

# MANAGING DIVERSITY IN THE REPRESENTATION OF BC HISTORY:

## *Point Ellice House and "Chinatown"*

---

MISAO DEAN

**B**C HISTORY MUSEUMS AND HERITAGE SITES are charged with representing the province and its people. The Museums Act created the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM) "to secure and preserve specimens and other objects that illustrate the natural history and human history of British Columbia, and to increase and spread knowledge in these fields by research, exhibits, publications and other means."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Heritage Conservation Act created an administrative infrastructure to "conserve and support the conservation of heritage sites and heritage objects; to gain further knowledge about British Columbia's heritage; [and] to increase public awareness, understanding and appreciation of British Columbia's heritage."<sup>2</sup> These pieces of legislation assume a "British Columbia" defined by its political and geographical borders; indeed, by assuming these borders, government legislation brings them into existence. Similarly, by assuming the unified history of an unproblematic "British Columbian," whose heritage and history can be represented by material objects, history museums bring such an entity into existence. Asserting the materiality and stability of this implied British Columbian is perhaps the most important function of such institutions; the objects they offer as "evidence" of a particular British Columbian is reassuring to those who feel thus represented, offering them "real material history" to stabilize their contemporary civil and political identities. However, the British Columbian implicit in such displays is beginning to look distressingly stable and discouragingly material. As Alan Hoover recently pointed out in *BC Studies*, the

<sup>1</sup> R.S.B.C. 1886, C. 326.

<sup>2</sup> R.S.B.C. 1886, C. 187.

displays in the RBCM are now almost thirty years old; innovative and forward-looking in their time, the gaps and absences in their overwhelmingly White and middle-class narrative of BC history now seem glaringly obvious.

The task of rethinking the assumed British Columbian implicit in museum displays and heritage interpretation is mandated by both political and academic authorities. The 2000-01 statement of “Strategic Objectives” for the BC Heritage Branch included a mandate “to respect the value of our ‘whole heritage’ by integrating diverse aspects of our history at BC Heritage Sites (e.g.: western, native and Chinese)” (interview with John Adams, BC Heritage Branch, 3 August 2000). This reorientation of policy in the BC Heritage Branch is partly a political response to the general critique, by First Nations and representatives of visible minorities, of the racism that seems implicit in displays and collections that may date back many years and that represent Canadians as White and European-descended.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, at the risk of stating the obvious, museum curators and heritage administrators do not exist in a vacuum; many of them were trained in the very disciplines from which the academic and political critiques of museums now emanate, and many remain active scholars and researchers. Most are aware of the deficiencies of both their collections and their displays – indeed, it is their job to critique both and to plan for their remediation.

Yet if this is so, then why have BC museums and heritage sites not changed radically? At least part of the answer is simple: money, staff, and time. Budgets to acquire, interpret, and staff new heritage sites or to rebuild complex narrative museum displays are not large; even to add a single display case in the RBCM, for example, requires months of committee meetings and consultations, and involves design, conservation, and publicity departments in addition to curatorial rationales and the acquisition of appropriate objects for display. In the case of heritage sites, opportunities for development and interpretation are

<sup>3</sup> Although I’m not sure that the issue of whether displays are racist or not is always easy to settle. See Linda Hutcheon, “The End(s) of Irony: The Politics of Appropriateness,” in *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Ajay Heble, Donna Pennee, and J.R. (Tim) Struthers (Peterborough: Broadview, 1887), 366-404. See also Gloria Frank, “That’s My Dinner on Display’: A First Nations Reflection on Museum Culture,” *BC Studies* 125-6 (Spring-Summer 2000): 163-78; Alan Hoover, “Response to Gloria Frank: ‘That’s My Dinner on Display’: A First Nations Reflection on Museum Culture,” *BC Studies* 128 (Winter 2000): 65-8; and Wendy Wickwire, “Response to Alan Hoover: ‘That’s My Dinner on Display’: A First Nations Reflection on Museum Culture,” *BC Studies* 128 (Winter 2000): 70-4.

limited, even if acquisition is mandated by the Heritage Conservation Act. Moreover, some sites (such as First Nations archaeological and burial sites) may be inappropriate for interpretation and public access. And certainly a case can be made that available money is better spent on the preservation of objects and heritage sites for future academic research than on their public display and interpretation.

