Repatriation, Resurgence, and Reconnection: An Investigation of Collecting and Belonging

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A thesis presented to OCAD University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Criticism and Curatorial Practice

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, April 2025

Abstract

This thesis focuses on repatriation, resurgence, and reconnection. In line with Indigenous methodologies of prologuing and story, I employ the auto-ethnographic method to detail my experience of Indigenous identity and investigating my relationship to my father's Métis heritage. I further engage in the practice of story through qualitative, semi-structured, conversational interviews with two Indigenous arts professionals currently working in the field of repatriation. Through narrative analysis and a critical museological framework, these conversations form the foundations for an exploration into strategies of repatriation and the role stolen cultural belongings play in the collections of galleries, museums, and other heritage organizations.

What emerges from the conjunction of these stories is a treatise on collecting and belonging through the lens of personal and professional functions of return. This research seeks to demystify the practice of repatriation as a one-time, almost bureaucratic occurrence and instead posits it as one tool of relationship building between museums and communities. Similarly, I show how the processes of reconnection and resurgence also struggle to be linear events. Through this combination of auto-ethnography and conversational interviews, I explore how access to or absence of emotional and material expressions of self shape identity through a critique of what collecting practices we engage in as both individuals and institutions.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my advisors, Tairone Bastien and Peter Morin. This has been quite a journey, and I am grateful to have been guided by you both through it.

Thank you to the Ada Slaight Graduate Scholars Fund for your generous support of my studies at OCAD University.

Thank you to Jonathan Lainey and John Moses for your agreement to be a part of this thesis and joining me in the process of story.

To my mom – who went above and beyond – this thesis would not have come to fruition without you. To my dad, I am who I am because of you – I would have it no other way. I am your daughter proudly and completely.

To Skipper, I think you would be proud of this story. I would have loved to call you and tell it to you myself.

To all my family and friends, thank you for your kindness, input, willingness to listen/read, edits, and words of support. I love you all.

To the self I am learning to be, I hope you will remember me and this process with love.

To the ancestors I am reaching for and have yet to know, I hope you can hear me.

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Prologue

I want to begin this thesis by explaining my positionality and how I come to this research as accurately as I can.

The woman who is writing this thesis is not the same woman who started it, nor will she be the same woman who ultimately finishes it. Partially because of the natural exponential growth any 20 something year-old goes through, but primarily because at the beginning of writing this thesis two major personal events took place: my mother's father died, and I was asked to investigate my father's Métis lineage and my relationship to that identity. While not causally related, the closeness of their occurrence entwined their influence. This dual fracturing changed how I view myself, shaped my idea of identity, and, naturally, affected my work.

As Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach explains in her influential text *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* the aim of such a prologue is "is to introduce oneself and situate oneself in relation to the community and to one's research. Through prologue, personal story is given value and recognized as integral to knowledge construction" (Kovach 2021, 144). I am using prologue here to be a researcher who "recognizes all of [who I am]" (145) and to invite readers of my thesis to join me in this process together. In this prologue, and throughout my thesis, I am trying to answer a set of placing questions from Kovach: "What is your purpose for this research? Why and how does this research give back to the community? How did you arrive at this research curiosity? What is your story? What is your connection to your culture?" (Kovach 2021, 140). In short, I am using this space to share what is my personal and intellectual provenance.

I introduce myself as a scholar with "mixed Métis and settler ancestry." My entire life I have understood that my father is Métis. I have identified as such myself with pride because of his pride. To use museological terms, as someone who works in that discipline, I was confident

in this being my personal provenance. The further I got along in my life, career, and education the more I had questions about this fact. Namely, *how* are we Métis and *where* are we Métis from? I love my father, I trust my father, and I am so grateful to him for sharing this part of his life with me. Still, our collective cultural connection is surface level. We attended the local branch of the Métis Nation of Ontario's semi-annual harvest dinners all throughout my childhood, but my understanding of Métis culture rarely went deeper than the Powley Case, the sash, the fiddle, Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont. In my family, our identification as Métis was a political one. Although we lacked a strong connection to material heritage, our identification as Métis moved us to action and advocacy. This facet of identification has always been important to me and has influenced many of my life choices. At 16, I was cast in a school play called *Sisters in Spirit* about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The show was collectively constructed through student research, community consultations and visits. As a cast, we made meaningful relationships with families who had lost members to this violent epidemic, who welcomed us into the shared mission of awareness. It was here where I started to use activism as a tool to learn more about my own link to Indigeneity. Since then, I have continued this way of being by protesting and serving in many student and professional roles related to Indigenous advocacy, which I detail throughout this thesis. I am proud of the impact this work had on me and the impact I hopefully had on others through these roles.

I took on these opportunities with great excitement because they gave me a sense of belonging and community. This helped me to feel *active* in my identity. But, passively, I fell into a generalized "pan-Indigenous" understanding of myself, rather than one anchored in distinct locations, cultures, and Nations. I did not start asking specific questions about *where* we were

from and *how* we are Métis until much more recently. I am in the process of putting these pieces together for myself and moving past tacit acceptance to explicit acknowledgement.

Here is a small part of my personal provenance:

My Mother, Wendy Ward (b.1960) and her father Peter Ward (b.1930, d. 2024) are from a settler-Canadian family with primarily British and Scottish ancestry. My father is (Jacques) Paul Grenier (b.1960). His father is Jacques Grenier (b.1938, d.1963), whose parents were Oscar Grenier (b.1907, d.1985) and Fleurette Rondeau (b.1914, d.1996). My understanding is that Oscar was from the historically recognized and accepted "half-breed" or Métis community of Mattawa in northeastern Ontario. Additionally, his wife, Fleurette, was non-status Algonquin through her mother Clara Gauthier and was raised in Blue Sea Quebec, close to the Kitigan Zibi Reservation. I share these names and locations to show where I come from and to invite those whom I may have family connections with into my story. Both Oscar and Fleurette left their homes when they were young and moved to Timmins, ON, where they met, married, and started a family. Eventually, they moved to Welland, ON, where Jacques and later Paul were raised. Given the time period, the cultural climate of the mid 1900s, and that both Oscar and Fleurette "passed" as francophone, I was told that neither had any desire to share or acknowledge their Indigeneity.

Jacques died in a drunk driving accident when Paul was a toddler. My grandmother, Shirley, remarried and had another child. When Fleurette was dying in 1996, her Indigeneity was revealed which eventually led to an investigation into Oscar's ancestry as well. As a result, a handful of family members began to self-identify and register with either the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) or the Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association (OMAA), the latter of which is now defunct. The MNO restructured the registry in 2019, removing many existing members and

contracting out the processing of all applications to an independent, third-party organization. Members who were removed were asked to resubmit their paperwork to be recognized by the MNO again, something members of my family are pursuing. This process has created a significant backlog of applications, leaving families like mine in a state of limbo with regards to obtaining official citizenship.

These realities of my family, and my related research into Métis histories, reveal a complex web of identity, rights, and politics. Within the last decade, there have been many controversies and conflicts amongst the national and provincial Métis associations. The majority of these issues arise from the question of *who* is Métis. For some, Métis do not exist outside of the historic Métis Nation. "From my perspective," writes Métis scholar Chris Andersen in *"Métis"* his 2014 study on Métis identity, "whether or not an Indigenous individual or community self-identifies as Métis today […] if the individual or group lacks a connection to the historical core in the Red River region, it is not Métis" (Andersen 2014, 6). He further justifies his position: "Hence, when I am asked why 'other Métis,' not linked to Red River, shouldn't be able to make political claims to Métis peoplehood, I reply, 'Because there are none' (that is, other Métis)" (25). However, he describes the aim of his position as "not to suggest that claims to some classification of Indigeneity will not or cannot be made in the future as opportunities, resources, and abilities dictate" (25). Even if "the claims of those who misrecognize themselves as Métis may very well be rooted in histories that are legitimately Indigenous (itself a matter for empirical investigation), they should not be making claims as Métis" (25).

Following the argument of Andersen, how did the distinct historical and cultural communities resulting from Indigenous and European intermarriages within Ontario come to call themselves "Métis"? Anthropologist Joe Sawchuk and historian Gerhard J. Ens tackle this

question (among others) in their 2015 book *From New Peoples to New Nations: Aspects of Métis History and Identity from the Eighteenth to Twenty-first Centuries*. They posit that "perhaps no province better illustrates the contradictions, complexities, and stress inherent in the contemporary definition of Métis than does Ontario" (Ens and Sawchuk 2015, 419). Because the province is "home to a non-tribal or mixed-blood Aboriginal population that for the most part has no direct links with the Red River Métis," these populations have "explored many avenues in its search for an identity […] *as a separate group of Métis Indigenous to Ontario*" (419, emphasis added).

Ens and Sawchuk explain that prior to the 1960s, these populations did not describe themselves as Métis, but rather as "half-breed" or "non-status." During this decade, along the shore of Lake Nipigon, a group of these men created the first "Métis" organization in Ontario as a result of being excluded on the basis of lacking "native status" from a subsidized housing project they had founded (422). "For a lack of a better term, they called themselves 'Métis.' The name was not chosen for cultural or historic reasons; rather, it was seen as the widest, most general and all-encompassing term that could be used" (422). During this time of political mobilization among similar communities in Ontario, the term Métis was never fully differentiated as a racial, legal, or cultural status.

As the 20th century progressed, two new representative bodies emerged: the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) and the Ontario Métis and Aboriginal Association (OMAA). Both made attempts to define Métis for themselves but often found their organizations at odds with each other and the other Métis organizations of Canada. Many of these conflicts centred on the previously mentioned complicated question of "who is Métis?" in addition to disputes over the

adoption of material culture and practices associated with the Red River Métis by the MNO and OMAA's membership. Ens and Sawchuk argue that:

> The adoption of western Métis values cannot and should not be interpreted as 'wrong' or 'misguided'; it is simply the way Métis ethnicity is being developed in Ontario. A new Métis identity is being forged in Ontario through the political activities of MNO and social change. The adoption of a western Métis version of identity is in itself entirely understandable. The idea of Métis in the Red River sense is a seductive and attractive one (the portrayal of the 'New Nation,' the Métis as one of the creators of western Canada, Louis Riel as culture hero). It gives the Métis people of Ontario a sense of pride in an actual ethno-Aboriginal identity as opposed to an 'anti-identity' based on rejection from other groups. (452)

It is also entirely understandable to see how this cultural adoption by the MNO of Red River Métis identity markers causes tension, doubt, and hurt. We have reached a point where growth of one identity is now coming at the expense of the sense and security of another. This is a gap for which no bridge has yet been built.

My family's Indigeneity has no other name than the one which was given to us at the onset of acceptance. That term was Métis. Now, a new language which can describe the situation of not only my heritage, but evidently the heritage of many others determined to reconnect, has yet to emerge. The more I search through my own family history and identity, the more questions I have. There aren't always answers. As of March 2025 — I have yet to come up with an answer about *where* this leaves me and *what* this makes me. Lineage is a fact: I can know where I come from and whose lives have led to mine. Feeling is inherent: the influence of my family and their ancestry is integral to who I am and how I view myself in relation to them and the world. Language is learned: the available terms are the only tools at my disposal. As they develop and expand, so should I. Through my life and work, I am still figuring out how to balance identity, connection, desire, culture, and privilege. I want to learn; I am learning. I was raised as a mixed Métis person with parents who taught me how to care, acknowledge, and advocate for my

people. I don't know another way of being, nor do I want to. How I was raised has given me a strong sense of curiosity, service, and justice — all of which guide my work and my purpose in this research.

Losing my maternal grandfather at the start of writing this thesis strengthened my research purpose and perspective. Peter Ward lived to be 93. For the 25 years I knew my grandfather, I always called him Skipper. He was diagnosed with diabetes in 1975. His tongue was reconstructed using the muscles of his forearm as a treatment for cancer. Regularly, he had spots of melanoma burned off his face. He lost 4 toes in 11 years. He progressively lost the ability to speak, eat, and walk. All this to say his death was expected, assumed, maybe even overdue. Still, it shocked me to my core. His ultimate decline towards an inevitable death took only 5 days. My mom, Wendy, and her older brother, Tim, sat with him during his last fearful breaths. Presupposition does not equal preparedness.

Skipper died on September 15, 2024. On September 16, I was on a train to Ottawa. I was waiting to be assigned a teaching assistantship and to get approval for my REB. Finding myself in a moment where I lacked professional and academic tethers, I ran towards my mom and my uncle to hold our grief collectively. Together, we began the process of cleaning out my grandfather's house. He had lived there since 1969. The house itself hadn't been cleaned since my grandmother's death in 2015. There was much to sort through, to remove, to remember. I ran to this challenge out of love, duty, curiosity, shock, and truthfully need. I felt I could help, therefore I should. I have always been one who aims to support others, especially through action. This ethos translates into how and why I approach and choose my work. It is additionally evident in how I handle personal crises. As I quipped to the covenant of neighbours, "I am a trained archivist who can bench 150 lbs." I was the right person for the job. I feel I have and am

cultivating the tools to be the right person for this research too. My personal treatise made plain by this statement is the same one which ultimately draws me towards my research. I incorporate into this thesis the story of my ancestry and my grandfather's death because I want to show my heart, my space, my reasoning in addition to "what I once knew, what I am beginning to know, and what I have never known" (Mitchell 2016, 52). Grief provides revelations as much as it does felt absence.

Also, as a trained archivist, I feel that prologue and provenance are fundamentally related. Throughout this thesis is the immediate grief of losing my maternal grandfather, and the sustained, ongoing, collective grief of losing and trying to reclaim my paternal family's Métis identity. As much as these feelings have influenced my approach to repatriation research, repatriation research itself has changed the ways in which I understand my current life circumstances. My research into the repatriation of Indigenous material culture from museums back into community is now fundamentally intertwined with who I am. Through the difficulties we face in restoring our belonging, both material and emotional, the emerging absences in our provenances present us with ruptures to collect, untangle, and solve. The core question I am revealing in these complexities – for this research, for myself, for the community I am trying to build and give back to – is not how to fill these gaps, but rather how to navigate these journeys of return both within ourselves and within institutions. This process can be encapsulated through the practice of story: telling, listening, sharing, and building.

Story

Storytelling is a reverence and talent integral to who I am and how I live. As I said in my eulogy for Skipper: "This gift – to not just tell stories but to make them, seek them, respect them as living – is one distinct to you. It is one I am thankful for having inherited from our family.

You remain a brilliant and bold man. You will be in my stories for as long as I tell them (and I aim to for a long time)." Research is storytelling too, and it's a methodology I use prominently in this thesis. About story as an Indigenous research methodology, Kovach writes: "Story nurtures relationship. Story kindles reciprocity. Story compels responsibility. Story thrives where there is respect. Story is a gift. And in research, this changes everything" (Kovach 2021, 156). In choosing to conduct interviews for my thesis, I wanted to make sure I was acknowledging and honouring this gift of sharing story with my interviewees. As such, I chose to hold interviews which were semi-structured but primarily conversational in nature. For Kovach, the benefits to the conversational method in interviews is that it allows both participants and the researcher to be collaborative in their storytelling (Kovach 2019, 127). It allows the self to be in relation, rather than in observation. This form of interview additionally signifies "commitment by the researcher that the research will be used purposefully," an outcome I believe we are on the path for (129).

