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Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Jennifer Kramer, and Ḳi-Ḳe-in, eds., *Native Art of the Northwest Coast: A History of Changing Ideas*, Vancouver and Toronto, UBC Press, 2013, 1120 pp., 19 colour illustrations, hardcover, $195, ISBN: 978-0774820493; 2014 paperback, $75, ISBN: 978-0774820509

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Reviews
Recensions

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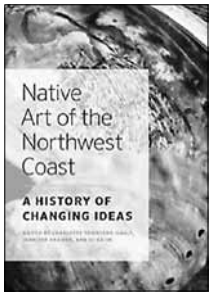

The immediate and enthusiastic response to *Native Art of the Northwest Coast: A History of Changing Ideas* signals the ongoing desire of scholars, activists, and artists to explore the complexities of local histories and cultural expressions as they relate to the increasingly global concerns about the effects of settler colonialism, decolonization, and sovereignty. Within weeks of the anthology's release, participants in the Native American Art Studies Association Conference scrambled to incorporate references to this long-awaited publication into their presentations on film and community collaboration, dance and sovereignty, masks and gender.[1]

The scale of this undertaking is unprecedented in the art historical and anthropological literature of the Northwest Coast and, more broadly, in regard to Indigenous cultural expressions in North America and beyond. Conceived from a 1998 graduate seminar at the University of British Columbia examining "the role of historiography" in the production and reception of Native art, this ambitious volume incorporates the vast knowledge of anthropologists, art historians, artists, elders, and others. It consists of a series of invited essays written by twenty-eight authors, most followed with briefly contextualized excerpts from a range of published and unpublished documents, including some early texts translated here into English for the first time. Spelling and terminology have not been standardized as in most books; rather, each author's choice of orthography as well as the use of words such as "Native," "Aboriginal," and "First Nations" serve both to historicize and to politicize two hundred and fifty years of texts examining the art of the Indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast. The roughly chronological 1,120-page text is rich with controversy and connections, and seeks to provoke questions rather than provide answers. As the editors Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Jennifer Kramer, and Ḳi-Ḳe-in note in their preface, their intention is to "confront the disturbing disjunctures between a dominant idea of art perceived as external or culturally detached, Indigenous epistemologies, and apparently intractable political and racial realities" (p. xxxvi).

The first three essays are meant to undercut the cohesiveness suggested by the phrase "Northwest Coast Art," as the perspectives provided by Daisy Sewid-Smith, Ḳi-Ḳe-in, and Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas reveal the complexities, similarities, and differences among diverse Indigenous epistemologies and the different ways in which these can be expressed. Sewid-Smith begins by acknowledging the importance of protocol, i.e., that one "must speak only about [one's] own customs, practices, and doctrines" (p. 15). She states that although she addresses only her cultural practices, many Indigenous people will find similarities with their own teachings. Throughout her descriptions of a range of cultural expressions including totem poles, feast dishes, and dances, Sewid-Smith makes a clear distinction between Kwakwak'wakw "art" made for the market and "symbolic representations"—regalia and other objects that are animated by "story, chant, song, and dance" (p. 24). She cautions that a focus merely on the form of an object disconnects it from traditional contexts, which is even more damaging than the devastating effects of the 1884–1951 potlatch prohibition. Ḳi-Ḳe-in notes that in spite of all the writing about Nuuchaanulth objects since the time of the early explorers, no one has engaged deeply with the "traditional belief system and its expression throughout the range of cultural activities" (p. 28). He argues that to achieve a better understanding of the physical objects discussed in publications by the Maatmalthnii (white people), books should also be written about Nuuchaanulth cosmology, judicial systems, responsibilities, and reciprocities, for they "demonstrate ownership and authority over territory and resources" (p. 29). Finally, Yahgulanaas utilizes Japanese Manga-style illustration to share aspects of Haida "cosmology and consciousness," following one soul from before birth, through life, and after death (p. 31). The appearance in the last panel of a European explorer's ship dwarfed by a totem pole connecting land to sky acknowledges the entanglements of contemporary peoples across time and place and the persistence of Indigenous knowledge systems. These three essays illustrate the often-ambivalent engagement with academic and popular discourses that tend to collapse the distinctions between Indigenous communities and ways of knowing. This is clearly the aim of the editors whose preface acknowledges the deeply problematic and contested nature of the concepts "Northwest Coast" and "Art" as well as their failure to describe Indigenous epistemologies, despite their now-popular, and generally unquestioned, usage.

