

BIGFOOT, ATMOSPHERE, AND STORYTELLING IN HARRISON HOT SPRINGS' SASQUATCH

MUSEUM

by

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Abstract

The Sasquatch Museum in Harrison Hot Springs, British Columbia, is a one-room gallery established in 2017 within the Tourism Harrison Greeting Centre. Though compact, the gallery makes full use of the space – the walls and ceiling are painted to mimic the forest surrounding Harrison Hot Springs, and there are three notable sections of display. The first, and largest, is the collection of material related to bigfoot hunting in BC, including eyewitness testimonials and casts of footprints. Beside this display are two smaller cases. The first case relates to the Sts'ailes (Chehalis) First Nation's ancestral being Sa:sq'ets (Sasquatch), and includes a Sa:sq'ets mask repatriated from the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) in 2014. The final case of the museum is dedicated to primatological evidence for the existence of a bigfoot-like creature.

In this thesis I answer the question: how does the Harrison Hot Springs Sasquatch Museum make use of Indigenous knowledge and imagery, western scientific data, and pop culture narratives in a highly stylized gallery atmosphere to further their particular perspective on bigfoot/Sasquatch? I will use the themes of atmosphere and folkloric narratives to develop a critical interpretation of this gallery space. This is, in part, a history and analysis of the development of the museum, sourced from interviews with Robert Reyerse (executive director of Tourism Harrison). It is also an interpretive analysis of the exhibits, as they stand today, based on my own visits. I examine how the museum displays pop cultural bigfoot narratives and Sts'ailes Sa:sq'ets ancestral knowledge, including how both interpretations come together.

Lay Summary

The goal of this project is to develop an in-depth history and analysis of the Harrison Hot Springs Sasquatch Museum. In doing this examination, my aim is to understand how the planned intention of a gallery space aligns with the gallery's staged atmosphere and manifest displays. This project combines expert interviews with Robert Reyerse (director of Tourism Harrison) and Bruce Miller (Chairman of the Museum of Vancouver) and an auto-ethnographic consideration of the gallery space. By studying the relationship between the gallery environment and intentional text, I mean to develop a robust understanding of the Sasquatch Museum, and the means by which it uses a variety of storytelling channels to contribute to the larger cultural narrative of Sasquatch.

Preface

This thesis is an original intellectual product of Caris Windhausen. The fieldwork discussed throughout was approved by Tourism Harrison and by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) under the title “Sasquatch Museum” BREB number H21-00137.

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Introduction

While much has been written regarding the histories, roles, and futures of large, urban museums, most of the smaller museums of North America have been left by the wayside in these conversations. These institutions are the local history, specialty subject, or historic house museums. In small towns and villages, these hyper-local institutions rely on donations and volunteers, often housing one or two permanent exhibits for decades with little change as a result of their limited resources. For new museums entering this field, initial investment and exhibit design become the foundation for the institution going forward, as wholesale changes in institutional purpose or permanent exhibits are not financially feasible¹. As such, examining the museum exhibit holistically, from text to design, in these smaller institutions can provide great clarity on the purpose and goals of these museums within their communities.

The Sasquatch Museum in Harrison Hot Springs, British Columbia is a one-room gallery within the Tourism Harrison Greeting Centre. This museum was added to the previously existing Greeting Centre by director Robert Reyerse and opened to the public in 2017. Though compact, the gallery makes full use of the space – the walls and ceiling are painted to mimic the forest surrounding Harrison Hot Springs, and there are three notable sections of display. The first, and largest, is the collection of material related to bigfoot hunting in BC, including eyewitness testimonials and casts of footprints. A smaller display case comprises a section relating to the Sts'ailes (Chehalis) First Nations' ancestral being Sa:sq'ets (Sasquatch), and includes a replica of a Sa:sq'ets mask repatriated from the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) in 2014 to the Sts'ailes First Nation. Another display case provides the third section of the museum, dedicated to primatological evidence for the existence of a bigfoot-like creature.

1 Robert Reyerse, interview by author, Harrison Hot Springs, July 28, 2021.

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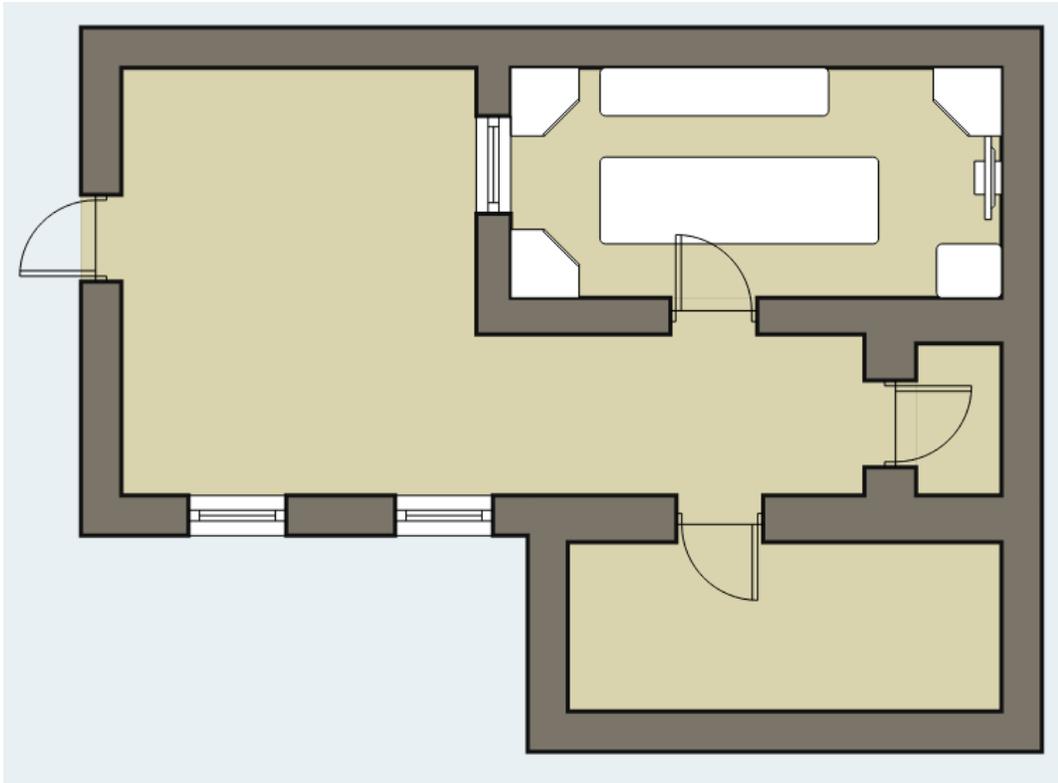


Figure 1: The floor plan for the Tourism Harrison Visitor Centre. The Sasquatch Museum occupies the corner room in the upper right of the diagram. The large room at the left is houses the welcome desk and a small gift shop. The final two rooms in the building house an office and a restroom. Image by author, July 2021.

In this thesis I will use the topics of atmosphere and folkloric narrative to develop a critical interpretation of the Sasquatch Museum. This will be, in part, a history and analysis of the development of the museum, sourced from interviews with Robert Reyerse (executive director of Tourism Harrison). It will also be an interpretive analysis of the exhibits as they stand today, based on my own visits. I will examine how popular bigfoot narratives are argued in the gallery, as well as the version of the Sts'ailes² Sa:sq'ets described in the space, including how they come

2 Anglicized as Chehalis

together in the museum. The Sts'ailes are an Indigenous group & First Nation whose traditional territory encompasses the location of Harrison Hot Springs. This will all be in service to answering the question: How does the Harrison Hot Springs Sasquatch Museum make use of Indigenous knowledge and imagery, western scientific data, and pop culture narratives in a highly stylized gallery atmosphere to further their particular perspective on bigfoot/Sasquatch?

This small museum forms an integral part of the Tourism Harrison identity – and contributes to the identity of Harrison Hot Springs as a whole. Its location in the tourism welcome centre draws in both bigfoot hunters and guests coming to enjoy the Harrison Hot Springs Resort and nearby Sasquatch Provincial Park. While innumerable pages have been written about bigfoot as a pop cultural phenomenon and its status as ancestral or legendary beings for First Nations and Native American groups across the continent, this little enclave of information has yet to be discussed in depth. The various stakeholders in a bigfoot/Sasquatch discussion come together in this one-room gallery, encouraging visitors to foster both a curiosity for the bigfoot mystery as well as respect for the Sts'ailes Sa:sq'ets. Additionally the highly stylized gallery – which includes full-wall murals and a forest-scape soundtrack – provides a fertile ground to interpret the use of atmosphere to establish a mood for the visitors as they go through the exhibit. Atmosphere here, drawing from atmosphere theory developed primarily within the context of art theory, refers to not only the environment of the gallery but also the affect that is produced by the co-mingling of environment, object, and person.

