

TOGETHER IN COMMUNITY, IN VISUAL CULTURE, IN PROTEST: Dzawada'enuxw on the Move

CATHERINE NUTTING, PH.D. CANDIDATE, HISTORY OF ART AND VISUAL STUDIES,
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

In the spring of 2010, Molina Dawson, who lives on the British Columbia coast, walked the length of Vancouver Island to bring a message to the provincial capital. What began with a handful of activists concerned about unsustainable fish farms grew to a force of several thousand, becoming known as the “Get Out Migration,” a migration of protestors raising awareness. Dawson is a member of the *Dzawada'enuxw* First Nation, whose home includes *Gwa'yi* Village in the stunning fjords of Kingcome Inlet in rural British Columbia. *Gwa'yi* is especially rich in artistic heritage, due in part to the rugged terrain that allowed for the uninterrupted practice of potlatching during the years when it was federally banned. As a result, *Gwa'yi* is renowned for such arts as carving, painting, music, and the making of jewellery and regalia, visual cultural traditions embodied in Dawson's training in carving and textile arts.¹ I recently interviewed Dawson, curious about her decision to engage in environmental issues and about connections among activism, ambulation, and visual and material cultures. I perceive material culture as being at the core of people's expressions not only of tradition, but also of vital personal experiences of place, community, and relatedness.² Part of my interest in interviewing Dawson stemmed from my fascination with the questions of how ambulation, or intentional walking, relates to material culture; and how visual culture ‘moves’; that is, how the arts can support practitioners of secular and sacred walks; and how ambulatory events cause the mixing of visual cultures as people move within and across cultural spaces. Travel brings about new convergences among what is carried, what is witnessed, and what new knowledge is created. Essentially, Dawson's family and *Ahdas* (grandmothers) walked with her, not physically, but in spirit; that is, the relationships that supported Dawson's process became manifest not only in the walkers' material culture, but also in the publicly witnessed historical milestone that the walk created.

There are long established practices of ambulation as a spiritual practice that is both healthy and heart-affirming. For example, Dawson likes the Tibetan proverb that “The secret to living well and longer is to eat half, to walk double, to laugh triple, and to love without measure.”

Walking is meditation, is protest, is self care, and these goals can be achieved simultaneously. Journeys to and through sacred spaces physically enact an individual's ties to land. The process of slowing down and walking is weighted with a sense of connection and responsibility to place; and yet it is also enlivened by the learning and knowing that come from slowly looking, listening, and being enveloped

by the environment. Such experience was formative for Dawson.

Dawson: I have enjoyed walking out in nature as long as I can remember. There is a spiritual element to it because when you're walking by a river or in the forest you connect with the earth more. You appreciate it more. You get to experience and learn from the outdoors. The Kingcome River is where I learned to fish with my grandpa and my dad, and where my friends and I spent a lot of time in the summers.

Dawson journeyed from *Gwa'yí* to Victoria to embody her dissent at the farming of fish in open nets in British Columbia waters, an industrial aquaculture system that spreads fatal disease and sea lice to the migrating wild salmon.³ Protest walking, camping, and indeed protest partying, have occupied a key position in the history of protest art, an art form utilizing portable objects and ephemera that often takes an optimistic, educative approach to serious issues.⁴ As Dawson explained, her protest walk gathered adherents and supporters as it went, with musicians and others adding to the festive atmosphere of the activists' daytime journey and their evening campsites.

Dawson: It started in Sointula with a core group including me, Alexandra Morton, my dad, my uncle Alan and several others who went from one end of the island to the other. Many more joined us while we were in their communities, where there were rallies and events, and for the final walk to Victoria.



FIGURE 1. Molina Dawson and supporters at the Big House, Kingcome Inlet, April 2010. Photo courtesy of Anissa Reed.

TOGETHER IN COMMUNITY, IN VISUAL CULTURE, IN PROTEST

Dawson had begun her journey with a send-off from her home in Kingcome Inlet, with walkers carrying signs and flags (Figure 1). As Dawson and her fellow “Get Out Migration” walkers proceeded south along the Island Highway, the movement gained momentum, while the visual and other art materials became increasingly prominent. When Dawson and her fellow walkers would finally reach the steps of the Parliament Buildings, they would be awed to find that they their numbers had swollen to 7,000 people.⁵ The movement had been joined by paddlers in canoes heading to Victoria from small towns and from the mainland, and people had travelled hundreds of kilometres to be present.

As the walk neared various cities and small communities along the Island Highway, supporters responded by creating personalized art pieces and signage. The walk was emboldened by musicians whose songs and drumming enlivened the pace. Supporters turned out in traditional regalia that physically embody not only identity, but also the place, time, and communal nature of their production, a shared process of making and learning that characterizes Dawson’s own training in carving with her *Ahda* Gert (Figure 4). One unusual piece of the visual material of the protest walk was the use of appropriately disgusting sea louse tattoos. There were also many fish kites and fish puppets made of fabric, papier maché, or recycled materials such as apple crates. One memorable painting on canvas shows the subject of Edvard Munch’s *Scream* reacting to the dire presence of a fish farm, dead fish in hand (Figure 2). This piece, painted by an un-named supporter in Victoria, highlights the grassroots nature of the event, as participants personalized their critiques and responses.