However, another part of the reason why museums and heritage sites have not changed radically is not so simple. Most visitors at heritage sites are simply looking for “a good day out.” As Susan Pearce has argued, “Heritage is about feeling good in the present”<sup>4</sup> and not really about the past at all. The link made in governmental circles between heritage sites, museums, and the development of tourism suggests that historical interpretation is limited by the commercial uses to which it is put. In British Columbia the interpretation and acquisition of heritage sites is publicly funded, but their operation is often contracted out to private enterprises whose continued operation is dependent upon the good will of visitors. Such sites are hardly likely to prosper if they offer a challenging or even unpleasant message. Similarly, museum curators who are aware of how dependent their institutions are on government funding are understandably reluctant to undertake controversial displays that might prompt angry phone calls to local MLAs. And when museums attempt to use the conventions of traditional museum display to signal an institution’s (or a curator’s) awareness of the politics of representation implicit in a given display, the results are not always as intended. In November 1888 the Royal Ontario Museum mounted a show intended to foreground nineteenth-century racism by displaying the objects in its African collection with information about the lives of the missionaries who collected them. Labels included many racist statements and beliefs enclosed within quotation marks. While the curator intended the quotation marks to signal her distance from the missionaries’ racism, some visitors were unfamiliar with this convention and interpreted the quotation marks as emphasis or even endorsement.<sup>5</sup> Even though the museum had worked closely with representatives of Toronto’s Black community, the reception of the display was vehemently hostile. For many inside and outside the museum, this episode demonstrated the risks involved in representing ethnic and minority communities that, despite their cultural

<sup>4</sup> Susan Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1882), 208.

<sup>5</sup> See Hutcheon, “End(s) of Irony.”

construction as singularly “other,” are not single entities but, rather, groups containing members with diverse educational backgrounds, political or family affiliations, religions, class status, and so on. While “representation” of such communities is absolutely necessary, it is also fraught with peril and is at the mercy of internal divisions and disagreements within those communities themselves.

In what follows I discuss two examples of efforts to represent cultural diversity in existing museum displays and attempt to analyze their respective strengths and weaknesses. The first is the reinterpretation of Point Ellice House, a heritage site in Victoria that uses a taped tour narrated by Chinese, cockney, and Irish house servants to represent the cultural diversity associated with its history. The second is the “Chinatown” section of the Modern History Gallery in the RBCM, which was added to the display (originally built in the early 1870s) in 1882. Both represent attempts to “retro-fit” existing representations of White history to include groups traditionally marginalized because of their ethnic, racial, or class identities.

Point Ellice House is a BC Heritage Site located at 2616 Pleasant Street in Victoria. The house was the home of Peter O’Reilly, who emigrated to Canada from Ireland in 1858 and who served the BC government as magistrate, judge, and gold commissioner in various locations in the interior of the province from 1858 to 1881, and as commissioner of Indian lands from 1880 until 1888. O’Reilly purchased Point Ellice House in 1867, and it was the home of his direct descendants until 1874, when it was sold to the BC government by his grandson, John O’Reilly, and became a heritage museum. In its heyday in 1885, the house was a social centre for Victoria’s upper classes; family members preserved it almost intact (with Victorian furnishings, household items, wall coverings, and carpets), adding running water and electricity by adapting the existing fixtures. The house and its contents comprise “Western Canada’s finest collection of Victoriana in its original setting.”<sup>6</sup>

When the house opened as a heritage site, tours were offered by costumed staff who assumed the characters of members of the O’Reilly family. However, this approach to the interpretation of the site was costly, and differences in the competence and the enthusiasm of tour guides meant that visitors’ experiences of the site were not consistent. In addition, the narrow corridors of the building made large single-group tours uncomfortable and threatened the more

<sup>6</sup> Point Ellice House Web site, [www.tbc.gov.bc.ca/culture/schoolnet/victoriana/eng\\_peh.htm](http://www.tbc.gov.bc.ca/culture/schoolnet/victoriana/eng_peh.htm).

fragile elements of the house. Curator Jennifer Iredale and BC Heritage manager John Adams decided to commission a taped, dramatized tour to be offered to each visitor to the site on a personal tape player (John Adams and Jennifer Iredale, interview, 3 August 2000). The tour standardized the presentation of the objects in the museum and ensured that the illusion of participation was supported by professional acting and sound effects. This chance to “reinterpret” the site also allowed the curators to “portray multicultural history” in response to a policy directive to stop “telling the history of rich White guys” (ibid.) and to incorporate representations of the cultural and racial diversity of the BC population.

