

CURATORS TALK:

A Conversation

JISGANG NIKA COLLISON AND NICOLA LEVELL

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INTRODUCTION

Nicola Levell (NL): Jisgang Nika Collison, you are internationally recognized as a mover and shaker in the museum world, in academic and professional circles, particularly with regard to Haida art and culture. You've been profiled in scholarly books and journals as well as in media articles and film documentaries. You've been an invited participant on numerous national and international advisory boards and committees. You've curated innovative exhibitions and public programs, given innumerable talks and conference papers, written eloquent texts and edited beautiful catalogues, and, I'd like to add, even apprenticed as a totem pole carver. Along with these museum-centred accomplishments, for almost two decades, since 1998, you've been the song leader and choreographer for Hltaaxuulang Guud ad K'aajuu, a traditional Haida dance group. So, can we begin our conversation by you introducing yourself and describing how you entered the world of museums?

Jisgang: First off, haawa – thank you for your kind words! In introducing myself: Dii Kaay'ahl Laanas jiina ga, Jisgang hanuu dii k'iiga ga, wagen Nika Collison hanuu dii k'iiga ga Yatz Xaaydaga kilhlgii. I'm of the Kaay'ahl Laanas clan, my name is Jisgang, and then in English, Nika Collison. People who know of me might get confused about my clan affiliation because, until very recently, we called ourselves Ts'aahl. Over time some Haida clans change their names. Ts'aahl refers to the last

village we lived in before migrating to Xaayna (Maude Island), then HlGaagilda (Skidegate) after the smallpox epidemic. We just recently returned to an old clan name, which stems from our originating town, Kay Llnagaay, which happens to be where our Haida Heritage Centre and Museum is located. It's kind of cool to work right where my clan originated, right on our territory. I also lived here with my mom when I was about five or six, and it's also where my Chinaay Bill Reid carved the Skidegate Dogfish pole, which was raised in 1978.

I grew up on Haida Gwaii, in the village of Skidegate. I left in 1990 to study financial management at the British Columbia Institute of Technology. Later, I went off and explored some of the world, in turn exploring who I am. After seven years away, I returned home. Being away so long, I had to reintegrate myself not only into my community and Nation but also back into being "Haida" in the conscious sense of living on Haida Gwaii and taking care of her, her beings, and each other, as is the Haida way.

I got involved in the world of museology through two streams that, in my world, have no choice but to coincide. One was entering into the heritage field, the other was just being Haida and doing the work that needs to be done.

One of the first jobs I got after moving home was as a Haida Gwaii Watchman. I learned so much from the Elders I got to live with – Captain Gold, Mrs. Gold (Bernice Wilson), and Golie (Kathleen) Hans, while living in Ancestral villages for the summer. This experience rooted me back into who I am and inspired me to get more involved in heritage work. After, I applied for a term position at the Gwaii Haanas/Parks Canada organization. I wound up working there for a couple of years, eventually as acting cultural resource manager while one of my long-time mentors, Kii'iljuus (Barbara Wilson), went off to further her schooling. During this time, I had the privilege of managing a collection of cultural treasures amassed over the years by Parks Canada. A visionary within Parks wondered why all these pieces were stored in a big warehouse back east and sent them back to the regions they originated from. It's an extensive collection (for us), on perpetual loan, as opposed to being repatriated (more because of bureaucracy than resistance to transferring title), and I'm sure "ownership" will change eventually.

Because the collection was being safe-kept at the Haida Gwaii Museum, I had the pleasure of working with the museum's executive director and curator at the time, Nathalie Macfarlane. We reintroduced the treasures back into our community, inviting Elders and others to

visit, handle, and share what they liked from the knowledge they hold. The emotional response and the information shared was outstanding! So much of it is not available in any book I've ever read. Then we created an exhibit around these pieces.

So, that was my first time working with our Ancestral treasures. Before that, other than some personal items in the community, I had only seen our ancient belongings in mainstream museums. I didn't really like these institutions because it was weird and oftentimes upsetting knowing how most treasures wound up in these places. But, getting to work hands-on with our history was magic. Nathalie kind of stole me away from Gwaii Haanas at the end of 1999 when she offered me an internship. I got sucked right in, and I've been a curator here since 2000.

In the case of simply being Haida and doing what needs to be done, it was our Nation's focus on repatriation that captivated me. Our museum had worked with our Nation on the recovery of Ancestral remains taken by a couple of unethical archaeologists in the 1970s. But an area left untouched was that of our relatives who'd been stolen in the late 1800s through the 1900s, and who were in museums and universities or in private homes. My good friend and colleague, Lucy Bell, was called to bring them home in the latter half of the nineties, and from that, the Haida Repatriation Committee was born.

It is through this work that I began to learn about the true history of Canada and Indigenous peoples, and the work that needed to be done to make things right. Through these two converging streams, I realized that working with and within museums can make a difference.

LANGUAGE

NL: Language, and in particular the Haida language, has been an important part of your personal and professional development and your curatorial practice. You have been actively involved in the Skidegate Haida Language Program (SHIP), participating in Haida language classes and its mentorship program on Haida Gwaii (1998–2012). During this time, you also curated *That Which Makes Us Haida – the Haida Language* (2011). Notably, the titles of your most recent publications have foregrounded Haida terms. Could you talk more about the role that Haida language plays in your museum work and curatorial practice and perhaps more broadly about the role of the Haida language and its revitalization in contemporary Haida society and culture and art?

Jisgang: Our visual and performance arts are essentially the visible companions to Xaayda kil, which means “Haida language” in Skidegate dialect. In Old Massett dialect and Kaigani dialect it’s Xaad kil. You need to know the story behind each visual in order to “read” it. It’s a different way of thinking. It defines our inextricable relationship with, dependency on, and responsibility to Haida Gwaii and the Supernatural. Our language influences every aspect of Haida life: it’s in our art and in our politics; in taking back our history; in how we live our lives today; and in our setting up for the future. It guides us in Haida law and our responsibility to Haida Gwaii. Xaayda kil is the verbal embodiment of who we are.

