COPPER ONTOLOGY:
BEING, BEINGS, AND BELONGINGS

by

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Abstract

Striking stone against metal, Kwak'waka'wakw hereditary chief and carver Beau Dick (1955-2017) and his companions broke the Haida copper, Taaw on the steps of the Canadian Parliament buildings in 2014. This act was a call to action in dialogue with the Indigenous grassroots movement, Idle No More, and a revival of a shaming rite prohibited for over 60 years under the Indian Act. Following their journey to Ottawa, Taaw and the other coppers were displayed in the University of British Columbia Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery's 2016 exhibition, Lalakenis/All Directions: A Journey of Truth and Unity, described as both cultural belongings and living beings. The categories of belonging and being communicate ongoing and active relationships between the coppers and First Nations communities, as well as their statuses as sentient entities. Endowed with supernatural power, or 'nawalakw in Kwak'wala, coppers occupy a central position within potlatch ceremonies. While the term ‘belonging’ could be said to have imposed Western property language and objecthood on the coppers, the term ‘being’ introduced the coppers as active subjects in the copper-breaking ceremony. Since the nineteenth century, anthropologists have studied coppers as both economic property and animate objects in the potlatch system. A discussion of coppers as living beings can also be situated within a recent return to animism in anthropology and a wider rethinking of human/nonhuman categories in new materialism and posthumanist theories. Locating the Lalakenis exhibition within the ongoing debate over the display of sacred materials, I propose an ontology of coppers, beings and belongings in the intercultural public spaces of the National and Provincial capitals and the Belkin Gallery.


Lay Summary

This thesis examines Kwak’waka’wakw hereditary chief and carver Beau Dick’s (1955-2017) copper-breaking ceremony enacted in front of the Canadian Parliament buildings in 2014. Described as both symbols of justice and living beings by Beau Dick, these broken coppers were displayed in the 2016 exhibition, Lalakenis/All Directions: A Journey of Truth and Unity at the University of British Columbia Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. An investigation of existing scholarship on coppers reveals a divide between their meaning and role in First Nations communities and their portrayal by non-Indigenous scholars.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Katherine Damon.
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1 Introduction

Journeying from the University of British Columbia (UBC) First Nations Longhouse in Vancouver to the Parliament of Canada in Ottawa, Kwakwaka’wakw hereditary chief and artist Beau Dick and his companions broke the Haida copper Taaw in a copper-breaking ceremony on July 27, 2014. In a statement read before the ceremony they declared:

On this day we invoke our culture bringing forward a copper ritual, seldom seen outside of our homelands…The copper symbolizes our wealth and everything that is dear to us…In breaking this copper we confront the tyranny of the government of Canada who has forsaken human rights and turned its back on nature in the interests of the almighty dollar.¹

In fracturing the Taaw, Beau Dick condemned the Canadian government for its broken promises with First Nations communities and the ongoing exploitation of the environment, juxtaposing First Nations copper and ceremonial wealth with the economy of the ‘almighty dollar.’ This ceremony followed Beau Dick’s breaking of the Kwakwaka’wakw copper Nunmgala in front of the British Columbia parliament buildings in Victoria the previous year, an event in dialogue with Idle No More, an “Indigenous mass movement” of rallies, teach-ins, and social media action across Canada protesting the treatment of First Nations communities and the expanding reaches of neo-colonialism.² In breaking copper, Beau Dick revived a traditional shaming rite, once banned by the Indian Act for over sixty years under the 1884 amendment prohibiting potlatches.³ Bringing a community-based ceremony into the public spaces of the parliament buildings, Beau Dick presented coppers as not merely objects of wealth but as ‘symbols of justice’ and ‘living

beings’ challenging an ontological divide of object and subject, human and nonhuman found in much of the existing scholarship on coppers.⁴

Beau Dick’s description of the copper Taaw echoes wider understandings of coppers within Kwakwaka’wakw, Haida, and other First Nations and Native American ontologies, as materials and entities at once economic, symbolic, spiritual and living. Shield-shaped, anthropomorphic in structure, and formed from copper metal, coppers are known by a variety of names: ƛaq’wa in Kwakwaka’wakw communities, t’aaguu in Haida communities, and tināa in Tlingit communities.⁵ While they vary in origin, shape, and personality, coppers commonly occupy a central position in potlatch ceremonies within many communities. Meaning ‘to give’ in Chinook, the term potlatch refers to diverse ceremonies that can mark a transferal of power, the naming of a child, a marriage, or a death.⁶ The prerogative of chiefs, coppers are at times gifted, broken, or repaired at potlatches by individuals with the hereditary right to possess and circulate them. While coppers can be broken into fragments in order to distribute them to guests as a gift or payment, they can also be broken in order to shame or challenge a rival as demonstrated by Beau Dick.⁷ The breaking of a copper becomes more poignant when it is understood as a living being, named and distinct. Among Kwakwaka’wakw communities, coppers are thought to

possess ‘nawalakw, or supernatural power, moving them beyond copper material to copper beings.⁸ In Kwak’wala, the term ƛaq’wa refers to both copper and blood, emphasizing the living statuses of coppers.⁹ Beau Dick described copper as “the blood, the life veins of the earth,” indicating that coppers are not only alive but give life to the land.¹⁰ The breaking of the copper Taaw thus takes on more significant meaning when understood not only as a symbolic action but as the fragmenting of a living being.

In 2016, the Taaw and other items present at the copper-breaking ceremony returned to Vancouver to be displayed in the Lalakenis/All Directions: A Journey of Truth and Unity exhibition at the UBC Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Arranged in mimetic dialogue with video footage from the copper-breaking, Taaw and the other coppers, masks, and regalia were neither labeled nor attributed in the gallery space. Rather, in the introductory text, the Belkin Gallery described the assemblage as composed of sacred objects, some of which were “considered to be sentient beings.”¹¹ In the course of the exhibition, the Belkin Gallery also adopted the term “cultural belongings,” as introduced by Jordan Wilson, of Musqueam and European descent, when he co-curated the čəsqənəʔəm, the city before the city exhibition at the

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⁹ On the U’mista Cultural Centre’s website, coppers are referred to as ƛaq’wa in “Potlatches.” Carol Jopling, by contrast, writes that the Kwak’wala term for copper is tlaq, 17. Anne Marie Goodfellow recorded the Kwak’wala word as ƛaq’wa in her book, Talking in Context: Language and identity in Kwakwaka’wakw Society (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 96. Goodfellow used the lambda symbol to represent an unvoiced lateral affricate rather than a ‘tl’ as used by scholars such as Jopling and Franz Boas. I will use the term ƛaq’wa from now on.


UBC Museum of Anthropology (MOA) in 2015. While this term emphasized that the displayed objects were the belongings of First Nations communities rather than the property of the Belkin Gallery, cultural belongings can also be understood as a verb or action. The ceremonial breaking of the Taaw copper, for example, indicated its belonging within Haida culture and the land. In light of this discussion, I will refer to the coppers as belonging-beings when referencing the copper-breakings and the Lalakenis exhibition. Through an analysis of the Lalakenis exhibition and the exhibition catalogue, featuring essays by Beau Dick, Giindajin Haawasti Guujaaw, the creator of Taaw and the previous President of the Haida Nation, and Wanda Nanibush, an Anishinaabe-kwe writer and curator who was present at the copper-breaking, I will examine coppers as both ‘sentient beings’ and ‘cultural belongings.’

Complex and enigmatic, coppers have intrigued and perplexed non-Indigenous scholars from the nineteenth century into the present. In early ethnographic accounts of Indigenous communities in the Northwest Coast, anthropologists like Franz Boas offered both economic and mythological interpretations of coppers. Depicted in terms of value and property, coppers were seen as central items in the potlatch, a gift-giving economy at odds with the Euro-American economic system. In contrast, Indigenous accounts of coppers as living beings were often

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12 Jordan Wilson, “čəsnaʔəm, the city before the city” (panel discussion, What’s At Stake? Intertexual Indigenous Knowledges Program, Vancouver, BC, February 4, 2017).
classified as ‘myths.’ While the anthropological categories of economic and animate echo Beau Dick’s description of coppers as at once symbols of wealth and living beings, the designation of ‘myth’ reveals a disconnect between non-Indigenous interpretation and Indigenous ontologies. An examination of Taaw and the copper-breaking ceremony could thus be said to critique the ontological divide of object and subject, human and nonhuman found in anthropological interpretations of coppers.

An understanding of coppers as both material and spiritual, symbolic and alive, can also be situated within a recent return to animism in anthropology, and a wider rethinking of human/nonhuman categories in new materialist and posthumanist theories. A foundational concept within anthropology, animism was first theorized by Edward B. Tylor in 1871 to describe the ‘primitive’ attribution of a soul or spirit to humans and nonhumans. In returning to animism, contemporary scholars such as Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have proposed a rethinking of nature and culture in ‘Western’ scholarship. Descola and Viveiros de Castro respectively describe humans and nonhumans as sharing a spirit and culture, differing in their

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14 Boas categorized the accounts he recorded on living coppers as myths, as evident by the title of his work The Mythology of the Bella Coola Indians. Carol Jopling (1989) also differentiated between the economic and mythological meaning of coppers throughout her work. While he did not use the term myth or mythological, Marcel Mauss too examined coppers as both economic and living in his book, The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West, 1966 [1925]).


natural bodies. While these theories could be said to align with Indigenous beliefs that coppers belong in Indigenous cultures as living and sacred beings, they differ in relation to nature and the body. As Beau Dick and his companions indicate in their essays, coppers have not only a cultural relationship with humans but a corporeal connection. In contrast to animism, new materialism and vital materialism allow for a more material interpretation of coppers, suggesting that humans and nonhumans share agentive and lively matter. While new materialism and vital materialism reject a Cartesian divide of inert material and thinking subject, when applied to coppers, these theories fail to account for the spiritual and cultural relationship between humans and copper beings within Indigenous ontologies. Like animism and new materialism, posthumanism critiques the anthropocentrism of ‘Western’ humanist thought, contending that humans and technologies coevolved. An understanding of coppers as a technology, like new materialism, does not encompass their belonging and being within First Nations and Native American cultures, however. While animism, new materialism, and posthumanism each offer a reconsideration of human and nonhuman categories, the distance between these theories and First Nations understandings of coppers expose the continuing dangers of universalizing or disregarding Indigenous ontologies within academia.

