MuseumsForward

Decolonizing museums: Perspectives from Indigenous museum professionals

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Abstract

This phenomenological study investigates the lived experiences of Indigenous museum professionals who are leading decolonizing initiatives at settler colonial museums, and how their work has impacted them personally, professionally, and socially. As the vast majority of museums in the United States were founded by and for the dominant culture of the U.S. settler colonial state, this study repositions "mainstream museums" as settler colonial museums. Perspectives from Indigenous museum professionals reveal that in addition to changing institutional practices, decolonization must also contribute to the wellbeing and healing of Indigenous communities. Participants in this study describe their experiences working in museums as a mix of feeling affirmed and valued at times, but tokenized and emotionally exhausted at others. Indigenous museum professionals feel supported by inclusive and culturally appropriate institutional policies, open-minded and approachable museum leadership, and solidarity with BIPOC co-workers, particularly their Indigenous peers. However, they are often limited by a lack of funding and autonomy. Participants found that their decolonization work has strengthened some community relationships, but also eroded trust with those who remain wary of settler colonial institutions. Given these findings, settler colonial museums should consider how their decolonizing practices carry greater significance for their Indigenous employees, and whether the decisions they make as institutions may inadvertently be reproducing colonial harm.

Keywords

Decolonization; Indigenous museum professionals; Settler colonial museums

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Introduction

Decolonization is an increasingly popular subject of discussion in the museum field, appearing in conferences, articles, and other media about the museum world (Cairns, 2018; Center for the Future of Museums, 2019; Nanibush et al., 2017). These conversations often draw from Amy Lonetree's *Decolonizing Museums* (2012), which argued that a decolonizing approach to representing Native stories and cultures can be used to address historical unresolved grief and transform museums into "places that matter" for Native peoples.

Some museums in the United States have begun to put decolonization into practice, beginning by confronting their roles in historic and ongoing settler colonial structures. Museums with cultural collections from Indigenous communities were often the source of racist narratives about primitive, disappearing, or extinct peoples, and had display cases filled with stolen belongings and human remains (Harjo, 2020; Harrison, 2013, Lonetree, 2012; Onciul, 2015). They are sometimes called "mainstream museums" in order to distinguish them from tribally owned or culturally specific museums. Keeping in mind that all museums are culturally specific (Cole et al., 2020), this study repositions mainstream museums as "settler colonial museums". A settler colonial museum is thus defined as any museum that was founded by and for the dominant culture of the U.S. settler colonial state, representing hegemonic beliefs and ideals. This includes but is not limited to museums with cultural collections; it also encompasses museums of science, art, and history.

Decolonizing approaches in settler colonial museums have been varied, though some recurring trends have emerged. These include land acknowledgements, advisory committees, and trepatriation of collections to communities of origin (Boast, 2011; CFM, 2019; Nanibush et al., 2017; Yepa-Pappan et al., 2020). Most settler colonial museums doing this work have engaged Indigenous communities as advisors or collaborators, while others have also hired Indigenous museum professionals as staff (Burke Museum n.d.; Catlin-Legutko, 2016; Macdonald et al., 2020; Yepa-Pappan et al., 2020). A handful of museums have emerged as industry leaders in decolonization, the Abbe Museum and the Museum of Us being two prominent examples.

Such institutions have been sharing their work through conference presentations and webinars (Anderson, 2018; Catlin-Legutko, 2016; Macdonald et al., 2020; Newell et al., 2020).

Decolonization was originally used in context of political independence, and early theorists like Frantz Fanon described it as "a violent phenomenon… which sets out to change the order of the world" (1963). Indigenous scholars in settler colonies like New Zealand, Canada, and the United States began to use decolonization in academic discourse around sovereignty and sustaining Indigenous practices in settler colonial societies (Miller, 2008; Smith, 2012). Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) wrote a notable critique of this phenomenon, asserting that "decolonization is not a metaphor", and can only mean "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life". Decolonizing museum initiatives have not yet been situated within this critique; while it could be argued that decolonization is being used as a metaphor for institutional change, it is also true that the return of ancestral remains under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the revitalization of cultural practices (Morris, 2017) constitute the repatriation of Indigenous life and lifeways.

These debates around decolonization could be greatly enriched by the perspectives of Indigenous museum professionals working in settler colonial museums that are implementing decolonizing initiatives. Despite the proliferation of field-wide discussions about decolonization, we do not have a sense of the agency or power that Indigenous museum professionals have within their institutions. As "insiders" in museums, they may be limited by the scope of their positions, considerations of job security, or wanting to preserve relationships with co-workers (Wajid and Minott, 2019). Restated, "Native bodies as inclusion do not necessarily connote Native agency" (Mithlo, 2020).

