

# Indigenous language use in museum spaces

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## Abstract

In the summer of 2020, two museums in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, simultaneously hosted art exhibitions by Indigenous artists. The Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) hosted an exhibition of works by Shuvina Ashoona, an Inuk artist part of the Dorset Fine Arts Co-operative, based in Kinngait, Nunavut. At the same time, the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) hosted an exhibition of the work of Kent Monkman, a Cree artist known for exploring themes of colonization and sexuality in his work. Each exhibition offered signage in an Indigenous language: in Inuktitut and Cree, respectively. Reflecting on the ways Inuktitut and Cree were used in these exhibitions has led us to write this review article, in which we draw on recent scholarship that addresses questions of language in museum spaces (Sönmez et al., 2020; Lazeretti, 2016).

## KEYWORDS

Cree, Indigenous, Inuktitut, language, signage

## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2020, two museums in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, simultaneously hosted art exhibitions by Indigenous artists. The Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) presented works by Shuvina Ashoona, an Inuk artist part of the Dorset Fine Arts Co-operative, based in Kinngait, Nunavut. At the same time, the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia exhibited the work of Kent Monkman, a Cree artist known for exploring themes of colonization and sexuality in his work. Each institution offered signage in an Indigenous language: Inuktitut and Cree, respectively. Reflecting on how these exhibitions used these languages has led us to write this review article, in which we draw on recent scholarship addressing questions of language in museum spaces (Lazeretti, 2016; Sönmez et al., 2020).

## THE EXHIBITIONS

Ashoona's work was displayed in a VAG exhibition titled *Shuvina Ashoona: Mapping Worlds*. Upon entering, visitors were immediately faced with a large wall of text introducing the exhibit (Figure 1). The text on the left was in Inuktitut, written in syllabics, while on the right, the text was rendered in English. Ashoona's work covers a diversity of subject matter, ranging from landscapes, such as scenes of boats in a bay, and depictions of everyday people, including portraits

of individuals, often wearing parkas, to iconographic work, such as her 2016 drawing *Composition (Red Headed Octopus)* (Vancouver Art Gallery, 2020b). While descriptive plaques beside each work provided information in both Inuktitut and English, audio guides were available in English only (Vancouver Art Gallery, 2020a).

Monkman's work was displayed at MOA in a touring exhibition titled *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*. The exhibition recounts Canadian history, framed through an Indigenous, two-spirit lens. Multimedia works depict scenes of exchanges between Indigenous people and settlers, with Monkman's alter ego—Miss Chief Eagle Testickle—appearing as a recurring figure. The exhibition is divided into chapters, each of which is introduced by large-format introductory text, in Cree (syllabics), English, and French; an example is shown in Figure 2. Descriptive plaques are provided alongside each work in the same three languages. The exhibition's accompanying booklet includes a foreword by Monkman, as well as text from each chapter as shown in the exhibition itself and an acknowledgments section. The booklet is bilingual, with the Cree preceding the English text and no French translation.

We find it noteworthy that these two recent exhibitions incorporate Indigenous languages into both the display texts and the exhibitions themselves, albeit in quite distinct ways. Museum spaces can be productive sites of language revitalization and reclamation, and to this end, we examine language use in museum spaces through comparative and theoretical lenses.

