



DECOLONIZED THEN, NOW, AND FOREVER

The Sikh Heritage Museum, National Historic Site Gur Sikh Temple

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My favourite quote about museums, and one that I repeatedly use, is by Aime Cesaire from *Discourse on Colonialism*. He states (1950, p. 71):

". . . it would have been better not to have needed them; that Europe would have done better to tolerate the non-European civilizations at its side, leaving them alive, dynamic and prosperous, whole and not mutilated; that it would have been better to let them develop and fulfill themselves than to present for our admiration, duly labelled, their dead and scattered parts; that anyway, the museum by itself is nothing; that it means nothing, that it can say nothing, when smug self-satisfaction rots the eyes, when a secret contempt for others withers the heart, when racism, admitted or not, dries up sympathy . . ."

We Are Hockey
exhibit opening, 2019.
Photo credits:
South Asian Studies
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of the Fraser Valley.

Though written in 1950, everything Cesaire says about museums is 100% correct and accurate. To this very day, the white colonial museum by itself IS nothing, because the white colonial museum is nothing to those of us who are BIPoC/IBPoC.

And yet, there exist gems within the museum world, gems that are decolonized, museum gems that are run, managed, and executed by and through BIPoC/IBPoC.

I am writing today about one such museum that I have been honoured to be a part of – the [Sikh Heritage Museum](#), a [National Historic Site](#) and Gur Sikh Temple. Many in B.C. may already know about this space, but unless you have actually been inside, unless you have attended one of our openings, you are not truly aware of the decolonized spirit and energy we work in.

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exhibit opening, 2019.
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The gurdwara (and as I mentioned in my [BCMA webinar talk](#), if you don't know what a gurdwara is, Google it, learn it, and use it) is a 109-year-old building, a National Historic Site of Canada, built by early Sikh settlers amidst adversity, resiliency, and solidarity. The lived experiences of those early settlers fighting for their right to vote, fighting to support the passengers on the Komagata Maru, fighting to protest racist government laws preventing their wives and children from coming to Canada, fill the gurdwara walls. The wood used to build the walls of the gurdwara was carried, piece-by-piece, from the mills where the Sikh men worked in Abbotsford, after putting in 8-10 hour shifts, after being paid a quarter the wage of their white counterparts.

These are the contexts in which the Gur Sikh Temple (its official name) was built from 1908-1911.

Fast forward 100 years to 2011, when the gurdwara's ground floor, traditionally the site where the langar would have been served, was converted into a Sikh Heritage Museum. Since 2011, the museum has presented 12 exhibits, ranging in theme from Sikh settler history in B.C., Sikh feminist practice, hockey and racism, the Ghadar Movement, the Komagata Maru,

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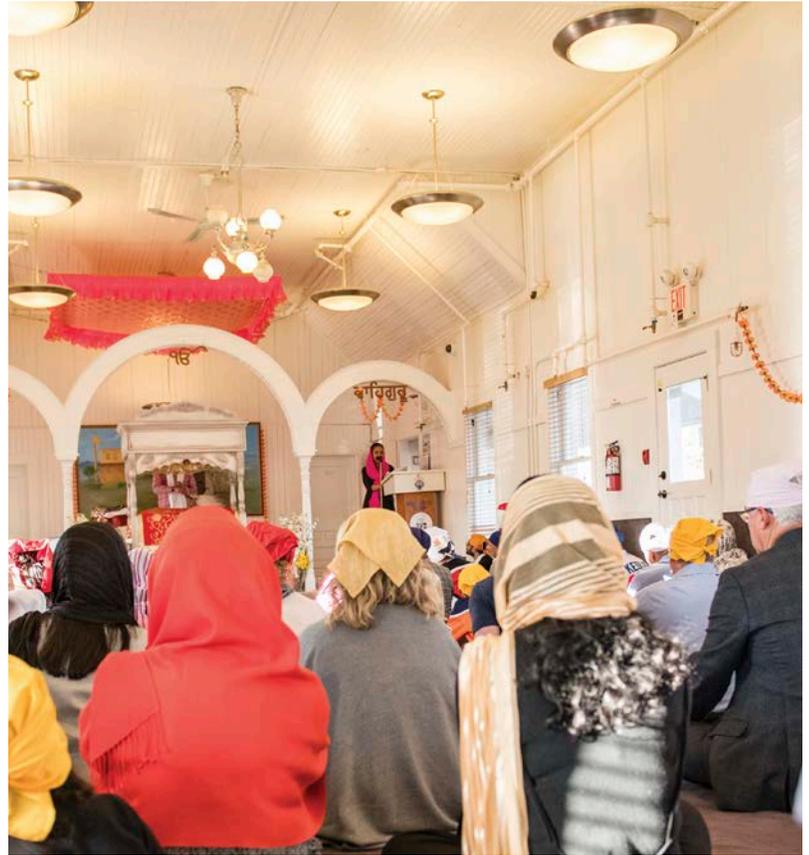


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and much more. The Sikh Heritage Museum has no permanent collection, no permanent staff, no consistent funding, lacks fancy technology, and yet we thrive because the core of our work is decolonized.