When examining museums of any size there are a variety of important factors to consider. Among those are the stated mission, implicit and explicit target audiences, starting collection and the guidelines for collecting going forward, relationship to other institutions locally and nationally, and the annual funding available. All of these will have a distinct impact on the work

the museum is able to complete, including the projects which are prioritized over others. Local history or special interest museums are often under particular financial pressure as well as influence exerted by local governments and educational institutions. Working with limited resources and under added local tensions, it is then clear that we must judge these museums within the context where they operate. To do otherwise would not only be a disservice to the museum itself, but would also do little to provide any actionable ideas for these institutions going forward.

In the process of studying and interpreting museums through avenues such as atmosphere and folkloric narrative, it is possible to build a constructive critique of these institutions. The goal of this project will be to study how the Sasquatch Museum makes use of its physical space, object displays, and written information including the ever-present audio, footprint casts, and binders of first-hand accounts, to tell stories about the history and mythology of Sasquatch. Using the aforementioned frameworks of atmosphere and folkloric narrative I will examine the following: 1) how the physical and auditory design features of the gallery interact with and impact the objects and information presented therein; 2) what role the presentation of Indigenous knowledge plays in the understanding of this gallery, including examination of the presence or absence of named Sts'ailes First Nation members as well as the information Sts'ailes provided within the gallery and 3) how the tools, and impact, of folkloric narrative methods are utilized in the gallery as a way of exploring the role of bigfoot in the Harrison Hot Springs community.

Previous Research

While there is extensive research available regarding bigfoot/Sasquatch as both a legendary ancestor and mysterious wildman (Buhs 2011, Bynum 1992, Halpin and Ames 1980),

almost nothing has been written about the Harrison Hot Springs Sasquatch Museum. The relevant pre-existing research that does exist relates to information inside of the museum itself, as in the repatriation of the Sa:sq'ets mask and Bruce Miller's subsequent article (2018). A retelling of this repatriation forms a major section of the museum's display. A similar project from 2018, undertaken by University of Denver graduate student Carrisa Kepner, examines a private Sasquatch museum in the mountain town of Bailey, Colorado. Importantly, her work makes use of visitor study methods and focuses primarily on economics and the intersection of the general store and museum when disseminating stories of bigfoot hunting and sightings. My own thesis will remain focused on the presentation of information by the Sasquatch Museum in the context of repatriation, primatology, atmospheres, and folklores.

The connection between museum objects in a display and the embodied experience of visiting a gallery space has been the subject of much inquiry (Bille et al 2015, Bjerregaard 2015, Dudley 2012). For the purposes of this exploration, this interaction will be interpreted through the corpus of atmosphere theory. Atmosphere theory is a tool to describe the intersection of all embodied experiences when interpreting our interactions with and interpretations of a place, exhibit, or event. The use of atmosphere theory is not prescriptive – every visitor will have a different experience. Rather, atmosphere provides for self-reflection when considering the intertwined physical spaces that constitute a gallery. Atmosphere theory has its roots in European philosophy, with Gernot Bohme (2017), Peter Bjerregaard (2015), Steven Brown et al (2019), and Ben Anderson (2009) providing much of the grounding for my approach to using atmospheres as a way to critically analyze museums.

Finally, I will speak to the body of work regarding folklore and storytelling, particularly in reference to the supernatural (Milligan 1990, Russell 2006, Thomas 2015, Wolf 2001). Bigfoot as

North American folklore is an important aspect of the museum, and fills a large section of the space, and its inclusion in this paper will be a requisite part of understanding the impact of the gallery space as a whole. Using the work of Dégh (1995) and McNeill and Tucker (2018) to contextualize the narrative tools of folkloric storytelling I will examine the histories of Sasquatch and bigfoot stories as discussed by Buhs (2009), Pyle (1995), and Bord (2010). These collections of encounter stories, international mythologies, and news recounting provide a solid base from which to view the figure that bigfoot has become.

Methods

Methodologically, I will discuss my in-person visits to the museum, including photos. Using the body of atmosphere theory I will critically analyze the gallery as text (without making reference to outside research regarding bigfoot) to understand how the museum presents information about bigfoot/Sasquatch. The analysis will focus on the physical space of the museum and how the gallery reinforces the information within it using decorative elements and physical artifacts. This will be an examination of the gallery as a whole, with special attention paid to the individual sections later on. Following this I will use information gathered from an interview with the museum creator Robert Reyerse, to understand the institutional logic of the museum, its intended purpose, and the goal for the staff when directing people to the museum. The interview with Mr. Reyerse provides the majority of the information regarding the institutional perspective of the museum, which I will then incorporate into the interpretation of the gallery.

The final elements of this project will delve more particularly into the materials of the three sections of the museum. I will use information gathered from an interview with Bruce

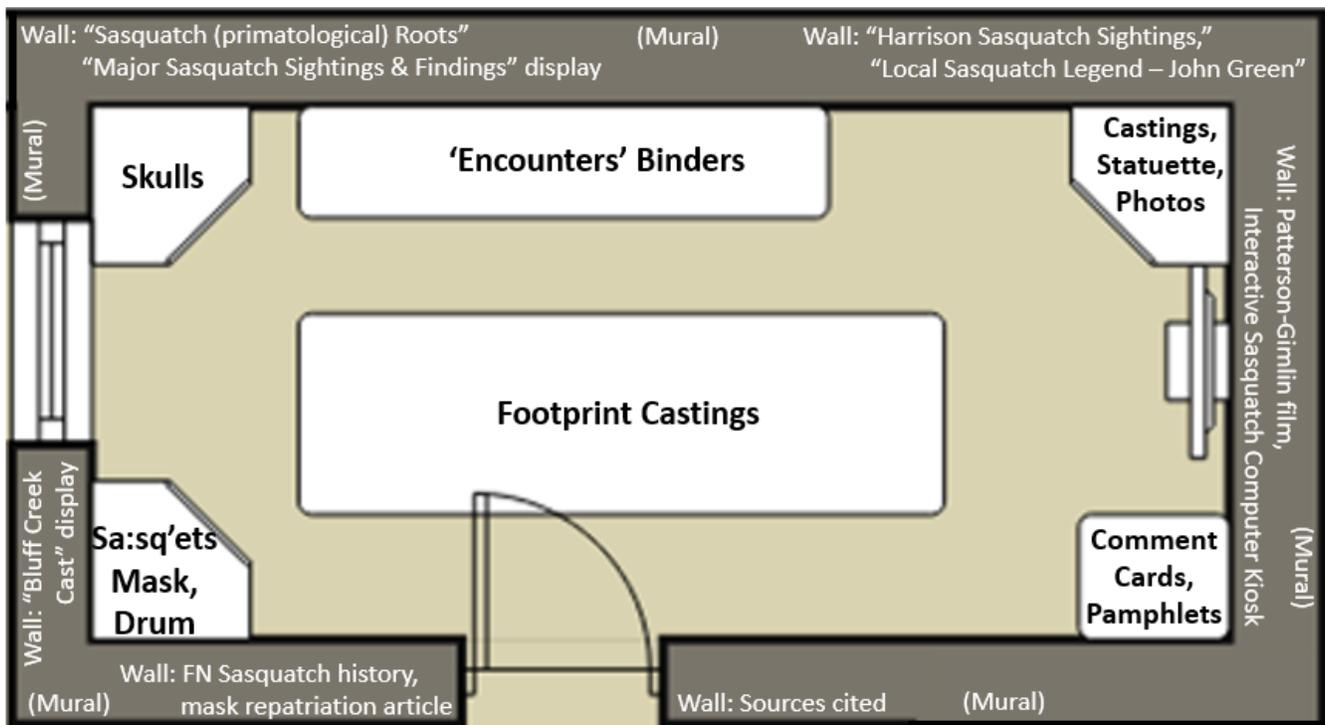


Figure 2: A floor plan of the Sasquatch Museum, housed within the Tourism Harrison Visitor Centre. The room is roughly 10 feet x 7 feet. Image by author, July 2021.

Miller, who worked on behalf of the MOV to repatriate the mask to the Sts'ailes First Nation, and Mr. Reyerse, as well as atmospheric analysis and text provided in the exhibits, as tools to understand and interpret these three sections: the Sts'ailes mask, primatological evidence, and bigfoot hunting.

Gallery Visit

Overview

Entering the Sasquatch Museum is a two-step process. First, I enter the front door of the visitor centre. This space features a collection of pamphlets on local attractions, books for sale regarding local history and bigfoot hunting, and a staff member sitting behind a desk prepared to answer questions. Behind the desk is a small corridor which ends in the doorway to the gallery

space. Entering the gallery, I first become aware of the large table cases in the middle of the room. These hold casts of footprints that are supposed to belong to a bigfoot. This is paired with the information on the north wall parallel to the entrance, which includes first-hand accounts from known local bigfoot hunters. Beneath the wall display is a table with binders full of the complete accounts from hunters in British Columbia. Photographs are provided with the more detailed descriptions below.