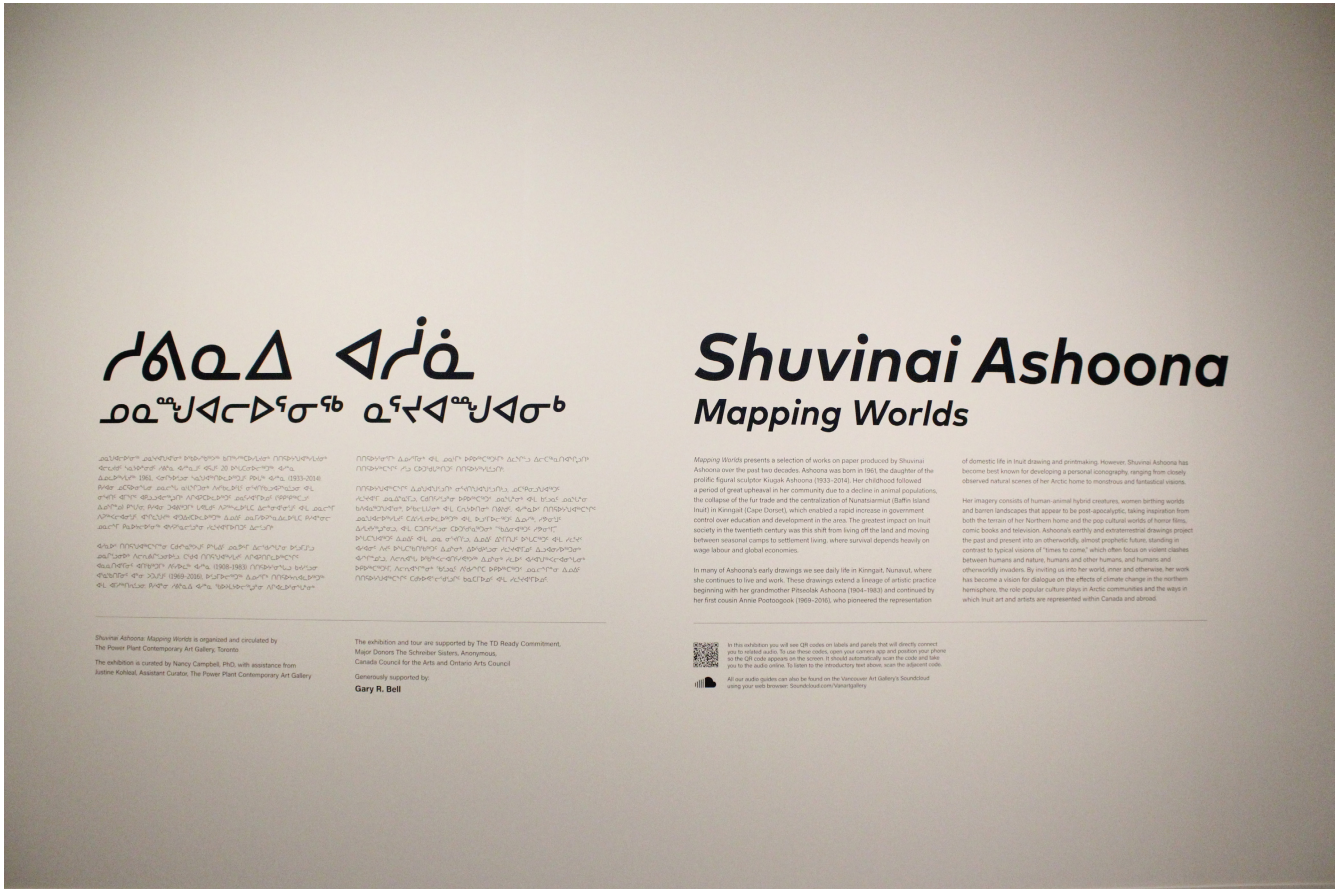


FIGURE 1 Bilingual Inuktitut and English text introducing Shuvinai Ashoona's exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Source: Photo by Julia Schillo, August 26, 2020.

### RECENT SCHOLARSHIP ON MUSEUMS AND LANGUAGE

In *Museums of Language and the Display of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Margaret Sönmez et al. (2020) bring together a series of papers that document language museums in different countries. These museums represent many languages and, indeed, varying approaches to representing and talking about language itself. Sönmez et al. note that “the interest in exhibiting languages and the establishment of language museums is very much a phenomenon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as is the recognition of intangible cultural heritage” (17). The book’s introductory chapter describes the role that language plays in intangible cultural heritage (Eaton and Turin, 2022) and discusses various ways that language museums can contribute to heritage preservation. Sönmez et al. warn that while language is an integral component of cultural heritage, it is also at great risk from globalization and linguistic imperialism.

Each chapter is written by a language museum representative who offers a description of their museum, its exhibits, history, mission, and goals. Many authors also outline their future plans, alongside challenges and successes. Additionally, most chapters address the different stakeholders involved in a language museum, including the institution’s primary audience, as well as any visitor feedback that has been gathered.

