

REFLECTION ON MELANIE VINCENT'S LECTURE

“BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIPS: THE HURON-WENDAT EXPERIENCE IN
REPATRIATION AND REBURIAL MATTERS”

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Summary

Melanie Vincent's lecture provided unique insight on the repatriation process of the Huron-Wendat ancestral remains that were excavated and placed in museums and institutions for viewing and research purposes. As a member of the Huron-Wendat Nation and a repatriation coordinator at the Huron-Wendat Council, she walked us through the motivation, vision, and principles adopted by the council to reach the ultimate goal of reburying the HW ancestors excavated from Southern Ontario. Vincent explained that before the HW migrated from Southern Ontario, they mostly led agricultural lives, resulting in an abundance of artifacts later left behind in Southern Ontario and excavated for archeological and developmental purposes. Therefore, the HWC shifted the council vision to prioritize the protection of HW ancestral remains. As a requirement for council operation, Vincent emphasized the importance of collaboration with other members of the HW nation, as well as academic institutions and other First Nations.

Reflection

I found Melanie Vincent's lecture incredibly unique in the sense that her knowledge and perspective on the topic of Indigenous repatriation come from her expertise as a repatriation coordinator at the HWC rather than academia. She developed her expertise by applying her skills in communication, planning, and organization to the goal of protecting Huron-Wendat heritage, which is a process involving numerous obstacles. For example, the repatriation of Huron-Wendat ancestors requires close communication with members of her nation, other First nations, and with archeologists, museums, and academic institutions, which may not always be so easy. In lecture, she told us a story from 2019, which involved a large reburial that unfortunately never took place due to a miscommunication between the city officials and the Huron-Wendat council. In this example, the consequences of such a small detail in planning illustrates the complex demands of her position in the council. Due to such challenges, her position requires her to have a perspective that takes into account the regulations, laws, beliefs, and motivations of other communities, in this case the city board. A strength of this perspective is that she may be able to foresee some potential challenges related to council projects. For example, she explained that the council performs reburials in a preventative fashion; repatriated ancestral remains are mostly buried in private property, and signs are avoided in order to prevent re-excavation.

An example of the knowledge I have gained from Vincent's talk relates to the Huron-Wendat's traditional views on death. Since the beginning of discussions of repatriation and reburial in this course, I have wondered *where* a given reburial of ancestors may take place. From Vincent's talk, I learned that the Huron-Wendat traditionally believe that the soul of the dead stays near the cemetery, where they can remain close to their families and loved ones. Therefore, the ideal reburial sites for the Huron-Wendat ancestors are the original sites where they were excavated. This knowledge helped me think about the emotional implications of ancestral excavation, as it implies that the ancestors were forcefully taken away from their families and homes. Vincent describes such implications as "it is not just a transactional issue; it is an emotional issue." Further, this relates to the issue of perspective differences between some archeologists and anthropologists and Indigenous peoples when it comes to understanding the emotional harm the excavation and collection of ancestral bones may cause. To better exemplify this, Vincent asked us how we would feel if the bones of our own families were kept in a box for research purposes.

Lastly, Vincent mentioned the Huron-Wendat council has members with a wide range of professional backgrounds, including scholars. She also mentioned that in a special case, an archeologist refused to give back the Huron-Wendat ancestral remains, with the excuse of being unsure whether the remains belonged to the HW nation. This information left me wondering how the expertise of the scholars from the council may become useful in communicating with the archeologist to resolve such issues.