Indigenous museum professionals face unique tensions and challenges in their line of work. The colonial nature of museums means that they are places of trauma and harm for many Indigenous peoples (Anderson, 2018; Lonetree, 2012; Onciul, 2015), and literature about museum professionals working towards institutional change has found that it takes an emotional toll (Morse & McCann, 2019). Taken together, it is no wonder that Nancy Mithlo (2004) writes that Native museum professionals face "an undue and often unworkable burden" – the expectation and assumption that they will educate non-Natives and address colonial legacies in museums. Áile Aikio (2018) describes the benefits of having special insight into her community and connections to cultural experts. However, some members of her community refused collaboration because of her involvement, feeling that her

family had too much influence in the museum. Bryony Onciul's (2015) interviews of Blackfoot museum professionals found that working for a settler colonial museum had significant impact on their community relationships. They were held accountable for decisions made by the museum, regardless of whether they had control over the issue, and had their loyalty to their community questioned. Clifford Crane Bear said of the situation, "When you are trying to bridge two cultures together you get walked on from both sides" (Onicul, 2015, p. 226).

As increasing numbers of settler colonial museums set out to decolonize their institutions, the perspectives of Indigenous practitioners must be heard and known. This will not only help museums assess and improve their decolonizing efforts, but also aid them in considering the wellbeing of their staff and collaborators. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Indigenous museum professionals in the context of institutional decolonization efforts, and how such work has impacted them personally, professionally, and socially. The research questions were:

1. How do Indigenous museum professionals define and conceive decolonization in a museum setting?
2. What type of institutional support or barriers have Indigenous museum professionals encountered in implementing decolonization policies?
3. How has working for a settler colonial museum impacted Indigenous museum professionals?

Understanding these personal and professional experiences can help settler colonial museums interrogate the power dynamics within their institutions and identify if there are ways in which their decolonizing work may actually be reproducing colonial harm.

Methodology

The study used a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of Indigenous museum professionals. Qualitative data was collected through interviews with self- identified Indigenous museum professionals who are current or former employees at one of the three research sites. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using Zoom video conferencing and recorded for transcription. Issues of consent and anonymity were discussed with each participant prior to recording, bearing in mind that identifiable responses could affect a participant's career or relationships. Automatically generated interview transcripts were edited for accuracy and coded to identify prominent themes.

Quotes used in this article have been smoothed to remove filler words and pauses without changing the words of the participants.

Participants were identified using the researcher's professional networks or through participants' public-facing work. It should be noted that the researcher worked at one of the research sites, the Burke Museum, for four years prior to the start of this study. She therefore had prior knowledge of the institution and existing relationships with the participants from this site. The researcher's analysis and perspectives are also rooted in her identity as a descendant of colonized peoples and a first-generation immigrant to the United States.

Participants were recruited from one of three museums: the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle, Washington; the Museum of Us in San Diego, California; and the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine. These sites were selected as they each have implemented significant decolonization plans and policies. They also have multiple Indigenous museum professionals on staff who could give different perspectives on the same institution.

The Burke Museum is located on the University of Washington (UW) campus. Decolonizing museum practices date back to at least the 1970s, when James Nason (Comanche) introduced guidelines for working with Indigenous communities, implementing culturally appropriate collections practices and co-creating exhibits with communities (Dobkins, 1999; Morgan, 2018). The Burke continues to work closely with Indigenous communities today, facilitating access to its collections for cultural revitalization efforts. One such project was undertaken by the Curator of North American Anthropology, Sven Haakanson, Jr. (Sugpiaq/Alutiiq), who used a model angyaaq from the Burke's collection to revive traditional boat-building practices in his community (Morris, 2017). In the education department, Charlotte Basch (Puyallup and Clatsop-Nehalem) began working on decolonizing initiatives in 2015 and was appointed Assistant Director of Cultural Education Initiatives in 2018. Basch oversaw the writing of a decolonization statement and the refresh of all educational materials to better suit the department's decolonizing goals. Her work is continued by Mary Jane Topash (Tulalip), the current Assistant Director. In 2017, the Burke hired its first Tribal Liaison, Polly Olsen (Yakama), who now leads museum-wide decolonization efforts. One aspect of Olsen's work has been to bring living practices into the museum, such as cedar brushing ceremonies to protect and bless museum staff. Haakanson, Basch, Topash, and Olsen were interviewed for this research.

