
Basket Becomes Codex: A Poem by Trevino Brings Plenty in the Portland Art Museum

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Before it was published in *Wakpá Wanáǵi / Ghost River*, the poem “Little, Cultural, Teapot Curio Exposes People,” by Trevino Brings Plenty (Lakota), was available on film as part of the Portland Art Museum’s exhibit “Object Stories.” The poem works to redefine the meaning of its subject—a Tlingit basket made for the tourist market circa 1920, acquired by a collector, and donated to the Portland Art Museum; the basket currently sits in storage as part of the PAM’s permanent collection. As an object made for sale to the tourist and collector market, the basket falls outside the scope of NAGPRA’s guidelines for repatriation: it will not return to the family and people who made it. Yet its meaning can be reclaimed, and the poem becomes an act of survivance through that reclamation. Through redefining the meaning of the basket, the poem creates a story of survivance that steps out of the colonial story of the basket as decorative item for a non-Native consumer and instead posits it as a holder of knowledge and means of connecting generations of family across space and time.

Reading through Native theory

In his essay “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice,” Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) sets forth some of the guiding principles of how survivance is created through Native storying, and what difference it makes to Native presence. He argues that “The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihilism, and victimry” and that “Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent” (1). Amidst the influences and acts of colonizing institutions, Native literature posits a different story from that of the colonizers. Most useful for this essay is Vizenor’s idea that “Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry. Survivance is the heritable right of succession or reversion of estate and, in the course of international declarations of human rights, is a narrative estate of native survivance” (1). I am particularly interested here in the language of succession and inheritance,

as the Brings Plenty poem refigures an object that is owned by a museum. While the poem cannot give the object back to the family whose ancestor made it, as a survivance story it can give back to that family—and other Native people—the object’s meaning and significance. As a survivance story, the poem reclaims the basket from the meaning assigned to it by the colonialist operations of the collector and museum and instead writes it as a form of art, knowledge, and relationship.

As Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo) writes in *The Sacred Hoop*, “The significance of literature can be best understood in terms of the culture from which it springs...” (54). Allen calls for placing Native literature in its contexts so that scholars do not misunderstand or misconstrue a work’s significance. She also calls for bringing things together rather than separating them: “the non-Indian tendency to separate things from one another—be they literary forms, species, or persons—causes a great deal of unnecessary difficulty with and misinterpretation of American Indian life and culture” (62). In this essay, I bring together several ideas to examine the teapot basket poem: Native material rhetorics (stories about objects and what they mean when connected with their communities), Tribalography (how stories bring ideas to life), Brings Plenty’s latest book of poetry, museum collection history, the history of spruce root basketry, and the policies and programming of the Portland Art Museum. I bring together these contexts—some from a number of different Indigenous nations—because these ideas inform Brings Plenty’s work as a Lakota poet who has lived a significant portion of his life in the city of Portland, Oregon, in a post-Relocation atmosphere of people from different communities and traditions coming together to resist colonization and express Indigenous art. When the poem resonates in all of these contexts, it works as a powerful revision of how museum objects have been understood in the past, and becomes a new storying of survivance that redefines the significance of even the most seemingly trivial objects.

Objects can be read as things that, at least in part, communicate possession, “havingness.” Objects are also important communicators of meaning. The field of Native material rhetorics helps us see the relationships between objects, community, and storytelling in an Indigenous context. In her article “Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice,” Angela M. Haas argues that wampum belts and the recitals connected to them serve as a form of hypertext; the essay thereby “positions American Indians as the first known skilled multimedia workers and intellectuals in the

Americas” (78). Haas shows the multiple processes through which a wampum belt connects people in a community: making a wampum belt, presenting it at the ceremony of agreement it signifies, witnessing its meaning (by an audience), and periodically reciting the story of its creation to renew the agreement. All of these processes contribute to the ways in which the object represents the needs and priorities of the people who participate. In other words, wampum belts such as the Two Row Treaty Belt (Haas 85) speak to commitments and agreements, and tell stories of relationship through their symbolism, physical materiality, and connections with people who know and tell their story. In Haas’s essay, rather than an art object whose value is primarily aesthetic, the wampum belt becomes a sign and tool of sophisticated networks of meaning and relationship. The essay helps contextualize wampum belts for people not familiar with them, revealing them as complex and communicative texts that resonate with meaning. We can then think about how other objects made by Native people might serve similar functions.

Another article that helps us understand the importance and meaning of objects appears in the journal *Museum Anthropology*: Martha Graham and Nell Murphy’s “NAGPRA at 20: Museum Collections and Reconnections.” The article details several case studies of Native people working with the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) on repatriation efforts. In the article Graham and Murphy describe an incident in which representatives from a Tlingit village came to the AMNH in order to identify objects that may have come from their village that should be repatriated. One elder, Harold Jacobs, spotted a carved prow piece, an object that had *not* been identified as an item for possible repatriation; in fact, the cataloguing information was very vague, only saying that the item had been acquired from Alaska by a Lieutenant Emmons (109). The prow piece and its canoe had been revered in the village several generations before the visit to the AMNH; it had been the only one not destroyed in a bombardment by the U.S. Navy, and therefore became the means of the village’s survival (109).¹ Rather than belonging only to the clan who created it, the canoe became the property of the whole village, and the men used it to “hunt, fish, and gather fuel” (109). Because of this history, the prow piece became much more important than it normally might have been: when the canoe developed a crack and could no longer be used, it was disposed of in a ceremony more like “a relative’s funeral rather than [...] dismantling an old canoe” (110). But information about the prow piece was unknown to the museum staff. Graham and Murphy note, “Neither the AMNH nor the [Tlingit] delegation knows how or when Emmons acquired the prow piece. Because the

catalogue description and provenience were nonspecific, the museum had no knowledge of its role in Angoon’s [the village’s] history. Jacobs’ discovery was a surprise for everyone” (110). If the elders had not recognized the prow piece as they toured the museum’s storage area, it likely never would have been repatriated—both because it was poorly catalogued and because a prow piece typically is not considered to be a sacred object or object of cultural patrimony, and thus would not be eligible for repatriation.

