

# SOMETHING LIKE ENCHANTMENT: NUUCHAANULTH *THLIITSAPILTHIM*, IN/VISIBILITY, AND THE MATERIALITY OF PUBLIC SECRECY

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## ABSTRACT

*Thliitsapilthim* is a term used in the Huupacasah dialect of the Nuuchaanulth language for large ceremonial curtains manufactured since the late nineteenth century out of single or sometimes multiple sections of muslin cotton. The term is roughly translatable to “easily moveable interior partition made in a meaningful way” (White 2013: 775). In 2010, the University of British Columbia’s Belkin Gallery presented “for the first time, contemporary ceremonial curtains...and historical curtains from museum and private collections in Canada and the United States” (Belkin Gallery 2009), and thus an opportunity to consider *thliitsapilthim* in an entirely new situation, one of cross-cultural dialogue and translation. Here *thliitsapilthim* take on a new role, or perhaps refashion an old one: not as objects that trouble the now clichéd categories of “art” and “artefact,” but as objects whose very materiality present an opportunity to consider larger questions of Nuuchaanulth knowledge and its ethical engagement from a non-Nuuchaanulth perspective. Drawing on recent discussions of materiality, visual culture, and affect I argue that where the public display of Indigenous cultural objects was once

the site to raise questions of access to and restriction of cultural knowledge (Myers 2002; Townsend-Gault 2004), it is now the site for new questions that emerge from an already-given understanding that objects are, at least partially, unknowable and even ultimately invisible in many ways, while still being physically present.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the relationships between materiality and affect that bring to our attention issues of in/visibility. Drawing on recent discussions of materiality, visual culture, and affect, I argue that where the public display of Indigenous cultural objects was once the site to raise questions of access to and restriction of cultural knowledge (Myers 2002; Townsend-Gault 2004), it is now the site for new questions that emerge from an already-given understanding that objects are, at least partially, unknowable and even ultimately invisible in many ways, while still being physically present.

I focus on a moment emerging from a public exhibition of Nuuchaanulth *thliitsapilthim* entitled *Backstory: Nuuchaanulth Ceremonial Curtains and the Work of Ki-ke-in* (Backstory) at the University of British Columbia’s Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. The event took place during the 2010 Olympic Games held

in Vancouver. The objects in question are the *thliitsapilthim* themselves. Loosely termed “ceremonial curtains”, they occupy a central place in the ceremonial life and cultural knowledge of Nuuchaanulth-speaking peoples on the west coast of Vancouver Island in what is now the Canadian province of British Columbia. This is a world to which I have no real connection, partly because I am a non-indigenous person, but that seems too unproductively binary. I am also more importantly not a Nuuchaanulth person, nor a member of a *thliitsapilthim*-owning family. As a result of my multi-leveled disconnection from these objects, deeply sacred to Nuuchaanulth owners, I attempt here to find a way to think about them in terms I can more readily relate to but that do not take away from their power as “unknowable objects” (Vogel 1991). I suggest that a line of inquiry based on recent discussions of materiality both inside and outside anthropology offers a possible way to do this. As an exploratory effort, I will engage in what Taussig (1999) calls a “characterization” of *thliitsapilthim*, rather than an explanation. In this way I avoid an appeal to a universal aestheticization that while unproblematic for some, seems to undermine the pleas of certain Nuuchaanulth people who maintain that *thliitsapilthim* are not to be understood as “art” (see Townsend-Gault 2000). I interpret this concern as an issue of mode of address and more specifically, my inability to find a way in which to appropriately address *thliitsapilthim* directly to understand what they might or might not “mean” to the people who make, care for, and have the right to display them publicly. As such, this is also an issue of knowledge and my lack of it in this circumstance. While I can claim to know something about *thliitsapilthim*, this is primarily attributable to the Nuuchaanulth people who have graciously shared their knowledge about them. I do not and cannot know enough about them to consider