My first turn after entering is to the left. Here I come into contact with the other two aspects to this gallery. First is the recounting of a Sa:sq'ets Mask repatriation from the Museum of Vancouver to the Sts'ailes First Nation. This is accompanied by news clippings of the event as well as a recreation of the mask itself, which has since been cleared for public viewing by the Sts'ailes First Nation. As described by Bruce Miller via interview (2021), the process of repatriation of the Sa:sq'ets mask involved several rounds of visitation between Sts'ailes community members and employees of the Museum of Vancouver. Over these visits to both Vancouver and Sts'ailes Nation, the provenance of the mask was established within the context of European-Canadian law. Following this process, the mask was danced at a potlatch, wherein other families within Sts'ailes nation could put forward their contesting claim to the mask. The dance had no other claimant come forward, ending with the grandchildren of the original carver reincorporating the mask into their family line. Bruce Miller, who was at the event to dance the mask, recalled:

They wanted to dance it in public, but because the mask was regarded as a sacralizing item at that point, they couldn't do that without the permission of Sa:sq'ets. So one of these men had a spiritual encounter. I think the man whose grandfather had carved it with Sasquatch, who he encountered spiritually, and Sasquatch, as I recall, turned and looked at him and he took

that as permission to desacralize the mask. ... And that was a great occasion. So the other part is that if you think of this as a prerogative mask, wearing prerogative in the Salish world, it's associated with the physical mask and a dance. So there were two big meetings and hundreds of people were there and they demonstrated title to it in the longhouse. And so by manifesting the music drumming and the dance. They were missing the third of these three things that constituted this prerogative. I interpreted that to mean a title claim. So my statement to the board was that the Sts'ailes people have made a title claim to the mask.

The Sts'ailes section of the museum is comprised of text on the wall next to the gallery door along with a case in the corner holding the mask and a decorated drum. In the parallel corner is the case dedicated to confirmed primatological science regarding hominid evolution. This section includes several recreations of the skulls of early hominids. The center wall is dedicated to accounts from hunters in British Columbia. These accounts are both from game hunters and sight-seers visiting the forest as well as dedicated bigfoot hunters and expeditions. The wall is covered not only in stories from these hunters, written out, but also with pictures of evidence gathered during their hunts. This features footprints, images of the site, and tracking evidence including scratches on trees and logs beside broken branches. Below the information on the walls are 3 binders which hold the complete stories that are quoted from in the display along with other accounts. This information is expounded upon in the middle of the room, with the two table cases containing castings and associated hunter information. The eastern wall continues with this theme by mentioning some of the more noteworthy bigfoot encounters across North America, including a television screen which can be prompted by the visitor to play a video giving

a general overview of the information displayed more in depth in the rest of the cases. Another screen continuously runs the famous and controversial Patterson-Gimlin 1967 “bigfoot sighting” footage (Bord 2010: 171). Finally, the southeastern corner of the room provides information on the hunters interviewed for this exhibit, as well as citations for further reading and a podium with visitor feedback cards.

While the information itself, which will be discussed later in this paper, is interesting and diverse enough to maintain one’s attention, the design of the gallery comprises its own spectacle. The visitor centre is housed within a small wooden structure that is just off the main road. Harrison Hot Springs maintains the forest within the village, instead of removing the massive trees.



Figure 3: Frame 352 of the Patterson-Gimlin film, shot October 20, 1967 in Bluff Creek, California.

Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons License.

Thus the centre, though near to the main road, is nearly hidden in trees. Except for during the winter season, the birds and nearby Harrison River provide background noise throughout the town. This is augmented by a digital soundscape of forest life within the visitor centre, emanating from the Sasquatch gallery. Inside the gallery, the sound is noticeable but not overwhelming. This recording accompanies the mural which covers the walls and ceiling of the gallery. The mural is of a temperate forest in spring or summer, much like the one outside the center walls. As nearly all of the bigfoot experiences discussed in the gallery take place in such a forest, this mural serves to evoke the potential habitat of such creatures as well as the setting for the stories visitors are about to read.

This gallery works to introduce visitors to the “Sasquatch figure” as it is known all around Harrison Hot Springs. If a visitor ventures further into town, they will see mentions of Sasquatch

on tourism advertising and private businesses. When turning off the highway to enter town, they are greeted by a statue of a bigfoot waving from a park bench. Even nearby Sasquatch Provincial Park shares in this name. While playing off of the pop-cultural popularity of the bigfoot story, the Sasquatch Museum also aims to provide its visitors with factual and historical information that may otherwise be overshadowed by encounter stories. Encapsulating these goals within the visual and auditory language of the forest within the gallery helps to ensure a memorable experience for the visitors coming through.

Sts'ailes Sa:sq'ets Mask



Figure 4: The first corner of the museum. On the wall is some framed museum text describing the history of Sasquatch in local First Nations communities. Below is a news article covering the repatriation of the Sa:sq'ets Mask from the Museum of Vancouver to the Sts'ailes First Nation. This is beside a reproduction produced for the museum by Gary Leon of Sts'ailes. Also visible is a section of the mural which takes up the entirety of the wall space in the gallery.
Photo by author, 2018.

The section of information closest to the entrance of the gallery is devoted to First Nations accounts of bigfoot-like creatures. These are often the stories which evolved during first contact with European settlers and gave rise to modern bigfoot mythology. Included in this section is a series of descriptive panels titled “Early Native Sasquatch References”. These recount a variety of First Nations historic creations, primarily rock paintings and stone statues depicting Sasquatch-like figures. The final information panel describes wood carvings and masks, including the Sts'ailes mask featured in the corner case. The reproduction mask is displayed alongside a drum bearing the image of Sa:sq'ets, the Sts'ailes ancestral figure³ whose name would later be anglicized into Sasquatch. This image is also the official public logo of the Sts'ailes First Nation, as seen on their flag, website, and official tribal communications. Completing this section of the gallery is a framed May 2014 article from *The Globe and Mail* discussing the repatriation of a Sa:sq'ets mask from the Museum of Vancouver to the Sts'ailes First Nation. Seized by a residential schoolteacher in 1939 for unknown reasons⁴ – either through coerced trade or in furtherance of upholding the Anti-Potlatch and Indian Act, the Sts'ailes elders had no information about where the mask had been taken. A young member of Sts'ailes Nation at the time he started his search, James Leon had been looking on their behalf for 16 years before finally confirming the mask’s location in Vancouver. He was able to petition for repatriation of the mask, which was returned to the Sts'ailes people. Harrison Hot Springs is located within the center of Sts'ailes ancestral land, which is why, in part, the gallery spends an extended period of time discussing the Sts'ailes Sa:sq'ets and its ongoing relevance in the community. To end this section, the museum requested a reproduction of the Sa:sq'ets mask that was repatriated to be put on display, created by the Gary Leon – grandson of the original carver.

3 Ancestral being refers here to the historical and ongoing connection between the extra-natural being of Sa:sq'ets and the people of Sts'ailes First Nation.

4 Bruce Miller, interview by author, Vancouver, July 21, 2021

Within the Sasquatch Museum, the work and heritage of the Sts'ailes people is given special consideration. This is crucial, as the information they provided produced a set of place-based knowledge specific to understanding Sa:sq'ets as they exist in the surrounding forest. The gallery text reads:

The very word Sasquatch is an anglicized pronunciation of Sa:sq'ets, a Sts'ailes word, which tells the story of how Sasquatch are the primary caretakers over who watched the land. The Sasquatch is so integral to the Sts'ailes that their adopted logo is a stylized image of the Sasquatch as is the Sts'ailes national flag. Their experience with the Sasquatch goes back many thousands of years and the oral stories of this history have been passed down from generation to generation as Xwelmexw – People of the Land. ... 'We were always told we were not to be scared of him and he wasn't a monster. Red ochre is used for all our paintings of Sa:sq'etstel (Sasquatch mountain). The paintings are 3000-7000 years old and our people back then were already depicting Sa:sq'ets. ... The word Slalikum in our language means supernatural, is like shapes shifter... so if they want to be seen they are going to be seen. On moonlit nights, the way our elders told us, that is when you are not thinking when you're not distracted you are focused on what is in front of you so it is that time if the light hits it right you can see it you might be able to see that. That is what I was told. If you are at the right place at the right time you will see him roaming through the land.' – Kelsey Charlie Sts'ailes Sasquatch Dancers.

This text communicates to the visitors crucial aspects of understanding Sa:sq'ets alongside Sasquatch: deep time, inextricable connection to the forest, and shared knowledge from generation to generation that ties into the mandates placed upon living generations as Xwelmxw.

