All My Relations: (Re)Imagined Communities and Indigenous Peoples

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In Canada, as in other countries with a colonial origin, museums have participated in the construction of a collective national identity through curated versions of the past and of the present which often silence or minimize Indigenous Peoples. Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson (1983), Canadians, as part of an "imagined community", have consciously avoided narratives that would position Indigenous Peoples as sovereign peoples, or else they have propagated a version of the settler's historical record that has painted Indigenous communities as participants in the building of Canada. This kind of epistemological structure is problematic for Nations and communities who already have, and who have had since time immemorial, their own identity as peoples. The reductionist framework imposed by the erasure of these histories, particularly within museums, is an impediment to the pursuit of true decolonization based in Indigenous principles, practices and ways of knowing.

Even more troubling, a reductionist view of Indigenous histories has concrete implications for museum policy. Museological approaches to decolonization in Canada, where they exist, have largely focused on efforts to change policies and to update content to reflect an awareness and a sensitivity to Indigenous histories as a part of a greater national and Canada-centric whole. In some cases, this has meant the inclusion of new representatives on Museum boards or in consultative capacities. In other cases, this has meant the hiring of Indigenous people within Museums to help share these important perspectives. Regardless of the mechanisms, the policies and practices related to decolonization have largely focused on the mechanisms of this work rather than its undergirding principles. In other words, we have largely failed, as institutions, to think big.

How can institutions articulate and transform themselves without applying a pan-Indigenous lens that subsumes key differences in protocol and perspective between diverse communities? As a curator and researcher, this question is central to my work at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) and raises important issues related not only to what we exhibit, but also to the process through which we create content and programming. It is also reflective of my own identity as an Indigenous person working within a national institution.

All my relations

In Lakota or Ojibway communities, this phrase is often used within the context of a sharing circle, or at the end of a prayer. It represents an acknowledgement of our interconnectedness and the respect we hold for each other.

All my relations - these are simple words, but the meaning they carry is significant. They represent the weight of the past and the possibility of the future, and they carry with them important values that have assisted Indigenous people in building families, communities and Nations since time immemorial.

In *Embers* (2016), Richard Wagamese discusses the phrase "All my relations". All my relations, he writes "points to the truth that we are all related, that we are all connected, that we all belong to each other" (p.34). Within this, as he explains, the most salient concept is the word "all", and that this relationship includes:

> Not just those who look like me, sing like me, dance like me, speak like me, pray like me or behave like me. ALL my relations. That means every person, just as it means every rock, mineral, blade of grass, and creature. We live because everything else does. (p.34)

As Wagamese asserts, the central idea of this kind of thinking is relational. This relational space represents an important nexus around which we might rethink our ways of relating to one another and even how museums may conceive of relating to the histories and contemporary perspectives of Indigenous peoples, whether First Nations, Métis or Inuit.

In his writing about Indigenous–settler relations, Cree researcher Willie Ermine discusses relationships as "spaces of engagement" to emphasize the opportunities that exist within relationships to work out the similarities and differences between the various ways of knowing that may be held by those involved. When we consider relationships as spaces of engagement, Ermine (1995, p. 195) explains that we pay attention to the words, actions, and behaviours that exist on the surface. These words, actions, and behaviours, however, also tell us something about the attitudes, beliefs, and contexts that run below the surface and that function as a "deeper level force" in shaping the ways of knowing and being that may be present in relationships.

Confronting the deeper level forces at work within the museum field is a critical task that involves looking at all aspects of museum work. The underlying values that this work takes on should, in the true spirit of decolonization, reflect a new way of approaching collections, content and education. The values deployed when working with and alongside Indigenous people need to reflect Indigenous ways of knowing about the world and about their histories.

At the CMHR in Winnipeg, Manitoba, curatorial and programming practices work to create an ethical space of engagement with Indigenous communities and individuals based in important foundational values. These include respect, reciprocity and interconnectedness.

Respect means honouring and respecting other living beings. Respect extends beyond humans to animals and other living elements in the world. It means acknowledging the contributions that each living thing makes to sustain life or to contribute to a good life, both individually and collectively.

Reciprocity is about give and take. When a relationship is reciprocal, both sides actively participate in giving what is needed and taking what is needed. This means that in everything, there is an exchange of ideas, and one idea or gift leads to another. It creates rights and obligations for people toward each other.