The Museum of Us, renamed in August 2020, was previously known as the San Diego Museum of Man. In 2017, its Board of Trustees adopted a new policy on the curation of human remains and hired Jaclyn Roessel (Diné) as the museum's first Director of Decolonizing Initiatives. Brandie Macdonald (Chickasaw/Choctaw) currently holds this position. In 2018, the Museum of Us introduced the Colonial Pathways Policy, which expands repatriation eligibility beyond the scope of NAGPRA to include any "personal and/or communal belongings that left their Indigenous community through a colonial pathway" (San Diego Museum of Man, 2018, p. 4). Colonial pathways are defined in three ways: inequitable trade, removal without consultation or consent, or acquisition through expedition, exploration, or exploitation (Macdonald et al., 2020). The policy recognizes that community needs can change over time and commits to establishing continuing consent with all communities whose cultures are represented in the collections. The Museum of Us is also updating exhibit galleries and using "Decolonizing Initiatives in Action" signs to visibly commit to decolonization and highlight behind-the-scenes work (Newell et al., 2020). Both Roessel and Macdonald participated in this study.

The Abbe Museum has become well known for its approach to decolonization, thanks to the work of former President/CEO Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko. Though the museum had existing relationships with Wabanaki communities, the formation of its Native Council in 2012 marked the beginning of the Abbe's decolonization initiatives (Anderson, 2018). The most significant change has been its governance structure, in which the chairs of Board of Trustees and the Native Council share power as co-leaders. In 2020, the board hired Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) as the Executive Director and Senior Partner to Wabanaki Nations. As the first Wabanaki leader of the Abbe, Newell is emphasizing the importance of equitable relationships, both inside and outside the museum, and is adjusting practices to be more compatible with Wabanaki ways of life. For example, Wabanaki artists who teach demonstrations at the museum are funded to do the same work at home so that cultural knowledge can be passed on within the community. The Abbe is also working on a climate action policy as part of its decolonizing efforts, and is rethinking gift policies in relation to extractive industries like mining and fracking. Research participants from the Abbe were Newell and Starr Kelly (Algonquin), the Curator of Education.

Defining Decolonization

All participants but one had a positive outlook on the idea of museum decolonization, and all had overlapping ideals about how museums could better serve Indigenous communities. Participants' perspectives on decolonization have been organized into three themes: changing colonial practices in museums, community wellbeing, and critiquing decolonization. As a point of comparison, each of the three sites defined decolonization as follows:

> Decolonization is the act of redefining practices and procedures through the acknowledgment of deep-rooted trauma caused by centuries of violence and colonization. (Burke Education, 2018, p. 2)

> Decolonization is a term that describes our ongoing work toward undoing colonial practices in the Museum, reflection, and truth-telling. (San Diego Museum of Man, 2018, p. 3)

> "Decolonization" means, at a minimum, sharing authority for the documentation and interpretation of Native culture. (Abbe Museum, n.d.)

Changing museum practices

The majority of participants talked about museum decolonization as the changing of museum practices to undo or address colonial trauma. As Basch stated, "At the most basic level, [decolonization is] the acknowledgment and active pushback against an institution's legacy and colonialization." Participants envisioned decolonization as empowering communities to make decisions about collections, exhibits, and programming relating to their cultures.

Every participant in this study mentioned exhibits and interpretation as a key area of museum practice in need of change, and participants consistently advocated for Indigenous voices to be centered and privileged in museum narratives as a decolonizing practice. Topash described the Burke's approach as "rather than talking about [tribes], … talking with them." Other aspects of decolonizing interpretation brought up were ensuring accurate depictions of Indigenous peoples and cultures, dispelling harmful stereotypes, and undoing the erasure that has led to misconceptions and implicit bias against Indigenous communities. Many participants also spoke about the importance of telling hard truths about colonization, or as Newell put it, including

"unvarnished viewpoints" in exhibit narratives. These conversations around representing Indigenous peoples in museums echo the recommendations made in Lonetree's *Decolonizing Museums* (2012), which is referenced in the documents from each site (Abbe Museum, n.d.; Burke Education, 2018; San Diego Museum of Man, 2018).

