cənəʔəm, the city before the city:
A Review of Historical Thinking Concepts in the Museum of Anthropology Exhibit

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The future of reconciliation projects depends partly on shifts within bystanders that enable them to become witnesses, achieving a critical mass of witnesses who are willing to take a stand for a more peaceful future... The bystander’s journey during processes of reconciliation must also involve a critical analysis of the societal pressures and ideologies that were foundational to the eruptions of violence and injustice (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

As I walk past glass panels and white wooden posts created to emulate a Coast Salish longhouse, I hear the voice of sʔəyələq (Larry Grant), an elder from the Musqueam Nation, welcoming me to the space, letting me know that “in the ways of our ancestors, we accompany you here.” The small room I enter contains a large television screen directly opposite the entrance. Images of Musqueam territory play repeatedly as intermittent streams of visitors enter the exhibit at the Museum of Anthropology, one of three exhibits happening throughout Vancouver, called ᵇəsnaʔəm, the city before the city. As I enter the space, I’m reminded of the introductory quote which describes reconciliation as being grounded in the shift from bystander to engaged witness. Visitors here are encouraged to actively engage with the material, by listening, touching, watching videotaped images and interviews, an active engagement with the historical and contemporary culture of Musqueam Coast Salish peoples. It also invites visitors to witness the ongoing conflict that has characterized relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples since contact.

MOA’s exhibit focuses on Musqueam identity and worldview. Through first-person testimonies of Musqueam community members, the exhibit complements two others at the Museum of Vancouver (MoV) and the Musqueam Cultural Education Resource Centre & Gallery. According to MOA’s website: “People often think of Vancouver as a new city, when in fact this region has been occupied for 9000 years. Located in the area now commonly known as the neighbourhood of Marpole in Vancouver, ᵇəsnaʔəm was first occupied almost 5000 years ago and became one of the largest of the Musqueam people’s ancient village sites approximately
two thousand years ago. Generations of families lived at what was then the mouth of the Fraser River, harvesting the rich resources of the delta” (Museum of Anthropology, n.d). The video at the entrance to MOA’s exhibit explains to visitors that “cəsnaʔəm tells us who we are.” This is the first indication of historical thinking concepts at work. If the very identity of Musqueam people is bound up in this important cultural site, then its historical significance starts to emerge. In the video we are exhorted to commit to our minds and hearts the “land, traditional teachings, language and history” of the Musqueam peoples. The foundation is laid for a narrative that will construct meaning about cəsnaʔəm, one that will establish the importance of this place both in the distant past and for contemporary Musqueam life.

One of the days I visited the museum, I stood for a time in this welcome vestibule, listening to the video and observing people around me. Some people took time to watch and absorb the welcome. Others hurried by into the main exhibit room. I realized that if visitors missed this essential point of contact, they would miss much of the intent behind the rest of the exhibit. In describing her storytelling practices, Dion (2004) writes: “My practice is premised on an understanding that the study of history is concerned with understanding who we are, our relationships with others, and the kind of world we want to create. Engaging with the stories is intended to provoke my reading audience to rethink their understanding of themselves, of Aboriginal people, and themselves in relationship with Aboriginal people” (p. 60). Rethinking relationships is very much the intent of cəsnaʔəm, the city before the city. Rushing through the exhibit obscures the relationships carefully laid out for visitors, and neatly summarized in the welcome space. On the poster titled “teachings,” visitors are even invited to slow down as they take in the exhibit: “Patience is one of the things we’re always taught. Take your time and do it right and it’ll work out for you in the long run” (Alec Dan).
The exhibit comprises a series of posters tacked to the wall behind which run long turquoise banners in the shape of waves. It’s a dynamic presentation for what is standard museum fare: photographs with captions, descriptions, quotes. What is not standard is the way in which the information is organized (as well as some of the other features of the exhibit which I will describe in more detail later). Each poster is organized under twelve hən̓q̓əmin̓əm concepts, along with photographs and quotes to animate each one. What is striking – particularly for more sophisticated viewers – is how “traditional” and contemporary elements effectively combine to produce a harmonious narrative of Musqueam occupation. For example, the use of the colour turquoise is generally restricted by Musqueam to the community’s logo as “palettes using this shade of turquoise are not traditional to Musqueam artwork, and therefore not suited to use as a primary colour palette” (Musqueam Indian Band, 2006, p. 36). Musqueam also acknowledges that “the sea and the river are integral to the fishing and canoeing traditions, and the Musqueam way of life in general, which may be why a rich turquoise is used as the colour for the Musqueam logo” (ibid.). Using this colour complements efforts to illuminate Musqueam worldview and reinforce strong connections to river and sea.