The critique of the idea of Northwest Coast Art is a thread that runs throughout the anthology. The authors situate this concept within specific historical contexts and consider both how it has been used in the past and how it continues to resonate, both positively and negatively, in the present. The Northwest Coast includes northwestern Washington State, western British Columbia, and southeastern Alaska, distinctions which privilege colonial borders over Indigenous ones. This geography is not reflected in the anthology, however, as the majority of the

essays and texts engage with histories defined by the borders of British Columbia and Canada. "Art" is likewise a European construct that privileges the visual qualities of an object. The often-heard phrase "there is no word for *art* in our language" is reflected in the argument that the visual is just one of the many tangible and intangible aspects that animate an object. Several authors prefer to use the phrase "cultural expression" to broaden the focus from the object itself to the networks of meaning and action that allow it to transform and be transformed at specific times and places.

Visual anthropologist Kristen Dowell provides one of the clearest critiques of these categories in her essay "Pushing Boundaries, Defying Categories." She identifies "Northwest Coast" as an American construct, in contrast to the strictly Canadian "West Coast," and explains that many of the contemporary Indigenous media-makers working in Vancouver are, in fact, from elsewhere, and that moreover, the term "art" excludes individuals working within a broad range of media not typically categorized as such (p. 828). While Dowell's essay addresses urban Indigenous issues specific to Vancouver, her perspective brings to light the way academic categories have been foregrounded over the concerns of the diverse nations that have lived and/or worked in this region for centuries. She notes, "kinship, family, community, oral history, and cultural protocol are just as prominent in Aboriginal media on the Northwest Coast as they are in carving, painting, printmaking, and ritual traditions" (p. 829). Like most of the authors in this anthology, Dowell acknowledges that visual expressions of specific cultural practices are inextricable from and deeply implicated in ongoing land claims and other political struggles.

The anthology's essays that address the relationship between archaeology and art as well as the encounters between Indigenous people, explorers, fur traders, and ethnographers reexamine relatively well-known texts, providing a strong sense of the tenuousness, misunderstandings, and mistranslations that characterize early encounters and ethnographic collecting practices. A particularly effective juxtaposition of texts made by the editors considers the legacies of "missionization." Socio-cultural anthropologist John Barker's contribution "Going by the Book: Missionary Perspectives" recognizes the deeply problematic role played by missionaries in suppressing and sometimes demonizing Indigenous cultural practices, while also making a case for missionary writing and collecting practices as resources for historical research and for the recognition of Indigenous agency. He argues for the complexities of the missionary presence and for the ambivalence expressed by individual missionaries; for instance, he shows that although they condemned potlatches and shamanism, missionaries praised artistic skills and subsistence techniques. Barker also notes that some Indigenous peoples became Christian for reasons of their own (p. 238). In the essay that follows, entitled "The Dark Years," Kwakwaka'wakw scholar and elder Gloria Cranmer-Webster eloquently condemns "missionization" and the legacy of residential schools and suggests that one of the reasons some people converted to Christianity was "to avoid meeting their potlatch obligations, which in some cases involved large amounts of money and/or goods" (p. 266). Cranmer-Webster relates this directly to the prosecution of participants in and the confiscation of potlatch goods from her father's 1921 potlatch, as the witnesses and translator were Christian converts. Despite the mass arrests, potlatching did not stop, and many individuals such as Mungo Martin and Charlie James continued to create ceremonial regalia and souvenirs for the tourist market. This contributed to the survival of these forms through the "Dark Years" until the potlatch ban was dropped from the Indian Act in 1951.

One of the standout essays addressing the early twentieth century is Kwakwaka'wakw artist and scholar Marianne Nicolson's "Starting from the Beginning," in which she discusses the concept of "auto-ethnography" and suggests that many of the First Nations individuals under observation by anthropologists were in fact using the "ethnographic interaction as opportunity" (p. 518). She notes that individuals such as George Hunt (anthropologist Franz Boas's informant) and Kwakwaka'wakw Chief Charles Nowell deliberately chose to share their stories outside the realm of the ceremonial in order to "occupy a new public space (publication) for traditional purposes" (p. 529). The community-based excerpts selected by Nicolson provide a vital counterpoint to the archive-based essays noted above and reveal the multiple ways in which First Nations men and women worked within and beyond the restrictions and opportunities of settler colonialism.