Importantly, Robert Reyerse, director of Tourism Harrison, notes that the text focusing on the Sa:sq'ets mask and the Sts'ailes ancestral being were produced in conjunction with Band officials from the Sts'ailes Band Office across the Harrison River⁵. As a part of the repatriation process with the Museum of Vancouver, the family of the original mask carver asked Sa:sq'ets for permission to desacralize the mask⁶ so that it may be danced in public at events like the recently re-instituted Sasquatch Days. By severing the specifically sacred connection from the original mask, Sts'ailes members could provide what once was privileged information to the Sasquatch Museum while the display was under development. Additionally, they were able to carve a replica mask to be housed in the museum and provide further context for visitors. He spoke at length of the importance of incorporating Sts'ailes Band leadership and community members in the development of the museum:

We've had good contact with [Sts'ailes] and it was part of the impetus for this as well. Back in 2013 we worked together with the Sts'ailes, and the village of Harrison Hot Springs to bring Sasquatch Days back to Harrison Hot Springs. This is an event that took place the last time in 1938 and it's basically war canoe races and First Nations events, salmon barbecue and all the sort of classic things that go with canoe races. So we brought that back in 2013 and that helped us develop a relationship with Sts'ailes. We've been talking to them over the years on different topics. And so we came up with the museum

5 Robert Reyerse, interview

6 Miller, Interview

idea. We absolutely contacted them, got their historical people, got their cultural people involved and they provided us with a fair amount of information – and they created a carving with that 1938 event. There was an actual Sasquatch mask that had been created that had been lost for a while, and they recently got that back. They got it back in Sts'ailes and we said, well, can you make us a copy of that mask? So we have that in the museum. We worked quite closely with them. They were involved with the opening day festivities. The chief came out and spoke. And it's [Sa:sq'ets] a very important spiritual being for their band. And so we wanted to be very respectful about the fact that, you know, to have a Sasquatch Museum is great, and the Sasquatch investigators that have lived in Harrison are interesting, but there's a much longer history here that relates to the First Nations, and we wanted to make sure that was prominently presented.

The vast majority of visitors to the Sasquatch Museum are from outside British Columbia, often stopping in from off the highway or while on their way to one of the resorts around Harrison Hot Springs⁷. While bigfoot stories can be found across North America, this section of the museum connects those stories to the originating beliefs found in the area which gave rise to popular conceptions of Sasquatch 200 years ago. Today, the central importance of both British Columbia and the visuals of the old growth forests around the Lower Mainland in bigfoot film, television, and books provide a space for the museum to capitalize on these existing narratives. The mural, combined with the general layout of Harrison Hot Springs itself, work to amplify the bigfoot stories both within the museum and outside of it.

7 Reyerse, interview

Physical anthropology and Primatology



Figure 5: The primatology corner of the museum, predominantly made up of the corner case with skull recreations and the informational text above. These skull recreations (of *G. blacki*, *G. gorilla beringei*, and *H. sapiens sapiens*) were commissioned by the museum. Photo by author, 2018.

The section devoted to primatology and physical anthropology is one of the smallest in the gallery, and serves principally as a primer on the physical attributes of ancient hominids. This is then used elsewhere in the gallery to help guests understand the arguments based on the physical evidence presented by several of the hunter accounts. Also noteworthy in this area are the models of gorilla and hominid skulls, which are noticeably larger than an average human skull. While these models are accurately sized, when placed parallel from the bigfoot print casts in the center of the room the relative scale of a bigfoot creature is implied to be larger than an average human. This case is accompanied by a Sasquatch origination theory based primarily around the work of Dr. Grover Krantz regarding *Gigantopithecus blacki*. The *G. blacki* fossil record indicated a large ancient ape existed 100,000 years ago in what is now southern China. Krantz

used this evidence in *Big Foot-Prints* (1992) to substantiate claims that such a creature could have journeyed across the Bering Land Bridge to North America, becoming the distant ancestor to a living Sasquatch in British Columbia today.

There is little else regarding what could be considered physical anthropology in the rest of the gallery, including in areas devoted to physical evidence of a North American Great Ape. Krantz' work is discussed extensively throughout the text, in part because he conducted research on all aspects of the Sasquatch belief in North America, not only the fossil evidence that could be connected to it. Instead of fossil records, the rest of the gallery focuses on stories told by residents and hunters in the Lower Mainland area of British Columbia. This aspect of the gallery is found on the entirety of the North and West walls, as well as the table case taking up a majority of the middle of the room. Here, those who have had bigfoot encounters explain the circumstances and provide any further evidence collected at the time. Most frequently this takes the form of footprint casts, with twelve such casts on display in the gallery.

Bigfoot Hunting and Cryptozoological Studies



Figure 6: A view of the majority of the museum from the door. The center table contains foot casts from the collection of John Green. Along the back wall are binders containing first-hand accounts of bigfoot encounters. The small television screen on top of the corner cabinet plays a copy of the Patterson-Gimlin film. Photo by author, 2018.



Figure 7: The comments and suggestions box beside stickers and information pamphlets. Photo by author, 2018.



Figure 8: The final informational panel in the museum, to the immediate right of door. It features the sources cited throughout the museum. Photo by author, 2018.

Finally, the largest section of the gallery is devoted to personal accounts from hunters and bigfoot researchers. The text of the exhibit draws extensively from 7 particular men. John Green, René Dahinder, Grover Krantz, and Peter Byrne provide most of the historical information. Bill Miller, Thomas Steenburg, and Chris Murphy focus on contemporary sightings and encounters. Included in this section are paragraph after paragraph of written accounts by people throughout the lower mainland of British Columbia. Alongside these reports are photographs of the site in question as well as casts of footprints. A television screen on the western wall scrolls through facts about bigfoot sightings combined with footage from the Patterson-Gimlin film.

The purpose of the screen on the western wall is twofold. First, it conveys information to the visitor through text and image. Second, it contributes to the atmosphere of the gallery by providing background forest sounds that correspond not only to the video on screen but also the gallery mural and the stories of bigfoot in the woods which comprise the majority of the exhibit. Guests are invited into a diminutive forest clearing to learn about the humans who live and work in the woods, as well as one of the forest's most legendary residents. By including this extra-textual element within the exhibit, visitors are encouraged to recall the information learned here when interacting with the woods just outside the visitor centre. For the hearing population, sound is a powerful tool of sense memory which can subconsciously connect events and individuals through that sound. I think the visitor in this gallery is intended to first recall walks through the forest when entering the gallery, and then connect the stories from the exhibit with the forest environment encountered later in life. While all gallery spaces make use of environment to provide a particular background for the information the visitors receive, the aggregated experience of the Sasquatch Museum provides an avenue for guests to more directly connect what they learn here to their experiences out in the wider world. Guests are encouraged

to place bigfoot as another member of the North American forest population, or at least allow for such a possibility.

As a part of the bigfoot hunting section of the gallery there is a computer screen allowing visitors to interact with more information. Titled the “Interactive Sasquatch Computer Kiosk”, the terminal makes room for visitors to explore Harrison Hot Springs and find other representations of Sasquatch in the area, including sculptures featured throughout town and a map to the “Sasquatch Trail” which highlights local businesses and attractions. This section not only encourages visitors to connect what they are seeing in the museum to the rest of the town, but it also gives them a tactile moment with the gallery, an opportunity which is not found elsewhere in the space. While it cannot be forgotten that the Sasquatch Museum is housed entirely within a small gallery space, Robert Reyerse nonetheless attempted to create a memorable experience for the visitor to interact with the gallery. Such interactive modes often take up a much larger space, and are thus often reserved for larger gallery spaces in other museums. By including this kiosk, and having it connect to the town of Harrison Hot Springs, I was reminded of the economy of space demanded by this museum and the level of intricacy involved in its production.

The final corner of the gallery is dedicated to providing further pointers and take-aways to the visitor, as well as citing the particular bigfoot hunters who were quoted or consulted by the museum. Visitors are invited to fill out a comment card, as well as pick up brochures that can be taken into the town and nearby Sasquatch Provincial Park so guests may follow along the Bigfoot Trail. Finally, when in stock, there is an advertising sticker freely available. Small museums are often dependent on word-of-mouth advertising more than any other kind. Providing items such as free stickers or bookmarks is a relatively easy way to encourage guests to discuss their visit with friends. The museum also provides a roster of references and options for further reading,

adding an air of legitimacy to the claims made therein as a final note for guests to consider as they leave. While I will not comment on the credibility of the information put forward in the museum, it is noteworthy that they would include citations at all. This is an aspect not frequently seen in museums, with gallery text often written from the point of view of some omnipotent, and usually unnamed, curator.

The sum of this section of the museum is a deluge of first-hand evidence from bigfoot hunters, both believers and skeptics, of something incredible and difficult to explain occurring in the forests of British Columbia. More than providing irrefutable proof to the visitor, the effect of this section to a neutral or skeptical visitor is to create reasonable doubt about bigfoot. This can then be a connection point for visitors who leave the museum and go into Sasquatch Provincial Park or any of the other parks and forests of the lower mainland and interior of the province. The fact that the majority of the text is sourced from named hunters also provides a level of credibility to their experiences, and allows the visitor to understand that any interpretation of those experiences was done by the hunters, and not applied later by the museum staff. Together with the sections on Sts'ailes understandings and primatological evidence this approach provides for an in-depth exploration of modern Sasquatch beliefs from a variety of explanatory avenues.

