**From Artifact Necropolis to Living Rooms:**
**Indigenous and at Home in Non-colonial Museums (excerpts)**

[Keynote: *New Encounters: communities, collections and museums*. The National Museum of Australia, Canberra, AU. 2016.]

[Editors. Much in the original is rough, or site and time specific, recycled, or better articulated in later writings. There are a few things that might be worth salvaging. I'll leave that to you. Below is an edit of what I think are better and less redundant bits.

Replying to a colleague who was defending a friend, Winston Churchill famously quipped, 'He *is* a humble man, but then he has much to be humble about!'[i] I resemble that remark. I am neither a museum curator nor anthropologist, not a PhD of any strain. I curate art, mostly Indigenous, in Treaty Four and Six territories. I am an artist who teaches painting and drawing at a regional university in Canada, Saskatchewan, Regina—the very trifecta of modesty. Ironically, in the inverted worlds of the contemporary museum and academy, where margins often centre, having much to be humble about can be a quality.

Legal scholar and Blackfoot philosopher Leroy Little Bear explains that Indigenous people prefer to be generalists; knowing a good deal about many things but not too much about too little. Being a specialist, he says, is a Western preference that serves capital better than it does persons, and planets. It reduces independence and the ability to be agile in a world in flux. Amongst this illustrious company, it is this philosophy alone that gives me hope that my multiple deficits might add up to an asset—and keeps me from fleeing the room.

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This time last year, my colleague Michelle LaVallee and I curated *Moving Forward, Never Forgetting*, a large contemporary art exhibition, performance art series, and set of community projects about Indian Residential Schools and other forms of aggressive assimilation, inter-generational reconciliation among Aboriginal families, and conciliation with Settler neighbours. At the opening, Tahltan performance artist Peter Morin collected a large pile of books whose contents have caused harm due to their erroneous depictions of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. Over five hours, he and community members drummed and sang over the children's stories, novels, and history, art, and anthropology texts. They washed each page with a medicinal tea.

Morin wanted to honour these once-were-trees but also the authors who were, he generously figured, more written by their racist society than self-authored. He wanted people to know about the caustic nature of these volumes but did not want to make a spectacle of Indigenous suffering for Settler consumption. He declined to write an essay or give a speech because such actions engage the texts according to their terms rather than his. Instead, the group cleansed the books and tried to lay their bitter content to rest, both symbolically and actually. Later, Morin planted the volumes in various locations across Turtle Island. It was a moving gesture by a humble man, a moment of grace, an instance of Indigenous critical care.

First Peoples have long been the subject of scholarship, museum displays, and academic conferences. Our history as speaking subjects in these spaces is recent, fugitive, and fraught—but improving. In a short time we have gone from native informants to consultants, and now struggle toward something resembling colleagues. The next step is the non-colonial museum and university. To Indigenize, rather than merely accommodate individual Indigenous persons, means fundamental change, anxiety, and excitement among us all.

The up-coming generations of Indigenous scholars, curators, and artists are more interested in sharing than being accommodated. They are reluctant to replicate Settler mentors and methods when they conflict with Aboriginal ways of knowing and being, and with territorial and creative sovereignty. They are more excited about learning, embodying, performing, producing, and presenting Aboriginal ways than they are about deconstructing dominant culture's false, inadequate, and humiliating representations. Well, let's not be hasty. That sort of work is endless, necessary, and can fun when not a heart-breaking grind. But rather than centre our lives on anti-racist and anti-colonial work, expend our creative energy reacting to dominant others, First Peoples are turning to positive production, to non-colonial activities, to reviving Aboriginal epistemologies, ontologies, metaphysical, and material practices and adapting them to contemporary lived realities. If this work is not to be a separatist project alone, but also to entangle and untangle colonial institutions for our mutual benefit, we need to map the moment, and to develop terms of engagement that produce the Indigenous without losing our Aboriginal selves.

I feel the weight of your invitation. How to present an Indigenous perspective in this company without relapsing into the native informant; to be heard without being fully apprehended; to participate without becoming an Indian agent, complicit in assimilation? Can we home in the house of another?