After the village elders told the museum staff the history of the prow piece, the museum repatriated the piece, which is now featured in ceremonies at home. It has a special relationship with the village, as recounted by Daniel Johnson, Jr. (Tlingit), one of the people interviewed for the article: “when it is out, our fathers, grandfathers, children, and/or grandchildren acknowledge its presence—and speak directly to it—granting it the status of being one of our leaders of the tribe—or more importantly—viewing it as being one of their father’s people, or grandfather’s people, or their child, or grandchild” (117). The prow piece participates in such community events as mourning a loved one’s passing (118). When asked about whether repatriation has led to healing, Johnson responds: “a huge resounding ‘Yes!’—for the Prow Piece and for all other artifacts that have been returned. All have been ‘brought back to life’ and are now fully integrated within the framework of our culture—as was intended by the ‘creators’ of the respective items” (117).

From this story, we can conclude that objects are more than just objects, in many cases. They are linked to stories, sometimes of survival, and they help to communicate a people’s identity and philosophy. They are expressions not just of Native aesthetics, but also of Native history, technology, knowledge archives, and belief systems. And sometimes they are relatives. Of course, different nations have different beliefs and practices, and we cannot assume that all objects will carry the same status as this prow piece or an Iroquois wampum belt. What I’d like us to notice, in these examples, is that the objects resonate and mean much more when considered in the context of their nation of origin. These two examples show that it can be extraordinarily important that an object be connected to its people if it is to be understood fully; this connection will also bring the object to life, wake it up from its sleep in the museum and give it voice so it can fulfill its purpose for being.

Giving voice makes a difference. In “The Story of America: A Tribalography,” LeAnne Howe (Choctaw) lays out a theory of connection and storytelling that helps to explain a Choctaw

perspective on how the world works. In one section of the essay, she describes the importance of storytelling through a closer look at one aspect of the Choctaw language:

My tribe's language has a mysterious prefix that, when combined with other words, represents a form of creation. It is *nuk* or *nok*, and it has to do with the power of speech, breath, and mind. Things with *nok* or *nuk* attached to them are so powerful they create. For instance, *nukfokechi* brings forth knowledge and inspiration. A teacher is a *nukfoki*, the beginning of action. *Nuklibisha* is to be in a state of passion, and *nukficholi* means to hiccup, or breath that comes out accidentally. (15)

In this Choctaw way of thinking, telling a story about something gives it breath, which in turn gives it life. Furthermore, Howe tells us that storytelling “brings forth knowledge and inspires us to make the eventful leap that one thing leads to another” (18). A story can help the listener, the audience, understand something new, and therefore be able to imagine something that may not yet exist.

In “Tribalography,” Howe also argues that other forms of art can be understood as storytelling: the genres of “novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history” (31), even a painting or a scientific theory. Howe notes that various forms of storytelling carry the power of creating something new, “Whether they [the storytellers] [are] speaking them into audio tapes, writing them by hand, typing them into computers, or recounting them to future generations of storytellers...” (36). If this is true, then Brings Plenty's poem and video can be stories that help to shift what the museum visitor thinks about an object on display; they can be stories that help change the viewer's understanding of an object, and therefore create a new possibility, one that falls outside the colonial mindset.

Basket becomes codex

As part of “Object Stories,” Brings Plenty's poem/video “Little, Cultural, Teapot Curio Exposes People” (and his commentary on the video after he performs the poem) focuses on changing the language around the object in order to change viewers' minds about what the object means and how it means. He reconnects the object with family and culture, shows that it is a form of sophisticated technology, and demonstrates its interconnection with its region and family of origin. Despite its appearance and purported definition as a decorative object for tourists and

collectors, the teapot basket is also a holder of knowledge and the means to carry that knowledge into the future.

Brings Plenty’s “Object Stories” film, with photographs of the poet and the teapot basket, can be accessed through the museum’s YouTube channel, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFpPA6drD34>. Here is the poem as it appears in the book

Wakpá Wanági / Ghost River:

The thought codex of a culture is in the object.

My cells are in the weave,

DNA strands of story.

The neuron mapping of us,

familiar dialogue as concrete as dream.

I gave this tome to your mom,
who turned into your grandmother,
who is your daughter's love
unraveling at the kitchen table.

We story ourselves to ancestors
for they are us to a future
who wondered at our language.
The structure of hand contains
schematics to that which we reimage.

We are everything all the time.
As story as people, we turn home.
I stitched coordinates,
systems, pathways.
The hues of age bind us.
It is simply love my people.

