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History That Promotes Understanding in a Diverse Society

“In the past, Indians have had good reason to distrust and even to scorn the professional researcher. Too often have they misinterpreted the Indian history, misrepresented their way of life. It becomes necessary now to correct the record, to write the history as it should be written, to interpret correctly the aboriginal past.”

—Rupert Costo, Cahuilla (1964)¹

FOR AS LONG as I can remember, I’ve been in love with museums, all kinds of museums. I was a kid raised on public television, and on vacation our family traveled to museums and historic places. Each summer in Colorado we’d visit old mining towns and trace disappearing rail lines, imagining the past and wondering what life was like way back when. We would spend vacation time researching these towns in public libraries and archives, looking for photographs that

Working in museums for more than twenty years, Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko has been a museum director since 2001. Prior to joining the Abbe Museum as President and CEO in 2009, Ms. Catlin-Legutko was the Director of the General Lew Wallace Study & Museum, where she led the organization to the National Medal for Museum Service in 2008. She served as Treasurer for the American Association of State and Local History and was the Founding Chair of its Small Museums Committee. She is currently a board member of the Maine Humanities Council and the American Alliance of Museums. At the Abbe, Ms. Catlin-Legutko co-leads its decolonization initiative and develops policies and protocols to ensure collaboration and cooperation with Wabanaki people.

showed them bustling with people. This was history that intrigued us, held our attention, and bound us together in family learning and adventure.

As I headed into my college years, I knew I wanted to work with precious collections, reveal the exciting stories that can be found in history, and inspire audiences to consider the human condition. As a museum leader, I've worked in a general history museum, a literary and Civil War historic site, and I am currently working in a Native history museum. My career was launched from an educational platform made up of training and study in cultural anthropology, archaeology, art history, and history.

I believe in museum spaces and their power to change lives, inspire movements, and challenge authority. And I have examples. The STEMInista Project at the Michigan Science Center can inspire a girl to become a scientist and cure diseases of the future. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum can influence the national conversation around immigration through its dialogue-driven visitor experiences. A traveling exhibition called *Race: Are We So Different?* can change how museums and informal learning programs approach difficult conversations about race and society. This is a power that museums hold and can wield. However, I believe museum history and modern practice are terribly problematic for communities of color and, specific to my work and the examples presented below, harmful to Indigenous communities and their ancestors. Change is long overdue.

MUSEUMS ARE COLONIZERS

“But one of the most important goals [of decolonizing museums], I believe, is to assist communities in their efforts to address the legacies of historical unresolved grief by speaking the hard truths of colonialism and thereby creating spaces for healing and understanding.”

—Amy Lonetree (2012)²

In the historic pattern of museum work, we find non-Indigenous people acquiring the belongings and the remains of people from other cultures. Museums are colonizing spaces. As Ho-Chunk scholar Amy

Lonetree writes, “Museums can be very painful sites for Native peoples, as they are intimately tied to the colonization process.”³

Historically, museums were built as temples of culture and art, reflecting images of Europe as the ideal. For many Euro-Americans, inclusion in a museum exhibition may instill pride and signify achievement. For colonized populations, it feels like being captured and isolated in a glass case or like being collected for display on a velvet-covered card. Natural history museums in particular used, and continue to use, classification systems to organize their contents: the “Hall of African Peoples,” the “Hall of North American Indians”... you get the picture. Classifications may be convenient, but they lead to a troubling practice of “othering” by those who work in museums, people who are predominantly white, like me.

Let’s unpack this term—*colonization*—for a minute. Colonization occurs when a population of invaders plants colonies in the homelands of other peoples. American colonialism is motivated by religious, political, and economic factors. People whose lands are colonized are in danger. The process leads to war, massacres, enslavement, and other atrocities. The real work of colonialism is the extraction of resources of colonized peoples. Cultures and human lives are always harmed and often destroyed during colonization. Always.

Right now, today, the United States remains in a colonial relationship with tribal communities. The invaders, the colonizers, are still here. This is a fact often overlooked by history practitioners and academics alike. As Susan Miller writes, “American historians have been loath to concede the point that the United States stands in a colonial relationship to the North American tribes whose homeland it claims.” This is a key difference from Indigenous historians who have “no such aversion” to using “colonialism and colonization to explain relations between Indigenous peoples and nation-states.”⁴ To be clear, museums hold the spoils of colonialism: the artifacts and human remains of Native people.

