

## Article

# Replacing Settler Spaces: The Transformational Power of Indigenous Public Art

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**Abstract:** Similar to 19th-century steamship travel, 21st-century cruise ships link far-flung communities for visitors to the Pacific Northwest Coast. Contemporary Indigenous artists, like their ancestors before them, have transformed touristic curiosity into economic, educational and cultural opportunities for their communities. Public art has become an increasingly important site for engaging visitors who have only a few hours to spend on shore. This paper compares two public art projects—Juneau, Alaska’s *Kootéeyaa Deiyí* (*Totem Pole Trail*) and Vancouver, British Columbia’s *Blanketing the City*—to explore the multivalent ways in which public art expresses Indigenous sovereignty.

**Keywords:** public art; sovereignty; Tlingit; Tsimshian; Musqueam; Squamish; Tsleil-Waututh; totem poles; weaving; tourism

## 1. Placing Public Art

Contemporary public artworks along the Pacific Northwest Coast are deeply rooted in Indigenous practices of display that embody ancestral and reciprocal connections to the land and people of the region. As well as this, they can be transgressive monuments that intervene into histories of intercultural interaction. Totem poles, generally carved and painted by men, have been significant markers of clan or family prerogatives for more than two centuries, primarily in the more northerly regions of the coast. Since the 1880s, however, they have also dominated the touristic vision of the entire region. Building on the rich scholarship addressing Northwest Coast monumental art, this essay considers two recent public art projects—*Kootéeyaa Deiyí* (*Totem Pole Trail*) in Juneau, Alaska (2023), a series of twelve totem poles, and *Blanketing the City* in Vancouver, British Columbia (2018–present), five murals utilizing Coast Salish weaving patterns, both of which are informed by the intercultural history of totem poles. These divergent multi-part installations both participate in and challenge the expectations of local and transitory viewers in these urban centers to illuminate culturally specific expressions of sovereignty. In discussing contemporary public art in Vancouver, Stó:lo scholar Dylan Robinson conceptualizes Indigenous sovereignty as: “. . . not a thing, but an action; it is a form of doing” (Robinson 2017, p. 85).

Both *Kootéeyaa Deiyí* and *Blanketing the City* are situated in cities with large Indigenous and relatively knowledgeable settler populations that also host thousands of short-term visitors during the summer cruise season. The international border that crossed Indigenous territories in the nineteenth century created related, yet separate, histories of settler colonialism that continue to have ramifications today. Current cruise ship itineraries linking Juneau and Vancouver serve as a metaphorical anchor to consider how the legacies of this imposed border have shaped these two dynamic public art projects. Both have been built on sovereign actions by earlier generations of Indigenous artists, express complex relationships between and within Indigenous communities, and engage with local, regional, and federal governments. As Robinson cautions, however, even powerful expressions of contemporary sovereignty, such as public art, are not often fully understood as such by their diverse audiences (Robinson 2017, p. 85).



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## 2. Kootéeyaa Deiyí (Totem Pole Trail) Dedication

On a blustery spring day in late April 2023, a six-hour outdoor dedication ceremony for the *Kootéeyaa Deiyí / Totem Pole Trail* took place in the heart of downtown Juneau on the Sealaska Heritage Arts Campus. Sponsored by the Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI)<sup>1</sup> with funds from local, state, and federal partners, including a USD 2.9 million grant from the Mellon Foundation, this multi-year project contributes to SHI's plan to make Juneau the center of Northwest Coast art. Sparked by the controversial 2017 installation of a bronze sculpture honoring William H. Seward, who arranged the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867, and motivated by the perceived lack of master totem pole carvers in Alaska, SHI developed this project with the ultimate goal of raising thirty poles along the Juneau waterfront.<sup>2</sup> As Rosita Worl Yeidiklas'akw and Kaaháni, the long-time President of SHI has expressed, these poles serve multiple purposes. Not only are they a hard-fought assertion of Indigenous presence in the state's capital, they are also a means to train emerging carvers using the customary mentor–apprenticeship system. At the same time, they serve to educate visitors and others about the Indigenous history of Southeast Alaska, which, as illustrated by the Seward sculpture, continues to be displaced in the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> The *Kootéeyaa Deiyí* dedication ceremony celebrated the first twelve poles installed along the soon-to-be bustling waterfront where giant cruise ships disgorge tens of thousands of tourists throughout the summer months.<sup>4</sup>

The *Kootéeyaa Deiyí* incorporates new work by master carvers and their apprentices from the three Indigenous nations—Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian—whose lands are located within the region now known as Southeast Alaska. The twelve new poles address contemporary cultural concerns and customary social structures, as well as ancient clan histories. Tlingit and Haida people are born into one of two matrilineal moieties and Tsimshian people are born into one of four matrilineal clans. The poles reference these social divisions through a variety of commissions, including four poles identified by SHI as the Tlingit Eagle Pole, the Tlingit Raven Pole, the Haida Eagle Pole, and the Haida Raven Pole. In addition, seven individual Tlingit clan poles include clan-owned crests representing features of the land, oral histories, and supernatural or historical encounters with ancestors: L'eeneidí, Wooshkeetaan, Kaagwaantaan (Figure 1), L'uknax.ádi, Shangukeidí, Ishkaahittaan, and Yanyeidí. Despite having four matrilineal clans, the Tsimshian people are represented by one pole, which provided an opportunity for the commissioned carver, David R. Boxley Gyibaawm Laxha, to advocate for stronger visibility of the Tsimshian community, as will be discussed in greater detail below.<sup>5</sup>

Dedication ceremony speakers acknowledged the cultural complexity of the raising of clan poles in Áakw Kwáan territory (in the vicinity of present-day Juneau and Douglas) by a corporate entity representing multiple communities and nations. While some cultural protocols were followed in the formal program—such as thanking and feeding the spirits of the trees—other customary practices, such as community participation in the physical lifting of the poles, as well as paying witnesses, were not. Nonetheless, the hundreds of people wearing a wide array of richly embellished regalia, the children's dance groups, and the powerful speeches by clan representatives speaking in Tlingit, Haida, and Sm'álgyak served as a visual and aural affirmation of the strength of this cultural resurgence.