what they mean to Nuuchaanulth people in any concrete sense. In my search for a starting point I returned to the moment when I saw a *thliitsapilthim* for the first time. It was not in a museum exhibition nor a gallery show. Nor was it in situ at a Nuuchaanulth “do”, an informal title given to a host of Nuuchaanulth ceremonial functions. It was in a photograph taken by Ki-ke-in (Ron Hamilton) entitled “Wiiwimta-eyk Thliitsapilthim” which subsequently became one of the main promotional images of the Backstory exhibition. It was also an image that, like all photographs of *thliitsapilthim*, I do not have a right to show without expressed permission of the curtain’s owner (a simple Google search will reveal for the reader images of the objects of which I speak here). In what follows, however, I use this unique encounter as a point of departure for my consideration of *thliitsapilthim* as objects with a particular agency that extends beyond their more “traditional” locale of ceremonial enactment. I hope to provide a way of engaging *thliitsapilthim* that does not depend on either the definitional limitations of art/artifact, or on the problematic negotiation of ethnographic and historical versus aesthetically-based regimes of value. Thus I am not as concerned with what *thliitsapilthim* are as much as I am concerned with what they do, or more appropriately what they have the potential of doing.

Here in/visibility operates as a key channel of affect in a complex relational network between human bodies, material objects, and more intangible forces of history, memory, power, and protocol. I understand in/visibility as an absence-through-presence, a feeling that something is missing. In/visibility can thus be sensed and carries in itself a certain affective charge. It is predicated on certain kinds of absences (of knowledge, or of actual substance such as the absence of imagery in this article), and also on particular “tactics of revelation” (Taussig 2006), understood as the strategic limitations of

presence that disrupt access to knowledge. I begin with a brief background discussion of *thliitsapilthim* and then move to a consideration of their materiality. Following this I discuss the relationship between in/visibility and access to knowledge that is made evident by *thliitsapilthim*. Finally, I present a different interaction with *thliitsapilthim* that draws on affective surges of “enchantment” (Bennett 2001) or “wonderment” (Clifford 1988), rather than context-based art historical or anthropological models, as a way to better engage their unknowability.

## BACKGROUND

*Thliitsapilthim* is a term used in the Huupacasah dialect of the Nuuchaanulth language for large ceremonial curtains manufactured since the late nineteenth century out of single or sometimes multiple sections of muslin cotton. The term is roughly translatable to “easily moveable interior partition made in a meaningful way” (White 2013:775). *Thliitsapilthim* are decorated with various kinds of imagery, from the more “classic” icons of Northwest Coast First Nations cultures like Thunderbird, Raven, Whale, and Eagle, to less extraordinary but equally significant representations of people, places, and things. In the Nuuchaanulth world, *thliitsapilthim* are the post-contact iteration of a ceremonial partition-making tradition that has existed since time immemorial. Their precursor *kiitsakuuilthim* were usually made from large wooden planks and decorated in a similar fashion (White 2013). The Potlatch Ban imposed by the Government of Canada which lasted from 1885 – 1951 (see Cole & Chaikin 1990) forced the transition from cedar planks to cotton sheets that could be easily taken down and hidden away in the presence of the local Government Indian Agent (White 2013).

*Thliitsapilthim* were and continue to be used in the context of Nuuchaanulth ceremonialism. The objects and imagery are owned by individual families and in some cases by specific individuals. When displayed, they work to tell the history of a particular family, the property of the family, and a family's origins. The contention of White (2013) that the context of the Nuuchaanulth potlatch continues to be the main animator of *thliitsapilthim* leads him to argue that when separated from this context, *thliitsapilthim* are deprived of their basic purpose. *Thliitsapilthim* have been separated from this context through various means and put towards various ends for more than a century. They have been collected and displayed, both privately and publicly, in many non-Nuuchaanulth arenas (see Hoover & Inglis 1990). This separation does not, however, mean that *thliitsapilthim* cannot be animated by other contexts and serve other purposes.

I consider *Backstory: Nuuchaanulth Ceremonial Curtains and the Work of Ki-Ke-in* as one of these powerful moments of separation. This exhibition presented “for the first time, contemporary ceremonial curtains... and historical curtains from museum and private collections in Canada and the United States” (Belkin Gallery 2009), and thus was an opportunity to consider *thliitsapilthim* in an entirely new situation, one of cross-cultural dialogue and translation. Here *thliitsapilthim* take on a new role, or perhaps refashion an old one; not as objects that trouble the now clichéd categories of “art” and “artefact,” but as objects whose very materiality present an opportunity to consider larger questions of Nuuchaanulth knowledge and its ethical engagement from a non-Nuuchaanulth perspective. Such a discussion must begin with a consideration of materiality. To do this I turn to an un-showable photograph and my first encounter with a *thliitsapilthim*.