Another *Moving Forward, Never Forgetting* performance: clothed in his recently deceased father's headdress and ornately quilled and beaded regalia, Siksika artist, Adrian Stimson, sits in a University of Regina hallway for five hours each day for three days. Art world types recognize a reference to Marina Abramović's performance at the Guggenheim. Uncomfortable civilians see a play on the stoic, or wooden Indian. Is he being ironic? Next to Stimson is a table with photos of his Dad as a child. Behind is a banner printed with the image of the Old Sun Indian Residential School that father and son attended. Across from him is an empty chair. Signs and an attendant let passers-by know that they can sit with the artist but that he will not speak.

Responses range from international students eager to take selfies with a real, live Indian, to others sitting in contemplative companionship. Some are annoyed that Stimpson will not explain himself. The academic branch of the colonial enterprise assumes that everything and person should be accessible to those with the means and will to access them. Stimson offers a dramatic Indigenous presence but refuses the sort of discursive engagement preferred by Euro-westerns. Frustrated would-be interlocutors, given no access to the author(ity), are left with their projections. Others, especially Natives feel the moment, sit in co-relational silence, cry, share comprehending and consoling gazes, nods, and shoulder pats. Some sing, drum, or play the flute

for him. Stimson's intervention is a gentle disruption of the academic flow; an Indigenous presence without apology, translation, or giving anything away but grace.

I have a bad taste in my mouth for leading with a Winston Churchill quote. The man also said:

> "I do not admit for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly-wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place."[ii]

While horrifying, it is refreshing to have the foundational sentiments of colonial thinking so plainly stated by one of its leaders. Most Canadians believe they live in a post-colonial country—independent since 1867. I assume Australians feel the same way—more or less free from British rule since 1901. But First Nations, Inuit, and Métis remain in a colonial state; most of our lands are occupied and lives governed, not by Britain, but by Canada. I use word "non-colonial" to indicate that we do not live in classically post-colonial countries. Canadians, Australians and their institutions are not leaving any time soon. As a result, Aboriginal Peoples have to be cautious about adopting post-colonial theory arising from truly post-colonial countries.

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Museums were never public institutions in the sense of "standing outside of the state and functioning as a means of criticising it,"[iii] explains Tony Bennett.[iv] They are designed to produce meanings that serve the needs of the nation and those citizens who most benefit from it. They perpetuate dominant ideology especially in the middle and professional classes who engage cultural institutions to learn what is expected of them. These publics go to museums to absorb the cultural competencies necessary to secure and reinforce their social status and distinguish themselves from the working class.

If we consider Bennett's critique in terms of colonization, and transpose 'working class' with 'Aboriginal people,' we get some insight into why, while these storehouses hold tons of Aboriginal objects, they notoriously attract few Native people. Simply put, they are not for us. To paraphrase and repurpose Bennett, heritage museums in still colonial countries are designed for Settler audiences to absorb the cultural competencies necessary to distinguish them from Aboriginal peoples and thereby reinforce and perpetuate their colonial status.[v]

Contemporary heritage museums formed within colonial, capitalist, and entertainment paradigms require novelty. The Aboriginal, and other forms of embodied dissent, are tolerated as long as they surprise with consumable difference but do not threaten to inspire beyond the aesthetic and affective. Worse still, if assimilation remains the unstated desire of Settler Canada and Australia, then the vogue for so-called decolonial adjustments to exhibitions—and the addition of community consultations, Indigenous curatoria but not-quite curation—may simply be the machinery of assimilation in slowed motion and with a new name. If so, then it is understandable if conscientious Aboriginal curators and audiences decline participation.

Any Native cooperation with colonial institutions, argue First Nations political thinkers Glen Coulthard and Taiaiake Alfred,[vi] is a compromise of sovereignty on the way to cultural and physical annihilation. They advocate for Aboriginal-only keeping houses—what I describe elsewhere as "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" and "sovereign Aboriginal display territories." These places exist, are growing, and are central to separatist futures. However, I am interested, here, in collaborative futures—ones in which colonization is transformed by Indigenization rather than vanquished by violent revolution. My view is that heritage museums and universities—and the folks who labour in them—are not necessarily, always, and only propaganda machines. We are all, of course, compromised in that whether we promote, resist, or simply benefit from colonization, we are infused by this system. However, not all such engagements are equal or total, and not all compromises are pernicious. Contemporary museums and universities do not simply reflect state ideology but produce it. They also articulate the state's discontents, and figure its remedies—one of which is Indigenous.