Interconnectedness is the idea that the rights of individuals and of the collective are connected to rights of the land, water, animals, spirits, and all living things, including other communities or Nations. Interconnectedness recognizes that everything and everyone has purpose and that each is worthy of respect and holds a place within the circle of life.

The Museum's permanent galleries are based on these principles, which are articulated in key practices such as community collaboration and co-curation, guest curation, the prioritization of Indigenous perspectives and the minimization of Museum voice, and, the presentation of human and Indigenous rights violations as shared history. Recognizing that decolonization approaches are by nature, dynamic, subsequent projects have also worked to create a deeper space of engagement based on the values of respect, reciprocity and interconnectedness. These projects include Rights of Passage, an exhibition I curated that employed exciting new methodologies for story-telling and artifact selection.[1]

Ongoing work also includes the development of the relationship around the Witness Blanket, an art installation by Carey Newman (Kwakwak'awakw and Coast Salish), which has become part of the permanent collection of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. The Witness Blanket honours the thousands of children who were forced into the Indian residential school system in Canada. It is a cedar "blanket," woven with over 800 pieces of Indian residential school history. These contributions were donated by residential school survivors and their families, band offices, friendship centres and governments. Other items were reclaimed from former residential school sites. The contributions include letters, photos, stories, books, clothing, art and fragments of buildings.

The exhibition of the Witness Blanket is directed in collaboration with the artist and is based upon the principles of respect, reciprocity and interconnectedness. But beyond what the public sees, and in terms of the care and stewardship of the Blanket, the relationship with the artist and with the installation is also unique.

On October 16, 2019, a historic agreement between Carey Newman and the CMHR was finalized through traditional ceremony at Kumugwe, the K'ómoks First

1. For more on this, see the article "Kanata/Canada: Re-storying Canada 150 at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association 2017*, New Series, Vol. 28, No.1, pp. 217-247.

Nation Bighouse on Vancouver Island. In an unprecedented process, Kwakwaka'wakw traditions and governance and Western contract law came together to form the basis of a permanent relationship, vesting rights with the artwork itself as a legal entity that carries the stories of the survivors.

The ceremony, held near Newman's traditional territory, was facilitated by chief and spiritual leader Wedlidi Speck, head of the Gixsam namima (clan) of the Kwagul people. A song, dance and the ancestors' mask marked the importance of the ceremony, which also included Carey Newman and CMHR president and CEO John Young each stating their purpose and intentions for the stewardship of The Witness Blanket. Witnesses from the Kwakaka'wakw community, youth, Elders and others with connections to the project, then reflected on their responsibilities as part of this relationship. The parties celebrated with a feast, acknowledging the gift of the agreement and the deep connection that has been forged. As Carey Newman expressed, in the aftermath of the ceremony, "Through spoken words and shared memory, we can express our commitment in ways that transcend written contracts — how we feel, our hopes and our goals for this agreement and our relationship as collaborative stewards of the Blanket and survivors' stories it holds."

For the CMHR, our responsibilities to the agreement include the care of the Blanket for future generations. Toward this goal, the Museum has begun restoration work on the installation in preparation for an upcoming exhibition project that will represent the Blanket's second exhibition at the CMHR.

Within the context of the Witness Blanket, as well as other notable projects including Rights of Passage, Indigenous epistemologies have been central to the development of curatorial practices and educational programs at the CMHR. Relationships and Indigenous principles surrounding partnership as the basis of a new or different kind of museology take to heart the need to create ethical spaces of engagement and to acknowledge the history and legacy of museums as institutions that have traditionally served to minimize or to amalgamate Indigenous histories within a larger umbrella of the "national" story of Canada. Recognizing and atoning for the ways in which this relationship has harmed Indigenous communities and Nations is in fact the central animus of decolonization practices, which should serve not only to modify what museums do, but to completely transform them.

Engaging in critical dialogue about the past and future of how museological practices serve Indigenous people, communities and Nations means daring to think bigger and more boldly. How museums envision a pathway focused on decolonization rests in engaging Indigenous principles of relationship-building and responsibility – not simply a change in policy.

And so, to return to the beginning, *All my relations*. This is a principle, it is a prayer, it is a hope for the reinvention of the ways within which institutions operate. As Wagamese (2016) maintains, "It's our saving grace in the end" (p.34).

References

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