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19 Coole and Frost, 7-8. Descartes’ ‘I think, therefore I am,’ was decidedly anthropocentric and does not allow for lively matter.
20 Cary Wolfe, ed., What is Posthumanism? (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
While not comprehensive, this overview of existing scholarship on coppers and human/nonhuman categories provides context for the challenges and controversies Beau Dick faced in bringing a sacred and guarded tradition of copper-breaking into the public spheres of the Provincial and National capitals and the Belkin Gallery. While potlatch ceremonies continued in secret during the potlatch ban of the Indian Act, after the law was rescinded in 1951 Kwakwaka'wakw elders prohibited copper-breaking at the opening of the Alert Bay Big House in 1963. At times akin to wishing someone dead, copper-breaking is still considered too “hostile” an act to be allowed in Alert Bay potlatches. Through breaking copper in Ottawa and Victoria, Beau Dick thus not only publicized a community-based ceremony but revived an act banned in some communities. In light of its public context, the copper-breaking was not only ceremony, but performance art, and political activism. Bought, stolen, and collected since the nineteenth century, the display of the coppers in the Belkin Gallery was also controversial among a number of First Nations communities. While Beau Dick condemned the holding of coppers in museum and private collections around the world and the commodification of First Nations art, he collaborated on the Lalakenis exhibition and displayed his own work in a number of museums and galleries including the MOA, the Contemporary Art Gallery in 2004, the 17th Biennale of Sydney, Australia in 2007, and documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel in 2017.

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21 Webster, 236.
22 “Potlatch,” U’mista Cultural Centre.
commodification, the controversy of displaying coppers can be further understood through a discussion of sentiency. If coppers are considered living beings in a mythological sense, as held by some anthropologists, then their display can be viewed largely in terms of property, the belongings of First Nations individuals and communities. If coppers are understood as living sentient beings, however, as discussed by Beau Dick and presented in the Lalakenis exhibition, their display and sometimes captivity in museums and galleries takes on greater significance. In dialogue with the display of belonging-beings, Beau Dick and other First Nations artists have introduced various modes of Indigenous resistance, including Métis scholar David Garneau’s concept of ‘screen objects’ or ‘artifakes,’ non-sentient objects that resemble sacred and sentient objects.24 Referencing anthropologist Annette Weiner’s concept of ‘keeping-while-giving’ in her discussion of inalienable possessions, I suggest that the coppers were ‘hiding-while-showing’ in the Lalakenis exhibition, their meaning and place within Kwakwâkâ’wakw and other First Nations ontologies largely hidden from non-Indigenous audiences.25

Central figures in Beau Dick’s copper-breaking in Ottawa and Victoria and in First Nations and Native American potlatches, coppers challenge an ontological divide of object/subject, human/nonhuman, and belongings/beings. This heterogeneity recalls anthropologist Nicholas J. Saunders’ use of the word “polysemic” to describe obsidian, a substance at once spiritual, economic, and agentive within multi-sensorial Mesoamerican ontologies.26 As symbols

of wealth and justice and living beings, coppers are polysemic belonging-beings within
Indigenous ontologies. The format of this thesis parallels my own encounter with coppers, as a
non-Indigenous settler student, at the Lalakenis exhibition in 2016. In presenting and
juxtaposing Beau Dick and other participants’ writing on coppers with text from the Lalakenis
exhibition and a survey of existing scholarship on coppers, animism, new materialism, and
posthumanism, I examine existing divides between Indigenous understandings of coppers and
human/nonhuman relationships and non-Indigenous interpretations.
2 Copper-Breaking and Copper Display

2.1 Awalakenis I and II

A Kwakwa’kwakw carver and artist-in-resident at the University of British Columbia, Beau Dick had dreamed of breaking copper on the steps of the British Columbia Parliament building since he was a boy. In his essay, “The Beginning of the Journey,” Dick recounted a story about his uncle, Jimmy Dawson who told the young artist, “One day, we’ll carve a canoe and we’ll take our coppers down to Victoria. We’ll paddle right into the harbour and bring them to the steps and I’ll break one there.”

Born in 1955 in Alert Bay, a Kwag-guluth community, Beau Dick waited many years before breaking copper. He became a carver, assisting his father and grandfather, Jimmy Dick, and later apprenticed with Kwakwa’kwakw carver, Tony Hunt in Victoria, and renowned carvers, Doug Cranmer, Bill Reid, and Robert Davidson. While Dick was primarily a carver, he also worked in the mediums of drawing and painting. His work has been displayed at the MOA, the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and most recently at documenta 14, an international art exhibition based in Athens and Kassel.

In 2013, Beau Dick realized his uncle Jimmy Dawson’s vision, leading a political-ceremonial march, Awalakenis I, to the British Columbia Legislature in Victoria. He recalled speaking with his daughters, Geraldine and Linnea Dick about Idle No More, an Indigenous

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grassroots movement of rallies and social media action in Canada.\(^{29}\) Invigorated by the reach and energy of the movement, Beau Dick and his daughters organized and led a march from Quatsino to Victoria on Vancouver Island from February 2, 2013 to February 10, 2013. Joined by family, friends, community members, and supporters, they visited a number of First Nation communities along the way. In Victoria, on the steps of the British Columbia Legislature, Beau Dick broke the Kwakw̱aka’wakw copper *Nunngala*, to shame the Canadian government and raise awareness of the *Idle No More* movement. A traditional ceremony practiced by Kwakw̱aka’wakw, Haida, and other Northwest Coast First Nations and Native American communities, the copper-breaking showed “a ruptured relationship in need of repair…passing the burden of wrongs done to First Nations people from them to the Government of Canada.”\(^{30}\)

With *Awalaskenis I*, Dick publicly revived a copper-breaking as part of local systems of law and ritual that had been suppressed and circumscribed by colonial powers.

In 2014, Beau Dick began his second journey, *Awalaskenis II: Journey of Truth and Unity*, taking the message of *Awalaskenis I* from the BC Provincial government to the National government in Ottawa. Dick and 21 companions left the First Nations Longhouse at University of British Columbia on July 2nd, bringing the copper *Taaw* and other belonging-beings. Following *Awalaskenis I*, Giindajin Haawasti Guujaaw, a carver and the previous President of Haida Nation, created the copper *Taaw*, urging Beau Dick to break copper again, this time in Ottawa.\(^ {31}\) Visiting sixteen First Nations communities along the journey, the coppers were quenched and washed, their value increased through ceremony. Dick and his companions

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\(^{29}\) “The Story,” IdleNoMore.ca.


\(^{31}\) Ibid.
brought along additional ceremonial items and were gifted objects by communities to participate at the copper-breaking event. On July 27, 2014, the company arrived in Ottawa, joined by local First Nations communities to march to the steps of the Parliament of Canada. There, Dick led a copper-breaking ceremony in order to “raise awareness about the plight of the environment and to challenge elected officials to attend to the relationship between the federal government and the First Nations people.” The copper Taaw was broken in two places, one to shame the national government and the other to condemn the provincial government’s lack of response after the copper-breaking in Victoria.

2.2 Lalakenis/All Directions: A Journey of Truth and Unity

Following Awalaskenis II, the UBC Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery collaborated with Beau Dick in the creation of the Lalakenis/All Directions: A Journey of Truth and Unity exhibition in 2016, bringing the participants and documentation of the copper-breaking ceremony into the gallery. The display featured items that had journeyed with Beau Dick on Awalaskenis I and II, including the coppers and many of the masks that Beau Dick had carved with family and friends. Lalakenis also documented the journeys through photographs, videos, maps, posters, banners, and Idle No More t-shirts. Upon Beau Dick’s request, an additional vitrine featured a display of pennies, their copper bodies and currency value in dialogue with, and perhaps in opposition to, the broken coppers. Two ceremonial curtains were also hung in the main gallery that had been created for a large feast hosted by Beau Dick before the exhibition opening. The central gallery

32 Watson and Brown, 3.
was dedicated to *Awalaskenis II*, while the western side gallery documented *Awalaskenis I*, the journey traced in thick dark lines on the wall with red place names designating the communities that Beau Dick and his companions had visited. Here, the copper-breaking was examined not through objects but through video footage from Victoria and an interview with Linnea Dick.

Upon entering the main exhibition, visitors were advised that they are crossing into “an active ceremonial space containing sacred objects and presences.” There was a proposed meeting of the secular and the spiritual as the visitor was asked to abide by both typical gallery guidelines, such as no food, drink, or touching of objects, as well as requested to “please bring good energy into this space.” In her article, “Vancouver Entrances: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Beau Dick,” Tarah Hogue contrasted the “quietness” of Lalakenis’ entrance signs to the “loudness” of the MOA’s Unceded Territories exhibition, in which a large video projection of Yuxweluptun confronted visitors, instructing them on the subjects and politics of his work. There was a ‘quietness’ in both the tone and message of the Lalakenis signs as the meaning of the phrases “active ceremonial space,” ‘sacred objects,’ ‘presences’ and ‘good energy’ were not expounded upon within the exhibition, which included few labels save an introductory text outside the gallery. While Hogue suggested that the sign indicated a “temporary conflation of a contemporary art gallery with an Indigenous spiritual practice,” the ‘spiritualism’ was declared but not described, perhaps intentionally drawing a line between participants and nonparticipants, Indigenous and non-Indigenous visitors. Indeed the minimal text throughout

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34 Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, “Lalakenis/All Directions.”
35 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
Lalakenis could be said to allude to the guarded tradition and meaning of copper-breaking ceremonies, made public but not explicitly explained by Beau Dick. This minimality, however, could also be described as an “aesthetic or formalist perspective,” as termed by Michael Ames, the past director of MOA, to describe art galleries that presented ethnographic collections as fine art without contextualization. The Belkin, like many contemporary art galleries, rarely includes didactic panels or any text beyond an introduction and object labels in its exhibitions. The lack of text in Lalakenis thus could be in accordance with gallery protocol rather than First Nations protocol.

Arranged to echo video footage of the ritual in Ottawa, the belonging-beings were roped off from visitors, placed on the gallery floor on the recommissioned WE ARE SORRY banner by Cathy Busby. Busby had created the original banner for the copper-breaking ceremony in Ottawa, printing in bold letters past Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s public apology to First Nations communities for the Canadian Government’s part in the history of residential schools. Beau Dick’s choice to break the copper on top of the banner spoke to the hollowness of this apology, which did not mend the government’s ‘broken promises’ with First Nations communities or the continuing exploitation of unceded Indigenous land. This recalled Métis scholar David Garneau’s use of the term ‘conciliation’ rather than ‘reconciliation’ to describe the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, occurring concurrently to the copper-breaking. While Busby’s original banner was never recovered after Beau Dick and

his companions wrapped it around the copper fragments and delivered the bundle to the government, the recommissioned banner brought the critique of Harper’s words into the gallery.