The title of the poem expresses the teapot basket as an insignificant thing, a “curio,” or item of curiosity, a cute oddity; but the poem’s first line negates this idea, calling it the “thought codex of a culture.” The teapot basket belongs to its culture in a meaningful, non-trivial way. The term “codex” resonates with the Aztec and Mayan texts that were burned by conquistadors, complex works that contained knowledge and that, according to Damián Baca, were intricately connected with their communities.² In his book *Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations, and the Territories of Writing*, Baca argues that the writing in codices was “a pictorial system consisting of images structured to create visual messages” (68). These messages were read by a special person who was able to decode and interpret them for the audience; such readings “constituted a communal ritualistic and ceremonial event” (73). Like the wampum belt, the codex connected symbols (writing) and objects with people, and forged connections among people and between those people and an event.³ So the basket, because it is a codex, becomes also a means of connection and meaning-making. When asked about the term, Brings Plenty said “The word ‘codex’ is a combination of coding and decoding, from computer language. Using code and information works on both sides—on the part of the maker, but also the viewer. I was also taking the idea of a knowledge base in something that’s not a book, putting cultural knowledge into a form that is available to you” (Brings Plenty, personal interview). The teapot basket as text is also echoed in the term “tome” used in the next stanza, which brings to mind a heavy, serious book. In direct contrast to the actual weight of a teapot basket, these metaphors invite the viewer to see it as heavy with meaning. The basket can be read as a document of the maker’s philosophy, an object that represents knowledge traditions gathered over multiple generations, not just a decorative frivolity for a tourist’s home or a beautiful object in a museum display.

The poem’s next lines bring into focus a particular speaker: “My cells are in the weave, / DNA strands of story.” With parts of its maker left in the object, the teapot basket becomes personal and particular, working against the anonymity communicated in the information card that the museum provides, which says the basket’s maker is unknown.⁴ The poem gives this maker a voice, and she is now speaking, describing the intimate connection between herself and the object. This line also draws our attention from the teapot basket resonating on a very large scale—the representative of a culture—to the level of the personal—so personal as to be absolutely unique, in the speaker’s cells left on the basket. The two lines complement each other

in scale, and claim for the teapot basket a significance that has nothing to do with its buyer or owner.

The next stanza also continues the idea of narration—that the object tells a story—in the reference to “*familiar* dialogue” (emphasis added), a verbal exchange between family members. The poem’s references to relatives—mom, grandmother, daughter—echo the idea of exchange, and even show people morphing into one another, the mom becoming the grandmother, then being expressed in the daughter’s love. These lines create family bonds that are so tight, they make the women part of each other. The teapot basket performs a kind of magic: it is able to connect people over time and space, beyond the normal limits of human being.

The poem then shows us the exchange that happens between these generations, between ancestors and descendants: “We story ourselves to ancestors / for they are us to a future / who wondered at our language.” Here again, we travel through time thanks to an object that will last beyond the maker’s time and preserve the family’s story into the future. These lines also carry the sense of a lost language—perhaps the descendants do not know how to interpret or speak the language of the ancestors, or perhaps their “wonder” conveys being in awe of their ancestors. Making this object might allow the artist to speak that language again, to make that connection with the ancestors. It also creates an object that can be passed to succeeding generations, even those that will not be seen by the narrator.

Placed throughout the poem are references that turn what seems to be a simple, whimsical object into an example of technology, of sophisticated method and significance. The teapot basket holds the maker’s DNA and is also the holder of “neuron mapping.” In stanza three, the relationship between the body and object is expressed in another way: “The structure of hand contains / schematics to that which we reimage.” In these lines, the maker’s hand—and those of her descendants—contains the plans needed to make more baskets, more objects that hold the stories of family and culture. The ability to make such an object is special; as Brings Plenty and I shared that we both were impressed by our friends who make things, he noted, in reference to the basket, “The technical knowledge needed to make this thing takes a lot of skill and preparation” (Brings Plenty, personal interview). In the fourth stanza, the speaker says, “I stitched coordinates, / systems, pathways.” These images suggest a map, and a system of navigation in the time travel that these family members will engage in. Such complex

situations—mapping, time traveling, reading schematics—help to communicate the idea that this basket represents knowledge.

Because the teapot basket is a form of technology that aids in navigation to the future, the poem suggests that objects themselves can rebuild links that have been severed between Native people and the repositories and expressions of their knowledge. In other words, Native people must have access to the objects their ancestors have made in part because these objects are their knowledge base, their codices, their libraries. Even if the objects are not ceremonial or sacred in nature, they still contain information that must be accessible to the people so that these particular ways of thinking and knowing and being in the world can inform and help the next generation.

The poem also expresses the sense that, when you engage with this system of knowledge, you engage in a different way of thinking about the world: a teapot basket becomes a codex. In his video commentary after the poem, Brings Plenty talks about language and relationship. He notes that the maker of the teapot basket and her family would have had a special relationship to the beings in Nature who provided the materials for her work, and her Native language would have created a connection between herself and those beings, a connection that was not just about taking resources but working with each other in a relationship of mutual respect and reciprocal care. When you practice making a basket, you are not just making a basket, you are engaging with the resources available in a specific place, with the language, and with a worldview derived from existing in an ongoing relationship with these things.

The ways of life that created this basket, this language, created a home that supported all of the beings who lived together, including the non-human ones. In the last stanza of the poem, we return to this home through the technology of the basket. In the poem's last line, "It is simply love my people," the multivalent referent "it" could point to a number of things: the object itself; the making of pathways and coordinates and maps so that the next generation can find their way; or the impulse to make such an object so that future generations will have a vocabulary for the expression of self and culture. Or perhaps the "it" refers to the tendency to turn homeward, like the maker's ancestors did, and create something that would represent the people who are "everything all the time."

The word "everything" here reminds us, finally, of the interconnection of all beings that is expressed in the worldview of many Native tribes, including the Lakota, Brings Plenty's ancestors. As I have noted elsewhere, Brings Plenty's *Wakpá Wanáǵi* brings the Lakota

philosophy of *mitakuye oyas'in*, “all my relatives,” to bear on the varied subjects of the poems in this volume. We see speakers and subjects—patients in a group home, uncles and grandfathers, a suicidal girl, a celebrity—brought together through love and relationship despite the difficulties that inevitably come with being in relationship (Poremski). The poem’s line “We are everything all the time” provides an expression of Lakota philosophy in a poem about a Tlingit basket on display in a museum.