My interviewees are John Moses (JM), Director, Repatriation & Indigenous Relations at the Canadian Museum of History (CMH) in Gatineau, QC, and Jonathan Lainey (JL), Curator of Indigenous Cultures at the McCord Stewart Museum (MSM) in Montreal, QC. John Moses is a member of the Delaware & Upper Mohawk bands of the Six Nations of the Grand River and Jonathan Lainey is a member of the Huron-Wendat Nation. Both have been working as professionals in the heritage field with a specific focus on Indigenous material as Indigenous people themselves for decades, giving their perspectives on the issue of repatriation immense weight.

Moses has spent the majority of his 30-year career working in the orbit of the Department of Canadian Heritage, including the Canadian Conservation Institute. Previously serving in the

armed forces, Moses subsequently began his career in the museum field as an artefact conservator in the last quarter of the 20th century (Canadian War Museum). He has held the role of Director, Repatriation & Indigenous Relations at the CMH for around three years and will be retiring from that role to take up a private consulting practice later this spring. The CMH itself has been operating as a museum under different names and mandates since the mid-19th century. Its collections contain materials from cultures across the world and span millennia (Canadian Museum of History). The CMH is one of the largest and most popular museums in the country; therefore, their policies and actions set examples and standards for all heritage institutions operating across what we now know as Canada.

Jonathan Lainey also previously worked at the CMH as Curator, First Peoples. Lainey additionally spent time at Library and Archives Canada in the role of Archivist, Indigenous Archives (McCord Stewart Museum a). He is an archivist, historian, author, and curator with a specialization in the study and preservation of wampum belts. Lainey joined the MSM in February 2020 with the mandate to help the museum Indigenize and further their decolonization efforts. Created in 2013, the MSM is an amalgamation of two historic museums the McCord (founded in 1921) and the Stewart (founded in 1955). As a result of these collections merging, the MSM is both a fine art gallery and an ethnographic museum (McCord Stewart Museum b). Their collection is characterized by its mix of materials and its focus on documentary art, mainly caricature works and historical photographs. They are a museum whose collection largely relies on donated materials for acquisitions, but program and curate many notable, new, and powerful exhibitions. Additionally, the MSM boasts a robust collection of materials (over 16000 pieces) related to Indigenous cultures. In recent years their messaging and programming has prioritized Indigenous art and engagement. In 2021, the museum opened a permanent exhibition called

Indigenous Voices of Today: Knowledge, Trauma, Resilience which highlights important pieces from their Indigenous cultures collection presenting them in tandem with oral histories collected by Huron-Wendat curator Elisabeth Kane grounded in the goal of fostering meaningful dialogue and connection (McCord Stewart Museum c). The MSM represents a model of smaller, private museums changing the quality and calibre of Indigenous cultural engagement.

I was interested in using these interviews to inform this research and to learn about the problems museums face in following through on the promise of repatriation. To date, much of the scholarship on this issue has been dedicated to the validity of repatriation (Bjornberg 2015; Cuno 2014; Green 2017; Nicholas and Smith 2020; Taylor 2020). While these lines of inquiry are important, my research seeks to look beyond a defense of repatriation to an acceptance of it as a necessity, as a constant. With that acceptance, however, arises new questions. How does repatriation work? What are the challenges? What are the solutions? Interviewing professionals working within the field of museums, galleries, and archives who are actively participating in repatriation efforts allowed me to engage in stories that reveal the complexities of this process. Our conversations result in a layered perspective about the practice of repatriation, especially since both of my interviewees are Indigenous themselves (the edited transcripts of the full interviews can be found in the appendices of this thesis).

In working through my interviews, I elected to perform narrative analysis using a critical museological lens as my theoretical framework. Former director of the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, Anthony Shelton describes this framework in his aptly named 2013 offering, *Critical Museology: A Manifesto*. According to Shelton, there exist two primary fields of museology: the operational and the critical (Shelton 2013, 7). Operational Museology concerns itself with the study of organizational practical museum functions such as

regulations, collecting practices, and exhibits. In turn, critical museology is a contextual interrogation of the operational. Two points emerge as the catalyst for this criticism: history making and material collecting. Critical museology asks us to realize that museums are not and cannot be neutral sites of knowledge preservation or production. In defiance of operational museology, we must understand that heritage organizations, "never protect or ensure authentic pasts," rather they "reconstitute them within the terms of the present" (10). Material collecting in this context is posited as an inevitable psychological urge and therefore universal, objective, and legitimate. Because "our species identity (materialist, acquisitive, and competitive) has been defined by our universal propensity to collect," museums are able to "legitimate their own 'stories' and activities by reference to transcendental criteria" (10). But these factors are essentialist and simplistic. Museums, and our study of their social function, can do better. Through scholarship like the kind I am engaging with and producing, we can aim to "restore a critical and reflexive historical approach to understanding the assemblage of collections and the development of collection-based institutions" alongside study of these figures' effects on identity and patrimony (11).

Following Shelton, the questions I developed for my interviews seek to gain insight on current functionings of major museum collections as they grapple with repatriation. Following Kovach, I began each interview by introducing myself, sharing pieces of this prologue, how I come to repatriation as an interest, and my experiences visiting their museum. Through my respective, hour-long interviews, there were three main questions I asked each participant to ground the story of our conversation: 1. *How would you define repatriation?* 2. *What do you believe is the future of repatriation?* And 3. *Do you think repatriation has a positive effect on senses of cultural belonging?* What follows are excerpts of our conversations organized into

segments around the above questions. Following each questions' respective dialogue, I provide reflections on their significance in relation to my identified analytical frameworks and my own experiences.

Conversations

1. How would you define repatriation?

Jonathan Lainey (JL)

CG

I remember seeing Kent Monkman's *Shame and Prejudice* at the McCord in 2019.

JL

We also did an artist in residence programme with Kent Monkman. His project is interesting because he's one of these artists who can come to the museum, work with the historical collections and objects and then create new objects, new art based on their consultation of the collection.

CG

I'm very interested in art being made from ethnographic collections, like Monkman does, and whether or not that could be seen as a form of repatriation, as it's an example of an Indigenous artist reclaiming their material heritage. So, this is a two-part question: how would you define repatriation? And does something like making art from the collection work with your definition of what repatriation is?

JL

Well, to answer the second part, it could be considered as a form of repatriation, but I would not include it in my definition of repatriation. It's definitely providing privileged access, but other than that, the object remains in our custody, so it's not true repatriation.

Providing access is something that we do often for Indigenous artists or scholars or community members. We bring the objects out from storage, and we display them on the table and then they can spend the day with the objects if they want.

We do that quite often actually. It's demanding in terms of internal resources because a lot of people are involved, and it can take several hours to prepare for this kind of visit. But, given our mandate, given what we want to do, we feel that we need to do it. We need to provide this access to objects from Indigenous people to Indigenous people.
We also participate in true repatriation. I mean, when I started five years ago, I asked my colleagues, “did we ever repatriate objects to communities?” And I was told that it never happened. But recently we received a couple of repatriation requests. At the end of December 2023, we repatriated 11 ceremonial masks to Kahnawake and to the Haudenosaunee.

There's another request that will be coming for an object that is currently displayed in the *Indigenous Voices of Today* exhibit, it's in the corner of the very dark space on colonial violence. It's a hand-drawn drum. This drum is displayed because on it is written that the Chiefs are actually surrendering this drum as evidence that they will stop dancing and singing.

The Mistawasis community, they know that this drum is here. A few months ago, the current chief, Darryl Watson, came to the museum. We brought the drum to the lab so he could handle it. His great grandfather was actually one of the ones who signed the drum. So, they will be asking for the drum to be repatriated.

CG

Is that the most recent item to have a repatriation request made on it at the McCord?

JL

Well, this one is coming. The thing is – we know we will repatriate it. We know they will ask. It's just that we are an institution. So, we need a letter with a signature. But this letter and signature is not coming. Recently we sent a reminder to say “hey, by the way, if you want to start the process, please do something.” But there’s another repatriation request that is ongoing right now. It's a request to repatriate the famous Two Dog wampum belt of Kanesatake. The Two Dog wampum belt is one of the most spectacular belts in the world and it belongs to

Kanesatake. It was displayed in our wampum exhibition. The repatriation request is under way, and we are working in making it real.

CG

Would you say that these experiences of repatriation, especially of the two that you've just mentioned, have changed your opinion on the process of repatriation? Either in a bureaucratic sense or a policy sense – are there things you feel that need to be changed based on these experiences?

JL

Yeah, it's funny you ask, because yesterday I was in Ottawa with people from the Bank of Canada Museum. They are working to develop their repatriation policy.

I was discussing with the curator, and I was telling her that it's funny, because at the McCord Stewart, we don't even have a repatriation policy that could be available online. We're working on that. It will be written, it will be developed and put online.

But why I say this is, you know, you can have the best written policy and still do very, very little. On our side, we do repatriate objects, we do negotiate and discuss with Indigenous people. But still, we don't have a repatriation policy. Even if you have your policy written down and publicly available, at the end of the day, the whole process will depend on the successful or the unsuccessful relationships that you're able to build and maintain with your interlocutors. And I think that this makes a big difference.

We at the McCord Stewart, we can be proud of being able to develop these relationships, this openness, these discussions, the will to work together.

We are quick to react. I mean, the masks that we returned to Kahnawake, it took just a few months to return them. I speak with people sometimes from different nations, from different provinces, and they tell us that sometimes they need to talk with the museums for 10 years and I just can't believe how it could take 10 years.

We can finalise the full process within 10 months! I mean, how come it takes 10 years? I don't know.

John Moses (JM)

CG

Broadly, how would you define repatriation?

JM

Well, we keep it very straightforward. Owing to the fact that we have been doing this for so long now, we have a very definitive view of what repatriation is and what it is not. Here at CMH, it's nothing other than the permanent physical return and transfer of legal title of selected Indigenous cultural properties from the museum back to the Indigenous communities of origin.

There are other related issues about how do you attempt to resolve or adjudicate competing claims to the same material. But, for us, repatriation is a very practical, legalistic issue.

CG

Would you say that most of the material in the collection is eligible for repatriation? Or what have you found in conversations with community members that people are most interested in receiving back?

JM

The way we've been doing repatriation since 1978 is a matter of museum best practises. The first ever repatriation was with the return of seized potlatch materials back to the Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw communities of Alert Bay and Cape Mudge in British Columbia. These had been seized on the ground in those two communities by local Indian agents and RCMP officials, I believe back in 1922. By 1927, they had made their way out here, to what was then called the National Museum of Canada. That material was finally returned home in 1978, and the museum continued to do repatriation as a museum best practise throughout the remainder of the 70s, 80s, and 90s. It was only in 2001 that we took all our best practises and lessons learned around repatriation, put that down on paper, and received board of trustees approval as our first official repatriation policy. For the

> first time ever, we had an actual document that we could send out to First Nations and share with other museums. That policy was last reviewed in 2011.
> In response to more recent events, including specifically the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we're looking at that policy right now to confirm that it continues to meet, or exceed, all the most recent standards and expectations around museums and their Indigenous relations, as articulated in both the TRC and UNDRIP. That policy is what we call a criteria-based policy that prioritises the return of specific categories of museum materials that have always been expressed to us by Indigenous communities themselves as the most important. So, at the top of the list, as you might appreciate, are Indigenous human remains, and the burial materials associated with those remains. Beyond that, we get into sacred, ceremonial, and ritual objects. Then, property owned in common, or important cultural patrimony. There are also clauses for ordinary items of material culture where there's evidence to indicate that they were acquired under conditions of theft or trespass on to Indian Act reserve lands or other Indigenous territories.

Reflections on question 1:

In comparing the differences in policies, definitions, and functions related to repatriation described by Lainey and Moses "it is possible to locate the contradictions and areas of tensions and contestations that play a fundamental role in institutional change and transformation, and that form an essential part of critical museology" (Shelton 2013, 15). Both Lainey and Moses focus on the legal aspect when asked for their definitions on repatriation. Contextually, this makes sense: the CMH and the MSM are each in the process of revamping or developing their official repatriation policies at their respective institutions. Their independent invocations of the phrase "true repatriation" reflect that priority in addition to highlighting how museums are beholden to their policy.

I first began to cultivate my research curiosity for repatriation in the spring of 2022 while I held an advocacy, policy, and research-based position in the federal government. I worked for the House of Commons in the Liberal Research Bureau (LRB) where I held the role of Special Assistant Diversity Equity and Inclusion: Indigenous Outreach. My main responsibility was to keep MPs appraised of important news and happenings within Indigenous communities. I additionally advocated for the attention, involvement, and action of caucus and their staff on these issues.

Within my first month at the job, Pope Francis issued the Vatican's long overdue official apology for the Catholic Church's involvement in the atrocities of residential schools which continue to haunt Indigenous life. The ceremony took place in Rome, where a delegation of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis leaders, youths, and elders had travelled to hear the apology and engage in private talks with the Pope. The delegation was additionally granted access to a Vatican-curated display of cultural belongings originating from Turtle Island held in the *Animus Mundi* collection of the Holy See. It was my job to compile a report for caucus and staff summarizing the trip. Some of the items shown by the Vatican in March 2022 had never been displayed by them before. Most of the didactic texts listed these cultural belongings as "gifts." Their true provenance is difficult to ascertain; however, most members of the delegation expressed reasonable doubt that these items were willingly given to the Catholic Church. Likely, they were stolen (Grant, Fiddler, Reguly 2022).

Currently, there is no federal policy in Canada directly legislating or defining repatriation for domestic or international cases. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) requested that the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) in collaboration with Indigenous communities compile a review of heritage institutions across the country to determine best

practices for their implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP). UNDRIP article 12 states that Indigenous Peoples have the right to "the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains," and that additionally, governments and Indigenous people should collaborate "to enable the access and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains in their possession through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms" (United Nations (General Assembly) 2007). The resulting report, *Moved to Action: Activating UNDRIP in Canadian Museums*, was released in 2022. *Moved to Action* defines repatriation in tandem with rematriation, encouraging museums to ask which term is preferred when working with Indigenous nations in order to honour matrilineal systems and challenge colonial, patriarchal structures. Here, repatriation is a strictly legal term. Whereas rematriation is deeper, signifying "a restoration of right relationships and a true action of decolonization, aimed not just at righting a past wrong but transforming our collective future" (Thunder Bay Library Rematriation Project quoted in CMA 2022, 40).

Beginning in the 1970s, CMH has a long history of repatriation, whereas the MSM only recently began participating in the process following Lainey's hiring in 2020. Despite that difference, both institutions express a commitment to repatriation among other facets of Indigenous partnership. "Privileged access," described by Lainey in this section and by Moses in the following section, is where community members are given the space to visit with their belongings currently held by the museum. This action represents an in-between space. It is a good-faith effort at reunification and reconciliation by the museum, but it is not a full legal transference of ownership, therefore it is not repatriation. "True repatriation" is placed alongside alternative forms of engagement with cultural belongings, such as privileged access, which aim to improve the presence of and partnership with Indigenous communities. The related function of

rematriaiton is more complicated to identify within the museum itself. Rematriation moves past a legal transfer to an experience of embodiment, which is hard to enshrine within policy and further is not for an institution to prescribe. Privileged access can facilitate a process of both repatriation and rematriation; however, only the latter can be accurately described as completed by the receiving Indigenous community.