On the steps of the parliament buildings and in the gallery there was a sense of movement as items such as the masks were worn during both the copper-breaking ceremony and the Lalakenis opening ceremony. In their introduction to the accompanying catalogue, Scott Watson and Lorna Brown described Lalakenis as ‘destabilizing’ the conventional notion of an exhibition as a “stable and fixed selection of materials.”40 Unlabeled and placed at ground-level, the coppers, hamat’sa masks, drums, and regalia, were ‘unfixed’ due to their continued use by Beau Dick and his companions when they were needed by the community. During a student tour of the Lalakenis exhibition, Registrar Teresa Sudeyko recounted the nontypical procedures involved in documenting the belonging-beings in the exhibition, and the adaptations she made to gallery protocol.41 Given only estimates of the number of objects to be displayed, she quickly took notes and photographs during the day of the installation, knowing that the assemblage was likely to change. As with other exhibitions, Beau Dick also requested that the belonging-beings remain unattributed, emphasizing the “collective spirit” of mask-carving.42 While the broken copper, Taaw was attributed to Guujaaw in the exhibition catalogue, it too remained unattributed in the gallery, perhaps reinforcing the ‘collective spirit’ of the journeys and copper-breaking

40 Watson and Brown, 14.
41 Teresa Sudeyko in discussion with the author during a student tour at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, January 18, 2016.
ceremonies. The lack of labels could also be said to subvert the display protocols of the Western gallery system.

While the belonging-beings were neither identified nor described in the Lalakenis exhibition, from a museological perspective a sense of protocol was suggested through their display and the accompanying footage of the copper-breaking ceremony and the exhibition opening ceremony. The protocol surrounding the hamat'sa masks, for example, varied between their use during the opening ceremony and their subsequent display in the gallery. Held aloft by Awalaskenis participants during the opening ceremony, their mouths opening and closing, the hamat'sa masks actively moved through the gallery. Following the ceremony, the beaks of the birds were tied shut with silk ribbons to prevent them from clapping with hunger in the night in accordance with Kwakwaka'wakw protocol. The mobility of the hamat'sa masks was thus remembered, or perhaps prevented, in the exhibition. Indeed, the tied beaks suggested not only a sense of protocol but recalled the gallery sign, “Lalakenis...is an active ceremonial space containing sacred objects and presences.” Objects or presences, or both, the hamat'sa masks and their companions in the gallery were also “attended to” throughout the length of the exhibition by Gyauustees, meaning ‘The one who gets things done,’ a member of the Nuu-chah-nulth Snuneymuxw Skokomish Kwakwaka’wakw communities and a key member in Awalaskenis II journey.

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43 Museum of Anthropology, “Masks of the Supernatural.” MOA includes several hamat'sa masks with accompanying text noting the protocol. It is of note that Belkin staff did not initially tie the beaks shut, but were prompted to soon after.  
44 Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, “Lalakenis/All Directions.”  
45 Watson and Brown, 14.
From the opening of the Lalakenis exhibition to the publication of the exhibition catalogue, the language used to describe the coppers, masks, rattles, and regalia shifted. Beyond the brief mention of ‘sacred objects and presences,’ the gallery included an introductory text describing the “many artists and communities [who] contributed sacred objects collected from up and down the continent — some of them considered to be sentient beings — to be carried to the copper-breaking event.”46 This suggested that while all of the objects in the central gallery were sacred, only some were sentient, a category left undefined and undesignated. While the tied beaks of the hamat’sa masks provided a visual cue to their mobility, their potential sentience, there was no further specific designations among, or discrimination between, the objects. The language surrounding the Lalakenis exhibition evolved following the two-day collaboration between the Belkin and the grunt gallery, “Cutting Copper: Indigenous Resurgent Practice,” a series of workshops and performances following the exhibition opening.47 In the course of these discussions, Wanda Nanibush, Tannis Nielsen, and other participants suggested that the term ‘belongings’ replace ‘objects’ in the exhibition. “Cultural belongings,” as introduced by Jordan Wilson, works outside of an anthropological and art historical framework of artifact and art, communicating ongoing relationships with First Nations communities.48 In their introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Scott Watson and Lorna Brown note their incorporation of the term in a footnote, remarking, “while not perfect…‘belongings’ reveals a connection to a people or place that ‘objects’ fails to do.”49 The terms ‘objects,’ ‘treasures,’ ‘presences,’ and ‘sentient beings’

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46 Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, “Lalakenis/All Directions.” My emphasis.
48 Wilson, “cəsnaʔəm, the city before the city.”
49 Watson and Brown, 15.
were all used, however, throughout the catalogue in addition to ‘belongings,’ suggesting an instability in these categories.

2.3 Coppers as Cultural Belongings and Sentient Beings

Neither art nor artifact, the copper Taaw was described as both a ‘cultural belonging’ and a ‘sentient being’ within the Lalakenis exhibition. The ritual use of Taaw in ceremony and its potential movement in and out of the gallery substantiated its belonging within Haida culture and the land. Jordan Wilson’s category of ‘cultural belonging,’ thus emphasized the copper’s ongoing relationships with living communities. One could argue that the term ‘sentient being’ further removed the copper from art/artifact categorization as it challenged an ontological divide of object and subject, inanimate and animate. As Beau Dick described in his essay for the exhibition, coppers are both “symbols of justice” and “living beings” with names, histories and values.50 In Kwak’wala, coppers, as well as other belonging-beings, possess ’nawalakw, or supernatural power, moving them beyond merely ‘symbols’ to ‘beings.’51 Within the complex and varied Kwakwaka’wakw, Haida, and other coastal First Nations systems of the potlatch, breaking a copper can thus be both a formal indictment as well as the fragmenting of a living being. Upon creating Taaw, Guujaaw named the copper after oolichan oil, a substance harvested by many First Nations communities through traditional and sustainable fishing practices.52 Guujaaw positioned the fish oil, a valued gift in potlatch ceremonies, in opposition to the oil of the Alberta tar sands which release dangerous toxins into the air and Athbasca river,

51 Willie, “K’wik’waladlakw.”
52 Guujaaw, 27.
endangering over 26 First Nations communities. The naming of Taaw after the oolichan oil thus signaled the economic and live presence of the copper, named and sentient.

Marked by two rectangular scars recalling the copper-breaking ceremony in Ottawa, the copper Taaw rested on the gallery floor in the Lalakenis exhibition. Russet, unpainted, and smooth, the body of Taaw was fractured, amputated fragments missing from its lower right and upper left. Within the gallery, Taaw was accompanied by six other coppers, including Nunmgała from the copper-breaking in Victoria. Varying in size, shape, and color, some unmarked, others painted, the coppers were neither named nor attributed in the gallery, interspersed with masks, a drum, a blanket, and other items from the journeys. Recognizable because of its missing fragments, Taaw was not emphasized as the specific copper from Awalaskenis II. Accompanying video footage, however, showed the copper at the centre of ceremonial action, men pounding a shaped stone onto a hammer to break off a section of its metal. Across from Taaw in the gallery, Nunmgała was too unmarked, identifiable by a missing rectangular piece to the upper right corner of its body. The placement of Taaw and Nunmgała, unmarked among the other coppers and belonging-beings in the Lalakenis exhibition, could be said to foreground the ‘collective spirit’ of the copper-breaking, their ‘belonging’ in ceremony and community. As I will examine, however, within First Nations epistemologies, coppers have individual histories, names, and identities. While the Lalakenis exhibition may have hinted that the gallery included ‘sentient

beings,’ a further investigation of *Taaw* offers a more nuanced portrait of coppers as named, living, and sacred entities.

Displayed but unaccompanied by didactic panels in the Lalakenis exhibition, the significance, use, and meaning of coppers and copper-breaking was explored in greater detail in the accompanying exhibition catalogue. Beau Dick began his essay, “The Coppers” with a quote by Kwakwaka’wakw scholar, Gloria Cranmer Webster from the 1975 film, *Potlatch...A strict law bids us dance*:

> A sheet of copper — always in this shape — is central to the economic and social system of potlatching. It is a symbol of wealth and power. The metal itself is associated with the wealth of the world beneath the sea. Each copper has its own name, its own history and a value that increases each time it is bought or given away. It carries with it the status of the chiefs who have owned it and stands as a symbol for all previous exchanges. It is spiritual and material… ‘The coppers are real and stay. We are fortunate, where we have come from is wealth.’ From supernatural beings, from people who dance with supernatural forces, from the sea, from villages like this one.54

Complex and enigmatic, Webster’s description evokes the heterogeneity of copper, a material and entity at once economic, ceremonial, symbolic, physical, spiritual and living. This recalls Saunders’ use of the word “polysemic” to describe obsidian in Mesoamerica.55 Like copper, turquoise, jade, and crystal, obsidian was and is culturally significant among many Indigenous communities, used in México sacrifice and by contemporary Mexican artisans. Significantly, Saunders described the obsidian as “natural material transformed into cultural matter,” allowed different forms of agency through its various relationships and uses.56 Copper too originates as a ‘natural material,’ described as the blood of the earth by Beau Dick, crafted into the ‘cultural

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55 Saunders, 221.
56 Ibid., 232-233.
matter’ of coppers which take on agency and are named, exchanged, and sometimes broken.\textsuperscript{57} The distinction between ‘natural material’ and ‘cultural matter’ is neither absolute nor binary, but fluid due to the coppers’ polysemic qualities, at once material and spiritual.

Beyond his inclusion of the Cranmer Webster quote, Beau Dick’s essay on coppers was more political than didactic, reflecting the public and condemnatory nature of the copper-breaking ceremonies in Victoria and Ottawa. He examined copper as a ‘symbol of justice’ in communities before European contact, a central part of the system of laws encompassed in the potlatch, outlawed for over 60 years by the Canadian government. While coppers are used (and participate) in a number of ceremonies during potlatches, such as the naming of a child, Beau Dick sought to revive their use in a shaming rite. He wrote, “The threat of having a copper broken on you in the old days was terrifying to the point where it could kill you.”\textsuperscript{58} In her essay “The Contemporary Potlatch,” Cranmer Webster similarly accentuated the gravity of copper-breaking, equivalent to wanting someone to die.\textsuperscript{59} By centering his discussion on the role of copper in traditional justice systems and the ability of copper to carry out death, Beau Dick emphasized the severity and exigency of his copper breaking against the provincial and national governments. He also denounced Canadian and international museums with coppers in their collections, directly criticizing the “Hull Museum,” the Musée canadien de l’histoire in Quebec for refusing to allow him to view their coppers.\textsuperscript{60} Like the banning of the potlatch, Beau Dick

\textsuperscript{57} Beau Dick in discussion with author, February 10, 2017.
\textsuperscript{58} Beau Dick, “The Coppers,” 23.
\textsuperscript{59} Webster, 236.
\textsuperscript{60} Beau Dick, “The Coppers,” 23.
viewed the withholding of the coppers to be “criminal” in the justice system of the coppers and
the potlatch.  