## THLIITSAPILTHIM AS OBJECTS

Here is how it began. When I first saw the photograph “Wiiwimta-eyk Thliitsapilthim,” what struck me was not the specific content of the image itself, but the familiarity of the image. The photograph was like so many I had seen before in my life, a family snapshot taken to memorialize *something* (Stewart 2007) significant. Badly lit, poorly focused, awkwardly composed, it was as if I could have taken it, or it could have at least been in one of my family’s albums. The people stood as I tend to stand on such a semi-formal moment: hands clasped in the front, uncomfortably rigid and unsure of whether to smile or to be more serious. Its vernacular qualities made this image what Elizabeth Edwards (2001:4) calls a *linking object* that draws connections “between past and present, between visible and invisible and active in cross-cultural dialogue.” One of the ways it was able to do this is that it was not a photograph of a *thliitsapilthim* exactly, but a photograph of people, of a family, with a *thliitsapilthim* in the background. With people in the foreground, the object seemed more familiar, less dominating, or at least easier to get at.

Photographs have long been prized for their ability to tell viewers something “real” about their referent. This situation has often been discussed in relation to the colonial history of image-making (Ryan 1997; Maxwell 1999; Hight & Sampson 2002). The post-structuralist turn in various domains of critical thought has significantly challenged this assumed ability of photographs to tell the truth, or to be considered an appropriate index of their subject matter (Edwards 2001; Pinney 1997, 2003). However, there continues to be a resounding faith in the indexical qualities of photographic images. This presents a complicated and problematic conflation of the assumed “truth” of the image with the observable

“reality” of its referent. Thus it is the last part of Edwards’ definition that intrigues me most here – what kind of cross-cultural dialogue about *thliitsapilthim* does this photograph help me engage in? What does it “tell”? I offer a slight departure from Edwards and argue that in reality it is not so much a dialogue, but more of a translation and one with limits.

The *thliitsapilthim* in the photograph functions as a material object and a visual presence. I argue that both figure into the mediation work of the curtain. Here I wish to consider the former more directly as the material potency is striking, but this objectness requires some unpacking. While not literally “the same,” it is in the oft-understated role of materiality in favour of the visual that I find a shared ground between the *thliitsapilthim* in the photograph described and the photograph itself. As Edwards and Hart (2004) argue, any consideration of photographic objects and their affective or performative potential that only considers their visuality – that only accounts for the photograph as image – is problematically limited. This is also true of *thliitsapilthim*. Despite this, in the discussions with Nuuchaanulth people that I have been privy to, it is always more about what is *on* a curtain rather than what it is made up of. I argue that their materiality is also key to what they are and *do* as objects, particularly in situations where their visual presence presents a protective surface, making invisible an unfathomable depth.

In many respects, the images on *thliitsapilthim* are essentially transferable to and able to be represented by other objects. The photograph that frames this discussion is exemplary of this process. They might very well appear on myriad substances from paper and wood, to t-shirts and coffee mugs (see Townsend-Gault 2004; Glass 2008). However, when placed onto large swaths of muslin cotton, this imagery is activated in a certain way that is



deeply entangled with its specific materiality. In one case involving this exhibition, a mourning family decided that their *thliitsapilthim* should not be shown for a year as part of their grieving process. It was agreed upon that perhaps a good-sized photograph of the curtain could take its place. Here, it is clearly the object of the *thliitsapilthim* rather than its imagery that is of concern. It is the thing itself that cannot be shown. In another case, a curtain that contained certain imagery that a particular family did not have prerogative rights to display was destroyed by request, but it was agreed upon that photographs of it could remain (Thompson, personal communication, 2009). Again it is the material presence of a particular object that is in question. Its physical display rather than its representation. It then becomes clearer that *thliitsapilthim* are powerful things. They are animated by their involvement in various kinds of relations – between individuals, families, and communities. But how might we consider the ways through which their object-agency is enacted?

