

Dispossession, Erasure, and Replacement: Appropriated Totem Poles in the Urban and Indigenous Histories of Vancouver and Seattle

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Madeline Knickbocker's FNST/HIST 326 course *History of Aboriginal Peoples of North America Since 1850*. The assignment asked students choose an issue in Indigenous history post-1850 and consider how Indigenous peoples from Canada and from the US experienced this same event, phenomena, or trend. The paper uses a Chicago citation style.

In both Vancouver's Stanley Park and Seattle's Pioneer Square, there are monuments that illustrate each city's Indigenous heritage. Indeed, both centres are proudly ordained with totem poles, which supposedly pay homage to the Indigenous people that once called the areas home. However, neither the Squamish peoples in Stanley Park, nor the Duwamish peoples in Seattle, traditionally erected totem poles as cultural monuments. Rather, these totem poles are appropriated symbols, and an example of the ways in which developing urban landscapes erased Indigenous people from their territories and replaced their memories with misrepresented symbols of Indigeneity.

This phenomenon of displacement and erasure is commonplace in many meta-narratives on North America's colonization. However, the replacement of Indigenous identity with appropriated symbols of Indigeneity is exemplified in the comparison between these two Pacific Northwest cities. This essay will examine the dispossession of Indigenous people from the areas around Vancouver and Seattle in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It will further compare the ways in which governments and city planners sought to displace local Indigenous communities for urban planning purposes, with special attention to the attitudes held by those in the dominant settler society. Ultimately, this essay

will add to the discourse on the erasure of Indigeneity from urban landscapes, and its replacement with “sanitized” symbols of Indigenous culture through international comparison.¹

Historians have long studied the dispossession and erasure of Indigeneity within North America. Both Jean Barman and Jordan Stranger-Ross have chronicled the displacement of Indigenous peoples in Vancouver by municipal authorities, and the ways in which Indigenous histories were replaced by symbols of Indigeneity “got from elsewhere.”² Similarly, in his history of Seattle, Coll Thrush extensively examined the ways in which Indigenous and urban histories came into conflict during the city’s development. However, missing in the discourse on erasure and replacement of Indigeneity, are comparative studies on this phenomenon.

This essay looks to contribute to the ongoing analysis of the subject, and to broaden the scope of these examinations. Vancouver and Seattle serve as appropriate centres on which to stake this comparison, due in part to their relative proximities to one another and their similar histories of urban development. Although there is much more to this topic than can be adequately transcribed in a brief analysis such as this, this comparison introduces the ways in which municipal authorities in Vancouver and Seattle dispossessed Indigenous people, and romanticized urban-Indigenous histories by erecting monuments that idealized Indigenous culture.

Although the Indigenous and urban histories of Vancouver and Seattle are intimately tied to one another, urban planners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw “Indigeneity and modernity” as being mutually exclusive.³ Thus, as each city developed and established its own history, Indigenous histories were “eclipsed” by the narratives presented by the dominant society.⁴ Over time, Indigenous histories were replaced by symbolic representations of Indigenous culture that did not align with actual Indigenous histories. The focus of this paper is on the erasure of Coast Salish peoples from Vancouver and Seattle’s urban

¹ Sanitized, in this context: safe, and in alignment with urban ideas about Indigenous culture. See Jean Barman, “Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver,” *BC Studies* no. 155 (Autumn 2007): 3.

² Barman, “Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver,” 4.

³ Coll Thrush, *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 95.

⁴ Thrush, *Native Seattle*, 8.

histories, and the erection of Northwest Coast totem poles in their traditional territories. The Squamish and Duwamish peoples, on whom this essay focuses, were dispossessed of their traditional territories and had their Indigeneity replaced with more romantic symbols of Indigeneity belonging to the Kwakwaka'wakw and Tlingit peoples. By comparing the ways in which Vancouver and Seattle's urban histories converged with Indigenous histories, it becomes evident that regardless of location, urban landscapes dominated and erased Indigenous peoples' Indigeneity.

In Vancouver, this erasure began following 1885 completion of the Canada Pacific Railway, as this event caused both immigration into the city, and rapid urbanization. In an effort to keep pace with Vancouver's growing population and industry, civic leaders looked to expand the city's residential and recreational areas. As a result, Native reserves near the city, such as those in Stanley Park, Kitsilano, and False Creek, became "coveted" territories for urban expansion.⁵ Beginning in the twentieth century, civic leaders experienced "ongoing frustration" over "the reserves in Vancouver,"⁶ and it was commonly articulated in the media that Indigenous land use was not only a waste, but also a "threat to urban vitality."⁷ These opinions formed the basis of the legal and political pressures that led to the dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands around Greater Vancouver, including the area now known as Stanley Park.

Although Stanley Park was not a formal reservation in the sense that it had been marked out by the federal government, it was nonetheless a native space, and an informal spatial boundary between the Squamish residents of the park and white settlers of Vancouver. However, in the early 1920s civic leaders began to plan Vancouver's recreation system, and saw Stanley Park as the "nucleus" of this system.⁸ In 1923 the City of Vancouver and the federal government joined in a lawsuit to legally dispossess the Squamish residents living

⁵ Barman, "Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver," 5.

⁶ Jordan Stranger-Ross, "Municipal Colonialism in Vancouver: City Planning and the Conflict over Indian Reserves, 1928-1950s," *The Canadian Historical Review* 89 no. 4 (December 2008): 542, accessed February 4, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1353/can.0.0113>.

