

Shame Totem 2.0/2.1

by Jennifer Jacquet



Fig. 1 The earliest recorded sighting of a carved pole. From the journal of Bostonian fur trader John Bartlett when he visited a Haida village on Langara Island in 1791. Reproduction from the original in the Peabody Museum, in John Frazier Henry's *Early Maritime Artists of the Pacific Northwest Coast* (University of Washington Press, 1984); courtesy of UBC Special Collections/George Dyson.

Although the days of whipping poles, dunce caps, and hot-iron branding are over, shaming still lives on in our contemporary cultures. For instance, at any given moment in New York City, about a dozen inflatable giant rat balloons are puffed up outside buildings signifying that union workers and an employer could not come to an agreement. Occasionally, prominent people are hit with a cream-filled dessert while making contentious statements or appearances, like the economist Milton Friedman, who was pied during a 1998 conference on the privatization of public education. This year in Japan, the publication of a photo showing a 20-year-old pop star with her 19-year-old boyfriend led her to shave her head and issue a tearful apology because the photograph provoked so much shame (Japan's norms dictate that pop stars project an image of austere morality, and her band had taken a vow against dating). Inflatable rats, cream pies, and tabloid photographs: contemporary shaming takes on strange forms.

Among these various forms, my research on shaming has been especially stimulated by shame totem poles. Carved from red or yellow cedar or Sitka spruce trees, totem poles are mnemonic objects only fully understood by those who possess the relevant cultural knowledge. Because their meaning is difficult to discern without the requisite symbolic points of reference, totem poles have typically been appreciated by settler cultures for their magnificence and beauty.

Fortunately, we know something of these poles from the oral history of native communities, as well as from early ethnographic studies. This evidence indicates that carved poles originated with the northern peoples of the west coast sometime in the eighteenth century, then spread south and up the major river valleys of British Columbia. There are eight different types of carved poles described in the literature: house posts, from which all totem poles may have evolved; house frontal poles, often erected at a house entrance (the form of the earliest recorded sighting of a carved pole); memorial or commemorative poles; poles to honour the deceased; mortuary poles (which actually contain the body or ashes of the dead); grave markers; welcome poles (often erected on beaches to welcome canoes); and shame poles. From at least the eighteenth century on, most indigenous nations of the northwest coast (with the exception of the Coast Salish) erected shame totem poles to signal to the community that certain individuals or clans had transgressed cultural norms or values.

For instance, one alleged shame pole formerly on display in Sitka, Alaska, was carved to include a likeness of Alexander Baranov, the chief manager of the Russian-American Company, perched on top. It is supposed by scholars to be a shame pole because Baranov is nude. Another more famous shame totem example includes three frogs said to represent three women from the Kiksadi clan (whose totem is the frog) who were allegedly living with a different clan. When the Kiksadi chief was presented with a bill for the keep of these three women, he refused to pay; the pole was carved with the hope of encouraging reimbursement. The theme of debt runs through many shame poles, and some are even referred to as "debtor poles." More recently, in 2007 Mike Webber carved a totem that was put up in Cordova, Alaska, to shame Exxon for failing to make payments for the Valdez oil spill. The totem includes

the upside-down face of former longtime Exxon CEO Lee Raymond, sporting a Pinocchio-like nose.

We should not let the provocative aesthetics of shame totem poles distract us from their purpose—the collective exertion of social control to establish, or re-establish, social norms. As settler culture was establishing its various forms of government to moderate the vicissitudes of human activity, Western colonial governments had their own shaming practices. A brief glance at this history evinces the serious harm effected by State shaming. The most compelling argument against this State practice is perhaps that of the legal scholar James Whitman, who contends that the State is tasked with alleviating citizens of their impulse and/or responsibility to punish others, not to invite them to partake in more retribution, which is arguably the point of shaming punishments.

Another persuasive position on the subject is advanced by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who argues that State shaming is at odds with the State's role in protecting human dignity. Nussbaum's objections to shaming do, however, leave an opening for the possibility of shaming particular groups, particularly those legal individuals we refer to as corporations.

This argument, which allows for shaming corporations for their flagrant transgressions, on the ground that we do not need to worry about issues of dignity, led me to consider the possibility of reformatting the shame totem for the twenty-first century as a means to expose some corporations (as opposed to individuals) that have most negatively affected society. Like clans, which had specific symbols that were appropriated and turned against them, corporations have logos and iconography that can also be *de-tourned*.