The use of narrative in the taped tour of Point Ellice House calls attention to how the “narrative of nationality” is supposed to be performed by prescriptive “tours” of history displays and heritage sites like Point Ellice House. Objects are arranged in a linear sequence and linked by physical arrangement. Object labels and tours led by guides or on personal tape players make explicit the narrative links between objects. These links are performed by the museum-goer, who follows the prescribed order of display cases and textual explanations that both represent our identities as citizens and interpellate us as subjects. “The History of British Columbia” is reified in the performance of the display sequence, and the product, “British Columbian identity,” is materialized in the person of the museum-goer. Thus the construction of “British Columbian identity” is both the justification for and the product of the narrative interpretation of objects.

Given this analysis,<sup>7</sup> the most striking element of the taped tour is the choice of the Chinese “houseboy”<sup>8</sup> as narrator. This character figures throughout most of the tape as the authority on the O’Reilly family members and their way of living, describing their social lives and relationships as well as the objects in the household and the

<sup>7</sup> The terms “subject” and “interpellate” are common in analyses of the ways that fictional or other kinds of discursive narrative solicit their readers’ identification, and the way that subjects “perform” identities. Useful texts for those unfamiliar with these terms might be Catherine Belsey’s *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1880); or Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1880). Louis Althusser coined the term, “interpellate” in his well known essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” A useful introduction to the methodology used here would be Anthony Easthope’s *Literary into Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1881); and Carol Duncan’s *Civilizing Rituals* (London: Routledge, 1885).

<sup>8</sup> While the job of cook and house servant in early British Columbia was invariably performed by adult Chinese men, I will follow the practice both of the time and of the Point Ellice House heritage site and refer to this character as the “houseboy.”

ways they were used. His voice immediately introduces the idea of ethnic diversity in the population of early British Columbia, but this is not the only reason that the “story” of the site is told from his point of view. The choice of the Chinese houseboy as narrator offers a practical solution to the problems posed by the physical limitations of Point Ellice House itself. The tour had to enter the house at the scullery, not only because it is the entrance closest to the outbuilding (the carriage house) that functions as the “cash point,” but also because it is a much more substantial room than is the narrow front hall off the main entrance. Since the tour was predetermined to enter the house by the scullery entrance, the encounter with the houseboy seems utterly appropriate. He is the logical person to describe the objects in the scullery, kitchen, servery, and pantry (with which he would have been intimately familiar), and his character provides a plausible reason for the detailed description of the O’Reillys’ mode of life, thus contextualizing the objects.

This strategy for representing diversity is continued as the visitor moves from the kitchen and pantry areas, through the “baize door” and into the living areas of the O’Reilly family, where the houseboy encounters a cockney housemaid and, later, an Irish gardener. The curators of the site stress that, in addition to representing ethnic diversity, these characters represent the “upstairs-downstairs story” that constitutes the academic approach of social history, an “increasing trend within historic sites. That house clearly had servants, and we were not telling that story before. At least half that building physically was devoted to the work that the servants would have undertaken” (Jennifer Iredale, curator of Point Ellice House, interview, 3 August 2000). However, from necessity, the servant characters on the tape are highly generalized; unlike their employers, who left a raft of diaries, documents, and letters, servants “didn’t leave any documents” (*ibid.*). Their attitudes and personal lives – their “stories,” as such – are unavailable.<sup>9</sup> These characters may represent the dominant discourse in the narrative tour, but that discourse is empty of any “historical” specificity except for the most general information about patterns of immigration and employment.

<sup>9</sup> The photograph of a Chinese house servant that appears on the Point Ellice Web site is not actually of a servant who worked at Point Ellice; rather it is of a Chinese man who may have worked at the McKenzie family residence (Lakehill) during the same historical era. According to Jennifer Iredale, this photograph is catalogued under BC Archives 74171. Another image of the same man is catalogue no. 3354 (also at Lakehill, which was the McKenzie family’s residence after it moved from Craigflower Farm).