In the end, it does not matter whether this object is seen as a “curious” decoration; it is, in fact, something else: the holder of a way of thinking and expression, the way to learn the past and pass it on to the future, the way to find home and self and family, the way to speak among all the generations. The poem’s title states that the object *exposes* people; the basket, in the eyes of the right viewer—namely, the poet Trevino Brings Plenty—performs the work it was made for: communicating between generations, telling a story about a culture, representing knowledge. The poem brings to life and to purpose this artifact, placing it in relationship, redefining how and what it speaks. In this way, the poem becomes a survivance story that speaks against dominance and Native victimry, in Vizenor’s terms, and reclaims the basket as a Native estate, signifying wholly different views and priorities from the basket’s definition in a typical museum context, a colonial context. In the space of the poem, the basket, like the repatriated prow piece, becomes alive and is able to fulfill its purpose. Even though the actual physical object “sleeps” in a storage area at the museum, the poem and video in the “Object Stories” exhibit bring it back into relationship, back to life.

Museums and Native people

Saying something meaningful about museums is tricky; they have changed so much since their beginnings, and they also have not changed. Museums started out as an important tool of colonization that was part of the effort to characterize Native people as savage, backward, untouched by the processes of civilization, and standing in the way of American progress and therefore in need of being removed from their land. Museums were both the result (product) of Manifest Destiny and the means (process) of carrying it out. In her book *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, Amy Lonetree (Ho-Chunk) provides an overview of the history of museums and their part in the process of colonization, along with the establishment of boarding schools, land loss and language loss, and the

criminalization of religious practices.⁵ There are countless stories in the historical record of how museums have participated in U.S. efforts to destroy Native people and culture even as they worked to preserve and display Native objects. I would like to share a few here as a way to ground the discussion, bring our focus to how these events affected human beings.

In the 19th century, U.S. soldiers decapitated the Native people they killed—including those at Sand Creek (Mihesuah 2)—and sent the heads to researchers back east for a study on crania. The purpose of this study was to prove that non-white people of all kinds had smaller brains and therefore were less capable of higher thinking and civilization and, therefore, less worthy of citizenship. In 1868, collecting Native bodies became official policy, which “directed army personnel to procure Indian crania and other body parts for the Army Medical Museum” (Trope and Echo-Hawk 126). After the study was completed, the “specimens” were sent to other museums. Devon Mihesuah (Choctaw) reports that “In 1900 at least forty-five hundred skulls and bones were transferred from the Army Medical Museum to the Smithsonian Institution” (2).

In another version of people becoming objects, Native people themselves sometimes became exhibits and items of study. Many have heard of Ishi, the Yahi man who lived in the University of California’s anthropology museum and became a resident subject of study for Alfred Kroeber and others (Kell), but in the essay “Bones, and Other Precious Gems,” Linda Hogan (Chickasaw) tells of six Native people from the Arctic “taken to the Museum of Natural History in New York for what was called a scientific study” around the turn into the 20th century; among them was a boy named Minik and his father (181). These men “stood naked for scientists, anthropologists, photographers, and others whose work it was to compare races” (182). The scientists wanted to know things like whether Native skin behaves the same way as white skin when you burn it (182). Minik’s father died while they were objects of study; years later, Minik returned to the museum to discover his father’s skeleton on display, an experience that “traumatized him for the rest of his life” (182).

Even when Native bodies are not on display, their objects can still tell a story of violent colonization. Two Lakota people have told me the story of the Blue Water Creek massacre and the artifacts taken afterwards, but I have rarely heard anyone else mention it, or write about it. In this event, G. K. Warren, an army surveyor, was sent out with several campaigns in the 1850s against the tribes the U.S. called the Sioux. His job was to make maps and collect items of scientific interest as he accompanied the army (Hanson 4). After a massacre carried out by troops

under the command of General William S. Harney in which more than 150 people (including children) were killed or wounded (Hanson 13), Warren ordered his men to empty their supply wagons and fill them up with things the Lakota left behind as they ran for their lives. Hanson’s book provides photographs of some of the items: men’s leggings, men’s shirts, women’s dresses, hair ties, moccasins; storage bags, blankets; saddles and headstalls; lariats, bows and arrows, knife sheaths; pipes and pipe bags; children’s toys, dolls. Even lodges (tipis) were taken. Hanson notes: “Warren [the surveyor] subsequently deposited the bulk of the floral, faunal, paleontological, and ethnographic collections he gathered with the Smithsonian, as was the custom of other U.S. army expeditions” (5).⁶ *He emptied their supply wagons in order to take “artifacts.”* Those items, some of them stained with blood, remain in the storage area of one of the Smithsonian museums.

There were others collecting Native objects. Ohiyesa (Charles Eastman) (Dakota) traveled in Ojibwe country in 1910 to collect stories and “to search out and purchase rare curios and ethnological specimens for one of the most important collections in the country” (94). Eastman had long acted as a go-between, trying to convince the U.S. government to do right by Natives, and trying to convince Natives that adopting “civilized” practices was the best way into the future. On his visit to the “Sugar Point band,” in which he hopes to see a war club that is said to be the instrument their chief used to fight his enemies, he notes: “I made use of the old-time Indian etiquette, as well as of all the wit and humor at my command, to win a welcome, and finally obtained from the old man the history and traditions of his people, so far as he knew them, and even the famous war club itself!” (96). Despite his eloquent and pointed critiques of non-Native people elsewhere, Eastman’s participation in coercing leaders to relinquish their important tribal objects here is haunting.