The taste for Imperialism has soured. And colonization in countries now known as Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, and somewhat in the United States, has shifted from the brutish invasion, (broken) Treaty, and forced assimilation stage, to the dominant culture's present wish to entreat survivors with what they call reconciliation. This activity is played out most poignantly in museums and other sites where history, nation, and identities struggle in formation. With respect to Bennett, whatever their origin, contemporary heritage museums and universities are now places where citizens not only learn who they are and are not, but where they go to change their minds. And, if there is a collective and explicit will to transform these places from sites of colonial (re)production to spaces of non-colonial conciliation, then Indigenous curators and audiences should co-author that future.

The evolution from genocidal dispossession to conciliation[vii] is part of an international social justice movement codified in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007) which recognizes and attempts to ameliorate past and current injustices. But scholars, environmental, and other activists, go much further. Canadian scientists like David Suzuki, philosophers such as John Raulston Saul, and numerous others, find in traditional Indigenous ways of knowing and being an antidote to the colonial, capitalist, patriarchal, and racist traditions that have engendered intolerable social injustice and environmental calamity. This turn is called anti- and de-colonization, reconciliation, and especially among Canadian academics, Indigenization. If enacted, rather than simply entertained, Indigenization upends the conceptual basis of the colonial state and requires true conciliation between the Settler nation and Indigenous Nations in a shared *non*-colonial territory.

I began with humility; before returning there I am going to talk about myself.

I am Métis. We descend from the union of First Nations women and European men (overwhelmingly French and Scottish), and then from Métis inter-unions and other metissage. Not all mixed-blood Aboriginal people are Métis; most are status or non-status First Nations, or Settler-assimilated. Métis descend from families who lived on the Northern Plains and woodlands of Turtle Island for generations before the founding of Canada. The Métis saw themselves, and were recognized by their First Nations cousins, as a separate People. For our flashy clothes, we were known as the "flower bead people." Acknowledging our independence,

the Cree call us *O-tim-pem-suak*, “the people who own themselves.” In the late 1800s, after armed resistances at Red River and Batoche, and through a type of treaty that included reparations for expropriated land, Métis were partially recognized by the new Canadian state before they were dispossessed. When the constitution was repatriated in 1982, we were formally acknowledged, along with First Nations and Inuit, as Aboriginal.

I first came to Australia in 2008 when the Canada Council for the Arts sent a delegation of First Nations and Métis curators to the Sydney Biennial. The conversations I had, not only with Aboriginal artists and curators from this territory, but also from other parts of Turtle Island, changed my life. I became Indigenous. I return at least once a year for more biennials, curatorial and writing projects, and to hear and give talks. I return to witness and participate in our parallel passage from Aboriginal to Indigenous.

In my experience, Indigenous and Aboriginal are not synonyms. My primary identity, for example, is Métis. I am part of a family that belongs to a culture and territory within the Métis homeland. My responsibilities include chairing the Shared Management Board of the Batoche site; one of our most important historical and spiritual places. And, much of my art practice is committed to extending Métis visual and material culture into the contemporary moment. If I were less preoccupied with Indigeniety, I would live in a traditional community, learn to jig, play the fiddle, hunt, and speak our language, Mitchif.

I also align myself with First Nations people from other territories across the country now known as Canada. I and am recognized by them not only Métis, but also as an Aboriginal. ‘Aboriginal’ is a secondary characteristic, a political identity formed in response to colonization. When individual bands recognized that they had more in common with each other than with Settlers, they formed inter-tribal treaties: the Iroquois Confederacy—later the Six Nations Confederacy, the Blackfoot Confederacy, etc. They became Aboriginal. While individual First Nations and Métis locals are centred on specific territories, Aboriginality is a more abstract and mobile set of relationships and agreements.

Indigenous is a relatively new category of being. This tertiary identity consists of Aboriginal people who ally with other Aboriginal peoples from around the world, especially those with a common original colonizer. Indigenous is a discursive and contingent space characterized by mobile relations enabled and maintained virtually, through the internet, telephones, reading and writing, etc., and physically, thanks to rapid and (for some) cheap travel. Prior to being offered the privilege of travel, of being brought to Australia by the Canada Council, I was a very regional person. I had not travelled much beyond the Prairies, where my life, work, and art are centered. That trip opened me to new relationships, places, and modes of being. What separates the colonial from the colonized, in Churchill’s formula, is that the imperialist is “worldly wise.” Indigenous consciousness is the development of world wisdom, but without an appetite for conquest.