*Thliitsapilthim* are “things” in a material sense. They are cotton sheets of various dimensions, decorated with a variety of designs that illustrate a family’s history and substances (paint of various kinds, marker, felt pen, etc.). They are also things that do things, they act. To consider this as materiality is not only to consider their *physicality*, but how this interacts with the world around it, where the goal is to “transcend the dualism of subjects and objects” (Miller 2005:3). Bruno Latour (1993) has famously critiqued the production of such dualisms as the work of “purification” that is seemingly hardwired into the modern constitution. In response to the subject/object divide, Latour posits the idea of the “quasi-object”. Thinking in terms of quasi-objects allows for “a continuous passage, a commerce, an interchange, between what humans inscribe in it and what it prescribes to

humans... .What should it be called neither object nor subject” (1993:149). Latour argues that there is no such thing as objects and subjects, but rather there is a mixture of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects, each thus becoming *actants* that are not only constructed by, but also construct, a relational network of human and non-human actors (Law 2002). I consider *thliitsapilthim* as Latourian quasi-objects. They are “actants” that have the ability to be constructed by and construct the world around them through their interactions with other quasi-subjects along circuitous relational networks. Pinney (2005:269) both builds on this concept and challenges how it has been put to work. He observes that this agentic possibility of objects can easily be thought of as dialectical process of “subjects making objects making subjects” (2005:258) but that this requires the problematic “suturing” of objects to a particular definitive context. Pinney critiques culture-based claims to the so-called “social life” (see also Appadurai 1986; Thomas 1991) of objects from this position, arguing that

[t]he fate of objects...is always to live out the social life of men, or to become entangled in the webs of culture whose ability to refigure the object simultaneously inscribes the culture’s ability to translate things into signs and the object’s powerlessness as an artifactual trace. Narratives of the social lives of things, they reaffirm the agency of the humans they pass between (2005:259).

This process Pinney terms (after Latour) “late purification,” where an initial concern with objects and materiality is soon predicated on the “further colonization by the social and the subject” (2005:258). In this state objects are only given their agentic capabilities by the human biographies and social lives they encounter (Pinney

2005:259). To avoid this he recommends a different conceptual tactic. Rather than position objects in relation to some kind of subject-centered context (be it cultural, historical, etc.), objects can be positioned in relation to what is “rendered ‘deceptive’ and ‘inexplicable’ by the current dominant paradigm” (2005:262) of context-based analysis. As such, we need to look “for all those objects and images whose evidence appears to be ‘deceptive’ and whose time does not appear to be ‘our’ time” (2005:262-263). Interactions with things like *thliitsapilthim* are thus better thought of as essentially transient moments of encounter with the unknowable or the inexplicable.

This provides an appropriate theoretical landscape through which to consider issues of in/visibility. *Thliitsapilthim* might be perfect examples of the objects and images in which Pinney (2005) sees potential for resisting standard anthropological and art historical forms of classification. In what follows I hope to better explore their “deceptive” or “elusive” nature more thoroughly in terms of relations of knowledge and knowing. Furthermore, I will consider how this in/visibility presents potential for a more fruitful engagement with intercultural or hybrid moments *as* moments and not the overarching contexts Pinney (2005) describes.

## *THLIITSAPILTHIM*, IN/VISIBILITY, AND THE PUBLIC SECRET: SURFACES AND DEPTHS

Returning to the image “Wiiwimta-eyk Thliitsapilthim,” the first thing that becomes apparent is the role of the *thliitsapilthim* as a backdrop both in the photograph and in its broader public life. This requires a consideration of “backdrops” more broadly, not only as photographic props, but also as transformative and performative

spatial objects that create both a tangible surface and an elusive depth. In “Notes From the Surface of the Image” (2003), Pinney uses ideas of “surface” and “depth” in relation to the production of photographic objects in postcolonial India. In Pinney’s usage, *depth* characterizes the colonial, modernist gaze of photography that “privileges the time/space of photographic exposure” (2003:204) and allows images to perform their indexical function. Certain contemporary photographic practices in India resist this depth by paying more attention to and playing with the “surface” of the image – an activity that explicitly denies the intrusiveness of depth.

A key element in this denial is the role played by the backdrop. As Pinney observes, backdrops have a longstanding history in photographic practice. Often “backdrops are valued as a record of the subject’s position in a particular actual space” (Pinney 2003:212). This purposing is what Appadurai (1997) has termed the “colonial backdrop.” In this usage, the backdrop becomes part of the overall contextualizing apparatus of the photograph itself. Appadurai argues that colonial backdrops of this sort seek to localize the photographic subject and reinforce the realism of the image. At other times, a backdrop of a different sort may be used to directly reject “real” space in favor of something more fantastical, to manipulate the surface of the image. Appadurai (1997) dubbed this the *subaltern* work of the backdrop. Here the backdrop actively “resists, subverts or parodies the realist claims of photography in various ways” (1997:5; Pinney 2003:213).

