

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:  
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

# **A Burdened Past, An Unburdened Future**

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## ABOUT THIS PAPER

An opinion piece exploring a future in which everything that was taken grows old and dies where it belongs.

## ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT

This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM's Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums' evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [\*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today\*](#).


Indian residential schools in colonized America were established to civilize and assimilate Indigenous children. This process was particularly efficient in Alaska, where church-run residential schools supported by federal funds and charitable donations dedicated fervent efforts to teaching Indigenous children to reject their Native identity, convert to Christianity, and be educated into a service occupation.

The best known and most impactful among Alaska missionaries was Sheldon Jackson, Presbyterian architect of residential mission schools throughout the territory, whose punitive English-only policies championed eradication of Indigenous languages, customs, and beliefs. Convinced that Alaska Native people needed to abandon their ways of life for their own good, Jackson pinned and preserved reminders of the ways of life his efforts sought to abolish. To house these reminders, Jackson established the first museum in Alaska, the Sheldon Jackson Museum, constructed in the late 1890s near the Sitka Industrial Training School he had earlier co-founded for training Alaska Native boys in service vocations such as boatbuilding and shoe repair.

Policies that called for taking children from their families and communities—sending them to places where they were forced to speak a foreign language, dress in foreign style, eat foreign food, worship foreign heroes, and celebrate foreign holidays—nearly achieved the results Jackson and those like him foretold: erasure of Indigenous ways of being, with remnants of Indigenous cultures confined in distant museums for the benefit of curious scholars. However, not all who unlawfully removed cultural treasures were colonizers. In fact, an equally familiar name to Jackson's is that of Louis Shotridge, a Tlingit man converted to Christianity who, unlike Jackson and his fellow missionaries, was well aware of the deep history and ceremonial purpose of the objects he arbitrarily removed, relying on arguments that would become familiar in coming years, assigning colonial value to uncovered bones in unmarked graves: hollow remnants preserved for examination and study.

Plainly, the history and purpose of museums in the United States cannot be separated from the history and purpose of Indian boarding schools: education. Then and now, Indigenous children are sent to schools to learn who they are and taken to museums to learn who they were.


When I was fourteen, I was myself sent to two residential homes for Indigenous wards of the newly formed Alaska state government. I was among the first generation to be taken—my mother had been a dutiful oldest child in the new Alaska territory; my grandmother had fought colonial domination before surrendering to alcohol; my great-grandmother, who died the year before I was born, fought for justice before surrendering to Christian prayer in her final years. Too many in my family suffered tuberculosis, alcoholism, rheumatic fever, diabetes, poverty, hunger, and loss—of




language, status, owned things, kinship, history, personal names, self-respect, parents, grandparents, children, and ourselves. My family is typical in these regards. Most Indigenous families know quite well these consequences of colonialism and more, especially those Elders who for the sake of future generations endured the forces of twentieth-century colonialism, like myself.

I was born in Alaska at the end of the Second World War. For the first several years of my life, I lived with my grandmother in our old house in the Juneau Indian Village while my mother was in and out of hospitals for tuberculosis. My grandmother put the world in me while I was young enough to recognize truth. The then-recently delivered good news of eternal damnation was not enough to persuade my grandmother to abandon the worldview she saw evidence of every day: that everything is alive, that everything is connected, that natural manifestations of respect, relatedness, and reciprocity offer effective, meaningful guidance. No matter her suffering, her trauma, her loss, my grandmother knew these truths for the rest of her shortened life, like her own grandmother and the grandmothers before her. She saw her place in this world.

The land known as Lingít Aaní is a complex, rich temperate rainforest from which a complex, rich culture emerged. The people who belong to Lingít Aaní are one people, socially divided into Eagle and Raven, which contemporary scholars call moieties, but my grandmother always called sides: the Eagle side and the Raven side, sustaining ceremonial balance in strictly matrilineal kinship. On each side are clans forming the basic political unit; clans own crests, histories, personal names, land and water rights, and precious ceremonial objects in which are embedded deep history and profound significance. Specific kinship groups within clans are termed houses, surviving the original structures and comprising the primary economic unit. In this dynamic, vibrant society, house groups can grow in size and wealth, and they can become new clans. History tells us that is how my clan, the Kaagwaantaan, came to be.



