

# MuseumsForward

## Decolonizing museums: collaborative curation and Indigenous representation in museums

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### Abstract

This article discusses a multi-site case study focused on understanding how curators at non-Tribal museums work with Indigenous communities in developing exhibits that show expressions of Indigenous systems of knowledge. The researcher examines collaborative practices implemented by curators who worked with different Indigenous communities to create and develop exhibitions that center Indigenous voices. The researcher utilizes a semi structured interview approach to analyze three research questions: 1. what are the motivations for curators and museums to develop these exhibits. 2. In what ways do curators engage with Native Artists and communities during exhibit development and 3. what are the outcomes and reflections of curators as a result of this process? The article starts to provide a brief context about decolonization and participatory practices implemented in museums. Then, it focuses on the analysis of the roles of four curators who bring their different perspectives while working with Indigenous communities and individuals to develop exhibits and finally focuses on the findings and limitations of the study by offering new opportunities to museums and curators to improve collaborative practices and create long-term relationships that benefits Indigenous communities.

### Keywords

Decolonization; collaboration; Expressions of Indigenous ways of knowledge; exhibitions.

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*Accepted: June 12, 2025*

*Published: July 2025*

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## Introduction

Over the last 30 years, activists, societal organizations and Indigenous communities have demanded decolonization of historical institutions such as museums and libraries that have perpetuated dominant narratives leading to the exclusion and invisibility of minority groups. Therefore, communities have requested participation to dismantle racism and discrimination through activism; communities like African-American, Indigenous communities, women and artists have made calls to action 'to confront the [colonial contexts](#) of their collections and to begin a dialogue with the countries or communities in which those objects originated'. (The New Internationalist, 2023)

In recent years, a notable movement of scholars like Amy Lonetree(2012), Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko(2016), Alaka Wali (2024), Andrew Zimmerman(2006) among others and indigenous communities towards decolonizing museums has emerged across the US, Europe, and Australia, proposing approaches like collaboration between museums and Indigenous communities to change museums mission regarding more participatory practices and decision making. This article analyses how curators who work at non-Tribal museums implement collaborative practices while working with Indigenous communities during the development of exhibitions that center indigenous systems of knowledge.

### **Decolonization in museums**

Decolonization is defined by Susan Miller as a process designed to shed and recover from the ill effects of colonization, such as restricted trade, war, massacre, enslavement, forced relocation, concentration on reduced land bases, impoverishment, among others (Miller, 2008). In the museum context, these institutions over the centuries have echoed some colonial practices such as extracting resources, cultural belongings and destruction of indigenous languages and traditions (Miller, 2008).

In 1990, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), a federal law was enacted to provide for the protection and return of Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony in the US (NAGPRA, 1990). The creation of NAGPRA and its recent update in 2024, established a historical benchmark for Indigenous Tribes and museums to start the

process of repatriation of some cultural belongings held in collections departments to their original owners (NAGPRA, 2024). This policy has prompted museums to review their collections and specific artifacts to return their collections to Indigenous communities.

Academics and museum practitioners, including Native scholars, have documented the process of decolonization including how museums are addressing the effects and implications of their own past practices of colonial harm on indigenous communities (Littletree et al (2020), Lonetree (2012), Wali and Collins (2023). Contributions like *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* by Amy Lonetree in 2012 are central to the analysis of how museums are managing the tension between colonization and decolonization (Lonetree, 2012). Lonetree describes how museums are institutions that have historically misrepresented and perpetuated the legacy of colonialism, are in charge to implement decolonization practices and should work together with indigenous communities to change collection policies, curatorial practices and implementation of repatriation; decolonization as a process doesn't have an end because it is focused on a process, not a goal.

