In many of today’s urban developments, planners install public artworks that commemorate the people who have traditionally lived on the site and in the wider region. These recalled histories, however, sometimes focus on selected cultural groups while eliding others from their narratives. In my paper, I examine artworks installed at two substantial developments built in Vancouver during the 1990s: Concord Pacific Place, an urban mega-project that encompasses approximately a sixth of Vancouver’s downtown peninsula, and the International Terminal at Vancouver International Airport. Concord Pacific Place is situated on a former industrial waterfront owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway. While the development’s public artworks recall the site’s industrial past, they omit any references to the Chinese laborers who built the railway and settled in Vancouver. I consider this elided history in the context of local racist reactions to Hong Kong developer Li Ka-shing’s purchase of the land in 1988 and the expected sale of Concord Pacific’s condominiums to Hong Kong buyers. At Vancouver’s airport, planners installed a number of Northwest Coast First Nations artworks in the International Terminal which opened in 1996. I discuss how they were deployed for commercial purposes and how they have a limited effect in terms of commemorating the traditional Indigenous owners of the land that the airport occupies.

Before addressing the artworks at Concord Pacific Place and Vancouver’s airport, I shall first briefly discuss the region’s history. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, Vancouver and its surrounding waterways were fishing and hunting grounds for the Squamish and Musqueam people.¹ Most of the Lower Mainland remained under Indigenous control until 1858, when news
of British Columbia’s gold deposits broke in San Francisco and a mass migration ensued. When British Columbia entered the Canadian Confederation in 1871, it was promised that a transnational railway would be built to connect the province to the rest of the country. The current downtown peninsula was declared the Canadian Pacific Railway’s terminal city and re-named Vancouver in 1886.

(Slide 2) Concord Pacific Place is situated on the north shore of False Creek, an area that was central to the CPR’s operations. Here, the company built a railway line, a roundhouse, and rail repair shops. A variety of industries also grew up along False Creek’s shore. Although the growing economy had positive effects, it certainly had a negative impact on the city’s environment. In less than half a century, False Creek had been transformed from a forested inlet to a polluted dumping ground. In 1968, Vancouver’s city council voted to change False Creek’s designation as an industrial area to that of a commercial and residential space. The south shore was redeveloped during the late 1970s and early 80s into low- and medium-rise neighborhoods. In 1979, the province purchased seventy-one hectares of the north shore for Expo ’86, a world transportation fair celebrating Vancouver and the CPR’s centennial. (Slide 4) Two years after the fair had run its course, the province sold the site to property developer Li Ka-shing, the wealthiest man in Hong Kong at the time.

Li’s purchase of the land was expected to draw a substantial amount of foreign investment into the city, and it coincided with the start of a growing wave of immigration to Vancouver. During the late 1980s and 90s, many affluent Hong Kong Chinese people chose to immigrate to the city because of anticipated political and economic uncertainties associated with Hong Kong’s return to the People’s Republic of China in 1997. Li’s firm, Concord Pacific, marketed its condominium units primarily to middle- and upper-class Canadian residents and
Hong Kong immigrants and investors. Li recognized the value of the former Expo lands as a desirable location for Hong Kong property owners because of Vancouver’s existing Chinese population, the site’s proximity to the shopping districts downtown, and, perhaps most importantly, Canada’s business immigrant programme which favored immigrants based on wealth. His purchase of the site was met with both positive and negative local reactions. Supporters lauded the expected influx of investment into Vancouver and the city’s growing popularity on the Pacific Rim. Detractors, on the other hand, worried about increased levels of immigration and expected rises in house prices. Some of these negative reactions include racist responses towards the site’s owners as well as the Hong Kong buyers Concord Pacific was courting.