Museum practices around collections stewardship were mentioned less frequently, potentially because the repatriation of ancestors and museum objects through NAGPRA is often the first step taken in museum-community relationships. Roessel emphasized the idea of continuing consent within the Colonial Pathways Policy, which allows communities to request repatriation "at any point they choose." By contrast, NAGPRA places all decision-making power in the hands of the institution. Haakanson also talked about "thinking outside the box of NAGPRA" because "there's so much more knowledge in the institutions that needs to be brought back to the communities, that NAGPRA has nothing to do with, and probably never will."

Community wellbeing

In addition to changing practices within the museum, participants saw decolonization as the ways in which museums could serve communities and contribute to health and wellbeing. Haakanson's philosophy has been to "make the museum work for the community, not have the community work for us." This emphasis on equitable and authentic museum-community relationships was echoed by all participants. Olsen noted that building trust needs to be the starting point for any type of decolonization work: "Until we all feel safe and we feel like we trust each other, we're not gonna decolonize anything." As Kelly said:

> I believe that in a decolonizing framework, museums will always become less about the collections and less about prestige… and instead museums become sites of memory, they become community spaces. I think in some cases they become places for peace and healing… depending on the needs of the community. …They end up becoming what they need to become based on the communities they serve.

Haakanson also expanded on how museums can serve Indigenous peoples:

> Whether you want to call it decolonization or another word, for me it's empowering the communities to take

> their cultural knowledge back and use it for their own health and wellness and awareness. Because when you ground somebody in understanding who they are in this world, it doesn't matter what you throw at them, they have a foundation and roots that can hold them strong… We need to give communities that foundation, so that they can build on that knowledge and have it flourish within their own community, on their own, and on their own terms.

Newell talked about using the Abbe's nonprofit status to obtain grants for ongoing Passamaquoddy-Maliseet language revitalization work in the community and ensure "a long term and sustainable project" where "whatever we create, the decision-making power… lands in the hands of the community members forever."

Critiquing decolonization

The final theme in how Indigenous museum professionals defined and conceived decolonization was looking at the work through a critical lens. Some participants seemingly made reference to Tuck and Yang's "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" (2012) by questioning if decolonization is the right word or the best word for museums to use in describing their efforts to engage with Indigenous communities. Newell and Haakanson both mentioned that their work predates the idea of decolonizing museums by several decades; per Newell, "it just didn't have a buzzword to go with it for a long time." Both emphasized the importance of the work itself over the word used to describe it. Other participants saw museum decolonization as part of a more expansive undertaking; Kelly described decolonization as "a complete shift of how we know, understand, and interact with the world, other people, and of course the land."

Participants also addressed the complex, often contradictory nature of decolonizing settler colonial museums. Macdonald observed that the idea of "[decolonizing] an inherently colonial institution" is one that "people grapple with, and they get frustrated." Of the same phenomenon, Basch said that "it's easy to end up in this cycle of self-loathing" and question whether decolonization work is worth doing. Both Macdonald and Basch addressed this contradiction by conceptualizing decolonization as a fluid, ongoing process "with no end date." Macdonald stated that "there is no decolonized museum… but we can decolonize… we can keep this process which leads to equity and cultural justice." Basch echoed this, saying "[decolonization] is this

unachievable concept, but that doesn't mean that it's not worth trying to achieve." Macdonald further described decolonization:

> So for me it's not decolonization, it's decolonizing. It's a process, it's not a noun. It's an action, it's a verb… It's really important for us to see it's not this linear start and beginning… It needs to be a complete process that consistently changes and morphs depending on the wants and needs of community.

Other participants had more to say about the impossibility of decolonization. Haakanson joked, "How the hell do I decolonize myself? I'm half Scandinavian, half Native, I mean do I split myself down?" He added:

> We can't take and change the past… We can try to erase it, but… erasing the past only repeats itself. We have to know and understand from our mistakes in the past of what not to do, moving forward.

Newell had a similar attitude towards undoing the past, saying, "My mom's non-Native, I don't want her to go anywhere. I don't want to decolonize her off to Europe. That's not a realistic goal, never has been." Both Newell and Haakanson proposed looking forward rather than back, with Newell elaborating on what decolonization should be:

> Not to guilt one another, but to learn from these mistakes as human beings so that we can collectively do better going forward for the future generations. Because regardless of how we got here, and once again genocide is part of that story, we are all here now.