As more partnerships between museums and Indigenous communities bloom, naturally, more repatriation requests will arise. This experience is reflected on and shared by both Lainey and Moses, with the former even stating that he believes the MSM can be proud of the ways in which they have developed connections and trust with various Indigenous communities directly due to their partnerships built through community outreach, including repatriation related efforts. The CMH began repatriation officially in the 70s and cemented this practice through internal policy in the early 2000s. Through the decades, they have repatriated thousands of belongings. On the other hand, the MSM has only participated in five repatriation cases since 2020, and they have done so without an official policy. Creating good policy takes time and is not a singular event. Navajo art historian and Curator of Native American Art at the Portland Art Museum, Kathleen Ash-Milby, explains that developing standards for Indigenous curation can be difficult as "the traditional museum was originally created as a place to preserve—to freeze in place—culture," therefore museums, "seek conventions and rules that can be broadly applied. However, this approach, which favours simplified interpretations of cultural practice, is unreliable" (Ash-Milby 2022, 100). Both Lainey and Moses believe strongly in the need for repatriation while expressing the difficulties of being beholden to specific bureaucratic needs. Yet, in major institutions, these forms of bureaucracy also have the capacity for accountability. Policy requires adherence: there are consequences for not following procedure, like responding and enacting a

repatriation request (as detailed by Moses in the following section). The fact that museums of this calibre take the formulation of repatriation policy seriously means they care about the process and see its value. It further represents a tentative commitment to decolonial or "non-colonial" action. Métis artist and Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Regina, David Garneau explains how non-colonial action is a move towards a society without settlers, "a future in which newcomers are in material and spiritual treaty with the land and the people who are its first stewards (Garneau 2022, 236). Therefore, he advises that if museums "are to become non-colonial, [they] can no longer feature First Nations, Inuit, and Métis as subjects; they must engage us as agents" (Garneau 2022, 235). Museums need to "not only 'mak[e]' and 'hol[d] space' for Indigenous people but also devis[e] new protocols and practices that transform us all … [We] need to be constructive. Non-colonial action means learning and using" (235). In this context, for a museum to become non-colonial or even Indigenized they must shift their priorities and value the needs of people over the prestige of possession. This development reflects an important change in museum culture: as institutions Indigenize – both in their policy and their personnel – these partnerships are seen as positive outcomes and necessary processes for the future of their institutions.

In 2022, Retired chief of the Okanese First Nation, Marie-Anne Day Walker-Pelletier, told the *Globe and Mail* following the tour of the Vatican collections that she was unsure "whether those artifacts had the proper spiritual ceremony to keep them protected in that way" (Grant, Fiddler, Reguly 2022). She also stressed the need for these belongings "to be restored and brought back and repatriated," and further how, "you cannot reconcile your history if you don't know what your history was. And if your items are sitting in other countries, certainly it does not fulfil the wholeness of your community as you are healing" (Grant, Fiddler, Reguly

2022). I am interested in repatriation research because my experiences have shown me that archives and museums can be structurally static. Respect and understanding of our histories as living, as requiring reactivation and reconnection can be hard to find in these institutions. However, through their descriptions of access and partnerships, both Lainey and Moses represent how listening and telling stories alongside cultural belongings must be included in our definitions and practices of repatriation.

2. What do you believe is the future of repatriation?

Jonathan Lainey (JL)

CG

Some of the research I've been doing for this thesis is about the arguments for and against repatriation. A lot of the arguments against repatriation come from, traditional Western museum workers who talk about the need for the encyclopaedic museum (Cuno 2014). In their opinion, repatriation is a closing down of culture, of saying "we don't want to share," and "this is only for one group of people" or "we don't want to learn from each other." And I think that tends to be a fundamental misunderstanding that can carry into museums collecting practices as well. About a year ago, there was a story from the Denver Art Museum refusing a repatriation request where the curator, John Lukavic, is quoted as saying, "well, we're not in the business of giving things away" (Tabachnik 2024). That idea of classifying repatriation as just giving something away rather than building a partnership and building trust.

It is very interesting to see how this idea carries over into the thoughts and actions of people who are currently doing repatriation in museums and reveals some of the structures that they're up against. That's why I wanted to interview curators doing this work.

JL

This idea of having the largest collection and it needing to grow forever – I don't

believe in this. This idea of being as exhaustive as possible, to be encyclopaedic, as you said – I don't believe in this either.

CG

I'm wondering what you believe is the future of repatriation within galleries and museums?

JL

Yeah. Well, it's a big question. I will start to answer by coming back to what you just said about this resistance that some curators or institutions will show with regards to repatriation.

You know, at the McCord Stewart right now, let's say we have in our collection something like 8000 objects. Even if we repatriate 800 – that's a lot, 800 objects – but we will still have 7200. So, this idea that giving back will empty the full storage. It's not true. It's like a scarecrow. I don't think this will happen. Or if it happens, it will take 150 years, so you won't lose your job. Just calm down!

More and more I see the future of repatriation as Indigenous communities having repositories where they can preserve their heritage. There're different aspects, you know. For example, the masks that we returned to Kahnawake, they will not be displayed. They don't need to be preserved. No, they will be danced, they will be worn, they will be fed. They will deteriorate eventually. But these objects were meant to be used and danced and celebrated in ceremonies. That's fine: we don't have to say, "oh, no, you cannot do your ceremony. You need to preserve your masks."

Having said that, a lot of Indigenous people today want their objects to be preserved. For example, the wampum belt that we will return. They said, "thank you for offering to give it back, but we are not ready." They want to invest in the building to preserve it, to protect it, to secure it. They're asking us about what type of light they should use and things like that because they want to preserve it. This idea that Indigenous people have different interests than museum is not always true. In some cases, they want to preserve the objects for the seven next generations […]

About 10 or 15 years ago, I was working at Library and Archives Canada, and we were trying to acquire written records and material from Indigenous leaders. We quickly realised that the goal is not that LAC preserves it, but that it's preserved somewhere and it's accessible to people. It doesn't have to come to the McCord Stewart Museum if it's preserved in a repository that is close to the community of origin or in the institution of the community. Because, at the end of the day, the belonging is preserved. It's available. That's the goal.
To put that into practise, recently more and more I have been trying to change the acquisition process of Indigenous material at the McCord Stewart. We work through donations. We don't have any acquisition budget, we receive offers; we say yes or no.

So, for example, if I receive an offer from one lady, that is, I don't know, 75 years old and that her mother was somewhere in the West, in Alberta, in the, I don't know 1930s. And she acquired this beautiful Blackfoot dress.
The person will want to donate it to the McCord Stewart because they know that we are strong with Indigenous initiatives, projects, and exhibitions.
But then, I wonder why would a Montreal institution preserve such a beautiful object so far away from its territory? So, what I'm trying to do now is to investigate whether the territory or the nation, or the community if it's known, could receive the offer. And if they say “yes, we are interested.” Then I tell the donor “what about giving it to the original owner?”
Sometimes they will say yes, and then I make the meeting and connection and then the object can return. So, I think of it a little bit like a pre-repatriation acquisition. Instead of me acquiring it, I just pass it to the original owner. But very often the case with these objects being offered is that they don't know where it's from. “My grandmother was in the north.” Hey, that's huge! Same thing for the West. West of what? So, in some cases we don't know and maybe we'll never know. In these cases, I prefer that the McCord Stewart Museum becomes the Plan B. Otherwise the donor could turn to auctions or eBay.
And then the object is gone to Germany, and we lose track of it for 100 years. So, if it’s at the repository here in Montreal, at least it will be preserved. It will remain

in Canadian territory, and it will be accessible to communities and, potentially, eventually repatriated.

CG

It feels like there's a stewardship element to that as well. Where it's this idea that "we don't know right now, but we're willing to learn and do the work for this object." I read your article that's in the Routledge companion about telling stories of objects in museum collections (Lainey 2022). And I found that an interesting tension you identified wherein it's okay to acknowledge that we don't always have all of this information, and we can't just keep making things up to satisfy a collection requirement. You have to respect the object as it is and steward it until it can find a home. And if the home is the museum, the home is the museum.

JL

Yeah, because even trying at all costs to give an attribution, a provenance can create more confusion. We know that researchers and museum staff will go from one museum database to another to try to document their objects. So, if I say, "oh, this is a Dakota or this is a Cree or Blackfoot" and it's not, I have created a reference that could be used by other people. So I've just created more confusion. I prefer to say we don't know yet. So far, we don't know. Maybe we'll know.

John Moses (JM)

CG

What would you say is the future of repatriation, both within the day-to-day museum sense and an overall policy sense?

JM

Most of the repatriation that we're involved with comes our way as a function of our involvement within Canada's modern treaties process. Although we do proactive repatriation too, but I'll get into that later… I would say, as important as repatriation is and as high profile as it is, we've always been at pains to explain to people that repatriation itself is but one outcome along a spectrum of other, what we call here, Indigenous engagement activities. We do indeed have repatriation at the far end of the scale, but there are many alternatives before you get to that point. We have very specialised training that we offer to Indigenous people

interested in museology: for over 30 years now the museum has been hosting its own Indigenous internship program. We have our ordinary suite of short and long-term loans. In many cases, especially with long term loans, that suits the purposes of the First Nation in question just as much as outright repatriation does. We also have our Sacred Materials projects and spaces. That's a pot of money that enables us to bring delegations – groups including cultural advisors, traditional knowledge keepers, elders, and elders in training – out here at our expense. This allows them to spend quality time here at the museum with their belongings. At least 6 to 8 times throughout the year we host these visiting Indigenous delegations. In about two weeks we have 3 representatives coming in from Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park. In April we have a Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en group coming in from northern Interior BC.

And, when I talk about the spaces, we have both specially developed interior and exterior spaces for visits like these. We have a traditional care area here at the museum that incorporates the best features of a conventional artefact conservation lab with the culturally appropriate meeting space. It's equipped in such a way that we can do smudging and pipe ceremonies and other traditional care, including ritual food preparation, if that's what the cultural requirement is. We also have an outside healing garden, where we can raise our own crops basically of sacred medicines like cedar, sage, sweet grass, and tobacco.

What has been a real game changer for us, has been Canada's Bill C-15 which was passed on June 21st of 2021. So, it's been over three years now that Canada has its own domestic UNDRIP implementation Act. Basically, it says the laws and policies of Canada, including laws like the Canadian Museum of History Act and the repatriation policy at the Canadian Museum of History, will be viewed through the lens of UNDRIP compliance. The UNDRIP declaration itself is very explicit. Article 31 says Indigenous peoples have the right to control their cultural heritage in all manifestations. Full stop. So, we have to both meet our obligations under the Museum's Act and continue serving as Canada's National Museum of Human History, while also trying to meet our obligations under Bill C-15. It's a

balancing act. Hopefully the two are never so contradictory of each other that it makes a middle path impossible to find. But that's a challenge that we're dealing with.

I mentioned, for example this notion of the sacred or ceremonial. Well, there are some groups we deal with who have the point of view that anything ever made or used by ancestors is by definition sacred. We just recently concluded a repatriation like that. Indeed, in that particular case, following negotiations, we essentially repatriated the contents of an entire archaeological site back to their stewardship. This was the Mississauga band near Blind River, ON. In this situation, there had been an archaeological site that included Indigenous human remains and burial goods. That aspect of it was fairly straightforward. Those items went back, and their return home was negotiated quite efficiently.

Beyond the burial contexts or the burial features themselves, there were hundreds, thousands, of broken pottery fragments, shards – that kind of thing. From a conventional museum based archaeological perspective, these were… well, these were pottery and ceramic fragments. Whereas the First Nation made the argument "Well, yes, but originally, they were pottery or ceramic vessels that were exactly the kind of container within which ritual offerings, typically food offerings, would have been left at the burial sites of the deceased."

A mainstream museum-based archaeology point of view in that situation would have been almost dismissive in arguing that these are just ordinary pieces. But, by making that connection to sacredness, they were returned to the nation.

CG

To me, it feels that these conversations, these examples of listening and exchange, demonstrates how museums have shown a bit more willingness, a bit more openness within the last 10 to 15 years to take those requests seriously. Whereas before, perhaps it would have been dismissive, like you said.

JM

Well, certainly. Again, Bill C-15 has been a game changer because the obligation on us is to basically implement UNDRIP in its museum and heritage aspects

within the CMH. It's legislation – we can be found at fault if we're not able to implement it. We have to report to Parliament on a yearly basis via the Minister of Canadian Heritage on how we're implementing Bill C-15 and UNDRIP within the CMH. If we fail, we could be sanctioned, we could lose funding, conceivably, we could even lose positions. It's no longer just an interesting topic for debate, it's a law. We have to abide by federal law. Just as we have to uphold the Copyright Act, for example, so too do we have to uphold Bill C-15.

CG

How do you think that repatriation has writ large changed the collecting practises of museums?

JM

For example, if somebody has passed away and the kids or the grandkids approach us out of the blue and because their relative was previously an RCMP officer who had many postings across the Canadian high Arctic, or was involved with the military, or any number of federal government departments, or perhaps one of the religious organisations and now as the surviving family they have fallen heir to material that they want to donate to the museum.

If we're approached with anything that is manifestly repatriatable according to the criteria – and it does indeed happen that we're approached with Indigenous human remains like, somebody collected a skull from a surface burial as an interesting souvenir, brought it back, and it's been in the family Rec room for 60 plus years. We won't touch that with a 10-foot pole. We're not going to acquire something simply to acquire the obligation of undertaking its repatriation. But for something not as gruesome as that, like just a very nice example of material culture – a finely beaded pair of moccasins or any other item that you can think of. We would, after having taken a look at it and if the family itself has a fairly good documentation as to what region of the country it was collected from, or even what specific Indian reserve, we would redirect that present day holder to get in touch with the First Nation themselves and approach them directly about returning it. Basically,

what's different from before, is that we're giving the right of first refusal to the First Nations.

CG

You mentioned proactive repatriation – could you explain that term and process?

JM

It's about identifying high risk collectors from within our own collections. Here again might be material that was acquired into the collections back in the 1890s, or the 1920s, the 1930s, or even the 2000s. And, in going through our records, we see that it was either donated or sold to us by somebody who might have been an Indian agent, a residential school administrator, RCMP, military, an Indian Affairs branch worker, or some kind of religious official. So, the question for us becomes, what were the conditions in that particular Indian Reserve, or Inuit community, or Métis settlement when the object came into the hands of our donor? Do the records indicate a situation of a willing seller, a willing buyer? Or perhaps is there anything that indicates coercion? The most draconian Indian Act restrictions against traditional cultural expressions were on the books as part of the Indian Act from 1888 up until 1951. Those dates line up exactly with the most active collecting periods for this institution. Most of what we have in the collection coincides with those years at the height of the Indian Act bans, where Indigenous groups for whatever range of motivations or impositions are actively letting things go.