Shortly after winning the bid in 1988, Concord Pacific consulted with Vancouver’s city planners to finalize the development plans. The False Creek North Official Development Plan, passed in 1990, called for tall and narrow “point” towers instead of slabs, and these buildings had to be integrated into the existing city space. (Slide 5) Towers were oriented according to the downtown grid, and in some cases their materials had to respond to existing structures nearby. The Yaletown Edge neighborhood, completed in 1996, includes four- to eight-storey buildings that line Pacific Boulevard with brick façades designed to mimic Yaletown’s historic buildings. Concord Pacific built residential towers ranging from twenty-seven to thirty storeys on the corners of city blocks, but recessed back from the lower-level buildings at the street-edges. (Slide 6) The Roundhouse neighborhood, completed in 1997, is named after an 1889 CPR engine turntable and maintenance building located on the site. Their surviving portions were restored in 1985 for the Expo ’86 fair. (Slide 7) Brick is used prominently in the lower buildings close to the Roundhouse and is meant to reflect the historical context of the site. (Slide 8) Similar to the
Yaletown Edge neighborhood, high-rise towers are set back from the streetscape with low-level buildings surrounding the base. The subsequent phases are fairly similar – they all contain thin slender high-rises on wide low-rise podia.

(Slide 9) In conjunction with the City of Vancouver, Concord Pacific has installed a number of public artworks on the site. In 1990 Vancouver enacted a policy that required developers rezoning at least 15,000 m² of floor space to contribute to the city’s Public Art Program. Developers were able to choose whether they wanted to participate in the artworks’ selection through a juried public process or contribute the entire funds to the city’s public art reserve. Concord Pacific, which was required to contribute eight million dollars to the program, opted to participate in the juried public process.

A number of the commissioned artworks recall the place’s history. Bernie Miller and Alan Tregebov’s Streetlight, completed in 1997, is a fourteen-meter-tall sculpture constructed out of I-beams with concrete bases and scaffolding supporting metal panes that are illustrated with images depicting False Creek’s history. The images on the panes are grainy, since the panes have been perforated in such a way that the images would also be replicated in the cast shadows. They include photos of the CPR’s foundations in the 1880s, Indigenous inhabitants during the early 20th century, shacks in the 1930s, bridges in the 1950s, and development of the Expo in the 1980s. Descriptions of the images are engraved on the concrete bases of the sculpture. For example, “Expo Centre Opens May 2 1985: The joy of the occasion is expressed in the spontaneous dance of three young girls.”

(Slide 10) Along the seawall, in line with Drake Street, is Henry Tsang’s Welcome to the Land of Light, from 1997. Extending one hundred meters along the seawall railing, Tsang’s installation comprises of two lines of text, Chinook Jargon and English. (Slide 11) A fibre-optic
cable, which emits colored light, runs along the base of the artwork. The plaques accompanying the installation explain that the bottom line, the English text, is a direct translation of the top line, the Chinook Jargon text – the region’s nineteenth century lingua franca that originated from Columbia River Chinook and was combined with elements of French, English, and Nootkan. This pidgin was the dominant language of commercial exchange until English replaced it in the twentieth century. The plaques explain that the juxtaposition of the two languages is “a metaphor for the ongoing development of intercultural communications in this region.”

*Streetlight* and *Welcome to the Land of Light* are only two of a number of Concord Pacific’s public artworks that recount the site’s history. These works examine themes such as the CPR, Expo ’86, industry, and the site’s Indigenous past – albeit in a whitewashed and clean rendition with no account of the actual oppressive history. The artworks’ commemoration of the CPR omits a significant cultural group: the Chinese laborers who built the railway. They largely cleared and built the last leg leading into Vancouver which passed through the Fraser Canyon, a treacherous and nearly impassable route.\(^{14}\) (Slide 12) A number of these workers remained in Vancouver once the CPR was completed and lived in Chinatown, a neighborhood adjacent to Concord Pacific Place.\(^ {15}\)