Placed at the water's edge, and backed by stores operated by cruise lines that advertise Alaskan t-shirts and tanzanite jewelry, these poles speak to 14,000+ years of Indigenous presence on the land. This is deeply significant in Juneau, which was built on nineteenth-century resource extraction leading to mid-twentieth-century displacement and destruction of Áakw and Taku Kwáan villages.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the placement and enduring iconicity of totem poles as symbols of the Northwest Coast both strengthen and transgress clan and cultural protocols in the twenty-first century.

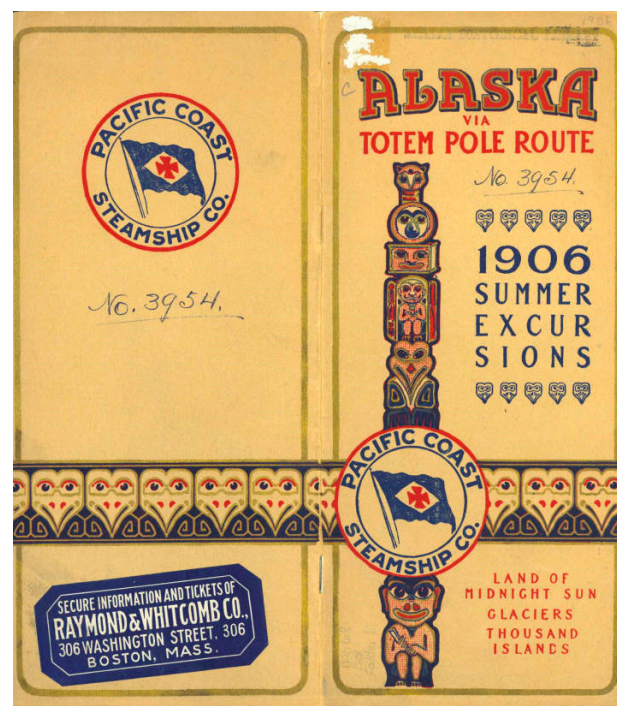




**Figure 1.** Kaagwaantaan (Eagle/Wolf) Pole by master carver Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Unangax̂) with apprentices William L. Burkhart Jr. (Tlingit), Lee Burkhart (Tlingit), and Merritt Johnson. From the bottom up, this pole depicts three significant crests: the Bear, Eagle, and Killer Whale. Atop the crests, a Kaagwaantaan clan member wears a Killer Whale clan hat. Crystal Worl (Deg Hit'an/Filipino/Tlingit) completed the mural honoring Tlingit civil rights activist Elizabeth Peratrovich Kaaxgal.aat (1911–1958) in 2021. Photograph by Megan A. Smetzer.

### 3. The Totem Pole Route

By raising these poles, SHI powerfully asserts Indigenous presence and connection to the land, and also participates in fulfilling expectations set by the visitor industry, just as their predecessors did in other parts of Southeast Alaska earlier in the twentieth century. For nearly one hundred and fifty years, tourists have boarded cruise ships to view the landscapes, wildlife, and communities of the “Inside Passage”.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to extensive marketing by cruise ship companies, a common desire of visitors, beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing to this day, has been to view totem poles alongside the natural beauty of the coast. As has been well documented in the scholarship, there has been a long history of making this desire a reality (Jonaitis and Glass 2010). The Pacific Coast Steamship Company, which was among the first to capitalize on the growing interest in the region, created seasonal pamphlets for passengers taking the “totem pole route” (Figure 2) and commissioned paintings that foregrounded richly carved poles looming over dramatic landscapes (Figure 3). Less recognized at the time were the ways in which carvers and clan leaders were also taking advantage of this desire to maintain elements of Indigenous sovereignty despite the increasing pressures from settler colonial institutions to assimilate.



**Figure 2.** Cover of a 1906 Pacific Coast Steamship Company brochure advertising the “totem pole route”. Alaska State Library, Steamship Company Publications and Promotional Materials, ca. 1887–[ongoing], MS68-1-01-05-cover.



**Figure 3.** Willard R. Cox, *Southeast Alaska*, 1929. This painting, located in the Alaska State Capitol building, may have been commissioned by the Pacific Coast Steamship Company. This imagined scene is anchored by a steam ship at its center and features the Thunderbird House Post by Kwakwaka'wakw artist, Charlie James Yakuglas. At the time of this painting, James' carved pole had been recently relocated to Stanley Park in Vancouver, BC. Photograph by Megan A. Smetzer.

#### 4. Alaskan Totem Pole Parks

US government-led programs also utilized totem poles to entice visitors to Alaska, as tourist dollars were an important part of the developing economy, particularly for Indigenous people who were often displaced from or poorly paid in resource-based occupations.<sup>8</sup> In 1906, the same year the territorial capital moved to Juneau, Alaskan Governor John G. Brady added totem poles to an existing park in Sitka, which had been the capital of the territory since Alaska's purchase from Russia in 1867. Drawing on the good relationships he had formed with Indigenous leaders, between 1900 and 1903 Brady acquired at least nineteen poles from Tlingit and Haida communities throughout Southeast Alaska. These poles, along with two house fronts and a war canoe, were displayed at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri, followed by the 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition in Portland, Oregon (Jonaitis and Glass 2010, p. 84). These displays were intended to draw exposition goers to the Alaskan resource exhibits housed nearby, and ultimately entice settlers to Alaska to develop the territory (The Poles of Historic Totem Park n.d.). Upon the return of the poles to Alaska, resident photographer Elbridge W. Merrill was asked to place them at strategic points along idyllic forest paths (Figure 4), complementing the scenic and romantic vistas of the landscape surrounding Sitka (Moore 2018, p. 74).



**Figure 4.** Elbridge W. Merrill, *Totem Way at Sitka*, 1906. The Haida pole in the foreground is one of a pair of house corner poles. It would have originally been located at an exterior corner of the Yaadaas clan house in Old Kasaan. Courtesy of National Park Service, Sitka National Historical Park; SITK 3822.