The “teachings” poster is a good example of how both continuity and change are woven throughout the exhibit. muneʔt (Johnny Louis) describes the importance of self-identity: “My eyes started to open up and I started realizing things. It was really important to our old people that you know who you are and where you come from. It was really important to them to know how to identify yourself, because when you went to other reserves you didn’t just walk in. You introduced yourself and explained yourself: who you were, where you came from, and who you came from.” qiyeplenex̱ (Howard E. Grant) explains that he now understands what his mother meant when she said, “‘You have an anchor.’ No matter where I go in this world and how
troubled it can be, I will always have a place I know is my home.” qiyeplenexʷ is anchored not just to territory, but to his ancestors, thereby maintaining a continuous link to history unbroken by colonial events due to ongoing Musqueam presence in the territory. This concept is made more explicit in the following quote from sialamaltan (Mervin Point): “[The ancestors] are always with you. When people pass, your mom or dad, whoever’s passed, they’re with you all the time. You have to remember that. They’re always with you, even though they’re on the other side. They never leave you.”

Within Indigenous communities, however, notions of continuity and change can mean different things from Western conceptions. Indigenous cultures have long been characterized as static, primordial entities, with no history to speak of prior to contact with Europeans. Judge Allan McEachern of the BC Supreme Court summarized this view when he held in the 1991 Delgamuukw decision that he was “not able to accept adaawk, kungax and oral traditions as reliable bases for detailed history” (Reasons, 1991, p. 75). He was not able to accept oral history because it did not conform to Western methods of interpretation with which he was familiar and accustomed. The MOA exhibit artfully blends oral and written history and invites a unique historical perspective on Musqueam presence in the territory. On the poster titled “ancestral territory,” qiyeplenexʷ describes how Coast Salish villages dotted the entire area: “And they were city-states within our great nation. I equate that to the Greek city-states that existed during the great Greek era of Sparta, and Athens. Ours were no different.” qiyeplenexʷ provides historical context by describing parallels between the ancient Greeks and Coast Salish peoples. With evidence of Coast Salish occupation dating back 9000 years, his correlation is more than boastful as the two societies developed contemporaneously. A computerized timeline in the exhibit shows the development over 9000 years of Coast Salish villages and colonial settlements.
It reinforces the oral testimony of community members by providing strong visual evidence of Musqueam presence on the land. This also serves as a counter story to the narrative that Musqueam history started with contact. As the settlement map reveals, European history in the “new world” actually starts with Musqueam contact.

On the left hand side of the exhibit visitors can relax in a chair in front of a screen projected onto a glass wall. There are headphones in which to listen to sounds of water rushing over rocks while video images of the same play on the screen. To the left, the story of “xe:ls” is stenciled onto the glass. Xe:ls is the transformer who came to Coast Salish territory and “took pity on the people.” men’?t (James Point) says “Those who weren’t right were turned into stone, some turned into a kind of animal or bird, some became fishes.” This station lies between “ancestral territory” and “recent history,” a bridge between two worlds much like Xe:ls itself. One community member describes the contrast between old teachings and how people came to know about Musqueam through “third parties.” Wayne Point (Smokey) describes how growing up “Musqueam meant living here on Indian Reserve #2. But when I got older, I found out that Musqueam territory went all the way to the Port Mann Bridge. I just wanted to know what happened to that Musqueam – and I wanted it back.” Point describes a place of (be)longing. There is a rupture in the narrative, a break in Musqueam history that is far from complete. I see this as a historical trace, “a scrap left over from the past” (Seixas & Morton, 2013, p. 43.). Growing up on IR #2 means something. My own community is IR #613. That Indigenous peoples and communities are assigned numbers, that “Indian country” is defined by these numbers, interrupts the Canadian mythology of the West as a place of opportunity and freedom. We are encouraged, however, to keep looking, listening, feeling around for a sense of this loss.
and longing. Perhaps Indigenous peoples are re-defining those borders. Perhaps they always have. The scraps of evidence are mounting and community voices getting louder.