Shaming has a democratic nature. If an entity is exposed and the group does not concur that the act was wrong or the exposure was justified, shaming does not work very well. With this in mind, rather than choosing the most wrongful corporations myself, in August 2011 I used an online survey to ask 500 anonymous Americans to select the 10 firms that had most negatively affected society from a list of the 50 biggest publicly traded corporations over the last ten years. I then aggregated that data and used the top 15 or so to inform the pole's content.¹



Fig. 2 *Shame Totem v.2.0* (2011),
by Oscar Baechler, soundtrack by Brian Eno.



Fig. 03. Detail of *Shame Totem v.2.0* (2011).



Fig. 5 Installation of *Shame Totem v.2.1* (2013) in Astoria, Queens.

Using the logos of those companies (which were all modified to prevent copyright infringement), I worked with Oscar Baechler, a 3-D digital artist based in Seattle, to render the *Shame Totem v.2.0*. We tried to follow some design principles common in traditional shame poles. For example, the figure at the top must be an animate object, so we chose an eagle to represent the United States. I had also read and seen photos that suggested carvers sometimes turned a person or crest upside down as a sign of shame, and so the smiley face, which evokes the Walmart logo, is upside down. Faces with red nostrils and ears signified stinginess; these were easy to add to Ronald McDonald. There were other modern quirks, too, including the egregious headlines that run across the television playing FOX News. Near the top of the pole was the corporation with the greatest number of votes: British Petroleum (the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe was still in the minds of many Americans). My personal favourite (and Baechler's idea and design) is the pig with five ties that each represents a bank on the list.

The result was a modern, garish, digitally rendered 3-D shame pole, which was presented at the Serpentine Gallery's Garden Marathon in October 2011. There, I had the chance to meet and collaborate with artist, activist, and musician Brian Eno, whose soundtrack for the shame totem combined slowed-down indigenous hymns, financial data from NPR, and his own creations.

In January 2013, I again surveyed 500 Americans using a different list of the biggest corporations; this time I only included US corporations (no BP) that were still in business (no Enron). There were differences in the most shameful companies:² Wal-Mart took the lead, and Apple moved onto the pole. Artist Brendan O'Neill Kohl designed this latest version, called *Shame Totem v.2.1*.

In First Nations communities, shame poles were usually displayed in prominent areas where clan members, potlatch attendees, and trading partners would see them. For our digital productions, I have visions of projecting them onto the Washington Memorial or in Times Square. In the meantime, the work will be exhibited in digital public space, i.e., online.

If the debt that led to a shame pole was paid, First Nations tradition often allowed the debtor's family to burn the pole in a gesture that suggested the restoration of reputation. However, like many other totems, shame poles were often simply allowed to rot in the damp northwestern climate. This eventuality baffles historians: how there could be so much effort put into something that occasioned so little effort toward preservation? This suggests, at least in part, that the production and carving of totems was more significant than their perpetuity, and perhaps, that the act of their creation might have possessed as much in terms of a therapeutic value as their iconographic referents did in terms of public shame. ×

Endnotes

- 1 Top 15 from August 2011 (with number of votes in parentheses): 1. BP (361), 2. Enron (306), 3. Exxon-Mobil (260), 4. AIG (232), 5. Walmart (230), 6. Philip Morris (217), 7. FOX News (211), 8. McDonald's (208), 9. Bank of America (195), 10. Fannie Mae (192), 11. Shell Oil (172), 12. Goldman Sachs (167), 13. Lehman Brothers (155), 14. Dow Chemical (141), 15. Chevron (131)

- 2 Top 15 from January 2013: 1. Walmart (311), 2. ExxonMobil (279), 3. Bank of America (250), 4. Goldman Sachs (234), 5. J.P. Morgan Chase (191), 6. Fannie Mae (183), 7. Philip Morris (166), 8. Freddie Mac (166), 9. Chevron (138), 10. Apple (136), 11. Wells Fargo (123), 12. Comcast (116), 13. Dow (114), 14. Citigroup (111), 15. Coca-Cola (101)

Bio

Prior to joining New York University as a Clinical Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies in 2012, **Jennifer Jacquet** spent seven years at the University of British Columbia, where she was a PhD student and post-doctoral researcher. She is interested in large-scale co-operation dilemmas, such as overfishing and climate change, with a particular interest in the role of social approval. She is currently writing a book about the evolution, function, and future of shame, to be published by Pantheon Books.