Our language is really descriptive. For example, there are over forty words to describe waves. It’s said that our language is a linguistic isolate. It’s also endangered. Xaayda kil was almost silenced through Canada’s residential school system. Growing up, a lot of people my age had just a few words, like “nanaay” and “chinaay,” *grandmother* and *grandfather*. Expressions such as “awaayah,” which communicates annoyance, but doesn’t sound ugly when used. Daily functions like amma and tsiigan, *poo* and *pee*; koosit is the general word for *fart*. There are more than ten different words to describe the passing of wind! Very descriptive. So, a lot of those types of things in Haida just mixed in with English. I didn’t even realize it was different from English when I was young. It was all one vocabulary.

Just as I moved back home, there was a big initiative to reclaim, remember, and strengthen our Haida language. I took a two-week immersion program that subsequently turned into the Skidegate Haida Immersion Program. It was just incredible because people who’d pretty much not spoken Haida since they left for residential school were now speaking it out loud! These speakers and our language were being honoured and celebrated. And there was so much information to learn from our language.

And, of course, we use Xaayda kil in our museum, which the Elders named Saahlinda Naay, or *Saving Things House*. Sometimes there are big paragraphs, sometimes it’s just a word or two. SHIP recognized that we were the first organization to assert Xaayda kil widely and publicly. There are less than twenty fluent speakers today. But there are as many if not more dedicated learners. About twelve of them are moms with families and full-time jobs, who go to school three nights a week and all day Saturday so they can learn Haida and learn how to teach it in school. They have to take so many other courses so they can become teachers



Figure 1. The Haida Heritage Centre (and Haida Gwaii Museum) at Kay Llnagaay (2010). Photo by Rolf Bettner, courtesy Haida Heritage Centre at Kay Llnagaay.

as well. Many of them are also involved in a really important program, the Haida Gwaii Master-Apprentice Program (HGMAP). We're really honoured because HGMAP recently became a formal program of our museum. It was born from a grassroots movement in the community and now we're privileged to be a part of this critical work.

EXHIBITIONS AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

NL: Your exhibition portfolio is really impressive. You've curated exhibitions that have explored and reinterpreted the historical canon of Haida art forms, in collaboration with Elders and other expert knowledge holders in your community. At the same time, you've shown a curatorial commitment to working with contemporary artists, many of whom utilize their practice to engage with current concerns and political issues, such as Indigenous rights, unceded territories, and ecological abuses. Although foregrounding Haida art and culture, your exhibition work is not delimited to the local or the regional, to Haida Gwaii or British Columbia. Rather, your exhibition work is international and global in scope: it has included collaborating and working as a consultant with major institutions in and across Canada, the USA, and Europe. Could

you describe your approach to curatorship? What different approaches do you use when working with historical artworks and/or contemporary artists? Are there specific exhibitions that have been most meaningful to you? If so, could you expand on their biographies and talk about how they came into being?

Jisgang: When people ask me what I'm an expert in, I say, "knowing where to go." As in, where the knowledge is. A lot of my work is facilitation. Facilitating the knowledge and stories of incredible, complex people, places, and histories. I didn't like the word "curator" when I started out. For me the word was quite elitist, individualistic, and prohibitive to real audience engagement. But then I took a class taught by Carol Mayer who used the word "facilitation" when talking about curation. That changed my mind about what a curator is, can be, or *should* be.

There are four projects I consider the most pivotal in my work as a curator. The first was working with an amazing curatorial team to create the Haida Heritage Centre, a fifty-thousand-square-foot complex, which included the expansion of our museum by threefold. This experience was pivotal in both my curatorial practice and personal life. It really set a foundation for how I operate today. The Haida Gwaii Museum opened in 1976. I was five at the time. I remember being at the opening. I think our museum is one of the earliest acts of reconciliation in the Indigenous-museum world. We came into being because the Haida community and our neighbours on Haida Gwaii came together. In support of our opening, the RBCM [Royal BC Museum] sent home several Ancestral poles. This repatriation initiative was led by Peter Macnair, then curator of anthropology at the RBCM.

In the 1990s the Skidegate Band Council, our museum, and Parks Canada partnered to create our Haida Heritage Centre. Shortly after I'd begun my internship, construction began. The museum's role was to curate exhibits, experiences, et cetera throughout the centre and advise on architectural designs. We began with extensive consultations on the development of the exhibits and the centre with our community, our greater Nation, the greater Islands' community, and urban Haida as well as with our museum friends. The first several months of my job were spent on this. Consulting every day with groups and individuals. We knew "Kay" had to be a place for *us* first and foremost, not for tourism. It had to be Nation-generated and Island-generated; it had to be about what *we* wanted to say and share, not what we might think the world



Figure 2. Hereditary leaders at the pole raisings (2001) for the Haida Heritage Centre. The poles were raised in advance of the centre, which opened in 2007. Photo by Kii'iljuus Barbara J. Wilson, courtesy Haida Heritage Centre at Kay Llnagaay.

wanted us to say and share. Three main themes came out of the first nine months of consultation: the Supernatural, natural, and human worlds. It was made clear: you can't separate these three aspects of life, so they became the organizing principles for the centre.

Over the next seven years we developed galleries and experiences to share our worldview and way of life in a way that fits with our Haida Nation. We worked with Nation-based scholars (such as Elders, artists, researchers, language experts, food gatherers, song-holders, ceremonial leaders, and politicians), our greater Nation, and our greater Island community. We collectively created the exhibits. We also did things that I've since learned were/are also "cutting edge." Like with oral history interviews, ensuring those who share their knowledge retain copyright, not the institution that "collects" it. The same with images. Almost every single image in the centre has been provided by a community member. Every word has its "i" dotted and its "t" crossed by the community, which is a special achievement for us all. People see themselves in here. This is their home. We also commissioned a lot of new works. We needed to strengthen our collection because we're a living culture, we're part of Haida society, we're not just an institution.

Another interesting dimension of curatorial practice is that treasures are presented with the permission of the lineage that they are linked to

(when known). For example, we had three monumental poles we wanted to present vertically as opposed to horizontally (in our original museum they had to be presented “lying down” because our roof wasn’t tall enough to stand them upright). We went to the head of each clan to get their permission for the poles to be raised and presented in the centre.