What is more interesting, though, is the role constructed by the taped tour for the museum visitor. The narrator specifically addresses the visitor as the new Chinese “houseboy” who is being trained in his duties by the incumbent. This role is developed not merely by direct address but also by using the visitor’s assumed familiarity with Chinese domestic practices to situate the O’Reilly family’s preferences as odd or unusual. The narrator explains the profusion of pots in the kitchen by stating that, unlike “in China,” where cooks use “one big pot” for any amount of food, in Canada cooks use different pots for different amounts. The narrator also chastizes the housemaid for gossiping about her employers: “in China, servants never tell such tales.” The tour implicitly engages the visitor in two developing narrative structures. The first involves the social interaction between the Chinese houseboy, the housemaid, and the gardener; in this narrative the visitor is implicated as the audience to be instructed, and the potential ally to be solicited, by the competing voices. The second involves the love affairs of “Miss Kathleen” O’Reilly, the adult daughter of the O’Reilly family; this narrative engages the visitor vicariously at the level of gossip. Thus the tape uses the conventions of dramatic narrative to actively engage visitors not just by setting the stage and prescribing a route through the display but also by literally giving them a role to enact. In this way, “the museum also ma[kes] manifest the public it claim[s] to serve: it [produces] it as a visible entity by literally providing it a defining frame and giving it something to do.”<sup>10</sup> By acceding to these conventions, museum visitors willingly suspend their disbelief and enter the “liminal space”<sup>11</sup> that allows them not merely to step back into British Columbia’s history (and more specifically that of the O’Reilly family) but also to take up a position specifically coded as racially “other.”

But how successful is this strategy? Even though the tape represents ethnic and class diversity by choosing to interpellate the visitor as the new houseboy, the focus of the tour is still the O’Reilly family. After all, “the artifacts which were most suitable for collecting and that had the best documented provenance frequently had belonged to people of comfortable means, who had the time, space, and funds to save historic objects, documents, or family furnishings over several decades along with the information to authenticate their provenance

<sup>10</sup> Carol Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian, 1981), 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

... Museum holdings, as a result, often tended to favour objects belonging to the well-to-do classes of society.”<sup>12</sup> The house exists as a museum because it represents well-to-do White settler society and because of its provenance as the home of a man who was central to the imperial administration of British Columbia. As Tony Bennett puts it, “What can be seen on display is only meaningful because of the access it offers to a realm of significance which cannot itself be seen ... [Artefacts] serve both to refer to a realm of significance that is invisible and absent (the past, say) and to mediate the visitor’s or spectator’s access to that realm by making it metonymically visible and present.”<sup>13</sup> The tape offers the narrative of the O’Reilly family’s domestic affairs as the unseen “realm of significance” to which the objects refer. But the tape does not address the metonymic significance of these items: they have been preserved, and they are on display, because they were Peter O’Reilly’s and because Peter O’Reilly was an important man in the history of British Columbia.

An immigrant from Ireland with several years experience in the Irish Constabulary, O’Reilly was immediately appointed as a stipendiary magistrate when he arrived in Victoria in 1858. He was an opportunist who, like his contemporaries, justified the huge fortune he amassed by his putative status as a well-born and highly moral servant of the British Empire: “From his first arrival in British Columbia he was a social climber, and it seems clear from his unofficial correspondence that he considered his government work as supplementary to his own standing and investments.”<sup>14</sup> His permanent legacy was the legalizing and mapping of hundreds of Indian Reserves, many of which are now the subject of litigation and land claims negotiation.

None of this history appears in the interpretation of Point Ellice House, despite the fact that the house itself and the gracious domestic life it afforded were dependent upon and, indeed, owed their existence to O’Reilly’s status as an agent of empire. Instead, the tour narrates the “story” of Kathleen O’Reilly, the unmarried daughter living in the O’Reilly household during the period depicted on the tape.

<sup>12</sup> Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims, “Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue,” in *Exhibiting Cultures*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian, 1981), 165.

<sup>13</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1985), 35.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Brealey, “Travels from Point Ellice: Peter O’Reilly and the Indian Reserve System in British Columbia,” *BC Studies* 115-6 (Autumn-Winter 1987-8), 225.