That's what proactive repatriation is: we do our own research in our collection about how certain objects were acquired to see if there anything in the conditions of their acquirement that raises red flags.

CG

This idea of proactive repatriation – I find that very interesting and very representative of a new direction of museum collecting practises. Being active in the acknowledgement of what's in your collection, being able to identify what is,

as you said, “high risk”… all of these developments in repatriation seem to keep ideas of reconnection to identity and community at the forefront.

Reflections on question 2:

As Lainey said, the future of repatriation is a big question, and as Moses mentioned, it’s a high profile one too. For Lainey, this future is focused on supporting repositories within Indigenous communities. For Moses, this future is about repatriation being seen as a legal, enforceable tool in tandem with other “Indigenous engagement activities.” Through “culturally diverse collaborations” like these “critical museology can help perpetuate its own critical efficacy while ensuring that the so-called democratization and decolonization of museums, here taken as labels that denote continuous processes rather than completed conditions, remain an important goal” (Shelton 2013, 14-15).

In order to appropriately understand the past, present, and future of heritage institutions and their related societal functions, we must first understand the theoretical foundations which have marked them. My interest in democratizing and decolonizing archives and museums originates from my choice to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Religious Studies. I picked this combination because I believe that the most influential collective and individual actions throughout history are based in political and religious thought. Much like the respective canons of religious and political thought, archives and museums represent the human capacity for devotion. When criticism of art and artefacts become intertwined with the study of religion and politics, a full story of society begins to emerge. Now, I find myself preoccupied with questions of ownership, autonomy, and respect within museums and archives with regards to cultural belongings and expressions. The answer to many of these questions appears to be repatriation.

For both Lainey and Moses, it appears as though the prognosis for *what* can be repatriated and *how* is changing. These are fundamental shifts to museums' collecting practices. Lainey speaks to this specifically by saying that he doesn't believe collections need to grow forever, nor that it is possible for museums to completely drain their storage. This is echoed in the recommendations from CMA: "ideas or fears that strong repatriation legislation and initiatives may lead to the emptying of museums should be set aside. The actual practice of repatriation is nuanced and takes a variety of forms" (CMA 2022, 43). In these excerpts, some of these nuances are discussed, such as preservation, propriety, and provenance. With regards to preservation, we see once again the concept of "privileged access" and museums acquiescing to the need to prioritize traditional care. Moses describes the Sacred Materials projects and spaces at the CMH, which provides funding, resources, and room for traditional care to be unfolding within the museum. These events happen frequently throughout the year at CMH and combine "conventional" artefact conservation procedures with those of traditional care. "Learning how to integrate institutional methods with the "traditional care" of Indigenous objects," Ash-Milby writes, " is also a process of understanding and accepting the limits of our access to cultural knowledge…Beauty and knowledge are active states, not a static product" (Ash-Milby 2022, 101). Related to this revelation of care in collections, is the development of proactive repatriation described by both Lainey and Moses. Here, the museums are investigating the meaning of their propriety in addition to refusing to take on items which could have been surrendered or stolen. This style of collections research aligns with the CMA's assertion that "measures must also be taken to identify, contact, and initiate repatriations from the side of museums to take the onus off of Indigenous rights holders" (CMA 2022, 42). This change in

collecting practices from CMH and MSM represent how the museum is becoming an active facilitator more than a static repository.

As a curious and rambunctious child (and, arguably, adult), I loved museums. Visiting my grandparents in Ottawa over the summer and winter holidays throughout my childhood allowed me to fall in love with the idea of museums. Further, it made me feel connected and courageous to learn from the artefacts; to get to be a witness to these stories of the made and observed world. However, these institutions are not neutral.

In our interview, Lainey describes the desire of Indigenous communities to preserve their heritage in similar ways to museums for themselves. As he says, the goal is that the belonging is preserved and accessible. Whether this is in an institution like the CMH, the MSM (or as Lainey mentions in the example, the LAC) or a local Indigenous repository, the priority is that a piece of culture is no longer forgotten, but recognized. This form of recognition can take on different tones. Lainey also describes the masks repatriated from the MSM to Kahnawake as not needing to be conserved but fulfilled, an important aspect of authority on the life of cultural belongings being honoured and subsequently transferred to their rightful owners. This is a different kind of preservation which transcends the material nature museums are accustomed to. A similar trend is identified in the CMH. As Moses shares, the definition of materials considered sacred, therefore requiring different facets of preservation, care, engagement, and eventually repatriation are changing based on individual nations' needs. In the example of a successful repatriation request from a Mississauga band, he shares how, in their view, anything made by an ancestor is sacred and therefore the rightful belonging of the nation. Here, the notion of propriety typically adhered to by cultural institutions is challenged. Recognizing these facets is also important to the prosperity of critical museology. Shelton highlights how museums have to understand and

incorporate into their operations the knowledge "that they no longer possess a monopoly over the meaning and significance of the material or visual cultures they institutionalize and that objects have different meanings" through curatorial and conservational positions "which imply mutual rights and obligations" (Shelton 2013, 19).

In the summer of 2022, I was an IMPRESS (Indigenous Mentorship and Paid Research Experience for Summer Students) intern for the McGill University Library and Archives. My main project for this role was a research creation piece which investigated what holdings the institution had in Indigenous languages. During this research, I found that the most substantial holdings of the archive in Indigenous languages were bibles. These books were the gospels. The writings of Mark, John, and Matthew translated into Cree, Mohawk, and Ojibwe by missionaries to encourage conversion to Christianity were meticulously preserved by the archive. In this fact is an inherent juxtaposition between recording and erasing.

Member of Wiikwemikoong Unceded Territory, author, curator, and Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto, Mikinaak Migwans, explains the significance of being an Indigenous person engaging with museum held cultural belongings in their article *Betraying the Object*. In Migwans' experience, Indigenous researchers and knowledge keepers visiting the museum feel a familial, relational obligation to the cultural belongings in storage and display there. "Focusing on this felt drive allows me to step away from the framing of cultural property and into the realm of care," they write (Migwans 2022, 128). This idea of "care" is an important framework for discussions of "connection and disconnection, because it helps us think about object relations in the way we think about human relations" (128). Migwans' words also connect to my discussion of provenance and stewardship with Lainey. I mention to Lainey a 2022 article of his, "Telling The Stories Of Objects In Museum Collections," wherein he makes

the argument that striving for absolute surety of a belonging's provenance in the absence of accurate documentation causes more harm. While this silence could be seen as "less interesting," to museum researchers or professionals, "not knowing about an object is also part of its story" (Lainey 2022, 297). Frankly, "a conspicuous dearth of information is in itself a significant key to an object's history. It reveals the methods of the collecting processes and the ways in which we have treated these items at some point in time" (297). As such, in our conversation, Lainey and I agree that in the absence of provenance, it's okay to say, "we don't know yet," and to work on recovering the source of the belonging.

Even now, as museums make attempts at decolonization, their foundations remain rooted in violent and supremacist practices. Ones which can never be forgotten or fully reconciled. Nor should they be. Archives and museums have caused irreparable harm to minority populations and continue to do so. Yet, I believe there is potential for improvement, for archives and museums to have positive functions. These conversations with Lainey and Moses on the future of repatriation affirm my hope for memorialization and amelioration.

3. Do you think repatriation has a positive effect on senses of cultural belonging?

Jonathan Lainey (JL)

CG

In this conversation about repatriation, do you believe that this kind of preservation within the community can help with reconnection to identity and cultural resurgence too?

JL

Of course! The two-dog wampum belt we're returning to Kanesatake, they say that it's clearly an opportunity for them not only to reconnect but to reconcile internally. They have a lot of divisions going on and they hope that this repatriation, this major object in their history will contribute to the healing

process.

Oh yes, definitely. These objects, they're so powerful and people put so much value, not monetary value, but emotional value and heart into them that when they're back its powerful.

I hope that when we return the two-dog wampum belt something public will be organised so we can celebrate. We can show that it's providing a lot of good.

I'm from the Huron Wendat nation of Wendake. The people of the longhouse at Wendake, they organised major human remains reburials starting in 1999. The last really large reburial was in 2013, and I had the chance to participate. These repatriations are…Sometimes I say that it's like in myself, in my mind, in my heart these repatriations opened a door. It opened something that I had, but that was not active or activated. Since then, I feel that I'm much more sensitive to different things. Even if you're really intellectual and cerebral and you feel that, you're not spiritual – when you participate in such powerful events it can impact yourself. This is what happened to me, I'm much more sensitive now. For example, we have human remains in the McCord Stewart Museum, and I feel uncomfortable knowing we have that. So, we are working right now with the Long House of Kahnawake to return the bones to the human remains. We are negotiating with McGill University as well. All of this is ongoing right now because we would like to return the bones to the Earth this year actually.

I see that this will be a totally different aspect of my work. When we did the wampum exhibition, to me, as a wampum scholar that had been studying these objects for more than 20 years, it was like, the peak of my career.

But to return the bones will be totally different because it will not be a personal achievement. It will trigger something really spiritual inside of me.

CG

Would you say all these experiences give you a strong positive feeling for repatriation and a want to champion it across different museums and policies?

JL

Oh, yeah. I feel with my situation – I think I say it in the article you're referring to

– I wear literally three hats. I'm a material culture historian, I work in a museum, and I'm a Wendat myself. *My* material culture is everywhere. We're trying to repatriate it. But, now, I'm in the position of the curator responsible for these objects. I mean, I have to handle all of these hats! The reason why I say this is because… I feel that I'm… I don't want to talk about myself too much.

CG

You're welcome to talk about yourself! I'm talking about myself quite a bit in this thesis so I would love to welcome in somebody else's story.

JL

[Laughs] OK.

I feel that I'm so privileged to be able to actually be paid for what I like to do. It's not that I like my job, it's rather that I'm paid to do what I like. It's a small nuance; it's not exactly the same.

You know, someone can work in a factory and oh, he likes to punch in, punch out and meet with colleagues and have a bad coffee at noon. But this is not the case for me. I don't *like* my job. Well, I like my job, but it's rather that I'm paid to do what I believe, what is about me, my identity, who I am.

So being a curator, or an archivist, or ethno-historian or whatever, I don't really care about the title. They could change the title of my position in my e-mail signature, but I will still do the same work.

CG

Do you feel that your role, regardless of its title, has improved your sense of cultural belonging?

JL

Oh yeah, I think so. Over the years, yes definitely. I'm going through different experiences, even personal, like the reburial of human remains. So, I have this personal experience that I hope will be useful in my professional experience where I can give back.

John Moses (JM)

CG

Do you believe that repatriation has a positive effect on senses of cultural belonging?

JM

Oh yeah. It's to the benefit of the conservation profession here in Canada. You know, there's a growing awareness across the conservation profession that there needs to be space and training on including Indigenous traditional care. Indeed, that helps project and develop a unique Canadian conservation profession on the world stage. It's something unique that conservators, including a growing number of Indigenous conservators, can bring to the field. Basically, we're of the point of view that the highest purpose of museums is not for the mere preservation of often fragmentary remains, but for cultural continuity. Cultural continuity is the priority over the mere preservation of fragmentary remains.

So, what does Indigenous traditional care look like in a museum setting? It includes things like the capacity to raise our own crops of the sacred medicine plants. It includes things like having capacity inside the building to do ritual food preparation, to do smudging, to do pipe ceremonies.

Our "backyard," slopes down to the banks of the Ottawa River. It's a very dramatic setting with the Parliament buildings, the Supreme Court, and the National Gallery in the background. Wherever possible, I like to encourage groups to do traditional care outside, right along the riverbank. Where we're situated is in the middle of a stretch of the Ottawa River, which, since pre contact times, has been recognized as a sacred site in its own respect. This stretch of the Ottawa River, about a half a mile long between the Akikpautik falls, also called the Chaudière Falls, and the falls of the Rideau River. Champlain went down this stretch of the river, I believe in 1613. And he, in surprising detail, describes tobacco ceremonies that were done at the two sets of falls by his Indigenous minders. So, we're very cognizant of the fact that we're smack dab in the middle of a traditional cultural space to begin with.

CG

It's a powerful, powerful setting. Through all of these experiences that you are sharing, all the knowledge that you bring, all the lessons you have learned – how do you, on both a personal and a professional level, feel about repatriation?

JM

Well, it's a good thing. But we have to consider again that repatriation is not the be all end all. It's not good enough for any museum, large or small, to say that they are "doing repatriation" or that they are "in talks" to give back a single Indigenous artefact in the collection, or a handful of artefacts in the collection. That lets too many institutions off the hook.

You know, there are many institutions that claim from the right off the top "we don't have any Indigenous content within our collections because that's not our mandate." My wife, she's not native – she's of settler Irish descent, she's from Goderich, Ontario on Lake Huron, and they have the Huron County Museum. For them, history begins in the year 1840 when this fellow Tiger Dunlop, who was the land Commissioner for Upper Canada, wrote their charter in black and white. Their term of reference is that the Huron County Museum is about the pioneer history of Huron County, full stop. And when they've been challenged in the past by people saying, "well, shouldn't you make some indication that you are on Indigenous lands?" their response up until fairly recently was "Nope. That's not what we're about. We're a pioneer Historical Society." They're slowly coming around because they're in a position of potentially having further federal and provincial funding withheld from them until they start trying to Indigenize themselves in some respect.

I guess my point there was that, yeah, repatriation is important. But it can't be the only Indigenous related activity that museums are held accountable for. Even if they don't have any Indigenous content within their collections, they could still potentially provide training opportunities to Indigenous museology interns. They could still potentially provide spaces to neighbouring First Nations communities that are looking to have meetings or gatherings.

Reflections on question 3:

Both Lainey and Moses emphatically agree that repatriation has a positive effect on senses of cultural belonging and identity. Their expressions of this effect differ between the two: Lainey focuses on an affective connection, whereas Moses focuses on how identity is strengthened through action and acknowledgment. What these two examples have in common is their relation to reclaimed agency.

Agency in museology has historically been ignored, "not only the agency of the institutions themselves, but also the agency implicit in the construction and institutionalization of collections, exhibitions, and related pedagogic work," writes Shelton (2013, 13). Because "the museum, no more than the expression of an official patrimony, does not expend agency in a vacuum. It elicits resistance, contestation, counterprojects, and even violent reactions," Shelton further argues that "critical museology needs to uncover these occulted relations, and also examine the intersections and struggles between different types of agencies represented by distinct groups and cultures" (Shelton 2013, 13). These processes are central to the stories shared by Lainey and Moses.

Moses again emphasizes that repatriation cannot be the only element of Indigenous engagement museums take part in. Only participating in repatriation, he argues, "lets too many institutions off the hook." He shares an interesting story of a small, local museum refusing to acknowledge that they have any relation to Indigeneity. Now, in the wake of federal legislation which mandates adherence to UNDRIP, these types of institutions are being made to realize the importance of partnership. Moses urges museums like this to consider Indigenizing as not just an opening of collections but a sharing of knowledge. Providing opportunities to exchange teachings between museums and Indigenous curators, archivists, researchers, and curators is

invaluable to the profession and the prosperity of cultural care. The CMA agrees: "responsibility for providing resources to assist in repatriation" does not end "with the return of ancestors or belongings. When requested by the community, resources and training should be offered by the museum to learn Western methods of safeguarding and preserving cultural belongings" (CMA 2022, 50). Migwans speaks to the realities of being an Indigenous person who has received such training in Western methods but knows the importance of incorporating traditional care. "A sensitivity to cultural objects is not about some deeper level of access through which to extract information," they explain that this attunement is rather a "deeper level of entanglement in relations that require reciprocation, and an awareness that one is being watched and held accountable" (Migwans 2022, 128). Ultimately, taken together, these snippets affirm Moses' charge that a museums' highest purpose is cultural continuity.