With continual community consultations and working with different people and groups over seven years, the excitement grew. Because it was ours. We did it for us – for our Ancestors, for our children, for Haida Gwaii. After the centre opened, two different parents phoned us, very emotional, they each, independently, said that their children saw how important their everyday lives were.

The second project was the *Raven Travelling: Two Centuries of Haida Art* (2006) exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG). To the best of my knowledge, this was a major breakthrough in which a Western art gallery respected and privileged the knowledge of the “university” of the Haida Nation. I especially want to credit Peter Macnair and Jay Stewart [former director of the Campbell River Museum] because they were the ones, who, when approached by the VAG to curate the show, said they would take it on but that there had to be Haida involved to develop the concept and content, to determine how the show was going to take shape, how it was presented, and what was shared.

Vince Collison, my cousin, was hired as the official co-curator of the show. Lucy Bell, Irene Mills, and I were brought in as “community contributors” or something like that. I think, being young and not “Western museum professionals,” we were seen as not having the professional experience to be “curators.” I say this with no disrespect to the VAG, it’s just how it was back then. But all three of us had curated in some form or another several times at home. The good news is, by the end of the exhibition, we were recognized as “curatorial advisors,” which was important, because it’s the truth. For me, personally, a truly pivotal moment in the project occurred when Douglas and McIntyre Publishers were approached by the VAG to publish a book for the exhibition. At the meeting, Scott Steedman of D&M wanted more Haida authors involved. There were just a couple of Haida identified at that point. Consequently, the VAG commissioned Lucy, Vince, myself, and a few other Haida to write essays. The Raven Travelling project was pivotal because it became clear to many: we know what we are doing, we know where to go, and we have the ability in our Nation to do what needs to be done.



Figure 3. Mona Jackson with her son Michael at home in Kake, Alaska (2005). Featured in *That Which Makes Us Haida* (2011). Photo by Farah Nosh, courtesy the photographer.

The third project is the exhibition *That Which Makes Us Haida – the Haida Language* (2011). The backstory is that Iraqi Canadian photo-journalist Farah Nosh covered the Iraq War and subsequent wars in the Middle East for many years. Before the war began, she was living in Haida Gwaii and became quite close with many people in our Nation, including my dad Skilay (Ernie Collison) and my aunty Gwaaganad (Diane Brown). Farah would come back to Haida Gwaii in between her trips to heal from the trauma she witnessed and experienced. She began photographing the last of our fluent Elders. There were fewer than forty at the time.

About three or four years into Farah's project, Scott Steedman, who happened to know both of us, suggested this whole thing could become a really important exhibition and book. We started looking closely at the history of the Haida language and interviewing the speakers and learners who were actively working to save it. Farah continued her photography; Jaskwaan (Amanda Bedard), a Haida language scholar from Old Massett, and I were the curators; Walker Brown, Vince Collison, and Candace White were our main researchers and support team. We went out into

the community, finding language and understanding through speakers, archival papers, and other sources. We worked in concert with SHIP in Skidegate, Xaad KihlGa Hill Suu Society in Old Massett, and even expanded the project to Alaska, covering full Haida territory and the three main regional dialects of our language. The Elders were interviewed about their lives, their relation to language, and their dedication to saving it.

Jaskwaan and I edited twenty-five interviews and many written texts, paring them down for the book. We had other book contributors we worked with, too: ten authors, a bunch of learners, and the two language programs. Most of the precious Elders featured have passed on – some before we began exhibition development. Three passed during the development. One Elder passed away as I was editing their story for the book. I can't describe to you the feeling. It was traumatic enough just learning about the real story of Canada from those who lived through it, to understand why the Haida language is foreign in our own land, and then, to have these people who shared their stories and lived their lives with such dignity, courage, and strength, who dedicated their later years to saving the language – to have them die in the midst of the work that was being done to honour them.

The exhibition consisted of hauntingly beautiful large-scale portraits covering our entire gallery. There wasn't much text – just the curators' statements and short labels for each Elder's image. There was a lot of sound – old and new Haida songs; stories told in Haida, then in English, and excerpts from the Elders' interviews. There was a small sectioned-off corner, a very tight space with a very tight entry. Inside it was dark, except for a single light bulb hanging down from a cord over an old school desk that had an old, heavy wooden ruler on it. On the wall were five framed photos of our children at church day school or residential school. There was an audio cone there, too, so you could hear our Elders talk about their experiences at school. With such dignity.

A book of the same name as the exhibition was edited by me and Scott Steedman. That's where all the stories wound up. The book is an inspirational source. It tells our peoples' stories, their language journeys, and how language has helped in their healing. How they are proud to speak Haida again. We're really happy that the book is often used and cited by the Western academic world. Part of the drive behind the exhibition and the book was the frustration with the lack of awareness of and support for our language by the outside world and, to some degree, even on-Island. Following the exhibition and book, more people became involved in the language programs and there has been more support in



Figure 4. *Gina Suuda Tl'í Xasii ~ Came to Tell Something: Art & Artist in Haida Society* (2014). Photo by Rolf Bettner, courtesy Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay.

sourcing local and off-Island funding. I'm not saying the exhibition is the sole reason for this growth, but I am saying it contributed to it.

The fourth project was the exhibition *Gina Suuda Tl'í Xasii ~ Came to Tell Something: Art and Artist in Haida Society* (2014), also accompanied by a book. The project was a critical inquiry into the social function of classical Haida art and artists, historically and today. It also asked the question, not outright, but through the presentation of high-level works, "What makes good art?" The answer is: work done by those who dedicate thousands of hours to honing their art form. Robert Davidson says you need several thousands of hours of practice before you can call yourself fluent in the art. On top of this, the artists are quite disciplined knowledge holders and storytellers. They learn the societal structure, histories, and protocols of our Nation. Knowing the lands and waters from which their materials come. Knowing how art functions in Haida society. They are dedicated to studying the masterpieces of the past and to learning from the masters of today. It doesn't mean I think people can't push the art, contemporize it, grow it. But I believe just as I've been taught: the classical form should be mastered, at least to a high degree, before changing it up.