Kathleen is the reference point for many of the object descriptions: the clothes she wore, her presentation at the Irish Court, her “feminine” accomplishments, and her preferred leisure pursuits. The tour climaxes with the story of Kathleen’s and Henry Stanhope’s courtship, dramatically recreated in excerpts from O’Reilly family letters. (This story had been presented at the site by actors in the previous summer and, because it had proved popular with visitors, was selected as the focus for interpretation.) The tour of the interior of the house concludes with descriptions of the parlour and the study and their function in the social life of the O’Reillys, with the narrators contextualizing each object described by relating it either to the supposed new duties of the visitor (in the role of houseboy) or to imagined social gatherings presided over by Kathleen and her mother, Caroline.

The curators suggest that explicit interpretation of the objects as the fruits of O’Reilly’s role as a public servant and capitalist would do violence to their status as domestic objects. They argue that O’Reilly’s work did not take place in Point Ellice House and, therefore, that the house cannot be made to represent it. However, the objects in the house, and the drama of Kathleen’s romantic liaisons, depended upon O’Reilly’s role as a government official; the O’Reillys’ elegant lifestyle, and Kathleen’s status as an eligible bride, depended upon her father’s wealth and public position. In the display of domestic objects at Point Ellice House, the supposed Victorian separation of domestic and public spheres works to substitute the one for the other (i.e., domestic history for history), much as Edward Said has argued occurs with regard to how imperial cultures substitute the art object plundered from colonized peoples for an analysis of the way it was acquired.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the generality of their characterization, the servants are the obvious choice to narrate this particular story. As the characters themselves point out, “servant[s] hear[d] many things in a house like this”; they had access to the personal lives of their employers and were witnesses to those scenes that, by Victorian convention, were private. Thus the servants function as stand-ins for the visitors, who, by “stepping into the past,” place themselves in a position to witness the private affairs of the family. Unfortunately, however, the lack of information about the servants and their personal lives impoverishes this dominant discourse: what would a cockney housemaid, or a Chinese houseboy, really have thought of Peter O’Reilly’s role in colonial administration or of “Miss Kathleen’s” many silk gowns? The lack of

<sup>15</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random, 1883).

an answer to that question reverses the meaning of the tour; instead of the visitor becoming a participant in the drama of the O'Reilly family, the servants become mere visitors, witnesses of a drama in which they do not participate.<sup>16</sup>

Because the interpretation of Point Ellice House lacks an explicit rationale for the preservation of the house as a heritage site, and because the narrators are not actively characterized, visitors use the codes offered by the tape to interpret the historic site as a representation of a desirable bourgeois "lifestyle" – one that they are invited to witness as spectators and to consume as buyers. The love affair of Kathleen O'Reilly and Henry Stanhope becomes celebrity gossip. The artefacts become signs of status and income level (which is precisely what they are, several blocks away in the display windows of Fort Street "Antique Row" shops). Both of these tropes of representation confound the curator's intentions with respect to the site as they construct the O'Reilly family and its "lifestyle" as objects of desire and create the experience of Point Ellice House as part of a continuous present in which the visitor is voyeur, barred from participation by class and income level. This interpretation of the past as desirable consumer lifestyle is reiterated in the other facilities offered to visitors at Point Ellice House, from the gift shop that sells paper napkins printed with authentic designs from the Victorian and Albert Museum to the restaurant offering Afternoon Tea prepared from Caroline O'Reilly's recipes and served on the lawn.

Thus, despite its attempt to represent the ethnic diversity of British Columbia's population by choosing narrators who are ethnically "marked," and despite the innovative way in which the tape interpellates the visitor as Chinese-British Columbian, the taped tour of Point Ellice House continues the tradition of museum history displays by focusing attention on the lives of the White upper class as constitutive of history. The prominence given the houseboy figure does not signal a radically new approach to inclusivity; rather, it represents what Smaro Kamboureli calls the "sedative politics" characteristic of the Canadian approach to creating a multicultural society.<sup>17</sup> Such

<sup>16</sup> An unfortunate parallel can be drawn between this tour and the taped tour of Helmcken House, which the Heritage Branch commissioned from the same production company. The tour of Helmcken House is narrated from the point of view of the walls. Like the walls, the servants have ears but little else. The servants are no more actors in the drama of the O'Reilly family than are the walls of Helmcken House in the drama of the Helmcken family.