Migwans reflections lead into a new facet of repatriation scholarship and practice: one that recognizes action and affect in the process of returning stolen cultural belongings. Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies at the Australian National University, Cressida Fforde (et. al) argues that "to engage with emotion is also to engage with the personal; abstract issues of power, cultural differences/similarities, and colonial legacies are telescoped to the level of personal feelings" (Fforde et al 2022, 80). As a result, "engaging with emotions in these contexts can either be enlightening or terrifying" (80). The deeply personal revelations and stories shared by Lainey in our conversation (for which I am immensely grateful to have been witness to) elaborate on these complexities outlined by Fforde and Migwans.

Lainey describes a sense of being awoken to something he had not previously felt through witnessing reburial ceremonies of stolen Wendat human remains in 2013. The profoundness of an event of this nature is impossible to ignore, as is its effect on one's sense of

belonging and identity. Co-director of the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures, Cara Krmpotich, writes in her study of Haida repatriation efforts that in place of tales about "loss or leaving, repatriation serves as a story of ancestors coming home. It counters stories of loss with actions of reclamation… [and] altered how individuals can remember their family members and their own actions as kin" (Krmpotich 2014, 149-150). Lainey's experiences echo Krmpotich's assertions. Repatriation, as Lainey declares, provides "a lot of good." This "good" ranges from improved spiritual health to professional development of Indigenous individuals in the heritage field, to reconnection, to resurgence, to repatriation.

In building story with Lainey and Moses on the topic of identity, I am moved to reflect once again on my own. A reverence for public service, like that demonstrated by Lainey and Moses, became imbued into the fabric of who I am from an early age. My dad first ran for office shortly after we moved from Toronto to his hometown of Welland, Ontario. For him, community belonging and care must translate into action. I was four when he was elected to Welland City Council in 2003 (he also represented Welland as a Niagara Regional Councillor from 2014 – 2018). The best expression of this ethos was to run for office. When he won his first election, the Métis Nation of Ontario's Niagara branch reached out to him. Since he was on their registry and now held public office, they wanted to know what he was going to do to help his community, to help his people. As a family, we began attending the local harvest dinners and other cultural events put on by the Niagara branch of the MNO. My dad got involved with provincial and federal organizations which advocated for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit interests. While in office, he sat on equitable housing committees, helped bring to fruition an exhibit on the history of the Métis at the Welland Museum, and also collaborated on writing the land acknowledgement for the Niagara Region. In 2018, he even won Métis citizen of the year in

Niagara as recognition for his work. I have always known him to advocate for visibility, access, understanding, and support. I have been inspired by him my entire life.

This question of my father posed by the Niagara branch of the MNO resulted in the formulation of an important life philosophy with which he raised me and that I continue to live by: when you have the opportunity to be a part of a cultural resurgence, it is your moral obligation to participate. Otherwise, you are simply complicit in its disappearance. As I have demonstrated throughout my life and work, I fight for repatriation for exactly this reason: I am incapable of being complicit in a cultural disappearance. Of forgetting stories. Repatriation research and action as discussed in this thesis is developing pathways of reconnection and resurgence which those such as myself, those I cite, Lainey, and Moses crave to continue carving.

Epilogue

I want to share some other reflections provided by Lainey at the end of our conversation, which ultimately echo my emerging ethos:

> It's so rewarding to work on this. Sometimes, I share these thoughts with my colleagues, and we feel that we are so lucky. Yes, a museum is about preserving for future generations – but it's not only this. It's not only scientific control of humidity and light. It's also about providing access. Providing access means several things. It can be repatriating; but it's also reconnecting. I could use the "re" for many things. Like, reconnect, rebuild, reinvent. All of the "re"s! And why use "re"? Because Indigenous people lost so much, so much. Their tradition, territory, spirituality, children, everything. So, museums, they have this power to "re" (Jonathan Lainey).

Naturally, for me this has become a manifesto. Within this thesis I have investigated the tandem practices of collecting and belonging surrounding three specific "re"s which form my title: repatriation, resurgence, and reconnection. What does it mean to enact your own power to "re"?

The experience of cleaning out my grandfather's house accidentally taught me a great deal about museological collecting practices and these "re"s. The age-old questions of what to keep, why, and how were seen in each filled trash bag and donation box. We make galleries of greatness and eventually they fall. Space, needs, desires, tastes change: who is in charge of the after? Who gets what we give? How do we let go? What does it mean to hold on – who, really, does it serve? This mindset of preservation demonstrated through the hordes of my grandfather's things can also be applied to the recalcitrance of museums to liberate their collections, even for good reasons. As Garneau writes, "a hoard is a mass of things collected and secreted away by people who feel the objects are valuable," therefore "colonial museums are hoards" (Garneau 2022, 244). Ultimately, "the stacks develop lives of their own" (244).

Repatriation, return, restitution are all words used to describe the practice of bringing cultural belongings *home*. Forcefully or dishonestly acquired, the plethora of cultural belongings held in the collections of museums, galleries, and other heritage institutions across the globe have yet to be reunified with their communities. Why do we still allow museums to operate as a dead man's house, as a monument to conquests, rather than places of exchange, of storytelling, and sharing? Museums can do this, but first they need to "place the needs of living people before preserved possessions," in addition to recognizing that "their inherited hoards are not inanimate things, but desires made firm and that some of those desires are healthier than others. Some need curatorial care; others need to be released" (245).

In researching, speaking about, and ultimately writing this thesis, I have of course thought a lot about the materials at the centre of repatriation and their stories. The scholars I quote and the curators I interview use many different terms; objects, artefacts, specimens, cultural belongings…To me, this final phrase "cultural belongings" seems the most accurate.

And, at times, the most tenuous. Both components of the term necessitate the question "to whom." To whom is it cultural, to whom does it belong? Belonging functions here as a noun, a verb, and an adjective. In all three instances it is also a reclamation. Exceptionally, in this process I have also begun to think of myself as a cultural belonging. But, "to whom." If I was a cultural belonging in storage at the Canadian Museum of History or the McCord Stewart Museum, would the provenance which I have laid out here be enough for someone to claim me? Or, as posited by Lainey, is it okay to live with the tension of not knowing *right now*, while also working to reclaim and understand these stories. Sure, "accepting the loss of knowledge and the silences in history can be unsatisfying;" however, "this reality is also part of the objects' lives" (Lainey 2022, 303). Through continuing to story, research, and share these connections will be better understood. I aim to story, research, share for a long time. Even when they result in complicated realities, as I have demonstrated here through my own experiences, the facts of my provenance can never change how I was raised nor how I got to this moment, this thesis.

Maintaining a strong sense of self has been difficult in this process, but it has also been the most necessary factor of my sanity to consistently come back to a surety of who I am. Often, I have reflected on moments where I felt the most connected to my family and to my mixed Métis identity. In particular, I keep replaying a phone call I had with Skipper a few years ago. In February 2020, I went to a protest in support of the Wet'suwet'en land defenders fighting to keep a destructive pipeline off their ancestral territory and the national railroad blockades reared in solidarity. Arm in arm with other students and community members, we created a human chain that shut down traffic on Sherbrooke Street downtown Montreal. We chanted calls for Land Back as a car tried to drive into us. I left the demonstration energized and filled with purpose and belonging. Again, I was living my identity through advocacy.

In the days following, I got a call from Skipper. He called me often to check in and chat (this is an absence which cannot be filled). He asked how school was going then asked me about what I thought of the protests. All his years as a journalist made him hungry for discourse; however, this was not a debate. For him, these protests were a trivial nuisance, a moment to roll your eyes and ask, "why can't they just get over it?" I felt like the car was driving into our line all over again. My grandfather had never really cared to acknowledge my father's, and by extension my own, ancestry. It was also a trivial nuisance to him. Until that phone call. This phone call taught me the importance of returning to oneself as an exercise in learning who you are, especially in the face of conflict.

When he asked me what I thought of the protests, I expressed a deep surety of self. I told him who I was. I told him that I had gone to a protest earlier that week. I told him that putting my body on the line was deeply important to me as I have a body with Indigenous ancestry permeating every fabric of my being, my thinking. This is who I am; this is how I act. To my surprise, he listened. He was trying to change, to acknowledge "what [he] once knew, what [he is] beginning to know, and what [he has] never known" (Mitchell 2016, 52).

When I look back at this thesis at 30, at 50, maybe even at 93, I still hope I am in the process of returning and learning. Identity building, much like repatriation, much like grief, are not simple, linear, or immediate events. These processes take time, truth, partnerships, and community. We must understand these facts as opportunities for growth. Lainey, Moses, and hopefully myself, represent a class of heritage workers and people committed to navigating these complexities of both the personal and professional functions of return.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview with Jonathan Lainey

23 January 2025, 2:30 PM. Video Call

Claire Grenier

I have been to the McCord quite a bit of times throughout my time living in Montreal. I remember when the permanent exhibit *Indigenous Voices of Today: Knowledge, Trauma, Resilience* opened in 2021 – which is a fabulous exhibit – I'm curious to know a little bit more about your role in creating that, and if repatriation plays any role in the curation and conception of that exhibit.

Jonathan Lainey

Well, the permanent exhibition Indigenous voices of today was developed by an external curator. Her name is Elisabeth Kaine. She unfortunately passed 2 two years ago. About a year after the exhibition opened. That was basically her creation, her words. She wrote all of the text, she did the scenario, the narrative.

She collected all of these testimonies from the people from the land over several years, not just for this specific project. It was part of a larger project she was conducting, and so she could actually pick into these archives they created over the years to create that exhibition at the McCord Stewart.

CG

And how long have you been in your role at the McCord Stewart Museum?

JL

Well, actually, it will be 5 years next month. I worked with her, and I helped her in the development of this exhibition as a curator at the McCord. But I was not a curator of the

exhibition. Of course I contributed in some ways, but I really have to give her all the credit because it's really her. I wrote few texts but mainly ones that were more historical. Like, for example, if she wanted to explain the legal and political context of residential schools – then I could be the one writing the small caption.

There's one thing I could give myself some credit for and it it's an important aspect of the exhibition that is not visible at all, but sometimes I share it because it's part of this decolonization process that is going on in different institutions and it's a constant battle. I mean it's not obvious for institutions to change, and so when Elisabeth started working with the McCord I was not there yet. When I joined the team, I realised that Elisabeth was not really satisfied with her relationship with the McCord staff. Not all of the staff, but with some people. She felt she didn't have enough room to create or that they were imposing one model, one template to her. That's not the way she was working or used to work. And I mean, she's not a junior. She's been there for quite a long period of time. She had a lot of experience, but she felt that she lost control at some point of her project. When I saw that, when I realised that our Indigenous curator was not happy with the museum, I flagged it to the management and I told them: "Once the exhibition is launched, you will give me the mic and I will be the one telling everyone how Indigenized we are and how decolonized we are. But if I know that during the process, during the methodology, our main Indigenous interlocutor was not happy, I will not be able to say that we succeeded," right? I told them to make sure that Elisabeth is happy with us. I don't what know they did. They met together and at the end of the day, Elisabeth had more room to work. I'm happy that finally, she was happy with us because otherwise it could've – would've – been a disaster. I mean, really.

You asked a question about repatriation, but during this process of developing this exhibition, there were no requests or issues. Starting repatriation, is not something that emerged from this exhibition project.

CG

In terms of the material you have in the collection at the McCord, because it's both a fine arts gallery and an ethnographical museum, is there a balance between those elements? Or do you think that the McCord is now moving more towards art collecting than it is actively collecting artefacts or ethnographic material?

JL

It's a good question because we say that we don't acquire art or contemporary art. The collection of art is called documentary art. In some cases we do, but not really. If a painter, for example, is still active we won't acquire their work. The collection does acquire caricature art – this is contemporary. But in terms of material, it's a very mixed collection. We have the photo collection made up of mainly historical photos, but also more contemporary works. But we don't acquire, for example, Indigenous contemporary art, and we don't acquire sculpture. But we do host exhibits related to it.

CG

Yeah, I remember seeing Kent Monkman's *Shame and Prejudice* at the McCord.

JL

We also did a residency artist in residence programme with Kent Monkman and this project is interesting because he's one of these artists who come to the museum and then work with the historical collections, historical objects, and create new objects, new art based on their

consultation of the collection. It's true that we are also doing some contemporary art. But we won't acquire the production of the artist.

CG

I'm very interested in art being made from ethnographic collections and whether or not that could be seen as a form of repatriation. So, this is sort of a two-part question, how would you define repatriation? And does something like making art from the collection work with your definition of what repatriation is?

JL

Well, to answer the second part, it could be considered as a form of repatriation, but I would not include it in my definition of repatriation.

It's definitely providing privileged access, but other than that, the object remains in our custody, so it's not true repatriation. Providing access is something that we do often for Indigenous artists or scholars or community members. We bring the objects out from storage, and we display them on the table and then they can spend the day with the objects if they want. We do that quite often actually. It's demanding in terms of internal resources because a lot of people are involved, and it can take several hours to prepare for this kind of visit. But, given our mandate, and given what we want to do, we feel that we need to do it. We need to provide this access to objects from Indigenous people to Indigenous people.

We also participate in true repatriation. I mean, when I started five years ago, I asked my colleagues, “did we ever repatriate objects to communities?” And I was told that it never happened. But recently we received a couple of repatriation requests. At the end of December 2023, we repatriated 11 ceremonial masks to Kahnawake and to the Haudenosaunee.

There's another request that will be coming for an object that is currently displayed actually in the *Indigenous Voices of Today* exhibit, it's the in the corner of the very dark space on colonial violence. It's a hand drawn drum. This drum is displayed because on it is written that the Chiefs are actually surrendering this drum as evidence that they will stop dancing and singing.

The Mistawasis community, they know that this drum is here. A few months ago, the current chief, Darryl Watson, he came to the museum. We brought the drum to the lab so he could actually handle it. His great grandfather was actually one of the ones who signed the drum. So, they will be asking for the drum to be repatriated.

CG

Is that the most recent item to have a repatriation request made on it at the McCord?

JL

Well, this one is coming. The thing is – we know we will repatriate it. We know they will ask. It's just that we are an institution. So, we need a letter with the signature. But this letter and signature is not coming. Recently we sent a reminder to say "hey, by the way, if you want to start the process, please do something."

But there's another repatriation request that is ongoing right now. It's a

Request to repatriate the famous two dog wampum belt of Kanesatake. The two dog wampum belt is one of the most spectacular belts in the world and it belongs to Kanesatake. It was displayed in our wampum exhibition. The repatriation request is under way, and we are working in making it real.