Every Indigenous person is Aboriginal and a member of a First Nation, tribe, Métis local, iwi, or what have you. However, not all tribal peoples are Aboriginal, or Indigenous. While our primary social identities are due to birth or adoption, being Aboriginal, but especially Indigenous, is a choice and privilege accorded to few. Of the three Native life-ways, the tribal or Nation-al is

most tied land and language. Aboriginality is in relation to country, but people living the Aboriginal tend to spend most of their time in cities. The Indigenous condition is, at the moment, the least grounded. It exists in placeless spaces: conferences, inter-National residencies, art fairs and exhibitions; studios and universities; in transit spaces, in books, over phones, and online.

Two months ago, Candice Hopkins (Tlingit) and I led an inter-National Indigenous residency at the Banff Center for the Arts. In one of our circles, Salote Tawale, a Fijian artist living in Sydney, remarked at how strange it was that she had to come to Banff to have a conversation that she should be having at home. Freed from having to translate and explain ourselves to non-Indigenous others, we can get on with deepening our identities and projects. In Indigenous space we can be critical without being adversarial. Most Aboriginal and tribal politics are in suspense here. The great weakness of the Indigenous, however, is revealed when it becomes unmoored from the identities, people, territories, and knowledge that ground it. The Indigenous can be a form of specialization, a cog easily slipped into the dominant culture's meaning making machine. The Indigenous must always be humbled by the Aboriginal and tribal.

Last year, I was invited to speak at the *Return of the Native* conference. I was drawn by the provocative title and Margo Neale's assertive ebullience. I sensed in the phrase *Return of the Native* an unconscious wish. We live in a moment of cultural dissonance. Colonial institutions and persons comprehend their complicity in injustice but cannot quite picture a state of non-coloniality that includes morally just, tolerably privileged, and recognizable versions of themselves—let alone image possible futures that do not include their replication, in white skins or not. Indigenous and non-Indigenous intellectuals and cultural workers alike can barely articulate what we intuitively know, but by ambiguous actions, strange invitations, slips of tongue, and paper, we give ourselves away. These caesurae in the colonial narrative are spaces in which artists and creative curators slip versions of difference and visions of our ideal relations.

Now, I know that the title is clever word play, like calling a hair salon Curl Up and Dye. But did the organizers read beyond the title of the Thomas Hardy novel they borrowed? Did they know that *Return of the Native* features a travelling salesman who peddles red ocher to farmers who use the stuff to mark their sheep? Did they further know that Diggory Venn's occupation as a "reddleman," or red man, has stained his skin red from head to foot…and that this has nothing to do with the conference? It is just an amusing coincidence, a red-herring. Unfortunately, my training in English literature during the postmodern era has condemned me to ferret out intricate beads of hidden meaning that may not be, but, when strung along a compelling associative rhetorical thread, may increase your willingness to consume acidic content with sweet relish.

Surely, I figured, *Return of the Native* was also a play on Freud's "Return of the Repressed"—the 'repressed' here being the presence of living Aboriginal people in the museum. Repatriation is not simply the turning over of Native bones and belongings to Aboriginal care, but the communion of living Native curators and participants with their ancestral and contemporary belongings in sites that should include the museum. This is the difference between the colonial museum, sovereign Indigenous display territories, and a non-colonial museum. The non-colonial museum is a site of struggle and negotiation where inter-National meanings are produced and contested. Repatriation is not confined to the return of Native objects, but also of subjects; including the Native curatorial turn. While Aboriginal things are at the center of national

museums, Aboriginal curatorial presence is a recent phenomenon, and the fit is uncomfortable. To be an Indigenous curator, rather than a curator who is Indigenous, or merely a curator, is to constantly negotiate the demands of the colonial institution—both conscious and not—along with the complexity of Aboriginal world views, political, tribal, and familial obligations.