<sup>17</sup> Smaro Kamboureli, *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), 81ff.

approaches embrace ethnically marked “multicultures” as the colourful context that defines “a dominant and supposedly unified, white, unmarked core culture.”<sup>18</sup> The Chinese-Canadian houseboy, the cockney maid, and the Irish gardener may be British Columbians, but they exist only at the margins of White settler culture, mere witnesses to what men like O’Reilly did. The taped tour fails to address the diversity of British Columbia because it treats Point Ellice House as a domestic microcosm that existed independently of the imperial project that sustained it rather than attempting to show how the two are mutually interdependent: prosperity in the heart of empire depends upon exploitation at its margins. The tour is unable to transcend its fetishizing of the bourgeois “Victorian lifestyle” and is reluctant to refer the Point Ellice House collection to the meta-narrative of BC history, which is its justification. For these reasons it is limited in its ability to effect the formation of the tolerant and liberal citizen/subject that its own critique of museum representation would suggest is its goal.

On the other hand, it might be argued that many of the visitors to Point Ellice house are not actually British Columbians; certainly a large number of them are American tourists, and a smaller percentage are Asian visitors and ESL students. For such visitors, the strategy of addressing visitors as passive witnesses of “celebrity gossip” and desiring consumers may be perfectly appropriate. This contradiction signals the way that the Heritage Branch’s dual goals – to serve up “a good day out” for the tourist and, at the same time, to interpret the diverse and multiple histories of British Columbia to its own constituents – might in some cases conflict.

An alternative way to structure the representation of minority cultures into museum representation is exemplified by the “Chinatown” exhibit that forms part of the “Old Town” in the Modern History Gallery at the RBCM. Old Town is intended as a three-dimensional recreation of a late-nineteenth century BC town. Visitors enter a two-story hall filled with reproductions of the exteriors of buildings, which serve as a context for historical artefacts displayed “realistically” in cases representing shop windows. Some of the displays can be entered: the “movie theatre” contains period seating and continuously shows silent films; the “Hotel” includes a sweeping staircase that leads to second-floor dioramas of domestic interiors and offices. The display

<sup>18</sup> Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (London: Routledge, 1988), 152-3.

includes sound effects (horses' hooves, a railway train arriving at the station) and scents. The Chinatown section continues the vocabulary of representation established in Old Town; visitors turn off the "main street" into a side street with reduced lighting and cramped proportions, representing the exterior of several shops with balconies above. Details include a red light over a doorway, a single small window onto a domestic interior, and a laundry line strung from an upper balcony. Sound effects include chickens clucking behind alleyways fenced from public view as well as voices emanating from behind the facades.

No narrative dictates how or in what order this display is to be consumed; however, the elements included in Old Town suggest an implicit narrative structuring. The display includes a railway station and a hotel as well as the various services that a regional "metropolis" might offer its surrounding regional "hinterland," including a garage, pharmacy, printing office, optometrist, and insurance agent. The visitor exits Old Town into displays that focus on resource industries, including logging, mining, and fishing.<sup>19</sup> As this account suggests, the display is structured by the "Frontier and Metropolis" thesis articulated by historian J.M.S. Careless, who asserted that, although "Canada took shape through the successive occupation of frontiers,"<sup>20</sup> the development of frontiers was vitally dependent upon regional metropolitan centres. Canada's frontiers were not populated mainly by independent farmers, Careless argued, but by workers in resource industries<sup>21</sup> who remained tied to metropolitan centres for financing and access to markets. The organization of the Modern History Gallery, which requires the visitor to pass through Old Town and then into the "hinterland" of resource industries, thus represents Careless's idea that "the very people who took up the forward margins often came there through outside direction and provision"; they were essentially "metropolitan outrunners in the primeval forest."<sup>22</sup>

Careless's interpretation of Canadian history elides the issues of gender and cultural difference that have come to be central to historical representation in the years since it was formulated; Old Town as originally constructed lacked an awareness of gender and cultural issues as well. As early as 1880 Bob Griffin of the RBCM acknowledged that the history galleries at the museum "are largely a

<sup>19</sup> A recent addition is a display case on recreational fishing, the first of a series of cases that will represent British Columbia's tourist industry.