Participants also emphasized the need for decolonization to be localized in its connections to community, and critiqued any notion of easily "packaging" decolonization for other museums to replicate. According to Macdonald, "There's no one way around a decolonial process. It needs to be fluid to match each community." Newell's perspective was that "you have to have knowledge of the Indigenous communities within your own landscape. …There's a different dynamic to how decolonization works for Wabanaki people versus southern New England." Basch also brought up the idea of localizing, saying "I think that's something that isn't obvious in decolonization work, of grounding in place, building connections to the land and the communities directly around the museum."

Finally, participants noted that true decolonization work needs to be multigenerational and sustainable. Newell talked about continuing his father's legacy, saying, "It's like turning a battleship in that it's a very slow process and you gotta… keep the wheel turned and constantly keep the pressure on over a long period, and it's multigenerational to really get a system to change." Macdonald echoed this sentiment, stating that her goal is to "lay the foundation and the groundwork for whoever takes my position after me" so "that they are not fighting these same battles" and can "think of things that I never even… thought of." Haakanson's focus has been "to start with educating our children… so that they don't follow the same practices as us." Newell similarly wants to invest in the next generation, in particular "building a deep bench of young Wabanaki museum professionals" as "the best-case scenario would be that the entire Abbe Museum is completely employing Wabanaki peoples throughout all levels of intellectual leadership."

Navigating Institutions

There was sometimes a dissonance between a museum's public commitment to decolonization and what implementation looked like internally. Participants described having to navigate and reconcile institutional stances with everyday workplace interactions. The institutional support and barriers discussed with participants have been organized into four themes: museum leadership, human resources (HR) practices, workplace environment, and funding. Participants' overall experiences with their institutions varied widely, with some reporting that they received little to no support for their decolonization work, while others have always felt welcomed and valued at their museum. Responses varied in this way even within the same museum.

Museum leadership

The biggest influence on how Indigenous museum professionals perceived and interacted with their institution was the quality of their working relationships with museum leaders. One participant identified their biggest barrier as the lack of authority in their role, as they could only comment on issues but not make the final decision. In one incident where museum leadership decided to act against the recommendation, the participant expressed frustration that they then had to publicly support and promote the initiative among community

members, even though they strongly disagreed with the decision that was made. They had to come to terms with the museum's decision on their own and in private.

Another participant described a generally positive relationship with their museum's leadership, in which they were given a lot of autonomy to set the agenda and they were able to implement almost all the initiatives they had planned. However, they had to expend a considerable amount of energy in negotiating that relationship, strategizing when to push forward and when to step back to do more research and preparation before pitching an idea again.

Multiple participants from multiple institutions talked about times when they felt that museum leadership was more interested in announcing the decolonization work than the work itself. Participants recalled some museum leaders who were hesitant, concerned, or fearful about certain initiatives because it could impact donor relationships. Museum leaders who were supportive of the participants were described as approachable, open to new ideas, and had community relationships as a high priority.

Human Resources practices

Many participants identified HR policies and practices that helped them feel supported at work. This began even in the hiring process, which Roessel described as "a really empowering experience, because I was really affirmed of my value as a person." Topash appreciated that one of her interview questions was about decolonization work, which signaled to her that "[decolonization] was at the forefront. It wasn't an afterthought, it was something that is deliberate and put into the interview questions in the process." Roessel found it important that her interviewer acknowledged the need for repatriation and provided a report of ancestors from her community being held at the museum.

Another significant way she was supported was in accommodating her commute back to her homelands:

> For two-thirds of the month, I was in San Diego and the other ten days I was back here in New Mexico, but also in my homelands in Arizona. So it was really inspiring for me to recognize, or just feel understood in that my homelands is really my stronghold and where, what enables me to do the work, and [to] have an institution that made room for that was really impactful for me.

Leave policies, particularly around bereavement leave were identified as a barrier for participants because they prioritized settler colonial definitions of family and did not consider Indigenous definitions of kinship. It was also noted that death rates are higher in Indigenous communities, so the few days allotted to bereavement leave were always inadequate.

Some participants spoke about job titles and seniority. When applying for her current job, Topash was impressed that it was an Assistant Director position, saying "just the weight of that title alone is indicative of the importance of tribal relations and tribal community within Education." As a museum director, Newell adjusted job titles and raised pay levels for his team in order to show appreciation and recognize their skills and expertise.

Workplace environment

The workplace environment at each museum was identified as a source of support for many participants, but was also a barrier for some. Those who felt supported by co-workers described a genuine sense of inclusion and feeling like a valued member of the team. Topash felt that she was invited to meetings because her co-workers saw her work as important. She appreciated that she was asked to write resources rather than editing what others have written, that she was "[being] part of that work instead of being after the fact."

