by larger seals, and, averting danger, he attempts to form a ‘crèche’ with other babies also left behind (*Wild Babies* 2022). For safety, they must gather and protect each other. Rules of entry to the crèche are ‘tough’, involving ‘play fights’ with other seals for initiation into the group. Tabo also scares away a hyena by squeaking and standing on his hind body (*Wild Babies* 2022). Through adversity, ‘brave Tabo’ demonstrates a ‘fighting spirit’ which is not entirely fictional or anthropomorphised - he does indeed fight off a hyena, form friendships with other seals and overcome risks (*Wild Babies* 2022). These encounters, even if narrated by a human, illustrate Tabo's nuanced experience of childhood, shaped by his own actions, his mother, and threats and friends on the beach.

Wild Babies (2022) demonstrates how animal-led childhoods materialise as negotiations of care, danger and reciprocity. Through learning to navigate the social world, stories like Tabo's are different to those of his adult counterparts, yet can closely parallel human children. The experiences of other-than-human children shown in *Wild Babies* (2022) show the experiential qualities of childhood that science-forward understandings of animals fail to recognise. Whilst Tabo exhibits personhood in alignment with Locke (2017), Miller (2019) and Shir-Vertesh (2012), his childhood is not contingent on human recognition of that personhood. Instead, it materialises through his own agentic negotiations with the multispecies world around him.

Tabo's crèche, the hyena threat, and his mother's departure, are not merely developmental milestones, but lived experiences that constitute a childhood (in the present tense). To reduce Tabo's story to a biological trajectory toward reproductive maturity is to mimic the adult-centred

and science-forward erasure of other-than-human stories that this article sought to challenge. Recognising animal-led childhoods as legitimate experiences is therefore not a sentimental or anthropomorphic gesture but a theoretical and ethical necessity, demanding broader discourse on whose childhoods are afforded protection, and why.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to draw scholarly attention to other-than-human childhood experiences through an ethnographic reading of nature documentary films (The Elephant Whisperers 2022; Wild Babies 2022). Nature documentaries serve as co-produced, multispecies sources for analysing complex negotiations of the social world undertaken by animal children and their human, or other-than-human, counterparts. Two forms of more-than-human childhood have emerged: those constructed through human-led ontological framings, as in Raghu's case, and those that materialise through animal-led negotiations of care, danger and reciprocity, as in Tabo's. In both, childhood is not a biological stage but a lived, relational experience, co-constructed across species boundaries and irreducible to the measurements and milestones dominating scientific accounts.

In bringing these experiences to the fore, this article has not sought to diminish the contributions of scientific approaches to animal life, but to sit alongside them, filling in the experiential and relational dimensions they often leave out. Limited by a lack of written and visual sources, this article has been unable to focus on a specific context and thus lacks the depth that could be achieved by doing so. However, to argue that such childhoods appear in varying spaces only serves the narrative that they *can* appear in further examples. Future research that centres more-than-human children directly, rather than working through the accounts of human or adult intermediaries, would bring the type of specificity this work points toward.

I invite reflection on the scope of childhood protection as we move towards an understanding of the world as an interspecies assemblage whereby *all* children seek fulfilled lives. Ultimately, this article has argued that childhood is not a uniquely human condition, and that recognising this is not merely an academic exercise, rather, it is the first step toward asking whose childhoods deserve protection, and ensuring that the answer is not limited by species.

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Reclaiming Space, Creating Place, and Affirming Identity: Graffiti in the Downtown Eastside

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Abstract

Initially planned out as a mapping exercise set to record points of “unsanctioned” publicly visible art in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood of Vancouver, this research has developed to become an anthropological examination of graffiti in the context of DTES. Through two days of data collection and the subsequent use of geospatial, statistical, and interpretative approaches, we sought to holistically study the phenomenon of graffiti not as a mere act of vandalism, but as a powerful tool which, through its ability to physically and symbolically affect the space, is able to create places of self-expression and affirm identities.

Introduction

Graffiti as a form of street art is often associated with crime and vandalism. However, it also serves as an important method of resistance and self-expression for marginalized groups. As a cultural product and symbolic form of representation, incorporating the study of graffiti in the investigation of urban dynamics gives an alternative insight into the intentions, ideals, and struggles of the local community. This paper employs a geospatial approach to examine the role of unsanctioned graffiti in reclaiming and recreating “place” within Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. By analyzing graffiti data through geospatial, statistical, and interpretative methods, we investigate how graffiti functions not merely as an act of vandalism, but as a powerful tool which, through its ability to physically and symbolically affect the space, is able to create places of self-expression and affirm identities.

The term “street art” is usually used to encompass graffiti with other forms of public art, however, this research project will be referring to graffiti as any publicly visible art that is unsanctioned. This paper will provide contextual information of the research area, outline the data collection process, investigate relevant theoretical frameworks, then discuss the results and its interpretation.

Background and Context

Understanding the Downtown Eastside and its past is crucial in understanding the role that graffiti has in this unique urban space (see fig. 1). As one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Vancouver, and once the original center of the city, the DTES has a rich but turbulent history. As industrialization began to pollute the area, the affluent moved further west, which left the DTES as the centre of Vancouver’s working class. Due to several waves of economic depression and displacement, the area became associated with “society’s vices” (Proudfoot 2011, 6). In addition

to its economic decline, the DTES also witnessed many conflicts and rebellions, most (if not all) involving minorities and marginalized individuals. This vicious cycle of poverty, social instability, and negative media portrayal was maintained and continues to operate today (Szöke and Parizeau 2018, 160). Szöke and Parizeau (2018) state that the city's main concerns and goals are focused on garnering international recognition and attracting foreign investors and tourists (162). Thus, there was always pressure to “beautify” places with visible poverty. This is reflected in the city of Vancouver’s strict policy on graffiti that criminalizes any and all instances of “non-commissioned art,” and commands its prompt removal (City of Vancouver, 2014). Many of these efforts consist of re-establishing public spaces in the DTES with commercial spaces – in other words, “spaces of consumption” (Szöke and Parizeau 2018, 162). Other forms of gentrification come in the form of Top-Down Public Art (TDPA), a method employed in the areas with visible poverty to “romanticize” the grittiness as a part of an “urban aesthetic” (162); this contributes to the production of urban space for more affluent individuals, promoting gentrification and threatening displacement (160).

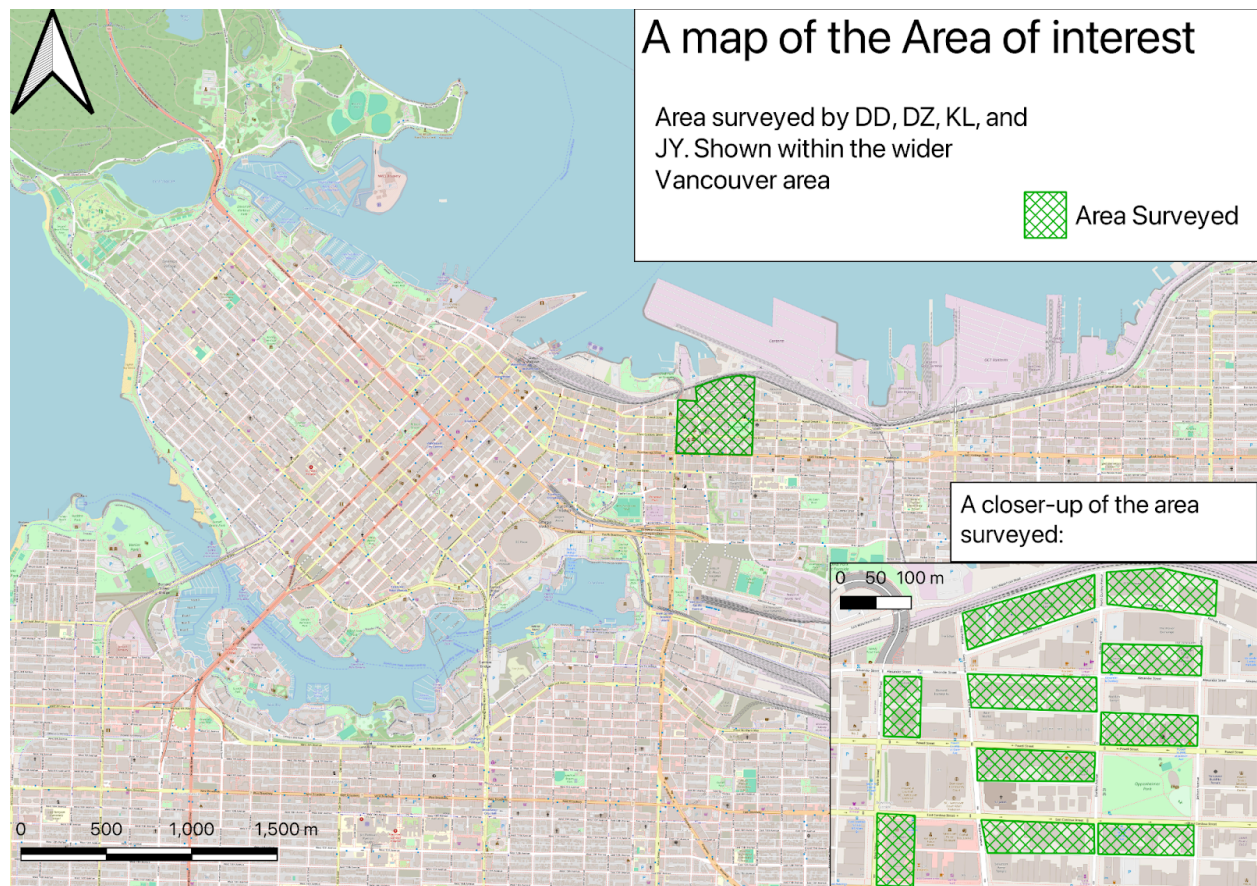


Figure 1. Map visualizing the area of interest within the wider Vancouver area.

Availability of public spaces and services is crucial in providing places of refuge for individuals, particularly those who are marginalized. These spaces are readily available in many accessible areas of the DTES (Szöke and Parizeau 2018, 161), and as such are often where the

residents choose to gather as communities. The DTES is one of the most diverse neighbourhoods in Vancouver (Proudfoot 2011, 1), with a large portion of the population identifying as a minority or marginalized. Thus, a sense of community is crucial in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. It creates a sense of belonging as well as an effective resistance against forces that threaten displacement of those who already face marginalization (Szóke and Parizeau 2018, 158). This is where street art, specifically graffiti, has an important role. Graffiti is a public art form as it is produced and consumed by members of the "public" – thus, graffiti can have the effect of converting a private space into one that is public. Graffiti is also a category of Community-Based Public Art (CBPA), which is "a method to politicize space; it draws in media attention, raises awareness about local issues, gathers communities of support, and encourages further public discourse" (158).

Place and Space in Graffiti Landscapes

In the scope of this project, place refers to the multilayered complexities imposed on a site, taking into account its historical and representational aspects (Whitridge 2004). The social and cognitive phenomenon of place-making wherein societal attributions are manifested through a place is influenced by historically emergent networks of representations and embodied practices. Ashmore (2003) emphasizes that social and spatial dimensions are intertwined, while asserting that space is actively inhabited and creates social relations and spatial structure. Reflecting the multilayered complexity of historical and social networks, Ashmore's "life histories of place" explores how specific places gain significance over time through human choices, embodied activities, and symbolic meaning (1177–1178).

Homologies created by these aspects attribute personal and collective significance to a given location, which can contribute to feelings of belonging or feelings of being out of place. Whitridge (2004) positions place as the qualitative aspects of location and space as the quantitative qualities of spatial extension. In this sense, space is universal and abstract. Graffiti is a spatial practice by nature, which opens up possibilities for alternative expression that challenges the authority and power of prevailing socio-spatial practices. It expands the meanings of political appropriateness and citizenship. Whether they are on private or public surfaces, graffiti changes how a landscape is visually represented (Moreau and Alderman 2011). Ashmore (2003) emphasizes the social meaning of choices and acts that represent various cultural values and conflicts over space (1178). Although graffiti itself is not specifically examined, this resonates with what Moreau and Alderman (2011) describe as the landscapes around graffiti. In general, graffiti is stigmatized negatively and is typically linked to gangs and criminal activity.

Therefore, the motivations for their appearance and the potential meanings of an inscription are often overlooked. At the same time, graffiti is a particular kind of communication that is utilized by many subcultures to express their individuality in public. As a strategy for questioning and providing different interpretations of public space, graffiti has the ability to determine who is allowed to use it and whose opinions are valued there. This has the power to

highlight different approaches to interacting with urban surfaces, traversing specific areas and bringing attention to specific problems (Moreau and Alderman 2011). The aforementioned top-down public art pieces, discussed by Szóke and Parizeau (2018), are examples of gentrification in a landscape that is controlled and commissioned by executive decisions to transform a place and its meaning. Instances of personal expression can be very significant as they display a pushback of these pieces. The idea of public art is shaped by many aspects like community involvement, democratic participation, and public engagement. Observers of art are interpreters and contribute to the continuous making of the public installations (Szóke and Parizeau 2018). So, in addition to being physically present, this art form is also public through its discursive and fictional involvement in a larger social and political context. Lastly, graffiti has the ability to attach identities to a landscape. Simple tags are often looked at as lesser quality or having less significance, but the identity in these pieces are significant as well (Moreau and Alderman 2011). Exploration of the ways in which graffiti artists navigate the legal and social constraints surrounding their art, as well as how their work impacts the perception and experience of place for different groups within the downtown Eastside, builds upon the idea of graffiti as a means of reclaiming space, both physically and symbolically, and how this act can create a sense of belonging for those who feel marginalized or excluded from traditional spaces of self-expression.

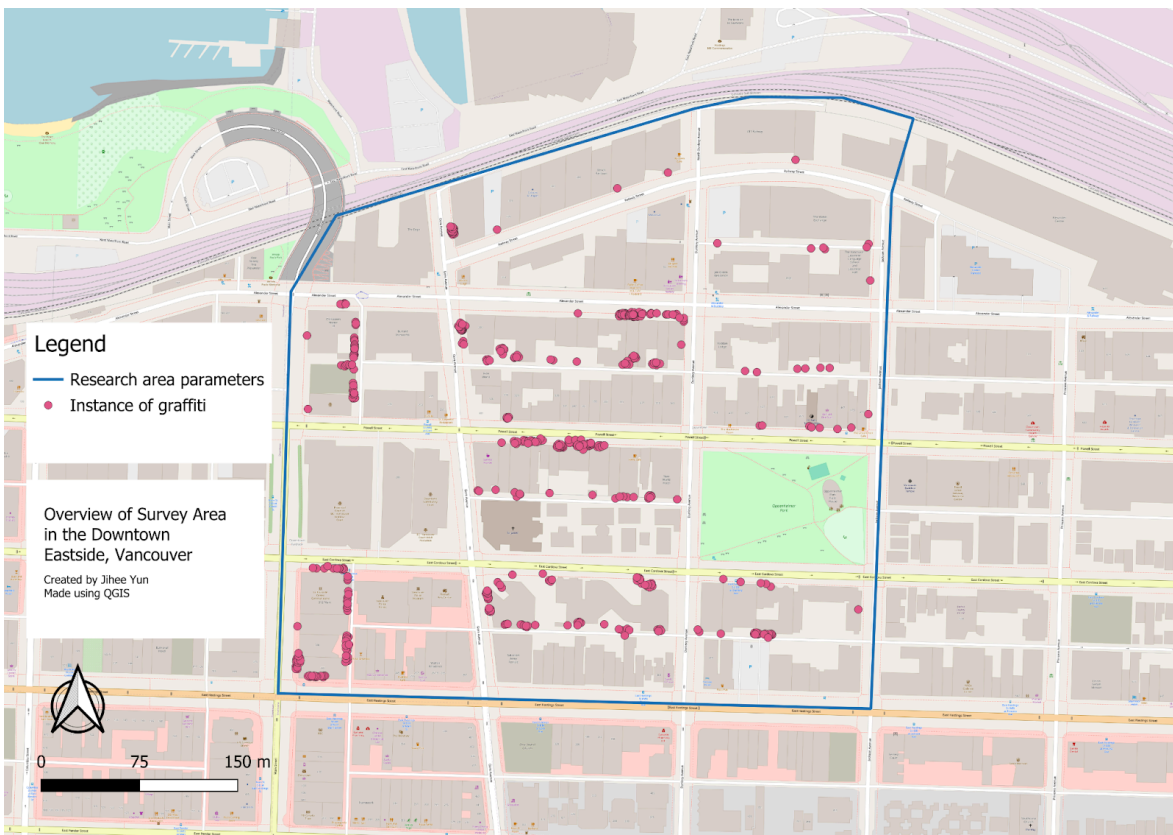


Figure 2. A map showing all instances of graffiti recorded in the survey area.

Data Collection

For the purpose of our research, it was necessary to collect primary data as the object of our research – graffiti – is a dataset constantly in flux. As an easily accessible and oftentimes anonymous art form, graffiti encourages constant modifications, additions, and expansions of the graffiti environment. Moreover, its illegality and the city's effort to remove graffiti further amplifies the rate of change. Thus, our research could not rely on the datasets previously collected by others as it would simply not represent the current state of graffiti in DTES.

Data collection was accomplished by two organized trips to the area of interest on November 13th and 18th of 2024. During both, the data was collected in two forms: a geographical point on Google Maps and as a picture. This was efficiently done by splitting into groups of two, with one person taking a point and the other taking a picture. The picture was later tied to the said point. On November 13th, all four of us gathered to organize the data collection process and participate in it, which led to recording a total of over 300 points (see fig. 2). As the area of interest covers over 200,000 m², it was not within the scope of our research to record all the population (i.e. all the instances of graffiti). Thus, the decision was made to represent the population by employing “systematic sampling” – in this context, by recording every second block. It must be noted that the reality of Vancouver's DTES planning has made a “pure” systematic sampling impossible due to the variety in the sizes of city blocks, their shapes, and due to the fact that many walls in the area are obstructed or difficult to reach. Another possibility was to employ a “simple random sampling” (Dig it with raven n.d.), which in our case was judged to be detrimental, possibly even capable of skewing the results. This was due to the fact that the ratio between an average block (our smallest unit) and the overall size of the area of interest was simply too large – which, if randomized, would inevitably overrepresent or underrepresent certain parts of the area.

The work done on November 18th only required the work of two group members – who by the end of the day collected a total of over 180 points. Summing up to over 480 points, the data was cleaned and organized into the spreadsheet, after which, it was analyzed through the use of qGis.