CG

Would you say that these experiences of repatriation, especially of the two that you've just mentioned, have changed your opinion on the process of repatriation? Either in a bureaucratic

sense or a policy sense – are there things you feel that need to be changed based on these experiences?

JL

Yeah, it's funny you ask, because yesterday I was in Ottawa with people from the Bank of Canada Museum. They are working to develop their repatriation policy.

I was discussing with the curator, and I was telling her that it's funny, because at the McCord Stewart, we don't even have a repatriation policy that could be available online. We're working on that. It will be written, it will be developed and put online.

But why I say this is, you know, you can have the best written policy and still do very very little. On our side, we do repatriate objects, we do negotiate and discuss with Indigenous people. But still, we don't have a repatriation policy. Even if you have your policy written down and publicly available, at the end of the day, the whole process will depend on the successful or the unsuccessful relationships that you're able to build and maintain with your interlocutors. And I think that this makes a big difference.

We at the McCord Stewart, we can be proud of being able to develop these relationships, this openness, these discussions, the will to work together.

We are quick to react. I mean, the masks that we returned to Kahnawake, it took just a few months to return them. I speak with people sometimes from different nations, from different provinces, and they tell us that sometimes they need to talk with the museums for 10 years and I just can't believe how it could take 10 years. We can finalise the full process within 10 months! I mean, how come it takes 10 years? I don't know.

CG

Is it a bureaucracy issue or a policy issue or an institutional issue when it takes that long?

JL

Even in this bureaucracy there's human beings with their emotions. It's not something we talk a lot about. It's not something we learn at school for museology or history. These people working in institutions they have personality, they have ego, they have trauma. I mean, they are human beings and sometimes they have their own understandings, or they are afraid of letting go. They're afraid. Right? And I think that this can be an issue.

A few minutes ago, I was telling you how Elisabeth Kaine had difficulties working with us. Well, it was based on – I don't want to say a clash of personalities, but it was about egos. It was about sharing power. Sometimes institutions can be reluctant not only because the process is heavy, but because the manager or the curator refuses or doesn't want to, right?

CG

Some of the research I've been doing for this thesis is about the arguments for and against repatriation. A lot of the arguments against repatriation come from, you know, sort of old-style museum workers who talk about the need for the encyclopaedic museum. In their opinion, repatriation is a closing down of culture, of saying "we don't want to share," and "this is only for one group of people" or "we don't want to learn from each other." And I think that tends to be a fundamental misunderstanding that can carry into museums collecting practices as well. About a year ago, there was a story from the Denver Art Museum refusing a repatriation request where the curator is quoted as saying, "well, we're not in the business of giving things away." That idea of classifying repatriation as just giving something away rather than building a partnership and building trust.

Is very interesting to see how that carries over into, you know, people who are currently working museums and the structures that they're up against. That's why I wanted to interview curators

doing this work.

JL

This idea of having the largest collection and it needing to grow forever – I don't believe in this. This idea of being the as exhaustive as possible to be encyclopaedic, as you said – I don't believe in this either.

About 10 or 15 years ago, I was working at Library and Archives Canada, and we were trying to acquire written records and material from Indigenous leaders. We quickly realised that the goal is not that LAC preserves it, but that it's preserved somewhere and it's accessible to people. It doesn't have to come to the McCord Stewart Museum if it's preserved in a repository that is close to the community of origin or in the institution of the community. Because, at the end of the day, the belonging is preserved. It's available. That's the goal.

To put that into practise, recently more and more I have been trying to change the acquisition process of Indigenous material at the McCord Stewart. We work through donations. We don't have any acquisition budget, we receive offers; we say yes or no.

So for example, if I receive an offer from one lady, that is, I don't know, 75 years old and that her mother was somewhere in the West, in Alberta, in the, I don't know 1930s. And she acquired this beautiful Blackfoot dress.

The person will want to donate it to the McCord Stewart because they know that we are strong with Indigenous initiatives and projects and exhibitions.

But then, I wonder why would a Montreal institution preserve such a beautiful object so far away from its territory? So, what I'm trying to do now is to investigate whether the territory or the nation, or the community if it's known, could receive the offer. And if they say “yes, we are interested.” Then I tell the donor “what about giving it to the original owner?”

Sometimes they will say yes, and then I make the meeting and connection and then the object can return. So, I think of it a little bit like a pre repatriation acquisition. Instead of me acquiring it, I just pass it to the original owner. But very often the case with these objects being offered is that they don't know where it's from. “My grandmother was in the north.” Hey, that's huge! Same thing for the West. West of what? So, in some cases we don't know and maybe we'll we will never know. In these cases, I prefer that the McCord Stewart Museum becomes the Plan B. Otherwise the donor could turn to auctions or eBay.

And then the object is gone to Germany, and we lose track of it for 100 years. So if it’s at the repository here in Montreal, at least it will be preserved. It will remain in Canadian territory, and it will be accessible to communities and, potentially, eventually repatriated.

CG

It feels like there's a stewardship element to that as well. Where it's this idea that “we don't know right now, but we're willing to learn and do the work for this object.” I read your article that's in the Routledge companion about telling stories of objects in museum collections. And I found that an interesting tension you identified wherein it's OK to acknowledge that we don't always have all of this information, and we can't just keep making things up to satisfy a collection requirement. You have to respect the object as it is and steward it until it can find a home. And if the home is the museum, the home is the museum.

JL

Yeah, because even trying at all costs to give an attribution, a provenance can create more confusion. We know that researchers and museum staff will go from one museum database to another to try to document their objects. So, if I say, “oh, this is a Dakota or this is a Cree or Blackfoot” and it's not, I have created a reference that could be used by other people. So I've just

created more confusions. I prefer to say we don't know yet. So far, we don't know. Maybe we'll know.

CG

And that's interesting too, because I've noticed in galleries that I've been to across the country, in Ottawa and in Vancouver and even in Toronto, some displays have started saying things like "once known creator."

JL

Yeah, I noticed that

CG

I'm wondering, as someone who works in these collections and as a curator, what are your thoughts on using language like that for displays?

JL

Well, we don't do it where I work, but I can understand it and maybe we'll start using this language too. We know that Indigenous people throughout history have been silenced. They have been made invisible and anonymous. We see it in photography, right? "Indians on the beach." Instead of having their names, their nations, their clan – they are people with a lot of story, but they're only Indians in the photos. So, these labels, it's a way to counterbalance this invisibility; to say, "we don't anymore who they were, but we used to know they had an identity." It's a way to actually denounce the fact that they were made anonymous and invisible. We don't know who they were because we wanted to erase them.

CG

Another thing I've noticed is alongside the didactics that say "once known" is the appearance of empty vitrines being displayed in the museum as a visual representation of repatriation. What are

your thoughts on this trend?

JL

Well, I think I think it's a good idea. The thing is, once one museum had done it, if we keep repeating it over and over, is it still original? Is it still the only way to talk about repatriation? I don't know. And it's a good example you're providing, because this drum that is currently displayed in the *Indigenous Voices of Today* exhibit will be repatriated, so of course we need to think about what will we put in this empty case. Of course we could replace it by something else. But the story of that drum is really interesting.

It's really interesting because of how it was collected; it was surrendered under duress. It's a surrender to the Indian agents because these people who used it, they were poor, they didn't have access to resources, their kids were sent to the school, watched and controlled by the missionary, the RCMP. They were over controlled in all aspects of their life. So, this drum becomes the perfect example to tell this colonial violence.

Instead of having just the display case empty, what I would like to do perhaps is to actually tell the story of repatriation, that this drum was here. We can have a photo of the drum and the text that is written on the drum displayed. We can say that it was here to tell visitors that Indigenous people went through a lot of colonial violence, but that the museum built a relationship with the nation. They came here and we gave it back. We can celebrate that, not in a way that says "oh, we're so good for doing this" because, of course, that's not the goal. To me, it's an opportunity to show that museums and Indigenous nations work together. We *can* work together. We're not enemies.

CG

Yeah. It's about building partnership, really.

JL

Yeah. And that's what we do, right: partnership and access

CG

Along that line, I'm wondering what you believe is the future of repatriation within galleries and museums?

JL

Yeah. Well, it's a big question. I will start to answer by coming back to something you said before about this resistance that some curators or institutions will show with regards to repatriation.

You know, at the McCord Stewart right now, let's say we have in our collection something like 8000 objects. Even if we repatriate 800 – that's a lot 800 objects – but we will still have 7200. So, this idea that giving back will empty the full storage. It's not true. It's like a scarecrow. I don't think this will happen. Or if it happens, it will take 150 years, so you won't lose your job. Just calm down!

More and more I see the future of repatriation as Indigenous communities having repositories where they can preserve their heritage. There're different aspects, you know. For example, the masks that we return to Kahnawake, they will not be displayed. They don't need to be preserved. No, they will be danced, they will be worn, they will be fed. They will deteriorate eventually. But these objects were meant to be used and danced and celebrated in ceremonies. That's fine: we don't have to say, "oh, no, you cannot do your ceremony. You need to preserve your masks." Having said that, a lot of Indigenous people today want their objects to be preserved. For example, the wampum belt that we will return. They said "thank you for offering to give it back, but we are not ready." They want to invest on the building to preserve it, to protect it, to secure

it. They're asking us about what type of light they should use and things like that because they want to preserve it. This idea that Indigenous people have different interests than museum is not always true. In some cases, they want to preserve the objects for seven next generations.

CG

It's a learning opportunity as well. And in this conversation about repatriation, do you believe that this kind of preservation within the community can help with reconnection to identity and cultural resurgence too?

JL

Of course! The Two Dog wampum belt we're returning to Kanesatake, they say that it's clearly an opportunity for them not only to reconnect but to reconcile internally. They have a lot of divisions going on and they hope that this repatriation this major object in their history will contribute to the healing process.

Oh yes, definitely. These objects, they're so powerful and people put so much value, not monetary value, but emotional value and heart into them that when they're back its powerful.

I hope that when we return the two dog wampum belt something public will be organised so we can celebrate. We can show that it's providing a lot of good.

I'm from the Huron Wendat nation of Wendake. The people of the longhouse at Wendake, they organised major human remains reburials starting in 1999. The last really large reburial was in 2013, and I had this chance to participate. These repatriations are…Sometimes I say that it's like in myself, in my mind, in my heart these repatriations opened a door. It opened something that I had, but that was not active or activated. Since then, I feel that I'm much more sensitive to different things. Even if you're really intellectual and cerebral and you feel that, oh, you're not spiritual – when you participate in such powerful events it can impact yourself. This is what

happened to me, I'm much more sensitive now. For example, we have human remains in the McCord Stewart Museum, and I feel uncomfortable knowing we have that. So, we are working right now with the Long House of Kahnawake to return the bones and the human remains. We are negotiating with McGill University as well. All of this is ongoing right now because we would like to return the bones to the Earth this year actually.

I see that this will be a totally different aspect of my work. When we did the wampum exhibition, to me, as a wampum scholar that had been studying these objects for more than 20 years, it was like, the peak of my career.

But to return the bones will be totally different because it will not be a personal achievement. It will trigger something really spiritual inside of me.

CG

Would you say all these experiences give you a strong positive feeling for repatriation and a want to champion it across different museums and policies?

JL

Oh, yeah. I feel with my situation – I think I say it in the in the article you're referring to – I wear literally three hats. I'm a material culture historian, I work in a museum, and I'm a Wendat myself. *My* material culture is everywhere. We're trying to repatriate it. But, now, I'm in the position of the curator responsible for these objects. I mean, I have to handle all of these hats! The reason why I say this is it's because I feel that I'm… I don't want to talk about myself too much

CG

You're welcome to talk about yourself! I'm talking about myself quite a bit in this thesis so I would love to welcome in somebody else's story.

JL

[Laughs] OK.

I feel that I'm so privileged to be able to actually be paid for what I like to do. It's not that I my job it's rather that I'm paid to do what I like. It's a small nuance; it's not exactly the same.

You know some someone can work in a factory and oh, he likes to punch in, punch out and meet with colleagues and have a bad coffee at noon. But this is not the case for me. I don't *like* my job. Well, I like my job, but it's rather that I'm paid to do what I believe, what is about me, my identity, who I am.

So being a curator, or an archivist, or ethno-historian or whatever, I don't really care about the title. They could change the title of my position in my e-mail signature, but I will still do the same work.

CG

Do you feel that your role, regardless of its title, has improved your sense of cultural belonging?

JL

Oh yeah, I think so. Over the years, yes definitely. I'm going through different experiences, even personal, like the reburial of human remains. So, I have this personal experience that I hope will be useful in my professional experience where I can give back.

CG

And give back in a literal way. How many items in the McCord Stewart's collection currently have requests for repatriation, or you could see having requests for repatriation in the future?

JL

Well, currently being requested – there's not a lot there. There are human remains, the wampum belt, the drum, the masks. That's a done deal. And we also returned an object to Nova Scotia. To

another museum closer to the Mi'kmaq nation who requested it. So, it's only 5 cases.

CG

They are pretty major cases nonetheless.

JL

Yeah, some cases are really major, but also, it's only 5 cases. You need to remember that I was told that there was no repatriation done at the McCord before I came in, right. So then suddenly 5.

But I believe that that there will be more and more for different reasons. First of all, more and more Indigenous communities are organising facilities to take care of objects that they want to preserve. Second, the museum is also changing. I mean, in our mandate in our strategic plan we claim to be allies to Indigenous peoples, we claim to be decolonizing. We advertise our position. So, this should open doors for more discussions. But also, we will need to be proactive ourselves. Yes, our database online is really rich, pretty much everything is online. It is not repatriation, but at least it allows people from all around to search our database and know if we have something from their community or nation.

Also, when I say we'll need to be proactive, I can give you an example. There's this Blackfoot man; I think Ayoungman is his name. He came to the museum, and he opened several drawers with Blackfoot material and in some cases, he would be holding an object, and he would say, "oh, this is a sacred item. This was used in ceremonies."

But we at the McCord don't know. I'm the only curator for Indigenous cultures. How can I be an expert of 640 communities and over 400 years of history? I cannot. And I refuse to be anyway! I will never be. I don't want to be an expert of everything.

Our plan is eventually to bring in these traditional knowledge holders to the storage rooms so they can help us to find the sacred. These sacred items would fall under the category of objects that we will not display. That should not be here and that should go back. But this will take time and resources, and we don't have a lot of time and resources. We are a very small museum; we don't have a lot of money either. And all of this will take time.

Even if we want to implement the TRC calls to action or recommendations of the last Canadian Museum Association report "Moved to Action" – we don't have the money to be so proactive. Recently, museums asked the Government of Canada for more money. Sometimes people believe that because we are in institutions, we are rich. But it's not true. So, it's not an absence of will, it's rather an absence of resources.

CG

What you said – "I can't be an expert on everything" – I think is really important. I find that museums tend to want to hire one Indigenous person and say "oh, you must know everything" and then have them be their only resources for questions about Indigenous people and materials. But, like you said, it doesn't work like that.

We have to be able to, learn together, to know when to talk to specific people. Part of this decolonizing mission within museums should be recognising that, you know, there isn't one pan-Indigenous knowledge that goes for everyone. It's more complex.