For Pinney, the subaltern agency of the backdrop opens up a “space of exploration” that “fractures not only the spatial and temporal correlates that are implied by the perspectival window created by photography but also suggests a different conceptualization of the subjects who are made to appear within this

window” (2003:213). In “Wiiwimta-eyk Thliitsapilthim,” it is the family that is centered and foregrounded in the frame, not the curtain. In this moment the *thliitsapilthim* becomes a backdrop in front of which people pose or enact a variety of other performances in different scenarios. Here we can begin to consider the work of *thliitsapilthim* as a space of exploration that Pinney imagines. Posed in front of this *thliitsapilthim*, the family is seemingly transported out of the Comox Community Hall where the photograph was taken, and transformed in a way. In just what way I cannot begin to realize because, as a backdrop, the *thliitsapilthim* also serves to mark out the limits of the photograph’s surface. Subsequently, it defines the limits of my ability to know more about what is happening in front, around, or behind it, producing the range of in/visibility.

*Thliitsapilthim*, as backdrops either in photographs or in the “real” space of the Comox Community Hall, regulate this kind of in/visibility by strictly demarcating areas of seen and unseen. As one Nuuchaanulth woman and participant in Backstory explains, *thliitsapilthim* hide

[t]hings you don’t want people to see. Things you don’t want them to see because it’s a surprise. It’s part of the overall effect. You don’t want people to see the things that make your regalia function or whatnot. Personal things. Things you give out are behind the curtain. Private things. Things you don’t want people to touch. You don’t want people to touch the curtain. It’s a piece of you. It’s precious (Cassavant, personal communication, 2009).

In the same way they mark out the division between private and public space, *thliitsapilthim* embody a division of private and public

knowledge. They do not sever the two realms as much as they are indicative of the way public and private are sutured together. Public knowing is always the surface for a depth of private knowledge and is a negotiation of who can know and what can be known. This is not limited to, as Comanche curator and cultural critic Paul Chaat Smith (2009) has said, a “who is Indian and who is not” kind of question. Though it might be a “who is Nuuchaanulth and who is not” kind of question. Regardless, it is a larger reminder that knowledge and knowing are always partial (Clifford 1986). As *thliitsapilthim* mediate this partiality they perhaps become agents for a kind of Nuuchaanulth “public secret” (Taussig 1999), providing a material presence of the inarticulable. Thus, *thliitsapilthim* reveal something, but not everything. They are elusive to most who encounter them. What they reveal, however, invites their interlocutors into an understanding that they do not and cannot know everything. This is similar to what Townsend-Gault (2004), following Weiner (1992), has defined as a certain “keeping-while-giving.” This indicates that *thliitsapilthim* are directly implicated in a larger system of relations – that of First Nations and their increasing efforts at cultural protectionism in relation to the exploitative and appropriative tendencies of Canadian settler society.

A system of inequality undegirds relations between contemporary First Nations and the nation state as a result of a legacy of European colonialism and its assimilationist policies in Northwest Coast of Canada (Townsend-Gault 1997; 2004). Denying that this tension exists is not helpful, but it should not be considered in terms of an “us versus them” relationship, whoever the “us” and the “them” might be. Chaat Smith (2009) observes that the situation is far beyond the simple binaries of native and non-native. We are all implicated in the common process of shaping a (post)colonial present

that addresses and redresses a colonial past in ways that render dichotomous identities unproductive. Bhabha concludes in *The Location of Culture* (1994:255-256) the need to move beyond binary divisions in the many forms we might find them. Then we are better suited to view how cultures “interact, transgress, and transform” one another in more intricate and ultimately productive ways. Latour (1993) might agree, but the tension remains.

This tension takes on many forms, but is primarily rooted in a long history of “theft” (Kramer 2006); of culture, of resources, of land, of people, of property, and of knowledge. The (post)colonial present of British Columbia is characterized by a unique effort to confront its historical theft of knowledge in some ways which are better than others. Questions about the knowledge of indigenous people, reflected in terms like “indigenous knowledge”, “native knowledge”, “traditional knowledge” or “local knowledge”, sit at the center of conversations about both appropriate redress and continuing abuse. This absolutely applies to the circulation and display of objects, especially if we are to understand objects as being/having a certain “materiality of knowledge” (Myers 2005:96).