The polysemic nature of coppers is apparent in Beau Dick’s essay as he described them 
not only as materials and ‘symbols’ but as ‘living beings.’ It is of note that he did not discuss the 
supernatural powers, ‘nawalakw, of coppers, but rather affirmed their sentiency without 
explaining it. In his critique of the Musée canadien de l’histoire he explained that he was 
“bringing the broken copper to go visit the old ones,” emphasizing the proposed meeting of Taaw 
and the older coppers over his own visit. Given Beau Dick’s censure of museums, it is of note 
that he does not discuss the display of the coppers in the Belkin Gallery nor the permanent 
display of those at the MOA. Perhaps the impermanence of the exhibition, his unrestricted 
access to the coppers, and the continued sharing of the copper-breaking ritual distinguished the 
gallery from museum collections of coppers. Beau Dick went into further detail about the origin 
and sentiency of the coppers when I visited him in his studio in March of 2017. He described 
copper as “the blood, the life veins of the earth,” emphasizing the living and lasting relationships 
between copper and the land. As described above, the Kwak’wala word for copper is ḷaq’wa 
meaning ‘blood.’ The life blood of the earth could thus be said to flow through the veins of the 
coppers, affirming their statuses as living, sentient beings. He also described copper sheets 
washing up on shore over 800 years ago from the hulls of Japanese ships, recalling Cranmer 
Webster’s assertion that copper is associated with the “world beneath the sea.”

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
64 Ibid.; Gloria Cranmer Webster also mentioned coppers coming from the sea in the film, Potlatch...A strict law bids us dance, see Beau Dick, “The Coppers,” 22.
have debated the origin of coppers since the 19th century, some citing natural copper sources in the Northwest, others arguing that coppers emerged only after Europeans brought in manufactured metal sheets.\textsuperscript{65} By citing the sea and the Japanese ships, Beau Dick extended the history of coppers far beyond European contact.

Like Beau Dick, Guujaaw, creator of Taaw, presented a similarly polysemic description of the coppers in his essay, “…The Copper” from the exhibition catalogue. Economic, material, and possessing “inmaterial properties,” coppers were both property and named entities in Guujaaw’s poetic stanzas.\textsuperscript{66} While Guujaaw did not discuss the copper as a living being as Beau Dick did, he emphasized its economic role, referencing their Haida name, t’aaguu, the “banking system of our people.”\textsuperscript{67} Guujaaw too positioned the copper-breaking ritual in economic terms:

\begin{quote}
A copper intentionally broken
to provoke, obligate or shame another
can realize a decrease or significant increase in value.
A copper intentionally destroyed or thrown into the briny deep could trigger an intense outlay of property or even bankrupt another…\textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

Here, copper-breaking is presented as more than a shaming rite, but rather as a provocation putting the onus on the Canadian government for a response beyond a formal apology. In his book \textit{All That We Say Is Ours: Guujaaw and the Reawakening of the Haida Nation}, Ian Gill paralleled Guujaaw’s metallurgic repoussé to his political work “\textit{pushing back} against governments, industry, developers and a range of other interests bent on eroding the Haida’s hold

\textsuperscript{65} For a detailed summary of various copper studies see Jopling, “The Coppers of the Northwest Indians.”
\textsuperscript{66} Guujaaw, 26.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid. Recorded in Guujaaw’s original syntax, this quote varies slightly from his discussion of coppers in Collison, 15.
on their land.” Guujaaw’s creation of Taaw and the public copper-breaking ceremony, saw a similar marriage of metal and activism.

While emphasizing the fighting action of breaking copper on the Provincial and National governments like Beau Dick, Wanda Nanibush made further reference to coppers as living entities in her essay “The Coppers Calling: Awalaskenis II: Journey of Truth and Unity.” Nanibush is an “Anishinaabe-kwe image and word warrior, curator and community organizer” who participated at the Awalaskenis II ceremony. The copper-breaking ritual in Ottawa, Nanibush wrote, “release[d] the pain and trauma held in the body through the intense physicality of breaking the copper shields.” Here, she draws attention to the cathartic effect that the ritual had on the participants, some survivors of the residential schools and others victim to intergenerational trauma. This was echoed by Beau Dick’s daughter, Linnea Dick who described the ‘magical’ effects of the copper-breaking in Victoria and the emotional and physical relief and peace she felt subsequently. Nanibush thus emphasized the relationship between coppers and the body, the physical-emotional release experienced by the participants and Taaw’s corporeal fracturing. She continued, “Breaking these coppers, these living beings, is a drastic act that responds to the breaking of our laws.” Again, Nanibush focused on the corporality of the coppers, their breaking made more serious due to their sentience. Similarly the collection and

69 Ian Gill, All That We Say Is Ours: Guujaaw and the Reawakening of the Haida Nation (Madeira Park: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010), 150. Here, Gill makes use of the dual meaning of repoussé, a metalworking technique produced by pounding metal into a shape from the reverse side, and its French meaning, ’to push back.’
72 Linnea Dick, 31-32.
73 Nanibush, “The Coppers Calling,” 70.
display of coppers in museums gains greater gravitas when they are understood as living beings, as Nanibush urged the “return of our coppers, drums and other spirits held hostage in museums worldwide.”

Ames described museums as cannibalistic, sequestering the objects of ‘others’ in glass boxes. As the term cannibal refers to the eating of one’s own kind, Ames could be said to characterize both the museum and the objects as similarly active and alive. As hostages or prey, the containment of coppers in museum collections thus goes beyond stolen property to stolen beings. Nanibush called not only for the repatriation of the coppers to assist in the revival of ceremony in First Nations communities but for the return of stolen land, the “larger justice.” Ultimately, she suggested that the breaking of the copper was not necessarily permanent, as copper fragments can be rejoined and broken relationships healed. She cited Musqueam activist Audrey Siegl who cut a 1980s weaving into fragments at the copper-breaking in Ottawa, resewing it whole upon her return home. Taaw and Numgala remained broken in the Lalakenis exhibition, however, a reminder of the unrepaired and unrestituted relationship between First Nations communities and the government.

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74 Ibid., 71.
75 Ames, 3. Ames drew the metaphor of cannibalism from Jane Tompkins who described the museum as “a kind of charnel house that houses images of living things that have passed away but whose life force still lingers around their remains and so passes itself on to us” in her book, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 188; See also Marc-Olivier Gonseth, Jacques Hainard and Roland Kaehr, *Le Musée Cannibale*, Neuchâtel: Musée d’ethnographie, 2002.
77 Ibid., 68.
3 Coppers in Anthropology

3.1 Coppers as ‘Economic’

Complex and guarded, the significance, use, and meaning of coppers and copper-breaking has been studied and subject to debate among anthropologists and non-Indigenous scholars since the nineteenth century. From Franz Boas’ early ethnographic accounts of the Kwakwaka’wakw to Marcel Mauss’ 1925 publication *The Gift: The Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, many anthropologists have viewed the function of coppers in potlatches from within, or at odds with a European economic system. Scholars have also disputed whether coppers originated pre- or post-contact, as examined by Carol Joplin (1989) in her broad study and metallurgical analysis of coppers in museum collections in Canada and the United States. Anthropologists have largely relegated accounts of the animism or sentiency of coppers as ‘mythological,’ apart from their economic function. Following a history of anthropological interpretation of coppers, I will provide a comparison with the portrayal of coppers in the Lalakenis exhibition. Did the terms ‘belongings’ and ‘beings’ replicate anthropological categories of economics and myth? What forms of ‘epistemic violence’ do anthropologists and other scholars commit when they subsume sentiency into mythology?

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, anthropologists studying First Nations communities of the Northwest Coast made numerous references to coppers in their

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analyses of the potlatch. Gifted, broken, and reconstituted, coppers illustrated the complexity and ‘other-ness’ of the potlatch. Using economic terms, early anthropologists often recorded the exchange value of coppers, referred to as ‘goods,’ forms of ‘wealth,’ or even primitive ‘money’ or ‘currency’ as described by James Deans in 1885. A Scottish ethnologist and collector, Deans valued a two-foot copper as ‘traditionally’ worth fifty blankets, and monetarily worth $500, incorporating coppers into Euro-American economies in both an academic and financial sense. Anthropologists also recorded that coppers were valued in terms of slaves, as American anthropologist John R. Swanton recorded that a Haida copper was worth ten slaves at one time. Copper-breaking too was viewed in value-based terms, as described by Edward Curtis in his 1916 collection of photographs in The Kwakiutl, volume 10 of The North American Indian:

The breaking of a copper is a means of destroying a rival. A fragment is given to the rival, who must then break a copper of equal or greater value and give both pieces to the first man. The contest continues until one or the other has exhausted his resources and is obliged, with great loss of prestige, to admit defeat.

Here, Curtis represented the copper as a resource, a good, an asset valued and manipulated by individuals to express social status. Franz Boas wrote extensively on coppers in his many ethnographic accounts of Kwakwaka’wakw, Haida, Tsimshian, and Nuxalk communities. In his 1895 publication, The Social Organization and Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians, for example, Boas recorded a Kwakwaka’wakw man saying, “We used to fight with bows and

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80 Ibid.
83 Among many publications, Franz Boas wrote Contributions to the Ethnology of the Kwakiutl; “Notes on the Ethnology of British Columbia”; The Mythology of the Bella Coola Indians; The Social Organization and Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians.
arrows, with spears and guns. We robbed each other’s blood. But now we fight with [copper].”

Described here as a surrogate for bows and arrows, and spears and guns, copper was not merely a resource but a weapon in its breaking. As anthropologists commonly referred to coppers as shields, misleading if understood in terms of the use of European shields, this terminology furthered the metaphor of weapon. The mention of blood, however recalls the Kwak’wala dual meaning of the word ƛaq’wa to signify both copper and blood. Perhaps the copper is not a surrogate for a weapon but rather the body, broken and bleeding. This double reading thus indicates the limitations of viewing coppers solely in economic terms.

In his publication, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Marcel Mauss examined coppers as an important part of the potlatch, a system of reciprocity and gift-giving at odds with Euro-American economies. In opposition to a market economy, Mauss presented three “system[s] of total prestations” in Polynesia, Melanesia, and the Northwest Coast in which gift-giving and gift-receiving was structured, prescribed, and all-encompassing. While he emphasized that all three phenomena could only be understood in their legal, religious, economic, and social totalities, Mauss primarily described the potlatch as a ‘gift economy,’ and the coppers as a form of ‘currency.’

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85 Anthropologists are not alone in referring to coppers as shields. While Beau Dick did not use the term, other First Nations individuals such as Haida artist, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas referred to coppers as copper shields as quoted by Nicola Levell in *Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas: The Seriousness of Play* (London: black dog publishing, 2016), 109.

86 Ian Cunnison, “Translator’s Note,” in *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen & West, 1966 [1950]), xi. Cunnison notes that Mauss’ original use of the word *prestation* in French does not translate directly to ‘gift.’ Rather, it means, “any thing or series of things given freely or obligatorily as a gift or in exchange; and includes services, entertainments, etc. as well as material things.”