Gradually, non-Tribal museums have incorporated collaborative practices in decision-making, co-curation and community engagement to address the demands of Indigenous communities who have faced racism, lack of representation and invisibilization of their culture for centuries (Museum Next, 2024). The work is important and full of complexity. Projects such as *Decolonizing Initiatives* at Museum of Us (Museum of Us, 2025) and the *On Our Terms* project at Burke Museum, Washington (Burke Museum, 2024), reflect the changes and complexities of decolonization, repatriation, and community engagement. *On Our Terms* interrogates ten frequently used DEAI terms including decolonization, consultation, and even museum. Rather than offer set definitions, the producers Aaron McCanna and Timothy Kenney explore the terms through the stories of 12 people, surfacing convergences and divergences in meaning.

Most recently, in their paper, *Decolonizing Museums: Toward a Paradigm Shift*, Alaka Wali and Keith Collins, examine how collaboration practices in museums have contributed a shift towards decolonization practices. Some examples describe how Indigenous communities

played a critical role in providing historical context about cultural objects in collections; “their contributions enabled understanding of Native American languages, culturally relevant identification of material culture and gendered usages, music, and taxonomies that shaped worldviews of communities, families, and societies”. (Wali & Collins, 2023, p331.) Academic analysis elaborated by Lonetree, Wali and Collins, and many others highlight practices like collaboration between museums and indigenous communities as a path to review the museums practices and create methodologies to better understand representation of Indigenous communities.

### **Frameworks of community involvement in museums**

Community involvement is seen a bridge intended to create spaces where museums and communities can dialogue and work together. Community involvement is seen as different from traditional, top-down approaches that center the knowledge and perspectives of museum professionals. Community involvement has been implemented in culturally based community museums since the 1960s (Coleman, 2006) and it is central to the mission and work of museums, such as the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle since the early 1990s (Wing Luke Museum, 2006). Many terms have been used to define the extent of community involvement and the terms are often inconsistently used. For example, the term collaboration as it relates to community involvement is used differently by researchers and practitioners. Sometimes, collaboration is grouped under participatory practice, broad term popularized for the museum sector since the 2010s by museum scholar and practitioner, Nina Simon, in her book *The Participatory Museum* (Simon, 2010). Simon describes participatory practices as falling on a spectrum of community involvement. From Simon’s work, of particular relevance are: 1. Contribution, where the museum exerts most of the control and invites community or general visitor contribution of ideas and objects 2. Collaboration, where the museum controls the process but has a partnership with a community(ies) which steers the action 3. Co-creation, where both museum and community have common goals and share both the process and action (Simon, 2010, pp190-191). Simon shares additional examples of participatory practices that have been adopted in different types of museum work from collections and preservation, programs and events, and curation and exhibit development in her following book *The Art of Relevance* (Simon, 2016).

On the other hand, some museum practitioners, describe collaboration differently. For example, In *Shared Authority: Collaboration, Curatorial Voice, and Exhibition Development in Canberra, Australia*, researcher Mary Hutchison, analyzes the practical application of collaborative exhibit development and includes a breakdown of the various elements when embedding collaboration between museum curators and external participants in exhibition making. She argues that the agency of both parties be visible in the final work and that egalitarian decision making should be centered in all aspects of the exhibit including design elements. Hutchison's definition of collaboration is more stringent and specific. What Hutchison describes as collaboration would equate to what Simon describes as co-curation. But lacking universal definitions, it is easy to see that the agency and role of the community in the process can be misconstrued. To frame this research, the term collaboration will be some form of community involvement in order to understand the extent of community involvement in their process.

### **Collaboration between museums and Indigenous Communities**

Wali and Collins share a different facet of community involvement process in the context of working with Tribal communities. They describe collaboration in curatorial practice through the creation of community advisors and community involvement on how they want to be represented, offering recommendations and making decisions through the process of exhibition development (Wali & Collins, 2023 p.338).

