“On behalf of the family”: A Pole Raising Ceremony at the Denver Art Museum

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Abstract
This article examines themes of collaboration and stewardship, the importance of cultural protocols, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge in the context of a Haida totem pole raising ceremony held at the Denver Art Museum in November 2019. Collaborating with members of the Wallace family, direct descendants of the original owners of the house frontal and memorial poles in its collection, the Denver Art Museum organized the event to honor the family’s legacy and the history of the poles. In this article, we outline the planning process, events, and outcomes of the event, and situate this within the context of Haida cultural practices. Combined with an analysis of Haida oratory, song, and dance, we demonstrate the ways in which collaborations that honor Haida cultural protocols can engender meaningful relationships between institutions and originating communities.

Keywords
dance; material culture; performance; ritual; transmission; woodcarving | Haida Gwaii; Alaska; Denver | Kaigani Haida; Haida.

Competing Interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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In November 2019, the Denver Art Museum (DAM) reinstalled the Haida house frontal and memorial poles from the permanent collection in the newly renovated Northwest Coast gallery of the museum’s Martin Building (Figures 1–2). The poles were lowered in January 2018 to prepare the museum’s Martin Building for the renovation, which culminated in the reinstallation of the museum’s permanent collection galleries. The Denver Art Museum collaborated with descendants of the nineteenth century carver Dwight Wallace to plan a ceremony to commemorate the reinstallation of the two poles, and to honor the artistic and cultural legacies of their family. Dwight Wallace, a member of the yahgu’laanaas Raven lineage from the Alaskan Haida village of Sukkwan (saxq’wa’áan), is closely associated with both poles in the museum’s collection. He is the carver of the house frontal pole, known as Land Otter Pole, and also commissioned the memorial pole in honor of his wife around 1870. These descendants included artist and community leader Lee Wallace, along with his daughter Markel Wallace, grandnieces Andrea Cook and Valesha Patterson, and Valesha’s son Tristen. The occasion was marked by a ceremony, gift giving, and feast commemorating the event and honoring their ancestors. These events were significant for both the museum and the family, and they generated conversations about collaboration and stewardship, the importance of cultural protocols, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge.
Figure 1. Dwight Wallace (Gid K’wáajuus), 1822–1913, Sukkwan (Saxq’wa.áan), Alaska. House Frontal Pole (gyáa’ang), 1870. Gift of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1946.251. Photography © Denver Art Museum.
Figure 2. Kaigani Haida artist, Sukkwan (Saxq’wa.áan), Alaska. Memorial Pole (k’áal), about 1870. Gift of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1946.252. Photography © Denver Art Museum.
Although part of the Denver Art Museum’s permanent collection, the poles remain forever connected to Lee and his family who have the right to tell the stories depicted on the poles. Lee’s grandfather, John Wallace, received these rights through matrilineal inheritance, which Lee recounted during a speech given on the day following the pole raising ceremony (Moore 2018, 92). Despite nuance in how ownership is articulated by museums and originating communities, Lee acknowledged the connection between the two. More than simply bringing people with diverse cultures and histories together, the events that took place over two days in Denver signified the ways in which oratory, song, and performance can enliven the stories encoded in the two poles, and the ways in which the stories can connect to Haida and non-Haida people today. Lee said “when we really examine ourselves, we are more the same.”

In this article, we outline the planning process for the ceremony and feast, the history of the poles and how they were acquired by the museum, and the historical context for pole raising ceremonies. To understand the cultural and institutional context for these events, it is equally important to understand the relationship between oratory, song, and speechmaking in Haida spiritual and political discourse. Using the speeches made by Lee and his family, as well as scholarship on Haida oratory and cultural protocols, we situate the ceremony within a broader constellation of Haida cultural practices. Although the institutional setting of the events was radically different than the environments for which the poles were originally produced, the speeches and ceremonies engendered lasting relationships that come with mutual obligations between the institution and the family.

Prior to the planning of the ceremony, the Native Arts department only had intermittent relationships with community members and artists from the Northwest Coast, and these were expressed in limited ways. The museum has acquired works in the collection directly from artists and community members, commissioned works, and corresponded with both living artists and direct descendants regarding works in the collection. The museum has also facilitated NAGPRA consultations with Tlingit communities in Angoon as well as with the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. With respect to the poles, the museum’s archives contain correspondence with John Wallace, Dwight Wallace’s son and Lee Wallace’s grandfather. In 1967, the museum’s then-serving Native Arts curator Norman Feder invited Kwakwa’kawakw carver Tony Hunt Sr. to repair a portion of Land Otter Pole. In light of this more limited history of engagement and given current trends in museums to more proactively collaborate with originating communities to coordinate pole raising ceremonies, conserve historical poles, and repatriate poles in their collections, the Native Arts department was eager to explore ways to initiate conversation with Lee and his family.