The fact that in the same year the territorial capital moved from Sitka, a small community with a historical Russian presence and a large Indigenous population, to Juneau, a rapidly expanding town based on resource extraction, is key. The placement of these poles in Sitka may have been meant to enhance the existing touristic narrative of its intriguing and somewhat exotic history, which was attractive to visitors, as opposed to becoming integral to Alaska's bright future as a resource-based economy. Moreover, through this re-placement, the original cultural context for these poles as markers of ancestral clan relationships to specific histories and locations had been minimized, if not erased, in favor of their aesthetic appeal.

While tourists would have understood these poles as "objects of aesthetic and historical contemplation" (Jonaitis and Glass 2010, p. 85), Indigenous residents and their out-of-town relations would recognize them as embodying ongoing resistance to the pressures of settler colonialism. Merrill's artistic approach aimed to create a nostalgic vision of an Indigenous past, perhaps building on the settler sentiment around the so-called "last potlatch" hosted in 1904 by Sitka Kaagwaantaan clan leaders. At this multi-week event, clan leaders came to an agreement with Governor Brady to end this central ceremonial practice, as a step toward assimilation. Yet, the placement of poles from around Southeast Alaska in a community that had no history of free-standing poles suggests an alternate narrative, one that places them within a complex web of protocol, prestige, and reciprocity. The willingness of local clan leaders and leaders from other communities to enable the relocation and re-raising of these poles indicates their multivalent meaning as markers of Indigenous sovereignty, particularly in terms of their proximity to the site of the historic 1804 battle between the Kiks.ádi clan and Russian invaders.

Two decades later, the federal Civilian Conservation Corp funded the restoration of the totem poles in Sitka in addition to developing totem pole parks in Saxman, Howkan, and four other Southeast Alaskan communities between 1938 and 1942. This project was meant to alleviate the financial hardships of the Great Depression and draw tourists back to Alaska. As art historian Emily Moore documents, the paternalistic repositioning of poles as tourist attractions and relics of an ancient American past had unintended consequences in terms of how Tlingit and Haida communities used these opportunities in an era of rampant discrimination. The artists hired to repair and replicate poles followed customary protocols, educated the next generation of carvers, and, most significantly, used the poles as evidence of sovereignty for land claims against the territorial and federal governments (Moore 2018, p. 20). In much the same way, SHI has made some compromises regarding cultural protocols in relation to the placement of clan-based poles to assert visual sovereignty for Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples a few short blocks from Alaska's Capitol Building in Juneau.

## 5. Politics and Poles

Today, the vast scale of cruise ships with the capacity to carry 5000+ passengers and crew dominate the Alaskan ports that they visit. Often hosting multiple ships in one day, small communities can be overwhelmed by visitors seeking entertainment, and hopefully, enlightenment. By reshaping downtown Juneau as an arts campus for aspiring Indigenous artists and their mentors, the Sealaska Heritage Institute also makes the most of the ongoing touristic desire to engage with the tangible visual culture of Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples by creating multiple educational opportunities that also provide economic benefit to the Indigenous community in Juneau and beyond. Visitors can see artists at work in their studios, wander through gallery spaces to learn more about the deep history of Indigenous presence on the land, purchase souvenirs of their visit in the gift shop, and now, take a stroll along the waterfront to photograph and admire totem poles.<sup>9</sup>

In keeping with the complexities surrounding the development of twentieth-century totem pole parks, the compromises made to create the *Kootéeyaa Deiyí* also provided an opportunity for important business to be conducted in public (as is customary). As noted earlier, the Tsimshian community of Metlakatla was allocated only one pole, despite having

four phratries or clans. The towering pole includes deeply carved representations of the four primary clan crests, each paired with an additional crest figure: Killer Whale is paired with Grizzly Bear, Raven with Frog, Eagle with Beaver, and Wolf with Crane. While incorporating all four clans into a single pole is standard practice in Metlakatla, the ongoing marginalization of Tsimshian histories in Southeast Alaska (as embodied by its location at the furthest end of the trail) inspired a powerful speech by commissioned artist David R. Boxley Gyibaawm Laxha at the dedication ceremony.<sup>10</sup> He stated: “getting asked to carve a totem pole to represent all the Tsimshian is a daunting task . . . very often the Tsimshian here in Southeast Alaska because of our unique history, because of our smaller population can tend to feel on the fringes, or feel like an afterthought” (Kootéeyaa Deiyí Ceremony @ five hour mark) (Figure 5) (Kootéeyaa Deiyí Ceremony 2023). By raising this issue in public, Boxley extracted a promise from SHI’s president Rosita Worl to include one pole for each of the four Tsimshian clans as part of the remaining eighteen poles to be carved and raised in future years.



**Figure 5.** David R. Boxley Gyibaawm Laxha speaking at the Kootéeyaa Deiyí Dedication Ceremony, 22 April 2023. Photograph by Megan A. Smetzer, with permission from David R. Boxley.

Following the larger dedication ceremony, the few audience members remaining at the end of the cold and rainy six-hour event were invited to meet at the Tsimshian pole for a blessing ceremony. There, Metlakatla community members and their guests gathered to observe the brushing of the pole with cedar boughs, singing, dancing, and speeches (Figure 6). At its conclusion, every member of the audience was gifted a small Tsimshian flag in payment for witnessing the occasion. The contrast between the celebratory corporate ceremony and intimate community gathering was powerful. The strength of Indigenous sovereignty expressed through regional resurgence was made even more complex by the carrying out of specific, community-based protocols.





**Figure 6.** Metlakatla, Alaska, community members preparing to bless the recently raised Tsimshian pole on 22 April 2023. The crests depicted on the pole, from top to bottom, include Killer Whale with Grizzly Bear, Raven with Frog, Eagle with Beaver, and Wolf with Crane. Photograph by Megan A. Smetzer, with permission from David R. Boxley.