One of the questions we were interested in is *how the data collected could be represented in terms of density*, which led to creation of the following heat map, which includes each individual point collected, as well as the perimeters surveyed by the team:

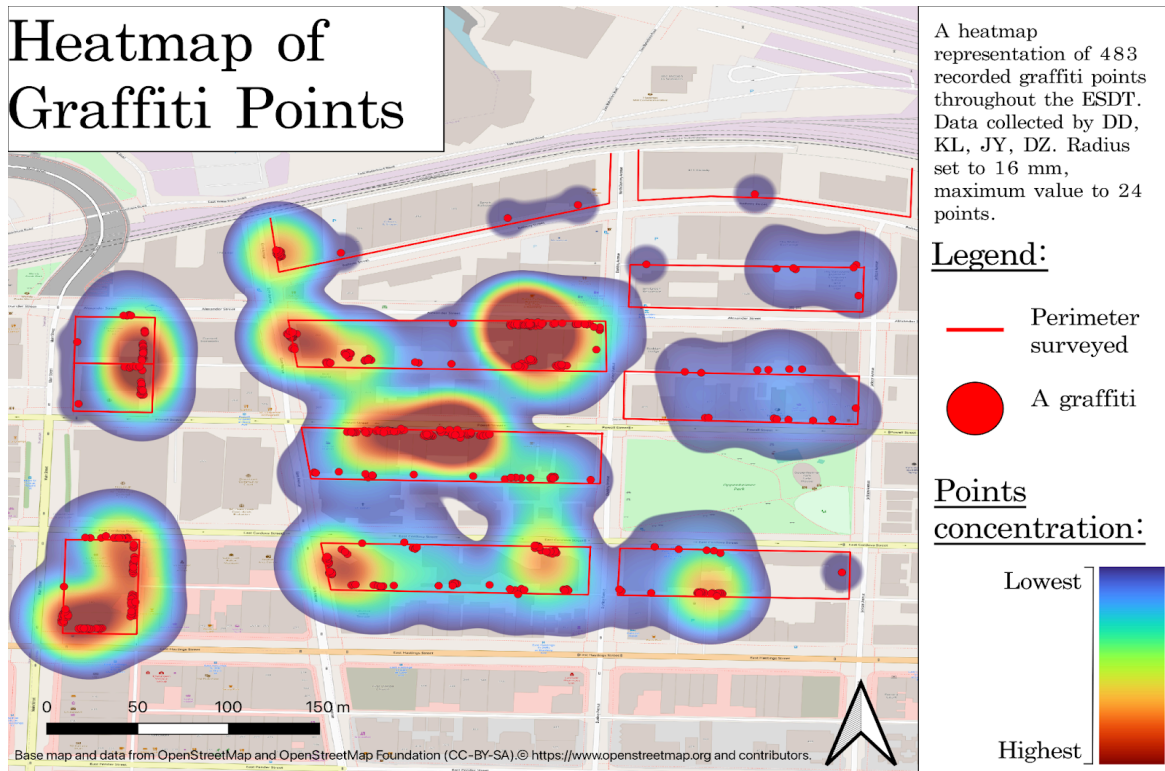


Figure 3. A heatmap of Graffiti Points collected with the perimeter surveyed and each graffiti point plotted.

Data and Methodology

The spatial analysis of graffiti patterns in DTES draws upon the geospatial dataset of graffiti points we collected through field observations that were recorded using *Google Maps*. The dataset was then organized in an excel sheet and later imported into *qGIS* for analysis. Data cleaning and preprocessing were also completed; duplicate entries were removed, erroneous coordinates were corrected, and the data was added to *qGIS* as a “Delimited Text Layer,” suitable for geospatial analysis.

A K-means clustering algorithm was applied to identify distinct clusters of graffiti locations. This unsupervised machine learning method distinguishes data points into clusters based on their proximity, with the number of clusters (K) selected through the elbow method using R. A value of K=4 was determined to best represent the distribution (see fig. 4).

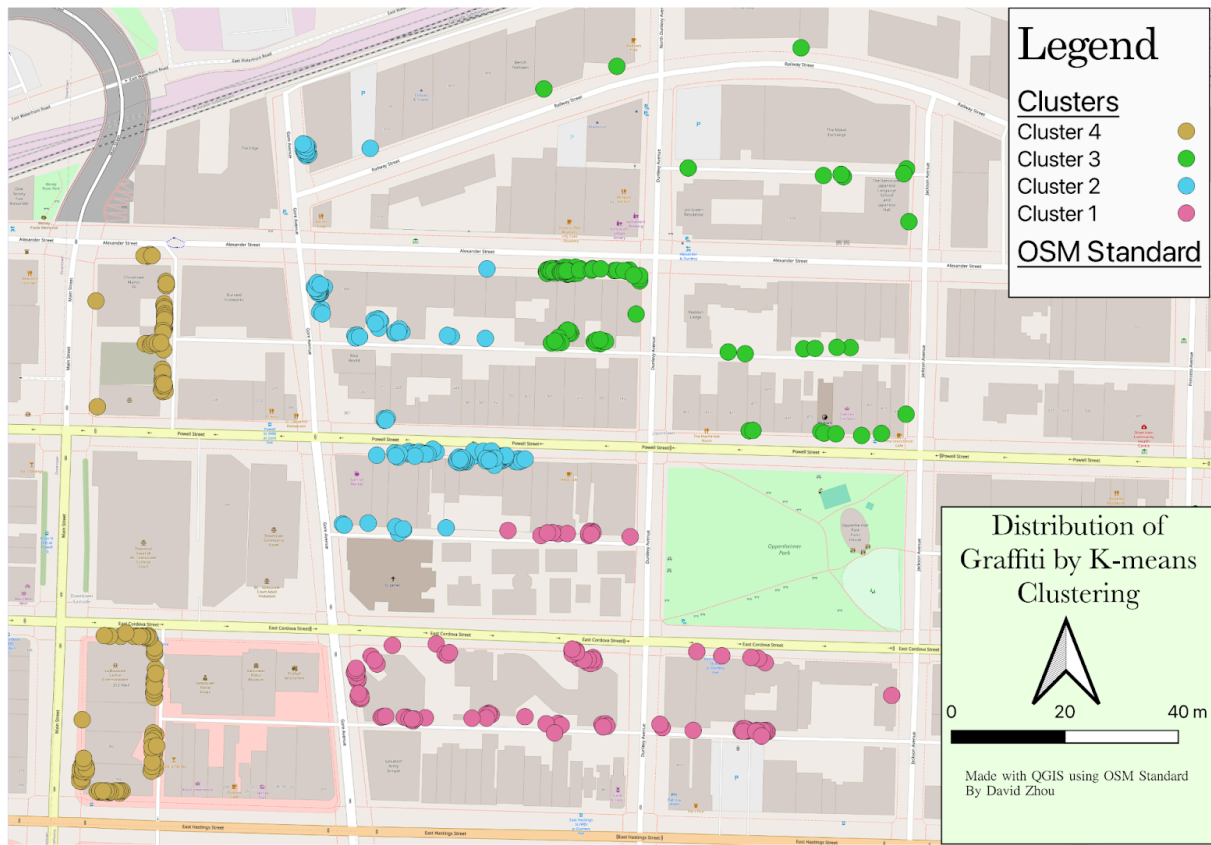


Figure 4. Map depicting four main clusters of graffiti occurrences.

Additionally, density mapping was performed to visualize the concentration of graffiti points. Kernel density estimation (KDE) was used to create a density contour map highlighting areas of high, medium, and low graffiti intensity (see fig. 5). For quantitative insights, graffiti counts within each cluster were calculated to assess relative activity levels and presented with a bar graph (see fig. 6). To contextualize these findings, spatial context was considered and significant social, economic, and historical landmarks—such as community centers, residential areas, and historically significant streets—were incorporated. This approach integrated geospatial analysis with sociocultural interpretation, ensuring that patterns were tied to the broader urban dynamics of the DTES. All statistical analyses were conducted in R programming language (R core team 2024).

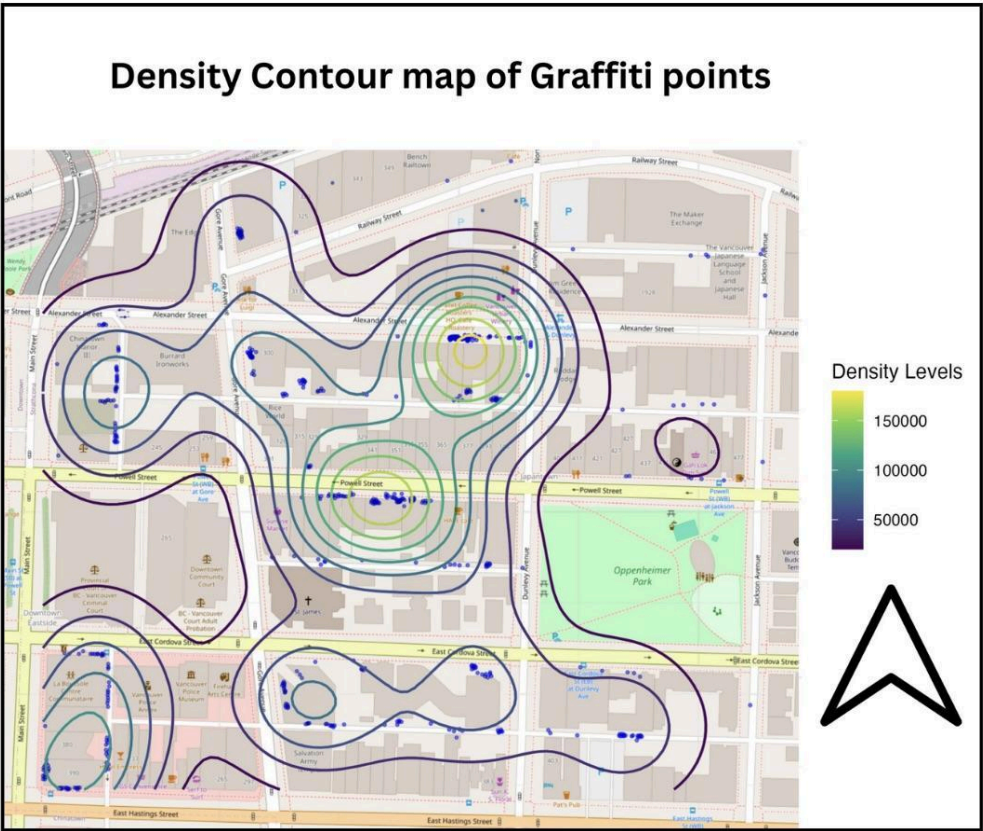


Figure 5. Contour map depicting the density of graffiti occurrences.

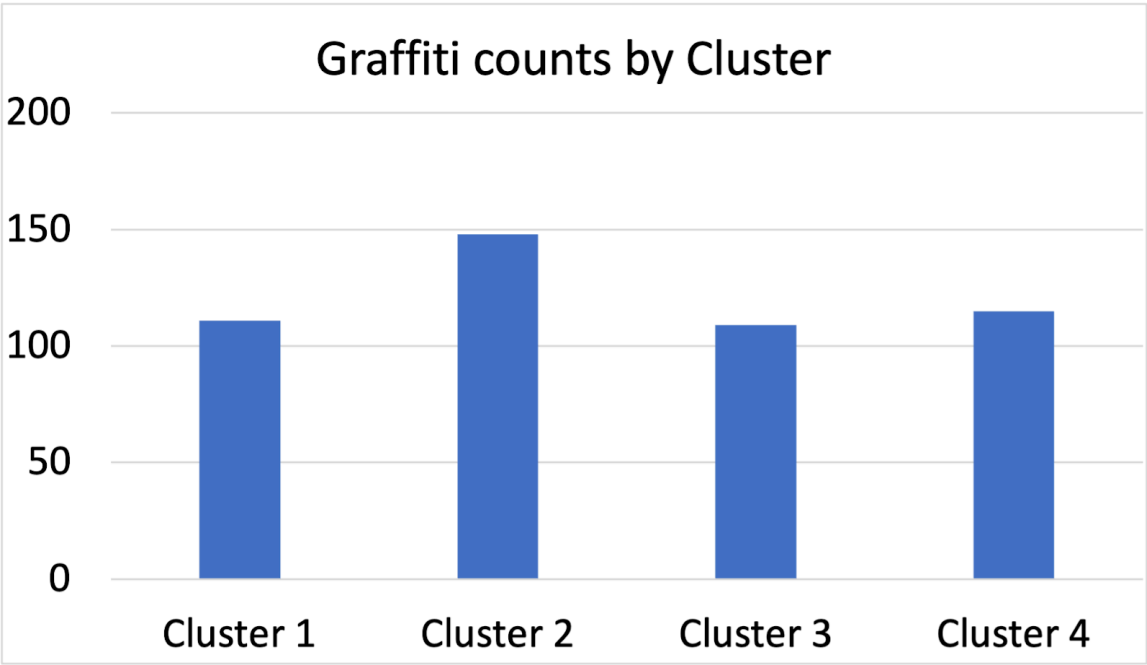


Figure 6. Bar graph comparing graffiti counts by cluster.

Results and Interpretation

The spatial distribution of graffiti in DTES suggests a different narrative to surface-level interpretation as simple vandalism. Rather, it reveals its function as a form of resistance and cultural assertion. Patterns identified through kernel density estimation (KDE) and K-means clustering show how graffiti is concentrated along significant corridors, such as East Hastings Street, Powell Street, and Alexander Street. These areas are historically tied to community identity and struggle. This alignment reflects graffiti's role in reclaiming urban spaces in the face of systemic marginalization and gentrification. Indigenous perspectives on tagging, such as Matthew Ryan Smith's interpretation of modern tagging as a spiritual connection to ancestors, further deepen the understanding of graffiti as a practice that transcends mere artistic expression and connects to land, heritage, and resistance against colonial displacement (Smith 2017). By layering these insights into the geospatial data, the patterns suggest that graffiti is not random, but a structured and potentially deliberate act of reclaiming visibility in spaces historically subjected to erasure. Rather than treating graffiti as a uniform practice, the clustering pattern suggests that its social meaning is spatially differentiated and tied to specific urban histories and institutional landscapes.

The spatial clustering analysis revealed four distinct graffiti clusters, each with unique patterns and sociocultural significance (see fig. 4). The largest cluster, spanning Powell Street, showed a linear distribution closely aligned with major pedestrian thoroughfares and community service hubs. Cluster 3, the second largest, is centered on Alexander Street and Dunlevy Avenue. This area is a focal point of social and economic activity, with various healthcare facilities, and nonprofit organizations. The persistent graffiti density here likely reflects the area's role as a center of community interaction and social struggle. By observing the heat map, we can see that the highest concentration of graffiti falls on Alexander Street crossing Dunlevy Avenue. Notably, this is also the location of the Al Mitchell Place, a homeless shelter run by the Lookout Housing and Health Society. Graffiti in this corridor may serve as a medium of resistance, identity assertion, and commentary on urban inequities. This aligns with common practices of using graffiti to assert land rights and presence, as exemplified by artists like Correy Bulpitt, whose traditional Haida iconography reclaims urban spaces as Indigenous (Smith 2017, 265). Similarly, Powell Street, once a vibrant Japantown, emerges as another graffiti hotspot, reflecting both its historical significance and the tensions between cultural preservation and modern urban redevelopment.

In the western DTES, clusters near La Boussole Francophone Community Center and Chinatown Manor III, a retirement home, also exhibit graffiti patterns tied to localized expressions of cultural identity (see fig. 6). These areas, undergoing rapid gentrification, highlight how graffiti is used to resist displacement and assert the presence of marginalized communities. The KDE map reveals that the highest-intensity zones such as Powell and Main Streets, Alexander and Railway Streets, and East Hastings near Main are not random but reflect its identity as a contested site of urban place making. Again, gaining inspiration from Indigenous

research, the act of tagging in such spaces aligns with broader narratives of challenging settler colonialism. This is exemplified in Warraba Weatherall's murals featuring the word "SOVEREIGNTY," which assert Indigenous land rights while simultaneously challenging legal frameworks criminalizing unsanctioned art (Smith 2017, 266). Furthermore, in post-conflict settings, graffiti often serves as a powerful medium for reclaiming and reshaping public spaces. It can shift attention away from the scars left by conflict or act as a form of protest and resistance against lingering divisions (Bush 2013). Similarly, graffiti in DTES can be interpreted as a form of resistance against gentrification, as well as an effort to reclaim public spaces that have been altered by outside forces. This act of deliberate place-making allows the local community to assert their presence and agency, reshaping their urban environment while resisting the encroachment of gentrification and external pressures.

Discussion

Before concluding this paper, it is important to acknowledge the limitations that were met by our team during this research project. The most important limitations were certainly in connection with our group size and the amount of time we were able to dedicate to the data collection – which both inevitably affected the area and depth of our research. By limiting our research to an area of Downtown Eastside of about 8 blocks North to South and 5 blocks West to East, and moreover choosing to sample only the half of the blocks, several questions were posed: *is the data collected truly representative of DTES, or does it merely represent the piece in between Main st, Jackson ave, and E Hastings? How and why are we able to make such a generalization? Was there a better way of managing such a large specimen as Downtown Eastside – perhaps through choosing to sample all of it, but with larger intervals?*

During the data collection, we additionally faced the inaccessibility of some areas – which is most clearly seen on the Northern edge of our research area (see fig. 3). At the same time, the team was unable to fully cover certain parts of the area either due to the physical barriers, low visibility at later hours, or weather conditions, all of which may have affected the accuracy of the survey. While an effort was made to compensate for these factors, it is still a possibility that the parts of the area with lower accessibility are associated with lower accuracy of the data collected.

Future research is needed to address the limitations of this study. Specifically, ethnographic studies of the DTES, particularly through the form of participant observation and interviews, would greatly strengthen our conclusion. In addition, the current conclusions derived here rely on pure theoretical and geospatial interpretation of material remains (graffiti), and thus lacking first person account of the artist's motives, intentions, and ideals. Therefore, conducting interviews with graffiti artists who are responsible for the works would greatly improve or even reorient our study.

Naturally, more data collection would also greatly benefit our interpretation – especially if such data would be collected in a similar manner, but in different neighbourhoods of Vancouver, or even in different cities entirely. Such an approach would allow us to conduct a comparative analysis of how graffiti relates to the space and place it occupies – a rather rich topic for exploration. A thoughtful categorization of the graffiti into types would moreover be useful as part of further research. While a conscious effort must be done to avoid simplistic arbitrary categorizations, such as size or colour, a categorization that would regard the graffiti's innate qualities – as, for example, authorship, style, geospatial position – would be beneficial to explore in the context of our research.

Conclusion

Graffiti, through its ability to physically and symbolically reclaim space, becomes a powerful tool for creating places of self-expression and affirming identities in downtown Eastside Vancouver. By challenging legal and social restrictions, graffiti not only asserts the presence of the DTES community but also transforms how the community is perceived in this contested landscape. Ultimately, graffiti in the DTES serves as a mirror to its socio-political fabric, reflecting the resilience of its communities and their resistance to displacement in the face of ongoing urban transformation. Despite its limitations, the study has illustrated the potential of integrating geospatial and statistical methods in addition to the qualitative study of graffiti and street art. The tentative conclusions arrived here could be strengthened by future research through more in-depth data collection, rigorous research design, and a wider array of comparative studies. In concluding this paper, we anticipate that this research could contribute to a broader scholarly discourse in the phenomenon of graffiti and open up possibilities for future research, particularly through the lens of reclaiming space, creating place, and affirming identity.

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Queer Indigenous Menstruation, Embodied Sovereignty, and the Art of Vanessa Dion Fletcher

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Abstract

This paper examines how Queer Indigenous artist, Vanessa Dion Fletcher, mobilizes menstruation as an embodied site of resistance to colonial–patriarchal biopolitical power. Drawing on analyses of *Own Your Cervix* (an immersive art exhibition), *#MenstrualAccessory* (a satirical performance piece), and *Colonial Comfort* (a sculptural installation), the paper argues that Dion Fletcher’s use of menstrual blood functions as both material and method, disrupting biomedical authority, menstrual shame, and respectability politics that regulate Indigenous reproductive bodies. Engaging feminist and decolonial scholarship, including Stoler, Burns, and Black et al., the analysis traces how colonial governance operates through the management of intimacy, hygiene, and visibility. Dion Fletcher’s practice intervenes by reclaiming gynecological tools, rendering menstruation public, and reframing discomfort as a political strategy. These artistic gestures enact embodied sovereignty, challenging colonial regimes of knowledge and reconstituting menstruation as a site of Indigenous feminist agency, relationality, and decolonial resurgence.

