

Bruce, Barbara S. *Tropes of Collection and the Construction of Canada in English-Canadian Literature*. Thesis (PhD [English]), University of Western Ontario. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2007. (Publication No. NR30788)

Abstract

This thesis offers primarily cultural-historical readings of tropes of collection and the museum in English-Canadian literature, particularly prose texts by John Richardson, Catharine Parr Traill, Robert Kroetsch, Jane Urquhart, and Thomas King. Collections and museums construct the past and thus influence the development of Canada in the present and future. The study of these tropes reveals that forms of collection are analogous to literature as types of narrative and that Canadian writers have employed such tropes to examine issues related to authorship and engage with ideologies instrumental to the constructions of Canada as part of the British Empire, as a British colony, and as a nation. The discussion of literary texts is uniquely able to illuminate the issues related to these stages of Canada's development, since they narrativize historical events and subjective responses to reveal that such modes of governance are, in fact, constructions, rather than "natural" or inevitable. This thesis argues that collection and the museum are ambivalent tropes in Canadian literature, since these phenomena are means by which an individual or governing body constructs a sense of self and can achieve a sense of empowerment by ordering and thus controlling (part of) the world, but this empowerment is always effected at the cost of an/other and is thus subject to resistance. These tropes accordingly become a means through which writers express and explore tensions inherent not only in collection and the museum as phenomena, but also in Canada's historical, cultural, social, and political existences, such as tensions between desire and reality, (the preservation of) life and death, power and powerlessness, order and chaos, possession and loss, memory and forgetting, and knowledge and ignorance.

Drawing on the theories of Jean Baudrillard, Susan Stewart, and Susan M. Pearce, among others, this study of collection in literature, from the colonial collection of indigenous artifacts to de-collection as a strategy of resistance in postmodern writing, provides an alternative means of understanding the impact collection has on Canadian culture and of "seeing" museums beyond their sublimity as authors guide us to specific artifacts and force us to consider their contexts.