(Slide 13) As noted, *Streetlight* describes the archival photographs reproduced on its ten panes. None of the descriptions, however, mention the region’s Chinese people. Similarly, Tsang’s *Welcome to the Land of Light*, which recalls the languages spoken in the region during the nineteenth century, only mentions English and Chinook Jargon. His account of the site’s multilingual history does not include Cantonese, a language commonly spoken in the region since the arrival of Chinese gold miners in 1858.
Concord Pacific did commission one public artwork, Al McWilliams’s *Untitled (Fountain)*, which was intended to commemorate Vancouver’s Chinese inhabitants. The fountain contains a black granite lotus flower from which water emanates and flows over the petals into a pool below. Apparently, McWilliams wanted to include Chinese funerary urns to refer to the region’s Chinese railway laborers. Concord Pacific, however, refused the proposal and allowed McWilliams only to cryptically refer to this history through a highly decorative lotus flower. The reference to Chinese railway workers is not directly apparent to passersby. Unlike *Streetlight* and *Welcome to the Land of Light*, it has no textual accompaniment to explain the sculpture’s intended meaning.

I can only speculate on why Concord Pacific Place’s public artworks fail to mention the history of Chinese railway labor and Vancouver’s Chinese population. The firm may have chosen to elide this contentious history because of Concord Pacific’s own experience of being a target of local anti-Asian criticism. My primary research on this topic included an analysis of the newspaper articles published in the Vancouver *Sun* between 1987 and 2001. During the late 1980s and early 90s, the *Sun* printed numerous articles pertaining to the B.C. government’s sale of the Expo ’86 lands to Li Ka-shing and his firm’s development of the site. The sale spurred a furious debate about increased levels of foreign investment and immigration into Vancouver. In many of the articles and letters to the editor, Concord Pacific’s detractors espoused anti-Asian sentiments and uttered overtly racist statements. Concord Pacific’s installation of the artworks during the mid- to late-1990s came only a few years after the racist backlash of the late-1980s and early 1990s. The firm may have chosen to omit obvious references to “Chineseness” to avoid another resurgence of the same type of racism.
Concord Pacific may have also avoided a discussion of Chinese railway labor because the firm did not want to broach an emotionally-charged and difficult topic. Julia Ningyu Li, a Chinese scholar based in Beijing, notes the difficulties of researching the history of Chinese railway laborers in Canada: (Slide 16)

… Everybody said that the history of the Chinese working on the CPR was a “blood and tears” story of hardship and suffering, of mistreatment and humiliation, that had nothing to do with glory; and no one wanted to re-open these old wounds, for fear of offending mainstream Canadian society… Second, the first generation of Chinese unceasingly pushed their children to embrace the society of their new country. They were ashamed and did not want to tell their children anything of their involvement in the construction of the railway.18

(Slide 17) Class differences between the descendents of Chinese laborers and the urban mega-project’s Hong Kong patrons and buyers may have also influenced Concord Pacific’s tacit embargo on this controversial history. Moreover, affluent Hong Kong immigrants landing in North America often have had to struggle with stereotypes that portray Asian immigrants as lower-class laborers.19

(Slide 18) While Concord Pacific was developing its urban mega-project, the Vancouver International Airport Authority was planning a major expansion to the city’s airport. The VIAA, a non-profit private organization, acquired the airport in 1992 when Transport Canada transferred its control of Vancouver’s, Calgary’s, Edmonton’s, and Montreal’s airports to local privately managed groups.20 The existing terminal, designed by Thompson, Berwick and Pratt and opened in 1968, was too small for the number of passengers arriving and departing at YVR. Shortly after attaining the airport, the VIAA started planning and constructing the International Terminal, a 116,000-square-metre expansion that cost $250 million and opened in 1996.21 The VIAA established the new terminal’s design theme when it launched its “The North Star” strategic plan in 1993.22 The firm aimed to “capitaliz[e] on the tourism appeal of SuperNatural
British Columbia” in order to establish YVR as a significant hub for intercontinental flights and an attractive destination for international and domestic travellers. The VIAA decided that Northwest Coast First Nations artworks would reinforce this ‘supernatural’ theme. (Slide 19) During the same year, it purchased Bill Reid’s The Spirit of Haida Gwaii: The Jade Canoe for three million CAD. This is the second casting of this artwork. The first bronze cast, known as The Black Canoe, was completed in 1991 and installed at the Canadian Embassy in Washington D.C. Unlike the first casting, this bronze sculpture was painted with a jade-green patina. 