Unfortunately, *Return of the Native* did not refer to people coming home but to expropriated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander belongings returning for a visit before being returned to the other Motherland. From a distance, *Encounters* sounded like a cruel twist, a re-turning of the screw. Yo-yoed from Britain, this exhibition of ancestral objects would drop in, pause, reverse turn, and return. "Behold your wonderful things. Enjoy them, quick, before we take them back."

Make no mistake. Axiomatic of colonialism is the elimination, removal, containment, and or assimilation of Indigenous peoples and cultures so that their territories can be occupied and resources exploited by and for the benefit of the colonizer. Axiomatic of the colonial heritage museum, then, is the repression of living Aboriginal peoples so that their belongings can be displayed as trophies of conquest. In this paradigm, Aboriginal artifacts are thought to be owned by their possessors and the preservation of these objects has priority over the fact and needs of living Native Peoples in relation to them.

Non-colonial museums take as axiomatic that these territories, by right of prior occupation, belong to its First Peoples whose relationship to country is not translatable as property, and therefore is not extinguishable by exchange, purchase, or occupation. Axiomatic of the non-colonial museum, then, is the centrality of living Aboriginal people, and the recognition that once-were-artifacts are their belongings no matter who is the current caretaker. Western-style museums, with their emphasis on object preservation, favour the sterilized object over the living body. This has led to the museum as necropolis. An Indigenized heritage museum the preservation of belongings is second to their use through touch, story, and replication. These objects hold half their story. The other half is contained within the makers. Curation, in this paradigm, is a curation of people rather than things. From the Latin, curator is linked not just to object care but to healing, curing. Rather than cure objects—in the sense of preserving—Indigenized curators heal the estrangement between people and their belongings.

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When it is a virtue, humility is a sense of inferiority based on sober evaluation. Through self-effacing judgement you determine your place in a specific context. You know who you are and what you are capable of given your skills, resources, and the situation. What prevents ego from collapsing from humility to humiliation is this self-awareness, and the knowledge that in another context you are not so entirely small. Well, this notion works pretty well *if* you have sufficient privilege, that is, relative immunity from the daily grind of systemic shaming that is the experience of the poor, most children, women, L.G.B.T.Q persons, the disabled, migrant, racialized, and Indigenous people. A consideration of the tense passage between humility and humiliation may help illuminate a paradox that ought to be central to this gathering: Why, when there are so many Aboriginal objects in our museums, so few Aboriginal people feel right here, a right to be here?

When your ancestral belongings now belong to another, being invited to visit them in their new owner's beautiful house can be humiliating. A further loss of dignity comes when you are expected to be publically grateful for these embroidered exhibitions of power. Museums are sites of colonization when they engender in Aboriginal subjects a sense of submission and cultural humiliation rather than agency.

On the other hand, to be able to contemplate and celebrate your cultural legacy in a home you truly share with others is humbling. Being overwhelmed by your people's achievements, seeing yourself in relation to and as an extension of that material and conceptual excellence, even succumbing to the pleasures of intelligent and affective display design are among the sublime joys of humility. Such environments create real relations between persons and pasts, and peoples with each other. They engender righteous pride, dignity, a sense of community and continuity, but also inspire a desire to exceed strategies of mere survival and defensiveness, and strictly tribal aspects of identity. Humility is awe followed by rational assessment, a grounding that allows us to leap forward. How do we collaborate to design museums as sites of humility rather than humiliation?

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[i] https://lexloiz.wordpress.com/2009/06/09/cultivating-humility/

[ii] Winston Churchill. 1937, 12 March. (OB, CV5/3, 616). From: Richard Langworth, ed. *Churchill by Himself: the Definitive Collection of Quotations*. PublicAffairs: London. 2008. P. 437.

[iii] Tony Bennett. "Difference and the Logic of Culture." *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*. Edited by Ian Karp, et al. Duke University Press: Durham. 2006. 50.

[v] The previous six sentences originally appeared in "Non-colonial Indigenous Art Gallery and Museum Displays." *Canadian Museums Association Magazine (MUSE): Aboriginals in Museums.* Ottawa. Fall 2015.

[vii] I differentiate conciliation from reconciliation. Please see: David Garneau. "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation." *West Coast Line*. #74. Jonathan Dewar and Ayumi Goto, editors. Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC. 2012. 28-3.