Our exhibits have been recognized by the BCMA and Heritage BC; have been short-listed for the Governor General's Award; have been visited by three Canadian Prime Ministers; and have been featured in a number of print and televised media, including the BCMA's *Roundup* magazine and the CMA's *Muse* magazine. We've had visitors from around the world and we have received over \$500,000 through a variety of grants to support our exhibits. This goodwill and energy results from our community building capacity, our connections within and outside of our community, and the power derived from forging meaningful relationships.

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We engage in storytelling about ourselves as a decolonizing practice. In the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 35), *“the need to tell our stories remains the powerful imperative of a powerful form of resistance.”* Because our approach is decolonized, our resistance to racism permeates our work at the Sikh Heritage Museum. We work through the Sikh concept of *seva* (selfless service) for our community. It is truly beautiful that the former space in which a vegetarian communal meal was served for everyone as a form of *seva*, was converted into a museum which engages in a cultural, historical, storytelling of *seva*. This is a decolonized approach. When we have larger museum opening receptions, the entire community and all attendees are invited into the main *darbar* hall, the sacred space (upstairs from the museum), as a part of the acknowledgement of the fully functioning *gurdwara* that still exists. This is a decolonized approach.

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exhibit opening, 2019.
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Our work for our community, through the countless number of community, school, and professional development tours we have delivered to organizations, continues to forge strong bonds. People who have experienced a Sikh Heritage Museum tour are deeply affected. This response occurs when people realize that the content, the storytelling, the choice of multilingual wording, the hiring of designers, the promotion, is completed solely through the eyes of two BIPoC/IBPoC women (namely, myself and co-curator Dr. Satwinder Kaur Bains). The incredible power in that experience alone is a decolonized approach.

We are so proud of our work at the Sikh Heritage Museum. I'd like to end with one of our panel pieces, a letter – the original in Punjabi – which was highlighted in one of our exhibits on the South Asian vote; the English translation is provided here. This letter, dated July 14, 1937, is from Kartar Kaur Gill in India to her husband Indar Singh Gill in B.C. The two were separated for 12 years:

We Are Hockey
 exhibit opening, 2019.
 Photo credit: South
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The One Creator created this creation, with the True Guru's Grace.

I Kartar Kaur am writing you this letter my beloved Sardarji. I am well and wish for your happiness always . . . Sardarji I put your letter close to my heart and was ecstatic after reading it . . . You are the only one who understands me and I say that my Sardarji is very intelligent and able. You have made a name for yourself on your intellect and hard work. My Sardarji, since I got your letter I have gotten more courage. Now my days pass well. You can understand how my soul has become lonesome without you. I hope, my Sardarji that you would not worry. By God's grace we shall meet again. We must have committed a grave sin that we are still apart; my Sardarji if I had known, I would have never let you go. May God keep you well.

Love transcends boundaries, love transcends language, love transcends history. Love, when used correctly, can also be a decolonizing approach within museums.

Recommended Resources

Sara Ahmed, *Affective Economies*, *Social Text* 22(2) (June 2004), p. 117-139.

_____, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

_____, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Translated by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Various publications since 1903.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2009).

Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2012).

Seema Sohi, Sites of 'Sedition', Sites of Liberation: Gurdwaras, The Ghadar Party, and Anticolonial Mobilization, *Sikh Formations* 10(1) (April 2014), p. 5-22.

Timothy J. Stanley, Why I killed Canadian History: Towards an Anti-racist history in Canada, *Social History* 33 (65, May 2000), p. 78-102.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Decolonizing the Mind, *Diogenes* 184 (46/4, Winter 1998), p. 101-104.

Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, Emma Watterton and Steve Watson (editors), *Heritage, Affect and Emotion: Politics, Practices and Infrastructures* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

www.canadiansikhheritage.ca

www.southasiancanadianheritage.ca

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