As with the earlier totem pole projects, Boxley's public calling out and personal ceremonial practice extends the long history of poles with multivalent and contested meanings regarding sovereignty. Each of these examples demonstrates that the business of pole raising is informed by the cultural moment within which it takes place. The shift from territorial and federal oversight of totem pole parks to an Indigenous-led project that builds on the historical models that appealed to touristic ideas of Alaska is significant. On the surface, and for the casual visitor, the *Kootéeyaa Deiyí* can be understood as a powerful statement of Indigenous resurgence. Yet, as Boxley's speech and actions illustrate, there are important protocols within and between Indigenous communities which, if not worked out beforehand, must be brought out in front of witnesses. Whether historically relocated or newly carved, Indigenous protocols have been both enhanced and transgressed in each of these instances.

## 6. Totem Poles in Vancouver, BC

The public art project *Blanketing the City* (2018–present) began as a collaboration between xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) artist Debra Sparrow ʔəliχʷəlʷət and the Vancouver Mural Festival (VMF), a non-profit, city- and private-donor-funded organization. As the VMF website indicates, this project is part of their commitment to the processes of Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. “We feel strongly that murals can contribute positively to asserting Indigenous visibility on the land to help address the cultural erasure of both local land-based nations and urban Indigenous populations across our city” (FAQ n.d.). The cultural erasure mentioned in this statement alludes, in part, to the history of totem poles in Vancouver, which for decades represented Indigeneity in the city. Debra Sparrow's idea to “wrap the city” in weaving patterns intervenes into the totem pole's status in unceded Coast Salish territory, creating connections to local peoples, environments and histories rather than those imported from other First Nations, as had been the case throughout the twentieth century.

Similar to the civic programs that created Alaskan totem pole parks, the City of Vancouver purchased poles from Kwakwaka'wakw and Haida communities, installing them in Stanley Park in 1920 (Figure 7). This centrally located peninsula in what is now known as Burrard Inlet had been home to Squamish Skwxwú7mesh, Musqueam xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, and Tsleil-Waututh səlilwətaɬ peoples for thousands of years. In 1863, the British created a military reserve on this unceded territory. In 1888, shortly after the City of Vancouver was incorporated, this reserve became Stanley Park, the first large-scale park in the region that drew on British and American precedents to create a seemingly natural green space untouched by human intervention. By 1931, the villages and most of their inhabitants, including xʷəy̓ xʷəy̓ (near Lumberman's Arch) and spapey'eq (now Brockton Point), had been forcibly removed, in spite of legal challenges from Indigenous residents (Wilson 2016). Regardless of their ongoing resistance to the outlawing of the potlatch in British Columbia in 1884 through the laws prohibiting the pursuit of land claims beginning in 1927, local Indigenous peoples were pushed to the margins of settler society in favor of a nostalgic and aesthetically pleasing attraction that sanitized the deeply problematic history of colonialism in the region.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 7.** Stanley Park Totem Poles in their current location at Brockton Point. A replica of Kwakwaka'wakw artist Charlie James Yakuglas' iconic Thunderbird House Post stands third from the right. It was carved in 1987 by Kwakwaka'wakw artist Tony Hunt. The original post is currently housed at the Museum of Vancouver. Photograph by Megan A. Smetzer.

One notable exception to this history of displacement was the 1936 commissioning of a pole from Squamish carver Chief Mathias Joe as part of Vancouver's Golden Jubilee celebrating fifty years of incorporation. Joe used this opportunity to assert Squamish presence in unceded territory by creating a large pole incorporating figures central to Salish creation stories from across the region (Figure 8). Normally, visual representations of supernatural and ancestral figures would only be seen in private, ceremonial spaces (Hawker 2003, pp. 108–9), however, this pole was part of a relatively recent expansion of Salish carving practices. Historically, larger scale carvings were limited to internal structural house posts embellished with human and animal figures or single-figure exterior welcome poles. The carving and raising of free-standing exterior poles with multiple figures only began in the twentieth century (Brotherton 2008, pp. 114–15). Like his father Chief Joe Capilano S7ápelek, who will be discussed below, Mathias Joe fought for Coast Salish sovereignty using multiple means. In this case, he deliberately transgressed cultural protocols to visually assert ancient connections to unceded territory, in public.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 8.** Squamish Chief Mathias Joe's pole at Prospect Point, the highest point in Stanley Park. Photo by Jack Lindsay, c. 1940–1948. Image courtesy of Vancouver Archives.

Prior to the intervention of Chief Mathias Joe's pole, this decoupling of Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh presence from their own territory and the imposition instead of Kwakwaka'wakw and Haida poles from further north aligned with similar tourist iconography all along the coast; this included the Alaska's Steamship Company's "Totem Pole Route" tours, Seattle's Pioneer Square pole, and iconic poles on the flyers for the city's 1909 Alaska–Yukon Pacific Exposition. These expectations, that poles above all else represent the arts of the Northwest Coast, created the circumstances that enabled the winged pole originally carved by Kwakwaka'wakw artist Charlie James Yaguklas in the early 1900s to become the most iconic symbol for Stanley Park. Poles located in Alaska were also visually supplanted by James's piece, as indicated by its central position in Willard R. Cox's 1929 painting titled *Southeast Alaska* (Figure 3).<sup>13</sup> Even Chief Mathias Joe's unique Squamish pole incorporated wings, due in part to the ubiquity of James' work (Hawker 2003, p. 108; Jonaitis 2012, p. 31) which, by 1936, had come to represent the entire Pacific Coast region for tourists travelling along the Inside Passage.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, the structure and iconography of Salish internal house posts had been adopted by some artists into free-standing monumental poles and posts for public art commissions, grounding contemporary artworks more firmly in historical Coast Salish carving traditions.<sup>14</sup> Artists have also turned to other ancient practices for public art inspiration, including the textiles and tools of Salish wool weaving and basketry. These public installations point to the hundreds, if not thousands, of years of weaving undertaken by women in their communities.<sup>15</sup> And, perhaps more significantly, woven blankets have always been understood within Coast Salish communities as a means of publicly asserting relations between and within the physical and spiritual worlds.