*Thliitsapilthim* are the material manifestation of a very particular kind of knowledge. Not simply reducible to flattened categories of “Indigenous knowledge,” or even “Nuuchaanulth knowledge.” They are best understood as family knowledge or more precisely, they *are* family. This knowledge is ultimately private, but is nonetheless revealed in various forms of public display of and interaction with *thliitsapilthim*. Here enter the aforementioned tactics of revelation. The public secret, private knowledge and its protection are entangled with a public affirmation of what cannot be known or rather, “knowing what not to know” (Taussig 1999:2). In the

interactions between *thliitsapilthim* and those who are not Indigenous, not Nuuchaanulth, and not family, people

know they cannot discern everything –ownership, status, privilege, family, rights, obligations – nor do they necessarily or particularly care to – what they do know is that they don't know, or that they can't know. The inalienable remains beyond them, beyond their reach. If this is so then protectionism can be effective (Townsend-Gault 2004:197).

However, to recognize that one cannot know *everything* is supported by a comfort that one has come to know *something*, or at least one thinks one does. *Thliitsapilthim* thus use their surfaces to reveal a limited “kind” of knowledge (Myers 2002). The degrees of this revelation are specific to moments of display and audience, but they share in common their partiality, their limitedness. This is a whetting of the appetite, so to speak. It is not meant to satiate, but rather brings into higher relief the fact that depth remains private, protected. This is the deceptive quality of *thliitsapilthim*. They present a surface that is easily taken for depth, but that is not even close. But what if we know this? We know they are deceptive. We know we do not know everything. We are all part of this public secret now.

If we approach the situation of knowledge and knowing, or an understood and publicly affirmed lack of knowledge and not-knowing, that surrounds and is embodied by *thliitsapilthim* as one in which their in/visibility becomes the basis for their engagement, what new kinds of potential does this present us with? If the goal is no longer to make it understood that we cannot know – or see – everything, what possibilities are opened up? There is a temptation to arrogantly try and force the unknowable into understandable



categories as both anthropologists and art historians have long tried to do with objects of non-Western manufacture (Clifford 1988). As such, there is perhaps something more fruitful in acknowledging in/visibility and allowing it to remain as such. Here *thliitsapilthim* become objects whose potential lies more in their affect than in their *meaning*. As I will discuss below, it is here that those on the outside of objects can best hope to engage them.

## THE POTENTIAL OF *SOMETHING*

*Thliitsapilthim* are thus objects that are inherently elusive or even deceptive (Pinney 2005) in what they communicate, or better yet translate, to those unfamiliar with or unrelated to them. They protect a depth of knowledge in providing a surface of partial revelation. They operate through a condition of in/visibility whereby physical presence is not tantamount to accessibility. However, we are past the point where this is a sufficient conclusion. In accepting the limitations and protection of knowledge as a given, we need to start asking new questions, such as: What do *thliitsapilthim* make possible? What is their futurity? How might they change the person? (Keane 2005:191). To a large extent this is clearly dependent on a familiarity between a particular *thliitsapilthim* and a particular person, and in a particular place. However, mapping the multiple trajectories and possible network reconfigurations is beyond the scope of this paper. Though it is perhaps possible to consider the moment, or *a* moment when something comes together, in which *thliitsapilthim* are actively involved; a point along a relational network of quasi-objectness. One needs not be specific. In fact there is more in remaining ambiguous if one is to avoid the contextual traps Pinney (2005) warns against.

This productive ambiguity is perhaps no better captured than by Raymond Williams (1977) who is critical of a course of analysis that seeks to understand the world as a collection of already finished products. For Williams,

[t]he strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is the immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products. What is defensible as a procedure in conscious history, where on certain assumptions many actions can be definitively taken as having ended, is habitually projected, not only into the always moving substance of the past, but into contemporary life, in which relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes (1977: 128).