<sup>20</sup> J.M.S. Careless, *Frontier and Metropolis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1888), 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

reflection of the working/middle class European (largely English) origin of the early immigrants” and that this “distorted image of ethnicity ... requires some readjustment.”<sup>23</sup> The display constructed its visitor as a White man (who could enter buildings like hotels, railway stations, and movie theatres at will but could not enter the millinery shop) moving through the town towards a hinterland destination. The lives of women were represented by displays of domestic goods in the supposed “shop windows” and a kitchen interior constructed in the “hotel”; the lives of racialized and ethnic minority individuals were represented solely by “two window display cases containing randomly selected Chinese artifacts.”<sup>24</sup>

The representation of the Chinese community of British Columbia within the Old Town gallery was targeted as “the starting point of a plan to delineate and increase ethnic profiles within all the galleries.”<sup>25</sup> In 1882, through the assistance of Dr. David Chuenyan Lai, a University of Victoria geography professor and noted expert on the history of Victoria’s Chinatown, the RBCM had acquired the contents of Man Yuck Tong, one of the earliest Chinese herbalist shops in Canada.<sup>26</sup> This collection formed the nucleus of a long-term plan to create an important gallery representing the history of Chinese Canadians. Members of the Victoria Chinese community and the Victoria Chinatown Lions Club were approached for help with fundraising, artefact identification, storyline authenticity, and Chinese calligraphy. The gallery opened in 1882.

The visitor who wanders into the Chinatown “street” experiences an atmosphere quite different from that in the rest of Old Town. The building facades incorporate many of the architectural features identified by Lai as typical of “tong buildings,” or meeting halls, in Chinatown: recessed or overhanging balconies, “Oriental” ornamentation, and horizontal and vertical signboards bearing Chinese characters.<sup>27</sup> The rebuilt Man Yuck Tong is a multi-use building typical of Chinatown, with two businesses (herbalist and tailor shop) located on the main floor, along with living quarters and a meeting hall for a “tong” (a clan or county society, recreational or

<sup>23</sup> Bob Griffin, “Exhibit Proposals: History Unit, October 5, 1880,” unpublished MS, RBCM Archives, 1.

<sup>24</sup> David Chuenyan Lai, “Curatorial Statement,” *Material History Review* 40 (Fall 1884): 77.

<sup>25</sup> Griffin, “Exhibit Proposals,” 1.

<sup>26</sup> David Chuenyan Lai, “The Chinatown Exhibit of the Royal BC Museum,” *British Columbia Historical News* 27, 2 (Spring 1884): 33. See also “Man Yuck Tong in Victoria,” *British Columbia Historical News* 25, 4 (Fall 1882): 34-5.

<sup>27</sup> See David Chuenyan Lai, *The Forbidden City within Victoria* (Victoria: Orca, 1881).

charity club) on the upper floor. The facades are separated by alleyways barred by slatted gateways; these openings terminate in angled mirrors that give the appearance of the “interconnecting passageways, closed off from public view”<sup>28</sup> that Lai identifies as a distinctive element of Chinatowns.

However, the architecture is not the only signal that the museum visitor has entered a distinctive part of Old Town. Lowered lighting, cramped space, and inability to enter any of the buildings makes the display seem claustrophobic and exclusionary. Sound effects that include chickens clucking and people speaking emanate from behind locked doors and curtained windows, suggesting a complex life going on behind the facades. The effect is of entering “the wrong part of town,” a place where community life takes place beyond the reach of the visitor and where all doors are barred. Chinatown is constructed as the exotic unknown and the visitor as a White man (for what White woman would have ventured here?) who experiences it from the outside, from the street.

Surprisingly, this effect is deliberate. In his “Curatorial Statement” Lai points out that the affective goal of the Chinatown exhibit is “to make visitors experience ... feelings of curiosity, mystery and ‘fear’ in strolling Chinatown at dusk which was perceived as a “Forbidden city’ by the white public.”<sup>29</sup> The “Interpretive Objectives” for the display included creating “a sense of being ‘not at home,’ if [the visitor is] of other than Chinese heritage.”<sup>30</sup> What is so striking about this representation of diversity in BC history is its self-conscious construction of the visitor as “White.” This strategy acts to represent diversity by reproducing in the White visitor the effects of racist exclusion; the visitor feels “not at home,” displaced and uncomfortable, amidst unintelligible signs and conversations.

As this account of its affective elements suggests, the display tends to assume White experience as the norm and the Chinese-Canadian experience as something special, set apart, hyphenated. This might be a shortcoming: while the “Interpretive Objectives” aim to create a “sense of comfort”<sup>31</sup> and familiarity in Chinese-Canadian visitors, Dr. Lai suggests that this would be a more likely reaction in elderly

<sup>28</sup> David Chuenyan Lai and Pamela Madoff, *Building and Rebuilding Harmony* (Western Geographical Series vol. 32, Department of Geography, University of Victoria, 1987), 52.