In response to the shifts in museum practices to work with Indigenous communities and to ensure that collaboration with Tribal communities is meaningful and non-extractive, the School of Advance Research an organization that promotes research and leadership in community advice and collaborative indigenous arts, developed *Guidelines for Museums: Collaboration between Museums and Communities*, guided by questions such as "What does collaboration mean for museum and community, institution and individual? How can ethical action drive our work?" (SAR 2016, 2019). The principles and considerations in the guidelines were developed together by conservators, collections managers, curators from Tribal museums and non-Tribal museums as

well as artists and Indigenous cultural leaders from North America and New Zealand. The guidelines describe collaboration by what it is and isn't:

True collaboration does not happen immediately—it is process driven and takes time and commitment. The specific manner in which you collaborate will be unique to your museum, the community, and the project. Do not confuse collaboration with a single invitation to view or comment on collections, or to rubber-stamp exhibition content.... It was about prioritizing the community, from their preferences in the collections (wearing gloves or using bare hands to handle works), to the museum database (what language, terms, and information were shared), to the terms for future interactions.

The guidelines describe some of the critical consideration's museums should consider while working with community representatives:

Every community has individuals they regard as experts or authorities (tribal officials, elders, cultural leaders, artists). Each individual will provide perspectives from their own experience and background, so do not assume they are speaking for their community in general unless there is an understanding, they are officially representing the community's political or cultural leadership. Respect the authority of their knowledge and expertise, just as you would any other scholar or researcher. (SAR, 2019)

Under the umbrella of collaboration with indigenous communities, relationship building is described as central and critical for to honestly dialogue with different indigenous groups and better understand how museum staff can address issues regarding representation, diversity of indigenous voices, cultural differences between tribes, among others. For Burke Museum in Seattle, relationship building is led by the Director of DEAI & Decolonization and Tribal Liaison Polly Olsen, a Yakama tribal member, ensuring that collaboration and consultation efforts are grounded in respect and reciprocity (Burke Museum, 2025). Olsen describes her works as "I want to see a culture of co-creating and co-managing science and curriculum that facilitates access to our ancestors" (AAM 2022).

To collaborate with Indigenous communities, museums need to establish relationships and build trust with the communities, to be

transparent and meaningfully integrate the contributions of these communities. The desire is to change museum practices and create collaborative methodologies that benefit all.

### **Collaboration and curation**

Within the museum, collaboration can have different impacts on museum professionals. Curators, held up in the past as the primary and infallible expert, have found their role changed through the years. Bryony Onciul describes these changes through the lens of decolonization and community collaboration and in the renovation of museum practices where the community voice is centered and communities have an active participation (Onciul,2019 p.161). Onciul highlights three types of roles for curators:

Curator as a foe: Under colonialism where museums were collecting and removing indigenous belongings. 'The curator was seen in the dubious position of being a gatekeeper who could be both a potential foe or ally colonial practices' (p.162) 2. Curator as facilitator: provides access, collaboration, coproduction and even repatriation with communities. This role has enabled new relationships to be built between source communities and museums. (p.162) 3. Curator as friend: In the role of 'facilitator', curators have to negotiate difficult museum histories. They have to establish genuine, meaningful relations with community members which, over years of collaboration can naturally develop into personal friendships between individuals. These changes allow individuals to potentially create collaborative exchange to potential locations of collaborative exchange, cultural revitalization, community voice and even empowerment and pride. (pp.162-166).

An example of the curator in practice at Burke Museum is Sven Haakanson, Curator of Contemporary Culture and his work with Indigenous communities, and in facilitating a mutual relationship between his own Alutiiq community members and the Burke Museum.

Through respect and honor of the communities he works with, Haakanson seeks to revive community traditions using knowledge from the museum's artifacts and in partnership with community members (Haakanson, et al. 2020). Haakanson describes the motivation and impact of his work as:

That is at the core of what I love doing: bringing this knowledge and sharing it, making sure that the community owns it, not me, and especially not an institution. The community should always have full control over how the knowledge is used and shared, and that's one of the driving factors for why I feel so privileged to have my job as a curator at the Burke Museum. (p. 525)

Wali and Collins share an example of how curators and community working together by combining curator and elder knowledge and facilitating the participation of Yup'ik tribal community members for input on exhibit content aided in the creation of an exhibition that conveys cultural values "about authoring and ownership, cultural pride and personal responsibility" (Fienup-Riordan, 1999, Wali and Collins, 2024 p. 339).