While some of the museums covered in this collection are focused principally on describing aspects of language structure and linguistic topics, others highlight linguistic diversity within a geographic region. The goals of such museums are often more explicitly political. For example, a stated goal of the Canadian Language Museum in Ontario is to “facilitate dialogue on fundamental language issues that are at the heart of the future of Canadian society, such as bilingualism, multilingualism, language endangerment, preservation, and revitalisation” (Sönmez et al., 2020, 134). Other museums showcase the diversity of written language and orthographic systems and use historical documents and artifacts to identify and explore links to the past.

*Museums of Language and the Display of Intangible Cultural Heritage* offers a broad overview of the many kinds of language museums that exist around the world, showcasing their diversity as well as their commonalities. This is a very readable volume, with a wide range of topics that will be of interest to many readers. In terms of organization, however, a reader looking to compare approaches to representing language in museum spaces might appreciate a more consistent approach across all chapters. As it is, each chapter presents information in its own order and format, making it harder for the reader to tease out common threads across and between chapters. The volume editors’ introduction and afterword are nonetheless helpful in summarizing the central themes of the collection.



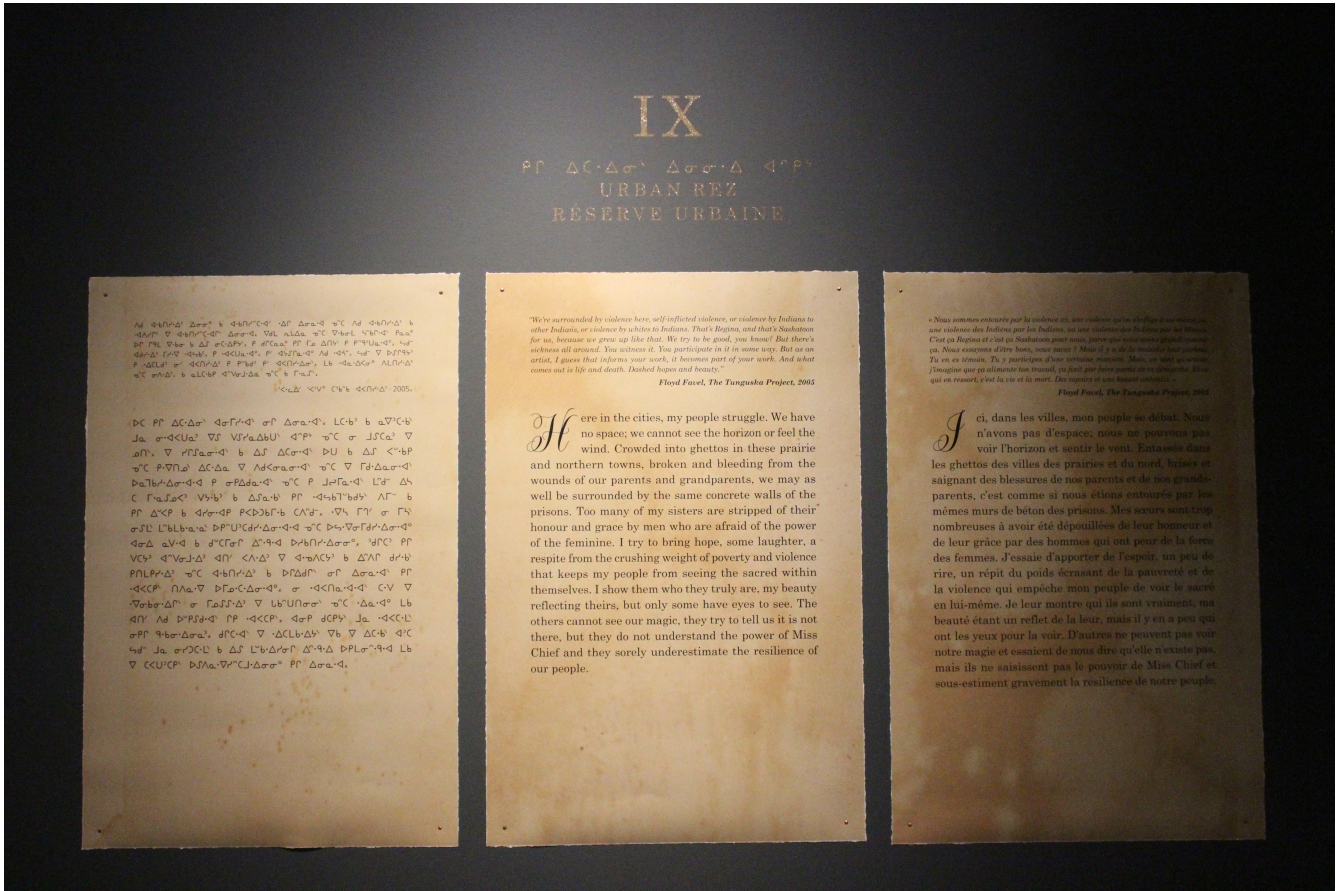


FIGURE 2 Trilingual Cree, English, and French text introducing chapter 9 of Kent Monkman's touring exhibition at the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver. Source: Photo by Julia Schillo, August 27, 2020.

In *The Language of Museum Communication: A Diachronic Perspective*, Cecilia Lazzaretti (2016) investigates how museums' written communication has evolved since 1950. Using formal linguistic analysis on a corpus of museum press releases, Lazzaretti determines how the lexical choices and structure of these documents have evolved over time, particularly with the evolution from primarily print to mostly digital communication.

Lazzaretti views museum communication “as a combination of different, yet overlapping discourse types” (2), namely art discourse, promotional discourse, and media discourse. The author describes the lexical changes in museum press releases over time, showing how

the increase of the words *culture* and *cultural*, both strictly related to the content featured by exhibitions, suggests an intention to provide visitors with an in-depth exploration of an artist's work or artistic subject that embraces all of the relevant context and adds great educational value to the visit. (127)