Building the collections of museums meant stealing Native people’s belongings, buying them at rock-bottom prices when Native people were desperate for food and other resources, taking them as the spoils of war, or buying them from collectors who had done these things. The rich resources in museums are the visible evidence of the violence of colonization. Behind the beauty of these objects lie pain and loss, grief and trauma.

Native people have always known this, and have always spoken out about it.⁷ The efforts of activists, lawyers, and legislators finally resulted in the enactment of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, which ultimately resulted in many

items being repatriated, and established a process to make repatriation more easy and systematic. During the discussion leading up to the Act's passage, many anthropologists and museum staff reacted with alarm, predicting that its enactment would result in empty museums. This has not happened. Large loopholes in the legislation—among them, a clause that states items can remain in museums if they are of significant scientific importance—have meant that museums can refuse to repatriate some objects and even human remains. The results from NAGPRA's implementation have been mixed: museums still have collections, and Native people are getting some of their objects back.

NAGPRA is not perfect, but it has created real change in the world of museums, and in the relationships between Native people and museums. Museums are being decolonized through the institutions' efforts to collaborate with Native communities in exhibitions, collections, and display practices. Viewers who are accustomed to the colonial story are getting something different, depending on where they go. Lonetree outlines the practices through which museums engage in decolonization, which has become more commonplace as a result of Native activism: "they do this through honoring Indigenous knowledge and worldviews, challenging the stereotypical representations of Native people produced in the past, serving as sites of 'knowledge making and remembering' for their own communities and the general public, and discussing the hard truths of colonization in exhibitions in an effort to promote healing and understanding" (25). Yet, as Lonetree also points out, we should be careful; if we "celebrate" that museums have been decolonized, we "[obscure] the glaring power imbalances that remain" between Native people and those institutions (24). As Brings Plenty stated in an interview in April 2016, "In the last decade, we've been viewing things differently; but for the most part, museums are about whiteness and old money." This is still the prevailing mode of museums in the world, despite the work of decolonization being done. While I would be uncomfortable claiming that Brings Plenty's poem single-handedly (single-versedly?) decolonizes the PAM, I believe we can say that a viewer who listens to the poem experiences a shift in the meaning of the object, a view of what that object means according to Indigenous priorities and worldviews. A visitor who hears this poem is invited to think about the object in a Native context rather than a traditional museum context.

Basket as knowledge

In addition to museum history helping us consider the poem in context, we can also gain an appreciation for how special its subject is—the teapot basket—through learning more about the history of basket-making in Tlingit culture. Made around 1920, the teapot basket of Brings Plenty’s poem represents an era when Tlingit women were adapting their art to new purposes.

Basketry had been one of the longest-practiced arts of the Tlingit before contact with non-Native people; both everyday items (used for cooking, storage, etc.) and ceremonial items (capets, hats) were made out of spruce roots and grasses. In Tlingit culture, baskets are so important that they have a place in their origin stories. In her book *Spruce Root Basketry of the Haida and Tlingit*, Sharon Busby shares the Tlingit story of the first basket: in the days when Raven [the trickster] was active on the earth, and before he “disappeared into the unknown, taking with him the power of the spirit world to mingle with mankind,” a maiden becomes the wife of the sun, and goes to live with him in the sky (19). They are happy and have many children, but she worries about her children, who are more like her (more human) than their father (19). As she worries and twines together some roots, she inadvertently makes a basket (19). It becomes the means of their return to earth: “Her husband, the Sun, had divined her fears and perplexities. So he took the basket [...] she had unknowingly made and increased its size until it was large enough to hold the mother and her eight children. In it they were lowered to their homeland, the Earth” (19-20). As in Brings Plenty’s teapot basket poem, this story shows a basket being made while a woman is thinking about her children and how they will live, and that basket becomes the means to carry them to safety, to home. To this day, Busby notes, some villages still hand down from generation to generation an enormous “mother basket” that is present at ceremonies (74-75). So, in Tlingit culture, baskets are an everyday object, a ceremonial object, and a means by which they came to live on earth. Their significance cannot be overstated.

Basket-making requires a serious commitment on the part of the maker. The process of harvesting the material for the woven object was as labor-intensive as its creation: “Many weavers say that over half the work of making a basket is in gathering, preparing, and splitting the spruce root and the decorative grasses. Moreover, the quality of the basket is absolutely dependent on the quality and regularity of the spruce root. Even a great weaver cannot make up for poor materials” (Busby 30). The tradition of gathering materials implies that Tlingit people developed a working relationship with the beings in their environment—in this case the spruce

trees and grasses—that supplied their needs. They make efforts to treat those organisms well: “Before leaving the site, the diggers return the ground cover [taken away to dig out the root] to its original position, taking care that no roots are left exposed, and thank the tree for its gift. Treasuring this renewable resource, the weavers are careful to let an area recover before visiting it again” (Busby 27). As careful stewards of the trees and grasses, the Tlingit weavers show respect through their art and its processes. And this practice goes back thousands of years: according to Busby, the oldest basket found by archaeologists is 6000 years old (23).⁸ Given the technical and artistic skill displayed in the baskets and the length of time they have been made, we can infer many centuries of careful observation, experimentation, stewardship, and care in harvesting. Before colonization, the Tlingit had a rich and far-reaching working relationship with the spruce trees that resulted in beautiful objects that helped the people live well.