⁷ Stranger-Ross, "Municipal Colonialism in Vancouver," 548.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 553.

on Brockton Point in Stanley Park.⁹ The case made its way to the Supreme Court of Canada, and based on cultural biases and careful interpretations of the *Indian Act*, squatter's rights, and witness testimony, the courts awarded the land to the city.¹⁰ The Squamish living on the south side of Brockton Point were forced out of their homes in 1931, and subsequently had their homes burned to erase any memory of their presence.¹¹ Over the next twenty years, the remaining Squamish residents in Stanley Park were slowly unsettled, and "the evidence of their longtime presence" was similarly extinguished.¹²

Vancouver's civic leaders always intended to maintain Stanley Park's "natural" environment.¹³ Parks were believed to hold the beauty of the city, and "along with civic art and landmark buildings," they "promised to make Vancouver remarkable and remembered."¹⁴ It was this philosophy that motivated the Vancouver Park's Board to erect a series of Kwakwaka'wakw totem poles on Brockton Point in 1923.¹⁵ However, this decision also had ulterior benefits and, in a number of ways, it put the Vancouver in control of its historical narrative. First, it created a degree of legitimacy for the city by incorporating the Indigenous history of Stanley Park into Vancouver's own urban history.¹⁶ Second, the totem poles romanticized Vancouver's Indigenous heritage, and presented the illusion that Vancouver was "Indigenous-friendly, even as it rid itself of the real thing."¹⁷ Third, the totem poles served as a symbol of urban dominance over a symbolic and distant Indigenous population, a triumph of urban civilization. The dominant society did not distinguish between Indigenous bands; rather, they attempted to best represent themselves through appropriated Indigeneity. Thus, Vancouver

⁹ Barman, "Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver," 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ Stranger-Ross, "Municipal Colonialism in Vancouver," 556.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 558.

¹⁵ Barman, "Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver," 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

used Indigenous culture to legitimize its own history, and in doing so, it romanticized, revised, and misrepresented Squamish Indigeneity. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the action of erasing Indigeneity and replacing it with romantic symbols of Indigenous culture was not unique to Vancouver; rather, it was part of a larger international trend during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁸

The erasure and replacement of Indigeneity that occurred in Vancouver's history is also echoed in Seattle's urban development. Following improved infrastructure, increasing immigration, and rapid industrialization in the 1880s, the Duwamish residents in and around Seattle faced increasing pressures to leave the city, both because of the its urban expansion and due to the federal government's policy that encouraged Natives to move to reservations.¹⁹ Indeed, beginning in the 1880s, formal and informal spatial barriers were erected between Indigenous people and white settlers. Over the next fifty years, these Indigenous groups were slowly dispossessed of their land and "overshadowed by symbolic Indians in Seattle's urban imagination."²⁰

One example of erasure is found in the violent displacement of Duwamish people from their residence on Ballast Island in Seattle. Already pushed to the city's periphery and forced to live on rocky, brick shores, Ballast Island was one of the few places left in 1890s Seattle "where large groups of Indians were tolerated."²¹ However, in 1893, the Indigenous residents of the Island were "turned out indiscriminately," and had their homes burned by settlers.²² Unlike in Vancouver, where colonial attitudes manifested in media, legal, and political discourse on unsettling reserves, this example shows how colonial attitudes could manifest violently and destructively. In the aftermath of this event, some of the Duwamish residents of Ballast Island became homeless residents in urban Seattle, or chose to move onto reserves outside of the city. In the following

¹⁸ Barman, "Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver," 27.

¹⁹ Thrush, *Native Seattle*, 68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 82

²² *Ibid.*, 83.

years, Seattle's urban history would obscure its Indigenous history, and Duwamish Indigeneity would be replaced with urban interpretations of Indigenous culture.

As Seattle grew into a major metropolis, its civic leaders began to re-engineer its landscape, and like in Vancouver, urban planners paid little attention to the social costs of urban development. Indeed, the displacement of "undesirable" people was seen as a benefit of change, and the loss of their history was the price of modernity.²³ In 1899, the City of Seattle unveiled a Tlingit totem pole in its Pioneer Square, in reference to the city's Indigenous heritage. And although this monument offered many of the same benefits to Seattle as the Kwakwaka'wakw totem poles in Stanley Park did to Vancouver, it further illustrated the desires and attitudes of the dominant society. The Tlingit people, from modern day Alaska had little (if any,) impact on the development of Seattle, and yet, their totem stands in Pioneer Square. This is hardly an intentional slight towards the Duwamish or Seattle's other Indigenous residents, rather, it is an attempt by the dominant society to reference the Indigeneity that best aligns with their conception of Indigenous culture. Turn of the nineteenth century colonial thought did not distinguish between Indigenous groups; rather, it appropriated what it perceived to be the best, and used it for its own benefit. As in Vancouver, the City of Seattle offered its own version of Indigenous history through romanticized symbols that misrepresented actual Indigeneity.

In sum, Vancouver and Seattle's urban development during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century closely affected the Indigenous people living in and around the cities. Although this essay is only a brief comparison of how Indigenous and urban histories converged during this period, it shows the similar narratives of dispossession and erasure that occurred on both sides of the border during colonization. In addition, this analysis focused on the replacement of Indigeneity with appropriated and misrepresented symbols of Indigenous culture, specifically, the totem pole. As historians work to correct the silences created in colonial histories, it is important to also correct the ways in which Indigenous people and their histories are represented.

²³ Thrush, *Native Seattle*, 94.

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