As I take in the quotes on the board titled “family ties” I can hear laughter coming from an adjacent room. I’m not sure if a group of museum patrons are simply enjoying themselves or it’s a recording. I soon realize it’s the latter. With laughter echoing through the space, I read the first reflections on c̓əsnaʔəm related by Louise Point (Weeze): “c̓əsnaʔəm to me means family, teachings, and elders. My late mom was once a resident of Marpole. I don’t know if you’ve been to where they have that monument for of c̓əsnaʔəm. I’d go with my grandfather and my grandmother to get ice cream, and we’d sit there...He would reflect on his younger years when his mom would travel by canoe and go harvesting for all the cedar bark, the cherry bark, and any other medicines that we used.” Point’s description provides another trace of the past. Contrary to the colonial record in which c̓əsnaʔəm is a “midden,” an archaeological site unoccupied for centuries, Musqueam oral history places this as a site of ongoing importance for Musqueam peoples. The late Musqueam historian James Point – who provided extensive testimony to well-known anthropologist Wayne Suttles – described how “c̓əsnaʔəm was “at one time a large village of people. The first people upriver from Musqueam.” These people were the “same kind as here at Musqueam” but had been “wiped out” by smallpox” (Point, as cited by Roy, 2006, p. 67). Evidence of deep and enduring connection to place is repeated over and over throughout the exhibit. Each person’s testimony builds upon the other, corroborating both the written historical record (flawed though they may be, archaeologists records demonstrate c̓əsnaʔəm’s extent and importance), and the work of Musqueam historians and community members.

One quote on the board titled “ancient history” highlights the need for three exhibits on c̓əsnaʔəm: “All of our history is oral, we have nothing written and archaeologists can do digs and
say, “This is how you lived how many hundreds of years ago,” but they don’t understand the whole realm of our culture” (swəlastənaːt – Nancy Roberts). To understand the “whole realm” of Coast Salish culture requires hands-on sensory engagement with multiple sources. The table in the centre of the alcove bounding three posters titled “customs,” “ancient history,” and “Fraser Delta,” makes corporeal the concept of “belongings” as articulated by Musqueam people. Long described as “artefacts” by archaeologists and others, sʔəyaləq (Larry Grant) describes a Coast Salish perspective: “Many times people are buried with things that are important to them or to the family that is putting away their loved ones. For that person to be in the other world, in the spiritual world, they need their belongings in order to use them. Those things belonged to somebody, they didn’t just appear in some pile of dirt. They belonged to someone, and that’s how it was always explained to us.” In between the posters, a screen that looks like an x-ray machine displays various objects, a coca cola can, keys, change, harpoon net, weight, knife, a “beautiful belonging,” all titled ?ələwkʷ (belongings). A metal gurney contains paper images of the belongings with the physical objects on top. By placing a ring on the table, visitors can move objects from the gurney to the table (the top of which is a computerized screen) and uncover explanations for each. It’s an odd interaction at first. The x-rays and metal gurney give a medicalized feel to the treatment of “belongings.” Upon reflection, though, it’s a clever device. Each element represents a careful cataloguing of artefacts (belongings), much as would take place on an archaeological dig. Like an x-ray going deeper to investigate the body’s inner workings, so too are we invited to think about, touch, explore the idea of belongings not just as “artefacts” from the past, but as items of ongoing and enduring importance today. Visitors can easily connect the idea of a “belonging” as a set of keys, a paper weight, even ice cubes in our
cup with a prior idea of things that belong to us. The harpoon and “beautiful belonging” that sit alongside everyday objects emerge as one and the same.

I then arrive at the voices. There is a room with a kitchen table, photographs displayed on top, four chairs around it, with four more in each corner of the room. A recording plays a conversation among six Musqueam community members. I pull up a chair and absorb the talk. It lasts 25 minutes. The topics range from experiences at residential school, to the teachings being passed on (or not) by younger generations. There is sadness in their voices, and a lot of laughter. The poster outside the room, “gathered together,” has quotes that illuminate meaning in this room: “Dinner table talk is how I learned who I was. I listened to my grandparents, my granduncles, aunts and uncles, and my mother. They would gather, have a sit-down dinner, and you’d hear them talk. You’d hear them reminisce. You’d hear them talk about what it was, and how it was” (qiyałənaxʷ – Howard E. Grant). Another community member says, “Those cups of tea around the table don’t happen anymore…” (swələstə́:t – Mary Roberts). The voices in the room signal cultural continuity operating alongside change as evidenced in the “gathered together” testimony.