As the economy shifted and their way of life was severely disrupted by the influx of outsiders, the Tlingit did not abandon their relationship with spruce trees, but adapted it. Rather than making everyday cooking equipment or ceremonial hats, the women shifted the bulk of their production to items they could sell to tourists and collectors (Busby 77-82). Despite the relative remoteness of the villages, in the early 20th century, tourists were encouraged to seek ethnographic treasures as souvenirs in their trips to the new wilderness. Busby notes, “In 1906 the Alaska Steamship Co. of Seattle published a pamphlet on Alaska Indian basketry that begins, ‘No home is complete now-a-days without a neat and artistically arranged Indian basket corner.’ The pamphlet encourages people to ‘wander about in the quaint Indian villages which still have the primitive charm’ and to search for ‘rare and curious relics.’” (88). Native people made changes to both the shapes and construction of their work to meet the new demand and new tastes in what the buyers wanted:

The average tourist wanted an attractive, inexpensive basket to admire rather than a basket sturdy enough to withstand heavy use. In fact, the typical tourist was not knowledgeable enough to appreciate the differences between the traditional forms and new ones developed by the weavers to save time and materials... During this period, fine weaving and decoration were prized over strength and functionality. (Busby 88-94)

With the disruptions of colonization, Tlingit women adapted their traditional practice to their modern needs while retaining relationships with the beings in their homeland, and retaining the art of making baskets. Even in the face of drastic changes to their way of life that caused

challenges and hardships,⁹ Tlingit people used baskets to maintain important relationships and create connections between ancestors and descendants.

Native objects at the Portland Art Museum

Some museums would not designate a basket made for the tourist trade in 1920 as an “authentic” Native object. Older objects, uninfluenced by non-Native forces, are seen as more “purely” Indian. The Portland Art Museum helps change some of these assumptions as it influences museum practices. The PAM includes not only ancient or pre-contact objects in its Native American exhibit, but also objects made in the 20th century and up to the present.¹⁰ The contemporary pieces invite non-Native viewers to think in nontraditional ways about Native objects and their makers—namely, that they are still here, still creating beauty, still using art to speak about their lives, and still practicing their cultures, bringing them into the future.

In the PAM, an older exhibit of Native American art that was once largely based on ethnographic materials collected in the late 19th / early 20th century now includes contemporary pieces as well as traditional ones. For example, a display of baskets in one glass case includes a piece woven by Gail Tremblay (Mi’kmaq and Onondaga) in 2011 entitled *In Great Expectations, There is no Red Leader* (“Online Collections”). This basket is made in the strawberry style, but uses strips of 35mm film rather than grass or roots or reeds. It becomes a traditional-style piece that comments on images of Native people created by the film industry. PAM’s Native American collection also features a piece called *Sits With the Stars*, a satin dress made by Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke). While the dress uses a traditional visual motif seen in star quilts, its materials—satin fabric and metallic fringe that catch and return all the available light in the dimmed room—create a strikingly contemporary piece. The space-age metallic fringe and star quilt motif combine traditional and contemporary ideas about stars and astronomy, bringing Native images in the museum forward to today and into the future. The PAM’s innovative policies change the way Native people are represented in museums, and lead visitors to a more informed understanding of Native art.

In addition to the changes in how objects in the permanent collection are presented in the Native American gallery, in fall 2015 the museum added a gallery for temporary exhibits of works by contemporary Native artists, as described in the blog post “New Directions—New Connections: Revitalizing a Museum’s Approach to Native American Art” (Murawski). Deana

Dartt (Chumash), who was the curator of the Native American collection until mid-September 2016, created this gallery as a way to feature new works by Native artists.¹¹ The PAM has hosted significant exhibits of Native art in its main galleries as well; recent shows included “Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy” and “Native Fashion Now: North American Indian Style.” With each exhibit related to Native people and Native creations, the PAM does community outreach and hosts events at the museum, drawing people from underrepresented groups in Portland. In the PAM’s efforts to bring together community and museum, Dartt says,

We want to show the whole spectrum of artists and art practice in Indian Country, from customary or ‘traditional’ to the edgy contemporary, seamlessly woven together in a way that is meaningful to our community as a whole as well as empowering for young Native visitors as they walk through the galleries. I’m always thinking about—and always inspired by—the power of art to heal historic wounds and restore hope. (Murawski, “New Directions”)

These efforts show an understanding of Native art as vital and current, and as connected to the community. Native art and artists are not frozen in some pre-historic past that has disappeared with the vanishing of the frontier; contemporary artists continue to find inspiration in traditional materials and forms (baskets, dresses, etc.), but use them to make a contemporary statement about their lives. The museum’s engagement with community shows that Native art is lively, dynamic, and looking to the future as it brings the past forward, and helps bring non-Native visitors a more complex and meaningful understanding of Native art and Native lives. Brings Plenty’s poem, then, is one example in a multivalent effort to decolonize the PAM.

Interlude: visiting the museum, April 2016

As part of a long-term project on objects in museums, I have been visiting museums in person, putting my body in those spaces and observing carefully the relationships set up between the visitor and the objects on display. I believe this is an important part of understanding the stories that museums tell, and the stories that Native people tell about their objects. I go to these places to see the objects, but also to notice what it feels like to walk into the institution, to enter a gallery, to travel through an exhibit.

During a 2016 visit to Portland, I went to the PAM several times to view the exhibit “Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy.” Like other museums noting the 100th anniversary of Curtis’s appearance in the art world, the PAM mounted a retrospective of his work. But the exhibit at the PAM situated Curtis’s photographs within the context of three contemporary Native artists: Zig Jackson (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara), Wendy Red Star, and Will Wilson (Diné); these artists and their works explicitly or implicitly engage with Curtis, the most (in)famous photographer of Native people. The entrance of the exhibit featured a giant enlargement of a photograph from Zig Jackson’s “Indian photographing tourist photographing Indian” series: a young man stands in pow wow regalia, a white tourist facing him, holding a large camera mere inches from the young man’s face. The image forces the viewer to think about representation—about who’s pointing the camera at whom, for what purpose, to tell what kind of story. The fact that the PAM’s rendition of the photograph was taller than me also said: “visitor, we will not let you look away from this issue.” I noticed two things: the boy being nearly assaulted by the camera takes it in stride (perhaps he is used to it, or perhaps he is brave; probably both); and there’s a younger boy in the frame, too, escaping the scene, on the lower left of the shot. He is laughing.