Introduction

In the Western world, menstrual blood is frequently cast as dirty, private, medical, and apolitical, yet these shared assumptions are produced through specific relations of power that discipline which bodies may be seen, known, or heard in public space. For Indigenous women, menstruation is further shaped by colonial histories that regulate reproductive bodies through shame, surveillance, and medical authority. Vanessa Dion Fletcher’s artistic practice intervenes in these regimes by making menstruation visible, embodied, and politically disruptive.



Figure 1. Vanessa Dion Fletcher, *Own Your Cervix* (2017), *#MenstrualAccessory* (2017-ongoing), and *Colonial Comfort* (2017) (Dion Fletcher 2019; @vdionf 2020; Sandals 2017).

Dion Fletcher is a Potawatomi and Lunáapew queer artist whose interdisciplinary practice incorporates menstrual blood, porcupine quills, Wampum belts, textiles, and performance (Dion Fletcher, 2025). Fletcher's work addresses colonial violence, Indigenous representation, and the gendered body, offering a compelling case for thinking about embodiment, sexuality, and decolonial knowledge from an Indigenous perspective. Specifically, her practice foregrounds art as a mode of resistance to colonial medicalization and menstrual stigma. This paper argues that Dion Fletcher's use of menstrual blood constitutes an embodied Indigenous feminist response to colonial–patriarchal biopolitical power, which operates through biomedical authority, menstrual shame, and regulation of public space. Through *#MenstrualAccessory* performances and the *Own Your Cervix* exhibition, Dion Fletcher challenges this power in three interconnected ways: by reclaiming colonial gynecological imagery and tools as sites of Indigenous bodily knowledge, by using menstrual blood as both material and method, and by rendering menstruation visible in both public space and institutional art contexts.

This project is influenced by my positionality as a cisgender woman of European descent whose relationship to menstruation has been shaped by discomfort and shame. Encountering Dion Fletcher's work required confronting these embodied reactions, revealing how colonial and heteronormative structures shape intimate bodily experience. Dion Fletcher's work contributes to broader movements for menstrual sovereignty by reclaiming Indigenous relationships to the body and knowledge.

The power structure at stake involves colonial and gendered shame surrounding menstruation: the disciplining of Indigenous bodies through European frameworks. Understanding this system requires an embodied approach. Embodiment refers to how social and historical violence becomes inscribed in and through the body—as physical pain, trauma, memory, and lived experience—so that the body becomes both a site of suffering and a site of resistance. Colonial–patriarchal biopolitical power operates through the governance of bodies, reproduction, and intimacy, rendering certain bodily processes invisible, shameful, or in need of medical regulation. Ann Laura Stoler, a distinguished professor of anthropology and historical studies specialized in colonial studies at the New School for Social Research, demonstrates that colonial authority has been exercised not only through law or overt violence, but through the management of sexuality, hygiene, and respectability in everyday life (1989, 636). In *Making Empire Respectable*, Stoler shows how medical and moral discourses surrounding sexual conduct and bodily purity were central to securing racial hierarchies and defining the boundaries between colonizer and colonized in Asian and African colonies (Stoler 1989, 635–636, 646, 650). Bodily fluids (enabling the transmission of syphilis) and reproductive capacities were framed as threats to colonial order, requiring surveillance and discipline (1989, 637, 642). As Stoler writes, “medical manuals warned that people who stayed “too long” were in grave danger of overfatigue, of individual and racial degeneration, of physical breakdown (not just illness), of cultural contamination and neglect of the conventions of supremacy, and agreement about what

they were” (1989, 646). These logics persist in contemporary biomedical frameworks that cast menstruation as dirty, private, and apolitical rather than socially and politically produced.

Biopolitical governance is especially visible in the regulation of reproductive bodies through medical authority. Shalhoub-Kevorkian argues that settler colonial states exercise power over women’s reproductive lives through surveillance, spatial and legal restriction, and the governance of access to healthcare (2015, 1190–1192, 1195, 1202). Medical institutions such as hospitals and clinics are thus implicated in colonial violence not as neutral sites of care, but as spaces whose accessibility is structured by checkpoints, military blockages, legal classification, and bureaucratic delay, rendering reproductive healthcare inseparable from state power (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015, 1193–1194, 1201–1202). This dynamic is captured in one of Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s participant’s testimony: “Even the hospital here is like a prison, look at all the women around you... each one has a story... we are all persecuted prisoners” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015, 1201). Her account reveals how systems of surveillance and restriction transform spaces of care into sites where colonial violence is embodied and experienced intimately. Shalhoub-Kevorkian demonstrates that such violence is inscribed onto women’s bodies through seemingly neutral medical and legal practices, blurring the boundary between public control and intimate bodily experience (2015, 1187–1190, 1194–1196). In this biopolitical framework, power operates not only through law or military force but through the management of reproductive capacity. While her analysis centers on pregnancy and birth, these mechanisms extend to menstruation, which is similarly medicalized and rendered subject to institutional authority and social stigma.

For Indigenous women, menstrual shame must be understood as a colonial imposition that disrupts Indigenous bodily and sexual sovereignty. As Burns (2020) argues, dominant colonial narratives frame Indigenous sexuality primarily through violence and victimhood, obscuring Indigenous understandings of gender, sexuality, and relationality (32–33). Drawing on Qwo-Li Driskill’s concept of the Sovereign Erotic, Burns emphasizes that reclaiming sexuality is an embodied practice of decolonization grounded in Indigenous histories and relationships to land, body, and community (2020, 28–29). Driskill defines a colonized sexuality as “one in which we have internalized the sexual values of dominant culture” (2004, 54, cited in Burns 2020, 29), indicating how colonial power operates at the level of everyday bodily experience. Burns further links this internalization to broader structures of colonizer power that rely on gendered and sexual violence to render Indigenous bodies—and by extension Indigenous lands—“inherently violable” (Burns 2020, 32–33). Reclaiming bodily processes and sexual being therefore becomes a way of restoring sovereignty over one’s “first homeland: the body” (Driskill 2004, 53, cited in Burns 2020, 29). Embodied sovereignty thus emerges as a practice through which Indigenous women actively heal, disrupt colonial sexual norms, reassert self-determination, and reconstitute relationships between body, land, and community (Burns 2020, 28–30).

Within this framework of colonial–patriarchal biopolitical governance—where reproductive capacity and intimate life are regulated through medical authority and moral discipline (Stoler 1989; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015)—reclaiming bodily processes rendered “improper” or “unspeakable” under colonial rule becomes a practice of embodied sovereignty. As Burns argues, acts that reclaim embodied knowledge challenge colonial regimes that discipline Indigenous bodies through invisibility, shame, and moral regulation. Against this backdrop, Vanessa Dion Fletcher’s work refuses the colonial logic that renders Indigenous bodies pathological or improper. Through the use of menstrual blood, porcupine quills, and performance, Dion Fletcher reinstates menstruation as a site of knowledge, power, and relationality, enacting artistic practice as a form of Indigenous feminist resurgence.

Own Your Cervix

Dion Fletcher uses menstrual blood as material, method, symbol, and provocation across performance, installation, and social media. Presented at Tangled Art + Disability, *Own Your Cervix* (2017) invited participants into a curtained space resembling a clinical exam room, where they were guided through a cervical self-exam using a plastic speculum, mirror, lubricant, and light (Robertson 2017; Inman 2018, 126). Journalist Kate Robertson (2017) describes the environment as “medical-like,” yet intimate, noting that many participants saw their cervix for the first time despite prior gynecological exams. The work disrupts the authority of the biomedical gaze by repositioning reproductive knowledge within the participant’s own embodied experience (Robertson 2017).



Figure 2. Vanessa Dion Fletcher, *Custom Colour* (2017), and *Cervical Self Exam* (2017) (AMI: Accessible Media Inc. 2017).

In *Own Your Cervix*, Dion Fletcher directly addresses the history of medical control over menstruation and reproductive knowledge. Colonial and biomedical systems have historically claimed authority over Indigenous reproductive bodies, going so far as to forcibly sterilize Indigenous women (Black et al. 2021, 1090). Menstruation and gynecological knowledge are treated as medical issues that require expert control, surveillance, and diagnosis. Within this framework, the cervix is something examined by medical professionals rather than something

people are encouraged to know or describe themselves. Gynecological tools such as the speculum therefore carry histories of power, shaping who is allowed to look, speak, and produce knowledge about the body. For Indigenous women, these practices are tied to colonial histories that regulate and objectify Indigenous reproductive bodies. The history of forced and coerced sterilization in Canada provides a concrete example of how colonial and biomedical authority has regulated Indigenous reproductive bodies. Forced and coerced sterilization refers to “the provision of permanent contraception without true informed consent,” a practice that has disproportionately affected Indigenous women within the context of Canada’s racialized eugenics programs (Black et al. 2021, 1091). Provincial legislation such as the Alberta Sexual Sterilization Act (1928–1972) and the British Columbia Sexual Sterilization Act (1933–1973) enabled the sterilization of individuals labeled “mentally defective” without their consent or the consent of their families (Black et al. 2021, 1091). Although Indigenous Peoples represented only a small percentage of the Canadian population (2.5%), they accounted for 25% of sterilizations performed under these acts (Black et al. 2021, 1091). More recent reports indicate that coerced sterilization has continued into the twenty-first century through practices such as pressuring patients to consent to tubal ligation during childbirth or misrepresenting the permanence of the procedure (Black et al. 2021, 1091). Within the broader context of colonial policy and ongoing violence against Indigenous women, scholars and activists have argued that the forced sterilization of Indigenous women constitutes a form of genocide (Black et al. 2021, 1091). Using the definition of genocide articulated in the *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* report as a coordinated attempt to destroy “essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves,” forced sterilization can be understood as a policy aimed at undermining Indigenous reproduction, family structures, and community continuity (Black et al. 2021, 1091).

The exhibition *Own Your Cervix* (2017) responds to these systems by reclaiming medical tools and the gendered body without reproducing medical authority. Within the exhibition, the purpose of the area designated for a guided cervical self-exam was not diagnosis or treatment, but to produce embodied knowledge and collective storytelling. Participants were invited to look at their own cervixes and generate their own understandings of their bodies outside of medical authority. As Dion Fletcher explains, the project emphasizes “the act of looking and describing” as a way of resisting medical and anthropological definitions of the body (Robertson 2017).

Furthermore, collective storytelling was not only metaphorical but materially embedded in the exhibition itself. During the self-exams, participants were invited to describe what they saw, felt, and thought while Dion Fletcher recorded their conversations from outside the partition (Inman 2018, 126). These recordings were later incorporated into the exhibition as audio accompanying a video work, meaning that participants’ voices, emotions, and interpretations became part of the artwork (Inman 2018, 126). Rather than presenting a single authoritative narrative about the cervix, the exhibition brought together many voices and perspectives, allowing meaning to emerge collectively through shared experience.

This emphasis on collective storytelling reflects Indigenous epistemologies in which knowledge is often understood as relational and produced through shared stories, lived experience, and community participation rather than delivered through institutional authority (Kovach 2019, 124). By inviting participants to interpret their own bodies and incorporating participants' voices into the artwork, Dion Fletcher positioned knowledge of the body as something created collectively rather than delivered by medical experts. The exhibition thus challenged not only medical authority over the body, but also Western models of knowledge production that prioritize objectivity and individual expertise, instead foregrounding relational, embodied, and community-based ways of knowing.

Importantly, Dion Fletcher emphasizes that participation in the self-exam was optional and not limited to people who have a cervix; “self-examination” could also be reflective or conversational, rather than physical (Sandals 2017). This framing expands bodily sovereignty beyond the individual body and into a shared, relational space of discussion and learning. By encouraging people to reflect on how bodies are viewed and regulated, *Own Your Cervix* challenges colonial and biomedical authority over Indigenous reproductive bodies and reframes bodily sovereignty as an embodied and collective practice.

#MenstrualAccessory

Colonial–patriarchal power regulates menstruation through respectability politics that frame menstrual blood as dirty, private, and incompatible with public life. Within this system, bodies that menstruate are expected to manage their reproductive processes discreetly in order to conform to colonial normalities of femininity, cleanliness, and professionalism. These expectations do not operate only through formal biomedical authority, but through everyday social discipline: the demand to conceal stains, control bodily leakage, and avoid public acknowledgment of menstruation. Shame is not an inherent response to “menstruation,” but rather a mechanism of governance. As Stoler demonstrates, colonial regimes relied on moral discourses of hygiene and bodily control to secure racial and gendered hierarchies, rendering sexuality a site of surveillance and regulation (1989, 635–646). These logics persist in contemporary norms that demand the invisibility of menstruation in public space. Respectability thus becomes a mechanism through which gendered bodies are rendered acceptable or unacceptable in public space, producing menstrual shame as a mode of governance rather than a natural response.

#MenstrualAccessory intervenes in this system by refusing the premise that menstruation must remain invisible. It is a satirical performance and social media project staged as an infomercial for a fictional product: a bottle of bright pink fabric dye designed to “beautify” menstrual stains (Sandals 2017). Wearing white clothing and allowing her menstrual blood to remain visible, Dion Fletcher parodies capitalist solutions to menstrual “problems” and critiques societal expectations of cleanliness and professionalism (Dion Fletcher 2017, 67–68). The performance invites audiences to share the stain rather than conceal it, allowing images of

menstrual blood in public space to circulate beyond the performance itself (see @menstrualaccessory on Instagram). Humor functions as a critical strategy, opening conversation around a topic typically framed as shameful or inappropriate (Dion Fletcher 2017, 62).



Figure 3. Vanessa Dion Fletcher, #MenstrualAccessory (2016), #MenstrualAccessory Performance in Chicago (2016), and #MenstrualAccessory at the Santa Fe Art Institute (2016) (@vdionf July 22, 2016; @menstrualaccessory 2019; @vdionf July 21, 2016).

By wearing white clothing and allowing menstrual blood to remain visible while moving through both galleries and everyday public spaces, Dion Fletcher disrupts the normative expectation that femininity must be managed through bodily restraint. As Dion Fletcher explains, the work emerged in response to institutional rules prohibiting the presence of blood, which she sought to question by drawing attention to the bodily fluids already present yet unacknowledged within public and professional environments (Sandals 2017). The performance exposes how respectability depends on the erasure of bodily processes and reveals the fragility of norms that equate cleanliness with moral and social worth. Rather than managing menstruation to preserve respectability, Dion Fletcher makes the stain itself the site of critique.

Importantly, menstrual blood in #MenstrualAccessory operates not only as a symbol but as a method of embodied refusal. Rather than representing menstruation, the performance enacts it in spaces where it is deemed inappropriate, forcing viewers to confront discomfort as a social and political reaction. Dion Fletcher has noted that the work addresses “what is acceptable and not acceptable” in relation to menstruating bodies, underscoring how such judgments are socially enforced rather than natural (Sandals 2017). This sustained discomfort is central to the work’s critical force, revealing how deeply respectability politics are internalized.

Through documentation and circulation on social media, images of menstrual blood in public space persist beyond the performance itself, extending the politics of visibility into everyday life. In this way, #MenstrualAccessory functions as an embodied refusal of colonial and patriarchal regulation, demonstrating how resistance can operate through the body itself rather than through representation alone.

The regulation of menstruation operates not only through biomedical authority and respectability politics, but also through the spatial separation of public and private life. Menstrual blood is expected to remain contained within domestic, medical, or invisible spaces, while public and institutional environments—including art galleries—maintain implicit rules about what bodies and materials are acceptable to encounter. Activism within this system often relies on visibility and confrontation, yet such strategies can also reproduce expectations of endurance and exposure. Dion Fletcher’s work complicates this dynamic by collapsing the boundary between public and private while refusing to frame political intervention solely through shock or spectacle.

Colonial Comfort

Within *Own Your Cervix*, the installation *Colonial Comfort* anchors these performances materially. A white Victorian settee is reupholstered, stained with the artist’s menstrual blood, and outlined with porcupine quills (Robertson 2017; Inman 2018, 126). The couch appears inviting yet unsafe, decorative yet marked, drawing attention to how blood, domestic comfort, and bodily presence are negotiated and disciplined within colonial contexts (Inman 2018, 129). This tension is grounded in Dion Fletcher’s positionality as a person of Indigenous and European ancestry, reflected in the work’s use of both Indigenous and European materials, methods, and iconography (Robertson 2017; Inman 2018, 129).



Figure 4. Vanessa Dion Fletcher, *Close-up of Colonial Comfort* (2017), *Dion Fletcher on Colonial Comfort* (2017), and *Left side of Colonial Comfort* (2017) (Baumstark 2019; @vdionf2017; @penandbrushnyc 2022).

The settee references European domestic respectability, rest, and intimacy—furniture meant to hold the body, invite pause, and signal safety. At the same time, the visible blood disrupts regimes of hygiene and colonial purity that govern which bodily substances may appear in shared space. As Dion Fletcher explains, the work emerges from the visual similarity between decorative textile patterns and bodily staining, exposing how European aesthetics are normalized

while menstrual blood is framed as dirty, excessive, and in need of concealment (Inman 2018, 127–128). By bringing these elements together, *Colonial Comfort* renders the private material of menstruation unmistakably public without relying on performance or direct confrontation.

Discomfort in this work functions as a deliberate political strategy. The couch both seduces and repels: viewers are invited to imagine sitting, resting, or waiting, while simultaneously negotiating how close they are willing to come to menstrual blood. The porcupine quills intensify this ambivalence. Drawing on Indigenous histories of quillwork as both decorative and protective, the quills introduce care, defense, and danger at once, grounding the work within a decolonial framework that emphasizes agency rather than vulnerability alone (Inman 2018, 128–129). The settee thus stages activism through proximity and hesitation, asking viewers to sit with discomfort rather than move past it.

Taken together, these interventions demonstrate how Dion Fletcher's practice reframes menstruation as a site of Indigenous feminist agency, where embodiment, sovereignty, and resistance operate simultaneously against colonial–patriarchal biopolitical power. Rather than simply revealing systems of control, her work actively responds to them by reclaiming bodily knowledge, refusing respectability, and reworking the boundaries of public, private, and institutional space. Through performance, installation, and care-based encounters, Dion Fletcher positions the menstruating body as a site of decolonial action, relationality, and ongoing political practice.

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Reconciliation Graphics for Positionality-based Solidarity: Melaney Gleeson-Lyall and Chinatown Wonders's Multilingual Thunderbird the Protector

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Abstract

This paper examines how graphics associated with Orange Shirt Day in Canada can cultivate a positional mode of solidarity through analyzing the trilingual graphic *Thunderbird the Protector* (2023) by Musqueam artist Melaney Gleeson-Lyall and Vancouver-based vendor Chinatown Wonders. Research investigates how settler practices of solidarity for Indigenous issues can more deeply engage with Canadians whose diasporic identities are shaped by racialization throughout Canada's settler-state history. This paper employs the term 'reconciliation graphics' to examine the artwork's effects beyond, but still in response to, the designated event and objectives of Orange Shirt Day. Through drawing historical and sociopolitical parallels between the Musqueam people and Chinese-Canadian settlers on Musqueam territories, visual analysis of *Thunderbird the Protector*, and positional and autoethnographic evaluation, I argue that reconciliation graphics that bring visibility to a multicultural consciousness mobilize a solidarity authenticated by the wearer's cultural resonance.

Introduction

Orange shirts worn during the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada (colloquially and originally known as Orange Shirt Day) commonly feature the tagline "Every Child Matters," and sometimes with a graphic by an artist (fig. 1). Through only three English words, the tagline's didactic message is communicated with an immediacy and moral weight that resonates both with Indigenous communities affected by Canada's residential school system and with settlers whose cultural backgrounds are just as varied as their understandings of reconciliation. By considering the power of "one simple action" (Orange Shirt Society 2025), that is, wearing an orange shirt and its effects on the wearer and observers alike, a curiosity is raised as to how this highly visible medium of 'reconciliation graphics' can address certain nuances in practicing solidarity as experienced by settler migrants of diasporic identities. Demonstrating this, the trilingual reconciliation graphic *Thunderbird the Protector*, by Musqueam artist Melaney Gleeson-Lyall and Vancouver-based vendor Chinatown Wonders, involves Indigenous-settler migrant collaboration, curated multilingualism, and reflexivity in its wearer's own identity. These processes are grounded references to the multicultural localities of those in engagement with the artwork, ultimately cultivating a form of positionality-based solidarity.