There are many examples of collaborative conservation, pole raising, and repatriation that served as useful models for the ceremony held at the Denver Art Museum (Moore 2010; Jonaitis 2017). For example, many Tlingit objects in museum collections that were removed from their communities during the Harriman Alaska Expedition have been returned. When the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University returned a pole to the Tlingit Saanya Kwáan in 2001, the museum commissioned Tlingit carver Nathan Jackson to carve a pole to replace it (Moore 2010, 125–28). Similarly, Lee Wallace has previously participated in similar acts of
“propatriation.”4 In 1993, the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis commissioned Lee to carve a new version of a historical pole originally carved by Dwight Wallace that once stood in the Golden Hill neighborhood of Indianapolis. Upon completion of the pole in 1996, the museum held a pole raising ceremony along with educational and scholarly programming (Feldman 2019). In Canada, the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia returned a mortuary pole to Haida Gwaii in 2019 (Rowley 2020).

As members of the curatorial team responsible for cultivating and maintaining these relationships, we understood that the reinstallation of the Northwest Coast and Alaska Native permanent collection galleries was an opportunity to fundamentally reconsider how we collaborate with both artists and originating communities.5 The conversations that we had with Lee and his family have challenged the institution to more clearly articulate its commitment to Indigenous peoples, resulting in the formation of a publicly available commitment to Indigenous communities that was reviewed and approved by the museum’s Indigenous Community Advisory Council, leadership, and the Board of Trustees. More than that, though, the ceremony created the space for future collaboration in whatever form Lee or his family see fit.

The principles of building relationships with communities and honoring obligations established by the communities with whom you work, such as those described here, are among the many tenets of collaborative museum practice that Daniel C. Swan instilled in his students and are central to the work he conducted (Swan and Jordan 2015).6 Throughout his entire career, Swan reinforced the notion that the work we do must benefit communities. It was with this grounding and understanding that we proceeded with this project.

From Alaska to Denver

In 1939, Denver Art Museum curator Frederic Douglas worked with René d’Harnoncourt, general manager of the United States’ Indian Arts and Crafts Board, to organize a comprehensive exhibition of historical and living traditions of Native American arts and artists for the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco.7 Haida carver John Wallace, who d’Harnoncourt had met in 1938, was invited to the exposition along with his son Fred to participate in live carving demonstrations at the fair (Moore 2012, 113; Wright 2001, 317). Wallace sent Land Otter Pole and the memorial pole from Sukkwan to San Francisco for display in the Northwest Coast section of the Indian Court exhibition, after which he sold them—an act that John Wallace declared was his right to do—to the Fairmount Park Association in Philadelphia (Moore 2020, 91–92).8 The park was unable to use the poles and transferred them to the University Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (a.k.a. Penn Museum) (Denver Art Museum n.d.). In 1946, the Penn Museum gifted the poles to the Denver Art Museum (Moore 2012, 113–14, 2020, 90–93; Wright 2001, 199–203). Upon receiving these poles, the Denver Art Museum initially installed them outdoors in front of Chappell House, which housed the museum’s collection of Indigenous arts until all collections were unified in 1971 within a newly constructed building designed by Italian architect, Gio Ponti. The two poles were installed in the building at that time and remained in place until renovations began in 2018.9

Totem poles have been objects of intense fascination for non-Native peoples, and the history of their misappropriation in the popular imagination of settler society...
has resulted in long-standing misconceptions about their history, use, and meaning to Indigenous nations. Even the term “totem pole” is a misnomer that belies their multidimensionality. According to Aldona Jonaitis and Aaron Glass, historian James McCabe was the first person to use the term “totem” to describe these monumental columns when he wrote about the history of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition (Jonaitis and Glass 2010, 5). Totem is an anglicized version of the Algonquin word dodem, meaning clan or clan animal, and was used by early anthropologists to describe what they considered animal worship or veneration among so-called “primitive” peoples (Jonaitis and Glass 2010, 5). However, this perspective fundamentally mischaracterizes the importance of crest beings to social organization, as the visual representation of these beings are not worshipped or venerated in the way that “totems” or “totemism” would suggest. Rather, they are enduring records of clan prerogatives that—through a combination of oratory, song, and dance—articulate the inherited rights of high-ranking persons and lineages.