Most participants had a mixed experience, feeling supported and affirmed by co-workers but also encountering barriers such as being tokenized, feeling isolated, and having to educate co- workers about harmful interactions. One participant recounted an experience where they were invited to give their opinion on an issue in the museum, only to have their work eventually be minimized and edited out. This made them feel tokenized, as if they were consulted just to check a box. Working in a majority white workplace with few or no Indigenous co-workers was also identified as a difficult experience. Kelly said:

> It can be really lonely work sometimes, especially when you are in a colonial museum and you are that one voice in a group and you're trying hard to balance it and you know that you need to continue working here and have good relationships, but you also have a lot of other commitments, whether it's at home or to other Indigenous peoples. It can be a really hard thing sometimes.

Some participants talked about encountering implicit bias in the workplace, including being romanticized or fetishized by co-workers. Participants who experienced this felt that they had to educate their co-workers so that "[their co-workers] are not dehumanizing the next group of people they encounter within their field." When confronting co-workers about harmful interactions, participants found that there was an additional barrier in having to moderate their tone and language in order to "defuse defensive responses" and avoid making co-workers upset. This was referred to as "white fragility".

As all three museums had multiple Indigenous museum professionals on staff, participants were asked if having Indigenous co-workers made a difference in their workplace environment. All but one participant said that it helped, with the dissenting opinion being that Indigenous co- workers made little difference to them. Olsen said, "It [helps] if we can… get together and hold the space and have some authentic peer mentorship in the process." Macdonald noted:

> I think there's something really powerful about being in a space with other Indigenous peoples, especially when the space is specifically curated to not be for us. …And us to talk about what needs to happen and even just disagree about what needs to happen, which I think is important too, because we shouldn't have to agree in order for the work to happen.

Many participants also talked about finding solidarity with other BIPOC co-workers at their museum, as they shared similar experiences with tokenism and white fragility.

Funding

When it came to funding decolonization work, the majority of participants saw the creation and funding for their jobs as support in itself. However, financial support from the museum often stopped there. Multiple participants talked about how they had to rely on grants to fund their projects and hire support staff. One participant noted that the museum always has funds for development and operations but not for decolonization work, saying, "Why is it all the brown people are consistently in the cycle of having to find money for their own jobs?" Another participant observed that Indigenous staff at the museum were often hired to do part-time, temporary jobs with low pay, resulting in a high turnover rate of Indigenous employees.

Personal Impacts

Most participants felt that their decolonization work had impacted them both positively and negatively. Their responses have been grouped into the following themes: emotional and mental health, professional growth, and community relationships.

Emotional and mental health

Every participant in this study mentioned the challenges of being in settler colonial spaces. As Roessel put it, "Just working in museums as Indigenous person is incredibly trying. It's exhausting." Many participants talked about how difficult it was to be in collections areas with human remains or certain types of cultural objects. Macdonald elaborated:

> There's also pain that comes from looking at the archives and cultural resources… all these items came to us in a state of chaos, they're detached from their communities, many times, and so even opening a drawer can be really hard, or pulling out a piece of archival information and seeing the ways that they were gathered from our homeland and stolen, or grave robbed. That's not easy to process.

Roessel had a similar experience and said, "Knowing that there are cultural belongings that are [in the museum] that shouldn't be there, just the energy that holds… [I] felt the tremendous weight of being there."

Participants also discussed the pressure of being one of the few, if not the only, Indigenous museum professionals at their institution, and some reported feeling as if they had to represent all Indigenous peoples and communities. As Basch said, "It just became exhausting to feel like I was speaking on behalf of thousands, millions of people, every time I was asked a question." Topash responded to this pressure differently:

> I feel like I'm one of the rare few that engage in that field [of anthropology museums], which historically has not been very kind to Native workers and Native scholars, so I'm very fortunate and very well aware that… I'm rare! I know that there's not that many that

> exist out there, so that in turn makes me want to work really hard and want to just be a good employee.

However, others felt anxiety or imposter syndrome in being the representative for Indigenous people in the museum. There was also tension in representing the museum externally. Two participants called out instances in which they had to apologize on behalf of their institutions, one of whom brought up the idea of "signing on to be an Indian" to absorb the museum's negative reputation. "I didn't do this, and yet I'm the Indigenous person apologizing for this. It's a really hard place to be sometimes." Another participant recalled saying to their co-workers, "I'm tired of having to apologize for things that non-Natives have done to us. Why am I apologizing?"