Theory

Atmosphere and Affect

Here I review how I employed concepts of atmosphere and affect in this museum analysis. When I approach the topic of atmosphere, I recognize its historical and continued use to allow for a more expansive approach to museum and exhibit development.

Atmosphere is an academically nebulous term, having found use across different disciplines including psychology, anthropology, philosophy, as well as other social sciences. Its makeup is ill defined, and yet it is a palpable part of everyday life. What, then, is atmosphere? Or, at least, what is a version of atmosphere that can be translated to the page and described understandably to others? It is dangerous to try and rely on so-called common human experiences – after all, who is to say if they are common at all? Perhaps “atmosphere “can only be understood inside oneself – you alone can understand your experience of anticipation, for example. To venture on some sort of answer I find the combined approaches of Gernot Bohme, Ben Anderson, Derek McCormack, James Gibson, and Gregory Cajete quite engaging. Bohme speaks to the ecstasies of things, “[atmospheres] are something thing-like, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through qualities – conceived as ecstasies,” (2017: 19). While ecstasies are not the object or location themselves, they are nonetheless an inherent part of the affect these things create. This is compounded by Gibson’s concept of “affordance” (2015), or the palpable possibility of an available action found when interacting with an object or space. Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2018) both work to understand the importance specific locality on our interpretation of atmospheres. In order to understand atmosphere we must examine it in context of place and time – indeed, as McCormack argues, an atmosphere cannot exist without some sort of boundary (2018). Anderson, while commenting on the importance of place, also notes the inherent messiness of atmospheres. The creation of atmosphere is dependent on ambiguities, “between presence and absence, between subject and object/subject and between the definite and indefinite” (Anderson 2009: 77). The inclusion of biophilia can also be a tool to understand atmospheres. A multitude of factors, beyond just humanity, has a palpable effect on atmosphere. To ignore such contributions and focus solely on humanity’s effect on a

space would be to miss half the picture (Cajete 1999). These ideas come together in my interpretation of atmospheres: an entanglement of place and things – both the physical reality and the opportunities they present – found within a particular space-time and held together by anticipatory tension.

As an additional tool to a generally holistic framing of my understanding of atmosphere, I also find the specific term “biophilia” useful when considering the relationships between humans, other living things, and all else that contributes to our lived environment. This is especially valuable when discussing the atmospheres of museums. Biophilia, as used by Tewa Indian education scholar Gregory Cajete of the University of New Mexico, comes first from the work of zoologist E. O. Wilson (1984) to describe “the innate human urge to affiliate with other forms of life” (85),” (quoted in 1999: 190). Cajete goes on to describe the use of biophilia in maintaining human health – physical, mental, and physiological. In opposition to this concept is “biophobia”; “a fear of nature reflected in the culturally conditioned tendency to affiliate with technology and human artifacts and to concentrate primarily on human interests when relating to the natural world,” (1999: 190). These two concepts affect museum operations in the most public of ways, specifically in regards to the methods and tools that are used in exhibit development, and how visitors are encouraged to interact physically with the space – and with what. In these questions the use of Indigenous epistemology to reinterpret the relationship of both museum and visitors to the world they inhabit can be an invaluable asset.

As with “biophilia”, an important aspect to consider in this discussion is the concept of place – one notably suited to the concurrent thought surrounding the embodied museum experience. While Indigenous thought cannot be described or used only in terms of place, and to simplify it so would be a continued disservice to this epistemic backing, the importance of

placeness as an integrated aspect of being in the world cannot be ignored. The incorporation of both place-based knowledge and the all-encompassing murals of the Sasquatch Museum force the visitor to reckon with the information they are about to take in as inherently tied to specific locations, and the way they exist within those environments themselves.

Entering the Sasquatch Museum, the anticipatory tension arises from several sources. First is the cultural baggage attached to museums as institutions. Their dual purpose as educational and entertaining places mean that simply the name “Sasquatch Museum” has a priming effect on the visitor, providing a lens through which to interpret their experiences while visiting. Once inside the gallery space, the lush visuals and verbose gallery text again emphasize the dual nature of the museum – and provides a space for the visitor to acknowledge the inherent importance of the forest in experiencing bigfoot tales. The numerous bone and footprint casts in the gallery are also a part of the atmosphere building process, bringing to mind the practices of biological sciences and paleontology. These objects, combined with the binders of first-hand accounts behind them, draw the visitor into the gallery to understand the purpose of these casts and how they might relate to each other as well as the broader story of bigfoot.

Atmosphere includes the examination of both material objects and personal interpretations in a physical space. An important part of atmosphere, accepted by much of the field, (Anderson 2009, Bille et al 2015, Bjerregaard 2015, Bohme 2017, Gibson 2015, McCormack 2018) is that it is coproduced by 1) people, 2) objects, 3) places, and 4) non-human animals and living things – it cannot be developed outside of this interaction and it is contingent on the existence of these four factors. Atmosphere and physical space are dynamically and mutually constituted; they work off each other in a particular time and place to create and bolster one another. If an aspect of that time, place, participant, or material reality is changed in some

perceptible way, the affect and the atmosphere will change. Museums are fertile ground for examinations of both affect and atmosphere for a number of reasons. Included among these is Bille, Bjerregaard, and Sorensen's approach to "staged atmospheres" (2015: 34). In this particular circumstance the atmosphere of the place, although it is as much personal as it is a shared experience, is in many ways directed by specific choices made by the creative and curatorial teams of the museum.

Bohme provides a grounding for understanding how humans may be affected by non-human objects. He argues that atmospheres are created by feeling the co-presences of subject and object. In this circumstance, Bohme describes "presence" not just as the existence of an object but instead as "the ways in which it goes forth from itself" (Bohme 2017: 19). Presence is therefore constituted of all the ways something may make itself known to others; tangibly, audibly, visually, olfactory, and beyond. In the context of museum spaces, it is crucial to note that it is not only the co-presence of visitor and displayed object that creates the atmosphere, but also the co-presences of architectural design, lighting, text, audio, and other visitors. This interpretation of atmosphere focuses on "the co-existence of embodied experience and the material environment," (Bille, et al 2015: 36). A part of this embodied experience is the materiality of the objects themselves – how they influence and are influenced by visitors, "In other words, objects are 'real' in themselves rather than mere expressions of a basically textualised, mental world, and this material reality can be put in use in museums through hands-on activities [the Sasquatch Kiosk and informational binders, within this museum], attention to objects as expressive art works etc.," (Bjerregaard 2015: 3).

Atmosphere is co-created through the experiences of people and things in a place – whether they are together at the time or instead working off of past developments. The

atmospheres in a museum are staged insofar as they are created to invoke emotional, physical, or intellectual responses. For example, in the Sasquatch Museum, the inclusion of birdsong and other forest sounds works to mentally place the visitor within a woods setting, working off the visitor's sensory memories from prior life experience. While the natures of these reactions to the stimuli are not universal, the act of responding is. All visitors come in contact with the object as a part of an object-information package developed within exhibition development, and this package is in turn used by visitors to create educationally, socially, or politically significant meanings (Dudley 2012: 3). Atmosphere provides a lens to understand communal reactions to shared spaces as an interaction between human, non-human, object, space, and emotion.

As a part of the exhibit design process, Robert Reyerse aimed to make use of all the senses a visitor might bring into the museum in big, grand set pieces:

The idea behind it was we have a small room, so let's give it some life. We wanted something that was a bit of a nature setting but also had some fun in it. And, you know, a little Sasquatch here or there. So that was the inspiration. I've been to many other museums and smaller museums. And the ones that stuck in my mind were the ones that that had gone that extra effort in terms of setting the environment. So we wanted to give it that feel. We put in some background forest sounds to help along with that as well.

The desire to “bring life” into the gallery also had the effect of establishing a system of place-based storytelling. The Sasquatch stories included in the gallery; from hunters, visitors, and locals; are inextricably tied to the forest setting. More specifically, the importance of the forests of the Pacific Northwest within the bigfoot storytelling tradition is emphasized through this design

choice. It reconnects the visitor to the locality of the histories they are reading, and further contextualizes the information they are seeing in the gallery.