Taken as a whole, the divergent approaches to contested histories taken by the authors in this volume raise important questions about the myriad ways archival materials can be read and understood and how knowledge is constructed and communicated. The anthology makes an especially valuable contribution through the depth and breadth of its engagement with the histories of the mid-twentieth century, a difficult era that merits more extensive critical attention than it has received in the past. The powerful trope of the "Northwest Coast Renaissance," which still holds sway within popular discourses, suggests that artistic practices blossomed in the late nineteenth century due to the introduction of superior carving tools and access to greater wealth; disappeared in the early twentieth century because of separation from authentic cultural practices and commodification; and were revived in the 1960s primarily through the talents of Haida artist Bill Reid, combined with the publication in 1965 of art historian Bill Holm's *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*. Anthropologist Aaron Glass's essay "History and Critique of the 'Renaissance' Discourse"

addresses the origins and criticisms of the trope and argues that any positive aspects of the revaluing of Indigenous cultural expressions as art in the 1960s and 1970s are outweighed by the history of colonial injustice and "do a disservice to diverse First Nations in their continuing struggle" against it (p. 494). As art has become recognized and valued by society at large, Indigenous people have used it as "cultural capital" to "articulate a unique (and often oppositional) Indigenous identity" to forward land claims, treaties, and other sovereignty issues (p. 494). At the same time, Glass points out that for some Indigenous people the danger of this admiration is that it overshadows the unfinished business of settler colonialism (p. 494).

The essays that focus on the mid-twentieth century investigate shifting categories of value and the reception of Northwest Coast cultural expressions within modernist discourses. Marie Mauzé explores the Surrealist fascination with Northwest Coast art and the collections, exhibitions, and publications that transformed Indigenous cultural expressions from ethnographic artifacts to "primitive" art in New York in the 1940s. Art historian Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse examines the positive and negative aspects of formal analysis—describing in detail the form of an object, differentiating it from formalism—a critical approach that separates form from content. Bunn-Marcuse points out that formal analysis is the basis for understanding "an object as a social, cultural, or commercial production," whereas formalism suggests context is superfluous in terms of value (p. 404–05). She points out that Holm's book—commonly called "the Bible" by Indigenous artists—has a complicated legacy, as the nineteenth-century Northern style, consisting of Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian design upon which the book is based has been problematically extrapolated to the entire region (p. 423). Other essays explore the contradiction between the suppression of cultural practices and the attempt by governments to create nationalistic narratives and economic opportunities from the very objects that had been outlawed. The essays in this section explore this era using archival and government documentation, crucially undermining the renaissance trope and historicizing present concerns.

Collaborations by Indigenous individuals and communities with museums and art galleries have been of ongoing concern since the late twentieth century. Several essays engage with this theme. Ḳi-Ḳe-in's critique of the Royal British Columbia Museum's exhibition *HuupuKʷanuṁ Tupaat — Out of the Mist: Treasures of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Chiefs* is especially noteworthy. Taking issue with the RBCM's statement that the exhibition was an "amazing collaboration," he brings to light some of the politics behind the display. Ḳi-Ḳe-in argues that the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, with whom the RBCM consulted, were "politicians, not necessarily culturally informed" (p. 687) and therefore did not have enough knowledge to enrich the displays of chiefly possessions. To support his statement Ḳi-Ḳe-in includes the three short paragraphs provided by the Tribal Council situating the Nuuchahnulth people's geography and epistemologies for the exhibition (p. 718). Later in his critique of the exhibition and its associated text, Ḳi-Ḳe-in points out that contrary to an assertion made by the RCBM, this was not the first time Nuuchahnulth arts had been exhibited: Nuuchahnulth people have always used arts and cultural practices to establish their authority and territory and "have been exhibiting [their] culture to Europeans since 1778, when Captain Cook first visited our shores and attended a potlatch" (p. 719).

Provocatively, the editors included "Collaborations: A Historical Perspective," an essay written by RBCM curator Martha Black, to provide another point of view and further demonstrate the nuances of complex histories and interactions. Black offers a broad definition of collaboration that encompasses both its positive and negative aspects. She argues that, contrary to the widely held notion that the relationship between informants and museum ethnographers is unidirectional, both sides of the interaction have agendas and gain something from it (see also Nicolson). She points out that collaborations in many forms had been taking place in British Columbia for at least five decades, well before the 1992 Task Force on Museums and First Peoples examined and formalized diverse institutional policies across Canada (p. 787). Ultimately, Black argues, contemporary museum collaborations adopt different forms in different venues and are tied to larger issues relating to land and rights, while "successful projects advance the interests of all parties involved" (p. 795).