JL

No, that doesn't exist. Once, during an interview, someone said that I was more like a facilitator. And I think they were right. Basically, what I'm trying to do is provide access, be generous with the available information, help people can reconnect. That matters the most to me. We preserve these objects and hide them in the dark downstairs. Why? there's something missing. They need

to be seen more, activated more. That's my goal – not to know them all or research them all – rather, I want to make them available to the original owner. Because this knowledge on objects, it's really often coming from the external, from the local communities. They know better. So, if we make the connection between traditional knowledge and the object, then the goal achieved.

CG

I like activation as the word there. I've seen that concept across a lot of repatriation literature too. Being in that dark storage space is the same as being dormant for the object. And to be activated and brought back; touched and spoken to, is also deeply important for its preservation. As we know, as people who are trained conservationists, you think, OK, but you can't touch it without gloves on or you can't put it in the light for too long… but this is a very different way of approaching collections, which is not really in line with Indigenous ways of being either.

JL

No, no.

One more thing about the future of repatriation that we were talking about before. There's another part of the story, and it's part of what I was saying in my chapter that you've read. Among the 8000 objects we preserve, there's more than half in our collection where the origin and provenance and history are unknown. We don't know.

So, even if we give back all of the objects that we know the provenance of, there will be a lot that we will never know or that we don't know. That could restrain any repatriation request because I will not give objects to the wrong nation. I mean, you don't do that. You shouldn't provoke or create a wrong by trying to repair a past wrong. I would be really, really embarrassed if I did that.

CG

What else would lead to a repatriation claim being denied?

JL

Well, it hasn't happened so far. But what would prevent the repatriation would be the non-legitimacy of the person or persons who request it. The absence of information. If there's this guy who knocks on the door and says, "oh, this is mine, give it back." I'm sorry, but we have to be to do due diligence! We need to be certain. It's not that we don't want to give it back. Some people think that we are just people who stole everything and that we refuse to give things back and we're hiding all the objects. No, we want to do things correctly.

I won't name them because I prefer to remain more professional, but last year we met with a group of people who were requesting a lot of material.

But we did our homework, and we spoke with our networks, and we were told to not deal with these people. That they aren't recognised; they're illegitimate.

So, we need to do that research as well. Imagine if we are scared and we say to a group like that, "OK, yes, we give it back." What about the other relationships we developed with people over the years who don't recognize them? They will hate us. They will say, "are you crazy? What did you do?"

We need to be really, really diligent.

CG

Part of that diligence is also respect for the for the belonging itself, right?

JL

I think so too. To use the example of wampum belts I would be really really upset if an institution gave a Wendat belt to the Mohawk.

That's why, when I know that there's a Wendat wampum belt in one institution. I write to them to

say “by the way, this is Wendat. So, talk to us before you do anything with that.”

CG

Interesting, thank you. Do you have any other reflections on your experiences as a curator working with repatriation?

JL

Well, I mentioned the fact that many objects are unknown. When they are known, sometimes it's really general, like Anishinaabe or Prairie. So, it's really difficult. In the absence of certainty, I prefer to wait.

In terms of access to and repatriation of the object… Coming to the museum to access and directly handle the objects – it creates so many feelings for these researchers or artists. Some people cry. Some people bring tobacco. Other people sing and drum. There's a lot of things happening. It's not like historians taking notes, something really cold. It's emotional. There's a lot of culture surrounding these objects.

Every week, every time an Indigenous person comes in, they feel this. When they come to the storage and open the drawers – there's so much emotion. So definitely, these people, they reconnect. It's like they are reconnecting with part of themselves that was hidden or forgotten or not accessible. This process has this great potential changing or transforming effect. I don't want to speak on their behalf, but this is why I gave an example earlier about my experience with the repatriation of human remains. It did change something in myself. I'm probably different since then. So having access to these belongings, or having these belongings returned permanently to the community, is creating a lot of good. a lot of good things.

It's so rewarding to work on this. Sometimes, I share these thoughts with my colleagues, and we feel that we are so lucky. Yes, a museum is about preserving for future generations – but it's not

only this. It's not only scientific control of humidity and light. It's also about providing access. Providing access means several things, but it can be repatriating, but it's also reconnecting. I could use the “re” for many things. Like, reconnect, rebuild, reinvent. All of the “re”s! And why use “re”? Because Indigenous people lost so much, so much. Their tradition, territory, spirituality, children, everything. So, museums they have this power to.

“re”. So, *this* is really re-warding

CG

I like that a lot actually, thank you.

Appendix B: Transcript of Interview with John Moses

23 January 2025, 10:30 AM. Video Call.

Claire Grenier

A lot of what I have written right now is a prologue and a positionality statement. I'm talking about my dad's ancestry, my relationship to that, the research that I've been doing into what I have known of my identity and what's available to know, and how all this shapes who I am. I think that goes along well with this idea of reconnection and resurgence, especially with material belongings. My dad was a local politician, in the town that I grew up in, and so we were more involved in political events than things related to material and spiritual culture.

John Moses

Oh yeah, and what town? What area of the province?

CG

Welland, ON. Niagara Region area.

JM

Oh, yes. OK. So not too far from Six Nations and everything.

CG

Yes. But my dad's heritage is through the Mattawa Métis settlement in Ontario. It was later in his life that he discovered it. He got very politically involved and that was how I was raised. In doing repatriation research and in talking with my advisors, this question of what do I really know about my heritage in a material and spiritual sense came up. Now, I am looking more into questions of how and where we are Métis from and what does that mean to me?

I'm also doing this in the in the wake my grandfather’s death, which was early in September.

JM

I'm sorry to hear that.

CG

Thank you. I appreciate it.

He was 93. So, I suppose it wasn't too much of a shock, but it happened quickly. He lived in Ottawa, in Westboro, since 1969. Right after he died, I went up and spent about 2 weeks with my mom and her brother cleaning out the house.

So, I'm writing about this experience couched with the ideas of collecting practises. The prologue is about where I'm coming from, both in terms of my ancestry and my family. And this major loss which really shifted who I am and the position I am writing my thesis in. What do you learn about institutional collecting practises when you have to clean out the house of somebody you loved, somebody who had lived there for 50-some-odd years?

My grandfather was a was a journalist for many years too. So, I'm using this idea of story as method; the stories that I'm living and the stories that are in these cultural belongings themselves. I'm trying to weave all these things together. Which is why these interviews are so important to me, it's another way of hearing and creating story.

JM

Well, I'm happy to answer any particular questions. I think its an intriguing way that you're approaching this. With Indigenous families, whether First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, we're used to thinking in terms of, in institutional language, "cultural property." There's a difference between family heirlooms and communally held items.

We see that issue raising its head within the modern treaties process. Each and every land claim, without exception, has a more or less detailed chapter around culture, heritage, and language.

The basic premise is that, just as natural resources have been removed from within traditional territories, so too have cultural resources been removed. In many cases, these cultural resources end up in the collections of museums, galleries, and archives.

Sometimes there's material that continues to be held within individual families, which might be recognised as property owned in common and need to have a designated person acting as its custodian. But, beyond a certain point, things cease being regarded as communally held – and they become family heirlooms to be passed on from one generation to the next within particular family networks.

CG

When something with that provenance ends up in a museum, where maybe it was donated by a private citizen, the quest for its return can become difficult, right? Because it's a question of who's arbitrating who gets what, and from what authority.

JM

Yeah, and we've seen this in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families. For example, from conventional European settler families, we have family Bibles that have been donated to the museum by an individual person saying "this was my great grandmother's Bible. She's long since deceased. We would like to donate it to the national collection." But of course, if you're talking about somebody who's a great, great grandparent, that person could have several dozen descendants. There might be another cousin elsewhere in the extended family who's saying, "well, she was my great, great grandmother too. And no, we do not concede that this goes to the national collection. In fact, she had promised it to me. So, my branch of the family wants it"

So, that's an interesting point about repatriation. It doesn't happen very frequently, but it does happen where we can be approached with repatriation claims from non-Indigenous families and

communities as well.

CG

How long have you held the role of Director for Repatriation and Indigenous relations at the Canadian Museum of History?

JM

Well, I've spent my entire 30 plus year career in and around the orbit of the Department of Canadian Heritage and its various portfolio institutions, including the Canadian Conservation Institute and here at the Canadian Museum of History. But it's actually only been about three years that I've been within this role.

CG

Has repatriation always been a specific focus of your work, or is that more of a newer development?

JM

Well, it's always been of interest to me. I actually started out in the museum field as an artefact conservator. As one of the people doing hands on repair and restoration of individual artefacts and works of art. Throughout my career, different opportunities presented themselves and I was found myself getting more involved with curatorial, research, and policy work. Ultimately, that's what's brought me here to repatriation and indigenous relations.

Since I'm in the process of retiring, I don't mind dating myself here. I started at the CMH back in 1988. Actually, we were called the National Museum of Man at that point.

But, what today exists as the Canadian Museum of History has been doing repatriation since the 1970s. In fact, we were one of the first National Museum systems anywhere in the world to ever undertake repatriating a portion of the national collections back to the Indigenous communities

of origin. However, only much more recently did we set up a separate stand-alone repatriation unit. Through the majority of the decades of its existence, repatriation work at the CMH was being done individually by individual curators, whether for the archaeology or the ethnology department.

CG

Would you say that most of the material in the collection is eligible for repatriation? Or what have you found in conversations with community members that people are most interested in receiving back?

JM

The way we've been doing repatriation since 1978 is a matter of museum best practises. The first ever repatriation was with the return of seized potlatch materials back to the Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw communities of Alert Bay and Cape Mudge in British Columbia. These had been seized on the ground in those two communities by local Indian agents and RCMP officials, I believe back in 1922. By 1927, they had made their way out here, to what was then called the National Museum of Canada. That material was finally returned home in 1978, and the museum continued to do repatriation as a museum best practise throughout the remainder of the 70s, 80s, and 90s. It was only in 2001 that we took all our best practises and lessons learned around repatriation, put that down on paper, and received board of trustees approval as our first official repatriation policy. For the first time ever, we had an actual document that we could send out to First Nations and share with other museums. That policy was last reviewed in 2011.

In response to more recent events, including specifically the TRC calls to action.

And the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we're looking at that policy right

now to confirm that it continues to meet, or exceed, all the most recent standards and expectations around museums and their Indigenous relations, as articulated in both the TRC and UNDRIP.

That policy is what we call a criteria-based policy that prioritises the return of specific categories of museum materials that have always been expressed to us by Indigenous communities themselves as the most important. So, at the top of the list, as you might appreciate, are Indigenous human remains, and the burial materials associated with those remains. Beyond that, we get into sacred, ceremonial, and ritual objects. Then, property owned in common, or important cultural patrimony. There's also clauses for ordinary items of material culture where there's evidence to indicate that they were acquired under conditions of theft or trespass on to Indian Act reserve lands or other Indigenous territories.

CG

It's a broad ranging list. And there are those challenges about ownership and desire from the community too. So, broadly, how would you define repatriation?

JM

Well, we keep it very straightforward. Owing to the fact that we have been doing this for so long now, we have a very definitive view of what repatriation is and what it is not. Here at CMH, it's nothing other than the permanent physical return and transfer of legal title of selected Indigenous cultural properties from the museum back to the Indigenous communities of origin.

There are other related issues about how do you attempt to resolve or adjudicate competing claims to the same material. Some institutions or university-based academics or others will speak very vaguely in terms of things like digital repatriation – we don't really abide by that. For us, it's a very practical, legalistic issue.

CG

I've done some research into the Sami example in Norway. There's a longstanding policy initiative called the Baastede State Agreement that primarily focused on all legal ownership of items being transferred first, and then physical ownership gradually being transferred as places for these belongings to return to are identified or built.

You mentioned digital repatriation, in the Sami case I know there have been institutions that have made scans or are creating replicas or are even doing holograms…

JM

Well, there are two things there. In relation to the Sami situation, the ongoing issue that we're still trying to wade through, and what has been a real game changer for us, has been Canada's Bill C-15 which was passed on June 21st of 2022. So, it's been three years now that Canada has its own domestic UNDIP implementation Act. Basically, it says the laws and policies of Canada, including laws like the Canadian Museum of History Act and the repatriation policy at the Canadian Museum of History, will be viewed through the lens of UNDRIP compliance. The UNDRIP declaration itself is very explicit. Article 31 says Indigenous peoples have the right to control their cultural heritage in all manifestations. Full stop. So, we have to both meet our obligations under the Museum's Act and continue serving as Canada's National Museum of Human History, while also trying to meet our obligations under Bill C-15. It's a balancing act. Hopefully the two are never so contradictory of each other that it makes a middle path impossible to find. But that's a challenge that we're dealing with.

I mentioned, for example this notion of the sacred or ceremonial. Well, there are some groups we deal with who have the point of view that anything ever made or used by ancestors is by definition sacred. We just recently concluded a repatriation like that. Indeed, in that particular

case, following negotiations, we essentially repatriated the contents of an entire archaeological site back to their stewardship. This was the Mississauga band near Blind River, ON. In this situation, there had been an archaeological site that included Indigenous human remains and burial goods. That aspect of it was fairly straightforward. Those items went back, and their return home was negotiated quite efficiently.

Beyond the burial contexts or the burial features themselves, there were hundreds, thousands, of broken pottery fragments, shards, and that kind of thing. From a conventional museum based archaeological perspective, these were… well, these were pottery and ceramic fragments. Whereas the First Nation made the argument "Well, yes, but originally, they were pottery or ceramic vessels that were exactly the kind of container within which ritual offerings, typically food offerings, would have been left at the burial sites of the deceased."

A mainstream museum-based archaeology point of view in that situation would have been almost dismissive in arguing that these are just ordinary pieces. But, by making that connection to sacredness, they were returned to the nation.

CG

To me, it feels that these conversations, these examples of listening and exchange, demonstrates how museums have shown a bit more willingness, a bit more openness within the last 10 to 15 years to take those requests seriously. Whereas before, perhaps it would have been dismissive, like you said.

JM

Well, certainly. Again, Bill C-15 has been a game changer because the obligation on us is to basically implement UNDRIP in its museum and heritage aspects within the CMH. It's legislation – we can be found at fault if we're not able to implement it. We have to report to

Parliament on a yearly basis via the Minister of Canadian Heritage on how we're implementing Bill C-15 and UNDRIP within the CMH. If we fail, we could be sanctioned, we could lose funding, conceivably, we could even lose positions.

It's no longer just an interesting topic for debate, it's a law. We have to abide by federal law. Just as we have to uphold the Copyright Act, for example, so too do we have to uphold Bill C-15.

CG

What would you say is the future of repatriation, both within the day-to-day museum sense and an overall policy sense?

JM

I would say, as important as repatriation is and as high profile as it is, we've always been at pains to explain to people that repatriation itself is but one outcome along a spectrum of other, what we call here, Indigenous engagement activities. It's points along a spectrum. We do indeed have repatriation at the far end of the scale, but there are many alternatives before you get to that point. We have very specialised training that we offer to Indigenous people interested in museology: for over 30 years now the museum has been hosting its own Indigenous internship program. We have our ordinary suite of short and long-term loans. In many cases, especially with long term loans, that suits the purposes of the First Nation in question just as much as outright repatriation does.