In conclusion, Lazzaretti considers whether the genre of museum press releases will survive the transition to new digital mediums of communication. She ultimately argues, based on her findings, “that museum press releases are likely to live on for some time,

as they have proved themselves able not only to survive the introduction of new media, but also to coexist side by side with them” (221).

*The Language of Museum Communication* is a comprehensive study, offering rich analysis of museum communication while at the same time remaining very approachable. Since the book covers a niche topic, it may not have wide appeal to a broader audience, but within the field of museum and heritage studies, it is certainly a valuable contribution about a particular aspect of museum practice.

### LANGUAGE AS BOTH SYMBOL AND METHOD OF COMMUNICATION

Rodrigue Landry and Richard Bourhis outline how a linguistic landscape can serve either an informational or symbolic function (1997, 25). A language has an informational function when, for example, it serves as a marker of the geographical territory of a given language community or it is the primary means of communication. Symbolic function is “most likely to be salient in settings where language has emerged as the most important dimension of ethnic identity” (27). A particularly potent site of symbolic language use is public signage (28).

Using such a theoretical lens helps to differentiate between language use for communicative and symbolic purposes. Lazzeretti describes language use in museum contexts that is entirely communicative, or informational. By contrast, the various museums described in Sönmez et al. blur the line. In those museums, language often serves a symbolic purpose: museums such as the Canadian Language Museum host exhibitions whose explicit purpose is to draw attention to minority and Indigenous languages spoken in Canada and their place in the linguistic landscape—but, at the same time, the languages they use for communicative purposes are most commonly dominant national languages, such as English and French (Gold and Turin, 2021). In other museums, such as the Lithuanian Hearth Language Museum, the national language serves as both the subject of the museum and as the meta-language used in exhibits to discuss the very role of language itself. In this case, Lithuanian has both symbolic and communicative functions.

In light of this discussion, how might we best characterize Inuktitut and Cree, as represented and used in the two Vancouver exhibitions discussed above? Unlike in the museums documented in Sönmez et al.'s volume, neither Indigenous language was the subject of the associated exhibition. At the same time, neither was a primary communicative language for most exhibition audiences: both Inuktitut and Cree are endangered, and their speech communities are far removed from Vancouver, the exhibition site. Yet we can characterize the use of Inuktitut and Cree in these exhibitions as serving both symbolic goals and communicative purposes.