Folkloric Narrative and Storytelling

Folklore is an essential tool of the human race. It allows for us to contextualize ourselves and our experiences within a wider world, and provides pathways to navigate new challenges in our lives. The telling of folklore can be a cross-generational process wherein all participants gain insight into the fantastical and mundane aspects of our realities. Within the context of a museum space, where the storyteller and audience are not fixed, known subjects, the presentation of folklore works to inform the visitor about the life and experiences of the storyteller. This sharing happens regardless of the manner in which the visitor incorporates the knowledge presented in the story into their own life, or whether or not they do at all. Folk narratives are a familiar form of sharing concepts, regardless of their actual content, and thus can be understandable to visitors regardless of a shared cultural background with the story at hand. In the context of Sasquatch, there are prevailing narratives in both First Nations and settler communities. While bearing some similarities, most often in regard to general appearance, these understandings of Sasquatch diverge in their utility within their story contexts. For Sts'ailes First Nation members, as well as other Northwest Coastal peoples, Sasquatch is as much a spiritual figure as real hominid animal. For settler communities, hearing this story in their expansion west across the 19th century, Sasquatch held no great spiritual value, but rather became another of dozens of dangerous animals to be cautious of while in the woods. This version of the Sasquatch narrative continued and expanded among settler communities as yet unfamiliar with the forests surrounding them, but still dependent on these locations for hunting and other resources. Hunters and trappers

traveling across Western North America, often isolated or in small parties, collected and shared experiences regarding dangerous wild animals with the hopes of providing some forewarning for others following the same path (Bord 2010: 15). In the mid-19th century such warnings were being collected from as far West as Mount Shasta, California and by such well known sources as Theodore Roosevelt in his book *The Wilderness Hunter*, wherein the stories of a massive ape-like creature destroying a campsite or rummaging through supplies were given the same weight as those dedicated to bears and cougars (Bord 2010: 15, Pyle 1995: 2).

As generations of settlers developed into what is known as Canada and the United States, these warnings of what lurks in the woods became part of the general folk knowledge of country life (Buhs 2009). While not always taken as verifiable fact, the sentiment remained that Sasquatches could be just one of the potential dangers when living or working in the forests of North America. As Western science developed, so too did the tools to understand the other animals who make use of the forest. Most specifically, primatology became an appealing lens through which existing Sasquatch physical evidence could be put to the test. Scientific study became entrenched in the folk narratives surrounding bigfoot, searching for a way for believers to legitimize these beliefs to skeptics. Beginning with the spread of the Patterson-Gimlin film, released in 1967, “bigfoot hunting” in North America became a mix of several tools: storytelling among believers, employing the techniques of hunting and trapping to collect fur, gathering ‘footprint’ samples, and sharing film and photos related to a bigfoot. This use of physical evidence then goes on to legitimize and influence stories told by hunters going forward.

In the text of the Sasquatch Museum, the information from hunters is presented with few editorial comments, if any. For cases that do not have some degree of public notoriety (such as the films and casts taken at Bluff Creek) the Museum text simply presents the events as recounted by

the storyteller. When discussing better-known, more controversial cases the museum text attempts to contextualize their claims. In the text discussing the Patterson-Gimlin film, for instance, the text reads:

The film taken has undergone rigorous scientific examination and cannot be proven to be a fabrication. Nevertheless, the general scientific community does not accept that the animal scene in the film is an unidentified primate. Roger Patterson died in 1972. Bob Gimlin is still with us (2017) and maintains what he saw was a natural Sasquatch or bigfoot. Significant scientific work has been done on the footprint photographs and casts, and the conclusion reached was that these prints were made by a natural foot. Scientists generally (there are exceptions) only consider physical evidence (and rightly so). In other words they do not let testimony sway their findings.

Here, the museum attempts to combine a personal narrative and its interpretation with scientific skepticism. This approach provides space for the visitor to weigh the arguments themselves, inclusive of the scientific and anecdotal evidence presented in the gallery.

Bigfoot stories are an iconic part of North American folkloric traditions. This is due in part to the manner of transmission. While there are some stories that have entered what may be called a “bigfoot canon”, the majority of bigfoot stories take the form of personal anecdotes, also known as memorates. However, even within the broader form of larger personal narratives – which can run the gamut of narrowly focused factual statements to aggrandizing, only semi-verifiable tales – bigfoot stories often follow a legend format, founded on discussion of contradicting accounts with similar themes and events connecting the storytellers and the stories themselves. Because of this, bigfoot storytellers become what Linda Dégh termed “legend tellers” (1995: 79). An important

distinction between legend tellers and other types of community storytellers, according to Dégh, is the reception of their stories by their audiences. While community members like epic singers, balladeers, and tale tellers have a primary goal of entertainment, legend tellers are perceived as having a “specific area of knowledge on which the narrator can offer information” (Dégh 1995: 79). Thus, unlike someone recounting the larger than life trials of an epic hero, those who communicate bigfoot legends are providing for their audience information that is, to the teller’s knowledge, factual or at least plausible. The museum, for its part, is attempting to work within this existing paradigm of the fantastical and the realistic in a bid to bring in visitors from across the belief spectrum⁸.

Beginning in 1818, with the account of a bipedal “hairy animal” in the *Exeter Watchmen*, stories of an unaccountable forest-dweller began to be shared in print across North America (Bord 2010). Before these stories became a genre in their own right, complete with common themes and descriptions, one must wonder about the potential for racist or classist reasoning for these stories. Often described as hirsute, odorous nocturnal animals by the predominantly white witnesses, the established prejudices of colonial and revolutionary Americans could easily translate to painting the existence of a person of any other race with the same unflattering brush. Likewise, a traveler or otherwise houseless person might evoke the same skepticism. In a more banal explanation of the stories’ origins, one favored to this day, skeptics also may point out the ability of bears to walk short distances on their hind legs. If such an animal is suffering from rabies or mange, this may explain their unusual actions. These explanations are rarely explored by witnesses in their accounts, and are likewise unlikely to gain traction among the community of believers who share these stories to a wider audience. Indeed, in the early years of bigfoot sightings, before the 1950s, these random experiences are treated largely as a quirk of the still

⁸ Reyerse, Interview

largely unexplored forest – creatures that exist predominantly away from humans and only ever make contact with isolated hunters or travelers.

The early 1900s saw the establishment of the “wildman” interpretation of these stories. In these accounts the creature is not entirely covered in fur and maintains the general proportions and features of a human. During this time a number of individuals who could be described as hermits were hunted down in the name of community safety. Often with limited speech capabilities and no connection to the villages they lived near, these men became a catchall for any issues the villages faced. This concept of a lurking, malevolent entity in the forest would join with the more animal-like descriptions that would come to define a bigfoot encounter tale. Following the successful Everest summit expedition by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, interest in legend-like adventures exploded. Emerging with the tales of mountaineers working in the Himalayan region was the yeti – a large, furry, bipedal, ape-like creature. This creature’s presence in the popular culture of 1950s America helped to fuel not only reinterpretations of existing bigfoot encounters, but also placed in the mind of a highly mobile American public that such creatures could exist near to human settlements without the knowledge of the people living there. Beginning from this point, descriptions of bigfoot encounters tend to use the same terminology to describe the creature, due either to the legitimacy of the claims or the prevalence and accessibility of bigfoot and yeti stories by the general public.

Descriptions of bigfoot-like creatures have always focused on their combination of human and animal characteristics. Additionally, even in the 1800s, bipedalism and a distinctive musky, foul body odor were common aspects in encounter tales. Beginning in the 1950s, other qualities became so common in descriptions as to be emblematic of the creature. These include: shaggy fur, gorilla-like aspects, consumption of raw meat and fish, 4-15 feet tall, long arms, eyes that glow in

darkness, hair/fur ranging from white to black to brown, predominantly nocturnal, and traveling alone or in groups no larger than 5. Most of the encounter stories from this time recount simply seeing the creature, often when driving through a heavily forested area. Occasionally they described some vandalization of a campsite, and very rarely they report outright violence from the creature toward the witnesses. These descriptive elements would become iconic to a bigfoot encounter, and come to be standard in many witness testimonies over the next several decades. It should be noted that the physical description here is also similar to that of the Sts'ailes ancestral being Sa:sq'ets. For accounts coming from communities settled in and around Sts'ailes ancestral territory, it is understandable that cross-cultural communication could produce a similar physical description combined with the ideas found in contemporary popular culture.

A common thread through each of the resurgence moments of popular bigfoot narratives is the interaction between settler communities and an imagined, mythologized Native history. When Hillary recounted his experiences in the Himalayas, part of the interest was in reference to the exoticized life of the Sherpa people. Included in this is the mystic nature of an 'Oriental' East and the great and terrifying creatures that share the space with the equally obscure human inhabitants. This pattern was equally applicable to the interpretation of First Nations communities by incoming American settlers. In the 1800s, when wildman stories first started to be reported by hunters and travelers from settler communities, the disdain for the First Nations settlements still extant in forests outside settler control was blended with tales told by those very same First Nations communities (Pyle 1995: 2). In this circumstance, the distrust of "outsiders" by settler communities led to not only a healthy fear of the as yet unexplored forests, but also a demonization and dehumanization of their First Nations neighbors (Buhs 2009: 7). Anything could be deemed a "wildman of the forest", including the very people that settler communities

were trying to push out. The Sasquatch Museum, due in part to its economy of space, does not attempt an in-depth historiography of the Sasquatch mythos. Instead, it presents the understandings of Sasquatch from settlers and First Nations as parallel story lines, each attempting to provide context for the phenomena experienced by their members.