Figure 1. Orange T-shirts designed by Musqueam artist Darryl Blyth (left and right) and Kwulasultun artist Eliot White-Hill (center) featured at the University of British Columbia Vancouver campus's Orange Shirt Day Intergenerational March. Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre, September 30, 2022. <https://irshdc.ubc.ca/orange-shirt-day-2022-photo-gallery/>.

Musqueam and Chinese-Canadian Collaboration, Relations, and Resilience

This first section outlines the artistic voices and historical-geographic grounds that have brought together the trilingual *Thunderbird the Protector*. From Instagram posts, online store webpages, and memoir, several sources cited in this section are neither academic nor peer-reviewed. While evaluating these sources, I chose not to linger on dissecting biases or subjectivity, which are conditions that positivist traditions of Western academia would disregard for lacking credibility (Wark 2021, 193). Rather, as primary sources, it is precisely these citations' subjectivities that record the motivations, experiences, and involvement of their authors in relation to advocating for reconciliation. The use of these primary source citations is especially relevant in centring Indigenous voices, as Joe Wark (Anishinabe) notes that such advancements in communication technologies have expanded Indigenous peoples' "capacity to represent [themselves] and [their] perspectives to Canada and the world" (Wark 2021, 193).

Melaney Gleeson-Lyall is a Musqueam, Snaw'naw'as, and Lyackson Coast Salish artist and a survivor of the Sixties Scoop (Gleeson-Lyall 2026; Chinatown Wonders 2023), a period from approximately the 1960s to 1980s in which an estimated 20,000 or more First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children were removed from their birth homes by child welfare authorities and placed for adoption into mostly non-Indigenous households, often without the consent of

children's families (IRSHDC n.d.; Sinclair 2007, 65–6). Raven Sinclair's review on the history of Indigenous adoption in Canada names traumatic identity crises as one of the issues endured by many adoptee-survivors (2007, 75), and articulates the Sixties Scoop as a period within the greater "Aboriginal child welfare era" that roughly begins with the establishment of residential schools in the late 1800s (2007, 67). Gleeson-Lyall's resilience as a survivor is reflected in her means to reclaim cultural identity and belonging through contemporary Coast Salish designs (Gleeson-Lyall 2026).

In collaboration with Gleeson-Lyall, Vancouver-based Chinatown Wonders, a vendor of artisan goods mainly by local Chinese-Canadian artists, operates to "build and strengthen connections to Chinatown [that] deepen ties to community, culture, history, heritage, and place" (Chinatown Wonders n.d.). Incorporated in 1886, Vancouver's Chinatown is one of the oldest Chinatowns in Canada (Parks Canada n.d.). Many descendants of earlier Chinese migrants—who arrived in the Vancouver area as early as the 1850s—have moved out of Chinatown since the decades following the 1950s and into Greater Vancouver's middle-class to rich neighbourhoods; middle-class and wealthy Chinese immigrants of the 1990s have bypassed living in Chinatown altogether (Grant and Steedmann 2025, 61–62). Today, the cultural and socioeconomic circumstances of the Chinese settler migrant experience in Vancouver live beyond the context of Chinatown, but Chinatown Wonders' summoning of local history recalls the city as a major entry point for new Chinese immigrants, where the Chinatown neighbourhood had developed as a "self-segregated enclave, due in part to racially motivated hostility elsewhere in the city prior to the Second World War" (Parks Canada, n.d.).

The central design of *Thunderbird the Protector* is an original work of Gleeson-Lyall's and has been sold as a T-shirt through the artist's own independent business (Gleeson-Lyall 2023). However, its trilingual iteration is the result of her collaboration with Chinatown Wonders, and this version is found on T-shirts and stickers sold exclusively on the vendor's website (Chinatown Wonders n.d.). The symbolic creation of this version of *Thunderbird the Protector* in Vancouver's Chinatown underpins the neighbourhood as the historic grounds of Chinese-migrant experiences with discrimination that not only parallel those of Musqueam experiences, but also interconnect the two communities' endured struggles. These interconnected struggles are intimately evident in the life of Musqueam Elder Larry Grant, as told in his memoir *Reconciling*. Elder Larry Grant was born to a Musqueam matriarch and a Chinese farmer father. The two met under the circumstances of early Chinese farmers leasing land from the Musqueam, as they could not own Crown land (Grant and Steedmann 2025, 28–29). At the age of four, Grant moved to Chinatown in 1940 after being displaced from the Musqueam reserve due to being stripped of his Indian status. The state's definition of First Nations identification, or in legal terms, being "Indian," was not based on Indigenous groups' own systems of kinship, but instead on the colonial criteria of patrilineal descent which assumes authority of men over women and children; amendments since the 1980s have addressed this sex-based criteria, but legal challenges of eliminating various inequities in status eligibility remain today (Crown-Indigenous

Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2018). But being non-status, legally labelled “bastard child,” also meant that Grant was no longer eligible to be sent to St. Mary’s Indian Residential School in Mission City (Grant and Steedmann 2025, 61–62), thus avoiding the assimilationist endeavours of residential schools to “destroy the Indian” (Davin 1879 quoted in IRSHDC n.d.) by removing Indigenous children from their communities, languages, and lands. Grant describes his Chinese-Musqueam identity within the context of these traumatic events as “like you didn’t belong anywhere. The government didn’t recognize Chinese as citizens at that time and didn’t recognize us [Musqueam of matrilineal descent], other than as bastard, half-breed children of our mother” (Grant and Steedmann 2025, 62).

Outlines of the Sixties Scoop and the involuntary loss of Indian status emphasize that while artistic, cultural, and sociopolitical expressions summoned by the events of Orange Shirt Day commemorate the victims of the residential school system, Daigle (2019) asserts that understandings of historical colonial violence in Canada must not be restricted to the context of residential schools. Through their meditations on personal and community experiences with being the target of colonial and white supremacist projects, the sociopolitical voices of Melaney Gleeson-Lyall, Chinatown Wonders, and Elder Larry Grant denote that such periods of migration and segregation as endured by Musqueam and early Chinese-Canadians in BC are as intertwined as they are parallel, and are intimate memories as much as they are history.

Visual Analysis and Composing Trilinguality



Figure 2. *Thunderbird the Protector*. Graphic by Melaney Gleeson-Lyall and Chinatown Wonders, 2023. Image provided by Chinatown Wonders through email message to author, March 21, 2026.



Figure 3. Example of Coast Salish design. Provided by Shaun Peterson (Qwalsius), January 25, 2010. “Coast Salish design elements”, 2:22. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kc3K-MyH3xg>.



Figure 4. Example of formline design. Provided by Shaun Peterson, January 25, 2010, “Coast Salish design elements”, 3:43. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kc3K-MyH3xg>.

While Elder Larry Grant makes ties between the communities known through the medium of memoir, Gleeson-Lyall and Chinatown Wonders take on a vocabulary and grammar of illustration and orthographies to make these ties known through artistic and didactic communication.

Evoking qualities of freedom, strength, and liveliness in its wingspread posture, the silhouette of Gleeson-Lyall’s Thunderbird illustration encloses symmetrically distributed trigons and crescents (fig. 2). These shapes and their relief onto the silhouette-framed body are specific to Coast Salish design traditions (fig. 3), which are distinguishable from the continuous flow of

shapes and lines in the “formline” styles of more northern Northwest-Coast art (University of Victoria Legacy Galleries 2015; fig. 4). As Jordan Wilson (Musqueam) explains, northern Northwest styles have “been privileged by non-Indigenous audiences [for decades]” and that “Vancouver has been somewhat of a ground-zero for this phenomenon, contributing to the erasure of the local [Coast Salish] nations’ distinct artistic traditions” (Wilson 2018, 28). Gleeson-Lyall’s distinctly Coast Salish design elements assert the graphic’s locality—the Vancouver area—as Coast Salish territory, where local traditions of cultural-visual expression are still alive, adaptable to the contemporary medium of graphics, and ultimately self-determined. This emphasis on locality is further affirmed by Chinatown Wonders’ textual additions of the tagline “Every Child Matters” not just in English, which is curved at the bottom of the graphic, but also its written *hən̓qəmin̓əm* (Musqueam’s language) version situated on the top:

wə ʔiʔ steʔəxʷəl tə mekʷ wet

Nestled under the *hən̓qəmin̓əm* text is the phrase of the same meaning in Traditional Chinese script:

每個孩子都重要

The *hən̓qəmin̓əm* and Chinese taglines are closer to each other than they are to the English “Every Child Matters” not just compositionally, but also in phrase. The *hən̓qəmin̓əm* tagline translates as “All children are important” (Musqueam Indian Band 2021), or “Every child is important” (MOA Shop n.d), and the latter phrase is also the translation of the Chinese tagline (author’s translation). Whether a descendant of the earliest migrants or of later waves of migration, from a lineage of Cantonese, Toisanese, Mandarin or Min Nan language group speakers (Stats Canada, 2024) to name a few, Chinese-Canadian identities in Vancouver have only become more diverse since the arrival of the first Chinese migrants. Thus, employment of the Traditional Chinese script over other Chinese language orthographies, like the Simplified Chinese script, cannot possibly reflect the language experiences of all Chinese-Canadians in this locality. Navigating these choices in representation, Chinatown Wonders ultimately adheres to the collaboration’s pillar of consciousness towards locality and history; the use of Traditional Chinese characters reflects the language specificities of the earliest residents of Vancouver’s Chinatown, who were mostly Cantonese and Toisanese speakers by 1900 (Grant and Steedmann 2025, 60). This linguistic context precedes the Chinese government’s standardization of the Simplified Chinese script in the mid-20th century by the Chinese government (American Translators Association 2024).

Choices in composition and phrasing promote a solidarity between Musqueam and Chinese settler migrants who both occupy Coast Salish territory. It is another form of “solidarity between various groups of the Pacific world” (Carnes 2022, 80) like Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas’s ‘Haida manga’ form (fig. 5), which merges traditional Haida visual representations and the dynamics of Japanese manga that Yahgulanaas first encountered during his experience as a guide for Japanese tourists visiting Haida Gwaii (Carnes 2022, 79).

Thunderbird the Protector and *Haida* manga are both contextualized by an understanding that these selected cultural, linguistic, and artistic expressions—Chinese script and Japanese manga—are of a non-Native, settler presence, but in Yahgulanaas's own words, are also "not linked to the colonization of our country" (Carnes 2022, 80). While Yahgulanaas's explanation does not completely resonate with my positional navigations on the complexities of settler migrant identity in relation to the state's colonial legacies, which I discuss in the next section, the cross-cultural process he describes ultimately produces a space for Indigenous revitalization that is not entirely reliant on criticisms and negotiations with colonial frameworks that may perpetuate their centring. The witness and identification of the three different languages (also aided by their three distinct orthographies) in a single work prompts a realization, or at least curiosity, of existing connections between these cultural identities through paralleled and shared histories.

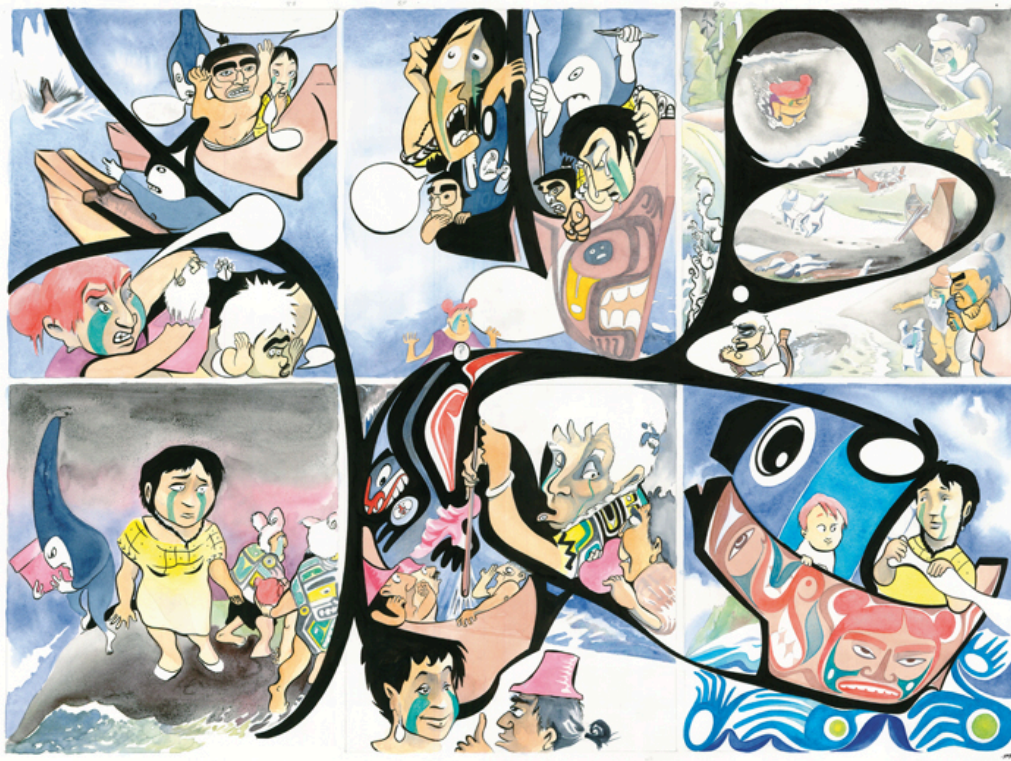


Figure 5. Panels from *Red: A Haida Manga*. Illustrated by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, 2009. <https://stoningtongallery.com/artwork/red-a-haida-manga-sheet-18/>.

***Thunderbird the Protector's* Unsettling of the Chinese-Canadian, Settler Migrant Self**

The tagline "Every Child Matters" has prompted me to reflect on my own second-generation immigrant heritage; my cultural identity hinges on a complicated relationship with the nation-state of Canada as being both a revered home of multiculturalism and a locale of racial othering. An uneasy realization strikes in me that I experience pride in my Chinese-Canadian identity on unceded Indigenous land, and I grow anxious as to how I can

demonstrate a sincere mode of solidarity that resists habits of prescriptive, impersonal, and ultimately counterintuitive performativity into which actions meant to be practiced by settlers, like land acknowledgements, have tended to fall (Robinson et al. 2019, 21). This personal, candid experience of “unsettling the self” (Walley and Elliott 2025, 126) is the core of this exploration’s framework of positionality and autoethnography. I explore my positionality, that is, my situatedness to the subject of study, to inform the research process (Njeri 2020, 386), and following autoethnographic methods, I use personal modes of address to transcend ethnography’s traditions of “othering different racial and socioeconomic groups” and navigate “ethnographic accounts that unapologetically start at home” (Walley and Elliott 2025, 122). As a second-generation immigrant whose family’s history in Canada began in the 1970s, my positionality in relation to previously outlined historical anti-Chinese racial hostilities in Vancouver calls for me to clarify that I am not part of the lineage of Chinese-Canadians whose homes and businesses were terrorized by anti-Asian riots (Grant and Steedmann 2025, 60) or actively denied citizenship until the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1947 (Grant and Steedmann 2025, 28). Nevertheless, I find that I owe it to academic research and myself to reflect on my Chinese-Canadian identity—as experienced on unceded Coast Salish territory—as a way of expanding understandings of what being a settler migrant on Indigenous lands means amidst the constructed dichotomy of Indigenous versus (white) settler identity in North American contexts.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released their final report on their investigations into the violence and abuses inflicted on over 150,000 Indigenous children in Indian residential schools, from the opening of the first school in 1831 to the closing of the last in 1996 (Daigle 2019, 704). Since then, understandings of Canada’s residential schools as colonial systems of cultural assimilation and genocide have entered the state’s collective consciousness at a level of mainstream which Indigenous individuals like Michelle Daigle (Mushkegowuk) had not encountered beforehand (2019, 704). But within this “era of reconciliation” arises issues of “the state’s fetishization of Indigenous suffering tied to the *history* of residential schools” (emphasis in original, Daigle 2019, 704), where colonialism is relegated as bygone through the performance of “white Canadians shedding tears over ‘past’ violence” (Daigle 2019, 704) as a means to “absolve themselves from implication in the colonial project without having to make any substantial changes” (Wark 2021, 196). Daigle also emphasizes that the very language of TRC focuses on the victims’ “*past* suffering”, “their responsibility to heal from *past* wounds”, and that the term “*reconciliation*” itself “ideologically implies that diplomatic and respectful relationships between the colonial government and Indigenous peoples once existed and can be returned to” (emphasis in original, 2019, 707). While I do acknowledge that I am integrated into the academic and sociopolitical institutions that facilitate and enable this performativity, and therefore have not been immune to participating in what Daigle terms the “spectacle of reconciliation” (2019, 704), I have also considered the harm in assuming that settler migrants, especially those of racialized identities, engage with reconciliation for the sake of alleviating settler guilt rather than to enact sociopolitical change. Such an assumption erases the

extent to which Canada, as a settler state, has facilitated white supremacist projects that have closely victimized both Indigenous and migrant communities. It also denies the complex, intersectional identities of migrant settlers through a sociopolitical whitewashing that ultimately perpetuates an Indigenous-white settler dichotomy. I must clarify that I am not arguing that Daigle (2019) and Wark (2021) are making these assumptions, but that this gap in addressing the diversity of settler identities reveals that my exploration of settler migrants resisting performative allyship is not anchored in the synthesis of these issues' existing literature, but instead, in a more immediate, intimate, autoethnographic approach.



Figure 6. Thunderbird the Protector in its T-shirt form. Photographed by author, October 9, 2025.



Figure 7. Melaney Gleeson-Lyall and Chinatown Wonders, *Thunderbird the Protector*, as a sticker on the author's laptop (author's own photograph), October 9, 2025.

While the potential of effective solidarity practices reaches far beyond land acknowledgements, wearing an orange shirt, or decorating personal belongings with reconciliation graphics, the “belief that even small, symbolic, and everyday actions are significant” therefore means that such actions “must be thought through carefully” (Robinson and Martin 2016, 2). In the following paragraphs, I exercise this careful thinking while reflecting on what it means to wear an orange shirt as a way to demonstrate solidarity, *Thunderbird the Protector's* tangible presence in my own life, and making space for Indigenous voices while advocating for Indigenous justice as a settler.

First, the story behind the symbolism of the orange shirt must be recalled, where Phyllis Webstad—the founder of Orange Shirt Day—upon arriving at St. Joseph's Mission Residential School at the age of six in 1973, had her orange shirt along with the rest of her newly

bought clothes for the occasion of being sent to school, taken away and never returned (Orange Shirt Society n.d.). The predominant symbol of the orange shirt ultimately emerges from the resilience of a survivor who has mobilized her story into a movement for engaging all Canadians regardless of age, background, cultural identity, with recognizing the violent history and ongoing impacts of the residential school system (IRSHDC n.d.).

As a T-shirt I wear on Orange Shirt Day (fig. 6) and a sticker on the surface of my laptop that remains visible year-round (fig. 7), the graphic does not simply demonstrate my support for honouring those affected by the residential school system, but more acutely provides visibility to my own positionality in the reconciliation process: my identity as a settler occupying the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Coast Salish First Nations is complicated by my identity as a second-generation Chinese immigrant, and my awareness of the interconnected endurences of discrimination between early Chinese migrants and Musqueam communities is what grounds my locality-informed solidarity. Activation of the wearer's cultural resonances with *Thunderbird the Protector* encourages current and localized discussion and action for expanding understandings of these site-specific shared histories and experiences of discrimination, endurance, and belonging, thus dissolving the performative reconciliation spectacle's illusion of colonial and white supremacist violence as a threat of the past.