The connection to the 1876 Philadelphia exposition is particularly relevant to the history of Land Otter Pole, as field collector James Swan commissioned Dwight Wallace to carve a pole for the Smithsonian Institution to display at the fair (Wright in Jonaitis and Glass 2010, 124–25; Wright 2001, 314: Moore 2020, 88). The pole produced by Wallace bears marked similarities to Land Otter Pole in Denver, and art historian Robin Wright has suggested that Dwight may have been assisted in the carving of that pole by a young John Wallace, who would have been around fifteen years old. In fact, there are several versions of Land Otter Pole. In addition to the pole commissioned by Swan and the one at Denver Art Museum, John Wallace carved a new version of Land Otter Pole for the Totem Bight State Historical Park, which has since been replaced by another version carved by Nathan Jackson in 1996 (Moore 2012, 112–16, 2020, 90–93).10

Making Connections

In 2018, the co-authors approached Emily Moore, associate professor of Art History at Colorado State University, and asked if she would introduce us to Lee Wallace via email. Moore has worked closely with members of the Wallace family and has researched and written about the poles in the museum’s collection. During our initial conversations, we explained to Lee that the museum was reinstalling its permanent collection galleries, and we asked how he and his family would like to participate in that process. Through this correspondence, we collectively decided that the best approach was to host a pole raising ceremony and then DAM invited Lee and his family to honor their ancestors in accordance with cultural protocols outlined by Lee. Over the next year, museum staff corresponded with Lee to organize the ceremony, while also negotiating an installation date with internal and external stakeholders. Since this was the first time the museum had coordinated a pole raising ceremony, the Native Arts department consulted with the Wallace family and colleagues from universities and museums on the Northwest Coast to better understand the museum’s responsibilities to both the family and to the Native American Nations that call Colorado home. Lee explained to us that as part of the ceremony, he would call ancestral spirits to come to the site of the pole raising. After these discussions, we reached out to Arapaho, Ute, and Cheyenne tribal leaders to inform them that we planned to invite guests from Alaska to come to Denver and perform ceremonies to honor their relatives and ancestors. It was important to the museum and to the Wallace family that we solicit approval from tribal leaders and ensure their comfort with the museum hosting the ceremony on their lands.11
Figure 3. Tristen Washington and Lee Wallace escorting Land Otter Pole into place with members from the Demiurge team. Photography © Denver Art Museum.

Figure 4. (Left to right) Markel Wallace, Andrea Cook, and Valesha Patterson sing while Land Otter Pole is moved. Photography © Denver Art Museum.
Prior to the poles’ removal at the start of the museum’s renovation, conservators assessed the age and condition of the poles. This review included consultation with conservators at other institutions who have conducted similar work. The poles’ removal required us to take protective measures to ensure their safe movement and installation. The museum was assisted in this effort by engineers from Demiurge LLC, an art fabrication and installation company based in Denver. The poles, which had been encased in a metal cage affixed with two horizontal armatures prior to their removal from the gallery, were lifted into place with forklifts. This was one of several atypical aspects of the raising ceremony, which took place in an active construction zone with strict occupancy limits and safety protocols. Lee and Tristen escorted the poles into place in concert with the men operating the heavy machinery used to lift the poles. While this occurred at floor level, Markel, Andrea, and Valesha stood on a landing that overlooked the gallery and sang in X̱aad Kíl, the Alaskan Haida dialect of the Haida language (Figures 3–4). The juxtaposition of ceremonial regalia and songs with heavy machinery and construction safety protocols further underscored the ways in which this ceremony differed from its historical antecedents and contemporary analogues.

Raising Haida Poles

Given this setting and the fraught history of collecting on the Northwest Coast, it is important to situate these poles within the broader context of Haida pole raising ceremonies (Cole 1995). Historically, the raising of a totem pole in Haida communities was accompanied by a potlatch—an event that the anthropological literature has tended to be contextualized in ideal terms. This has been done by examining or reconstructing the processes and procedures of nineteenth-century potlatches, or chronicling changes to the ceremonial complex wrought by missionaries and the legal suppression of the potlatch by Canadian authorities during the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century (Blackman 1971, 40–51; Murdock 1934, 159). More recently, scholars such as Marianne Boelscher and Margaret Blackman have recontextualized early anthropological texts and Indigenous languages to better understand how language, oratory, and ceremonial performance continue to express Haida political processes, cultural values, and community building.