## 7. Susan Point

In the early 2000s, the City of Vancouver at long last publicly recognized the deeply troubling history of Stanley Park, and the problematic imposition of installing poles from northern regions of the Province onto unceded territories without proper protocols. In



2004 the city issued a call for proposals from artists of the Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh nations, and subsequently commissioned Susan Point, who by that time was one of the most prominent Musqueam artists in the region with an impressive portfolio of public artworks.<sup>16</sup> Point created *People Amongst the People*—three gateways representing the three nations whose territories encompass the region. These portals, raised in 2008, welcome visitors to Brockton Point and provide a frame for the older northern poles in Stanley Park. Point's imposing structures resembling Coast Salish interior house posts connected by roof beams are embellished with figures, both human and supernatural, as well as patterns reminiscent of Salish weaving (Figures 9–11). Through these works, Point acknowledges the ancient and ongoing presence of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh people, and illustrates how deeply entwined weaving is within Salish ceremonial protocols, intergenerational relationships, and the environment (Watt 2019, pp. 67–77).



**Figure 9.** Susan Point (Musqueam), *People Amongst the People: Male and Female Welcome Figures*, 2008. Here, Point depicts the female figure wearing a woven robe. Photograph by Megan A. Smetzer.

A consideration of Debra Sparrow's *Blanketing the City* without recognizing Point's public artworks would be remiss because, while Point's works do not visually evoke the form of a blanket, per se, they do consistently center women and their weaving tools in both subtle and dramatic fashion, often utilizing the scale and materials more closely associated with men in the art historical literature, despite the long and generally overlooked history of female carvers along the coast.<sup>17</sup> *Flight*, commissioned in 1995, depicts an enormous spindle whorl embellished with flowing, intertwining eagles, humans, and salmon, carved from red cedar. It is perhaps the most prominent example of public art for anyone who has flown internationally into Vancouver. This work, in conjunction with the four monumental wool weavings titled *Out of the Silence* by Musqueam weavers Krista Point, Robyn Sparrow, Debra Sparrow, Gina Grant, and Helen Callbreath, which hang above the Vancouver Airport's (YVR) international arrivals hall (known as the Musqueam Welcome Area), foreground the public aspects of Salish weaving practices and the space they have held, both in the past and in the present. As art historian Alison Ariss notes in her ground-breaking research on Salish weaving as critically engaged public art: "This work may not be confrontational,

but it is distinctly political” (Ariss 2019, p. 62). In other words, for the artists and their communities, these works are a powerful statement of ongoing presence and sovereignty in unceded territory, even if this intent is not fully recognized by those passing through YVR.



**Figure 10.** Susan Point (Musqueam), *People Amongst the People: Grandparents and Grandchildren*, 2008. The three grandmothers pictured here illustrate the matrilineal knowledge that passes from generation to generation. Photograph by Megan A. Smetzer.



**Figure 11.** Susan Point (Musqueam), *People Amongst the People: Salish Dancer and Whale*, 2008. Salish weaving patterns adorn the crossbeam. Photograph by Megan A. Smetzer.



## 8. Blanketing the City

While totem poles have long been perceived as the public icons of the Northwest Coast, Coast Salish community members recognize the woven patterns of woollen blankets as the iconic expression of identity within their own territories. Its scale and multiple locations throughout the Lower Mainland (encompassing Vancouver and neighboring municipalities), home to nearly three million residents, has enabled *Blanketing the City* to become the largest public expression of the power of Salish weaving in the region. As noted earlier, this art project, initiated by x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy<sup>ə</sup>m (Musqueam) weaver Debra Sparrow θəliχ<sup>w</sup>əl<sup>w</sup>ət, began as part of the Vancouver Mural Festival in 2018. It is now a collaborative, iterative project with weavers from related communities: Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) hereditary Chief Janice George Chepximiya Siyam', her husband Willard "Buddy" Joseph Skwetsimeltxw, and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) artist Angela George q<sup>w</sup>ənat (George n.d.).

*Blanketing the City* transforms the soft, malleable enwrapping warmth of Salish blankets from their human scale into massive cultural expressions that assert women's contributions to Coast Salish cultural practices, overlooked for decades in the art historical and anthropological literature addressing the Northwest Coast. Chief Janice George notes: "Weavers are a powerful voice in the community. They were someone who provided wealth-building skills. It was valuable knowledge" (Tepper et al. 2017, p. 155). More broadly, as a project developed in response to the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's 96 Calls to Action, the artists are working toward unravelling generations of harm caused by the processes and institutions of settler colonialism by foregrounding community understandings of the power of weaving and the central place of women in Indigenous knowledge systems.<sup>18</sup>

The first mural in the series was created on centrally located Granville Island, one of the city's most popular tourist destinations. The 44-foot-high geometric weaving patterns in black, red, yellow, and white, zig zag up and around two massive abutments [reminiscent of interior house posts] of the Granville Street Bridge—a major transit conduit into downtown Vancouver (Figure 12). As Sparrow notes: "So these pillars were really significant to really make a mark and hold that bridge up and hold up our people in the ways we hadn't been held up, and you know, it sort of catapulted the idea I had to blanket and wrap the city ... " (Sparrow n.d.). By covering the imposing pillars with color and design, the mural energizes the busy commercial and industrial site and reminds passersby of the ancient past, resurgent present, and future possibilities of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples in their unceded territories. Sparrow explains: "... you are now part of a history that's a thousand years old, not just 150 ... this is not about making a pretty blanket or pretty design, this is about educating" (Sparrow n.d.).

Sparrow's second mural embellishes the side of a centrally located hotel transformed into transitional housing, and features the refracted light of the Salish Sea, whose bounty has sustained Indigenous peoples since time immemorial (2019). *Blanketing the City III* (2021), painted in shades of blue, adorns the entrance to the building where the VMF offices are located (2021), as a reminder of "what it means to produce public art on unceded lands" (VMF). For *Blanketing the City IV* (2021), Sparrow collaborated for the first time with Squamish weavers Janet George and Buddy Joseph, and Tsleil-Waututh weaver Angela George, on six 30-foot-high columns within a large downtown park facing the Holy Rosary Cathedral. Ironically, the artists were in the final stages of completing this installation when the news was announced of the discovery of 225 unmarked graves on the grounds of the former residential school in Kamloops, BC, which had been run by the Catholic Church for the majority of its existence. As discussed in *Weaving the Path*, a film about this project, the artists chose to incorporate 225 dots into the murals to honor and commemorate each child, as well as bring attention to the ongoing intergenerational trauma inflicted by religious and government-run residential schools on Indigenous communities (VMF). *Blanketing the City V* (2023) is the most recent collaborative iteration, located across the Burrard Inlet in North Vancouver.