Lastly, I acknowledge that my use of 'reconciliation graphics' and 'reconciliation' as shorthand terms for referring to advocacy towards righting the wrongs of Canada's colonial projects contradict my acknowledgment of criticisms on the word "*reconciliation*" as enabling the fetishization and historicization of Indigenous peoples' subjection to systemic violence and abuses that aimed to eliminate their cultures, communities, and rights to their lands (Daigle 2019). My response to this contradiction is not a rebuttal, or even a proposed resolution towards such criticism, but instead an articulation of practicing positionality-based solidarity as a settler. To enter localized and multiculturally conscious discussions of support for Indigenous justice often calls for the use of language that, while facilitated by the state—such as the official observance and very name of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation—is accessible to individuals of the locality's varying understandings of the issues which Indigenous communities in Canada face today. But like the visual and orthographic compositions of the *Thunderbird the Protector* graphic, centring Indigenous voices must continue to be principal within vernacular expressions of advancing solidarity for Indigenous justice; to acknowledge and embrace the capacity of these expressions to be unsettled and transformed is a positionally and autoethnographically-conscious means to make space for Indigenous peoples to reclaim control over their histories, experiences and voices.

Conclusion

Melaney Gleeson-Lyall and Chinatown Wonders' *Thunderbird the Protector* encourages a mode of solidarity that is not directly shadowed by colonial legacies through making Indigenous and migrant parallels and relations visible. This is evidenced by the graphic's

contextualizing citations of interconnected Musqueam and Chinese-migrant histories of hardship on the grounds of Vancouver's Chinatown, historic and locality-informed choices in curating trilingual and cross-cultural design, and its evaluated effects through the positional interpretation of its tangible presence in the author's life. *Thunderbird the Protector's* bestowed visibility to these historically rich parallels and dynamics between Indigenous and settler migrant identities stimulates a practice of solidarity that is profoundly based in positionality. It prompts exploration into the shape of one's settler identity by reframing the depth of familiarity with events of discrimination on the unceded lands which one occupies. Engaging in one's positionality resists performativity, as it is the responsibility of the individual who engages with the graphic through circulating its visibility to be informed on the processes of its creation and how its associated narratives resonate with their personal practices of solidarity.

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SOCIETY & TECHNOLOGY



1. Student and generative AI model, Managing AI in the Classroom: An Ethnography of the “In-between” How Faculty of Arts Professors are Navigating AI Policymaking at UBC. 2. UBC Learning Exchange building at 612 Main St., Missing: Wheelchair: Access, Accessibility, and Disability in Community Development Work.

Managing AI in the Classroom: An Ethnography of the “In-between”: How Faculty of Arts Professors are Navigating AI Policymaking at UBC

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Abstract

As of 2025, the University of British Columbia (UBC)’s policy on the use of generative AI in classrooms grants professors a significant amount of freedom regarding how to create policies for student use of GenAI tools in their classes. Such autonomy leaves room for individual perceptions, motivations, and values to impact policy design. Considering the constant development of AI as a technology, professors’ processes of AI policymaking exists in a purely liminal state. Through a critical examination of AI-use statements included in syllabi, semi-structured interviews, and Interlocuter-drawn mind-maps, this study aims to analyze how professors in the UBC faculty of Arts manage the uncertainty and improvisation involved in AI policymaking while the technology (and ethical standards) remains in a state of ‘in-between’. Through engagement with professors and their policymaking process, we explore how ethics and emotions are navigated during the policymaking process, the various pedagogical considerations confronted with AI use, and consider relational policymaking as a way to imagine new academic futures. From this analysis, we notice the remarkable lack of consistency or predictable developmental patterns of the future of AI policymaking; thus emphasizing the urgent need for additional research as UBC continues to respond to and regulate generative AI in post-secondary education.

Vignette from Interview with Interlocutor 3

On November 14th, 2025, at 3 pm, I sat at my apartment desk tucked in an overpriced cul-de-sac on the University of British Columbia Vancouver campus. With a cup of cold coffee to my left, a nearly dead dollar-store black pen and tabbed pink, blue, and yellow notebook to my right, I opened my computer and started up Zoom in anticipation of the interview. On the left side of my laptop, I watched my professor as she carefully walked me through her current and past AI-use policies for her students at UBC.

Backed by the delicate clicking of my hands against the keyboard, I listened as the UBC professor began to explain how she tackled the daunting task of regulating generative AI use in her classrooms. I glanced to the left and right corners of my computer screen, watching my professor’s hands move in great elegant arcs in and out of frame as she chronicled the experience. When she had worked her way through all her points, she stopped. With the bright light illuminating her face, she looked at me with focus, waiting in the brief pause for my next question. In her first answer, she had managed to flow from one point of discussion to the next.

Her answer touched on each of my questions, which I initially thought would need to be approached one by one.

When I asked her to elaborate on how she approached the intellectually and technically challenging task of regulating AI in classes, she emphasized that “this isn’t the kind of thing individuals can handle.” She took a breath before continuing, “it feels a little bit weird when you are forced to make a policy in a vacuum... especially ‘cause you are operating in an institutional context.” She paused and then asked, “how can you make this kind of policy? It’s weird right?” There another was a pause, leaving me time to mull over her words as she gathered her thoughts.

“It is...it feels...it’s very scary actually because...I mean... it doesn’t feel like it is your place to make that kind of policy?” she stammered. Another pause. “But [there are] no forthcoming [policies], so you kind of have to take it upon yourself to do it,” she said. Her shoulders and chest seemed to curl slightly inwards as she finished, deflating from the effort of sharing and heavy with the weight of her own words. I felt myself sink further into my chair.

Together, we released an awkward, “yeah”, acknowledging the weight of the responsibility thrust upon her across the digital divide. I listened to the static of the microphone buzz for a couple of seconds, still feeling stuck under the heft of her last sentences. It almost felt like a confession - one that seemed so natural and obvious once spoken, but that I was nonetheless unprepared for. A squeaky laugh echoed between our microphones, breaking the flow of static briefly. I forced a smile, trying to climb back out from underneath the weight of her words. I glanced again at my interview questions. Then back to the screen. Another fuzzy breath of silence wrapped around us. I released another breath. Then a “yikes... yeah... um...” before slipping back into a smooth, light cadence.

Introduction

With the recent rise of generative AI, academic institutions have been forced to quickly adjust their overall approaches to teaching, student engagement, and academic integrity. As of 2025, the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) implemented policy on generative AI use in the classroom grants professors a high degree of autonomy in creating their respective policies. With the recent release of UBC’s drafted Principles and Guidelines for Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in Teaching and Learning in January of 2026, more thorough principles and areas of consideration have been listed by UBC to aid professors in considering how they want to regulate AI use in their classes. However, with the introduction of this draft after the start of the semester (and based on the contents of the draft itself), the development of AI-use policies is still largely left up to professor discretion.

Thus, current AI policies are subjective to individual perceptions and motivations, which leads to variation and flux in policies as professors grapple with the changing landscape of academia, student experiences, their own personal ethos, and new studies on artificial

intelligence. UBC's 2025 policy guidance for professors simply states that faculty must "pay attention" to the "ethical considerations" of generative AI (*GENAI - Academic Integrity at UBC*, 2025). But what does it mean to "pay attention" to ethical considerations of an ever-changing, brand-new, and paradigm-shifting technology?

This study aims to analyze how professors have thus far managed the uncertainty and individual improvisation involved in AI policymaking. Looking at how professors have experienced managing AI in their classrooms allows us to evaluate how policymaking involves weighing ethical, emotional, pedagogical, and relational considerations against each other on scales determined by personal experiences. This ongoing process of negotiation has thrust professors into a space of "in-between," where there is no certain direction or destination for AI-use policies. Similarly, generative AI itself occupies a liminal space in academia. By dramatically challenging existing understandings of pedagogy, academic integrity, and student-professor trust at UBC, generative AI forces existing academic structures into uncharted territory. This dual liminality creates a space for infinite possibility as professors, institutions, and students are creating and envisioning futurities in academia. Thus, studying AI use policies at UBC is deeply important as it provides insight as to how professors navigate change, and how this navigation is connected to and informed by a larger web of relations.

A Note on Reflexivity

In conducting this research and delivering our findings, we recognise that our position as undergraduate students at UBC has influenced both our choice of topic, our pool of interlocutors, and the interpretation of our findings. Although our integration into UBC as students gave us greater proximity to our research subjects and topic, being insiders at UBC as an institution of learning and employment has undoubtedly shaped our overall approach to AI regulation and the tensions we notice within our own academic community. As UBC students, we are also aware that the topics presented in our study are directly relevant to our own learning experiences. This has allowed us to remain passionate about our study while simultaneously forcing us to recognize that our results may align or oppose our personal opinions on the use of GenAI. Simultaneously orienting ourselves as insiders at UBC and outsiders to department and administrative relationships has been vital to the unique character of our study. However, we must acknowledge this positionality in the interest of transparency and to hold ourselves accountable to higher standards of academic conduct.

Literature Review

Existing literature on AI policies in post-secondary education has primarily focused on how AI will impact pedagogy in higher academic institutions, and proposes a direct Theory of Change (ToC) that can be followed to a desired outcome. Chan (2023) and Luke (2025) have attempted to establish an AI-use policy framework to help address the impact of artificial intelligence on post-secondary institutions and systems of learning. To create these policy

frameworks, researchers like Chan (2023) draw from student, professor, and administrative knowledge to create policy recommendations. Many of these studies also center around international AI policies, including those adopted by UNESCO and international education organizations (Chan 2023). A variety of research, including theoretical works and ethnographies, focus on how AI policies can be used to regulate AI use in academic institutions (Vambe, 2025; Parker et al. 2025; Chan 2023; Stix and Maas 2021). Further, policymaking literature often focuses on direct pathways for change that are directed by quantitative data (Ulla-Diez et al. 2025; Laing 2022; Bolten et al. 2018). In this regard, new policies are introduced along a linear Theory of Change (ToC) to stabilize outcomes through risk assessment, cost-benefit analysis, and stakeholder assessment. ToC does not account for the personal experiences of uncertainty that guide policy changes, especially regarding generative AI use in the classroom.

Alternatively, existing literature on anthropological patterns common in policymaking argues that policy construction ought not to be viewed through a linear model. Traditional conceptions of the ‘policy cycle’ view the process of policymaking as a bureaucratic action capable of acting through a kind of ‘authoritative instrumentalism’ to solve problems and produce a desired outcome (Shore & Wright 2011, 1). Importantly, this account of policymaking assumes policies are ‘objective entities’ and thus, policy construction consists of analyzing a range of possible policies, implementing the best one, considering the outcomes of said policy, and (depending on the desirability of the outcomes) adjusting the policy to better resolve the identified issue (Shore & Wright 2011, 4–5). Despite many academics recognizing the flaws of this account, the linear understanding of policymaking continues to largely define the ways in which academics conceptualize policies (Shore & Wright). In political science, much consideration has gone into the ways in which policies are replicated and disseminated globally. Similarly, this literature is “framed within rational choice theories and positivistic models” and views policymaking as a process where “decision makers make fully informed strategic choices and analysts measure policy effects in terms of calculable costs and benefits”. (Shore & Wright, 2011, 6). In contrast, a more anthropological account of policymaking has pointed out that as policies are contextualized in cultural structures and systems of meaning, policies are continuously contested and are not the result of simplified or linear cause-and-effect relationships. Thus, policies can “act as windows onto political processes in which actors, agents, concepts and technologies interact in different sites, creating or consolidating new rationalities of governance and regimes of knowledge and power” (Shore & Wright 2011, 2).

The literature revealed gaps surrounding the firsthand experiences of professors in developing AI policy. Few papers have situated AI policy creation in the context of policies developed for syllabi by professors. There is little known literature on how this is further complicated in large public Canadian universities that have institutionalised frameworks for learning and academic conduct. Additionally, sparse literature exists exclusively focusing on how professors specifically are navigating AI-use in their classroom. Our work aims to focus on AI policy-making in the Canadian context to offer valuable insight into how AI policies are

created, changed, and implemented in the Faculty of Arts at UBC Vancouver. By looking at AI-policymaking through a process-oriented lens, our ethnography does not aim to provide any solutions or definitive suggestions for academic institutions. Instead, we focus on the constant negotiation of values and ontological actors as a distinctive object of study in itself, which could allow for greater insights into the individual and internal mechanisms involved in AI-policymaking at UBC.

Research Questions

To focus our investigation of AI policy creation in the Faculty of Arts at UBC, we organized our study around the following three research questions:

- **First**, how do professors navigate or attempt to control the use of artificial intelligence in their classes? What personal values or factors inform AI policies included in course syllabi?
- **Secondly**, have professors' AI policies changed since being added to their syllabi? Why and when have they been adjusted? What personal values come into play when professors notice new capacities and uses for AI in (and outside of) the classroom?
- **Thirdly**, in what ways do departmental or disciplinary norms and academic areas of study influence a professor's generative AI policies? Have changes in disciplinary focus or research prompted changes in AI policies in syllabi?

As we conducted our fieldwork, each question was examined and (based on the relevance of the question to the lived experiences of our interlocutors) used to direct both our research methods, the nature of our interview questions, and the organization and interpretation of our findings.

Research Methods

Considering the wide range of prospective findings related to our research, we employed a variety of techniques to gain insight into how professors manage AI in their classes. For our sample, we included five professors across the Faculty of Arts at UBC from the departments of History, Philosophy, Political Science, and Anthropology. It should be noted that all of the professors included in our sample are instructors and researchers working in the faculty of arts. In this sense, the findings of our study are contextual to this area of specialization. However, given the broad scope of our initial research questions, this methodology and sample size was intentionally employed to properly saturate our data and expose ourselves to a broad range of policy processes within the social sciences and humanities at UBC while still engaging in the nuance of perspectives presented by our interlocutors.

To gain insight into how our interlocutors' policies evolved over time, we conducted archival work-studying past and current syllabi. To ensure that our research remained relevant to our direct environment, we limited the syllabi incorporated in our study to those connected to classes taught at UBC, even if the professor had taught at another institution since enacting their

AI policies. Based on the number of classes a particular interlocutor taught and the number of years they were a professor at UBC, we received between one to three syllabi from each of our five interlocutors, ranging from term one of the 2023 summer session to winter term one of 2025. In each of these syllabi, we took note of any policy changes, major adjustments in course structure, or statements on academic integrity that were related to artificial intelligence and generative AI use. With these statements in mind, we made sure to approach the second method of our research in context of the interlocutor's current and previous policies to determine changes across time.

Our primary method of study used in this research was a series of semi-structured interviews. These interviews were scheduled for an estimated forty-five minutes, however based on follow-up questions, the direction of the interview, and the number of comments made by the interviewer, the interviews ranged from thirty minutes to three hours. Although initially, our intention was to conduct every interview in person, in the working environment of the professor, our interviews occurred in a variety of formats, with two of the five total interviews occurring over a virtual call platform for the particular interlocutors' comfort and convenience. One interlocutor who was interviewed over a phone call did not want their interview to be recorded. In this case, only written notes were taken. Here, the notes reflected general policy concerns and contained some quotations, but due to the format, non-verbal cues were impossible to take notes on.

After interviews were concluded, we asked each interlocutor to create a 'mind-map' illustrating their policy creation experience. Grounded in Colebrook's (2022) interpretation of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizomatic network theory (1980), the mind-maps visualize the policymaking process as described by the interlocutors. The rhizomatic network theory provides a framework for thinking, reading and writing that is decentralized and nonhierarchical (Colebrook 2022). Colebrook points out that a rhizome is "a lateral, decentered, proliferating, and interconnected web of relations," and is therefore "unlike the hierarchical (root, branch, offshoots) model of a tree" (Colebrook 2021)). Additionally, Chatterjee (2021) applied rhizomatic literary theory to ethnographic field assemblages, to represent a network of places, ideas, persons, and objects, allowing fieldworkers to trace the complexity of multiple identities across time and space. We followed the work of Chatterjee (2021) and Colebrook (2022), by mapping our fieldnotes on paper as relational, non-hierarchical networks. Following this logic, policymaking is more than an individual, iterative process, and is instead the result of a flowing, multidirectional network with resounding impacts. The metaphor provides a nuanced approach to the various hierarchical and non-hierarchical relationships between elements of AI-policy making.

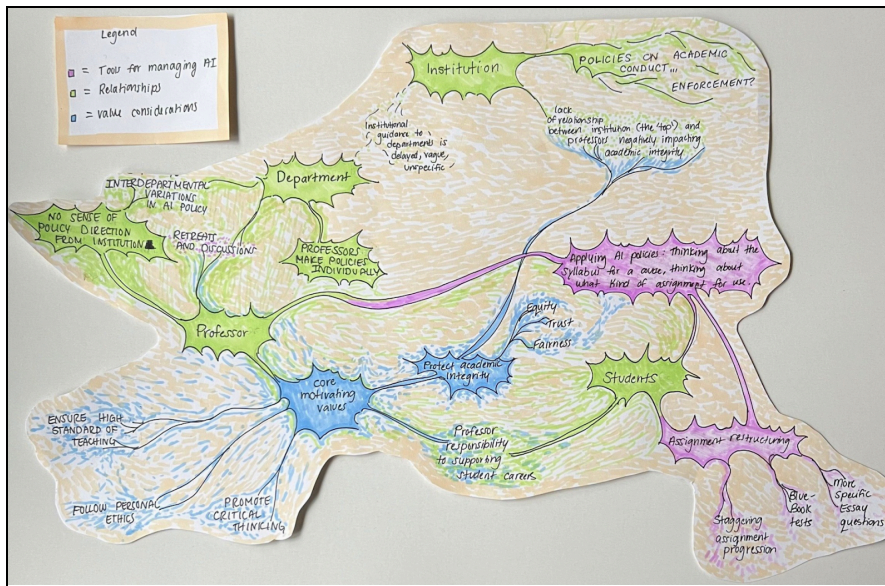


Figure 3: Mind-Atlas

With this methodology, we provided guidance when requested, but we refrained from providing our interlocutors with any substantive instructional framework or format for their mind-maps. This ambiguity allowed us to observe how each professor naturally conceptualized, visualized, and navigated the process of AI-policymaking. By ensuring that each interlocutor was the primary author of their respective mind-map we lowered the risk of bias, however our presence as observers during the creation process, especially as UBC student's, may have influenced the degree to which professors were comfortable expressing their full opinions. Notably, not all of the interlocutors created a traditional mind-map. After consultation with our interlocutors, we came to realize this unconventional formatting was intentional. For one interlocutor, it reflected the non-visual nature of their AI-policy creation. For another interlocutor, the decision to create a simple drawing was intended to reflect their hesitancy to even engage with AI as a technology and thus, make an AI policy.

To visualize the connections between professor's experiences we constructed a mind-atlas to demonstrate how common points mentioned by our interlocutors contrasted and connected on a larger scale. The larger ethnographic map-atlas serves as a visual representation of the prominent points highlighted by the interlocutors in their own mind-maps (Appendix 2). After creating and combining various drafts of our cumulative mind-atlas, we were able to illustrate the personal values, actors, tools, and common concerns and sentiments that contribute to AI policymaking for syllabi. By combining interlocutor mind-maps, the mind-atlas allowed us to build a more holistic and nuanced narrative of the shifting pressures and considerations that influence AI policymaking.