A girl of the powerful Chookeneidí clan sat seed behind a curtain at the beginning of her enrichment, where she was isolated until she could use her powers responsibly. She stayed there, neither looking at the sky nor glancing at men. When her isolation was finally complete, she would be married. From where she sat, this girl could see a glacier in the distance. Even though she knew she must always respect mountains and glaciers and rivers, she had not yet fully learned to control her power, and she called to it like a dog. Her sister saw this and told her mother, but her mother told her not to speak of it. Not long later, though, all the people in the village saw the glacier running toward them like a dog. No one knew why, until the girl's mother confessed what her daughter had done, whereupon the people knew they had to flee. There was hardly time to prepare. The glacier moved with sounds of white thunder. Icy water churned fast like




an earthquake. All the people fled except one. The girl's grandmother stayed to restore balance. She endured the fullness of glacial force.

Most of the powerful Chookeneidí clan moved to a place close to their home, where they waited, always looking in the direction of that grassy place at the top of the bay, always waiting for the end of the time that settlers call the Little Ice Age, when they could return. But by the time the glacier made room again, colonizers had turned that home into a national park and renamed it Glacier Bay.

As house groups fled to separate places, some became new clans. Histories diverged, new crests emerged. In the *Box of Knowledge* series published by Sealaska Heritage Institute, Senior Ethnologist Chuck Smythe tells of a man who belonged to the Burnt House who encountered a distressed wolf that was acting like it had something caught in its mouth. That Kaagwaantaan man drew close to the panting wolf, and sure enough, a bone was stuck between its teeth, which the man slowly, cautiously dislodged. One imagines the wolf shaking its head and licking its mouth, glad for the help. The man himself must have been amazed. He must have talked about it to everyone. It's even said he dreamt about it. It's said he became a wealthy man and attributed all his good luck to that wolf. This is how the panting wolf became a crest of the Kaagwaantaan.

Together with associated melodies, lyrics, and movements in commemorative song, told history is intangible wealth that with age and repetition becomes heavy with meaning. When the image of that history is painted, woven, or beaded into being, it can become at.óow, translated by scholars Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer as "an owned thing." In *Haa Tuwunáagu Yís, for Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory (Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature)*, these noted scholars describe the substance of owned things around which the energy of those who made them, carried them, and danced them gathers, as does energy of the plants, skin, and sinew that give them life. These precious owned things can be brought out in ceremony to sustain living memory. That ceremony is part of their natural cycle. However, when owned things are taken to be displayed in airless cases, they become like the bones of taken children buried in boarding school graves.

We learn from seeing, watching, and recognizing that we are part of the living world. The most important lesson offered is that of birth, aging, death, and return. We resist and deny aging and death, but in moments of clarity we accept our place in the natural order. We see such truth in dandelions, mountains, and glaciers—in ourselves and in every child and every owned thing taken from where they belong, the paths of their lives suspended.



Some years ago, I traveled up the Kuskokwim River into ancient Yupik territory miles past the village of Kwethluk, where we hiked through tundra to an isolated collection of abandoned buildings where Indigenous children were once housed. Because I am not Yupik, it is not my place to tell their stories, but I can say that not all the children taken there were able to subdue their longing for home. Some of them ran. Some who ran were caught and taken again. Some continued to run and are running still. They all still long for home.


Those abandoned buildings are only a few of countless institutions constructed in this country for holding Indigenous children taken from their families, their villages, their languages and ways of being—their lives regulated, changed, and in far too many cases, lost—every day longing for home, and all their relatives, past, present, and future, waiting for their return.

As a child in 1950s grade school, I ran into the back of the territorial building across the street from the school into the second-floor post office, down marble stairs, out heavy brass doors, to try to tiptoe around the base of marble pillars without losing my balance. Now and then, I braved a shaky gated elevator to the third-floor territorial museum, where I studied quartz rocks and assay tools stored in glass cases, with portraits of rude-bearded White men looking down on me from museum walls.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, missionaries separated heathens from ancient belief, soldiers separated savages from ancient territory, and teachers separated unwashed masses from ancient ways of seeing. In the twenty-first century, policies of separation continue in colonized settings with conversion, imprisonment, schooling, and the claiming of owned things, of children, and of children's bones.


But not all institutions remain in centuries past. That marbled building now houses the state legislature. The Alaska State Museum has moved, and more than its location has changed. Thoughtful museum staff seek to understand the meaning and purpose of Indigenous owned things and to know the deep history and ceremonial role of place. Museum staff acknowledge the intellectual and cultural authority of the people related to owned things in their care. They understand that a robe is meant to be danced. They know that a cedar hat is meant to be worn. Personally committed and professionally dedicated, they light a path to future museums who will hold more sophisticated understanding than those of the past.