87 Mauss, 32. Among other scholars, Karl Polanyi also examined the concept of reciprocity, contrasting non-utilitarian economics with the modern market system in *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).
only had barter systems of exchange before contemporary systems of sale, loan, and credit, Mauss argued that Northwest Coast gift economies were in fact ‘complex’ with built-in systems of credit. He contended, “Economic evolution has not gone from barter to sale and from cash to credit. Barter arose from the system of gifts given and received on credit.”88 While Mauss applied Euro-American economic and property language to the potlatch, he disrupted an evolutionary and hierarchical understanding of reciprocity and gift economies.

Mauss was not alone in his fascination with gift economies, his interpretation of the potlatch functioning within wider discussions of reciprocity and inalienability. Annette B. Weiner wrote, “during the rise of capitalism, the give and take of reciprocity took on an almost magical, sacred power among Western economists.”89 The extensive gifting and distribution of goods at potlatches stood in stark contrast to growing industries and mass consumption in Europe and North America. Ethnographer Bronisław Malinowski’s early writing on the ‘Kula Ring’ in the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea, for example, propagated discussions of complex forms of reciprocity, the gift and the counter-gift.90 Weiner noted that Malinowski and Mauss fundamentally disagreed on what motivated individuals to reciprocate gift-giving in the Kula Ring, the former arguing that “custom” elicited the return of a gift while the latter argued that it was the “spirit of the gift” itself.91 Mauss drew parallels with the Northwest Coast writing, “in the things exchanged at a potlatch there is a certain power which forces them to circulate, to be

88 Mauss, 35.
89 Weiner, 2.
given away and repaid.”

Focusing on the power of objects within Northwest Coast communities, Mauss differentiated between “ordinary articles of consumption and distribution” and “valuable family property” such as coppers and blankets, which he described as inalienable. In describing the ‘spirit’ in objects, which could connect to the concept of sentiency, Mauss used coppers as an example of property that was sometimes purposively not exchanged or gifted. He described the breaking of copper or the throwing of copper into the sea as a serious interruption of the gift economy in a ‘war of property.’ According to Mauss, coppers are thus inalienable both as ‘valued family property,’ passed down generations, and through their deliberate breaking or disposal.

3.2 Coppers as ‘Animate’

A discussion of the inalienability of coppers becomes more nuanced when they are understood not as inanimate property but as animate entities. In his seminal publications, Boas examined coppers in both economic and ‘mythological’ terms, using extensive quotes from Kwakwaka’wakw, Haida, Tsimshian, Nuxalk, and Tlingit individuals to demonstrate the diversity of coppers within and between communities. Boas, for example, translated a story recorded by Henry Tate, a Tsimshian man who said, “Our people call this copper ‘living’ copper. They say that spring salmon went up river, and when they reached the deep water at the upper

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92 Mauss, 41.
93 Ibid., 42.
94 Ibid., 37.
part of the river, the salmon became copper.” In Boas and Tate’s 1916 *Tsimshian Mythology*, copper was greatly valued, used by chiefs, and transformative, originating from beavers as well as salmon. Among the Kwakwaka’wakw, Boas recorded that copper emerged from the sea, coming from *Q’lo’mogwa* (Wealthy) also known as *L’a’qwagila* (Copper-Maker), the chief of the ocean, who lives in a copper house, surrounded by coppers. These two accounts are among hundreds of copper stories in Boas’ work from 1887 to 1935, demonstrating the themes of origin, transformation, and animism.

Having conducted no fieldwork of his own, Mauss largely relied on Franz Boas’ writing to discuss coppers as animate. While he used economic terms throughout *The Gift*, within his ‘total’ understanding of the potlatch, Mauss described coppers as “living being[s]” endowed with personalities and spirit. Mauss emphasized the individuality of coppers, each possessing a distinct name and disposition. Referencing Kwakwaka’wakw coppers *Dandalayu* and *Maxtoslem*, Mauss wrote, “a copper talks and grunts, demanding to be given away or destroyed; it is covered with blankets to keep it warm.” Here, the coppers’ demands manifest Mauss’ assertion that reciprocity is motivated by the ‘spirit of the gift’ rather than custom.

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96 Boas and Tate, 272.


98 Mauss, 43.

99 Ibid., 44. In this section Mauss drew from Franz Boas, *The Social Organization*, 622 and *Ethnology of the Kwakiutl*, 882. It is of note that the circular arrangement of the coppers in the Lalakenis exhibition echoed a common arrangement of coppers at potlatches where they are positioned around a fire for warmth.
In a discussion of sentiency, the interconnection between coppers and chiefs goes beyond ownership to relationship. The prerogative of chiefs, coppers can only be gifted, broken, and repaired by select individuals with the hereditary right to possess and circulate them. The connection between copper and chief goes beyond object and agent, however, and can be viewed as a meeting of bodies. In her 1989 article, “The Coppers of the Northwest Indians: Their Origin, Development, and Possible Antecedents,” anthropologist and librarian, Carol Jopling described the physical relationship between Kwakwaka’wakw copper and chief:

A Kwakiutl Copper has a quasi-human form: the upper part, on which the face motif appears is the head; the central T, the spine — “bones of the chief” — and the lower part decorated with ribs the ‘hind end or body.’ The Copper has a name and seems emblematic of the chief, the ancestor of the tribe as well as the man who assumed a high social position by giving a potlatch.  

Anthropomorphic in shape, face, and structure, when understood as sentient the bond between the copper and the chief goes beyond visual analysis to corporeal connection. As the ‘bones of the chief,’ the copper recalls the earlier discussion of ƛaq’wa meaning both copper and blood in Kwak’wala. In this sense, copper breaking takes on a more carnal significance, as the face, ribs, and bones of the copper become fractured. This too connects to Wanda Nanibush’s statement that the breaking of Taaw, “release[d] the pain and trauma held in the body.”  

While Taaw was not painted nor engraved with anthropomorphic features, Nanibush emphasized the interconnection between the body of the copper and the bodies of not just the chief but the other participants. The sentiency of coppers is similarly evident in their naming, lineage, and relationships with chiefs. Coppers receive new names and greater value as they are gifted,

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100 Jopling, 41.
101 Nanibush, “The Coppers Calling,” 70.
acquired, or broken in friendship or rivalry. As a hereditary Kwakw’kwa’wakw chief, Beau Dick had the inherited right to to break coppers, as Kwakw’kwa’wakw copper, Numgala and Haida copper, Taaw were named, washed, and broken during Awalaskenis I and II.

While the anthropologists that I have cited examined coppers as both economic and sentient, at times in similar ways to Beau Dick, Guujaaw, and Wanda Nanibush in the Lalakenis exhibition catalogue, there is a danger and disconnect between anthropological interpretation and Indigenous ontologies. Both Beau Dick and Jopling, for example, described the coming of copper from the sea and the making of coppers from the sheet metal of ships. Jopling, however, differentiated between the ‘mythological’ origins of coppers, and their historic provenances based on various metallurgical tests. She also relied heavily on the work of Boas, who has been critiqued for mistranslating Indigenous stories and imposing unequal power relationships in various communities. Beau Dick, Guujaaw, and Nanibush, in contrast, presented a more polysemic understanding of coppers, both ‘symbols’ of justice and ‘living beings.’

Kwakw’kwa’wakw scholar Sarah Hunt, has described the academic world as enacting a form of “epistemic violence…in creating and sustaining boundaries around what is considered real” when discussing Indigenous ontologies. Métis scholar, Zoe Todd has similarly critiqued Bruno Latour for failing to acknowledge Indigenous ontologies and thinkers when lecturing on natural religion and the anthropocene. In differentiating between economic systems and myths, scholars like Jopling could be said to perform ‘epistemic violence’ in both appropriating

102 Maud (2000).
or disregarding Indigenous ontologies. As a settler student, myself, this is something that I would like to remain aware of in my discussion of copper belongings and beings.

The use of the terms ‘cultural belongings’ and sentient or living ‘beings’ in the Lalakenis exhibition reflects anthropological scholarship on coppers as ‘economic’ and ‘animate.’ In her recent essay “‘Fighting with Property’: The Double-Edged Character of Ownership,” anthropologist and MOA curator, Jennifer Kramer warns of the hazards of applying Western ‘Lockean’ property language to objects like coppers, which like land, can be thought of as inalienable. She writes, “many Indigenous people espouse the view that…they are merely the stewards of objects that cannot be divorced from social identity.” The collection of coppers in Canadian museums following the Potlatch Ban imposed an alienable status on inalienable beings. Similarly, when Beau Dick and his companions shamed the government for ‘turning its back on nature,’ they asserted the inalienability of nature. One must then wonder, does the term ‘cultural belongings’ used in the Lalakenis exhibition perpetuate Western property language and ‘epistemic violence?’ Perhaps, understanding coppers as sentient beings belonging within Indigenous communities, belonging-beings, better emphasizes their ontological status and therefore inalienability.

4  Coppers in Animism, New Materialism, and Posthumanism

4.1  A Rethinking of Animism in Anthropology

A discussion of coppers as ‘sentient beings’ can be situated within a recent return to animism in anthropology and a wider rethinking of human/nonhuman categories and relationships in new materialism and posthumanist theories. First theorized by anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his 1871 publication *Primitive Culture: Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, animism has been used to describe the attribution of soul and spirit to humans, animals and inanimate objects, a ‘primitive’ belief system in an evolutionary understanding of religion. In returning to animism, recent anthropologists have rejected Tylor’s concept of the soul and ‘primitive’ religion, advocating instead the active relationship-building of humans with nonhuman entities within different communities. Outside anthropology, new materialists have advocated a rethinking of matter as lively and agentive rather than inert, shared among humans, animals, and objects. While new materialists vary in their ascription of agency to objects, Jane Bennett’s related ‘vital materialism’ more clearly attributes agency to inorganic life such as the electricity grid, food, garbage, and metals. An examination of agentive objects can be thought of as posthumanist in its decentering of the human. Cary Wolfe, for example, has advocated that posthumanism “comes before and after humanism” as humans have always been embodied and embedded in biological and technical worlds. While animism, new materialism, and posthumanism all offer diverse and multidisciplinary approaches

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107 Coole and Frost (2010).
109 Wolfe, xv.
to understanding sentient objects, I will explore the disconnect and danger of applying these theories to coppers.

A foundational concept within Anthropology, animism comes from the Latin root, *anima*, meaning life or soul. First theorized by German chemist and physician, Georg Ernst Stahl in the late 18th century as a spiritual, vital principle that “moves living beings and governs their growth and evolution” in opposition to physical somatic processes, the concept of animism was adopted by Tylor in *Primitive Culture.* In opposition to materialism, Tylor described animism as a primitive belief in souls and spiritual beings and the attribution of spirit to humans, animals and inanimate objects. The first step in an evolutionary understanding of religion and culture, Tylor viewed animism as a form of spiritualism at odds with modern science. Tylor’s theory of animism found its origins not only in early ethnographic accounts but in the Christian concept of the soul and the modern spiritualist movement popular in Victorian England, where he saw remnants of a primitive spirituality. From Stahl to Tylor, animism thus emerged from a European understanding of the soul and spirit to be applied to the universal ‘other.’