Citing George Murdock, Boelscher noted that nineteenth-century potlatches associated with pole raisings were called *sang naagad*, which was a minor version of the house-building or *wáahahl* potlatch (also *7waahlal* or *wałal*) (Boelscher 1978, 126–28; 1988, 65–66). Anthropologist Blackman did not make a distinction between house-building or pole-raising potlatches. According to Blackman, “only through the *wáahahl* potlatch could children become eligible for important titles in their own matrilineage.” These ceremonies included the bestowal of names, tattoos, and piercings, which were—and continue to be—“indicators of rank in Haida society (Blackman 1977, 41).” These processes gave children of those who potlatched *yahgid* (noble) status, meaning that they could host such potlatches in the future, and transfer that status to their children. Both house-building and pole-raising potlatches were critical to the distribution of tangible and symbolic wealth, and reproduced the means by which title, rank, and lineage positions were conferred (Breinig 2013, 60–61). In ceremonial contexts, a house frontal pole was raised into place by members of the opposite moiety of the person who commissioned it, who were paid by the host for their labor (McDonald 1983, 26). Today, the reciprocal exchange of property and labor between moieties creates bonds and mutual obligations between people that cross-cut clan affiliation, and help to foster deep ties within the community.
However, the radical upheaval during the colonial era along the Northwest Coast resulted in dramatic shifts in the “potlatch complex.” Blackman identifies the influx of material wealth generated by the fur trade, pressure and coercion from missionaries, and population decline due to a series of smallpox epidemics along the coast as major factors that contributed to the decline of the wáahahl. Both Land Otter Pole and the memorial pole are dated to 1870, after the 1862 small-pox epidemic but prior to the arrival of missionary Reverend William Henry Collison to Haida Gwaii in 1876, suggesting that the two poles were raised in Sukkwan at a time during which people from northern Haida villages were consolidating at Masset on Haida Gwaii. The poles were originally raised within the context of these sociocultural transformations, occurring alongside colonial expansion and the purposeful disruption of longstanding modes of social organization. As stated by Blackman, the last house-building potlatch occurred in the winter of 1881—1882 and that by 1883, there were no ceremonial houses being built in Masset (Blackman 1977, 48–49).13

Given that house building and pole raising potlatches were central to the conferral of status to the children of high-ranking individuals, claims over status and rank have changed since the colonial period, as oratory and the public articulation of social relationships has become integral to such claims. According to Boelscher (1988, 54): “the extension of kin terms, in short, provides additional prerequisites for claiming high positions. Regarded as contingent upon birth right demonstrated through genealogical ties, rank is not immutable but requires skillful management of pedigree.” Status, then, is negotiated through the knowledge and public declaration of kin ties and ancestral relations rather than the inherited privilege passed on to children by their parents. Lee’s speech on the day following the pole raising ceremony mirrors these protocols, and both the ceremony and the speeches are part of a continuum of oratory and performance that have occurred since the poles were initially raised in 1870. Like the various versions of the poles that have existed, the raising of the two poles and the attendant performances over the course of two days in Denver are part of an iterative process that connects the poles and direct descendants to stories and lineages rooted in a specific land base.

To be sure, the ceremony at the museum lacked the generative qualities that continue to sustain the lifeways of the Haida. This was not a newly carved pole being raised, but rather a commemorative ceremony that celebrated the legacy of Dwight Wallace and the lineage of Wallace carvers, including Dwight’s son John, his grandson Fred, and his great-grandson Lee. In addition, it was an opportunity for the museum to pay respect to this lineage of carvers and affirm its commitment to maintaining this relationship in culturally appropriate ways that express understanding of the deep importance of the protocols established by citizens of Haida First Nation. In spite of the unique setting and limitations presented by the pole-raising taking place in an active construction zone, it was an opportunity for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Valesha’s young son Tristen played an important role in both the pole raising ceremony and in the feast the following day. When Valesha spoke at the feast, she said, “I really try to instill the culture in [Tristen] and to introduce him to something of this magnitude is so meaningful.” Lee Wallace used this opportunity to teach his young relative not only the ceremonial aspects of a pole raising, but instilling in him a sense of the responsibility that he may one day bear.