The fields of history and anthropology have long crafted the narrative and the interpretation that describe Indigenous museum collections—fields dominated by Eurocentric, white voices and points of

view. The history of museum representation of Native peoples begins with the development of anthropology as an academic field; modern representation stems from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Academics, especially anthropologists, earned accolades by systematically collecting American Indian material culture, that is, obtaining the authentic for museum collections.⁵

They were also removing the physical remains of Native people from execution burials, traditional burial grounds, and battlefields, and depositing the ancestors in museums. To this day U.S. collections hold the remains of an estimated half million Native American individuals, and European museums hold an equal number.⁶ And while there is legislation in the United States to return the ancestors through the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, there is no such legislation (or the equivalent) requiring European repatriation.

So our perceptions of Native people and Indigenous cultures are shaped by the work of colonizers: people, like me, who are trained historians, anthropologists, and museums workers. What do the results look like in our memories and in our experiences today?

Whether as a young student or as an adult, we formulate a view of static, unchanging Indigenous cultures when we read the work of biased academic textbook writers and interact with museum exhibitions informed by the same biased voices. Certainly dioramas promote this view by depicting Indians as frozen in time and by displaying them in the same galleries as dinosaurs and other extinct animals.

Our memories may also recall Native objects defined and explained by Western scientific nomenclature and not by Indigenous categories of culture, worldview, and meaning. Exhibitions often remove the human story from the material culture on display by presenting artifacts as cold and lifeless when their meaning and purpose are intimately tied to human stories. Lastly, scholars and museum workers have homogenized Native communities into one pan-Indian group, disregarding the complexity and difference that well over five hundred Indigenous nations represent.⁷

These practices, which may have informed your memories, also dehumanize Native history and create colonizing museum spaces. In

such places, emotional, spiritual, and physical harm is done when these colonized spaces and practices are not acknowledged and addressed. So it makes sense that many Native people would find American museums to be painful institutions.

DECOLONIZING PRACTICE AT THE ABBE MUSEUM

“Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.”

—Article 11 of the United Nations Declaration
on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)⁸

What is to be done? We need to decolonize museum spaces. Undoing the harm colonization has caused is the focus of our work at the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine.

Founded in 1928, the museum’s mission is to inspire new learning about the Wabanaki Nations with every visit. A historic confederacy of tribes, the Wabanaki are the Micmac, Maliseet, Abenaki, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot. At the Abbe, their stories are shared through changing exhibitions, special events, teacher workshops, archaeology field schools, and craft workshops for children and adults. Native community members are actively engaged in all aspects of the museum, including policymaking as members of our board. The museum greets thirty thousand visitors each year with seven year-round staff members and about a dozen seasonal staff. In recent years, with broad community support, we have grown from a small trailside museum, privately operated within Acadia National Park, to include an exciting contemporary museum, opened in 2001 in the heart of downtown Bar Harbor.

Our organizational and strategic plans ask the overarching question, what can and should our museum do that is a service to Wabanaki people? Decolonization means, at a minimum, sharing governance structures and authority for the documentation and interpretation of

Native culture. Borrowing again from Amy Lonetree, decolonizing practices at the Abbe are collaborative with tribal communities. This means that when an idea for a project or initiative is first conceived, we have a conversation with Native advisors and make sure it's a story or an activity that we have the right to share or pursue. We ask permission; we don't get halfway down the planning timeline and then check with Native advisors to learn how we're doing and if we're getting it right. And, when ideas for an exhibition or program come to us from the tribal communities, we prioritize the ideas and work collaboratively to bring them to fruition. Native collaboration needs to occur at the beginning and be threaded throughout the life of the project.

A second characteristic of decolonizing museum practices is to privilege Native perspective and voice. The vast writings on the human experience are with little exception written by white academics and observers. When we begin to prioritize and privilege the writings and observations of Indigenous scholars and informants, the story broadens, expands, shifts, and introduces a clearer and non-oppressed perspective of Native history and culture. There is room to consider academic writing and research in this practice, but when there is conflict, both points of view may be presented, so long as the non-Indigenous research is not exposing sensitive information or causing harm to communities of people and their ancestors. And to this point, I have many Indigenous academic and advisor voices to credit: Amy Lonetree, Susan Miller, Taté Walker, Jamie Bissonette Lewey, Geo Neptune, Bonnie Newsom, and Darren Ranco. Their words shaped this article and influence my thinking on a regular basis.