In this sense, the possibilities of *thliitsapilthim* do not need to be considered in terms of the larger, concrete contexts of which both Pinney and Williams are wary. They arguably can and need to be dealt with in the moment. Stewart (2007) theorizes the “ordinary” and its affective capabilities and presents a way to think beyond the specificities of time and context in her rendering of the ordinary as “surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact” (2007:128). Here the emphasis is on a productively ambiguous *something* that does not necessitate analytic classification in order to have an affect. “Ordinary affects” are the moments and things that “catch people up in something that feels like *something*” (2007:3). This appears to have resonance with Pinney’s appeal to seek the “jolts and disjunctions” (2005:270) that objects present. Stewart’s “something” then provides a necessarily ambiguous space for Pinney’s deceptive objects, and more importantly palpable

in/visibilities, to impact without becoming dependent on the context of a subject in order to be affective.

The materiality of *thliitsapilthim* might very well catch us, everyone, up in something that is somewhere between individualized experience and historicized finality. They present to us a certain “structure of feeling” (Williams 1977) that is as undeniable as it is indefinable. It is potentially best understood as “enchantment” (Bennett 2001) or “wonderment” (Clifford 1988). Either way, it is something that carries a certain ethical potential. Jane Bennett defines enchantment as “a feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence; it is to be under the momentary impression that the natural and cultural worlds *offer gifts* and in so doing, remind us that it is good to be alive” (2001:156). Clifford (1988) similarly argues that rather than completely abandoning our wonderment and fascination with inexplicable or unknowable objects, we should embrace such encounters as ethically reflexive moments. In encountering such objects Clifford recommends that we engage them “not [as] specimens of a deviant or exotic ‘fetishism’ but our own fetishes... seen in their resistance to classification they could remind us of our lack of self-possession, of the artifices we employ to gather a world around us” (1988:229). It is through these different kinds of engagements that inexplicability and our lack of knowing become not hindrances, but the foundation for a new kind of ethical project. Here Backstory presents a moment that, in separating *thliitsapilthim* from their ceremonial context by displaying them in a gallery setting, allows them to work in new ways. While information about the *thliitsapilthim* are offered to the viewer – a curtain’s owner, its year of manufacture, what it depicts – these standard art historical/museological tidbits pale in comparison to what is not being shared. Backstory is very much about coming face-to-face

with unknowable materialities and in so doing offers a potential space in which *thliitsapilthim* can perform acts of acknowledged deceptions so as to make us more fully aware of our own, to let their in/visibility bring us face-to-face with the tension that characterizes the past and permeates the present. They remind us of our ethical responsibility, that we are all in some way in this together and are connected now. In so doing, *thliitsapilthim* reveal the range of their possibility, their futurity, and their potential to enact change.

## CONCLUSION

I have tried in this paper to wade through some of the issues being presented by the Backstory exhibition as the first time in which an extensive and diverse collection of Nuuchaanulth *thliitsapilthim* were displayed to a primarily non-Nuuchaanulth audience. Considering this moment requires a different kind of approach than a standard anthropological or art historical context-based model. In seeking to outline its potentiality rather than its actuality, this paper has sought to consider the moment through the objects themselves. In doing so, the materiality of *thliitsapilthim* as objects with agency is necessarily made central. As I have attempted to show, a consideration of this materiality is key in characterizing (Taussig 1999) *thliitsapilthim* beyond the purview of simplistic art/artefact binaries or problematic contexts.

Taken as objects that are neither aesthetic nor historical, *thliitsapilthim* are opened up to a different kind of engagement. Extending from their more “traditional” role as ceremonial backdrops, in this scenario they become objects that negotiate the translation of Nuuchaanulth family knowledge to a wider audience. They embody a division between surface and depth; of knowable and unknowable, that has come to define much by way of Indigenous

peoples' relationships with larger Canadian society. In this moment, by offering a surface for public consumption, they protect a depth of private knowledge that remains central in maintaining contemporary indigenous identities (see Townsend-Gault 2004). This act is seemingly one of purposeful deception and central to the continuance of a particular public secret – the understanding that knowledge is partial, controlled and protected.

In knowing this and in being part of the secret, the question becomes: what is left if the task of articulating the unknowable is becoming more and more a redundant effort? If this is no longer the ethical imperative, then what is? As I have tried to show, attention must now be turned to the role of affect and the new possibilities that can be found in accepting in/visibility. In this sense, the unknowable becomes not a hurdle that must be overcome, but a refreshing baseline from which to explore the affective thrust of enchantment or wonder with renewed ethical vigor. One of the many possibilities presented by Backstory is to engage with *thliitsapilthim* not for the purpose of uncovering or exposing their depth, but to play on their surface and feel, for a moment, like we are part of *something*.

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