Similarly, Markel reflected on the importance of sharing the experience with her family. In an email sent to museum staff after the event, she wrote that “we come from a long line of people who roamed the Pacific Northwest and Pacific Ocean long before
there were museums. The totems are our oral history and keep us connected. It was an amazingly surprising invitation, and a truly humbling experience for my dad and three cousins. [I am] forever grateful for the memories made here.” Lee reiterated that there are often differences in how museums and their visitors value these monumental sculptures compared to how their importance or meaning is understood by the people who produced them and their descendants. For Lee, the formal elements of the poles are less important than the story that they tell. “Because really, when you see the pole erected,” stated Lee, “and you see the beautiful Northwest Coast artform depicted, a lot of people say that’s the real thing about the totem pole; it’s the image itself. But really it’s the story of that pole.” When describing the relationship between oral histories, totem poles, and their “legibility,” Moore has written:

Totem poles cannot be ‘read’ simply by the crests they depict; they rely on a speaker who has the knowledge—and the right—to publicly relay the expansive stories of the crests displayed on the pole. In speaking the story, the storyteller links him or herself to a long line of ancestors, including the relatives who commissioned the pole or who were commemorated by it, and the ancestors whose encounters with the animals or entities depicted in the crests had earned the right . . . for the descendants to claim those animals or entities as their clan’s identifying symbols. (Moore 2020, 30)

The affective and visual qualities of totem poles often obscure the ways in which they reinforce social relationships and kinship ties. Moreover, these relationships are only activated within a complex system of movement, song and oratory enacted in ceremonial settings. The dynamism of these events is often crystallized or frozen when such works are on view in museums, and this decontextualization shifts focus away from this nexus, thereby placing emphasis on the visual language of Northwest Coast art and design. The pole raising ceremony was an effort to reorient the museum’s understanding of the relationship between speakers, stories, and objects, which was demonstrated in speeches made by Lee and his family.

**Telling Stories**

Although the stories depicted on the two poles have been recounted by Viola Garfield, Wright, and Moore, in several publications, we briefly outline them here using letters written by John Wallace to J. Alden Mason, curator at the Penn Museum, as well as stories told by Lee during his speech. Land Otter Pole tells the story of a shipwrecked man who barely escaped capture by land otters after his canoe capsized in a storm. After capsizing, the man killed his dog and disguised himself with its pelt to avoid detection by the land otters, because land otters are feared for transforming “drowned or nearly drowned people” into land otters (Wallace 1941). Eventually, the man found a cave in which he discovered two naked men with human bodies and land otter heads, or drowned men who had been turned into land otters.

The next day he was visited by a person who appeared to be his sister. However, her speech patterns revealed her to be a land otter appearing to the man as his relative. Using his club the man killed this land otter. This happened again and again for several days, until one day his true siblings saw smoke coming from the cave and found their shipwrecked brother. Still unsure, he asked for tobacco and his sister gave it to him, which told the man that they really were his siblings. They all left the cave.
together, and the shipwrecked man told his siblings about his experiences in the cave (Wallace 1941; Wright 2001, 199–203; Garfield and Forrest 1948, 92–93).

In the same correspondence, John provided an equally detailed description of the memorial pole, which was carved “as a gravestone” in honor of Dwight Wallace’s wife by John’s wife’s grandfather and erected by John’s uncle in Sukkwan (McDonald 1983, 30).16 He wrote that the figure at the base of the pole is a frog, and above that is “an old woman holding the medicine man’s cane and wearing a spruce root hat (Wallace 1941).” This figure “represents the grandmother who instructed the children of the clan.” The grandmother told her grandchildren to be kind to all living things, and not to harm them. Despite this warning, one of her grandchildren mocked a frog that he saw while hunting one day. On a subsequent hunting trip, the boy got lost and was confronted by a man who said that “the chief wants to see you in his house.” The boy arrived at a large house filled with people eating, except for an ill child laying in the corner of the house. The father of child “called on medicine men” to cure him, but they were unsuccessful. The boy summoned his grandmother’s power and was able to heal the child, only to realize that the sick child was the same frog he had teased, which caused him to become ill (Wallace 1941).