Lastly, decolonizing museum practices include taking the full measure of history, which ensures truth-telling. Histories of Wabanaki people connect to today's challenges. Issues of water quality, hunting and fishing rights, and mascots are connected to the past and the present. When we present this full history we have a better opportunity to identify harmful statements and practices.

There are certainly museums across the United States and even around the globe that are incorporating decolonizing practices into their operations, but through our research we've found that their ef-

forts are typically limited to exhibition development. We're concerned about exhibitions at the Abbe as well, but we're also looking at all of our operations—including governance structures, hiring practices, collections management, and educational programming—and creating decolonizing pathways. The Abbe Museum is committed to developing decolonizing museum practices that are informed by Wabanaki people and enforced by policies, managed by protocols, and overseen by inclusive governance structures. In addition, we will have other structures in place that will maintain the museum's commitment to decolonization regardless of the players involved—foremost among them the staff, trustees, and advisors.

DEVELOPING THE SKILLS FOR DECOLONIZING WORK

“Dialogue . . . is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. . . . In our modern culture men and women are able to interact with one another in many ways: they can sing, dance, or play together with little difficulty but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariably to lead to dispute, division, and often to violence.”

—David Bohm, Donald Factor, and Peter Garrett,
Dialogue: A Proposal (1991)⁹

Since 2013, the Abbe staff have been working closely with Sarah Pharaon from the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (the Abbe is a member) to develop our skills in facilitated dialogue. We anticipated that our decolonizing commitment would require us to be able to have difficult conversations with each other, our board, and our museum audiences. In particular, our visitors would regularly throw us for a loop with questions such as “Are your Indians poor?” and “Can I touch an Indian?” While the visitors may not have intended to be hurtful when asking these questions, their impact is harmful for Native and non-Native staff members working the frontline audience interface. We wondered, how best could we transition questions such as these into new learning experiences that would broaden the visitors' understanding and minimize the potential for harm in the future?

We also observed that very often if a visitor was not alone, his or her companion would recognize that a question or action was rude or offensive or should be phrased differently, and would begin to mediate or correct the speaker. Dialogue was trying to happen on its own, and we were ill-prepared as a staff to engage.

Facilitated dialogue allows personal truths to come forward, be examined and valued, and be evaluated for harmful impact. The Coalition describes the opportunity dialogue offers:

Dialogue gives equal value to the insights drawn from personal experience and the knowledge gained from intellectual study or external sources.

Dialogue requires people to surface and examine the assumptions that inform their beliefs and actions. Dialogue invites a person to learn about him or herself while learning from others.

The process of dialogue requires participants to establish, protect, and maintain a culture of mutual trust.

The process of dialogue assumes that it is possible for two markedly different perspectives to coexist at the same time and therefore, rejects binary, either/or thinking.¹⁰

Fortunately for the staff, our board of trustees is committed to developing decolonizing practices and has evolved into a “learning board,” hungry for readings and guest speakers to be part of our regular meetings.¹¹ The board could easily have been a limiting force as we dove into this training and its applications, but it was truly the opposite.

The team skill set is still a work in progress, affected by staff transitions and limited resources. We have piloted dialogue-based programs and are gradually embedding these skills into our work. Beginning in 2017, we will create and revise all educational programming to include dialogic elements, from opportunistic dialogues to intensive, guided dialogues. Facilitated dialogue places museum-goers at a shared table where they can see themselves as part of the story, either through personal connections or universal themes. This approach to relevance not only engenders support for history, anthropology, and museology;

more importantly, it generates empathy in visitors when it connects the story to their worldview. When relevance is evident, oppressive and colonizing frameworks can be dissolved.