As I walk through the exhibit, a persistent question in my mind is whose voices are not represented. I keep seeing the same names throughout the exhibit, prominent members of the community, leaders, administrators, representatives of a handful of Musqueam families. It may well be there is community consensus for these families to represent the Musqueam Nation. And they are likely an excellent representation of community voices. Assuming the task of historical thinking, however, encourages me to ask such questions. Who is included in the exhibit may be just as important as who is not, for whether historians (or visitors at a museum exhibit) find continuity and change depends on “where they look and what questions they ask” (Seixas &
Morton, p. 78). Understanding why these particular voices were included contributes to a deeper engagement with čəsnaʔəm as a unifying force for all Musqueam peoples.

Themes that repeat throughout the exhibit reinforce the dynamic interplay of continuity and change. Some describe the kitchen table as no longer being the place where teachings are passed on, yet another community member explains that “We had that same feeling of sharing at the kitchen table when we were down at čəsnaʔəm. People were sharing their stories from different places as well as from Musqueam, and we need that.” Perhaps the first time čəsnaʔəm entered the consciousness of Vancouverites was in May 2012 when “over 100 Musqueam and supporters marched to čəsnaʔəm to demonstrate commitment to the appropriate and respectful care of our ancestors and to demand action” (Musqueam Indian Band, n.d.). These events unfold on the poster titled “talking together.” Here we have historical context for contemporary actions: “There’s no legislation in Canada to protect Aboriginal heritage. The provincial legislation is the Heritage Conservation Act. It has a provision for entering into agreements with First Nations to protect their heritage. But to my knowledge the province hasn’t negotiated a single agreement with a First Nation” (salisəye - Leona Sparrow). The actions of community members in 2012 are put into the context of longstanding and on-going conflicts with federal and provincial governments, even though it was very much a local government planning conflict. Both the short and long-term causes and consequences of the actions at čəsnaʔəm are on display, presenting compelling evidence of historical thinking at work.

Throughout this exhibit there is an ethical dimension to past and present actions. This quote on the poster “our belongings are coming home” speaks directly to the need for an ethical lens: “There is a void in Canadian consciousness about Indigenous people. They’ve forgotten about us. People understand that we were here before contact. They have some understanding of
what contact looked like, that some bad things happened a long time ago. It’s like we went away, and now we’re back. People don’t understand why we’re upset, because they think everything was resolved. They think these things didn’t matter to us until today. People need to understand that these issues have always mattered to us” (Rhiannon Bennet). Examples are given of how people are coming to understand how much these things matter. The poster tells us that since 2006, six families have returned belongings from čəsnəʔəm to Musqueam. There is a news article about Grace Islet in the Gulf Islands, a burial site for the Cowichan Tribes, and a rare good news story for Indigenous peoples. The province has agreed to purchase the island to settle the dispute between local Indigenous nations and the owner who wanted to develop the land. On the last two posters visitors are encouraged to reflect on their own responsibilities. salisəye says that “In terms of protecting archaeological sites, it seems like First Nations presence and pressure gets a little bit of reaction but most often it’s public pressure that really assists First Nations in protecting the archaeological sites.” This is both an indictment of a system that marginalizes Indigenous resistance and an appeal to visitors to consider what responsibility they might have to respond to injustices like desecration of sacred sites.

To fully understand the history and contemporary importance of čəsnəʔəm, all three exhibits – MOA, MoV, and the Musqueam Cultural Centre – need to be considered together. Each offers its own insights into the history of Indigenous peoples in the territory and the relatively short history of European presence in this country. Historical thinking concepts are clearly woven throughout. They appear in artful ways, such as the video showing images from the territory alongside a narrative in hən̓q̕əm̓iʔəm̓ telling the origin of the Musqueam name. Historical significance is projected onto glass, corroborated through oral testimony, made tangible through objects meant to be touched, placed, arranged, considered. Two concepts that
emerged most powerfully for me are continuity and change, and the ethical dimension. ʔəsnəʔəm was an important village and remains a vital transportation node as a north-south corridor and the main thoroughfare between Vancouver and the airport. Musqueam’s decline was Vancouver’s progress. There are constant reminders, however, that this was an incomplete process. Compelling evidence from multiple sources provides a counter-narrative to colonization. On the welcome plaque, we are asked to commit ʔəsnəʔəm to our hearts and minds. We are being asked to make an informed judgement about the past as it relates to the present. Most importantly, “The city before the city” invites us to listen and remember, actions that provide the foundation upon which we can become both engaged bystanders and honourary witnesses.
References


Roy, S. (2006) "Who were these myserious people?": cesna:m, the Marpole Midden, and the dispossession of Aboriginal Lands in BC. *BC Studies*, (152), 67-95.