Although scholars and institutions have documented and provided examples of collaboration practices created between museums and Indigenous communities, the literature does not document enough examples on how centering collaboration between curators and indigenous communities impacts the process of creation and development of exhibitions:

Standards for Museums with Native American Collections (SMNAC) is a comprehensive document for use by museums with Native collections to clarify their roles as stewards and improve the museum field as it relates to Native American peoples, communities, and cultural items. The SMNAC document provides support for institutions to become true community partners, enabling them to connect collections with descendent communities for more meaningful, relevant and culturally sensitive interpretation and documentation (AAM, 2025).

However, the curatorial perspective has not been analyzed in depth including how they work with Indigenous communities. Their role as facilitators reshapes representation and narratives for example by the extent of involvement and decision making of Indigenous communities on how they want to be represented. The curator's voices could enrich the discussion on what collaboration looks like when indigenous communities are being consulted in the process of developing an exhibition, especially when incorporating expression of Indigenous systems of knowledge in the exhibits. Expressions of Indigenous knowledge is defined as the manifestation of Indigenous cultures. The manifestations can be tangible, taking the physical forms of weavings, pottery, buildings, weapons, calendars, and gardens. Intangible manifestations can be songs, prayers, dances, gardening practices, customary food recipes, hunting techniques, and medicinal plant knowledge. (Littletree, et al. 2020p. 420)

This term allows to better understand the inclusion of Indigenous communities in exhibitions where they are the central voice. The definition integrates how diverse expressions of Indigenous knowledge are represented in non-Tribal museums and mainstream museums. An examination of curator's perspectives can provide insights to better understand the challenges, progress and outcomes of collaboration practices within museums when working with Indigenous communities in representing Indigenous systems of knowledge and expressions within exhibit development.

The purpose of this study is to understand how curators at non-Tribal museums work with Indigenous communities in developing exhibits that show expressions of Indigenous systems of knowledge. The research questions were:

- 1: What are the underlying motivations for curators/museums to develop these exhibits?
- 2: In what ways do curators engage with Native artists and communities during exhibit development?
- 3: What are the outcomes and reflections of curators as a result of the process?

## Methodology

In this research, collaboration is being examined through the lens of curators, who have established relationships with Indigenous communities to develop collaborative exhibitions in museums. The research aims to understand how centering collaboration and relationship had an impact on curators, and the institution, which is making efforts to decolonize predominant narratives that persisted in these institutions. It should be stressed that this research does not examine the community viewpoint and which is a critical gap in this work.

A case study approach was used to understand how curators at non-Tribal museums work with Indigenous communities. Sites selection was based on museums that had developed art or culture based-exhibitions in collaboration with Indigenous communities and individuals within the past 10 years. Sites are anonymized by request of participants.

The first museum is a large-sized museum located in the Midwest of the United States and focuses on the history, culture and nature. The second museum is located in the southwest of the United States, is a place that focuses on highlighting diverse voices about cultural resources. The third museum is an art museum located on the east coast. It aims to connect art and community through art and ensure that all are welcome. The last museum is located in the southwest region; it recognizes the diversity and contribution of Native peoples in the region.

Interview participants were curators at these museums and identified via the museum website contact information or through a professional network. Two of the curators identified themselves as Indigenous. Qualitative data was collected through interviews with the four curators who are or were former employees at the research sites. Structured interviews were conducted via Zoom video and recorded for transcription. Consent was given from each participant prior to recording. Quotes used in this article have been cleaned to remove filler words without changing the responses of the participants.