<sup>29</sup> Lai, “Curatorial Statement,” 77.

<sup>30</sup> RBCM. “Interpretive Objectives for the Chinatown Exhibit at the Royal BC Museum,” 27 April 1982, unpublished MS, RBCM Archives, 6.

<sup>31</sup> “Interpretive Objectives,” 6.

Chinese Canadians; that is, in those people who once lived or still live in a Chinatown (David Lai, interview, December 2001). More recent immigrants or more wealthy Chinese Canadians, many of whom live in prosperous suburban communities, might view the display as separated from them by history rather than as part of their own cultural past. In addition, as Joan Seidl remarked in her review of the display, the focus on difference and exoticism de-emphasizes the interaction between White and Chinese-Canadian communities, and elides the way that Chinatowns can be seen as a “response to the legislated racism of the state.”<sup>32</sup> But despite these potential drawbacks, the display attempts to challenge racist division in BC society by making visitors aware of their “whiteness” and prompting them to feel themselves as part of an exclusive cultural community even as they experience the “affect” of exclusion.

Neither the taped tour of Point Ellice House nor the Chinatown exhibit at the RBCM completely achieve their objectives. Point Ellice House invites the visitor to step into the shoes of a Chinese house servant in the late nineteenth century but first empties those shoes of any historical specificity. Assuming the position of the “new houseboy” thus has no affective consequences; instead, it allows a seamless integration of the curious contemporary visitor into the historical “lifestyle” of the O’Reilly family. The RBCM Chinatown does not attempt to offer the White visitor any subject position but his or her own; instead, it contextualizes that subject position in such a way as to challenge the assumed hegemony of the White middle class in BC history. However, because the display has no prescriptive narrative structure it merely recognizes visitors within the subject categories they already accept and allows them to experience their “whiteness” in a non-coercive way. Visitors may simply “drift through the exhibit accumulating random impressions” rather than reflecting on their significance.<sup>33</sup> Both these strategies are sincere and sophisticated attempts to grapple with the problem of representing diversity in BC history, and both have their merits. But the Chinatown gallery suggests a more imaginative, more serious, and more intellectually challenging approach to the issue – one that the wider mandate and less commercial orientation of the RBCM facilitates.

<sup>32</sup> Joan Seidl, “Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, *Chinatown*,” *Material History Review* 40 (Fall 1984): 76.

<sup>33</sup> An important point made by one of the anonymous reviewers for *BC Studies*.

There is no easy solution to the politics of representation in museum displays. While the priorities that governed the acquisition of Point Ellice House and the construction of the Modern History Gallery in the 1870s may now appear dated, more inclusive approaches to interpretation of objects and heritage sites may also distort, albeit in different and perhaps unanticipated ways. I try to illustrate this concept in the classroom with a simple exercise: I ask the students to choose one object (just one) to represent “the student experience” in an imaginary display case illustrating the history of the university. Even if the students can agree on a single object (a box of Kraft Dinner? a student loan application?), they learn that, in the process, the experiences of some students are always elided. An axiom of critical cultural theory is that “all representation is distortion”; if no one version of the past is “true,” then the goal of creating a single representation of the past, no matter how “inclusive,” in a permanent museum display is doomed to failure. In the academy we address this limitation through debate – a discourse within which we are the privileged speakers. But talk is cheap, and an essay is much easier to revise than is a diorama. Unlike academics, museums must remain responsive to commercial imperatives, funding sources, the comments of casual visitors, and the political agendas of backbench MLAs. Assessing museum displays from a critical cultural perspective is both an intellectually engaging and useful pursuit, and it is becoming more popular as cultural studies encourages scholars in the humanities to look beyond the discursive to visual, gestural, and material modes of representation. But analyses such as these should pause and reflect on the aims and goals of critical practice, and avoid merely giving ammunition to those who would starve museums of funding, attack their legitimate scholarly goals, or turn them into tourist Disneylands. Instead, in the process of exercising our critical muscles we might attempt to start a dialogue, to collaborate, and to think with and through museum curatorial practices.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Lorne Hammond and Martha Black of the Royal British Columbia Museum, and John Adams and Jennifer Iredale of Heritage BC, for their kind and tolerant responses to my queries.