Participants also identified many ways in which decolonization work positively impacted their emotional and mental health. Topash described her work as fascinating and rewarding as she feels that she is making a difference. Macdonald recounted a recent event:

> The joy is seeing communities connect with their cultural resources, like a couple weeks ago having the Maya community members in there. And they're playing the whistles that… haven't been touched by their communities in several decades, and so I think that is beautiful and having ancestors go home is beautiful. Even seeing young Indigenous people come into our space… that is a moment of joy.

Newell talked about how his work had a healing effect on his life:

> When I found museums, I found my niche. But I still had that chip on my shoulder about how ignorant America was. And through this work, I've been able to see so much momentum… that the chip is gone. I think all of the anxiety and anger I might have felt… as a younger person… was healed when I turned it into a career, because… [I'm] able to actually impact these institutions and I'm actually able to see change.

Macdonald concluded that despite the ups and downs of decolonization work, "Our ancestors have put us here in these positions in order to create change. They wouldn't put us in these painful and joyous positions if they didn't know that we can handle it."

Professional growth

The second theme of professional growth was entirely positive for participants, who found that working on decolonization strengthened their confidence and professional abilities, even outside of the museum. Olsen felt that she has become a stronger leader as a result, and has dealt with her anxiety about presenting in front of big committees. Macdonald is working towards a PhD that draws on her experience and expertise in decolonial practices. She received support from the museum with a letter of recommendation and flexible work hours to accommodate her schedule as a graduate student. Roessel found that even after leaving the Museum of Us, her time there has driven her work as a consultant as she "[has] seen this glimpse of what is possible… that [decolonizing] is achievable" in museums.

Community relationships

The final theme is how decolonization work impacted participants' relationships with their home communities and other Indigenous groups. Most participants reported a mix of positive and negative responses, and only one participant thought their work had no impact on their community relationships. Olsen, Basch, Haakanson, and Newell said that their communities see the value in their work and felt supported by them. Haakanson commented, "people started to understand that [joining the Burke] allowed me to be able to take what we're doing to another level, and also reach more people who can also do the same thing." Topash, Basch, and Newell all mentioned that their home communities feel represented in the museum because of their work. Topash found that being at the Burke has strengthened her relationship with her community; she was able to host the Tulalip education team at the Burke and said, "it's nice to have that influence… have home come to work." Basch thought that her community was sometimes more trusting of the Burke because they knew she worked there. Newell echoed this, noting that some Wabanaki people were wary of outsiders but "now those people are saying I'm going to engage [with the Abbe] because Chris is there, and we trust him."

Participants also reported negative impacts in equal measure. As Basch put it, "People have a hard time knowing whose team you're on." She encountered community members who assumed that her priority was the museum and its work. She said, "That was hard for me, because… everything I do is going to be for my community." Haakanson recalled

that when he left his community, there were people who felt like he was betraying them. Macdonald said:

> There's still folks that, because I work at this place, that don't trust me anymore. And I think that's justified… How can I ask an entire community… to trust us? Because I know our history, and really these last ten to five years is just a blink in the eye of a hundred plus year old organization that has hurt Indigenous people on a global scale. I can't fault them for not trusting me because I'm now a representation of the institution.

Kelly was aware of how other Indigenous people's perceptions of her could change as a result of her role at the museum:

> I think sometimes I almost don't want to say I work at the Abbe Museum when I'm meeting people… especially if I just want to get to know them… on a personal level… just so it's not an expectation that I'm trying to get something from [them]. Because I think that's how museums have operated so much in the past, where it has been that extractive relationship.

Conclusion

The experiences of the Indigenous museum professionals who participated in this research resonated with existing literature in the field and shed additional light on topics that have gotten less academic attention. They revealed how influential Lonetree's *Decolonizing Museums* (2012) has been for the field, as many Indigenous museum professionals consider it a guiding text for their work. The ways in which participants defined and conceived decolonization also showed how Lonetree's vision for the museum field is coming to pass. In the conclusion of *Decolonizing Museums*, Lonetree writes:

> However, righting wrongs is only the beginning of decolonizing. The possibility of decolonizing and indigenizing museums lies in transforming these sites of colonial harm into sites of healing, and restoring community well-being. Decolonizing is powerful not only because it ends and mends harms, but also because it opens opportunities. (p. 171)