Since the nineteenth century, the concept of animism has been expanded, repudiated, and reexamined by generations of scholars. In his 1915 text, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* sociologist Emile Durkheim was an early critic of Tylor’s theory of animism, advocating that the ‘cult of totemism’ rather than animism or naturism was the most fundamental and ‘primitive’ origin of religion. An all-encompassing, neutral, and foundational force, totemism, 

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according to Durkheim, could be found in all materials (humans, animals, and objects or emblems), giving rise to religious beliefs like animism.\textsuperscript{113} Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss also favored theories of totemism over animism, proposing a structuralist binary of nature and culture.\textsuperscript{114} Unlike Durkheim, however, Levi-Strauss did not view totemism as an evolutionary step in the development of religion. Rather, he saw totemism as a classificatory system arising from the nature/culture divide. As totemism superseded animism in the mid-twentieth century, poststructuralist debates called for a rethinking of nature/culture and spiritual/material binaries, reawakening discussion of animism in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{115} While there have been many anthropologists who have reexamined animism in the last thirty years, I will focus on the work of Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.\textsuperscript{116} Descola and Viveiros de Castro have been particularly influential in the return of animism, both conducting work in South America.

Descola, for example, examined animism as an alternative to naturalism, while conducting


ethnographic work among the Achuar indigenous people in Ecuador. Influenced by Lévi-Straussian structuralism, Viveiros de Castro notably began rethinking the nature/culture divide within Amazonian and Amerindian ontologies, engaging with animism and proposing a theory of perspectivism.

As both Descola and Viveiros de Castro called for a rethinking of nature/culture and human/nonhuman categories, they debated their varying viewpoints at a panel at the Maison Suger Institute of Advanced Studies in Paris in 2009. Famed philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist Bruno Latour documented the debate in an article for *Anthropology Today*, contrasting Descola’s quieter call for a retreat from naturalism with Viveiros de Castro’s desire to place a “bomb...under Western philosophy.” Summarizing his work, Descola described naturalism as the prevailing Western view that humans and nonhumans share physical similarities while they differ in their mental and spiritual capacities. Within animism, however, humans and nonhumans share spiritual similarities. While this recalls Tylor’s universalizing understanding of ‘primitive’ societies sharing the belief that the soul or spirit inhabits all beings, Descola sought to conceptualize a ‘relativist’ universality of human and nonhuman relations. During his portion of the debate, Viveiros de Castro similarly contrasted a Western belief in multiculturalism with an Amerindian ‘perspectival multinaturalism’ in which humans and nonhumans operate within the same social systems, perceiving the world in the same way. While

117 Among many articles, Descola reexamined animism and the nature/culture divide in *In the Society of Nature: A native ecology in Amazonia*; “Constructing Natures: Symbolic ecology and social practice”; *Beyond Nature and Culture*.

118 Viveiros de Castro published a number of articles on perspectivism, including “Cosmological Deixis.”; “Perspectivismo e multinacionalismo.”; “Exchanging Perspectives.”


120 Ibid.; Descola explores ‘relativist’ universality further in his book *Beyond Nature and Culture*. 
a Western ‘multiculturalist’ ontology conceives of a universal nature inhabited by multiple cultures, a multinaturalist ontology conceives of a shared culture, subjecthood, and spirituality, and a particularity of nature and bodies.\textsuperscript{121} In his article, “Exchanging Perspectives: The transformation of objects into subjects in Amerindian ontologies,” for example, Viveiros de Castro described a jaguar who, as he drinks the blood of his prey, conceives of himself as drinking manioc beer, a common cultural practice in Araweté communities and other human Amazonian groups.\textsuperscript{122} This perspective, he believes, delegitimizes much of the ‘cultural’ studies within Anthropology, requiring a rethinking of the discipline.\textsuperscript{123} Within Descola’s animism and Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism, nonhumans and humans respectively share a spirit or culture, differing in their natures.

How does anthropology’s return to animism function in relation to the coppers of the Lalakenis exhibition? In one sense, the Belkin’s portrayal of the coppers as ‘sentient beings’ was in line with anthropological theories of animism where humans and nonhumans share \textit{anima}, spirit, or culture. The relationship between chief and copper, human body and copper body, described by Beau Dick, Guujaaw, and Wanda Nanibush affirmed an interconnected and sentient relationship. Tylor’s concept of \textit{anima} as ‘primitive’ and prototypical was Eurocentric and colonizing, however, perhaps why the Belkin chose to use the word ‘sentient’ rather than ‘animate’ in the exhibition. While Descola and Viveiros de Castro focused their work largely on the relationships between humans and animals, their use of the word nonhuman could be said to include non-animal entities in their theories. In Descola’s animism, the coppers would share a

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\textsuperscript{121} Viveiros de Castro, “Exchanging Perspectives,” 466.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 471.
\textsuperscript{123} Latour, “Perspectivism,” 2.
\end{flushright}
spirit with humans and other nonhumans, differing in their bodies. Similarly, within Viveiros de Castro’s ‘perspectival multinaturalism,’ coppers would inhabit the same cultural system as the humans that surround them, differing in their natures. While both theories could be said to support Kwakwaka’wakw, Haida, and other First Nations beliefs that coppers are ‘living beings’ with names and personalities, they differ in relation to the body as Nanibush emphasized the corporeal connection between Taaw and the participants upon its breaking. While Descola and Viveiros de Castro critiqued the nature/culture divide, they in a sense reproduced it through describing shared spirits and cultures and dissimilar natures. Their dialectical approaches recall the binary of economic and ‘mythological’ (animate) interpretations of coppers employed by anthropologists described in the previous section. Rather, a polysemic understanding of coppers acknowledges their coexisting sentiency, materiality, symbolism, and economic and judiciary role within First Nations ontologies.

The political dimension of Beau Dick’s copper-breaking, his shaming of the Canadian government and call for the restitution of Indigenous lands, also reveals the missing politics in Descola and Viveiros de Castro’s theories. Indeed in their essay for the Lalakenis exhibition, “Cutting Copper: Indigenous Resurgent Practice,” Métis curator Tarah Hogue and Belkin Gallery curator Shelly Rosenblum emphasized Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s writing on theory as embodied practice.\textsuperscript{124} Theory, Simpson argued, is not just an “intellectual pursuit,” but is “generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community and generation of people.”\textsuperscript{125} Whereas Descola and Viveiros de Castro debated

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[	extsuperscript{124}] Hogue and Rosenblum, 84.
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animism at the Maison Suger, the copper-breaking ceremonies in Victoria and Ottawa were embodied practices, generated by Beau Dick and his companions as they fractured the coppers to condemn the Provincial and National governments. Wanda Nanibush similarly described the copper-breaking as a means to “fight with our ceremonies,” emphasizing the political activism in the act.126 Although Descola contrasted naturalism and animism and Viveiros de Castro juxtaposed a Western multiculturalist ontology and a multinaturalist ontology, they did not examine the conflict or politics that results from the meeting of the two.127

4.2 New Materialism and Vital Materialism

While animism attributes a shared spirit or culture to both humans and nonhumans, new materialism and vital materialism examine matter itself as lively and agentive. Thought of as a material substance distinct from the human mind or spirit in Western philosophical history, matter has long been understood as inanimate. In their seminal book, New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost reject a binary of inert matter and thinking subject, describing new materialism as post-Cartesian.128 Coole, a professor of political and social theory at Birkbeck, University of London, and Frost, a professor of political science at the University of Illinois, advocate that perceiving matter as, “possessing its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directness, and thus no longer as simply passive or inert, disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who…have

127 In his 2015 exhibition, Rights of Nature: Art and Ecology in the Americas, TJ Demos better aligned occasions of Indigenous activism, such as the Idle No More movement, with an academic rethinking of the ‘Western’ ontological divide of human and nonhuman, nature and culture. Within a biocentric, rather than an anthropocentric understanding of the world, nature and nonhuman entities are viewed as legal and political subjects rather than natural resources and commodities. See Demos, 2.
128 Coole and Frost, 7-8.
the right or ability to master nature.”129 In one sense this is similar to Descola’s animism and Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism as it critiques anthropocentrism and a division of human/nonhuman. The focus on materiality is distinct, however, as humans and nonhumans share a lively matter rather than spirit or culture. While Coole and Frost’s new materialism encompasses primarily organic matter, Jane Bennett’s vital materialisms more clearly examines inorganic life. Critiquing a life/matter binary, Bennett holds that there is an “indeterminate vitality” that inhabits all matter, including nonhuman materials such as metal, electricity, and trash.130 Disparaging comparison with Tylor’s animism in which only children or ‘primitives’ believe in animate nonhumans, Bennett instead draws from a number of fields and scholars including microbiology and Bruno Latour’s writing on ‘actants’ and ‘protoactants.’

Bennett’s writing on metal is most relevant here, as she describes it as an actant capable of producing action or change. On an elemental level, Bennett examines the polycrystalline structure of metal, composed of small crystals and free atoms that interact, rendering the material always lively.132 She also discusses the relationship between metal and human/nonhuman actants, an alloy of “geological, biological, and often human agencies.”133 An imprisonment in chains, for example, can be thought of as an “encounter between ontologically diverse actants,” metal and human both composed of lively matter.134 Metalworking too can be thought of as an encounter between vital metal material and the human body. Bennett thus rejects an

129 Ibid., 10.
130 Bennett, “A Vitalist Stopover,” 63.
133 Ibid., 60.
134 Ibid., xiv.
anthropocentric depiction of both encounters, presenting both metal and human as material actants. One could assume that Bennett would view copper-breaking as a similar kind of meeting, an alloy of metal and human materials, an encounter between ‘ontologically diverse actants.’ If we view the copper and *Awalaskenis* participants as equal, one could propose that the copper-breaking saw a meeting of copper ontology and First Nations ontology.

Both new materialism and vital materialism offer a more material interpretation of coppers, in opposition to animism and perspectivism. While these schools of thought all favor a biocentric examination of human and nonhuman relationships, they can be seen as focusing on opposing sides of a spirit/material binary. Whereas animism and perspectivism attribute spirit and culture to humans and nonhumans which differ in nature and bodies, new and vital materialism view bodies and materials as agentive and vital themselves. The distance between these theories speaks to their disconnection from an Indigenous understanding of coppers as both sentient bodies connected to chiefly bodies, and beings endowed with ‘*nawalakw*, supernatural powers. Materialism and animism, perhaps function better as critiques of Western anthropocentrism. Beau Dick too opposed Canadian anthropocentrism, decrying the government’s treatment of both Indigenous peoples and Indigenous land.