**Figure 12.** Debra Sparrow ʔəliχʷəlʷət (Musqueam), *Blanketing the City 1*, 2018. Located on pillars supporting the Granville Street Bridge. Courtesy of the Vancouver Mural Festival.

### 9. Blanketing the City V: (Rescue) (Aftermath) (Wealth of the Land)

*Blanketing the City V* provides insight into the intertwined histories of settlers and Indigenous people in the region. Painted onto all four sides of a steel storage container located on the Burrard Dry Dock Pier in North Vancouver, *Blanketing the City V: (Rescue) (Aftermath) (Wealth of the Land)* recounts the events of 13 June 1886, when the recently incorporated city of Vancouver burnt to the ground in a matter of minutes. Strong winds caused flames from a fire on Canadian Pacific Railway property to spread rapidly, destroying up to one thousand buildings and taking countless lives (Smith 2014, p. 7; Mussett n.d.; Crab Park n.d.).

Despite the history of displacement by newcomers intent on resource extraction and capital built from stolen lands, the human tragedy of the fire was met with empathy and action by local Indigenous individuals. Among the first rescuers to arrive was Agnes Locket Joe, a Squamish woman who witnessed the fire from the village of Eslha7an and paddled across the inlet to rescue those who had jumped into the water to escape the heat, smoke, and flames. She was followed shortly after by other Squamish paddlers, who travelled back and forth, transporting settlers to safety. This history has been largely unacknowledged beyond the Squamish community until recent years (Smith 2014, pp. 50–51; Mussett n.d.; Crab Park n.d.).

*Rescue* (Figure 13), designed by Chief Janice George and Buddy Joseph, depicts, on the container's north-facing short side, the two-headed serpent central to Squamish oral histories. The abstracted, geometric weaving pattern features dramatic oranges, reds and yellows representing both fire and the serpent's scales, set against a white background. On either side of the primary design, narrow white zigzags framed by a deep-red ground draw the eye upward, creating a sense of movement that connects the water and the sky.

On the longer west side, Chief Janice George's family history informs the design. "My great grandmother witnessed the fire and passed down to me the story of a woman singing the Paddle Song while she was rescuing people on the beaches in her canoe. The Paddle Song is used today for different occasions. It is about people being on their journeys and is sometimes used today for funerals" (*Blanketing the City V* n.d.).<sup>19</sup> The lower third of the mural is dominated by a large ocean-going canoe paddled by a male and female canoeist, backs bent and arm muscles bulging as they strain toward the raging fire through choppy blue waves. Orange, yellow, and red triangles flare up behind them—leaping flames that threaten to consume everything in sight. These dramatic patterns and colors emulate those found on historic woollen "Delegation" blankets, discussed further below,



worn by Squamish and other Coast Salish chiefs as they travelled to England and Ottawa to advocate for the return of the land being stolen from them (Figure 14).



**Figure 13.** Chief Janice George Chepximiya Siyam' and Buddy Joseph Skwetsimeltxw (Squamish), *Rescue*, 2023. Photograph by Lori Phillips.



**Figure 14.** Chief's blanket. Made by Sp!aq!elthinoth. Worn by Chief Calpaymalt. Courtesy of UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, Canada, A1720.

On the narrow southern end of this same steel container, a darker scene reminds the viewer of the grim toll of that fateful day (Figure 15). *Aftermath*'s dark grey and black palette, illustrating the jagged silhouette of burnt buildings, is pierced with elongated orange, red, and yellow trigons emulating the flying sparks and embers of a dying fire. Debra Sparrow explains that she purposefully omitted beautiful weaving patterns from *Aftermath*, yet to

the knowledgeable viewer the trigons appear similar to the long wooden pins used to hold a blanket in place, suggesting the healing power that weaving brings when wrapped around cold and damp bodies. Sparrow's *Blanketing the City* collaborator, Angela George, explains that "to blanket someone signifies a genuine embrace of love and protection" (George n.d.). The values of care and connection entwined in Salish weaving communities is communicated here. Sparrow also points out that "it is important to appreciate the irony of Indigenous people paddling across the inlet to risk their lives to rescue the people from a town that was systematically evicting Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh people from their lands. This says a lot about who we are" (*Blanketing the City V* n.d.). The sharing of blanket designs throughout the lower mainland as part of this project extends this practice of care into the public realm.



**Figure 15.** Debra Sparrow ʔəliχʷəlʷət (Musqueam), *Aftermath*, 2023. Photograph by Lori Phillips.

*Wealth of the Land*, created by səliłwətał weaver Angela George, on the east side of the container, is a far more direct representation of weaving patterns (Figure 16). Split into four quadrants by wide vertical and horizontal bars of calm, blue, wave-like patterns representing the water, the upper half of white and copper triangles hold multiple meanings and are balanced by the black and white triangles in the lower half. While it may appear quite abstract to the uninformed viewer, the harmony of pattern and color align with George's motivations. The copper and white triangles are meant to represent fire and sunrise and the horrors of residential schools and other destructive colonial practices. The blue waves counter that history by represent the enduring wealth of the land and waters and the reciprocal responsibilities of care that all must take seriously for this bountiful environment to continue to provide.

George's explanation of the window piercing the east side of the container foregrounds the role of weavers and weaving in maintaining continuity and connection to the lands and waters of the region through time. She notes: "I have integrated the window into the design as a 'portal', the way our loom is a portal into the past and the future" (*Blanketing the City V* n.d.) The murals of *Blanketing the City V* work together to speak directly to a specific historical event and beyond it. These shared designs become a visual metaphor for the histories of the land and the practices of care that are embodied in the processes of weaving.

