The Politics of Decolonization and the Museum Enigma[1]

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Museums, a western construct, are constantly "reinventing" themselves to suit the current socio-political trend of the day. They are continually looking for a niche in which to frame their existence, let alone their diverse messages. They seek for new meaning and more relevant definitions of who they are. Many rebrand themselves for public acceptance and change their internal administrative hierarchies to match those of the corporate world where Directors become Chief Executive Officers. Professional level museum staff have even taken on guest friendly titles to include such words as 'visitor experience' and 'collections engagement', perhaps in a quest to increase the public's comprehension of their raison d'être. Nevertheless, museums are caught in the grip of a troubled world where the ethnosphere is concerned (Janes, 2009).

It could be said that the Canadian experience represents a benchmark for the discussion at hand, even though any territory that has been heavily colonized by immigrants of European origin would see similarities. Nevertheless, when talking about decolonization and museums, the subject matter is similar and the current situation is the result of the thousands of years over which waves of first peoples have migrated here, populating the land long before the arrival of western colonizers.

In the political arena in Canada, indigenous populations are governed by the 1876 Indian Act, which was then primarily aimed at their assimilation into mainstream Canadian society by outlawing their languages and cultural mores and enforced by incarcerating children in residential schools, outlawing ceremonies (Potlatch ban 1885-1951), and moving peoples off 'traditional' lands in favour of an enforced Reserve system. Indigenous persons registered with the government become Status Indians eligible for benefits, rights and services. Those subject to the Indian Act were organized into Bands with Band Councils being their basic unit of government. Today, while the Act has undergone many changes, it still exists, is still administered by the government and still allows the government to control most aspects of indigenous life. Consequently, as wards of the government, indigenous peoples are not free to determine and pursue their own destiny.

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1. This paper contains information that originates from the author's personal first-hand knowledge garnered over 44 years as a museum anthropology curator.

Yet they have become very vocal as regards their contested 'traditional' territories through land claims, of compensation related to the residential school system, of how the justice system has treated them, of the removal of resources from their traditional lands, of squalid living conditions, and of other blatant discriminations. In 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was officially launched as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement and the 'reconciliation' buzz word has become front and centre to government interaction with First Nations populations. Nevertheless, because of ghettoizing indigenous peoples and continually treating them as different, inferior, or even as a source of curiosity, a state of decolonization may never be achieved.

With the absence of decolonization on a national scale as regards the indigenous populations still living under the yoke of government control, there is little wonder that museums—housing and exhibiting material culture originating from these peoples and also relying on governments for funding—are not leading the way forward in an endeavour to right the wrongs of the past. Given their ready accessibility, museums have the capability to sow the seeds of change not only in the minds of their visitors, but also at the highest levels of government, but this has not been the case. Consequently, museums with their own 'political' corporate structures often feel bound to follow suit for their own survival. In this way, museums have created their own enigma, beyond which they seemingly have not or cannot reach.

There are, however, museums that are endeavouring to come to grips with decolonization by being responsive to indigenous voices for inclusion in collections, exhibitions, interpretation and information dissemination, as well as in the area of repatriation of ancestor remains and of ceremonial and sacred objects of cultural patrimony.

For Canadian museums holding First Nations archaeological and ethnological collections, and pursuant to *The Spirit Sings* boycott (Phillips, 2011, p. 12), the impetus for museum change was grounded in the 1992 Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples sponsored by the Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association. The Report specifically recommends that partnerships be established between First Nations and museums in such areas as interpretation, access, repatriation, training, and implementation. In spite of its best intentions, as funding to effect implementation was not forthcoming from the Canadian Government, the Report became a shelved document without teeth, although museums could accept it 'in spirit' or provide their own financing.

The 1994 symposium *Curatorship: Indigenous Perspectives in Post-Colonial Societies* focused on Promoting Cultural Equity: Museums and Indigenous Peoples, and "organized around the realignment of relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples…in the context of traditional museum practices" (Cummins, 1996, p. iii). Its resolutions included that museum professionals must work towards "finding alterations or extensions to the museum concept," "deconstructing the colonial perceptions of museums and other public institu-

tions that collect … past indigenous cultures," "redefining the idea of 'museum' from houses of indigenous peoples of the past…to consider that museums house cultures and cultural meanings that reflect living cultures for indigenous people" (p. 197) and that museums "cease patronizing indigenous and aboriginal groups by assuming a right or role in speaking for such groups" (p. 201).