It should also be noted that when gathering our data, we also took photographs of the interlocutors' workspaces. We hoped that this would allow us to see how each professor's values and AI-policy creation processes were reflected in their working environments. However, after comparing these photographs with our interlocutor's interviews, we noticed no connection between these environments and their inhabitants' AI policies. Thus, we chose not to include these photographs in our analysis.

After gathering all of our visual, audio, and written data, we transcribed and coded our interlocutor interviews based on the natural themes that emerged from the discussions. Then, we inductively drew connections between the themes and sub-themes to our original interview questions and theoretical framework. In keeping with the desires of our interlocutors, anonymity has been maintained throughout this paper. This will be notable in the following section, featuring discussions on "Interlocutor 1", "Interlocutor 2", "Interlocutor 3", "Interlocutor 4" and "Interlocutor 5".

Findings

Our study—including interview responses, archival research, interviews, and creative visualisations (interlocutor mind maps)—revealed three primary dimensions navigated by professors during the policymaking process: general ethical and emotional considerations navigated during the policymaking process, pedagogical considerations in responding to AI, and the relationality of policymaking (as a tool to imagine new academic futures). These three dimensions involved in the policymaking experience are not definitive or exhaustive. However, they do provide a structured overview of different experiences that professors had throughout their AI policy creation process. It is also important to note that these experiences often coexist or overlap during the policymaking process, as professors weigh multiple considerations simultaneously. Understanding the overlapping nature of these themes further demonstrates the liminality of AI policymaking, as the process of information acquisition, elimination of choices, and decision lacks a clear boundary.

1. Intersections of Ethics and Emotion

When confronted with the uncertainty of regulating generative AI in academic spaces, there was a significant emotional dimension in our Interlocutors' reactions (which often stemmed from personal ethical stances). A key feature that came up repeatedly was a sense of being completely overwhelmed by the prospect of creating an AI policy without institutional guidance and given the high stakes. In their interview, Interlocutor 5 succinctly described the overwhelming and high stakes nature of policymaking. For them, "university educators at every level... are somewhere between upset, alarmed, terrified, and completely confused as to how to navigate a crisis of writing." In this sense, the idea of setting a precedent for future AI use policies (whereby current choices have increased weight because they are connected to a 'crisis') makes the practice of AI policymaking particularly upsetting, confusing, and high stakes for

some professors. Thus, AI policymaking can simultaneously act as a soothing and upsetting process. By actively mitigating the academic crisis posed by the (mis)use of generative AI in the classroom, AI policymaking can present itself as a possible avenue to successfully navigate the ‘crisis of writing’. However, being the solution to this overwhelming crisis can also cause AI policymaking to feel particularly high-stakes. With the lack of certainty at every bureaucratic level in the university as to how to navigate the crisis of writing, a lot is riding on these AI-use policies being successful, which could make AI policymaking a particularly emotional and stressful experience for some professors.

The overwhelming and high-stakes nature of policymaking also raised pedagogical concerns in our sample. More specifically, it seems educators are fearful of how AI will undermine education. Even though Interlocutor 3 confessed their area of study gives them a conceptual advantage in understanding Generative AI tools, they also stressed how GenAI is “such a paradigm shifting technology that even in [Interlocutor 3’s area of study], I don’t think [we have] the conceptual resources to currently make any sense of it [AI]”. They paused before stressing that AI is really a “black box for everyone”, even experts in the field of artificial and generative intelligence. After asking when Interlocutor 3 first noticed Generative AI, they described how,

“I thought it was going to be nothing, right? I just tried to have a conversation with it. And I was just blown away/.../It seemed to be passing whatever Turing test I might design for it at that time.”

From that moment on, Interlocutor 3 was very aware of the danger this technology presented to existing ways of teaching. Shortly after this encounter, Interlocutor 3 was first tasked with regulating AI in one of their classes. Overwhelmed, they “just freaked out”. Initially, they in fact “didn’t realize how I would even address this [regulating AI use] issue”. Moments such as these from Interlocutor 3’s interview (particularly the “black box” analogy), allowed us to notice how professors felt inadequately prepared to manage or mitigate the use of generative AI in the classroom. Interlocutor 3 felt that the AI technology was too powerful and misunderstood, and demonstrated how the introduction of such a technology could be overwhelming and paralyzing for some professors.

Interlocutors 5 and 3 also demonstrated similar perceptions of AI technology as too powerful for policies of “mitigation.” Rather, both interlocutors employed policies of complete restriction such that no generative AI technology was permitted at any stage of assignment or coursework completion. When asked to describe the logic behind their AI-use policy through a mind-map, Interlocuter 5 simply wrote “NO” in large lettering.

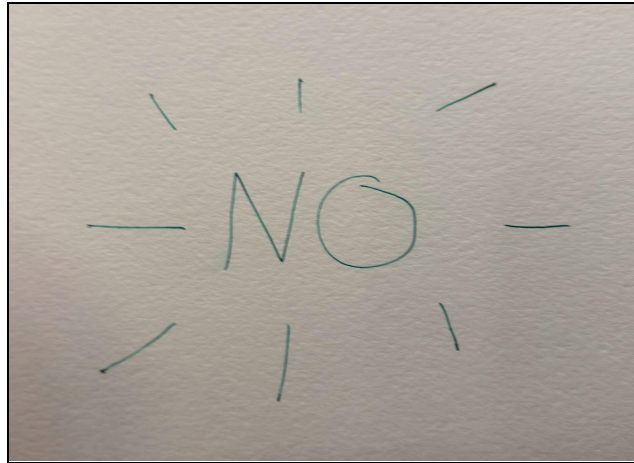


Figure 2.5, Interlocutor 5 Mind-Map

For Interlocutor 5, a stance on AI use was not a regulatory policy, but an ethical position. They explained that the use of AI has two irreconcilable issues that prevent them from ethically incorporating or allowing for the use of GenAI in their course structure. First and foremost, Interlocutor 5 notes GenAI's substantial environmental impact. They see no way—especially in an institution that prides itself as a “leader in climate innovation”—to defend either using or allowing the use of AI in the face of its massive environmental impact. Second, Interlocutor 5 sees GenAI as stripping away the ability of students to think critically. Interlocutor 5 relates the inclusion of generative AI in the classroom to broader philosophical and moral implications of a failure to think, act, and judge. For them, systems and processes that stand in the way of critical thinking are deeply worrying and must be curtailed. The primacy of moral considerations in Interlocutor 5's views on AI is reflected in the simplicity of their mind-map. Rather than a programmatic map that weighs different pragmatic judgements, Interlocutor 5's moral convictions necessitated a strong and all-encompassing policy of “No”. Notably, such levels of abstraction and ethical reasoning were uncommon within our sample, but this approach was given wider credence in Interlocutor 2's interview, wherein they stated that they have colleagues that are against AI for ethical, environmental, and human costs. While an outlier in our data sample, Interlocutor 2's position may be more broadly held within scholarly communities. Furthermore, while considering this process as one in flux and subject to constant change, it is important to recognise that for this ethically-guided professor, their policy has remained the same since its inception, demonstrating a consistency in their position of “do not participate”. Important to note here is that Interlocutor 5's position reflects one particular ethical perspective. In such a fluid policy environment, different ethical conceptions are brought into dialogue with one another, with no one being objectively more worthwhile or ‘ethical’ than another. The positions taken by academics are often related to their communities and experience, serving as an example of the interplay between the ‘real’ of one's community and practice, and the ‘abstract’ of their morals and beliefs. The supposed ‘finality’ of Interlocutor 5's mind-map is informed by their unique academic and social position, and could be subject to change.

2. *Balancing Good Pedagogy and Pragmatism*

Although emotional and ethical factors were central to the GenAI policymaking process for some professors, it is important to note that logistical and pedagogical concerns were identified as central factors motivating AI policymaking for the majority of our sample. Here, the mind-map framework is useful because it demonstrates how emotions, ethics and logistical concerns inform pedagogy through networks of relation. Pedagogical concerns were aptly explained by Interlocutor 4 during the course of our fieldwork period. In their view, AI is simply a necessary part of modern academic and professional life. Considering the world students will be entering after graduation, Interlocutor 4 expressed an obligation to allow for some AI-use. Thus, rather than trying and failing to censor or stop the use of AI in the classroom, Interlocutor 4 asserted that educators should encourage the responsible use of these technologies (which will encourage the adaptive use of AI as the technology changes).

Interlocutor 1 echoed similar pedagogical concerns. During their interview, Interlocutor 1 confessed their AI use policy is partially informed by their fear that if AI is banned completely, Interlocutor 1's students will not be properly equipped to enter job markets that increasingly integrate these technologies. This concern causes Interlocutor 1 to feel a strong sense of duty to their students to ensure they understand how to use AI thoughtfully and responsibly (knowing students could very well use it in the various jobs they take on after undergraduate studies) and thus, they found ways to integrate GenAI use into their class policies. Promoting spaces for critical thinking remains deeply important for our interlocutors, but here, manifests as a set of pragmatic, mitigation-based policies. In this regard, AI policies were informed by multiple competing considerations of ethics and emotion, balancing good pedagogical practices with pragmatism to address AI-use in an ever-changing world. For Interlocutor 1 and Interlocutor 4, it would be a disservice to their students to ignore and completely outlaw GenAI.

Our interlocutors recognised the need to maintain a delicate balance between pragmatism and 'good' pedagogical practices, identifying critical thinking as a core tenant in post-secondary education. Interlocutor 1 expressed that good pedagogy looks like, "[making] space for learning how to use [AI] thoughtfully and responsibly." Indeed, without careful consideration, the inclusion of AI in the classroom can threaten spaces for critical thinking. For Interlocutor 3, when critical thinking is impacted by AI, individual student autonomy is also fundamentally threatened. When asked how these pedagogical concerns influenced their policymaking process, they expressed worry that:

"I'll create policies that just allow people to impair their own autonomy, that they [students] might outsource too much of their cognition, and not develop their own cognitive skills. And then I'll just let that happen, right? I won't do anything to encourage them [students] to just kind of go against the grain, because it's become so easy right now to just offload and outsource [autonomy]."

Similarly, in Interlocutor 5's view, a purely vocational approach to education is "dangerous" and they want "nothing to do with it." In our sample, we found these kinds of reactions to different pedagogical approaches to be deeply connected to individual concepts of ethics, with Interlocutor 2 explicitly linking those that put more value in purely ethical considerations in their AI policymaking to a "return to pen and paper." Here, we noticed a strong overlap between a theoretical approach to AI policymaking and the larger pedagogical landscape at UBC.

At the inflection point between pragmatism and good pedagogical practice lies the essence of concern about AI-use in the Faculty of Arts at UBC. For Interlocutor 5 and Interlocutor 3, there is no defensible way to incorporate AI into course/assignment design. Through our fieldwork, we noticed a feeling of disappointment among some about how AI is limiting course/assignment design and format. Interlocutor 2 said they missed the types of assignments administered before generative AI was introduced, including broad essay questions that demanded orchestration and retention of a diversity of academic material. They feel that essay writing is an obvious place for students to over-rely on generative AI, which has caused them to prioritize assignments that test memorization and information retention instead of critical thinking. On the other hand, Interlocutor 4 stated that although it is a shame that students can and do use AI, they have refused to limit their course format and instead have relied on stringent AI identification tactics. Generally, Interlocutor 4 expressed that generative AI often fails to reach the same level of argumentative and persuasive performance that students do, and that the process of specificity involved in their assignments (citing exact parts of multiple articles in discussions, for example) necessarily prevents AI from performing at a high level. Thus, we found there is a degree of variance among professors regarding their opinions on how AI affects their assignments and classes, with some feeling insulated from negative effects and some seeing fundamental shifts in what types of learning is now being prioritised.

So how is this concern reflected in pedagogy? How are professors designing course content to limit the use of AI? For professors who implemented a completely restrictive AI use policy (or completely banned the use of AI), changes to course structure range from implementing timed, in person exams and assignments, to more subtle strategies. When explaining how they enforced their AI use policy, Interlocutor 5 stressed that discussion and focus on morality and the topic of thoughtlessness could cause students to internalise deeper moral considerations that would then be applied to personal use of AI. Some professors use a more procedural strategy and create staggered or more scaffolded assignments. Instead of submitting one final project or reports, assessments are designed to highlight the process behind the assignment, which could include the presentation of stages of research or other check-ins.

On the other hand, some professors, such as Interlocutor 4, haven't changed much of their class design as a method of implementing their AI use policy. For Interlocutor 4, ruling out AI is a disservice to their students and that the nature of their material and assignments intrinsically prevents the irresponsible use of AI. Furthermore, some professors like Interlocutor 1

(anecdotally, this is also used by professors beyond our sample) find ways to incorporate AI into lesson plans (optionally) to better prepare students for work and learning outside undergraduate study with courses that “[make] space for learning how to use [AI] thoughtfully and responsibly.”

The diversity and dynamism of the policy approaches discussed here highlights in a clear manner the ways that AI policy processes differ within relatively proximate contexts. This is indicative of the grand picture here, that the *macro*, as well as the *micro* policy formation process is one in a constant state of flux, depending not just on personal preconceptions and directives, but also on the reality of AI and personal judgements about the purpose of education. The very fact that education as such can not be defined broadly showcases how this process has neither a direction, nor a destination.

3. *Relational AI Policymaking and Envisioning Academic Futures*

From our research, we recognized our interlocutors had diverse policy processes, influenced by their unique positionality and relationships. For many interlocutors, the foremost relationship that informed their policy was that between them and the institution of UBC, their employer, and its perceived lack of policy. Interlocutors also discussed how their immediate (departmental) environments affected their process, and individual level/novel approaches to relational policymaking were also discussed.

The popular view of the relationship between the institution and AI policy is that there is, broadly speaking, a lack of institutional guidance. Interlocutor 3 indicated that, especially at first, navigating the regulation of AI use was a “free for all” with no institutional guidance from UBC. Even in the years since, the university has been slow to offer any position at all, and the position it does offer is still extremely vague, resulting in feelings of discomfort and negativity for some. In Interlocutor 3’s experience, it “feels weird” for professors to independently form their AI policies discussing how AI policy making simply “isn’t the kind of thing that individuals can handle.” When creating their policy, Interlocutor 3 got the sense that it isn’t “their place”; especially when and if one considers AI use as an issue of academic integrity, they feel as if institutional guidance/backing is needed. Key to consider here is the interplay between personal feelings of comfort in relation to AI, as well as the relationship between educators and their establishments, particularly regarding topics such as academic integrity. The lack of clear institutional guidance leaves educators in a state of limbo, not knowing where they stand as pertains to responsibilities, and privileges.

Although more resources exist now, such as UBC Arts IT offering potential options, the process is still largely in the hands of professors and is managed vaguely. While this is a source of negative feelings for some, Interlocutor 4 felt as if the lack of institutional policy is actually a good thing, and that AI policy is best left up to professors to create and communicate. Interlocutor 2 offered an alternative take on this lack of policy, framing it not as a negative or a

positive, but instead as a matter of feasibility and functionality. Due to the size and scope of UBC, and the wide array of departmental norms and attitudes towards AI, they held the creation of an overarching institutional policy as both impossible and inadvisable.

When we sat down to talk with Interlocutor 5, they gave us a contrasting take on the institution. In their eyes, the institution does in fact offer an implicit policy to professors. They explained that by giving vague guidance and recommendations on how to use/communicate AI policy, this implies that the institution is in favour of AI use and is subtly telling staff “it [AI]’s here...you have to use it”. For this interlocutor, their view on (as they see it) the implicit AI-use policy ties into more foundational notions they hold regarding a growing divide between the ‘administrative class’ within institutions and faculty. They went on to state in their interview that they believe this gap is now being widened by AI. More specifically, they mentioned that by giving administrators power to increase class size and orient the institution towards the market, the use of AI (and the implicit nature of the AI policy) is dumping unintended material and ethical consequences upon staff. Consequently, they see UBC as,

“Utterly thrilled to acquiesce to AI, regardless of the consequences of it, because it enables, or they think it’s going to enable/.../course sizes to get larger, and they think that it’s going to satisfy some sort of misguided/.../consumerist desire that our students have”.

Interlocutor 5 briefly paused before confessing that in their view, *“the whole thing [or described approach to AI] is/.../fundamentally dangerous.”*

Here, we see a wide range of influences and relationships regarding the faculty, the institution, and AI policy. Some are in favour of the ‘lack’ of policy, some regard it as harmful, and some see the vague communications of the school as implying a policy of acquiescence. So, while UBC is not directly and explicitly involved in the policy process, it is an inseparable part of the whole equation and is affecting individuals in disparate ways.

As mentioned above, it seems that academic departments will become an increasingly important part of the AI policy process for professors. In fact, it seems that they are already engaging in a form of informal idea-sharing that is influencing faculty.

When asked if their policy was informed or influenced in any way by their academic department, Interlocutor 4 said that they were “absolutely” influenced by their department. They brought up departmental retreats (wherein department leads/experts disseminated information about AI in the classroom) as a notable example of this influence. However, throughout our conversation they also maintained that for each professor in their department, autonomy was still extremely important. In their view, the retreats were simply a way for each professor to take the information given to them and make an educated decision about AI policy.

Similarly, Interlocutor 2 discussed talks held by their department where AI policy was discussed and a range of individual positions were presented. Thus, it seems that departments are ‘picking up the slack’ and filling a role, at least in a deliberative fashion, that the institution is

not. But are departments likely to create and disseminate official policies? Interlocutor 2 thinks no. In their view, influence on professors' syllabi—the home of AI policy—is minimal, and that if the institution does not offer an official policy, the departments likely won't either. This may mirror Interlocutor 2's previous contention that academic diversity precludes a central policy, with Interlocutor 5 stating that (due to differences in background and focus) there is a sort of “cold war” brewing within and between departments. It seems that a centralised policy, even on a department level, is unlikely in the eyes of our interlocutors, but it seems as if departments are already attempting to foster some form of dialogue to help professors develop policy in a largely amorphous environment, although it was unclear to what extent most of our interlocutors had been influenced by their departments, except for Interlocutor 4 (above), and Interlocutor 5, who stated that they were *not* being influenced by “institutional circles at UBC”.

The last aspect of relationality worth considering is those influences outside of the traditional bounds of professional, academic communities. There is of course, the individual influence of colleagues upon each other, with Interlocutor 5 describing humans as “sponges” that inevitably emulate their friends and colleagues, and Interlocutor 2 describing a form of plagiarising of AI policy that is occurring between academics, resulting in a constant transformation as the result of dialogue. Furthermore, Interlocutor 2 and Interlocutor 3 both discussed the role that personal interactions with research and publications have had on their policy-emphasizing the import of conscious independent research and discovery. Finally, Interlocutor 1 discussed a novel concept within our sample, involving a form of student input and consultation about how AI was and should be used, and what attitudes towards it were. Although this occasionally happens, student engagement over ‘the rules’ is uncommon, highlighting this as a notable example of the reflexivity and creativity that professors are bringing to this topic.

Conclusion

Over the course of our fieldwork, we found that in its current state, AI policy creation in classrooms at the Faculty of Arts at UBC is a relational process contingent on the positionality of each respective professor. The diversity of policies produced through each process is reflected in the normative standards professors hold for AI-use policies and the goals of post-secondary education as a whole. While the professor's expressed beliefs range from emphasizing moral considerations to more pragmatic approaches, our analysis demonstrates how policy creation in this context is often non-hierarchical and relation-based.