The themes that arose during this research reflect this shift towards transformation in the museum field. Beyond changing museum practices, participants saw community healing and wellbeing as essential to decolonization. It is not enough simply to invite Indigenous communities into the museum to advise, share their knowledge, or even hire them as museum professionals. As Robin Boast wrote in his critique of museum collaboration, "No matter how much we try to make the spaces accommodating, they remain sites where the Others come to perform for us, not with us" (2011, p. 63). Decolonizing museums must cultivate a deep understanding of Indigenous communities, the unique needs of each community, and consider how the museum can contribute to their health and wellness. Newell's work with the Passamaquoddy-Maliseet Language Trust is an example of this, as the Abbe Museum can use its reputation and nonprofit status to apply for funding and ensure that language speakers are equitably paid for their work. Newell also plans on creating a language conservation space within one of the Wabanaki communities rather than at the museum so that knowledge and resources are not separated from the community. Considering Boast's assertion that "[museums as] contact zones are not really sites of reciprocity" but rather "asymmetric spaces of appropriation" (2011, p. 63), perhaps the answer is for the museum to go into the community instead, intentionally create an asymmetry where the community holds the power, and place itself in service of community healing.

Within museums, it is apparent that decolonization must go beyond museum functions and consider workplace interactions as well. Participants who reported strong institutional support worked for institutions that incorporated decolonizing initiatives into HR and other administrative processes. Hiring practices, leave policies, and pay structure all made a significant impact on whether participants felt supported by their museum. The issue of bereavement leave also came up in other research as part of a general observation about the compatibility of traditional museum employment and participation in Indigenous spiritual and ceremonial life (Onicul, 2015). Authority and power were recurring issues, particularly with museum leadership, creating an interesting contrast between museums' institutional commitments to sharing authority with Indigenous communities and their willingness to bestow authority on the Indigenous museum professionals who work for them.

The stories and experiences gathered through this research showed that carrying out decolonizing work in museums has a tremendous personal impact on Indigenous museum professionals. Scholars have

already written about the difficult and emotional experience of being an Indigenous museum visitor or worker (Lonetree, 2012; Mithlo, 2004), so it should be no surprise that trying to change the museum only compounds these difficulties. In addition to the challenge of working in the same space as ancestral remains and objects in spiritual distress, participants had to navigate fraught interactions with co-workers and museum leadership regarding colonial harm and implicit bias, feel the pressure of having to represent the opinions and interests of all Indigenous people, and in some cases apologize for the things the museum has done to Indigenous communities. One way that museums could support their Indigenous employees is by diversifying their workforce even further, as participants reported significant benefits in having Indigenous or other BIPOC co-workers.

Conversations around community relationships echoed those of the literature. Like Aikio (2018), participants found that their family background and cultural knowledge strengthened their work. The range of positive and negative reactions that participants received regarding their decolonization work was similar to the experiences of Blackfoot museum professionals documented by Onciul (2015). In this aspect, museums should consider that their work and the decisions they make around decolonization carry greater significance for their Indigenous employees, who will have to bear the consequences in their personal as well as professional lives.

A future area of research could be indigenizing museums, as the idea often came up in conversations with participants. Indigenization is sometimes thought of as a synonym for decolonization, a complementary strategy, or an alternative to decolonizing museums. Additional research could investigate the experiences of Indigenous museum professionals at different types of institutions, such as art museums, or could gather perspectives from community members and collaborators working with settler colonial museums on decolonizing initiatives. It could also be valuable to learn more about the impact of having Indigenous co-workers at settler colonial institutions and the mentorship, sense of community, or tensions that result.

The growing trend of settler colonial museums seeking to voluntarily decolonize their institutions is owed in large part to decades of activism and scholarship by Indigenous peoples (Harjo, 2020; Lonetree, 2012). As settler colonial museums begin to examine and deconstruct colonial power structures in their collections, exhibits, and programming, they should not neglect how these same power structures may be perpetuating themselves even within decolonization work. In order to avoid replicating colonial harm, decolonizing principles and initiatives

need to reach across the institution, from daily frontline interactions to the minutia of administrative policies. Museums should recognize that their Indigenous employees face additional challenges in the workplace, particularly if they are leading decolonization efforts, and may need more support and mentorship to prevent emotional exhaustion and burnout. Finally, decolonizing practices should be written into institutional policy so that the work can live on beyond the current moment. This, along with investments into a new generation of emerging Indigenous museum professionals, will ensure that decolonizing museums can be truly equitable and sustainable.

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