As the governments of Canada and the United States moved further along in their planned genocides of their native communities, the stories and beliefs of those communities became playthings for the ever-growing settler population. In the early 20th century this took the form of mythologizing conflicts of the previous century as well as the establishment of the “cowboys and indians” sub-genre of Western literature and film. As Indigenous peoples were cast aside and shown as a thing of the past to modern audiences, their histories, religions, and mythologies became an open source for monster stories. When the Patterson-Gimlin film was released in 1967, it was able to draw not only on the substance of the film itself, but also decades worth of tales from settler communities and centuries worth of accounts from Indigenous peoples. These came together, with equal weight, to create the contemporary bigfoot mythology.

The biggest change in approaching bigfoot mythologies and encounter stories began in the 1950s with the integration of European scientific inquiry – most specifically the study of primate physiology. The growing accessibility of scientific texts via a boom in magazine publishing in the early 20th century meant that casual observers, researchers, and hunters had access to a new lexicon through which to describe their experiences. While tracking practices going back centuries had long been used to identify circumstances which could be related to a bigfoot, like the collection of fur and footprint samples, the integration of this information with more formal study of the great apes allowed hunters to argue for new theories. Additionally, a growing body of

knowledge regarding the movement of various species across the globe further rationalized theories of a North American great ape.

Likewise, as the popularity of bigfoot stories grew throughout the mid-1900s, so too did their presence in the academy. Researchers like Grover Krantz, Jeff Meldrum, and Joseph Blum Buhs took the bigfoot-encounter stories and put them under more focused scientific rigor, while also placing these stories in context as folklore. Krantz is quoted extensively throughout the Sasquatch Museum, in part due to his fervent and very public belief in the existence of a bigfoot-like creature in North America. Trained as a physical anthropologist, Krantz used his expertise and the methods of the field to try and explain the physical evidence available from bigfoot hunters. His conclusion, based partially on the fossil record and partially on more recently collected evidence, was to argue for at least the possibility of such a creature living in North American forests. Krantz received frequent public criticism from those within his field, and can be a contentious citation in more modern works. Most notably, according to professional anthropologists and amateur bigfoot hunters of his time, Krantz often believed fraudulent claims regarding sightings and evidence. Unable to accept his fallibility, Krantz alienated most of his colleagues both in and out of academia while at the same time becoming a well-known researcher on the subject of Sasquatch for laypeople (Regal 2009: 84). Meldrum and Buhs take a more muted approach to the evidence at hand. While, they contend, there might be evidence for a now extinct ape which lived in North America, what is more pertinent today are the stories people tell of their experiences, and what the existence of these tales might mean within their larger culture.

For museums and attractions reliant on highway-based tourist traffic, including those termed “tourist traps”, the legendary stories they tell as well as those told about the locations themselves feature prominently in their advertising, exhibits, and importance within their

communities⁹. A sub-section of the tourist industry, “dark tourism” focus on visiting the sites of supernatural and/or fabled, inexplicable experiences. Inclusive in these locations are sites of real historical events that have aspects of the supernatural within them – as in the witch trial- based tourist industry of Salem, Massachusetts. For some locations, such as the Oregon Vortex of Gold Hill, Oregon or Ye Old Curiosity Shop of Seattle, Washington, the site itself is the point of interest, rather than any particular event that occurred there. For visitors of legendary locations, the site is as important as the events that occurred there not because of the possibility of a repeat event, but rather to provide context to their own understanding of whatever occurred on that site (McNeill & Tucker 2018). It is at this intersection of legendary happening and informational site that institutions like The Sasquatch Museum sit. Indeed, the Museum’s own visitor feedback cards confirm its appeal as a central location in bigfoot country¹⁰.

Museums occupy an intriguing place in the public imagination. They are not only focal points of disseminating knowledge, but also stimulating locations meant for inspiration and creativity. The information within museums is styled as factual – they are reputable, researched locations worthy of some degree of public trust. Even when featuring stories that have a more tenuous connection to reality, or indeed none at all, the museum is nonetheless entrusted with telling an accurate version of the story. When putting forth information compiled by the museum (that is, not quotes or artist statements), museums become trusted authorities, even without a named writer for their text. How then can museums work within the purposefully fluid and malleable framework of folklore? One approach, used by the Harrison Hot Springs Sasquatch Museum, is to focus almost exclusively on quoted material like first-hand accounts and scientific

9 Reyerse, Interview

10 Reyerse, Interview. “We've had people come in specifically, even though it's a small museum, from Alberta or from the States because they heard about this Sasquatch Museum and they've been wanting to investigate further and find information.”

interpretation. Guests to the Sasquatch Museum are encouraged to be open to this type of storytelling. As a combination of fantastical stories and scientific interpretation, bigfoot stories purposefully toe the line of believability. By playing in an already fraught landscape, visitors in the museum are encouraged to reconcile the information presented within with their own knowledge. Like all folk stories, Sasquatch legends rely equally on the information put forward in the stories and the notions brought by the recipient. Folklore is, after all, an inherently communal project. Without some communication between storytellers and recipients, folklore would have no vector for transmission and development. This communal aspect of story development helps to ensure the longevity of story plots, characters, and archetypes.

In the context of the Sasquatch Museum, the stories presented in the gallery are static relative to other methods of story transmission. Guests cannot communicate with the hunters featured, nor the museum itself unless they fill out a comment card. This creates a gap not found in more traditional storytelling methods, and the museum must fill this through other means. For the Harrison Hot Springs Sasquatch Museum, this mechanism is the built atmosphere of the gallery.

When discussing tales of a supernatural or extraordinary event, often the “truth” of the matter, or its believability to an outside audience, is beside the point for those sharing their stories. Indeed, the purpose of legend telling has little to do with confirming a truthful narrative, but rather opening up the interlocutors to a discussion about the *nature of reality*. Likewise, whether or not the teller is a part of a belief system that allows for the reality of these stories is unimportant. For those sharing legendary experiences, their own understanding of their events could make room for the improbable, when they would not provide the same allowances in different circumstances or to a different teller. As described by Linda Dégh, “Rather, legends

appear as products of conflicting opinions, expressed in conversation. They manifest in discussions, contradictions, additions, implementations, corrections, approvals, and disapprovals during some or all phases of their transmission, from their inception through various courses of elaboration, variation, decline, and revitalization” (2001: 2). Thus, when examining these stories, their validity is secondary to the understanding that it is a true lived experience of the witness – and the explanation they attach to that experience is more important than the explanation an outside listener, or even third-party to the event, might ascribe. These stories are formed as much by the cultural and life history of their teller as they are by the events in question, and can thus serve as a tool to not only unpack the story being told, but the larger viewpoint and trends that went into its creation. In this way, the Sasquatch Museum provides a valuable case study into the history and trends of bigfoot hunting in British Columbia, providing eyewitness testimony as stated by those witnesses without clouding those stories with other second hand thoughts.

Analysis

All museums make use of editorialized information necessitated by limited space and resources, and the method employed by the Sasquatch Museum helps lead the visitor to some specific conclusions. While the sources of all the hunting stories are named, and often pictured, beside their accounts, the overall tone of the text in the museum provides a sense of finality. The narratives of the researchers and hunters are not put through scrutiny or counterarguments. While it is fair to allow these stories to stand on their own as individuals providing first-hand accounts of events as they understood them, the lack of counter narratives acts as an implicit endorsement of the information put forward. Other museums also take this approach, acting as a kind of three-dimensional textbook that contains trustworthy information even without direct

citations in the wall text. By employing this method, the Sasquatch Museum can claim neutrality on the subject of the existence of a North American great ape, allowing the visitor to draw their own conclusion – but only using the information they have been provided.

This is not an unreasonable approach to take, given the importance of bigfoot stories to the local tourist industry. Regardless of the personal beliefs of the museum creators, it is understandable why they would want to further the distribution of bigfoot stories through the museum. Not only does it connect to town identity, but it also encourages repeat visitors as well as book sales in the visitor centre gift shop. As belief in bigfoot is a relatively harmless narrative to further – especially compared to both contemporary and historical museums projects worldwide that have furthered racist, sexist, homophobic, and anti-Indigenous messages. The contemporary formulation of bigfoot as a pop-cultural entity draws from a variety of sources, including folkloric heritages from both native and settler communities. While the belief, and some of the story devices, can be used to the detriment of some communities – most particularly the potential for continued exoticization of contemporary First Nations communities via conflation with some fictionalized barbarian past – the overall belief in a bigfoot-like creature is ultimately value neutral. I find no issues with a small museum using its platform to benefit local tourism. Guests are, after all, presented with anecdotes and information from which they can form their own opinion, although the museum’s material certainly facilitates the delivery of a bigfoot ‘existence’ perspective. Visitors only can take out of the gallery a modified version of what they bring in. A guest who is not already receptive to the idea of a Sasquatch existing in North America is unlikely to be swayed by the information presented. Likewise, a staunch bigfoot hunter would likely latch on to information that supports their preconceived notions. More importantly, I would argue, is the featuring of Sts'ailes stories alongside those of hunters from settler communities.