The colorful, geometric patterns of Salish weaving that embellish the container are deeply meaningful to Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh people, and are becoming increasingly familiar to settlers and perhaps even the visitors who pass through Vancouver airport and Stanley Park en route to the cruise ship docks and then Alaska, due to the work of these artists and others. Tourists, and even most local residents, are far less likely to know that Coast Salish weaving has always been a significant means for communicating power and connection in public places. As noted above, *Blanketing the City* references the long histories of Salish leaders donning woven regalia while engaged in public negotiations on



behalf of their communities. Blankets, in addition to connecting the weaver to the natural and spiritual worlds, also denote the significance of the person who wears them. As Chief Janice George states: “The robe you wear identifies who you are, where you come from, your family, your home territory,” and, as such, was critical to the political work of Salish leaders in the public realm (Tepper et al. 2017, p. 149).<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 16.** Angela George qʷənat (Tsleil-Waututh), *Wealth of the Land*, 2023. Chief Janice George and Buddy Joseph (Squamish), *Rescue*. Photograph by Lori Phillips.

### 10. Chief Joe Capilano (Sa7plek)

In 1906, the same year poles were being raised along a rainforest trail in Sitka to delight tourists, Squamish Chief Joe Capilano (Sa7plek) was presented with a blanket, one specifically woven to provide strength and protection as he embarked on an important journey. Capilano and other Coast Salish leaders traveled to London to meet with King Edward VII, seeking justice for their people who were being displaced into tiny reserves, lacking enough resources to survive. Two years later, Capilano, wearing the medal he had received from King Edward, posed with other Coast Salish leaders at the North Vancouver Ferry en route to Ottawa to meet with the Prime Minister, Wilfred Laurier, and reiterate their concerns (Figure 17).<sup>21</sup> *Blanketing the City* embodies the persistence of Coast Salish people advocating for their ancestral connections to the land and visually honors the work of weavers and their weavings.

One large surface at a time, Debra Sparrow, Janice George, Buddy Joseph, and Angela George are making statements of sovereignty. *Blanketing the City* raises awareness of the ongoing presence of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples in their ancestral, unceded territories. Translating blankets from the body to the building wraps these settler spaces in a cloak of responsibility to the people who have always been here. Chief Janice George explains blanketing someone as a process: “It is almost like a transformation, you turn around and then you step forward and then you conduct your responsibilities” (Tepper et al. 2017, p. 149). These murals are an invitation to viewers to educate themselves about the harsh realities of the intercultural histories that led to the Truth and Reconciliation process. As many have stated, there is no reconciliation without the truth.

In some ways, this series of murals transgresses Salish protocols, by bringing the work of ceremony into public spaces. At the same time, the wearing of woven blankets, particularly in intercultural spaces, has long been an important form of visual resistance and an assertion of sovereignty, as demonstrated by Chief Joe Capilano. As with the



totem pole trail in Alaska, successful public art has the power to create opportunities to educate diverse populations, support economic growth for communities that have often been left out, and, perhaps most significantly for Indigenous communities, signal ongoing sovereignty in occupied lands.



**Figure 17.** Chief Joe Capilano and delegation of First Nations leaders, May 1908. Chief Capilano stands just left of center with a woollen blanket draped over his arm. Also visible, pinned to his chest, is a medal from his 1906 visit to England to petition King Edward to seek justice for his people. Image courtesy of North Vancouver Archives.

## 11. Wrapping Up

In her explanation of *Blanketing the City IV*, Angela George notes that “Art is an intriguing and beautiful way to create awareness and understanding in a non-threatening manner that embraces and weaves us all together with our common ground as well as our unique and diversities [sic].” (George n.d.). *Kootéeyaa Deiyí* (Totem Pole Trail) and *Blanketing the City*, two recent public art projects visible to those travelling between Juneau and Vancouver, work with and beyond the weight of public expectations around representations of Pacific Northwest Coast Indigeneity. Historically, these expectations have been focused on monumental sculpture, most often totem poles, and very often based on forms that have been associated with the singular male artist. *Kootéeyaa Deiyí* builds on this history by placing new poles representing Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples at the heart of Alaska’s state capital. As David R. Boxley expresses in his dedication ceremony speech, “the Áakw Kwáan are challenged to have a state capital on their territory, and I want them to know that we recognize that challenge, and we are grateful that we are allowed to express the modern presence of our people on their territory” (Kootéeyaa Deiyí Ceremony @ 5 h, 3 min) (Kootéeyaa Deiyí Ceremony 2023). *Blanketing the City* moves beyond these visual expectations to express the specificity of the Lower Mainland as unceded Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh territory, remediating the ignorance around Salish histories and honoring women’s knowledge and skill, which have been historically marginalized.