**Generosity and Reciprocity**

The day following the pole-raising ceremony, museum staff hosted a feast in the museum’s boardroom to honor our guests and thank them for coming to Denver. The feast began with a procession led by Tristen, who announced to the audience that “the Haidas are here” in Ḵaad Kíl. He was followed by Markel and Valesha, who “cleared the air” for the audience through song, letting them know that they came in peace prior to entering where staff and guests gathered. They sang a welcome song, and then began giving speeches (Figures 5–7). Lee introduced himself and articulated his ancestral relations. “On behalf of the family,” said Lee, “we want to express our sincere appreciation for making this all happen. It is really through relationship building that [this] happens.” Lee then thanked Moore for introducing the family to museum staff, and for being the catalyst that generated the conversations culminating in the pole raising ceremony and feast. “This whole thing didn’t happen by itself,” said Lee, “and we really appreciate it.”

Markel spoke, and said “I’m so happy to be here . . . we come from a very long line of folks that traversed the Pacific Northwest. To be able to be here and witness the installation of the poles, it’s really emotional, but it’s powerful. I have so much gratitude, along with my cousins, and I feel so grateful for the communication and all the work the museum staff does.” Valesha introduced herself and said, “I am good; I am happy. Thank you all for everyone who has been a part of this process. It has been quite emotional, but in the most uplifting way, to see that everybody that has been a part of it has cared so much, and has put so much effort and meaning into these poles and having us here . . . Háw’aa to everyone involved in this.” Andrea spoke next, and said, “it’s one of those things that doesn’t happen very often, to see one of my great-great-great grandfather’s poles. And that’s pretty incredible for me to be able to connect to the past that way, and to be here and to witness that is really precious to me . . . I want to extend my love to my family and to experience this all together. Háw’aa.” While Lee would later offer thoughts on how the poles and their stories can be relevant today, Andrea emphasized the importance of the links that such stories and works maintain with the past, and the continuum along which they exist.
Figure 5. (Left to right) Andrea Cook, Valesha Patterson, Markel Wallace, and Tristen Washington begin the feast with a procession. Photography © Denver Art Museum.

Figure 6. Lee Wallace speaks to invited guests at the Denver Art Museum. Photography © Denver Art Museum.
Lee responded by stating:

You know, when we say Háw’aa or when we say Gunalchéesh—Gunalchéesh—the quick and easy translation is ‘thank you.’ But when you translate a language into English, that it means much more than a simple ‘thank you.’ It really means without you, without all of you at the Denver Art Museum, this wouldn’t have happened.

Lee went on to elaborate that thankfulness as articulated in Xaad Kíl and Lingít expresses connections between hosts and guests and shared responsibilities to one another to maintain and honor the relationships formed and strengthened through the pole raising ceremony and the subsequent feast. Giving thanks is also deeply connected to sharing the experience with Markel Andrea, Valesha, and Tristen.

Boelscher writes that “the Haida place immense emphasis on thanking and being thanked . . . Honouring the addressees, whether they are guests or the host, is characterized by repetition, the words stressing over and again how highly one thinks of those one addresses, how much one respects them (Boelscher 1988, 85–86).” While Boelscher is describing formalized oratory in sociopolitical settings that involve the articulation and negotiation of rank through political discourse, the rhetorical conventions of the speeches delivered by Lee, Markel, Valesha, Andrea, and Tristen incorporated certain speech protocols that acknowledge their rights and relationships to the poles. This was further emphasized by Lee who after thanking the audience stated his familial ties. “Knowledge itself is a source of prestige,” states Boelscher, “and mentioning names implicitly makes claims to a say in matters or even in shared

Figure 7. Tristen Washington demonstrates dancing prior to leading Denver Art Museum staff in dance. Photography © Denver Art Museum.
rights to ownership (Boelscher 1988, 87).” While Lee does not share kin ties with museum staff—who served as the hosts of the feast—his knowledge of the history of the poles combined with his stated relationship to John and Dwight Wallace served to demonstrate these shared rights to ownership. Indeed, the thankfulness expressed by Lee and his family was also a reminder that Haida concepts of tangible and symbolic property do not conform to—and even supersede—the museum’s stewardship of the house frontal and memorial pole.