This provides the First Nations information on an equal level of legitimacy to visitors who come from settler communities and have a weaker connection to the First Nation perspective on Sasquatch.

When planning the development of the Sasquatch Museum, Robert Reyerse aimed to provide visitors with multiple perspectives from which to view bigfoot tales. By providing spaces for the storytelling approaches of the Sts'ailes First Nation, western fossil and living biological sciences, and settler hunting communities the museum was built specifically to allow visitors to understand the broad world of bigfoot tales. As he noted in our interview, "Some of the first serious investigators of Sasquatch were based out of Harrison, and in addition the Sts'ailes people on the other side of the river. They have a long history with the Sasquatch that goes back thousands of years." This deep history in both First Nations and settler communities lead to interest in developing a museum that could share these stories with a wider public. The integration of local bigfoot hunting traditions and the expertise of well-known hunters in the area also invigorated discussions of how a museum might approach this topic. According to Reyerse:

That Harrison had been established as the center of Sasquatch research is also exciting, so it's something that's been talked about for years and years and other people had thought about how nice it would be to have a museum. Primarily because of the different sightings here. Because of the fact that there's been quite a collection of footprints assembled over time, people thought it would be a great tourist attraction as well. And so the idea had been floating around for a long time. When I took over with Tourism Harrison, we really embraced the whole Sasquatch thing. There was a period of time where, for whatever reason, people – skeptics – in town and some of

the businesses in town thought it was giving Harrison a bit of a funny name. So, in the '90s, it kind of fell away for a while. But when I took over for Tourism Harrison, we kind of embraced it again. We created our own little stuffy and I started connecting with some of the remaining serious Sasquatch investigators and, through that discussion, we talked about the idea of a museum several times, and we actually pursued some funding to see if we could build an actual museum – that was the original idea.

As the museum project progressed, and brought in sought-after tourists to Harrison Hot Springs, the town itself began to appreciate the unique symbol that bigfoot could provide as a mascot for the whole community.

When considering the gallery in its totality, it strikes me as an interesting, immersive space. While not overly focused on swaying guests to one perspective over another, it does an admirable job of putting intriguing stories and personal histories of local hunters and residents on display. While focused firmly on the evidence surrounding bigfoot, the anecdotes from hunters and the researched text work together to help the visitor understand the argument long made by bigfoot hunters of at least the possibility of a North American great ape. Most intriguingly, the gallery design utilizing wall murals and forest audio help to encourage the visitor to not only contextualize the stories they are reading but also recall them when outside the gallery in natural forests. This is an especially strong tool used by the museum to ensure it is a memorable experience for the visitors. By having a gallery that encourages the guests to use sight, hearing, and touch the museum provides multiple ways to understand and internalize the gallery text. In this way the gallery is successful in its mission of spreading more, and more variegated, bigfoot hunting stories to a public that would otherwise be unlikely to know the specialized information

presented. Although guests cannot interact directly with those quoted within the gallery, the set-up of the museum allows for their stories to spread and mingle with the guests' own knowledge in a manner similar to the exchange that occurs in more traditional folk storytelling settings.

This gallery works to not only create a memorable experience for visitors who may go out into nearby parks and forests for more recreation, but it also connects gallery visitors to



Figure 9: The official logo of the Sts'ailes Development Corporation featuring the Sasquatch by Ron Austin.

events and cultural landmarks within Harrison Hot Springs and the nearby Sts'ailes First Nation. Sasquatch is an integral part of the tourism persona created for the businesses and hotel that rely on tourism to the town. Events like the Harrison Hot Springs Sasquatch Days, held in conjunction with the Sts'ailes First Nation, and the "Sasquatch Trail" through town encourage visitors to take the information provided in the museum and place it in context in town. Likewise the establishment of Sasquatch, illustrated by Ron Austin of Sts'ailes, as the public-facing symbol for the Sts'ailes First Nation in 2010 provides a familiar idea to which outside tourists can connect while also illustrating the deep history and social importance of Sa:sq'ets to the region's first inhabitants.

The goal of this museum was not only to provide a site of interest within the town, but to also fill a gap in the village culture that tourists had actively been seeking in the years leading up to his installation as director – interest in Sasquatch¹¹. This could, of course, only be done ethically with the assistance of Sts'ailes community members, especially those connected to Sa:sq'ets through spiritual actions or family ties. By foregrounding this relationship in the museum as well as through the reintroduction of the Harrison Hot Springs Sasquatch Days,

¹¹ Reyerse, interview

Reyerse hoped to provide context for the centuries-old tradition of Sasquatch stories in the region. Combined with accounts from hunters and bigfoot enthusiasts, there is an implicit understanding that these experiences are not culturally bound, and are indeed indelibly tied to life in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

Conclusion

Scholarly discussions of museums tend to prioritize the viewpoints of curatorial research and exhibit development. Occasionally visitor-studies projects will be produced by institutions, but those rarely leave the bounds of internal research. It is of little surprise that the curatorial process receives such focus as many museum academics producing these papers also have a curatorship from which they can draw insights, experience, and data. Exhibit reviews are one avenue for exploring the experience of walking through a gallery as it exists in the moment, with occasional reference to the history or development of the exhibit in question. The goal of this project has been to bridge these approaches into a more holistic view of not only seeing an exhibit as a visitor, but also considering the history and development that inform why the exhibit is the way that it is.

As part of this project, the cultural figure of the Sasquatch has been interrogated as a point of cultural exchange, appropriation, and development. Sasquatch, bigfoot, and the wildman archetype all come together in North American folklore to produce a particular type of story – a mix between legend and practical advice. As the Sasquatch Museum in Harrison Hot Springs was being developed in the mid-2010s, the development team had to deal with each one of these facets of contemporary bigfoot folklore. As such, this museum works as an effective way to understand the many diverse types of bigfoot stories, and the way that these stories have changed

over the years. While the text of the museum prioritizes the bigfoot hunter narratives, it also provides space to compare these stories to those from a different perspective – like that of a physical anthropologist or the Sts'ailes First Nation. If the goal was to curate a collection of bigfoot stories for discussion and comparison, all within the same space, the museum certainly succeeds. Correspondingly, it has itself become a site of inquiry and discussion, as well as an additional resource for the dissemination of bigfoot stories.

Existing as not only a repository for bigfoot stories but also a bigfoot experience in and of itself, the museum works to provide visitors a memorable visit, the content of which they can take with them into the rest of Harrison Hot Springs and British Columbia. Guests who come into the gallery are placed in an all-encompassing faux forest in which they can contextualize the information provided – and understand the experience as intrinsically connected to the forests and communities of the Pacific Northwest. The building of such an involved atmosphere adds interest for new visitors and provides sense memories with which to connect the gallery text once the visitors have left. The multimodal nature of the gallery creates an unusual sort of storytelling experience for museums, a type of approach that is more akin to a campfire story than a gallery. The décor, combined with the focus on first-hand accounts, further separates this gallery from what might be considered a more traditional approach, that of a modernist room filled with text and objects placed as single displays on walls and pedestals. While this type of “white box” gallery certainly serves a very particular purpose, so too does the maximalist sensory saturation that is the Sasquatch Museum.

When planning a small museum such as this, one that is unlikely to receive a major redesign due to lack of resources or budget, the built atmosphere must serve the purpose of each part of the gallery. The murals and soundtrack work to establish bigfoot and bigfoot stories as

something that is both fantastical and deeply natural. Regardless of the actuality ascribed to the stories held within this gallery by the visitor, those telling these stories are convinced of their truth. There is a very human desire to explain inexplicable, frightening, or odd events. When these events take place in isolated locations, that desire is compounded by a fear of danger and the unknown. Perhaps the stories put forward in the Sasquatch Museum are factually accurate accounts of encounters with a strange wild creature. Perhaps they are more simply a reflection of the human desire for entertainment and explanation. Either way, the museum allows the visitor to draw their own conclusions with the evidence provided. It is this ambiguity that allows the museum to cater to a generalized public, instead of focusing in on one particular population of people.

The Sasquatch Museum works to provide information for its visitors as well as entertain them and enrich their understandings of local Indigenous culture. This is achieved through continual references within the museum to areas within town and elsewhere nearby in the province, as well as information tied directly to the Sts'ailes First Nation. By providing these connections in the Museum, housed with the visitor centre, the gallery works to establish the character of the town, and reminds visitors of the importance of Sasquatch in both native and settler communities in the area. Thus, beyond merely providing information, the museum works as a welcome and introduction to Harrison Hot Springs in a manner all its own, compounded by its location in the Centre. As a focal point for introducing the town and its most famous inhabitant to visitors, the Sasquatch Museum uses all the tools in its arsenal to create a memorable, enjoyable experience. Through a richly built atmosphere and dozens of eyewitness testimonials the museum enables the visitor to give the benefit of the doubt to those who claim to experience

bigfoot encounters. This approach is applied equally, regardless of heritage, as a reminder of the historical and cultural importance not only of bigfoot, but of bigfoot stories and storytelling.

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