We do well to remind ourselves that had the colonial invasion not taken place, Indigenous people would still be living in the twenty-first century. Our lives would still be modern. Airports and Wi-Fi would still appear in them. Some things would have evolved in a different way. Language. Education. Museums. Our very concept of art, of



life well lived and death well received. We would more easily confess the unmistakable beauties of age, the vulnerabilities and power that time brings. We would see monuments fall, war helmets soften, and faces wrinkle. We would come to understand that bones and owned things wither, fall, and rebloom, and that rust and rot and ancient bones are best fulfilled in the place that saw their birth. As we now permit ourselves to be open to such views, we draw closer to a place where all living things find themselves: on a path lighting the way to a future where everything that was taken grows old and dies in the place where it belongs. We stand together in a moment that asks us to remove our gaze from a colonial path and turn our thoughts to a different future, yet before we change the direction of our path, we must first change the direction of our gaze. To that end, regional museums lead our way. A bronze plaque in Juneau's Alaska State Museum now contains a version of a paragraph I wrote:

**Almost every source describes the long record of Native use and occupation that took place before European contact as “pre-history.” Indigenous groups, however, possess histories of thousands of years of occupancy and exodus, relocation and settlement, exploration and discovery, embedded throughout the generations in legal process, artistic declarations, symbolic regalia, and oral tradition at least as accurately and in many cases more accurately than the European system of writing that has been used for too many years to remove rights and appropriate lands. We must always remember that before colonial contact, Native cultures possessed vigorous legal systems, effective educational systems, efficient health systems, elaborate social orders, elegant philosophical and intellectual insights, precise methods of environmental observation and inference, sophisticated kinship systems, complex languages, profitable trade systems—every social institution needed for a culture to flourish for thousands of years.**



These words introduce museum-goers to the advanced technology and sophisticated art of the Indigenous peoples of Alaska, with emphasis on the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures who have lived and died in this place for hundreds of generations. Exhibitions feature Indigenous ways of knowing, modern qayaq-making, traditional body arts, and demonstrations of Indigenous adaptation and resistance, in addition to Alaska's Russian history and its important role in America's wars and economy. Contemporary works by Native and non-Native artists highlight fine arts collections. Teachers, curators, artists, and Elders step together onto a path illuminated by visions of schools finally unsanctified of buried bones and museums at last unburdened of hoarded history: the community schools and regional museums of our enlightened future.



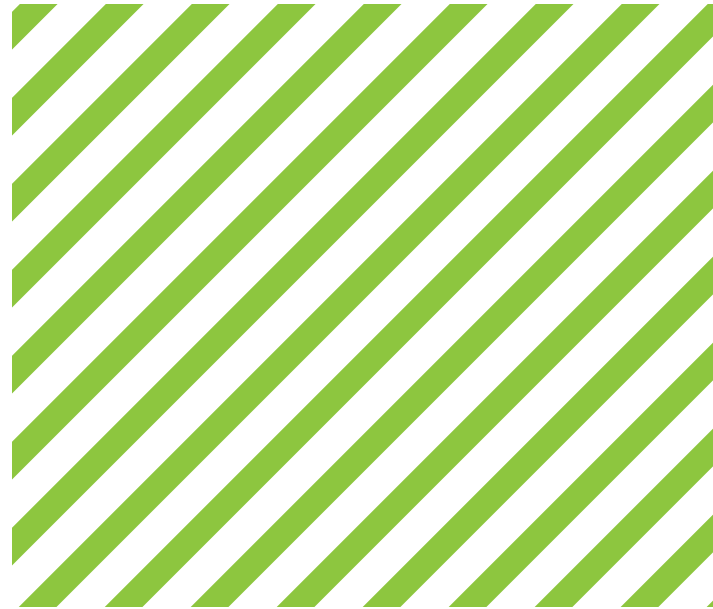
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ernestine Hayes** belongs to the Wolf House of the Kaagwaantaan clan of the Lingít nation. She has gratefully received recognition from Rasmuson Foundation, United States Artists, First Nations Development Institute and Henry Luce Foundation, Alaska State Council on the Arts, and Before Columbus Foundation. Alaska State Writer Laureate 2016-2018 and author of *Blonde Indian, an Alaska Native Memoir* and *The Tao of Raven, an Alaska Native Memoir*, Hayes makes her home in Juneau.





## Center for the Future of Museums

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