I worked with many advisors on this project. The formal group included my Aunty Diane along with Evelyn Vanderhoop, Isabel Rorick,



Figure 5. *Gina Suuda Tl'í Xásii ~ Came to Tell Something: Art & Artist in Haida Society* (2014). Photo courtesy Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay.

James Hart, Guujaaw, and Robert Davidson. I also looked to some of my Western museum mentors such as Nathalie Macfarlane, Bill McLennan, and Mike Robinson for inspiration and guidance. I also worked with all the artists, of course! About forty of them. They ranged from our strict definition of “emerging” to those called “masters.” We have some serious Nation-based scholarship going on on Haida Gwaii.

I also dealt with about forty lenders – individuals and institutions. A lot of works were from individuals or families in our Nation, but a lot were also borrowed from off-Island. Even some from the States. I’d never brokered a loan outside of our own Nation. So here I am, working to gain the trust of private collectors and institutions, then dealing with facility reports, special insurance, fine arts transport, getting works across the border, and so on. It was a huge learning curve, and *everyone* was so supportive. They were all part of the team.

This exhibition was pivotal for many reasons. It’s the biggest project I’ve ever managed, and it was put together in six months! We had a very dedicated team. The book was created in less than a year. I’m happy to say it’s sold out and that we’re printing another run soon. I’m also happy to say we did this project full on “Haida style,” which includes things like I mentioned above, but also calling on members of the Nation to

come help last minute. Calling people up at two in the morning because we needed an extra hand installing if the show was going to open the next day, or if we'd discovered we needed an extra case ... And people just popping in and out, seeing how they could help – people who in the outside world might be seen as having no qualifications for the job. But we have *so many* multi-talented, hard-working people in our Nation. And who better to handle our treasures than a Haida?

Keeping on with the Haida-ness. A lot of the works we borrowed belonged to people in our Nation who lent their personal belongings – works they'd collected over the years along with precious potlatch-wear, coppers, masks, drums, and so on. Part of Haida curatorial practice is to be *very* flexible and responsive to community needs. In this case, part of the loan agreement was that if personal items were needed, they would be taken out of the exhibition and returned after use. That happened a few times, it made us really happy that we could do this. We do this with other treasures in our museum too. My favourite sign to put up is one saying: "Away for ceremony." No "temporarily off exhibit," no apology for any "inconvenience."

A standard exhibition approach, as I understand it, is to keep text to one hundred words or less, preferably around sixty. You can't do that with Haida! Most of our didactics were four hundred to six hundred words long. And there were a lot of them. There were eleven in the textile section alone. That's over five thousand words in a small area of the gallery. And people read them. They spent hours reading the texts – not just our people, but visitors as well. I saw parents reading to their young children. That choked me up. It was a very informative, very inviting, and very exciting exhibition. The book too. Most importantly, they were built by our Nation. Another project that took millennia to realize, even if it seemed to come together in such a short period of time.

REPATRIATION: YAHGUUDANGANG – TO PAY RESPECT

NL: We cannot have a conversation without talking about the incredible work you've done on repatriation – or, as it's known in Europe, the restitution or return – of Haida Ancestral remains, funerary goods, and cultural treasures. I recall being incredibly moved watching Jeff Bear's *The New Collectors: Repatriation* (2003) documentary, which profiles you, along with members of your family and the Haida Nation, travelling to New York to reclaim your Ancestors from the American Museum of Natural History and take them back to Haida Gwaii for reburial. In

the second part of the series, you are in London and it's evident that gaining access to and connecting with Haida treasures in the British Museum is not so straightforward. The emotional resonance of these journeys and encounters is clearly palpable. Fast forward fifteen years and you're still actively involved in trying to secure the return of Haida Ancestral remains and cultural treasures to Haida Gwaii, in your capacity as senior negotiator on repatriation initiatives at the Haida Gwaii Museum and as co-chair of the Haida Repatriation Committee (HRC), a position you've held since 1999. To date, beginning in the 1990s, the HRC has repatriated more than five hundred Ancestral remains from museums in North America and the United Kingdom. Very recently, you were involved in the repatriation and reburial of Ancestral remains in Old Massett and Skidegate. Could you talk about your role in this process and, particularly, how the repatriation process has changed over the years?

Jisgang: First, I will explain the history of repatriation and our process. Most of our Nation's treasures left during the height of colonial regimes, so our museum has had to be active in repatriation since its inception (1971). Outside of the RBCM poles and a few loans, the collection has been built through the generosity of Haida and greater-Islander families and friends throughout the world.

Consultations with Haida hereditary leaders led to our work being named *Yahguudangang – To Pay Respect*. The Haida Nation officially mandated the Haida Repatriation Committee to conduct the work of repatriating both our Ancestors and cultural treasures, facilitated by our museum and the Haida Heritage and Repatriation Society (HHRS). The HRC is a group of volunteers committed to *Yahguudangang*. We formed in the mid-nineties through the vision of Lucy Bell, as I mentioned earlier.

The structure of *Yahguudangang* is as follows: the work done through the museum and HHRS is supervised by the HRC. Two subcommittees of the HRC work with their respective communities: the Skidegate Repatriation Committee and the Old Massett Repatriation Committee. We are mandated to conduct *Yahguudangang* with the goal of mutual respect, cooperation, and trust. We do everything in consultation with our Nation. Through this, we formed our processes and protocols around *Yahguudangang*. It is not just us saying, "Give us our Ancestors back. Give us our stuff back," and walking away. It is about exploring our shared history together and looking at reparations, first and foremost through our Ancestors, our relatives. We understand we need to do this together with the world. In doing this repatriation and reparation,

we are paving one of the roads towards “reconciliation.” I wouldn’t say we are reconciled yet, but there is the effort and commitment. We are changing minds and institutions.

When we’re at these museums to bring our Ancestors home, we also visit our treasures. Twenty years ago, I think it was hard for Western institutions to understand that we needed to not only see our heirlooms, but handle them as well. First, there was the challenge of getting them to let us ... I shouldn’t say “let us” ... it was *our requirement* that we have access to our belongings. I don’t like the word “let”; it sounds very colonial. An example of our people’s wisdom is when we were looking at all these pieces at the Canadian Museum of History while there to bring home 148 Ancestors. When we take our Ancestors back, we do it the Haida way, we conduct our business orally and publicly, we have certain ways things need to be done. Part of this includes ceremony, such as food burnings, praying, but also singing and dancing. When we were looking at our hundreds of treasures that had been in storage, one of our younger people said, “We should be using some of these pieces! Why are they just behind closed doors?”