Most importantly, Lee spoke about the ways in which Haida stories can be meaningful to people today. The stories of the Gaagiixiid, or wild man, offer a fitting parallel to the story encoded into the pole and recounted by John and Lee. Gaagiixiid is a person living in isolation in the forest, who over time loses touch with his human self and is caught between worlds. Insatiable hunger is also an important characteristic of Gaagiixiid, as anthropologist and folklorist John R. Swanton described in his identification of common tropes in Tlingit and Haida oral histories. He writes that a Gaagiixiid is person who “takes a notion to live entirely alone. He is met by people at various times, but refuses to go with them. He is said to live on raw food and to cut up and carry home very small birds as if they were large animals (Swanton 1905, 102).” Lee articulates that this is not a physical hunger but a spiritual hunger that needs to be filled by song and prayer. He makes the analogy to the plight of drug and alcohol abuse, stating that people who succumb to such diseases need spiritual nourishment that only family, song, and prayer can provide.17 Addressing participants in the Denver events, Lee noted:

When you’re distressed like that, when you’re in a weakened state, you can have deception, you can be fooled. Spiritually, they could take your mind and really become a wild person. I live in a Tlingit village, Saxman, and they have this Wild Man song. To bring back the person in that state, is to bring him back with love and prayer. When you hear the story ‘how do I put in 2019 context?’ . . . In today’s time, our people get involved with drugs, alcohol, and other things that deceive them in the world that can harm and destroy. It is through songs and love that you bring people back into normalcy.

Concluding his speech with a reminder of the daily and existential struggles faced by many Haida families, Lee offers a poignant reminder that collective healing is possible when people are included in their community and sustained by their ancestral practices.18

At the conclusion of the feast, Tristen demonstrated some Haida dances, and led staff members in dance with accompaniment from Markel, Valesha, and Andrea. Museum staff concluded the feast by offering gifts to our guests and spent the rest of the day touring the museum’s galleries together. The ceremony and feast left a lasting impression on those attending, but more importantly, it fundamentally shifted the museum’s approach to how these monumental columns are contextualized for visitors. Rather than focusing on the iconography and “meaning” of the supernatural and ancestral beings that physically and symbolically inhabit the poles, we retooled our live interpretive elements to stress the importance of the constellation of human and non-human relationships that the poles engender. They are links to the past—activated and made meaningful in the present—that serve as testaments to the legacy of Lee, his family, and the communities for whom these poles perdure. Implicit in this temporal continuum is the fact that the poles will produce new meanings and be understood.
in new ways now that a relationship rooted in collaboration, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to articulating a multidimensional human experience has been established (Figure 8).19
Notes

1. The museum is deeply grateful to Lee, Markel, Andrea, Valesha, and Tristen for traveling to Denver and sharing so much of their time, knowledge, and values with us. It is an honor to steward the work of their family and ancestors. The ceremony was not only an opportunity to thank them, but to publicly declare our commitment to maintaining these relationships and honoring the protocols that caring for these objects require.
2. Throughout the article, we use quotations from Lee and his family. Some have been lightly edited for clarity.
3. John Wallace’s role in the circulation and contextualization of the poles is discussed later in this paper.
4. Emily Moore defines propatriation as “the sending forth of an object from its country or lineage of origin in acknowledgement of an object returned (Moore 2010, 126).”
5. While the museum has had only limited relationships with Indigenous communities along the Northwest Coast and in Alaska, the museum has longstanding ties with the local community. Since 1990, the museum has hosted the annual Friendship Powwow and American Indian Cultural Celebration. Additionally, the museum has sponsored an Indigenous Artist-in-Residence program since 2012, with a brief hiatus during the renovation of the Martin building.
6. Daniel C. Swan, whose work is recognized in this double issue of Museum Anthropology Review, served as co-author John P. Lukavic’s graduate advisor at the University of Oklahoma.
7. In a lecture given to the American Indian Defense Association, DAM curator Frederick Douglas described the goals for the exhibition, stating that:

   The Indian presentation of the Golden Gate International Exposition will be devoted to the Indian of today and tomorrow, seen against the background of yesterday. It will present the Indian’s traditions and past, since they are indispensable for understanding him. It will also give the living Indian a chance to prove that he is today the keeper of values which, if they were better known, could be an important contribution to our own civilization and the means of his finding a place in our world. [Douglas 1939]