Responses were anonymized to protect participants' identities requested by the participants. The responses are coded by A, referring to the first museum, B to the second, C to the third and D to the last museum. Document analysis comprised papers and books which

enriched the responses of the interviews and these were provided by the interviews. Some of the documentation was provided by the curators which helped to understand what was the process of developing the exhibit behind-the-scenes.

## Limitations

The main limitation of this study was the community perspectives who participated in the exhibits weren't part of the research due the time limits during the collection phase.

## Results

### **1. What are the underlying motivations for curators/museums to develop these exhibits?**

*Update and highlight indigenous art and cultural expressions of knowledge and inclusion of consultative practices in indigenous collaborative exhibits*

Participants in two of the four sites interviewed, described that the motivation was a need for renovation of outdated exhibition content that misrepresented indigenous communities of the area. In Museum A, the curator referred to a book, which documented the whole process behind the scenes to make the new exhibition possible. It took at least 5 years to uninstall the previous exhibition, work along with the conservators and collections department to preserve, clean and safeguard the objects that were displayed in the museum for more than 70 years and then work closely with Indigenous advisors, built relationships and work with Indigenous communities to develop the new Native American Hall:

A.: From a content thinking through where we are in anthropology today, it was a very outdated exhibition and had inaccurate information. In the 1950s, they weren't representing cultures, not just Native American, but overall, in this kind of static way, basically very problematic, racist in its kind of overall depiction of Native Americans. (Direct quote)

In Museum B, the curator refers a need of update an exhibition that did not represent the Indigenous communities and currently are in consultation with the community to create a new version of the exhibit:

B: We hosted an event where we invited all Indigenous peoples from the area to come and spend time with their cultural belongings, things that are not on public display. We wanted to bring into the museum to really listen to the community and have some deeper conversations around what is appropriate to say about Indigenous peoples in these public spaces. The message overwhelmingly was that we needed a new exhibit while we were taking steps to fix the current exhibit, if we were going to more genuinely know uplift stories of Indigenous peoples.

The other two museum's motivations were to create collaborative exhibits to respond to the needs of a community who previously did not feel included or seen in the museum space.

C: One of the biggest considerations was the fact that Native folks in the region felt invisibilized within museum spaces. They felt like museums didn't see them as an active community, a vibrant community that still has a really strong presence to this day.

D: The institution from the beginning was very conscious that they wanted this to be a community developed exhibition, it would consist of a great deal of community members, not necessarily potters, although many of them are, but they could work in other fields.

All participants concurred with the importance of working together with Indigenous communities from the beginning of the exhibition development either to renovate an existing exhibition or create a specific short-term show.

## **2. In what ways do curators engage with Native artists and communities during exhibit development?**

### *Curators leverage relationships with Indigenous communities and individuals*

The relationship between curators and Indigenous communities and individuals was a starting point to establish pathways to collaboration. In this case, museums acknowledged the importance of strengthening previous relationships with Indigenous organizations or creating new relationships with them in order to highlight the importance of listening to Indigenous demands and consider how the content should be developed along with their interests. Some of them highlighted the importance of building trust, acknowledging the harm the museum did in the past and request of consent during the exhibition development:

A. : One of the organizations we were working with was the (name withheld) Center in the city. I was kind of getting, understanding something about Native Americans and getting to build relationships and trust with them. I began to build relationships with Tribes around the country to think about what they want their material culture to do in our collection.

B: Our museum has had a relationship with Indigenous peoples for a long time. In some ways it would have been easier to start from neutral but we can't really start those relationships or conversations without first acknowledging the harm that this institution has done to Indigenous peoples through some cultural resources as acquisitions with what might be considered consent.

One of the curators pointed out the creation of a special space between the institution and the Indigenous artists to listen to their requirements and interests to be part of the art takeover. However, it is important to acknowledge that even though the museum made the effort to include Indigenous individuals in the space, Individual voices do not represent all of the voices of a specific Indigenous community:

C.: “We hosted the Unconference, where we invited all the living artists whose work was going to be featured, as well as all the catalog contributors and for portions of it, community advisory folks”.