FIGURE 2. Painting of Munch’s *Scream* a la Fish Farm, en route to Victoria, BC, May, 2010. Photo courtesy of Alexandra Morton. (<https://vimeo.com/user3586150>)



FIGURE 3. Salmon Puppet in Victoria, BC, May, 2010. Photo courtesy of Alexandra Morton. (<https://vimeo.com/user3586150>)

The distinctive salmon symbol painted on the large cloth made for Dawson by a Kingcome artist was, by the time the walk reached Victoria, also constructed as a gigantic puppet that angled its way up the city streets on the shoulders of half a dozen supporters (Figure 3). That the walk was personally relevant to a vast array of people was made physical and visible not only by the personalized paintings and flags that people made, but also by the carrying of signs inscribed with the names of participants' home towns. These simple inscriptions on fish-shaped signs made it immediately evident that the salmon farm problem was not a contained, small scale issue, but rather that there was deep concern coming from many regions of the province. By the end of the journey, the geopolitics of protesters on the move had rendered the streets awash in a sea of place names, essentially bringing dozens and dozens of small communities to the immediate awareness of capital city viewers. This heightened sense of community was an extremely important outcome of the walk, in Dawson's view.

Dawson: The walk helped me realize how big a community I am part of. It raised awareness and created momentum. It helped people concerned about salmon connect with each other. People who had been fighting for wild salmon for a long time realized how many others cared. It also inspired another more spiritual walk to Victoria, to break a copper shield. My parents and all three of my little sisters came on that walk. It was good for a lot of communities including mine to get involved. For me it was a great and challenging experience.

TOGETHER IN COMMUNITY, IN VISUAL CULTURE, IN PROTEST

To journey is sacred. Dawson's process of journeying, from a small town on the BC coast to the provincial capital, carried with it community and multiple voices. It also made evident the rural places that decision-makers and others in the city needed to be reminded of. Walking stills the mind and opens the heart, and walking in community creates lasting connections. Walking itself materializes ways of knowing and being – moving oneself through places is a physical process that quintessentially embodies, contains, and builds personal and communal memories.

Dawson: Walking has a meditative head-clearing affect for me. I liked to walk along the Kingcome River by myself, watching the water and the birds. But walking with someone is also a good way to get to know and connect with them. A lot of my favourite memories are from on or near that river - I will always remember walking with my Ahda Joy around the village when we both lived there.



FIGURE 4. Dawson and supporters on the steps of the BC Legislature, Victoria, Canada. Photo courtesy of Alexandra Morton. (<https://vimeo.com/user3586150>)

HEMISPHERE

Walking can simultaneously have the effect of publicly demonstrating opinions and present conditions. Standing on the lawn at the provincial legislature, Dawson had completed her first long, politicized, heartfelt, sacred walk. The “Get Out Migration” resulted in an anti-farming petition more than 3,400 pages long and weighing 40 pounds.⁶ The walk also dismantled an invisible geopolitical boundary, bringing rural voices to the capital city, rendering longstanding concerns visible and public. Dawson’s participation in what became a mass migration contributed to shared sacred experience, continuing a process that connected her present day to her past and future walking in community. Walking is a personal activity embodied in the behaviour of an individual, yet the individual carries within her the memories and traditions that give knowledge and courage; so by carrying and wearing the material culture that she is steeped in, she renders her community present. Through such aspects of material culture as worn regalia, painted signs, sonorous voices and instruments, and publicized place names, Dawson, her co-walkers, and their supporters essentially put into physical form the past and present relationships that manifest as shared culture, as contemporary protest, and as increased awareness.

CATHERINE NUTTING is a Ph.D. candidate and sessional instructor in the Department of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Victoria (Victoria, BC, Canada). Her dissertation, *The Stoic Baroque: Rubens as Artist and Theorist*, is supervised by Erin J. Campbell. She received a scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; and has researched and published on internationalizing Art History through university Learning Without Borders grants. Her Master’s thesis, *Concrete Insight: Art, the Unconscious, and Transformative Spontaneity*, was on British Modernist Herbert Read. She teaches Theory and Modern and Contemporary Art History at the Vancouver Island School of Art (Victoria, BC, Canada).

NOTES

¹ For images of Gwa'yi visual culture, see for example the Simon Fraser University collection at digital.lib.sfu.ca/billreid-collection (accessed May 25, 2016); and Judith Williams, *Two Wolves at the Dawn of Time: Kingcome Inlet Pictographs*. Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001.

² Material culture is made up of the objects that we make and use, overlapping with objects that might be labelled fine arts. See for example, E.H. Gombrich, *The Uses of Images: Studies in the Social Function of Art and Visual Communication*, London: Phaidon Press, 1999; and V. Buchli, editor, *The Material Culture Reader*. Oxford: Sage, 2002.

³ www.alexandramorton.ca (accessed January 15, 2016); and www.farmedanddangerous.org (accessed May 25, 2016).

⁴ Cases in point are the British street parties "Global Street Party," "Reclaim the Streets," and "Carnival Against Capital." Andrew Robinson and Athina Karatzogianni, *Power, Resistance, and Conflict in the Contemporary World*. Routledge, 2009; and Andrew Robinson, "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival Against Capital, Carnival Against Power," <http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk> (accessed January 21, 2016).

⁵ Celia Brauer, "Get Out Migration Shows that People Care about Saving Wild Salmon," *Georgia Straight*, May 13, 2010. www.straight.com (accessed January 15, 2016).

⁶ Celia Brauer, "Get Out Migration Shows that People Care about Saving Wild Salmon," *Georgia Straight*, May 13, 2010. www.straight.com (accessed January 15, 2016).