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The Pole Is Back Home

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On May 10, 2023, a delegation from the Gitxaała Nation entered Harvard's Peabody Museum. Wearing ceremonial red and black, the seven members had traveled from their territory in the Pacific Northwest to the ground floor of the museum where a small group of museum staff, invited guests, and chance visitors observed a palpably momentous event. Even unsuspecting museum-goers who wandered out of the Lakota images exhibit to the galleries on the first floor seemed to sense the importance of the occasion. Surrounded by Penabscot canoe exhibits and the Kaats' and Brown Bear Totem Pole, the Gitxaała Nation and university representatives acknowledged in a poignant ceremony the return of a Gitxaała house frontal pole and associated fragments. Repatriation of the totem pole had taken 126 years.[1]

This moving ceremony was not to hand over the totem pole; its actual return had taken place months earlier. Rather, this observance served as an acknowledgment of closure, and, potentially, a blueprint for possible future encounters. In fact, the Gitxaała Nation had come to leave a marker, a *gan niidza*, "to explain what happened." In selecting an object to represent them as a living people, the Gitxaała Nation was purposefully disrupting the official narrative that others had constructed about them. They are still *present*, a delegate asserted; not simple objects to be collected or studied. The Gitxaała Nation representatives were there "closing a circle that should never have been opened," when sacred objects were stolen from their territory in the nineteenth century and transformed through new claims of ownership into scientific "artifacts."

What can repatriation of a sacred object like the Gitxaała house pole tell us about troubling encounters and their possible afterlives? Rather than delve into the rich themes of data collection, knowledge making, research ethics in science, and other topics covered so well in this book, I wish to center the ceremony at the Peabody as one of meaning making and repair that situates respect and reciprocity as an ethical frame for possible futures. Many of the

[1] The exact date is not known as some news outlets said 126 years. www.ominecaexpress.com/news/gitxaala-house-post-returning-after-138-years-and-decades-in-harvard-storage.

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chapters in this book foreground disquieting interactions whose future endings are yet to be written. Who can collect and who gets collected, studied, and exhibited are certainly stories about domination, but they are also tales about the manifold constructions – evidentiary "slivers" of both material objects and human remains (blood, skulls, or other genetic material) – needed to cement the colonizing idea of difference. How might historians of the human sciences think about these stories as we move forward?

The Totem Pole

To the Gitxaała and other Indigenous peoples, totem poles or house posts (or pts'aan) possessed history and power. Not only were they territorial markers but they also contained stories of the clans they represented. Purchased by a skipper of a New England Fish Company in 1885, the totem pole, an integral part of Gitxaała culture, was sold under duress to be "displayed as a historic oddity" in the offices of the Boston harbor fishing company.[2] As the Gitxaała museum webpage explained, "It was cut down, saved, sold, abused, given away, and displayed." Though the returned pole stood at an already imposing 12 feet, it is thought to have been as tall as 50 feet when it originally stood outside a clan home.

On the day of the ceremony at the Peabody, I learned more about the history of the pole from the director of the museum and a member of the Gitxaała Nation. I am not a scholar of the Gitxaała Nation but I was there as a mere member of the faculty museum committee. In other words, I, like the many scientists in this book, am rendering my interpretation of the events wholly aware of my power in being able to write an account. Having said that, though I was in the first row, my view was partially blocked by someone who, despite arriving late, planted themselves in front of occupied chairs and stood there for the duration of the ceremony. To see, those who were seated needed to strain, leaning to either side of the man, who turned out to be a *Boston Globe* reporter. From my uncomfortably slanted viewing position, I could not help but reflect what it means to be able to see/to witness/to rewrite histories with an unobstructed view. As I moved my body to the left and right, trying to capture as much of the experience as possible, there were inevitable moments when I missed key details and was left to infer what had happened. Even my advantaged seating precluded me from fully understanding subtle movements, words spoken, and the meaning of songs and rituals. In short, I lacked a broader historical context and training to give a truer account, made more difficult by the reporter who, now part of my account, continued to obstruct my view.

Though these blocked views were mere moments, afterwards I found myself thinking how they rather neatly captured the partial views we have been given

[2] https://gitxaalamuseum.com/journeyhome.