I have to give a shout-out to the CMH, because although some staff initially seemed shocked by our need to touch and experience these pieces, and now wanting to *use* them – you could see it in their faces – ultimately, we wound up playing a bentwood box drum, a few other pieces were danced, and others put on display as they would be in a potlatch. We wanted to use a headdress, but it couldn’t be worn, it was too fragile for movement. So, we carried it out on a big bentwood chest. We involve museums in every aspect of our process, with the exception of the preparation of our Ancestors – that is private. Staff are invited to participate in food burnings, in the feasting. They are invited to share in our emotional experiences and to witness our upholding our responsibility to our Ancestors. So many of our museum friends have wound up coming to participate in the reburial of our Ancestors. Inclusion has helped shift Western museum practices. You’ve watched *The New Collectors*, now watch the documentary *Stolen Spirits of Haida Gwaii* (2004), you’ll see what I mean..

Our Nation understands the power of the media. Early on, we recognized it would be very helpful to moving Yahguudangang forward. In the beginning, museums were very afraid to work with us. They were worried about opening the floodgates for repatriation, or of being persecuted in the media. We said to them: “This is a moral issue, an ethical issue. And we’re not going to drag you through the mud, you aren’t guilty of how our



Figure 6. Haida Repatriation members Kuunaaajaad (Jenny Cross) and SGang Gwaay (Dolly Garza) prepare for a food burning to feed Haida Ancestors at an End of Mourning Ceremony in Skidegate, 2005. Photo by James McGuire, courtesy Skidegate Repatriation Committee.

Ancestors wound up here. The only guilt to be had is if you don't work with us. So, let's use the media to educate and celebrate." I believe the media, which has been very supportive, has been quite important to our successes, to our getting the word out to the masses.

Our Nation is one of the leaders in repatriation, in relationship building, and in changing attitudes. The impact has been huge. We don't want to make museums feel bad. We want to do this work together, to both encourage and make change. Early on, a couple of attitudes were dismissive, kind of along the lines of "there's a 'pesky Indian' trying to get through the door." Not very many, though, and it's not really like that anymore, at least with all the museums we work with, and we work with a lot.

NL: Intimately bound up with repatriation is the impact and reverberations that it has on the living community or descendants when ancestral remains are brought home. The cultural anthropologist Cara Krmptich – with whom you've collaborated¹ – has written about the

¹ See Cara Krmptich, Laura Peers, Members of the Haida Repatriation Committee, Staff of the Pitt Rivers Museum, and Staff of the British Museum, *This Is Our Life: Haida Material Heritage and Changing Museum Practice* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).

way in which repatriation generates new material culture forms such as bentwood boxes and button blankets that are part of the process of honouring your Ancestors and at the same time they become part of the collective memories of those who participate and bear witness. Bearing witness to these repatriation ceremonies and reburials must affect in different ways your community's emotional state and collective sense of well-being. From your own perspective, could you expand on some of the affective dimensions of repatriation?

Jisgang: First and foremost, Yahguudangang honours and pays respect to our Ancestors, both by bringing them home with respect and by treating our belongings with love and care. This work requires us to learn about and understand the colonial past. It is very difficult learning this. Doing so often deepens existing grief as well as brings out new grief, but because of the work we are doing, we can address this heartache and use it to make good in our Nation and in the world. So, Yahguudangang facilitates healing in our Nation, and with others.

We are also mandated to do the work of Yahguudangang on behalf of the Nation rather than for individual persons or clans. In this manner, we are moving forward collectively, all of us bearing responsibility for our relatives and belongings and avoiding potential personal conflicts. But this does not mean we ignore relationships. If we know what lineage, village, or territory the Ancestors are from, we make sure the affiliated clans are involved.

In order to be truly successful, Yahguudangang cannot be done by our committee and organizations alone. It requires the commitment of our Nation, from the youngest child to the eldest of Elders. Children make little button blankets to wrap our Ancestors in while artists make bentwood burial boxes for their final resting place. Elders guide, teach, and protect us. The community fundraises to support Yahguudangang initiatives. We travel in large groups, bringing youth, hereditary leaders, matriarchs, artists, Elders, fluent speakers, ceremonial leaders, scholars, and other Haida citizens to off-Island institutions, where we also connect with other Haida living out in the world. Yahguudangang has revitalized ancient ceremonies, protocols, and traditions, and created new ones in order to adapt to modern circumstances while keeping Haida.

Yahguudangang also introduces Haidas to the field of arts and heritage. Many Haida have gone on to secure museum internships or careers after becoming involved in Yahguudangang, shifting society for the better. Countless collaborative exhibitions, publications, programs, et

cetera have occurred because of Yahguudangang and our Nation-based scholarship is valued on the same level as Western academia and is also regarded as critical to progressive museum work. Our Elders also insisted that our Ancestors were not to be sent home by museums, universities, or private collectors. The Haida way is to retrieve our Ancestors, our relatives, our loved ones, when they pass away from home.

My personal change came from my first repatriation experience, at the UBC Laboratory of Archaeology (LOA), a repository for remains that have been turned in. Our agreed upon protocol is that LOA contacts us to arrange for their repatriation and return home. LOA was the place where I first handled one of our Ancestor's remains. I was holding this person who could have lived hundreds or thousands of years ago. They could have lived just a short 150 years ago and been a victim of a smallpox epidemic or other colonial tragedies.

The way their remains were treated – it was so disrespectful; our Ancestors were not seen as human. Their graves were desecrated; their remains stolen and stored in museums. All of this history is remembered when we stand in a museum and hold our Ancestors' partial or full remains and prepare to bring them home. My friend Jason Alsop, my clan brother, he was on our last repatriation trip – it was his first. There were the remains of twelve Ancestors, which meant we didn't need a whole bunch of totes to put hundreds of our relatives on the plane, where they essentially become "freight." Jason pointed out the absurdity regardless of how they travel – us wrapping up our Ancestors' bones, putting them in suitcases, spending the night with them in hotel rooms, and then putting them above our heads as "carry-on luggage" to fly home. We shouldn't have to do that! But here we are. So, when I held a skull at LOA, all of these emotions came out. All this confusion. All this determination. Since then, I have taken on the role of a ceremonial singer rather than one who physically prepares our Ancestors. We all find our place in Yahguudangang.