Appearing in the exhibitions' bi- and trilingual signage, Inuktitut and Cree appear, on the surface, to be used for informational and communicative purposes. However, it is unclear how many visitors have the aptitude or take the time to read the Inuktitut or Cree syllabics. Given this, the use of these two Indigenous languages can be seen as having a powerful symbolic and political role, signaling to the exhibition visitor that they are entering an Indigenous space shaped (at least in part) by an Indigenous language. This aligns with some of the uses of language described by Lazzeretti, specifically art exhibitions' increasing efforts to present artistic subjects within their

own cultural context. Similarly, Sönmez et al. demonstrate how some museums attempt to draw links between language and broader cultural practices and tangible cultural heritage.

In some ways, the Inuktitut and Cree museum signage and plaques documented in this review article are not dissimilar from the street signage becoming more prevalent in settler colonial nations, in which Indigenous place-names exist alongside toponyms in the colonial language (Seal, 2018). On the Vancouver (Point Grey) campus of the University of British Columbia, for example, street names are given in both *hən'qəminəm'* and English (Figure 3). Even though most viewers may not be conversant in the *hən'qəminəm'* language, the language's visible presence has a symbolic impact, signaling to pedestrians that might reconsider and more deeply interrogate their perspective on the linguistic landscape in which they are walking. Likewise, in Kent Monkman's exhibition on Canadian history from a Cree perspective, the presence of the Cree language is critical for audiences to shift their symbolic and referential perspective. Similarly, in Shuvina Ashoona's exhibition, Inuktitut provides a powerful framework for audiences to immerse themselves in Kinngait, the geographical setting of the exhibition. Even for those visitors who cannot read the language, the use of Inuktitut nonetheless specifically contextualizes the space through a Inuit lens.

## MUSEUMS AS SPACES FOR LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION AND RECLAMATION

In helping to create a distinct linguistic space, symbolic language use can align with the goals of language reclamation (Pine and Turin, 2017). In so doing, it also helps to situate museums as productive spaces for language reclamation, as a dynamic site for symbolic language use. As Bernard Perley explains, “Cultural institutions such as museums are also playing an important role in honoring Indigenous languages. Exhibitions offered in multiple languages can create experiential spaces where Indigenous worlds can be shared with a wide variety of visitors” (2022, 8).



FIGURE 3 Bilingual English and *hən'qəminəm'* street signs on the University of British Columbia's Vancouver campus. Source: UBC Campus and Community Planning (2018).



However, for museums to truly engage with the goals and ethics of language reclamation, signage cannot be restricted to individual exhibitions. Both MOA's and VAG's permanent collections house numerous works by well-known Indigenous artists, including from the  $x^w m \theta k^w \acute{a} y \acute{a} m$  (Musqueam Indian Band),  $S \acute{k} w x w \acute{u} 7 m e s h$  (Squamish Nation), and  $s \acute{o} l i l w \acute{e} t \acute{a} l$  (Tsleil-Waututh Nation), on whose territory Vancouver is situated. To our knowledge, their languages are not currently consistently incorporated into the plaques and labels displayed with any of these works.

Additionally, while museums can serve as supportive sites for language reclamation, they have an opportunity to assume a more active role in language *revitalization*. They can do so by supporting Indigenous languages to serve wider practical and communicative roles for speakers and learners, alongside important symbolic functions. At the VAG, for example, including Inuktitut audio guides would have helped to introduce greater dynamic range and practical utility for the language.

## CONCLUSION

As museums increasingly engage with intangible heritage, we find it exciting to witness the emergence of museums devoted to language and to see museums engaging with and representing Indigenous languages in innovative ways. At the VAG exhibition of Ashoona's work and in Monkman's exhibition at MOA, Indigenous languages—while not the subject—play a central role in creating Indigenous spaces. We celebrate this development and find it indicative of the positive role that museums can play in language reclamation and revitalization going forward.

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