The Jade Canoe is the airport’s most expensive acquisition. During the design phase, the VIAA and the building’s architects, Waisman Dewar Grout Carter Inc, envisioned it as a prominent place-marker that passengers and visitors would recognize as a landmark and could use as a meeting point. (Slide 20) Today, it is certainly used in this capacity – usually there are a number of people seated in the theatre-like space around this work while they wait for their flight or their friends or family to arrive. The VIAA also expected that this eye-catching sculpture would draw people towards food outlets nearby. It is currently situated between a Starbucks Coffee stand and a gift shop. The food court is just a few meters to the north.

The VIAA also believes that the works themselves can stimulate passenger spending. It believes that Northwest Coast Indigenous artworks in particular lend the terminal a “sense of place,” which in turn entices passengers to spend their money while they spend their time waiting. The VIAA also contends that this “sense of place” will attract international transferring passengers. It alleges that passengers such as those flying from Asia to the Eastern United States will choose to land at YVR as a stopover because of its “authentic sense of place” instead of other airports in Pacific Rim cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle.  

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The artworks used to evoke this “authentic sense of place,” however, are not limited to those made by the First Nations people who have traditionally lived in Vancouver. For instance, Reid is of Haida ancestry, a nation from an archipelago 700 kilometres away from Vancouver. The adjacent informational panel explains that his sculpture depicts a traditional Haida dugout canoe with thirteen creatures on board that derive from Haida mythology. (Slide 22) Joe David’s *Welcome Figures*, installed the publicly-accessible arrivals area in 1998, are by a Nuu-chah-nulth artist and are modeled after the traditional cedar statues from Clayoquot Sound, a coastal region located 200 kilometres away on Vancouver Island. “Meeters and greeters” awaiting arriving passengers can read the signage installed next to the figures. It notes: “Carved in the Clayoquot tradition, figures such as these would be taken from storage and temporarily positioned, with arms raised, on the beach in front of the village, to welcome guests to special events.”

YVR, however, is situated upon unceded Musqueam territory. (Slide 23) A series of artworks by Musqueam artists was incorporated into the terminal’s design before it opened in 1996, though they are not accessible to all visitors to the airport. The VIAA installed these works alongside a set of escalators and stairs in the secured airside arrivals area, and the series is meant to welcome international travelers. All passengers arriving on flights originating outside of Canada must walk through this passageway, before entering the Canada Border Services Agency screening area. The VIAA designed the installation with the Musqueam Nation, who helped decide which artworks would be appropriate for the airport. (Slide 24) On the stairway’s intermediate landing, passengers walk past Susan Point’s *Flight (Spindle Whorl)*, a red-cedar disc 4.8 metres in diameter that hangs in front of a granite wall with water cascading down its face. Point’s enlarged spindle whorl, a tool that is typically six-inches wide and used by the
Musqueam to spin yarn, occupies a central focal point for those looking back at the stairway from the border screening area.  

(Slide 25) The water that rushes down the granite wall is directed into two channels that flow alongside two escalators flanking a central stairway. This rushing water was intended to refer to the Fraser River delta, the traditional fishing and hunting grounds of the Musqueam people. (Slide 26) As passengers head down this lower set of escalators and stairs, they are faced with Point’s Musqueam Welcome Figures. Both were made out of red cedar and stand 5.2 metres high.

The VIAA’s installation of the Musqueam Welcome Area is a sincere gesture that acknowledges the airport’s location on Musqueam land. However, its intended meaning is not clearly elucidated for arriving passengers. Unlike other artworks in the terminal, these Musqueam pieces do not have informational panels installed directly adjacent to the work. Furthermore, the series is installed in an area where passengers are not intended to linger. (Slide 27) This contrasts with Reid’s The Jade Canoe and David’s Welcome Figures which have accompanying signage and are in spaces where passengers are encouraged or expected to wait.