I've seen changes in every person involved in repatriation. I change every time. We're there with our Elders, who are sharing all this exciting information, and, at the same time, we're all sharing in some pretty big emotions: horror, anger, grief, hope, happiness. Repatriation has brought out more of our ancient ways around death, burials, and spirituality. We've worked with our Elders to adapt or create some ways to meet these modern-day circumstances. Repatriation brought out more of our songs and ceremonies. We have the art of making bentwood boxes for reburials back. This reclamation has also brought out more of our language.

When a delegation returns home, the greater community comes out to transfer our Ancestors from their carrying boxes to their burial boxes. People wrap them in their button blankets or woven cedar mats, and place them in their bentwood boxes. Someone sits with them through the night. We walk them to the graveyard and rebury them. We feast to mark it all. The healing that happens in our Nation, because of Yahguudangang, is so huge!

NL: In the USA, the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) has provided a legal framework for repatriation and – bearing in mind that you have a close working relationship with federally funded, national museums in the United States – I am interested to know whether you think that repatriation legislation is the best way forward? Should Canada think about developing legislation for the repatriation of Indigenous ancestral remains, funerary goods, and “cultural items”? What are some of the challenges that need to be addressed?

Jisgang: If you look back at our twenty-plus years of Yahguudangang, it’s very clear that we’ve not brought home our Ancestors through someone else’s legislation. While these Western policies and laws are important, they can’t be too prescriptive of how things should be done. We’ve done it through relationship building, through the mandate of our Nation, through creating mutual respect, cooperation, and trust. Ultimately, we want people to want to give our Ancestors back and to want to give our belongings back, not because they have to. That’s why it’s called Yahguudangang.

We’ve brought home Ancestors from museums across nation-state borders without Western law. With the exception of the Oakland Museum of California, which contacted us quite early in the game (instead of the other way around), US institutions told us: “We follow NAGPRA, so you have to be a recognized tribe of the United States.” We were like, “That’s ridiculous! We don’t follow NAGPRA.” The response was: “We have to repatriate to your Haida relatives in Alaska, then they can send them home to you.” We said, “That’s ridiculous! We love our northern relatives, but these Ancestors are from Haida Gwaii.” So, of course, we brought them home in the end. It is a process of education, respect, and standing firm while addressing mainstream museum practices that aren’t working for us.

In Canada, some of our first work was with the Royal British Columbia Museum, bringing home our Ancestors. Despite their early repatriation of monumental poles, by the late nineties we were told the provincial museum couldn't repatriate to First Nations who were not in treaty negotiations. Our Nation has never agreed to treaty and we are not going to. So that was actually a really cool situation because it resulted in our Nation formalizing our mandate on paper, where we clearly state that the Haida Nation does not view repatriation as the substance of treaty negotiations and will not be subject to the finalization of a treaty. Things have changed since then for a variety of reasons. The provincial museum works inside and outside of treaty. We're all growing.

CREATIVE REPATRIATION

NL: On the subject of repatriation, I have to mention last spring's momentous occasion when the Moon and Mountain Goat Chest returned to Haida Gwaii, having spent over a hundred years in storage at the American Museum of Natural History. I'd like to quote from an informative article that appeared in the *Globe and Mail*:

It was Ms. [Nika] Collison's idea, as co-chair of the Haida Repatriation Committee, to bring the chest home to Haida Gwaii ... And it was her smarts, passion and connections that helped to broker an extraordinary loan from the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), which owns the item. She proposed it as a creative repatriation: The chest would not only be displayed at the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay, where it is now, but first, the pioneering agreement would allow Guujaaw, the Haida artist, activist and leader, to use it in a potlatch marking his transition to Gidansda, hereditary chief of Skedans.²

Your legendary brokering skills came into play, as did the partnerships and friendships that you've cultivated with museums and their personnel over the course of two decades, resulting in this innovative and groundbreaking case of "creative repatriation." Could you give some backstory and a little more detail about this case of "cultural brokering"? Do you regard creative repatriation as a phase, perhaps the first step, in the Haida Nation's move to "repatriate proper"? According to some accounts,

² Marsha Lederman, "For Haida, This Wooden Chest Holds the Promise of Reunion with Indigenous Treasures," *Globe and Mail*, 8 July 2017, <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/haida-indigenous-repatriation/article35572292/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&>.

there are over twelve thousand Haida objects located in more than 130 museums in different parts of the world. Do you have a strategic plan when it comes to the next phase of repatriation?

Jisgang: Last spring, we worked with the AMNH in New York to bring home that giant chest, whose chiefly lineage goes back seven generations. Guujaaw, his chiefly name is Gidansda, first presented it at his uncle's memorial potlatch. The second day was Guujaaw's inauguration potlatch, where the chest participated in a really big way. From it, twenty-five coppers were taken out and gifted to hereditary leaders and other distinguished guests. I'm really glad curator Peter Whitely and conservator Samantha Alderson could attend. They were the key people from the AMNH side in making this thing possible. It was a transformational experience for all of us – to witness this ancient chest being used in traditional custom.

We brought the chest home on loan, and the AMNH just extended the loan for another year. We all understand that this is one stage on the strategic path to actual repatriation. Building trust, making real friends, seeing what is possible when working together. Taking steps to educate, to share, to bring two worlds together.

The AMNH went to the nth degree to make sure the chest came home. And it was such a last-minute idea that neither of us had money in the bank for this project! But we did it anyway. People and organizations understood this incredible initiative and helped us out a lot in a very short time period. Our relationship with the AMNH is probably one of the most progressive we have, and we have some pretty progressive relationships. They wanted this as much as we did. We both bent over backwards to make it happen in a matter of months. Four or five months at the most!