As the editors note in their opening essay, the histories, issues, and controversies contained within the anthology are based on the backgrounds and interests of the contributors, and gaps and oversights are therefore to be expected. While this may be true, one oversight is too significant not to mention, and that is the question of the gender biases introduced and reinforced through "missionization," settler inheritance laws, museum collecting practices, and the marketing of art. As many communities along the coast are matrilineal or receive rights and privileges from both the matrilineal and patrilineal lines, this is a central issue, for the patriarchal biases of settler colonialism continue to have a tremendous impact on the lives of contemporary Indigenous women. In one of the two brief discussions of this issue, a four-page excerpt, Haida weaver Dolores Churchill makes the important point that the imposed distinctions and institutional biases between art and craft have social, cultural, and economic repercussions for Indigenous people, specifically women, but much more discussion is needed. Within the history of exhibitions of Northwest Coast art since the 1960s, the majority of solo exhibitions have been granted to male artists and, until

very recently, group shows have been overwhelmingly male dominated. In the two-page excerpt discussing female artists working in the 1990s, the late Gitksan artist and scholar Doreen Jensen highlights the detrimental effect of settler categories of value on women's cultural expressions. Pointing specifically to the binaries of art versus craft and traditional versus contemporary, she notes, "Such distinctions are at best irrelevant; at worst, they are racist" (p. 891). The lack of sustained engagement with this issue seems particularly egregious today, when increased attention is finally being paid to Canada's murdered and missing Indigenous women through calls for a federal inquiry, yearly commemorative marches, and the multi-year tour of the community-based, collaborative exhibition "Walking with Our Sisters," conceived by Métis artist Christi Belcourt. It is perhaps these types of grassroots movements, which pay attention to Indigenous women, their cultural expressions, and the politics in which they engage, that will provide the impetus needed to reassert the customary balance between women and men on the Northwest Coast.

Notwithstanding this deeply problematic lack, this anthology offers many productive aspects, including an extensive bibliography, numerous excerpts from unpublished or difficult-to-find texts, and diverse contextualizing essays that provide access to the resources needed to navigate the vastness of the literature and of these complex histories. This book can be read cover to cover, or by specific cross-referenced themes. The anthology would have benefited from the inclusion of additional images in both colour and black and white. The paucity of illustrations is curious given the subject matter and raises questions about why so few were included. Was it in order to avoid the added cost of copyright fees to an already expensive book? Was it the recognition that certain objects, valued over time as ethnographic, art, or cultural expressions should not be viewed outside of ceremonial contexts? And does this limitation open the possibility for a web-based companion site, a "mode of address" that might engage a wider audience (p. 874)?

The question of reaching a wider readership is crucial. As Alice Marie Campbell points out in her essay "Shifting Theory, Shifting Publics," Northwest Coast anthropologists—and, some would add, art historians, artists, and communities—have been on the cutting edge of decolonization research. The ongoing negotiation of these concerns on the ground occurs through collaborative museum exhibitions, community-led projects, and institutional and community support for the growing number of students working to indigenize the academy. As the essays in the anthology make clear, scholars continue to connect local issues with global trends through the examination of settler laws and art, Indigenous protocols regarding ownership of tangible and intangible property, expanding concepts of artistic practice, and the ways in which contemporary Indigenous artists and scholars negotiate both colonially imposed borders and borders relating to Indigenous knowledge. This vast contribution to scholarship, Campbell suggests, has been largely marginalized within global networks because the interactions and engagement with these issues remain so deeply embedded in the local (p. 553). Charlotte Townsend-Gault's concluding essay, "The Material and the Immaterial Across Borders," also points to this disconnect in the scholarship, noting that more critical attention has been paid to the cultural expressions of Maori and Australian Aboriginal peoples.

Though initially modeled after *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* and suggestive of the Smithsonian Institution's sixteen-volume *Handbook of Native American Indians*, particularly volume 7, *The Northwest Coast*, the present anthology is unique in its contribution to scholarship.[2] The depth of research contained within its covers and the commitment to multivocality, interdisciplinarity, and consultation, are groundbreaking. As the editors note in their preface, reading this text is "a volatile experience." As such, it should not be perceived as another example of the insularity of the "Northwest Coast." Rather, it should be seen as a model for similar projects spanning the globe.

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Notes

1 The Native American Art Studies Association (NAASA) Conference was held in Denver, CO, 16–19 October 2013.

2 Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. William C. Sturtevant, gen. ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, vols. 2–17, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978–2008.