An intrinsic step in adopting facilitated dialogue in museum environments is to identify non-negotiables. These specify what does not constitute acceptable conversation in your museum because it may be wholly untrue, even if it is commonly espoused by visitors, or because the topic is incredibly sensitive and harmful to some people and can act as a trigger. There is a wide host of reasons why selecting non-negotiables is important for moving forward with difficult conversations. The Coalition training also cautions that recognizing a non-negotiable is to be done in a way that doesn't shut down dialogue—a delicate balance indeed and a process that was incredibly challenging for the Abbe staff.¹² Ultimately, we adopted three operational truths, or non-negotiables:

De-humanizing thousands of generations of ancestors and Indigenous people is unacceptable and perpetuates intergenerational trauma.

Colonization is an ongoing, harmful process.

Wabanaki nations are sovereign nations. That sovereignty is inherent and cannot be taken or given away.

Once we put these words on a flipchart and confirmed that this is the truth of our work and that it is non-negotiable, we all became surprisingly emotional. With these three truths in hand, we can navigate academia, practice, and visitor experiences while reducing harm to Indigenous people.

Of course, this isn't the only work we needed to do to be adept at decolonizing. At the same time as our study of facilitated dialogue, we submitted ourselves to racial bias training led by internationally known social justice activist Steve Wessler. Through his careful and experienced framework, we did self-work, looking at our biases and learning how to combat them and to interact in difficult situations when micro-aggressions, misrepresentations, stereotypes, and more

are expressed in direct communication and overheard conversation in our museum space and personal life. Each year we offer this training to our seasonal staff as well as any new employees who have joined the professional staff.

Our training at the Abbe continues.¹³ Most recently, trustee Jamie Bissonette Lewey, Abenaki, an accomplished healing and transformative justice facilitator, led board and staff in a facilitated discussion she created on power sharing and museums. In two parts, the exercise first asked the question, “Where do museums have power in America?” The answers were wide-ranging and startling when viewed as a whole: museums have control of information and objects; they selectively disseminate information; they hold power over stories and interpretation; they determine what is and isn’t “appropriate”; and they hold power over taste and aesthetics.

We followed this discussion by asking a second question, “What does power sharing look like?” The ideas we generated were motivational and achievable: a Native person would serve on all museum committees; Wabanaki cultural protocols are on par with museum best practices; academic and Native knowledge and scholarship are no longer adversarial; and our archaeology field school would be led by an Indigenous archaeologist. This discussion and others continue and are designed to reveal the work we have before us and to prioritize our next steps in service to Native people and their history, culture, and art.

When you choose to dive into decolonizing work, you must accept that you won’t always get it right—there will be many missteps. Your personal need to espouse “correctness” isn’t a good motivator, either. And in the scheme of museum operations, the decolonizing work won’t appear as urgent as it needs to be. While the work will never be done, at the Abbe we’ve made the decision no longer to be complicit. We’ve made the decision to avoid creating harmful museum policies and practices. We’ve made the decision to commit to revising or reversing past practices that perpetuate harm. We’ve made the decision to change.

This article was adapted from a TEDxDirigo talk given on Nov. 5, 2016, by the author (www.tedxdirigo.com/talks/we-must-decolonize-our-museums).

- 1 Rupert Costo, "A Statement of Policy," *Indian Historian* 1, no. 1 (1964):n.p.
- 2 Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill, 2012), 5.
- 3 Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 1.
- 4 Susan Miller, "Native America Writes Back: The Origin of the Indigenous Paradigm in Historiography," *Wicazo Sa Review* 23, no. 2 (2008):9–28.
- 5 Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 9–10.
- 6 Samuel J. Redman, *Bone Rooms: From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), 15.
- 7 Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 14.
- 8 U.N. General Assembly, Resolution 61/295, "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People," Sept. 13, 2007, www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf.
- 9 David Bohm, Donald Factor, and Peter Garrett, *Dialogue: A Proposal* (1991), www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html.
- 10 International Coalition for the Sites of Conscience, Facilitated Dialogue Training Materials, 2013 and 2016.
- 11 How they became a learning board is a topic for another article. This was not an overnight transition and was not without serious bumps in the road.
- 12 International Coalition for the Sites of Conscience, 2013 and 2016.
- 13 The Abbe board and staff include regular Native representation and participation, but the percentage fluctuates from year to year. The board recently developed a protocol with the goal to reach Native/non-Native parity on the board by 2021.