In addition to centering questions of Native representation, this exhibit also called into question what many have been taught about Curtis. When I toured the exhibit with friends, I told them that I had heard (like many others) that Curtis’s regular practice was artificial to the point of deception, making his subjects don costumes from a hundred years ago, and long-haired wigs. I did not trust Curtis’s representations of Native people. Because of the exhibit, and a lunchtime public presentation given by Mike Murawski, director of education and public programs at the museum, I learned that the story is more complicated. Curtis was in a position of negotiating with his subjects, not just ordering them around; they chose whether and how they wanted to be presented. Murawski shared the response of one subject’s grandson, who said: how dare we assume that Native people had no will, no say, no power in these transactions. Yes, the power relations were complicated, and were partially determined by race and economic status, but Native people were not pawns, not dupes (“Midday Art Break”). And some aspects of Curtis’s portraits changed over time despite his consistent use of sepia tones. At the beginning, the photographs tended to portray an anonymous Native figure striking “stoic” poses, or riding into harsh landscapes and sunsets, or serving as a representative of their people, identified only as a

“type” (a Kiowa maiden, a Nez Perce man); these images echo and repeat the “Vanishing Indian” narrative of the late 19th and early 20th century in the U.S. In the photographs made toward the end of his career, however, some of Curtis’s subjects appear in their “normal” clothes (non-buckskin, non-beaded, non-exotic). Some of them are smiling. They have names. They are individuals.

On my visits to the PAM with friends, I steered them towards a couple of my favorite works in the exhibit: the gorgeous panoramas of a poisoned landscape by Will Wilson, post-apocalyptic and yet utterly contemporary, beautiful and scary at once; Zig Jackson’s portraits of elders in their living rooms, complete with photographs of ancestors who were alive during Curtis’s time and descendants whose smiling faces speak of survival, a family reaching into the future; Wendy Red Star’s photographs of contemporary Apsáalooke women in their brightly colored trade cloth dresses on a backdrop of a huge black-and-white allotment map covering a whole wall, showing plots of land with names of families on them. These works speak volumes of the context that Curtis’s work has been said to erase. They reinscribe the various ways in which colonization has taken its toll on the land, on people, on families. The vague and romantic gestures at the edges of Curtis’s early work are here fully visible, demanding acknowledgement. These contemporary photographs, most importantly, speak volumes about how Native people *did not disappear*. They are reviving Native populations, cultures, languages. Native presence and Native art, as acts of survivance, negate the narrative Curtis’s photographs echoed and amplified a hundred years ago. Like Brings Plenty’s poem, the exhibit told a new story, a Native story of survival and persistence, perseverance despite terrible odds.

“Objects have stories”

The ongoing online exhibit “Object Stories” at the Portland Art Museum, not overtly linked to the museum’s Native American collection or exhibits, seeks to explore how people feel about objects that are important to us. The exhibit’s tag line tells visitors: “Objects have stories. Tell us yours” (“About”). “Object Stories” features videos in which a person describes an object and why it is important to them. In some videos, staff members point out the compelling features of a favorite item in the museum’s collection; in others, members of the public talk about a favorite object from home. The objects cover a wide range of categories: paintings, a purse, a contemporary reproduction of a medieval musical instrument, ceramic figurines, a pair of pants.

The variety is stunning, and invites the viewer to think about the range of objects to which we give meaning—not just works of art, but the everyday things around us.

In online materials, the exhibit is described as “an open-ended exploration of the relationship between people and things, the Museum and the community, and the subjective and objective” (“About”). The exhibit seeks to encourage museumgoers to rethink the relationship between viewer and object: “By [...] calling attention to the things we overlook in our lives, Object Stories ruminates on the ways objects make us as fully as we make objects, and the myriad ways objects speak to and shape who we are—our ideas, emotions, values, relationships, and aesthetics” (“About”). In this way, the museum makes patrons into co-curators of the exhibit, and storytellers in their own right, rather than passive consumers of art. So, in addition to rethinking their relationships to objects, the museum asks visitors to rethink their relationship to the museum. Though Brings Plenty’s poem appears as one of the stories in “Object Stories,” the exhibit as a whole does not focus on Native objects, and does not overtly engage questions about acquisition of museum objects, or the relationship between Native communities, their objects, and the museum.

However, the connections between museum objects and Native people are more overtly shown through a subset of the Object Stories collection, “Listening to the Ancestors,” a project that arose from a collaboration between the Portland Art Museum and the Native American Youth Association Family Center’s Early College Academy in Portland. In this project, Native high-school-age students chose an object in the museum’s Native American collection, conducted research on it, and presented their information in a video similar to the ones in the rest of the Object Stories exhibit (“Listening”). In addition to the benefits of giving high school students some experience in researching, writing, and presenting information to the public, the project resulted in other benefits as well. According to a brief audio commentary from Deana Dartt on the PAM web site, those benefits extend to the museum and its visitors, who gain in hearing “alternative voices” in the information provided about the object (Dartt, “About”). And there are less obvious benefits to the students, among them cultural pride (Dartt, “About”).