### 4.3 Posthumanism

The ontological reorientation of humans and nonhumans within animism and new and vital materialism can be thought of as posthumanist in its decentering of the human. While many

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135 While Descola, Viveiros de Castro, Coole and Frost, and Bennett all critique a prevailing ‘Western’ anthropocentrism, it is important to note that ‘Western’ thinking, philosophy, and ontology do not speak with one voice. Philosophies and ontologies vary among individuals and across communities.
scholars have investigated a growing interconnection between humans and modern technology, Cary Wolfe, a professor of English at Rice University, describes his scholarship as posthumanist, arguing that humans have always been embedded and embodied in biological and technological worlds. Posthumanism thus “comes before and after humanism,” and does not signify an impending cyborgian disembodiment of human thought and information.¹³⁶ Rather, Wolfe suggests that there has been a “prosthetic coevolution” of humans and technologies and what he refers to as “external archival mechanisms” like language and culture.¹³⁷ Like animism and new and vital materialism this coevolution emphasizes relationships between humans and nonhumans, critiquing prevailing anthropocentric ‘Western’ ontologies. It is of import in Wolfe’s work that prosthetic refers not only to technologies and archival mechanisms but to humans themselves, “prosthetic being[s].”¹³⁸ Within Wolfe’s posthumanism coppers and humans could be conceptualized as coevolving prosthetics, embedded and constituted in each other’s worlds. While Wolfe indicates that the concept of prostheticity has “profound ethical implications for our relations to nonhuman forms of life,” his emphasis is on animals.¹³⁹ There would thus perhaps be little room for a copper ontology in his theories.

An examination of animism, new and vital materialism, and posthumanism sees a turn in ‘Western’ scholarship to reinvestigate human and nonhuman relationships and propose a critique

¹³⁷ Wolfe, xv.
¹³⁸ Ibid., 295. Hayles presented this concept slightly differently, referring to the human body itself as a prosthetic, 3.
¹³⁹ Wolfe, xxvi.
of anthropocentrism. The limitations of each theory to accommodate for the polysemic nature of coppers, however, demonstrates a continued divide between these scholars’ texts and Kwakwaka’wakw, Haida, and other First Nations understandings of and relationships with coppers. While Descola and Viveiros de Castro conducted ethnographic work among specific Indigenous communities, both sought to create universalizing theories of ‘animism’ and ‘Amerindian multinaturalist perspectivism,’ applied to wider Indigenous communities and a rethinking of ‘Western’ philosophy. Coole and Frost, Bennett, and Wolfe, in contrast, did not include Indigenous ontologies in their respective concepts of vital matter and prosthetic coevolution. This recalls Sarah Hunt and Zoe Todd’s critiques of the academic world in which scholars commit ‘epistemic violence’ through their selective interpretations or omissions of Indigenous ontologies.\(^\text{140}\) In a rethinking of the human and nonhuman, there is thus a danger, and indeed violence, in both appropriating or disregarding Indigenous ontologies.

\(^{140}\) Hunt and Todd are, of course, capable of being selective in their interpretations too, referencing specific beliefs and specific communities in their articles.
5 Coppers in the Public Sphere

5.1 Copper-Breaking as Performance Art

Through enacting the copper-breaking ceremony to shame the Canadian Government, Beau Dick brought a sacred ceremony into the public sphere, compelling a meeting of human and nonhuman actants. Like the display of belonging-beings in anthropology museums and art galleries, the publicity of the copper-breaking was controversial among a number of First Nations communities. In the context of the Provincial and Federal parliament buildings in Victoria and Ottawa and the Belkin Art Gallery, was the breaking and display of coppers ceremony, performance art, or political activism? Beau Dick’s colleague, Dana Claxton, a Lakota artist and Professor of Visual Arts at UBC, has described a “grey zone” where ethnographic museums and contemporary art meet and conflict.141 Beau Dick has long occupied this zone, displaying and selling his work in a number of museums and galleries while critiquing the collection and commodification of Indigenous art. The meeting of coppers and contemporary art was not unprecedented, however, as a number of First Nations artists have included copper in their practices, including Sonny Assu, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, and Marianne Nicolson. When examined in terms of sentiency, the contentiousness of exhibiting coppers in museums and galleries goes beyond commodification. In the museological display of the sacred, Beau Dick and other First Nations artists have introduced varied methods of Indigenous resistance. Like Annette Weiner’s concept of ‘keeping-while-giving,’ perhaps these artists enacted a form of

‘hiding-while-showing.’ In the public venues of the capital and the gallery, what does it mean to expose the coppers to view, and viewers to the coppers outside of ceremony?

In her essay for the exhibition catalogue, “Lalakenis: Mode and Situation,” Charlotte Townsend-Gault, an anthropologist and professor emeritus at UBC, speculates whether the copper-breaking ceremony became performance art in light of its public context. She compares the ‘shock’ and ‘controversy’ of the parliament copper-breakings among First Nations communities to the publicizing of the Kwakwaka’wakw Hamatsa ceremonies.142 Once part of a ‘secret society,’ the knowledge of which was the prerogative of certain individuals, a number of communities began performing the Hamatsa ceremonies for tourists in the 1950s, presented the ‘dance’ as ‘educational’ and ‘harmless’ rather than ‘sacred’ and ‘secret.’143 While Beau Dick did not represent the copper-breaking as ‘harmless,’ it became public, political, and potentially ‘educational’ through social media coverage, filming, and gallery display. Townsend-Gault also juxtaposes the protocol surrounding copper-breaking, a sacred and secret prerogative of hereditary individuals, with “a western performative tradition that imagines itself as bound by [no rules.]”144 Beau Dick’s breaking of protocol through his public copper-breaking could thus align itself with Western performance art’s boundlessness. Recalling James Luna’s 1987 Artifact Piece, in which he exhibited his own body in a display case as an Indian artifact, copper-

143 Aaron Glass, “The Intention of Tradition: Contemporary Contexts and Contests of the Kwakwaka’wakw Hamatsa Dance” (Master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, 1999), 12-13. Glass offers a comprehensive history and analysis of the publicizing of the Hamatsa ceremony from Franz Boas’ writing and presentation of the ‘dance’ at the 1893 Chicago’s World Columbian Exposition, to its prohibition under the 1895 Indian Act’s Potlatch Ban, and its reanimation in the 1950s as a performance for tourists.
144 Townsend-Gault, “Lalakenis,” 76.
breaking as performance art goes beyond a division of ‘performer’ and ‘spectator,’ implicating the government and the viewer in the shaming action.\textsuperscript{145} The copper-breaking was thus a call to action, demanding restitution from the government for its poor-treatment of First Nations and the land. Townsend-Gault suggests that the divide between the meaning and significance of copper-breaking in Kwakw'wakw communities and non-Indigenous perception, however, left room for misinterpreting the ceremony as mere ‘Native spectacle.’\textsuperscript{146} Through breaking and displaying the coppers in public spaces, Beau Dick thus risked mistranslation for exposure.

Beau Dick’s decision to ‘perform’ a copper-breaking ceremony was not an isolated incident. During a panel hosted by the Union of BC Indian Chiefs in 2000 at the Museum of Anthropology, Kwakw’wakw Chief Adam Dick simulated the breaking of a copper from the collection. His companion proclaimed that he was “breaking the copper on the government of Canada, the province of British Columbia, and the museums to challenge them to deal with the outstanding issues of repatriation.”\textsuperscript{147} Ruth Phillips, the museum director at the time, described this event as performative action, a rehearsal in the “museum-as-theatre” for activism and legal change on a macro governmental level.\textsuperscript{148} When I asked Beau Dick about this event during a studio visit in February, he suggested that Adam Dick refrained from breaking the copper not because he saw it as a rehearsal for ‘real’ political action, but because he did not have the hereditary privilege to do so.\textsuperscript{149} Beau Dick, who did have that right, enacted the copper-breaking ceremony, not in the museum but in the macro sites of the provincial and national capitals.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{149} Beau Dick in discussion with the author, February 10, 2017.
Outside of their original contexts, did Adam Dick’s simulated copper-breaking and Beau Dick’s realized copper-breaking meld ceremony with performance?

5.2 Coppers and Contemporary Art

As a contemporary Kwakẉa’wakw artist, Beau Dick occupied a complex position, selling and exhibiting his work while critiquing the display and commercialization of First Nations art. While he mourned the ‘scattering’ of coppers among museums around the world, condemning the Musée canadien de l’histoire for not granting him access to the coppers in their collection, Beau Dick choose to display the belonging-beings from his journey in the Belkin Art Gallery.\textsuperscript{150} He perhaps differentiated between the anthropological context of the Musée canadien and the Belkin’s contemporary focus. In her discussion of the ‘grey zone,’ Dana Claxton wrote, “I am not convinced that old sites of ‘artifact’ can successfully facilitate new ways about thinking about ‘other,’ or that ‘other’ can be represented as both contemporary and ancient within the realms of old-school museum structures.”\textsuperscript{151} While Claxton only displays her work in contemporary art galleries, Beau Dick occupied this ‘grey zone,’ displaying his carvings at anthropology museums like the UBC Museum of Anthropology and in galleries like the Belkin and the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver.\textsuperscript{152} In their display, however, Beau Dick distinguished between masks for sale and Atlakim (Forest) masks, animate beings that are danced four times at potlatches and then burned. In an interview he explained, “they’re recycled…What I mean is that they’re sent back to the spirit world where they came from. The greatest thing

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\textsuperscript{150} Beau Dick, “The Coppers,” 23.
\textsuperscript{151} Duffek, 148.
\textsuperscript{152} Museum of Anthropology, MOACAT; Contemporary Art Gallery, “Neil Campbell and Beau Dick.”
about it is that once they’re burned, we carve them again.” Candice Hopkins, who curated Beau Dick’s work at documenta 14, explained that this was not only a cycle of rebirth through destruction, but a “short-circuiting” of the masks’ position as commodities. Within Kwakwaka’wakw epistemologies, coppers too come from the spirit world, at times destroyed and reborn through rejoining the broken pieces of copper. Beyond their destruction, Hopkins emphasized that masks and coppers also short-circuit commodification through their own agency. While Beau Dick displayed the Atlakim masks and the coppers in contemporary galleries, he viewed them as not commodities nor objects but inalienable animate beings, destroyed with the potential for rebirth.

In addition to Beau Dick, a number of First Nations artists have used and depicted coppers in their works. Sonny Assu, Ligwilda’xw, Kwakwaka’wakw of the We Wai Kai Nation, for example, examined copper in 1884/1951 (2009), an assemblage of 67 copper cups displayed on a Hudson’s Bay blanket. Resembling Starbucks cups, a “Vancouverite status symbol,” each copper cup represented the 67 years that potlatches were banned under the 1884 Indian Act. A descendent of hereditary Chief Billy Assu (1867–1965) who held an illegal potlatch in 1911, Sonny Assu prompted a meeting of contemporary capitalist and Kwakwaka’wakw values, similar to Beau Dick’s display of the copper pennies in a vitrine near the coppers in the Lalakenis exhibition. Haida artist, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, too juxtaposed copper wealth with Western status symbols in his series, Coppers From the Hood, coating car hoods with copper.