Reflecting on the experiences of our interlocutors, the creation of AI policies is in a state of complete directional and ontological flux. Currently, there is no consensus regarding the role of AI in the classroom (if that exists) or how it should be addressed by either the institution or the individual. From this picture of instability, AI policy creation becomes a unique process that necessitates constant and considered adaptation from the part of academics, bureaucrats, and other professionals. For some, AI-policy-making exists purely in the domain of academic integrity and professional development. For others, it rests at the very core of knowledge and

education, both of which are at risk in this liminal state. On a broader level, this nuance and instability seems to reflect a more anthropological and non-linear view of policymaking promoted by Shore & Wright (2011).

As UBC continues to define and redefine guiding principles, regulatory frameworks, and their own role in the creation of Generative AI policies, tracking how the pedagogical, ethical, and relational aspects of policymaking change will be vital to understanding the nuances in evolving normative and regulatory perspectives about AI in post-secondary education. Considering how the current ontological and directional state of AI policymaking becomes more or less ambiguous in light of new GenAI regulations will be vital to gaining clarity on how Generative AI continues to change the pedagogical landscape at UBC Vancouver and larger academic communities in Vancouver and beyond.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Please see the link below to access our interview guide. The guide provides a comprehensive view of our research questions, and the interview questions we created from the research questions. These interview questions were used as a starting point for our research. During interviews, we remained open to hearing about our interlocutors' experiences with AI policy creation and creating corresponding follow-up questions that allowed us to gain a better picture of their individual process, feelings, values, and struggles with AI policy creation. Access the [Interview Guide](#).

Appendix 2: Interlocuter Mind-Maps

See below for mind-maps created by our Interlocutors. Please note that not every interlocutor created a mind-map, and these were not all made in the same format. Some were written on paper and photographed, and others typed and sent via email. They all represent a “visualized process,” although there are different interpretations of what that means.

Figure 2.1 Interlocutor 1, First Mind-Map

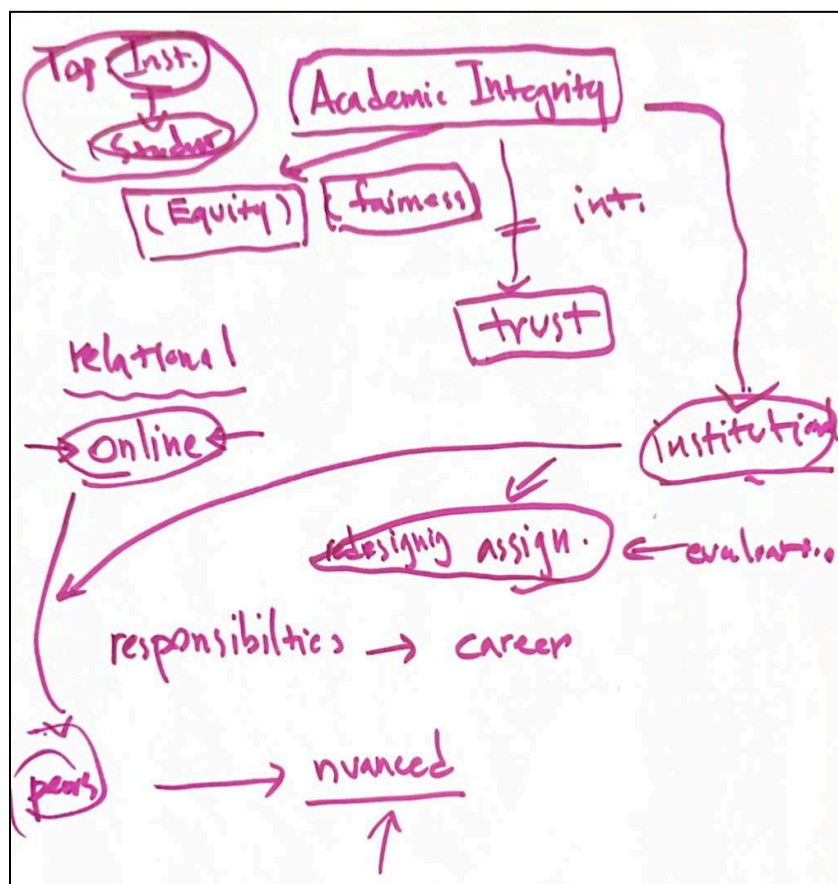


Figure 2.2 Interlocutor 1, Second Mind-Map

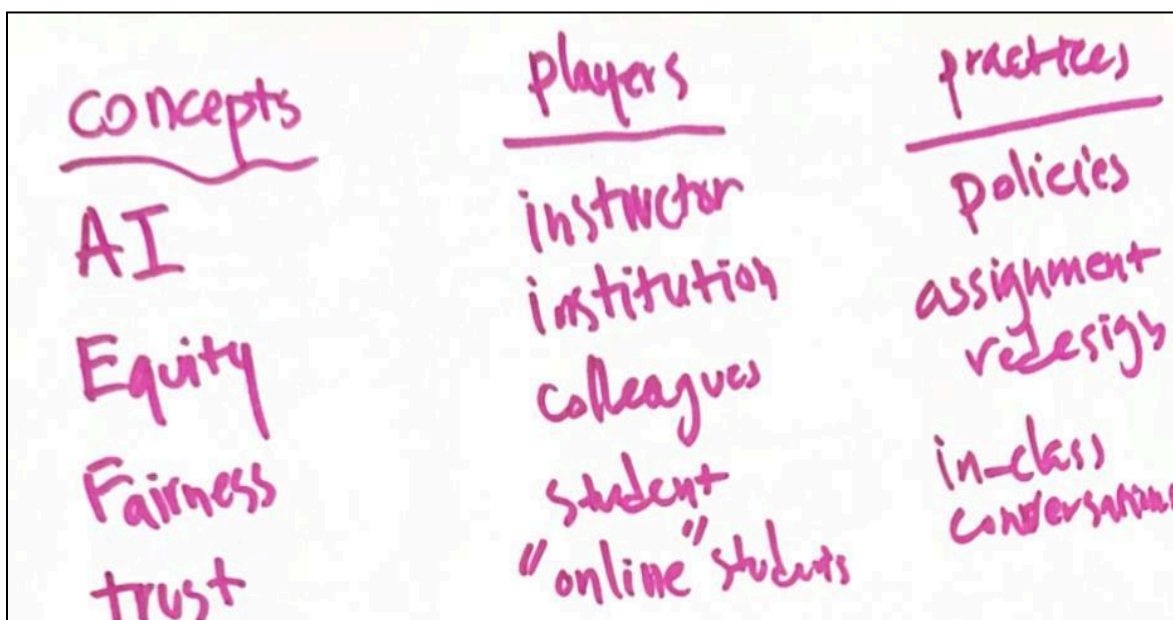


Figure 2.3 Interlocutor 3, Mind-Map

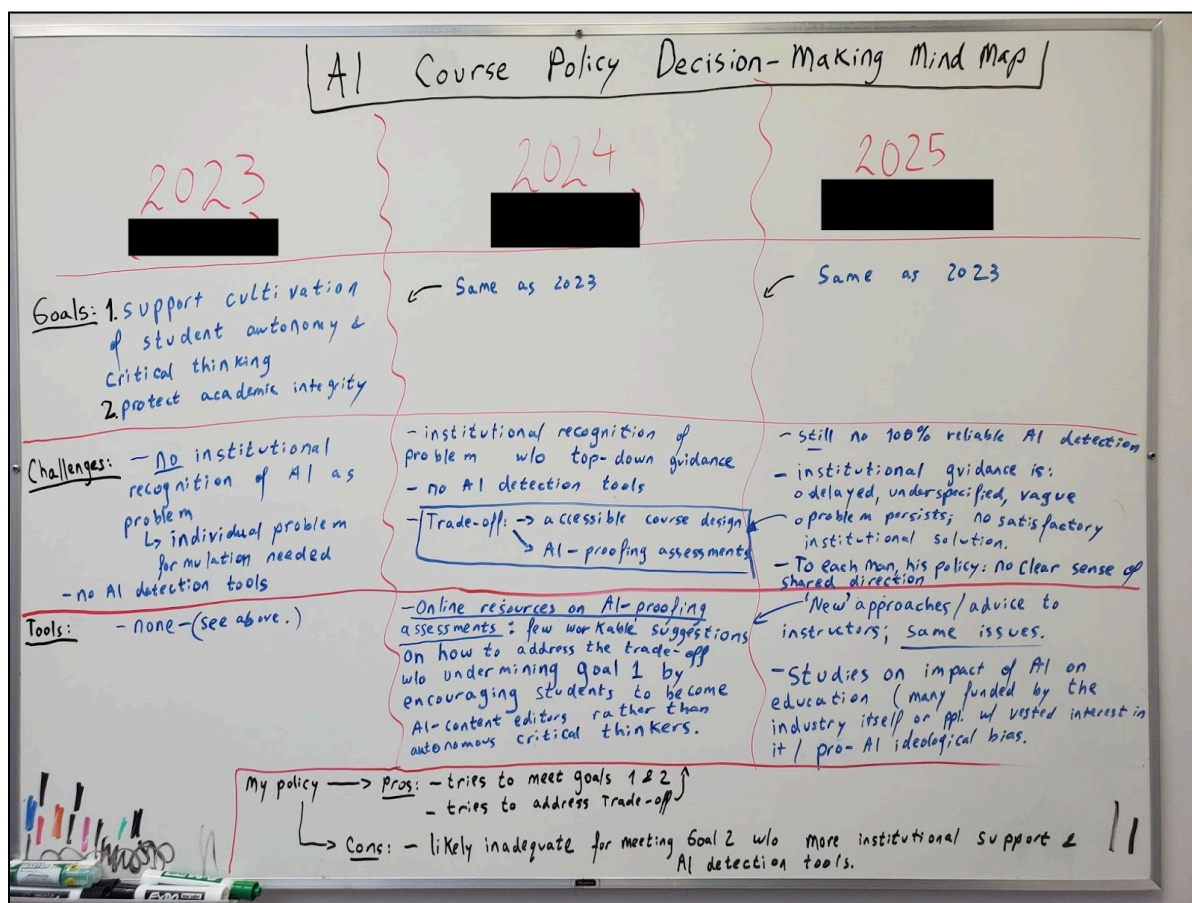


Figure 2.4 Interlocutor 2, Mind-Map

For my process in creating an AI policy, I would say:

Reading up on current AI capabilities, reading news stories about its place in academia and professional life.

Speaking to colleagues about their policies and pieces in the Chronicle for Higher Education and the Guardian's Education section.

Attending events in which academics are speaking about AI challenges, including those organized at UBC.

Sitting down with the syllabus for a course, thinking about what kinds of assessments I will use, and what AI policy will best fit.

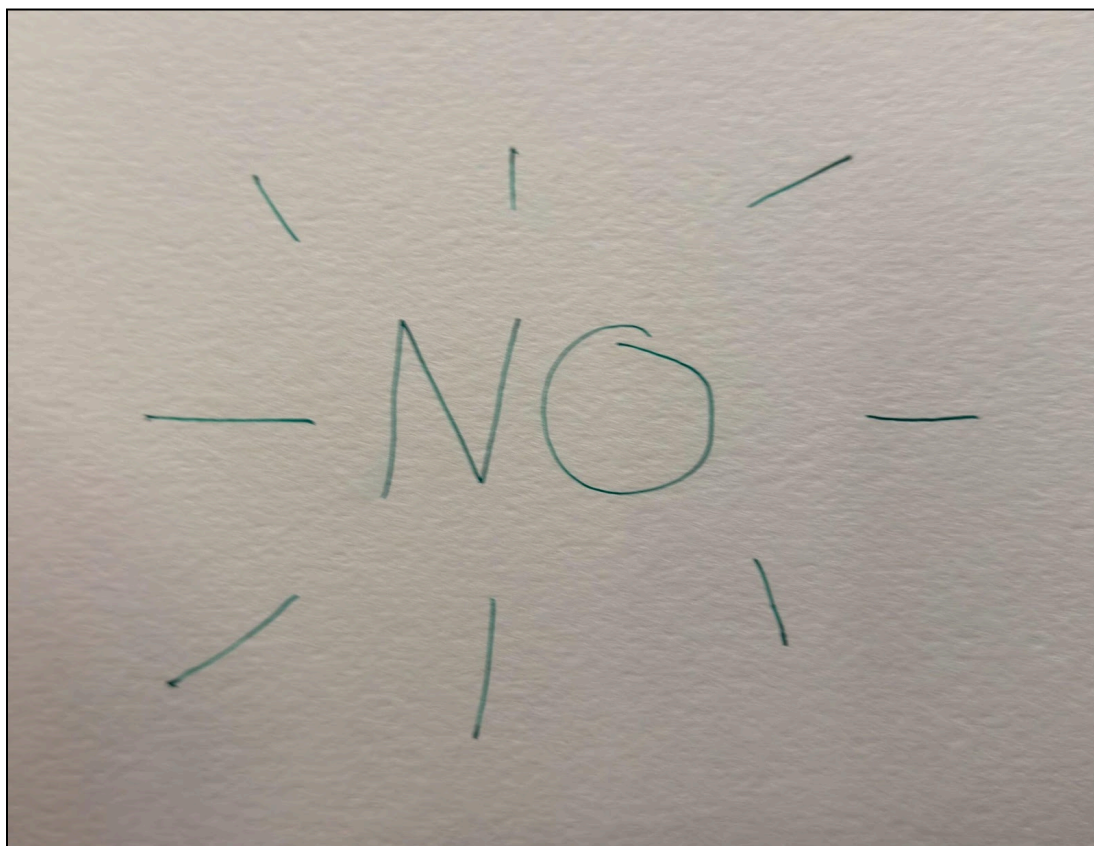
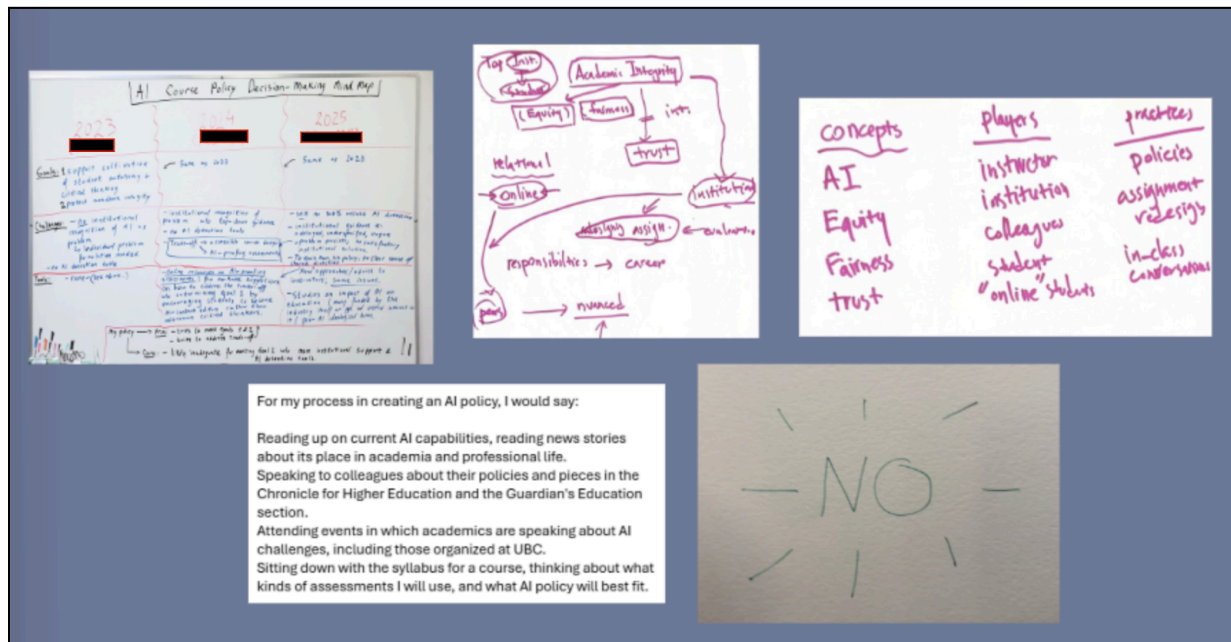
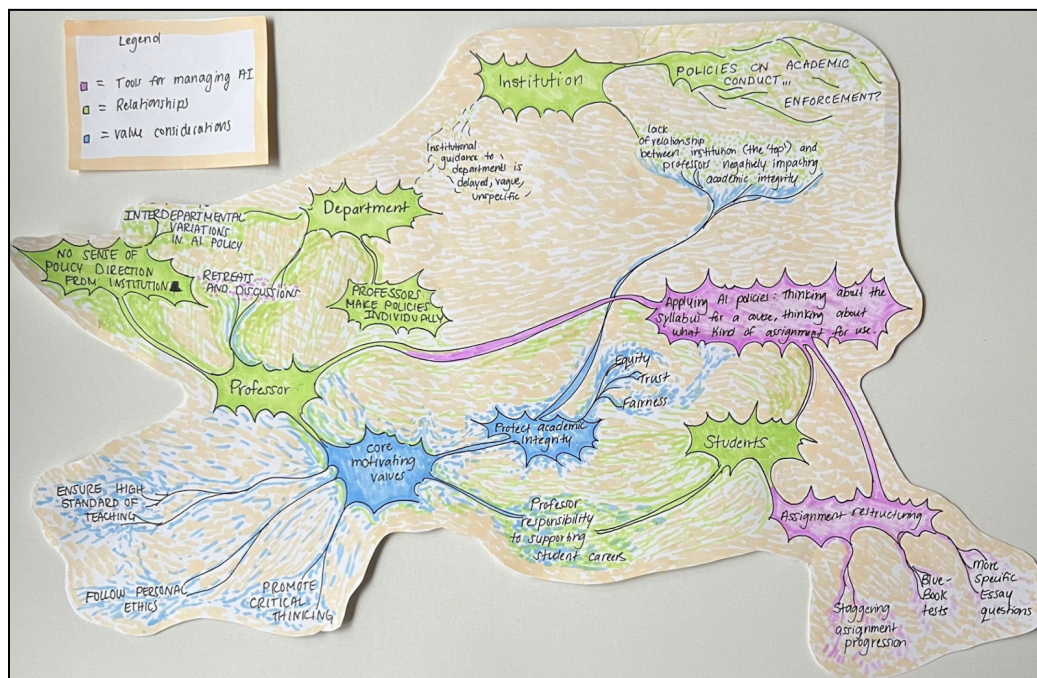
Figure 2.5 Interlocutor 5, Mind-Map

Figure 2.6 Mind-Map Collage



Appendix 3: Mind-Atlas



Missing: ~~Wheelchair~~: Access, Accessibility, and Disability in Community Development Work

Telka Pesklevits

University of British Columbia

Abstract

This autoethnographic account analyzes the physical barriers faced by the author while participating in coursework and fieldwork at the UBC Learning Exchange, and examines the systemic barriers to engagement that disabled students, employees, and community members face in community development, academic institutions, and anthropological fieldwork. Personal narrative, critical engagement with approaches to anthropological fieldwork, and multimodal representations ultimately come together in this paper to explore community adaptation and resilience in response to institutional norms and physically inaccessible research environments.

Introduction

By the end of my first half-day at the Urban Ethnographic Field School (UEFS)—hosted at the UBC Learning Exchange (LE) in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES)—representatives from community partners were identified, and students joined each other to meet their new contacts who they would be spending their afternoons with. I began to eat lunch with my peers while waiting for our organizational contact, Eric, whose role at the LE includes student engagement. He had stepped away for a moment to welcome a different field school on the floor above. After a few of my peers finished their second serving of food, it was time to learn more about our placement and the LE itself.

As we climbed the stairs to Eric’s office on the second floor—I did so slowly after requesting assistance with my bag, taking one step at a time while holding onto the railing and using my cane for support—Eric apologized for the lack of an elevator; this was an old building that had previously housed a bank. Even past the flight of stairs, however, entering his office required more steps connected to a weaker railing than the last. After that first meeting, he assured me that he would book any further meetings in a space that would not require stairs.