Both projects reveal the inversions and transgressions of longstanding cultural practices relating to public display and express Indigenous sovereignties in a contemporary context. While on the surface these projects enliven and transform settler spaces, a closer examination reveals the histories of negotiation and translation that underpin these public places. By installing totem poles along a waterfront or wrapping a city in woven designs, these artists place a heavy responsibility on local, regional, and federal governments, as well as settler citizens, to recognize Indigenous sovereignty. At the same time, these public art installations provide short-term visitors with an opportunity to expand their vision beyond the iconic totem pole to see the diversity and complexity of this region.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sealaska Heritage Institute is a non-profit organization “founded in 1980 to perpetuate and enhance Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian cultures of Southeast Alaska.” <https://www.sealaskaheritage.org/about-shi-alaska/> (accessed on 15 March 2024) (About 2023). SHI was created in response to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971, which imposed corporate structures onto Indigenous communities. As the corporate structure did not take into account longstanding cultural practices, elders worked with the Sealaska Regional Corporation to create this non-profit organization, which has become a significant contributor to the resurgence and expansion of Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultural practices in Alaska.
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.travelawaits.com/2876721/totem-pole-trail-juneau-alaska/> (accessed on 22 January 2024).
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.mellon.org/grant-story/raising-indigenous-art-and-stories-in-alaskas-capital> (accessed on 23 January 2024). Worl estimates Juneau receives one million visitors to the city every year.
- <sup>4</sup> The ceremony also included the dedication of five bronze masks representing the major Indigenous cultural groups of Alaska—Inupiat, Athabaskan, Alutiiq, and Yup'ik, as well as Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian.
- <sup>5</sup> The location, name, and description of each pole, including the previously installed Sealaska Cultural Values Pole, can be found at this link: [https://www.sealaskaheritage.org/sites/default/files/2023%20Pocket%20Guide\\_TotemTrail.pdf](https://www.sealaskaheritage.org/sites/default/files/2023%20Pocket%20Guide_TotemTrail.pdf) (accessed on 8 September 2023) (Pocket Guide n.d.).
- <sup>6</sup> For an overview of this history see Charles W. Smythe's 1989 report (Smythe 1989): *The Tribal Status of the Auke Tribe*.
- <sup>7</sup> For early publications regarding the tourist experience see, for example, Septima M. Collis' 1890 (Collis 1890) *A Woman's Trip to Alaska* and Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore's 1885 (Scidmore 1885) *Alaska, Its Southern Coast and the Sitkan Archipelago*. For analyses of this early literature see Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse's “Streams of Tourists: Navigating the Tourist Tides in late 19th Century Southeast Alaska” and Robert Campbell's *In Darkest Alaska: Travel and Empire Along the Inside Passage* (Campbell 2008).
- <sup>8</sup> As Bunn-Marcuse points out in “Streams of Tourists”: “The 1890 Census report lists 25,048 tickets sold by the Pacific Coast Steamship Company between 1884 and 1890, with the numbers growing from 1600 the first season to over 5000 in the last two years. It was estimated that each tourist spent between fifty and one hundred dollars on curios (United States 1893, pp. 250–51)” (Bunn-Marcuse 2017, p. 171).
- <sup>9</sup> SHI's approach has many parallels to the nineteenth century context, as indicated by Bunn-Marcuse's research: “In fact, the Alaskan economy as a whole depended heavily on tourism and especially on the production of Alaska Native curios. The 1890 census reported that Sitka ‘is supported chiefly by the trade of the Sitka and Yakutat Natives, who sell their furs, baskets, carvings, spoons, bracelets, beadwork, etc., and purchase all their clothing and a constantly increasing proportion of food and utensils’ (Boursin 1893a). This was a reliable, profitable trade and one in which the Native vendors, non-Native businesses, and steamship companies depended on each other for success”. (Bunn-Marcuse 2017, p. 172).
- <sup>10</sup> Metlakatla, Alaska, was founded by lay missionary William Duncan and 823 Tsimshian Christian converts who travelled by canoe from Metlakatla, British Columbia, in 1887. Advertised as a utopian Christian community whose members ostensibly gave up Tsimshian ways of knowing, recent scholarship has shown the myriad ways in which community members maintained ancient cultural practices using new technologies (Askren 2009).
- <sup>11</sup> For in-depth background on this history, see, for example, Jean Barman's *Stanley Park's Secret: The Forgotten Families of Whoi Whoi, Kanaka Ranch, and Brockton Point* (Barman 2006), and (Hawker 2003)'s *Tales of Ghosts: First Nations Art in British Columbia, 1922–1961*, among many others.
- <sup>12</sup> See Marcia Crosby's essay “Making Indian Art ‘Modern’” for a discussion of Coast Salish leaders protesting the 1966 development of the “Route of Totems” on Vancouver Island (Crosby n.d.).
- <sup>13</sup> This painting is just one example among a myriad of other representations of this pole (Jonaitis and Glass 2010, pp. 104–8).
- <sup>14</sup> Such as Musqueam artists Susan Point and Brent Sparrow Jr., Stz'uminus (Chemainus) artist Luke Marston, Squamish artists Ray Natraoro, Jody Broomfield, and Darren Yelton, among others.

- 15 For a discussion regarding ancient weaving practices as they relate to basketry, see Carolyn Marr's (2008) essay "Objects of Function and Beauty: Basketry of the Southern Coast Salish." in *S'abadeb*, as well as Ed Carriere and Dale Croes' 2018 book *Reawakening Ancient Salish Sea Basketry* (Carrier and Croes 2018).
- 16 Susan Point remains the single Indigenous female artist from the Northwest Coast whose artistic practice has received in-depth scholarly and curatorial attention. Recent publications include Arnold and Thom's *Susan Point: Spindle Whorl*, the 2017 exhibition catalogue for the Vancouver Art Gallery's solo exhibition of the same name (Arnold and Thom 2017), and Watt's 2019 monograph *People Among the People: The Public Art of Susan Point* (Watt 2019).
- 17 See Bunn-Marcuse and Smetzer's essay "Working to Change the Tide" for an in-depth discussion regarding the gendered legacies of art along the Northwest Coast (Bunn-Marcuse and Smetzer 2019). See also, Jonaitis' essay "The Invention and Perpetuation of Culture: The Boasian Legacy and Two 20th Century Totem Pole Carvers" (Jonaitis 2003), which addresses this history specifically in relation to Susan Point and her most well-known predecessor, Kwakwaka'wakw artist, Ellen Neel (1916–1966), who advocated for Indigenous art and artists, and also carved poles of all sizes in a studio located in Stanley Park, with her family.
- 18 <https://nctr.ca/records/reports/#trc-reports> (accessed on 2 March 2024) (Reports n.d.).
- 19 In her essay "Dancing Chiaux, Dancing Sovereignty," Mique'l Dangeli elaborates on the women's paddle song called "Skemelh Slulem" and how its enduring connection to the 1886 fire is a potent embodiment of Indigenous sovereignty (Dangeli 2016, p. 82).
- 20 While the iconography of Salish weaving has been employed by Point, Sparrow, and others in countless public artworks, other tangible aspects of Coast Salish ceremonialism are not for public consumption, as they are reserved for sacred spaces within the community.
- 21 This photograph has been incorrectly identified in multiple publications as having been taken prior to Capilano's journey to England in 1906. It has recently come to light that this was taken just prior to his journey to Ottawa in 1908. As noted in the caption, Chief Capilano is shown wearing the medal he received during his audience with King Edward (Duffek 2023).

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