The American Indian Defense Association was founded by John Collier, who would later become the commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs under Franklin Roosevelt. The Indian Arts and Crafts Board was established by Congress in 1935 to create and grow the market for Indigenous art and craftwork. For more information about the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (1935), see McLerran (2009).
8. After John Wallace removed the poles from Alaska, he was contacted by Charles Hawkesworth, the Director of Alaska’s Office of Indian Affairs. Hawkesworth was dismayed that Wallace had taken the poles to San Francisco, as he believed they should remain in Alaska to be installed in the “Totem Park” in the village of Hydaburg. In response, Wallace argued that since the poles were carved for his maternal uncle, they were his according to matrilineal inheritance. Moreover, Wallace suggested that since the poles were badly deteriorated, he would carve new poles to replace them (Moore 2020, 91–92).
9. Immediately thoughts of repatriation come to mind with the return of other poles from museums to their originating communities in the Pacific Northwest; however, as noted in John Wallace’s assertion that he had the right to remove and sell the two poles now at DAM, Lee Wallace stated that the family respects that decision made generations ago.
10. Emily Moore has written extensively about John Wallace’s role in the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition, his introduction to and relationship with Rene d’Harmoncourt, and Wallace’s role in carving totem poles for the Totem Bight State Historical Park in Ketchikan, Alaska. A US Forest Service and Civilian Conservation Corps project, the totem park was filled with repaired poles that had been left behind in abandoned settlements as well as new versions of old poles from these villages. John Wallace carved a “replica” of Land Otter Pole for the park (Moore (2012, 112–16, 2020, 91–93).

11. The museum is especially grateful to Jennifer Kramer and Aldona Jonaitis for guiding us through this process, and for answering questions about the museum’s responsibilities as host. In connection with the focus of this particular special issue of Museum Anthropology Review, we note that when the Gilcrease Museum hosted the exhibition “Down from the Shimmering Sky: Masks of the Northwest Coast” in 1999, that museum’s then-Senior Curator Swan organized similar approvals and ceremonial participations between the museum, ceremonial leaders from the Native nations in the Tulsa area, and exhibition team members from First Nations of the Northwest Coast (Jason Baird Jackson, pers. comm., May 25, 2022).

12. Haida scholar Jeane Breinig has noted that pre-colonial Haida society was comprised of three classes: noble, commoner, and slave. However, most people were considered part of the noble class, and the status of commoner “functioned primarily as a moral imperative.” Meaning that the status of commoner was reserved for those who did not abide by Haida protocols, and exhibited behaviors “such as self-promotion, cruelty, or wasteful actions.” High status is intimately connected to the Haida concept of yahkwdáng, which translates to respect, according to Breinig. Breinig also suggests that one was and is expected to act in accordance with the principles of yahk-wdáng such as humility, kindness, and a demonstrated understanding of familial and ancestral relations. Status is less about access to material and intangible wealth, but the ways in which one passes these principles on to their children, and how they treat people (Breinig 2013, 60–61).

13. Blackman also suggests that the last pole raising held in Masset occurred in the early 1890s.

14. There are variations in the details of both the story and the identification of figures depicted on it

15. Lee recounted a nearly identical story as his grandfather, but identified the location of the events as occurring near Cape Muzon. According to Robin Wright, Dwight Wallace may have been buried at Cape Muzon.

16. MacDonald writes that these types of memorial poles are not properly “grave-stones” since the remains of the person they honor reside elsewhere (McDonald 1983, 30).

17. In 2018, Haida artist Gwaai Edenshaw and Tsilhqot’in filmmaker Helen Haig-Brown co-directed a Haida language film called ‘SGaawaay K’uuna (translated to “Edge of the Knife”), which follows a high-ranking man who ends up transforming into a wild man, or Gaagiixiid.

18. In this way, Lee continues the advocacy of his grandfather, John. According to Wright, John Wallace witnessed the destructive potential of alcohol while working at Hunter’s fish saltery near hlanqwáan (Klinkwan, AK), and joined the Salvation Army in Klawock, “and dedicated himself to stopping the drinking in his community through the Christian mission, helping to build the church in hlanqwáan in 1907.” Lee mentioned how scripture informs his understanding of the carvings he produced during his career as an artist. Underscoring the ways in which we possess shared values regardless of cultural upbringing, Lee looks for shared values in Haida stories and Christian scripture (Wright 2001, 314).
19. We offer our thanks to Dan Swan who provided a model for respectful, ethical, and responsible actions within museum contexts. Seeking the understanding of obligations set by originating communities and embracing the responsibilities to honor these obligations establishes trust and is crucial for maintaining long-lasting and meaningful relationships.

References Cited


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