During my six-week placement at the LE, Eric and I would go on to discuss physical accessibility almost every day that we interacted. Most days, this took shape through simple check-ins about the suitability of workspaces, but it also extended to deeper conversations about the building, programming, current projects, and the organizational structure at large. Eric has met my concerns about the physical accessibility of the LE with care, reflection, and a healthy curiosity for solutions without placing the entirety of that responsibility on me. While I am the expert in my body and my limitations, he has institutional and building knowledge to understand how to accommodate them. This environment for open discussion was appreciated, and even

somewhat refreshing, but we likely would not have done so in such length if the space was accessible to begin with. Although I chose to attend the UEFS at the LE without a solid understanding of how accessible the space might be, it was not for a lack of research beforehand.

Upon learning that I would be placed at the LE, I began to search for information on the physical accessibility of the LE building. After several unsuccessful attempts to coax the answer from Google Search (see figure 1), I scoured the LE's website and turned to Google Maps. I was unable to find any information about accessibility inside the building, but I did come across images of the building's exterior (UBC Learning Exchange n.d.; Google 2022). At the very least, these images indicated an absence of one of the first barriers I often face when attempting to access a building: a step at the entrance. It is surprising how many businesses and organizations have a step, or several steps, to get into their space. Although I can normally manage without my wheelchair, my disability is dynamic and unpredictable during the best conditions, often leading to acute injuries that require extra attention or accommodations. Knowing that the LE provides programming to the community, I decided that the space would likely be accessible enough to accommodate my attendance.

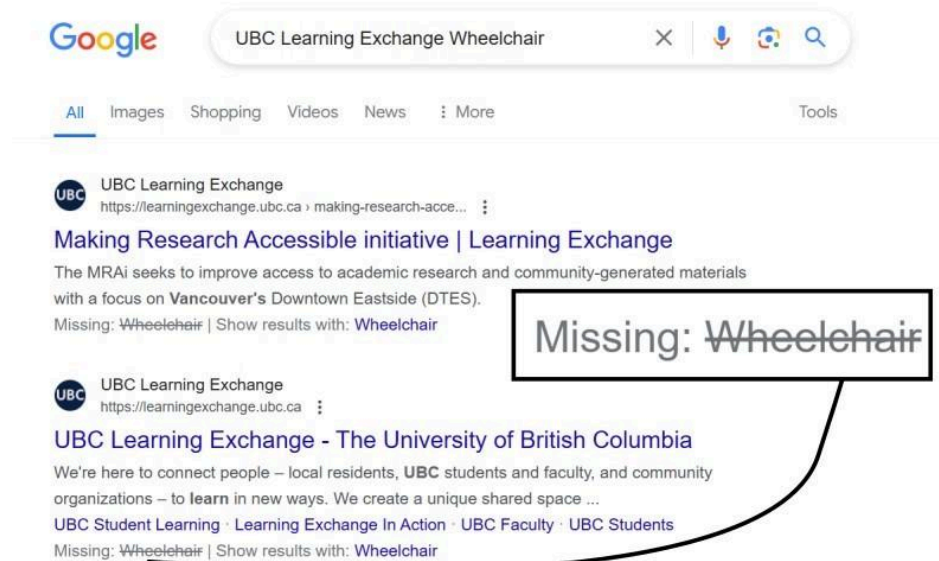


Figure 1. Google search results for "UBC Learning Exchange Wheelchair." Screenshot by author, 2024.

Despite some uncertainties about the UEFS, it was by far the most accessible anthropological field school that I had come across. Many other field schools that I encountered are inaccessible for reasons that are both implicitly and explicitly stated in their entrance requirements or their programming. At each stage of trying to obtain experience in ethnographic fieldwork, I dealt with expected and unforeseen barriers, much bigger than just concerns about a possible step to get in the door. In this article, I situate my experience as a disabled student researcher in relation to the LE as a fieldsite on a community level and as a place that facilitates anthropological knowledge production. Interrogating my relationship to the LE and the

circumstances that led to it becoming my fieldsite, demonstrates the physical manifestation of existing hierarchies and continuing constraints that restrict the organization's ability to remove barriers to equitable, nonextractive, and reciprocal research. Through the lens of disability, the LE demonstrates how the act of not prioritizing certain concerns within an organization can impact who is able to fully engage with it at all levels, limiting the organization's abilities to fulfill their larger goals.

The Community

In 1999, the LE was established in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). Grounded in the idea that "learning is a 'two-way street'", the LE has worked to connect students to the DTES community, create a presence for UBC in the area, and provide a "non-traditional academic" venue for the exchange of knowledge (UBC Learning Exchange n.d.). Understanding the DTES community is important for understanding the LE itself, as it would not exist without the DTES. It also provides additional context for the accessibility needs of those who may be utilizing the LE's services and building.

Geographically, the DTES is a neighborhood that encompasses areas like Strathcona and Chinatown (City of Vancouver n.d.), though I have discovered that it can be difficult to narrow down its exact borders. As someone who grew up in the Greater Vancouver area, it was surprising how limited my understanding of the geographical region was. According to Google Maps (2024), the LE is within Chinatown, but is one block short of being considered part of the DTES. One of my peers, who was also raised in the Greater Vancouver area, echoed this sentiment during a discussion and identified Vancouver's Chinatown as bordering the DTES. Although we both came to understand that the LE and Chinatown are both considered to be part of the DTES, I found interest in that shared knowledge gap. Even though there are tangible explanations for this disconnect, such as resources like Google Maps, I believe it is also likely connected to the greater dialogue around the DTES community, which has historically focused on deficits through reporting and research (Boilevin et al. 2019, 6-7). This has constructed a limited and often negative image of the community and area, focusing on the specific places deemed most problematic.

Creating a physical space for the LE within the DTES, away from UBC's main Vancouver campus, was important to the organization's original goal of breaking down barriers between the academic world and the DTES community (Towle and Leahy 2016, 69-70). The space is central to the services they provide, which include weekly programming, support and social events, and small, low- or no-cost spaces for meetings and events. The LE has worked to build trust and reciprocal relationships between the community, researchers, students, volunteers, and staff to help reduce the amount of extractive research historically faced by the community (Boilevin et al. 2019, 6-7). It also functions as a space for student learning, hosting programs like the UEFS, and offering volunteer and work positions through UBC's Work Learn program, providing opportunities for students to gain employment and professional skills that complement

learning outside of the classroom (UBC Student Services 2026; Taylor et al. 2018, 11).

The work of the LE takes an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach, promoting personal and systemic growth through meaningful collaboration without ignoring the circumstances that have led to the need for its existence (Towle and Leahy 2016, 73). The DTES community faces disproportionate levels of food and housing insecurity, addiction, and an overrepresentation of many marginalized communities who often face additional physical barriers to accessing resources, such as elderly and disabled individuals (Singh Kelsall et al. 2023, 4). As of 2020, over 1600 nonprofit organizations were active in the City of Vancouver, a large proportion of which were concentrated on serving the DTES community (5). The LE does not exist outside of the nonprofit industrial complex of "Vancouver's endless nonprofit landscape" (4), especially when considering that the LE's affiliation and funding model via UBC restricts the discursive work that they can participate in, which often falls to organizations that are less reliant on similar forms of public funding (5). Despite experiencing institutional limitations, the LE attempts to platform and amplify the community care networks and organizations that work with the DTES community by promoting connections beyond the surface level, empowering those who want to be involved in ethical research in the DTES regardless of background, and creating new opportunities for collaborative change informed by those who need it most.

When serving its purpose, the LE becomes a space that facilitates community building and values unique perspectives, acknowledging existing power imbalances and lived experiences that may serve as a barrier to engagement between individuals. Because the physical space itself is important for the execution of the LE's core work and vision, and for serving the community, it should be viewed as a resource. It is then important to question what message it may send the community that those with physical disabilities are not able to use the resources equally, and how that disproportionately impacts those who experience disabilities at a heightened rate when attempting to access the programming and services.

My 'Community', Accessibility in Field Research, and Anthropology at Home

While many factors contributed to my eventual fieldwork placement at the LE, including my previous knowledge of the challenges faced by the DTES community and my familiarity with the area, my extremely limited pool of opportunities for practical fieldwork experience cannot be separated from the decisions that led to it. The practices of anthropological fieldwork have evolved immensely during the growth of anthropology as a discipline (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006, 178), but there are still many barriers to entry for researchers from non-traditional academic backgrounds. During much of its early history, practicing anthropological fieldwork meant traveling to 'exotic' places away from home and studying the 'other', with the completion of such fieldwork serving as a benchmark for academic recognition and promotion (179). Anthropology has since seen a shift towards the rejection of binaries like 'us' and 'them', and fieldwork can now be performed from almost anywhere under frameworks like "anthropology at

home”, which allows researchers to use preexisting connections as points of opportunity and exploration instead of considering them as detrimental to perceived objectivity (Hadolt 1998, 313). Although anthropology at home has been critiqued for its own binary of ‘home’ and ‘not home’, which has been broadly applied to include researchers who remain within their own continent (312), it has also been adopted as an accessible framework for disabled scholars engaging in traditional research for a variety of reasons like a need to remain close to medical providers and support systems (Gibson 2019, 74).

Despite these changes, many field schools in North American institutions include a component of fieldwork that is completed internationally, consisting of sites that require physical activity outside of my limitations to fully participate. I found this to be particularly true when trying to find fieldwork opportunities in material culture, which tend to be archaeological in nature, and many of these experiences required a doctor’s confirmation that the researcher is in good physical shape. Having the opportunity to participate in fieldwork at home removed these barriers alongside other complications that arise from travelling with a disability, like the safe transport of mobility aids. However, I was often reminded that although I was appreciating benefits from participating in fieldwork in a community that is close to my home, I was not entering the space as someone with lived experience in the DTES—I was an academic outsider, at least to a certain extent. I found myself returning to the question: how integrated in a community must the researcher be to consider their work anthropology at home? I felt similarly in the field while questioning how I fit in the larger picture of the DTES community, especially as I continue to learn and unlearn during my research?

My struggle in determining how I fit in the community can be explained, but not resolved, by understanding that “community” itself is difficult to define, and can change depending on the context or the intent of the individual using it. John Clarke (2014) discusses the complexity of the concept and use of the term “community”, critically examining the ways that academics have engaged with, and even benefited from, its elusive definition. Even what might be considered basic definitions of the word, such as “*those who live within a shared geographical region*” (47), can be quickly complicated when trying to categorize real humans and their experiences. Attempting to apply this lens to the DTES demonstrates this issue because we must define what it means to ‘live’ within the area. Does living in an area require one to have a permanent address? If so, do those who have no address have no community at all? Additionally, attempting to discuss the DTES community without acknowledging the unhoused population in the area completely shifts the conversation.

At the LE, staff are cognizant of the concerns with expanding the definition too far and how this can become appropriative, negatively impacting members of the community through misrepresentation. At the same time, LE staff and other organizations in the DTES have actively participated in the daily lives of community members for years, and have created genuine connections with the community. I spoke about this relationship with Eric, who has worked at the LE in some capacity for over a decade. He shared that he does not consider himself a part of

the DTES community, but this is not because he does not want to be associated with the community. The distinction comes from a place of recognition that he does not and has never resided in the area, and that he does not share many of the experiences and limitations faced by community members.

Interrogating my personal connection to the DTES community and seeing how my positionality as an academic can impact my relationships also forced me to return to the central goals of the LE, which include removing barriers between community members and academics, not just removing barriers for the community to access people in academia. Even if we discount my connections, the LE is still intended to remove barriers for researchers. People who are not DTES community members are also important pieces of the mosaic that make up the LE community, and disabled individuals can belong to any groups that engage with the LE. On an individual level, the LE staff are incredibly caring and are prepared to do their best to accommodate individuals who are experiencing limitations in their space or when accessing their services beyond their doors. Unfortunately, they cannot change the resources they have, which is an ongoing struggle faced by most community development organizations. In 2022, an external review of the LE outlined the top ten recommendations for future improvements, and moving to a more physically accessible space was second on the list (UBC Learning Exchange 2022). However, little has been discussed on the topic since, besides the staff's desire to see these improvements come to fruition. The lack of funding for capital projects, like building upgrades, has limited the accessibility of the space, which actively works against the LE's values and long-term goals. Accessible learning for all includes individuals with physical disabilities who may be community members, community partners, staff, students, or researchers performing fieldwork. While the main spaces on the lower level of the LE are accessible to those with limited mobility, all staff offices and spaces on the upper floor are not as they can only be accessed by stairs. This may not impact an individual who is attending a drop-in event, but if they are looking to be involved in the organization on any higher level, they would likely require similar accommodations to the ones I sought out. The same can be said for other researchers, community partners, students, and UBC staff. This dynamic creates an invisible yet very real hierarchy that is built into the building, where LE staff offices are separated from the physically accessible areas.

Action on Access at the Learning Exchange

I greatly benefited from the many conversations I shared with Eric around physical accessibility at the LE, both personally and for ethnographic reasons, but the frequency and depth at which we had these discussions does not appear to be reflected in the organization's usual operations. At the LE, the discussion of 'access' and 'accessibility' is almost entirely centered around providing access to knowledge, specifically through the UBC Downtown Eastside Research Access Portal, or the DTES RAP. As part of the Making Research Accessible initiative (MRAi), the DTES RAP was created through a partnership between the LE and UBC Library's Irving K. Barber Learning Centre to improve access to research and resources about

the DTES (UBC n.d.-b), and is an “ongoing commitment to changing the negative impacts of extractive ways of doing research and encouraging a more engaged and collaborative culture of knowledge exchange” (UBC n.d.-a). This example is by no means a critique of the use of the terms ‘access’ and ‘accessibility’ in this context—I even considered replacements for these terms but could not come up with a better alternative. Rather, it was chosen to highlight how these terms take on different tangible forms in the LE’s work. For example, the DTES RAP not only removes cost barriers that have previously excluded DTES community members from reading research that they contributed to (UBC n.d.-a), but it also promotes methods of data communication that can be received by non-academic audiences, such as infographics and research summaries.

It is also important to acknowledge that initiatives like MRAi do directly benefit individuals with physical disabilities. Creating a digital portal allows these individuals to remotely access data that may otherwise be stored in inaccessible places, such as the physical location of a community organization or in the collections of academic libraries. Additionally, individuals who are visually impaired benefit from the increased accessibility in the presentation of information. This type of accessibility is achieved by creating repositories that feature intuitive search functions and prioritize compatibility with digital access tools, such as screen-readers. Examples of this can be seen in the DTES RAP, which uses larger text than other UBC-hosted repositories and allows users to easily filter and view resources by complete and incomplete projects, research topics that appear most in the repository, and a directory of academic researchers. Furthermore, these accessible forms of communicating benefit those with mental, neurological, and intellectual disabilities who may not have engaged with the content otherwise. This type of project is not separate from efforts to create more accessible environments, even within the physical space, but it is in no way providing the same type of access to physical space that the architecture of a building can.

To contribute towards this goal of communicating information in ways that are accessible to non-academic audiences, and in an effort to represent how important the physical space of the LE is, I created a print inspired by the street entrance of the LE (see figure 2). This entrance is the most accessible way to enter the space, but it also demonstrates how integrated the community is in the organization's decision making, because it features decorative bars in the windows that were commissioned by an artist from the community. The bars and curved brick windows—immediately recognizable to those who have visited the space—have been extended in the print, with the bricks representing the building itself and the bars representing the people who, together in their own unique ways, make the LE what it is. The print was created using a reduction method, and the medium itself speaks to how the formation of the LE also required work to remove barriers and stigmas that already existed, both creating something new and making changes to what existed before. After completion, I digitized the image to echo the work of the DTES RAP. A physical version of the print now lives at the LE.

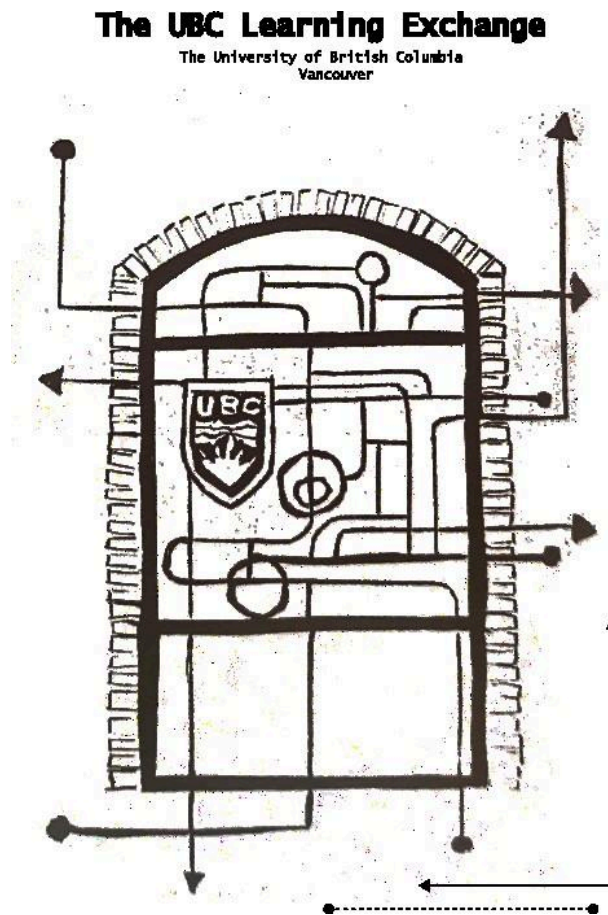


Figure 2. Digitized image of UBC Learning Exchange print, created by author.

Conclusion

Though I was able to participate and make meaningful connections during my placement at the LE, to the point that I continued my relationship there beyond the program, it is undeniable that my disability caused me to experience the space and organization differently than my peers in the program. I was reminded of this on two occasions during my final week, once when one of my classmates who was not placed at the LE was scrolling through images of completely unfamiliar art they found on the second floor while exploring during a lecture break, and again during the second and last time that I climbed the stairs for a short meeting and was able to view a version of the upper floorplan and realized how large the building is. Even until the end of my placement at the LE, I was only truly familiar with what likely accounts for just over a quarter of the building, and was never able to fully experience every space that is offered as a resource at the UBC Learning Exchange.

My experience navigating inaccessible institutions and spaces while engaging in anthropological fieldwork is not isolated; other disabled (and able-bodied) researchers share similar hurdles. These experiences exist as a result of underchallenged barriers that persist from

historical expectations of academic researchers, of anthropological fieldwork as a practice, and of the researcher's relationship to the community they are working in. Similarly, my experience as a disabled person navigating a community development space was not novel. It was an embodied reminder of the inaccessible infrastructure that continues to exist without intervention.

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Closing Remarks

The Ethnograph team would like to take a final moment to thank you, the reader, for engaging with our 10th Volume. As a student-led, undergraduate journal, the support of our peers, faculty, and wider UBC community is what keeps this project alive. The 10th Volume has been a labour of love by the authors, our student and faculty editors, and our team. *The Ethnograph* is a conduit for the voices in our community, and we are so grateful to get to share them with you. Let this 10th Volume act as a reminder that collectivity and collaboration remain as important as ever, especially when attempting to disrupt dominant hegemonic norms and institutional frameworks in an increasingly divided world.

Thank you again to our authors, editors, and faculty members for supporting our vision for the 10th Volume of *The Ethnograph*, and for helping us illuminate the voices of our community.

We would like to close the 10th Volume by encouraging our readers to be a part of an amazing team and an incredible learning process. We are proactively recruiting executive members, authors, and editors for the 2026-27 Edition who are seeking further involvement in the UBC Anthropology community.