Much has been written on what museums should/should not do as regards their interface with indigenous populations. Canada, being a young federation initially cobbled together by immigrants of European origin, is still trying to locate its own identity. Nevertheless, it needs to come to grips with its internal issues, not only with respect to its indigenous peoples, who have populated the land since the retreat of the ice some 10,000 years ago, but also to its growing ethnically diverse population, much of which comes from Asia. Canada faces missing out by not incorporating its indigenous peoples into its 'national culture' and thus is in danger of losing what these peoples could be contributing to making this country. Canada is not homogenous – its culture is multiculturalism and museums are expected to serve that culture. Nevertheless, museums have been slow to respond where indigenous cultures are concerned.

Museums are their own sociopolitical corporate entities administered by a government, by a Board of Trustees, or by some other body to which they are held responsible. While public opinion can often weigh heavily, museum staffs are not free to set their own course outside of their institutions' internal policies, and this has often led to an enigmatic lack of action where the ethnosphere is concerned. Museums continue to be self-serving and to maintain an ingrained ethos of superiority and right of appropriation and ownership not only of the collections, but also of their accompanying intellectual property. Museums still do not fully embrace their obligations to stewardship. Many still maintain their predatory ways for collections acquisition in an arena of competing wants for scarce resources, where supply is low and demand high both in the marketplace and in the field, and many have suffered the consequences of their actions.

Due to their intrinsic learned knowledge base and their societal position of control, museums have exerted their power over information construction and dissemination (the politics of representation) and, until recently, this has neither been questioned nor challenged. In other words, the museum "has fundamentally become a mirror of the societal values of the predominant culture in which it is located" (Maranda, 2015, p. 60). Nevertheless, museums "are one with the community, regardless of that community's cultural composition, and they should be a primary vehicle through which minorities communicate their histories and lifeways to others" (p. 63).

How can this enigma be addressed? The museum's approach to its own existence is itself a colonizing act and requires a change of mind set. While there may be ingrained political and societal barriers that are difficult to overcome, much of the impasse comes down to such basic human mores as perception and attitude. Change at this level can kick-start real change at the institutional level. The underlying recommendation advanced in the Task Force Report on

Museums and First Peoples is one of partnership—the movement away from self-centeredness towards inclusivity. This would mean that the museum ethos would need to evolve "from inward to outward looking … from paternalistic to respectful, from independent to sharing, from reactive to proactive, from single to multiple voices and perspectives …" and such "a major attitudinal shift would constitute a complete re-evaluation and re-alignment of institutional values…" and would require "a fully committed, policy-driven effort by the museum to effect the necessary results" (Maranda, 2015, p. 63).

While many museums are engaging in such processes as consultation and even collaboration, spawned by "native activism and academic epiphanies" (Lonetree, 2012, p. 16), neither go so far as that of an equal partnership whereby the roles of both museum and indigenous peoples are shared equally. Trained curators, perhaps unknowingly espousing their own form of scientific colonialism, are not the only persons who can create meaningful exhibitions and disseminate meaningful information. Why cannot museum curators become facilitators while indigenous persons take on roles as curators? While there may be a tension between learned information and traditional knowledge passed down verbally through the generations, and despite the perception that memory can be elusive, museums need to acknowledge differences and embrace multiple voices. Further, why cannot a full partnership be achieved whereby indigenous peoples have a voice in all aspects of museum activity in presenting indigenous lifeways and thought? And indigenous peoples sitting on Museum Boards – why not?

Even the politics of museums as "keeping places" to be shared with indigenous peoples goes to the heart of what museums need to do to decolonize the imbalance that exists. Issues involving repatriation could well be ameliorated if an equality of access could be brokered. The closer the interaction the greater the benefit for both demographics; by equally sharing the museum sphere, perhaps the stresses generated by an "us first" ethos will devolve into an "us together" stance. If this does not work, museums could become a construct of the past.

References

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