Another aspect of the relationship was to reach out to the individuals and going out to the communities and invite them to be part of the project:

D: “The partner institutions were reaching out to contacts they've already worked with before, also going to different community events and going to different art shows to really get a broad range of people to talk about pottery from the area”.

### *Creation and consultation with community advisory committees*

As part of the collaboration efforts, the creation of community advisory committees during the whole process allowed the organizations to have the guidance, feedback and accountability of diverse indigenous voices in the process. Museum staff recognized the need of forming advisory committees or working individually with each community as an opportunity to strengthen their relationships and recognizing the roles of indigenous members in the process of developing the exhibitions:

A: We started by forming the Native Advisory Committee, we had a committee that was Native American scholars, artists. I had been working with these contemporary artists. I really think art played a huge role in bringing out the stories of contemporary Native Americans artists, scholars, community leaders, that we'd come to know, not just me.

B.: There are many different perspectives even within the Indigenous community. We're really trying to make an effort to work with each band individually to the

extent that we work with the (name withheld) Council and it has been a really valuable resource for us in the sense that there was tribal representation from many of the bands not all of them, but it is a space where we can report out on what we're doing at the museum in an effort to create transparency.

C: We had this community advisory group. The relationships we built with community members aren't personality based. It's not just because I wanted this that they showed up. There are longer relationships that museums are building on.

D: The consultant and her staff would organize Zoom meetings. They would also record and willing to let people know if you do have an opinion, a question, or a comment, you could contact them separately to bring those issues to them. We really worked by consensus and basically relationship building.

In this last example, the participant went further and explained in detail how the process of consultation allowed the participants to provide feedback after the meeting, created flexibility on the timeline, and accommodated individuals' needs over the course of the project.

### *Degree of consultation differ from museum to museum*

All interviewers described how consultation worked in the project, some of them highlighted those Indigenous participants picked the objects or spoke for themselves about their story whereas others showed the role of the curator working closely with them. While some of the participants decided to be part of the design process rather than being solely focus on the creation or selection of a specific artwork:

A.: They picked the objects, we did virtual tours, if they couldn't come into the museum, they selected the pieces they wanted in their display. I think there's a 360-

version online version of the exhibit that you can also explore.

B: We're working with artists and culture bearers to speak about their own cultural practice. We're conducting a series of interviews in community where somebody is talking about traditional wood cutting and bird songs and somebody else is talking about pottery.

C.: One particular example that I think about was when a female artist had an installation where she took over this room. It was a very complex, challenging gallery to work with. The angles were all weird. It's rounded walls, so it's a very tricky place for artists to work with. She completely refused the architecture by building her own structure on the inside of this gallery. The structure was emergent from two Indigenous communities, one it included eel trap baskets that were woven by folks in our region where she comes from.

D: They [Indigenous participants] made all of the labels, basically a paragraph of text, and the community curator of the collective who picked the piece. Taking an example made by an indigenous artist (name withheld) or whoever picked this vessel, or was influenced by this vessel reminded them of a family member. The label was a little a mini story so that you're engaging in that connection that they had with that piece.

*Integration of diverse expressions of indigenous systems of knowledge.*

In this section, curators shared some examples on how the exhibitions align with different aspects of the expression of Indigenous systems of knowledge on how they were part of each exhibition. There were some references to the inclusion of some specific objects or cultural practices like (name withheld) revitalization, inclusion of storytelling and sharing how Indigenous knowledge was part of the curatorial texts:

A.: They selected the things that are in the cases. They selected not just the things but they like what color did they want the background of the case to be. How did they want the objects positioned in relation to each other in their case and then they wrote the text with our help from our exhibit developers. It's all them.

B: An indigenous artist has been working for a big project: The revitalization project, he's been building, harvesting and building boats. We invited him here to build a boat. He's very hands-on learning through doing and so he really wanted to invite visitors to grab some material and take some direction and how to put this Boat together.

