

ROOTING

for Reclamation

October 2 – December 7, 2024



Nathan Smith, *Anansi* (detail), 2019.

Curatorial Essay

By Madison Bridal



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**"No one comes from the earth like grass.
We come like trees. We all have roots."**

— Maya Angelou



We all have roots—our connection to ancestors and heritage. Roots ground themselves to the land through the soil. They nourish their plant, feed into the natural beauty of the world, and create an underground network of communication and support. When titling the exhibition *Rooting for Reclamation*, I was drawn to everything roots could symbolize: the relationship to land, finding place, and reclamation of space; the connection to ancestry and striving for better for our ancestors; the lack of visibility of people that are here and have been here; and the relationships in the community. The title also plays on the phrase "I'm rooting for you." I saw so much joy and uplifting in this exhibition space and wanted the title to represent that.

Rooting for Reclamation features four local Black artists: Aya Behr, Kemi Craig, Fatima Tajah Olson, and Nathan Smith. It centres individual's interpretation of Black reclamation. Coinciding with the exhibition *The Chorus is Speaking*, which features Black artists throughout Canada, *Rooting for Reclamation* tells the local perspective of four Black artists living on ləkʷəŋən territory in what is colonially referred to as "Victoria."

Local Black History

To understand Black reclamation as central to this exhibition, it is important to contextualize the local history. Black history in this region predates Canada.ⁱ Only 190 years ago, the *Slavery Abolition Act* (1834) was enforced in British North America—an act that, in practice, did not liberate all enslaved people in Canada. Ever since Victoria was established, the Black community was also here (approximately 27 Black men were listed in the "First Victoria Directory " in 1860).ⁱⁱ

Black exclusion and segregation permeate the history of arts culture in Victoria. One notable example recorded by the BC Black History Society occurred on September 25, 1861, when actor Emil Sutro refused to perform on stage unless the Black patrons were removed from their seats in the audience.ⁱⁱⁱ One of the Black patrons, Mifflin Gibbs, refused to move. Following the performance, the patrons were doused with flour, and fights broke out in the Victoria Theatre. After that incident, local theatres enforced segregation by only allowing Black patrons to be seated in the gallery section of the theatre.^{iv} Another local example from a different perspective, is the story of San Francisco-born landscape painter and lithographer Grafton Tyler Brown.

Although born to African American parents, Grafton's race was recorded differently in every census, until 1880 when he was eventually and arbitrarily marked as white. In 1882, he moved to Victoria and opened a painting studio. A year later, he was praised in the local press for his exhibition of BC landscape paintings as a "pioneer of this intellectual and refined art" and "an artist of more than local celebrity in California and elsewhere."^v Although Brown is often documented as the first professional Black artist living and working in the Pacific Northwest, it should be noted that when he established himself as a professional landscape artist in Victoria, he was presenting as white.^{vi} The art world was not welcoming to Black folks in 1883, and he likely would have been treated differently if he presented as Black. He may not have been exhibited or been able to make a living as an artist. I think it is possible to celebrate Grafton Tyler Brown, while also acknowledging that he did not present as the first Black artist in the region during his lifetime.

Representation and Own Voices

Histories of exclusion, as mentioned in this exhibition, include these previously mentioned histories. However, they also refer to the lack of access to art and education spaces, exclusion of appropriate representation, and lack of control over narratives. The documentary, *Black Life: Untold Stories*, speaks both to the statistical lack of historical and contemporary Black art in public collections, and to the lack of appropriate representation.^{vii} There has been a systemic underlying assumption that whiteness is dominant, and that the Black community has nothing to contribute to discourse. Many exhibitions have displayed Black art or artifacts without any context or narrative from the Black community, often generalizing themes or reducing an objects history when labelled as "African."

Representation, therefore, involves narratives and own voices.¹ One narrative that needs to be reclaimed is the idea of the "beginning" of Black art. Black art does not need to be colonially defined by its introduction into institutions and acceptance into society. Despite the history of exclusion from institutional spaces, Black art has been here and will continue to be here, regardless of being exhibited in galleries. Similarly, Black histories, stories, and advocacy also exist outside the space of institutions. However, these institutional spaces can be reclaimed. Through this reclamation, these spaces can be excellent spaces to tell our own narratives, with our own voices, and share our stories and art that deserve to be seen.

¹ "Own Voices" was termed by Corinne Duyvis as a hashtag movement in 2015 aimed to create lists of books written by authors who personally identified with the marginalized experiences they wrote about. It has been adopted by People of Colour, to emphasize the need for People of Colour to share their own stories, and use "own voices," rather than being spoken for. See Sindu Karunakaran, "Why #OwnVoices in Literature Matters," Her Campus, April 6, 2022. <https://www.hercampus.com/life/own-voices-representation-literature/>.

Reclamation

The reclamation we are rooting for in this exhibition includes the reclamation of histories, narratives, and space. I acknowledge the histories of exclusion to the Black community; I want this exhibition to be a reclamation of a type of space that perpetuated harm.

As an advocate for own voices, it was important to me to open the space to interpretation from the artists. I wanted them to be able to express their own voice, and own relationship to Black reclamation. Through the beautiful works of the artists, we see diversity in voice, media, interpretation, while also seeing overlapping themes. Reclamation is explored in many ways: through Black beauty, Black joy, community, and ancestors, connection to space and land, Black narratives and voices, and interconnection. I love that this exhibition is a reclamation for individuals and community. While it is important to acknowledge historical context, exhibitions do not need to be rooted in the harm. While rooting for reclamation, this exhibition is also rooted in joy and community—and I love that.

—**Madison Bridal, Curator.**

i. "BC Black History Timeline." BC Black History Awareness Society. Accessed October 25, 2024, <https://bcblackhistory.ca/learning-centre/bc-black-history-timeline/>.

ii. Mallandaine, Edwd. (Edward), 1827-1905. 1860. "First Victoria Directory; Comprising a General Directory of Citizens, Also, an Official List, List of Voters, Postal Arrangements and Notices of Trades and Professions; Preceded by a Preface and Synopsis of the Commercial Progress of the Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia. Illustrated." City directories. BC Historical Books. Victoria: E. Mallandaine & Co. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0221845>.

iii. "BC Black History Timeline." BC Black History Awareness Society.

iv. Ibid.

v. John Lutz and Legacy Art Galleries, The Mystery of Grafton Tyler Brown: Race, Art and Landscape in 19th Century British Columbia. https://legacy.uvic.ca/gallery/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/GTB_BrochureFinal.pdf.

vi. Ibid.

vii. CBC Gem. Black Life: Untold Stories. "Episode 8: Claiming Space." October 25, 2023. <https://gem.cbc.ca/black-life-untold-stories>.