We also have our Sacred Materials projects and spaces. That's a pot of money that enables us to bring delegations – groups including cultural advisors, traditional knowledge keepers, elders, and elders and training – out here at our expense. This allows them to spend quality time here at the museum with their belongings. At least 6 to 8 times throughout the year we host these visiting Indigenous delegations. In about two weeks we have 3 representatives coming in from Blackfoot

Crossing Historical Park. In April we have a Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en group coming in from northern Interior BC.

And, when I talk about the spaces, we have both specially developed interior and exterior spaces for visits like these. We have a traditional care area here at the museum that incorporates the best features of a conventional artefact conservation lab with the culturally appropriate meeting space. It's equipped in such a way that we can do smudging and pipe ceremonies and other traditional care, including ritual food preparation, if that's what the cultural requirement is. We also have an outside healing garden, where we can raise our own crops basically of sacred medicines like cedar, sage, sweet grass, and tobacco.

CG

Related to that, do you believe that repatriation has a positive effect on senses of cultural belonging?

JM

Oh yeah. It's to the benefit of the of the conservation profession here in Canada. You know, that there's a growing awareness across the conservation profession that there needs to be space and training on including indigenous traditional care. Indeed, that helps project and develop a unique Canadian conservation profession on the world stage. It's something unique that conservators, including a growing number of Indigenous conservators, can bring to the bring to the field. Basically, we're of the point of view that the highest purpose of museums is not for the mere preservation of often fragmentary remains, but for cultural continuity. Cultural continuity is the priority over the mere preservation of fragmentary remains.

So, what does Indigenous traditional care look like in a museum setting? It includes things like

the capacity to raise our own crops of the sacred medicine plants. It includes things like having capacity inside the building to do ritual food preparation, to do smudging to do pipe ceremonies. Our “backyard,” slopes down to the banks of the Ottawa River. It's a very dramatic setting with the Parliament buildings, the Supreme Court, and the National Gallery in the background. Wherever possible, I like to encourage groups to do traditional care outside, right along the riverbank. Where we're situated is in the middle of a stretch of the Ottawa River, which, since pre contact times, has been recognised as a sacred site in its own respect. This stretch of the Ottawa River, about a half a mile long between the Akikpautik falls, also called the Chaudière Falls, and the falls of the Rideau River. Champlain went down this stretch of the river, I believe in 1613. And he, in surprising detail, describes tobacco ceremonies that were done at the two sets of falls by his Indigenous minders. So, we're very cognizant of the fact that we're smack dab in the middle of a traditional cultural space to begin with.

CG

It's powerful, powerful setting. Through all of these experiences that you are sharing, all the knowledge that you bring, all the lessons you have learned – how do you, on both a personal and a professional level, feel about repatriation?

JM

Well, it's a good thing. But we have to consider again that repatriation is not the be all end all. It's not good enough for any museum, large or small, to say that they are “doing repatriation” or that they are “in talks” to give back a single Indigenous artefact in the collection, or a handful of artefacts in the collection. That lets too many institutions off the hook.

You know, there are many institutions that claim from the right off the top “we don't have any indigenous content within our collections because that's not our mandate.” My wife, she's not

native – she's of settler Irish descent, she's from Goderich, Ontario on Lake Huron, and they have the Huron County Museum. For them, history begins in the year 1840 when this fellow Tiger Dunlop, who was the land Commissioner for Upper Canada, wrote their charter in black and white. Their term of reference is that the Huron County Museum is about the pioneer history of Huron County, full stop. And when they've been challenged in the past by people saying, "well, shouldn't you make some indication that you are on Indigenous lands?" their response up until fairly recently was "Nope. That's not what we're about. We're we are a pioneer Historical Society." They're slowly coming around because they're in a position of potentially having further federal and provincial funding withheld from them until they start trying to make trying to Indigenize themselves in some respect.

I guess my point there was that, yeah, repatriation is important. But it can't be the only Indigenous related activity that museums are held accountable for. Even if they don't have any Indigenous content within their collections, they could still potentially provide training opportunities to Indigenous museology interns. They could still potentially provide spaces to neighbouring First Nations communities that are looking to have meetings or gatherings.

You know, things of that nature. So, repatriation is important and its high profile. That's understood. Everybody gets that. But it has to be but one outcome along the spectrum of other outcomes of Indigenous engagement that museums are making available.

CG

Could you tell me about a specific item from the collection that the Canadian Museum of History successfully repatriated? How did this experience change your opinion on the repatriation process?

JM

I don't know how many dozens of repatriation negotiations we've successfully negotiated since that original return of the Potlatch materials back in 1978. There's got to be over 100 by now. It's a bit misleading too, because this is an ongoing challenge. Even here at the museum our financial people, our bean counters, they want to know things like during the third quarter of the last fiscal year, how many objects did you successfully repatriate? And it's not really a numbers game. Remember that Mississauga First Nation archaeological site I was talking about? Well, the number of items returned actually ventured into the thousands. But that was unfolded rather efficiently over a relatively short period of time. Just going by the numbers, it resulted in thousands of archaeological fragments being returned in one fell swoop. Whereas we've had other negotiations for single objects or for pairs of objects that, because of overlapping claims and their involvement in the land claims process and everything else, are into their third decade of repatriation talks now. You can't really describe repatriation just based on the numbers alone. Personally, I've been involved in the return of these 2 Buffalo rib stones that are going to the Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park. That's one of the delegations that's coming here in February I mentioned previously. As we get closer towards the physical date of return, they're sending three of their staff members here to do their own photography, take their own measurements, and comment on the necessary packing and shipping. Any given repatriation file is unique in its own right. Whenever it's in the process of actually happening, of course that's what's preoccupying everybody. So those two Buffalo rib stones are very much on my mind right now. They're small boulders that basically, through both human intervention and natural erosion, from a distance look like Buffalo silhouettes. They were both recovered from areas of land in North Central Alberta that are nearest to the present-day site of the Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park located on Siksika First Nation Indian Reserve lands. One of those stones arrived here in the 1880s and

the other one more recently in the 1920s. But after many months of negotiation, they're going back to Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park sometime after April 1st.

CG

How long did that process take from first reaching out to the Blackfoot Nation to finalzing the return?

JM

Well, there was a lot going on. When I talk about doing traditional care within the museum, we have records going back to the decade of the 1970s of periodic visits that were held by elders and other traditional knowledge keepers coming from Blackfoot communities to the museum to visit those Buffalo stones. Every several years there'd be a delegation that came out to do a pipe ceremony, or perhaps do tobacco and other offerings. But it's only been much more recently that those traditional care visits have morphed into formal repatriation requests.

A lot of this is has come to a head again with the increased profile around repatriation that came about as a result of Canada's adhesion to UNDRIP and the museum and heritage related provisions within the TRC calls to action.

CG

How many items in the collection of the Canadian Museum of History currently have, or may in the future have, requests for repatriation related to them?

JM

You know, it could be anything. As I said, with some groups, their definition of the sacred is anything made and used by an ancestor. That could anything that we've got here. Whether it's an archaeological fragment or an ethnographic artefact, if it was made by an Indigenous creator there's nothing to stop a present-day group from saying, “this is part of our cultural patrimony or

matrimony. And we want it back on that basis alone."

If we receive a request, we're obliged to follow up and to respond to it. Perhaps at the end of the day, what they're interested in is not necessarily repatriation but a long-term loan. With long-term loans, the potential benefit is that, in legal terms, the legal title remains vested in the Canadian Museum of History. In the physical sense, the object has been returned from the museum to the Indigenous community of origin; however, so long as it remains a museum material within the meaning of the museum's act, the obligation remains on the museum to provide for its upkeep in terms of insurance and any periodic conservation care that might be required.

CG

Right, because the professional care of these objects can be quite a large barrier for these communities. I know in some situations there can be caveats in the repatriation agreement that these items must be kept in a climate-controlled environment or have this specific light or case.

JM

That's the other important thing to take note of. Once items are repatriated, the museum ceases to have any further legal say on them. It's understood, for example, that when human remains and burial materials are repatriated, it is for the purposes of reburial. It's understood that if it's a sacred ceremony or ritual object, it will be going back into traditional use. From that point forward, as different changes occur in its physical state through wear and tear, the Indigenous group, using their own traditional methods for safekeeping, will continue to provide that kind of upkeep. But if an object goes back not as a repatriation, but as a long-term loan, it's the museum that remains on the hook for doing upkeep periodically when deemed necessary. Which can represent a cost saving for the First Nation itself.

CG

Are there any instances you speak about where a claim for repatriation was denied by the museum? And was the reason because something like a long-term loan was more suitable for the situation, or because there wasn't enough information about the object to repatriate it?

JM

Well, not necessarily deny, more like things in the past have occurred where there are so many overlapping or competing claims for the object in question that we can't return it to one group alone. In that situation, there comes to be a consensus agreement among claimants that the object in question, for whatever period of time, remains in respectful, safe keeping at the Canadian Museum of History. But, periodically, it can be sent out on long term loan to a number of different groups in succession basically.

CG

And what has the reception for something like that been in the communities that have the competing claims? Is that something that they're satisfied with?

JM

I would yes, generally. But, in some cases more than others there is sort of a begrudging or a reluctant acceptance of that kind of arrangement.

And in the meantime, you know, this is because in terms of, in,

In terms of adjudicating competing or overlapping claims to the same material, we certainly could take it upon ourselves to make a very arbitrary museum-based decision upon our own curatorial and research expertise. We could quite easily say "based on the weight of all the evidence that we have access to, we are making the decision that the most appropriate present-day representative First Nation community is community A, as opposed to communities B, C, or

D.” But, you know, that can be shot down on any number of fronts. Who's a non-Indigenous organisation, a colonial institution like the Canadian Museum of History, to tell any First Nations what is theirs and what is not theirs.

The best that we can do in our approach to adjudicating overlapping or competing claims is, to the maximum extent possible, shy away from being the decision maker. We will lay on museum resources in terms of hopefully facilitating some sort of a negotiated or agreed upon outcome. We've done this many times in the past. We did this in relation to the do Buffalo stones that are now being returned. These are of cultural interest to a wide variety of present-day Blackfoot confederacy communities as well as Plains Cree communities. But these two stones, to the extent that they're of geological origin, could be of such antiquity that they even predate these notions of what's plains Cree and what’s Blackfoot. They could relate to Indigenous cultures that predate these present-day distinctions by many millennia. This time last year, we had a week of meetings where we brought out representatives of Plains Cree communities and of Blackfoot confederacy communities. By the end of that week of meetings, the Plains Cree representatives did indeed agree that most appropriate receiving point would be Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, which is squarely within Blackfoot Confederacy Territory treaty #7 territory. That's an example of a good outcome where after negotiations the groups with competing claims do indeed come to a consensus amongst themselves.

But that's not always been the case. Things remain here in respectful, safe keeping. At least all the communities involved know where the items are. Although they might be hundreds of kilometres from their Indigenous territory of origin, at least all the parties all involved know where the objects are. And, from time to time, if they choose to do so, we will cover their expenses for having to come out here to do whatever kind of traditional care is deemed

appropriate.

CG

In terms of why requests for repatriation are launched in the first place, an integral element is access. Not just physical access, but access to the knowledge of where these items are and how they're being cared for. This access you've spoken about, even though its outside of that clear-cut definition of return you provided, I think that it's a very interesting function of repatriation work within that spectrum of Indigenous engagement. Ultimately, is it about building partnerships?

JM

Yeah, it is. Most of the repatriation that we're involved with comes our way as a function of our involvement within Canada's modern treaties process. Although we do proactive repatriation too, but I'll get into that later. Whether you're talking about Aboriginal self-government agreements comprehensive land claim agreements, there's a cultural heritage and language chapter within each and every one of those agreements these days. The first thing that we ask for of any new file that comes our way as a function of a treaties process is a map of what's called the asserted traditional territory. Like what physical area of land are we talking about? Upon receipt of that map, the question for us becomes what do we have in the collections here, whether archaeological, archival, or ethnographic that appears to originate from within that area of land shown in the map? And so, depending upon the complexity of the file, it can take us anywhere from several weeks to several months to come up with a response to that question.

CG

How do you think that repatriation has writ large changed the collecting practises of museums?

JM

For example, if somebody has passed away and the kids or the grandkids approach us out of the

blue and because their relative was previously an RCMP officer who had many postings across the Canadian high Arctic, or was involved with the military, or any number of federal government departments, or perhaps one of the religious organisations and now as the surviving family they have fallen heir to material that they want to donate to the museum.

If we're approached with anything that is manifestly repatriatable according to the criteria – and it does indeed happen that we're approached with Indigenous human remains like, somebody collected a skull from a surface burial as an interesting souvenir, brought it back, and it's been in the family Rec room for 60 plus years. We won't touch that with a 10-foot pole. We're not going to acquire something simply to acquire the obligation of undertaking its repatriation. But for something not as gruesome as that, like just a very nice example of material culture – a finely beaded pair of moccasins or any other item that you can think of. We would, after having taken a look at it and if the family itself has a fairly good documentation as to what region of the country it was collected from, or even what specific Indian reserve, we would redirect that present day holder to get in touch with the First Nation themselves and approach them directly about returning it. Basically, what's different from before, is that we're giving the right of first refusal to the First Nations.

CG

You mentioned proactive repatriation – could you explain that term and process?

JM

It's about identifying high risk collectors from within our own collections. Here again might be material that was acquired into the collections back in the 1890s, or the 1920s, the 1930s, or even the 2000s. And, in going through our records, we see that it was either donated or sold to us by somebody who might have been an Indian agent, a residential school administrator, RCMP,

military, an Indian Affairs branch worker, or some kind of religious official. So, the question for us becomes, what were the conditions in that particular Indian Reserve, or Inuit community, or Métis settlement when the object came into the hands of our donor? Do the records indicate a situation of a willing seller, a willing buyer? Or perhaps is there anything that indicates coercion? The most draconian Indian Act restrictions against traditional cultural expressions were on the books as part of the Indian Act from 1888 up until 1951. Those dates line up exactly with the most active collecting periods for this institution. Most of what we have in the collection coincides with those years at the height of the Indian Act bans, where Indigenous groups for whatever range of motivations or impositions are actively letting things go.

That's what proactive repatriation is: we do our own research in our collection about how certain objects were acquired to see if there anything in the conditions of their acquirement that raises red flags.

CG

This idea of proactive repatriation – I find that very interesting and very representative of a new direction of museum collecting practises. Being active in the acknowledgement of what's in your collection, being able to identify what is, as you said, “high risk” … all of these developments in repatriation seem to keep ideas of reconnection to identity and community at the forefront.

JM

As we talk about priorities with different Indigenous groups or communities, in many cases, the major preoccupation of the group in question might not be with the return of things. Their main cultural priority might in fact not have to do with artefacts at all, but with language retention and language revitalization. So, perhaps there are materials in the archives here that might be of interest to the present-day community because it could be recordings of oral histories being

given, or of songs and chants being sung, there could be manuscript materials of word lists and vocabularies, or even historical photographs as well. Rather than the Indigenous group necessarily being concerned about objects from their community that might reside at the museum, they are wondering if there are any language related resources that might be in the museum's archive that in fact would be their greater priority.