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153 Griffin, “Kwakwaka’wakw potlatch masks.”
154 Hopkins, “Beau Dick.”
155 Candice Hopkins, Fogo Island Dialogues: Islands, Sovereignty and Decolonial Futures (panel discussion, Vancouver, BC, December 12, 2016).
which he then decorated with ‘Haida manga.’ Marianne Nicolson, of Scottish and Dzawada’enuxw, Kwakwaka’wakw descent, invoked coppers not through the material itself but through tracing a 12-metre outline of a copper on the sheer face of a cliffside near the village of Gwa’yi. Depicted in red oxide paint with the story of the Wolf ancestor and a treasure box, the copper rests above older petroglyphs of coppers and cows used in potlatches in the 1920s. Nicholson’s copper not only connected past and present coppers but condemned a logging company who sprayed pesticides on nearby traditional Indigenous land without consulting the Gwa’yi community. Like Beau Dick’s copper-breaking, Nicholson’s prominent placement of the painting on the cliff could be said to assert the inalienability of both copper and the land within Kwakwaka’wakw ontologies in opposition to the Canadian government and economy.

### 5.3 Sacred Displays and Indigenous Modes of Resistance

Beyond a discussion of commodity, the display of coppers in the Lalakenis exhibition entered into ongoing debate among First Nations individuals and communities over the public display of sacred, sentient materials. In the colonial context of the museum or gallery, David Garneau writes, “the colonist refuses the sacred character of the object or site because it derives from a metaphysical system that it rejects in favour of its own cosmology.” While these belonging-

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157 Levell, 105-110.
160 Garneau, 25.
beings are consumed by the ‘scopophilic’ gaze of the colonizer, they are denied sacredness within ‘Western’ ontologies. Garneau describes materialist theories as similarly damaging, as scholars recognize the “semiotic value” of sacred belongings within other cultures but do not “experience their symbolic value” themselves. This recalls my earlier discussion of animism in which anthropologists acknowledged the animism of coppers within First Nations ontologies without experiencing it. It also draws parallels with Sarah Hunt’s discussion of the ‘epistemic violence’ committed by scholars debating what is ‘real’ and what is not. Through bringing copper-breaking into the public eye, in the Provincial and National capitals and the gallery, Beau Dick thus exposed the coppers not only to colonial scopophilia but to a discussion of what is ‘real.’ The government’s minimal response to the copper-breakings also demonstrated a continuing colonial disinterest in First Nations’ rights and ceremonies.

In response to the holding and display of sacred and sentient belonging-beings in museums and galleries around Canada and the world, First Nations artists and scholars have developed strategies of resistance. Garneau described Indigenous activism in the form of creating ‘screen objects’ or ‘artifakes’ for museums and galleries that resemble ‘sacred objects’ but do not have their animation or sentience. With a similar ‘patina’ to sacred objects, artifakes protect their counterparts from the eyes and epistemic reaches of the colonizer. Garneau described Haida argillite carvings, for example, as not tourist art but screen objects that

\[161\] Ibid.
\[162\] Garneau, 26.
resemble sacred pipes. Vancouver artist Shawn Hunt, of Heiltsuk, French and Scottish
descent, also used the term “Artifake” as the name of his solo exhibition at Macaulay & Co. Fine
Art in 2014, where he displayed a stuffed animal totem pole as well as carvings and paintings.

Screen objects and artifakes thus offer agency to Indigenous communities who are not merely
victims of colonization and scopophilia but resistance fighters. As the belonging-beings in the
Lalakenis exhibition were a part of the copper-breaking ceremony, and were described as
sentient, one could presume that these were not ‘screen objects.’ Beau Dick’s differentiation
between the masks he sells and his Atlakim masks, however speaks to a distinction between
screen and sacred objects. Dzawada’enuxw culture and language teacher Mikael Willie’s
intervention in the multiversity gallery of the MOA offers another approach to resisting public
exhibition of sacred belonging-beings. Designing a display of a hamat’ša mask wrapped in a
blanket, Willie explained that “in the Kwak’wala language there is a word, k’wik’walatlakw,
which means ‘things that are hidden’…[and] objects with ‘nawalakw, or supernatural power,
were put away when not being shown in ceremony.” In the Lalakenis exhibition the coppers
were described as sentient, endowed with ‘nawalakw, and yet were fully on view.

Douglas Cole recorded Bill Holm’s earlier use of the term ‘artifake’ to describe an argillite carving in a
footnote in his book, Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts (Vancouver:
University of British Columbia Press, 1985), 359. While Garneau uses ‘artifake’ to describe Indigenous
resistance and agency, Holm used the term to describe a fraudulent carving in the Horniman Museum,
copied from a line drawing from Franz Boas’ 1897 “The social organization and the secret societies of the
Kwakiutl Indians.”

macaulay-co-fine-art/exhibitions/shawn-hunt-artifake/.

Willie, “K’wik’walatlakw.” It is of note that images of the mask are available in the online collection
database, while information on Willie and his project are not listed. Jennifer Kramer documents her
meeting with Willie and other Dzawada’enuxw community members to discuss the display of sacred
materials in her article, “Möbius Museology: Curating and Critiquing the Multiversity Galleries at the
Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia,” in The International Handbook of
Museum Studies: Museum Transformations, eds. Annie E. Combs and Ruth Phillips (Hoboken, NJ: John
These various methods of negotiating the display of sacred materials could be described as hiding-while-showing. As described above, Annette Weiner used the phrase ‘keeping-while-giving’ to examine theories of reciprocity and the category of inalienable possessions. Drawing on this term, hiding-while-showing could be said to similarly encompass the friction of exhibiting inalienable belonging-beings in museums and galleries. Garneau’s concept of artifakes, for example, hides sacred belonging-beings from display, while showing screen objects to the public. Willie’s covering of the hamat’ša mask following k’wik’waladlakw protocol similarly concealed the mask while it was exhibited in the Multiversity Gallery. Beau Dick’s hiding-while-showing was somewhat more obscure as he enacted the copper-breakings and the exhibition of coppers in the public spaces of the parliament buildings and Belkin gallery. While the coppers were clearly shown, they were described as the cultural belongings of First Nations peoples, their roles and uses in community potlatches hidden. Presented as ‘symbols of justice’ and ‘living beings’ in media interviews and the Lalakenis exhibition catalogue, the coppers were described as named and sentient entities with little explanation beyond these categories. While Beau Dick showed the coppers to the public, their meaning and place within Kwakw’k̓a̓w̓akw ontologies remained largely hidden from non-Indigenous audiences. As I have examined in earlier chapters, there is a similar disconnect between copper ontology and anthropological, animist, new materialist, and posthumanist theories. Polysemantic, inalienable belonging-beings, the coppers Nunmgala and Taaw remained hidden-while-showing in Awalaskenis I and II and the Lalakenis exhibition.
6 Conclusion

Symbols of wealth and justice and named living beings within Kwakwaka’wakw, Haida, and other First Nations and Native American ontologies, coppers challenge an ontological divide of the material and the spiritual and the human and the nonhuman within non-Indigenous scholarship. Situating coppers as polysemic belonging-beings, I have examined the significance of Beau Dick’s contemporary copper-breaking ceremonies, the bringing of coppers into the public spaces of the National and Provincial parliament buildings and the Belkin Gallery. An analysis of Boas, Mauss, and Jopling’s writing on coppers as both economic and animate parallels the Belkin Gallery’s categories of cultural belongings and sentient beings. By viewing Indigenous accounts of living coppers as myth, however, Boas and Jopling’s work reveals a history of divergence between anthropological interpretations and Indigenous ontologies. A rethinking of animism in anthropology, new materialism and posthumanism each offer a critique of the ongoing anthropocentrism in much of ‘Western’ scholarship. Through uniting humans and nonhumans with a shared spirit, culture, matter, or technology, these theories can be seen as more accepting of coppers as living beings. The distance between these theories and First Nations understandings of coppers as spiritual and material, economic and living, reveals the dangers of appropriating or disregarding Indigenous ontologies in a rethinking of human/nonhuman relationships.

From the public spaces of the Canadian parliament buildings and the Belkin Gallery, the coppers travelled internationally in 2017, displayed in Athens and Kassel for documenta 14, a large art exhibition and cultural event that has taken place every five years since 1955, the year
Beau Dick was born. Beau Dick was meant to accompany the coppers but passed away unexpectedly on March 27, 2017 after suffering a heart attack and a series of strokes. A father, friend, mentor, and hereditary chief, Beau Dick is survived by four daughters, his partner, Bernadette Phan, and seven grandchildren. The many obituaries published by Canadian and American media feature dozens of heartfelt and grateful testimonials to Beau Dick’s creativity, kindness, and importance as a First Nations artist and activist. Among his many accomplishments, *Awalaskenis I* and *II* are often cited as examples of his leadership, community-building, and advocacy for Indigenous and environmental rights. A funeral service and potlatch were held for Beau Dick in his home community at Alert Bay on April 2, and the MOA hosted a Celebration of Life for the artist on April 30. A retrospective film, *Beau Dick: Maker of Monsters*, made by LaTiesha Fazakas of Fazakas Gallery, will be released this year documenting the artist’s copper-breaking ceremonies in Victoria and Ottawa as well as other parts of his life.

In a lecture, *Fogo Island Dialogues: Islands, Sovereignty and Decolonial Futures*, hosted at UBC on December 12, 2016, Beau Dick considered his future visit to Athens, the birthplace of democracy, quipping “I don’t know if Pericles knew what he was unleashing?” As the Parthenon was under repair, Beau Dick continued, “Hopefully, Western Civilization is under repair” as well. By citing Athens and Pericles, Beau Dick contextualized and condemned a North American history of ‘Manifest Destiny’ that justified the colonization of Indigenous lands.

168 Beau Dick, “Closing Remarks” (presentation at the Fogo Island Dialogues: Islands, Sovereignty and Decolonial Futures Lecture, December 12, 2016).
and peoples in the name of democracy and freedom. His emphasis on repair echoed earlier statements on the copper-breaking as indicating a relationship in need of repair between First Nations peoples and the Canadian government. While Beau Dick did not intend to break copper in Athens, by bringing the broken coppers to Europe he indicated that the relationship between Indigenous peoples, lands, and all of ‘Western’ Civilization required repair for an increasingly globalized future. Although Beau Dick agreed to attend documenta 14, he did not like leaving his home and community. When he expressed some reluctance to go, his daughter, Bernadette reminded him that the journey was for the coppers not for himself.169

Figures

Figure 1. The breaking of the copper Taaw on Cathy Busby’s WE ARE SORRY banner in front of the National parliament buildings in Ottawa. Francisco Heinze, Digital Image (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2014), http://belkin.ubc.ca/past/lalakenis-exhibition.

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