In bringing our Ancestors home, we took it upon ourselves to create the resources needed to do so, which is not to say that museums didn't try to help. They contributed as much money as they could, but they don't have a lot, either. We've got a couple of small grants over the years, but mostly it's community-based fundraising. It's cost us well over a million dollars in cash, sweat-labour, and in-kind to bring home just over five hundred Ancestors these past twenty years.

The work is exhausting: it is not nine to five; it is a way of life. We don't have another twenty years to bring home our belongings. Many of our Elders have passed on. It is unfair. To use my friend Miles Richardson Jr.'s term, it is "un-Canadian." It's un-Canadian to make us take on another twenty years, another million dollars.

Canada needs to stop putting the onus on us to cover the cost of repatriation, to put to rest the idea that our Nation is responsible for the cost if we're not in treaty. We understand that museums have financial constraints, but they should push for bigger budgets around repatriation, too. The Canadian government is moving towards it, the Province has already started, but it's not just us out there – how many Indigenous Nations are across the land? How much work needs to be done?

When people learn of our history, including the shared history with Canada, which is not so great, you can see that mainstream museums are, as I like to point out whenever I can, the physical evidence of Canada's genocide against Indigenous peoples. But they don't have to be. They can become agents of change when they work with us to make things right.

When it comes to repatriation, many museums have argued, "But these pieces were sold," and show collection records. My point is, over 95 percent of our people were killed by smallpox and other introduced epidemics. Our population also lost over 95 percent of our cultural materials – most left at the same time our people were dying. Belongings were stolen or forcibly handed over. Absolutely some pieces were made for sale, but most of the others were sold under duress. The potlatch ban made our way of life essentially illegal from 1884 to 1951. Our belongings are not just physical objects: they are made up of lineages and histories, our spiritual world, of the lands, waters, and airways of Haida Gwaii. There's also the duress that comes with economic and social marginalization, which existed before, during, and after the potlatch ban. It still continues today. There are also cases when something was purchased from someone who didn't actually own it, because our matrilineal system got turned upside down by colonialism and the Church patriarchy.

My brother, Walker Brown, a Haida scholar, has located Haida materials or northern coastal materials in about three hundred-plus museums around the world. Before he took on this research, we had contacted over 130 institutions to get their inventories of our belongings. At that point, over twelve thousand pieces were tallied. I can't imagine how many more Walker's sourced.

What is our next step for repatriation? It will be to the RBCM and the CMH, because they are government institutions that are ready to take responsibility. The governments shouldn't blink an eye at the pending costs. If you think of the *billions* of dollars generated from what people call "resource extraction," with literally almost none of it staying in or benefitting Haida Gwaii ... the least Canada and BC can do is to cover the cost of making things right. It's cost us much more. We shouldn't

have to rely on project grants to make this happen. We shouldn't have to hold countless loonie/toonie auctions and sell countless t-shirts and sell dinners to pay to bring our belongings home. Those governments are starting to change, that's heartening.

COLLABORATIVE MUSEOLOGY

NL: Returning the conversation to British Columbia – you have been actively involved in enhancing the relationships between the RBCM, MOA, and MOV and the Haida Gwaii Museum as well as other First Nation cultural centres. You are working on educational and capacity-building projects, joint exhibitions and publications, repatriation initiatives, and the mobilization of First Nation expert knowledge to breathe life into collections held in, to use James Clifford's term, "majority museums."³ MOA director Anthony Shelton writes:

While academic museologists have written about collaboration, Nika [Collison] has used an Indigenous model to create an effective praxis, which has already attracted extensive academic comment and has the potential to establish a post-collaborative paradigm that dissolves the binary oppositions between Indigenous and Western approaches to collections and Indigenous heritage and helps to meld our institutions more closely together.⁴

How would you like to see the relations develop among the different museological institutions in British Columbia, including, for example, the majority museums and art spaces, Indigenous cultural centres, small heritage institutions, and schools? Are there other partnerships that need to be forged and melded?

Jisgang: Twenty-plus years ago we needed these majority museums. We needed to get through their doors. We needed them so we could bring our Ancestors home, become reacquainted with our history, and to have these colonial institutions recognize our scholarship and our authority over our cultural diaspora and lives in general. Twenty years later – they need us. I say this respectfully. We are approached more and more to partner or collaborate with museums, galleries, and performing arts centres. Twenty years ago, we did a lot of things for free because we had a goal. We knew what steps needed to be taken. We needed to prove ourselves.

³ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 188–219 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁴ Personal communication, 27 September 2017.

About ten years ago we started charging a fee for service. Museums would be shocked: “Oh my god, we don’t have a budget for that!” But now we go in with a figure and museums have learned, for the most part, to budget for that. I’ve had some incredible museum experiences with institutions valuing what we bring to the process, but I would say there’s still work to be done in this respect. While we are recognized because of the knowledge we have and share, I don’t think that our people are properly valued in terms of remuneration. But it’s changing.

We have relationships with institutions around the world. We have put a lot of effort into different museums overseas – either they come to visit us or we have our people visit them. Friends, like Laura Peers and Cara Krmpotich, both now back in Canada, were pretty pivotal in opening doors and minds in the UK when they were at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. We have amazing friends in museums on either side of the border and long-standing relationships with museums/universities in our own backyard.

But museums need to populate their staff with Indigenous folk. Up until about five years ago, I never really met a lot of Indigenous people working within the museum system, though I’m sure they were there. In the last five years, I’ve met a lot! Indigenous Peoples from across these lands are advising on or participating directly in the development of exhibitions – this demonstrates how museums and heritage institutions have changed. But let me be clear: we’re not there yet.