Dartt is most likely pointing to the same studies cited in the White House’s *2014 Native Youth Report*, studies that suggest “incorporating Native languages and culture into academic settings can improve educational engagement and outcomes” (Executive 20). One other thing to note: most of the programs connecting Native children to their cultures are located on or near

reservations; it is highly unlikely that urban schools would be able or willing to add such material into their curriculum. So the project at the PAM was a unique way to address the needs of urban Native youth. It is not difficult to imagine that if a young adult feels pride in her culture—if she admires the art and science and philosophy created by her ancestors—she feels better as a human being and wants to learn more. In this scenario, museum objects are much more than beautiful things, aesthetic expression; they make it possible for young Native people to see their lives as worthwhile. The objects come alive, and help people.

Conclusion: what poems can do

Because it is included in a museum exhibit, the poem “Little, Cultural, Teapot Curio Exposes People” becomes a way to make change, to speak in the museum against the “normal” practices of objectifying Native people, to inform an audience about the truth of Native art and knowledge. In that place, the poem becomes a survivance story—a way to recover Native knowledge *as knowledge*, to recognize the technical and artistic skill of ancestors, and to honor the ways in which they changed what they were making yet kept alive their relationships with the natural world (however limited, however damaged, however hemmed in). They made do and made art; they continued forward and survived.

Brings Plenty’s poem has brought me this idea, which I am sharing with you, hoping to give it breath and life: even when it is appropriate and legal that a museum own and display an object, we need for that object to be accessible to the people who made it, and to their descendants, as a way of continuing culture. It is not just sacred objects that need to be reconnected to their people, as Brings Plenty’s poem shows us. The poem does the work of revealing the true import of this teapot basket codex, and connecting its technology and its philosophy to its people so that future generations can keep these alive. If the Tlingit descendants of the basket’s maker cannot get the object back, at least a Native person’s voice can say what that object means and why it is important—not for its aesthetic value to a white collector, but for its expression of complex relationships between human generations, some of whom will never meet each other, and between humans and the plants that supply them with the means to live. It can speak about sophisticated knowledge, and values of reciprocity and beauty.

Reconnecting people with objects so that the people can regain or relearn ways of life lost to colonization can take many forms. Sometimes it happens through legislation; sometimes it

happens through policy changes at museums. And sometimes it happens through literary art, through a poem whose words create a survivance story of relationships between objects, people, values, land. A poem can give objects and people a voice to tell their stories so their stories can come true.

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Notes

¹ What was destroyed: 40 out of 45 homes, a building that stored food and heating oil, and all the canoes on the beach (109). In other words, the attack destroyed their shelter, their food, their heat in the wintertime, and their means of survival.

² I first learned of Baca’s book through Haas’s article, which also compares wampum belts to Maya codices.

³ Baca points out that, during the era of conquest, in addition to ordering the destruction of codices, the invaders ordered new codices to be created that presented knowledge according to European ways of thinking (73). One duty of the people creating these new works “was to reconstruct Mesoamerican memory by literally rewriting codices that had been systematically destroyed” (73). And further: “Under Spanish rule, the early colonial codices were converted to something closer to ‘artifacts’ instead of the living commemorative manuscripts they once were in the hands of the *Amoxoaque* and their fellow performers” (73-74). This process reminds me of what happened with many objects that were acquired by museums: they became overwritten and redefined by the meaning that outsiders placed on them.

⁴ Busby notes that the weavers of most baskets collected in the 19th and 20th centuries are unknown; it was not common until recently to keep track of who had made the piece.

⁵ There are many resources available on the history of museums and exhibitions. Here are some that I have found particularly helpful, in addition to the works of Lonetree and Erikson: the essays in Mihesuah, *Repatriation Reader*; Riegel, “Into the Heart of Irony”; Simpson, “Native American Museums and Cultural Centres”; and Sleeper-Smith, *Contesting Knowledge*. Also notable are *Exhibiting Cultures*, ed. Karp and Lavine; Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*; and Clifford, *Routes*.

⁶ Hanson’s book includes journals written by Warren as well as an introductory essay to the volume. Hanson explains that “Because the property was destined for destruction [under orders

by Harney], it could not have been considered stealing to take it as loot of war” (16). Hanson also speculates on the sources of Warren’s later regret over participating in the expeditions.

⁷ Suzan Shown Harjo tells a number of remarkable stories in the article “Protecting Native American Remains, Burial Grounds, and Sacred Places: Panel Discussion.” See Riding In et al.

⁸ Busby also cautions that there may have been much older examples that disintegrated because they’re made out of organic material, and that archaeologists are always finding more things, so it is plausible that even older examples could be found someday (23).

⁹ Lonetree points out the complex status of items made for the tourist market: they were “objects that tribal communities either sold or voluntarily parted with... However, even when objects were sold voluntarily, we must remember the deeper historical context. Extreme poverty and ongoing colonial oppression permeated tribal life at the time, as it does for many Native people today” (12).

¹⁰ When I asked Dartt if she thought that some of the PAM’s more innovative practices were possible because it is an *art* museum rather than a *history* or *anthropology* museum, she said: absolutely yes (Dartt, personal interview). Indeed, art museums have been engaged in presenting Native art that decolonizes the space of the museum for decades, most notably in the work of James Luna (“Artifact Piece,” “Take a Picture with a Real Indian,” and many others) and Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco (“The Couple in the Cage”).

¹¹ Dartt’s contributions to the PAM were significant and numerous. According to a retired museum director who attended Dartt’s send-off celebration, her accomplishments as recognized at that celebration include: adding 300 objects to the Native American collection; indigenizing the curatorial care of objects, including implementing ritual to honor ancestors in the curatorial process; establishing a Native American advisory board and expanding the Native American council to support programs; establishing the Center for contemporary Native American Art (the new gallery on the 3rd floor); securing a \$1 million endowment for Native American art; securing a \$325,000 NEH grant for “Art of Resilience,” a Tlingit art exhibit (with catalog book and programming through 2018); creating alliances between the museum and regional educators (Smith).

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