In short, the VIAA commemorates the region’s Indigenous history but not specifically the Musqueam Nation whose land the airport is situated upon. Instead, it has chosen to display Indigenous artworks by artists from across British Columbia. The panels that accompany these artworks acknowledge their First Nations authorship, and they iterate that their ancestors have lived in British Columbia since time immemorial. However, they do not address any current issues such as the political aspects of First Nations land rights and unceded territory. The VIAA portrays Northwest Coast First Nations people as being ‘one with the land,’ but they do not address contemporary concerns regarding stolen land and treaties. Furthermore, it chose First Nations artworks in a traditional style rather than more critical works by artists such as Lawrence
Paul Yuxweluptun, whose work addresses land claims, and Brian Jungen, whose work critiques the commercialisation of Indigenous art. As noted, the VIAA’s aim for commemorating the region’s First Nations people is largely driven by commercial imperatives. While the VIAA’s display of First Nations artworks offers passengers an insight into the region’s cultural history, its apolitical display of First Nations art certainly supports its larger aim to create an ‘ambiance’ where passengers are encouraged to spend.

(Slide 28) Concord Pacific and the VIAA have installed artworks on their sites which recall historical narratives that avoid controversial topics. This is unsurprising since they are both privately run companies that rely on profits generated by their developments. Concord Pacific sells real estate, and the VIAA acquires proceeds from passenger spending to pay for the airport’s operations. While these apolitical and safe representations obscure the histories and political aspects of Vancouver’s Chinese and Musqueam people, they elucidate the complexities regarding commemoration and how historical narratives can conflict with or be appropriated for commercial interests.

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This immigration policy was introduced in 1978 (David Ley, “Myths and Meanings of Immigration and the Metropolis,” Canadian Geographer 43, no. 1 [1999]: 2-19; David Ley, “Seeking Homo Economicus: The Canadian State and the Strange Story of the Business Immigration Program,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers 93, no. 2 [2003]: 426-41; Lloyd L. Wong, “Taiwanese Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Canada and Transnational Social Space,” International Migration 42, no. 2 [2004]: 113-52). “Entrepreneurial immigrants” had to invest at least 250,000 dollars directly into Canadian business ventures. In 1986, the federal government added the “investor” category. Applicants needed to have a minimum net worth of 500,000 dollars and the ability to invest 250,000 to 500,000 dollars over three to five years. From 1986 onwards, Vancouver saw a marked increase of affluent Chinese immigrants, predominantly from Hong Kong. Although other countries such as the United States, New Zealand, and Australia had similar business immigrant programs, Canada was a more popular destination for Hong Kong emigrants because they initially did not need pay Canadian tax on income earned outside of Canada and the flexibility accorded to business immigrants – they neither had to have business experience nor detailed plans for their future enterprise.


10 City of Vancouver, False Creek North Official Development Plan, Adopted by By-law No. 6650, April 10, 1990 (Vancouver: City of Vancouver Planning Department, 2004; first published 1990).
17 Trevor Boddy, “What’s wrong with public art?: Public art is now juried to death, but the results are timid works that are just as controversial, Richmond has found,” Vancouver Sun, Saturday 25 November 2000, sec. D, p. 17.
18 Li, 192.
21 “Did you know?,” SkyTalk 4, no. 4 (1997): 11
23 Ibid.
25 Jez Odam, “There’s more light for arriving passengers as Vancouver airport tunnels come to end,” Vancouver Sun, March 11, 1994, sec. B, p. 1
28 Marcus Binney, Airport Builders (Chichester: Academy Editions, 1999), 213.
31 “Flight (Spindle Whorl),” YVR, accessed June 11, 2013, http://www.yvr.ca/en/about/art-architecture/Spindle-Whorl.aspx. Unlike the traditional spindle whorls used to make yarn, Point’s sculpture at YVR does not include the shaft that is fixed to the centre of the disc.
32 The Musqueam Welcome Area also includes four woven tapestries by Krista Point, Robyn Sparrow, Debra Sparrow, and Gina Grant and Helen Callbreath that hanging from the ceiling beside the two escalators.