NL: We began our conversation, after your introduction, by talking about the significance of language for your museum and curatorial practice. Certainly, the reclamation and mobilization of language has been identified as one of the essential tools of decolonization. I immediately think of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s 1986 classic, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* or, in the context of local museums, the postcolonial concept of “multiversity” that underpins the Multiversity Galleries at UBC MOA.⁵ These manifestos on decolonization rest on the reclamation and use of Indigenous language categories and words, not those of the colonizer. With this in mind, I’d like to come full circle and conclude by critically reflecting on the changing terminology that is being stabilized within contemporary museum culture in BC and beyond. I’m especially thinking of terms like “collaborative museology,” “indigenization of museums,” “source communities,” and “cultural be-

⁵ Anthony Shelton and Gustaaf Houtman, “Negotiating New Visions: An Interview with Anthony Shelton by Gustaaf Houtman,” *Anthropology Today* 25 (2009): 7–13.

longings” that are currently being mobilized in scholarly literature, in professional museum circles, in academic museology, and in the local media. These terms are embraced because they are seen to reflect the changing relationship between Canadian majority museums and First Nation communities, which can be traced back to the 1992 *Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples*. It’s eye-opening to realize that this report, subtitled “Turning the Page, Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples,” is now twenty-five years old and the principles and recommendations it outlines for creating equal partnerships between museums and First Nations are still being worked through – of course, you can’t make good centuries of abuse within a few decades. Yet its terminology has been inscribed and stabilized: it’s become the discourse of the day that centres on collaborative museology, which identifies First Nations in relation to their cultural heritage, held in museums, as “source communities.” In my opinion, there is little problematization of the monolithic term “community,” let alone the somewhat unsavoury use of the adjective “source.” As one leading UK-based museum anthropologist provocatively asserted, the “source communities” are, ironically, “resource” communities, assets for extractive yet worthy Western museum anthropologists. At MOA, there is a drive to rename and stabilize First Nations’ “tangible cultural heritage” (to invoke a UNESCO term) as “cultural belongings,” and, at the same time, there is resistance to using the term “masterworks” because it is associated with a Western hierarchical and gendered system.⁶ Yet, in the Haida context you still refer to your “tangible cultural heritage” in catalogues, in professional circles, and on your official websites as “masterpieces” and more generally as “cultural treasures.” How do we begin to navigate these fractured semantic territories? Do we stick with Western terms: object, object list, object label? Or do we adopt an anglicized Indigenous alternative: cultural belonging, cultural belonging list, cultural belonging label. Or do we decolonize the museum mind and take our lead from the Maori and embrace Indigenous terms like, in their case, *taonga*, which embraces the sentient, the ontological, and the intangible as well as the material, the aesthetic, and the tangible dimension of cultural heritage?

Jisgang: Belongings is a word that I love, I adopted it from the Musqueam actually; I heard Leona Sparrow say it. In the past, the terminology

⁶ Kevin Griffin, “Historical Northwest Coast Works Become More than Art at Museum of Anthropology,” *Vancouver Sun*, 24 June 2017, <https://vancouversun.com/entertainment/local-arts/historical-northwest-coast-works-become-more-than-art-at-museum-of-anthropology>.

we contested was “museum collections.” We said, “No, they are *Haida* collections held in your museum.” We don’t like the terms “artefacts” or “ethnological materials,” or “archaeological objects.” We started using the term “treasures,” or “cultural treasures,” and sometimes “objects,” as well as “heirlooms” – this is a term some of our Elders use. We don’t use the word “heirloom” a lot, but our treasures are heirlooms if you think about it. I think in the Western museum world, “heirloom” can make it sound as if a work is outdated. A precious, but old object. I worry about that word, used in a Western context, because it doesn’t communicate the entire intrinsic nature and value of our belongings.

“Yahguudangang” is a good example of decolonizing words. It doesn’t mean strictly repatriation, or “bringing someone/something home.” It is a much bigger concept. Some of us don’t like the term “reconciliation” much. We use it in some contexts, but in Haida the term is *tll yahda* – “to make things right.” I see the word “reconciliation” becoming a commodity: it is being commodified by the Western world in certain circles to further certain agendas.

We use Haida words throughout our museum. In English, the museum is called the Haida Gwaii Museum, but its proper name is Saahlinda Naay, “Saving Things House.” That doesn’t mean old; it means uninterrupted caretaking. I use the word “museology” in the outside world, but really it’s just part of our life. The museum, repatriation, they’re part of Haida life now. Once I was asked, “What do you call yourself?” I said, “Maybe a Western way of looking at things would be, I’m an ethnologist?” But I’m not really. I’m just practising our way of life, I’m learning and passing on knowledge. I’m just part of our greater Nation’s goal to make things better in the world. That’s not ethnology. That’s figuring out how to live in two worlds. Where ethnology lies for me is in studying the Western world, how to get through the door, how to change minds. That is what I study.

FUTURES

NL: With Canada announcing its full support of the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we may be entering a new phase, turning a new page, in the relationship between Canadian “majority” museums and First Nations peoples. Looking to the future, based on the work that you’ve undertaken to date, what kind of future would you like to envision in terms of the collaboration between

the Haida Nation and museums? Are there any pressing museum projects or initiatives that you would like to pursue?

Jisgang: The Canadian government passed a bill (Romeo Saganash's Bill C-262) so that Canada's laws will align with UNDRIP. A couple of days later some of those same people decided that Kinder Morgan aligns with UNDRIP. That is unbelievable! That is a violent act.

But in response to your question, the "museum," whether our own or out in the world, is part of Haida culture now. In regards to our museum, it's a living entity. It changes. It redirects. It's not linear. It's very much a process. A big part of my job is working with my Nation to reconnect our treasures with our people and way of life. Treasures in this case being our Ancestors, our material culture, our intangible heritage. Treasures being healing, self-determination, and Nation-based scholarship. Treasures being finding ourselves in this work. It is important to continue to try to reconnect even when there is not a specific project that we are working towards. The journey of our museum represents the coming together of two worlds, the act of *Yahguudangang* – To Pay Respect; the establishing of relationships that cannot only help to make things right, but also make a new world that is inclusive of our people and our way of life.

We have a lot on our minds. Right now, it's time to not worry too much about major exhibitions or publications, but to refocus on *Yahguudangang*. It took over two decades to bring back our Ancestors; we've taken some breaks, now we are focusing on our belongings. We don't want all twelve thousand-plus of them back, although in a perfect world we would have them back. In a perfect world we wouldn't have to get them back in the first place because most would have been passed down through generations. As we move forward, the goal is to bring home our intangible, intellectual properties and excellent examples of the full spectrum of our material culture. It is time to bring our belongings home and our language, our precious language. We will still put on exhibitions, maybe even publish a book or two, but that won't be the main focus of our attention, resources, or people. Our focus will be on making things right.