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from archives, oral histories, ethnographies, and erstwhile collecting expeditions of those who have long been the living subjects of science. Indeed, what I was witnessing was a mere instant in a much longer and complex history – described in most of the chapters of this book – of colonizers, sailors, businessmen, intermediaries, and social scientists, among others, who trafficked in objects, facts, and conjecture.

The pole or pts'aan was the first of seventy-three culturally significant objects that are currently held in more than twelve national and international museums and which are at different stages of being returned to the Gitxaała Nation. Those who had come to acknowledge the return were also there to reframe the history, to retell it from their perspective. Hearing the spokesperson explain the theft of the pole was a powerful reminder of what was lost when objects – and people – were captured during, as a Nation member explained, "one of our darkest moments." The loss was more profound for it was more than the material object displayed first by the fishing company and later the museum; it is what the objects represented, the history and the spirits of the ancestors. For the Gitxaała Nation the pole was living, holding the spirits of those who came before.

Indigenous newspaper coverage of the return of the totem pole eschewed words like "artifact" and "repatriate," replacing them instead with Sm'algyax words to describe the return of the pole as putting the "value and sacredness back in" and most importantly reasserting "we are still alive."[3] Historian Vera Candiani reminds us that words, especially in extractive economies, have deeper meanings. She writes, "Using such descriptors not only treats objects, processes, and people as products of random genetic combinations, but also, by so swiftly categorizing it thus, also prematurely forecloses on deeper understandings of the things in themselves and their relationships to processes around them."[4] Candiani uses this argument to urge historians to think more broadly about environments, but deliberate word choice, as used here, is a powerful assertion against imposed scientific terminology and categorization.

Explaining why the use of "artifact" erased multiple meanings, a member told a reporter:

> The word "artifact" is such a loaded colonial word that implies that our culture died off. It's not an artifact, it's part of our living culture. "We're

[3] https://coastalfirstnations.ca/gitxaala-bring-treasure-home-a-historic-turning-point-for-the-nation/.

[4] Vera Candiani here was explaining how certain "artifacts" used for transforming colonized landscapes were described as being either "hybrid" or "Mestizo" while knowledge was always described as being "European or creole." Though she uses the word artifact to reference technologies, Candiani acknowledges that this forecloses other meanings. "Reframing Knowledge in Colonization: Plebians and Municipalities in the Environmental Expertise of the Spanish Atlantic," *History of Science* 55, no. 2 (2017): 234–252.

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> still alive," Wilg'oosk says. "We came up with phrases in our language . . . we had to differentiate between what's already come home, what's on its journey home, and what we still need to bring home. We were really challenging our committee, with our Elders, to try and find the right phrase, the right way to explain it in our culture."[5]

The afterlives of troubling encounters hence necessitate new words for ruptures created in communities but also for, as in this case, the jigsaw-like pieces needed to bring them together. Words, like the sacred objects now being returned to US Tribal Nations through the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), have power.

In her introductory comments at the Peabody ceremony, the director of the museum, Jane Pickering, raised the question of what ethical stewardship of Indigenous objects might mean in the twenty-first century. She spoke not just about acknowledging that many of the objects the museum obtained and withheld came to it under duress and violence, but also argued for an ethics of repair. To establish open communication with communities whose objects had long been on display, repair, the director clarified, "sometimes meant *return* to the community."[6]

But the return of sacred objects opens the possibilities for other portrayals, other interpretations in museum spaces. For instance, on that day as the ceremony neared its ending, the representatives unfurled the marker they had brought to leave at the museum: a flag of their nation. With the gifting of the flag, the Gitxaała Nation reclaimed power over those who had taken their culture to display as an exotic talisman, both the shipping company and the museum. By requesting that it be the Gitxaała Nation flag, a representation of a sovereign nation, that is displayed where the totem pole once stood is laden with meaning. It creates another encounter, one infused this time with a deeper understanding, a fuller picture of both the historical context and cultural meaning. It affirms sovereignty and the dignity and power of telling one's own story. It was also a reminder for future museumgoers that the Gitxaała people are not relics of the past but, as the delegates remarked several times, "we survived."[7]

[5] https://coastalfirstnations.ca/gitxaala-bring-treasure-home-a-historic-turning-point-for-the-nation/.

[6] On museums and collecting, see Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

[7] For a notion of survivance, see Gerald Vizenor, ed., *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008). For pushing back against damage narratives see Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 415 and Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

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