C: There is an Indigenous male artist who is revitalizing this basket weaving style. The artists went down to meet him to learn about his weaving and how this is being revitalized within his community. We talked about their perspectives from their tribal context on what it means to tell the truth in a museum.

D. : I think they really enjoyed be having being creative as well the designers that it wasn't just going to be working on a standard exhibition. The community also wanted a clay for the title wall. They wanted the background to be mud, basically clay.

### **3. What are the outcomes and reflections of curators as a result of the process?**

#### *Strengths and weaknesses: Interests, gaps, and assets*

Curators described a number of issues, from apparent to unforeseen and that needed to be addressed. All participants agreed that there

was a need to educate museum staff and create educational resources to teach them in depth different cultural aspects and terminology about indigenous communities.

*Some of the positives:*

A: I just learned that this exhibit is now the most highly requested exhibit for teachers in the public schools when they come to do field trips. The education department has had to really provide guided field trips to this exhibit in a very different way, and it's very much focused on native peoples today, and so on to fit with what the teachers want to teach the kids about native cultures today.

D.: The current director of education has a wide range of experience. It's been really nice working with her, because we've been engaging communities more in depth, since her hire that part has definitely changed. That's been revitalized, it's that we're getting back that strength.

*Some of the negatives:*

B.: One of the Indigenous participants told us: it doesn't seem like your staff knows very much at all about our people. Folks were spending time with their objects but when they asked staff for more information, they were learning through engaging with our staff who did not have a very grounded education. We needed to reconcile working closely with our front-facing teams and visitor experience. Folks didn't feel comfortable talking about this Indigenous community because we don't want to speak for cultures that are not our own.

C.: People in the [gallery] space didn't even know Native people were still around on the East Coast. We trained various security and visitor services staff, we gave them lists of things to consider, questions that might come up

and how they might respond to it. When someone is derailing conversations and bringing it into an uncomfortable place, how to shepherd it back to a zone where it feels safer and more respectful.

*Affective impact on curator's works.*

In regards to the impacts on exhibition development to the curators, certainly, the community aspect plays a central role on how curators are reshaping their work. Curators state that the voice of the community shows how the work with consent and consultation is key to address harm made in the past. Although some of the curators did not provide in detail how their work experience changed, the curators provide some examples on how their work changed:

A: I think my whole life changed working with Indigenous communities. Trying to basically empower those communities in the face of everything they were facing. So that changed, working with them changed the way I think about everything.

B: My gosh it's so humbling, we'll turn to an example from a different exhibit a couple years ago. We worked with a council of seven different indigenous scholars who really helped inform us on how to do better by the exhibit we have had on display since the beginning of the museum. We could tell no indigenous peoples had been consulted in the creation of that exhibit and so that was a big change for us.

In the last two research sites, both curators are indigenous and their viewpoint refers on how be part of the community exists within the responsibility to support Indigenous voices in all of the aspects of consultation and representation; people want to be seen, heard and also they show the importance of being guardians of their ancestors belongings and how much matters for them to be part and active voices of these museum changes:

C.: I'm native, this is my community and I want to support them in these public platforms wherever I can. When I have opportunities to work with artists, even when it's not curating, maybe it's just doing something as simple as a studio visit. I want to make sure that folks feel seen, comfortable, appreciated, and like we're doing, like we're navigating this museum ecosystem in a healthy way.

D.: Being a Pueblo Indian myself, and trying to be the best reflection of my deceased family and my ancestors. It is something that always is in my mind. Get from them a source of strength, wisdom, knowledge and to be adjusted, and to protect the items that I have. I am the temporary caretaker of and that even at the museum.

*Organizational impact: reflecting on the relationship process between the communities and the institution*

Most of the participants expressed the staff willingness to respect and listen Indigenous voices throughout the whole process. Some of them described how the programming department benefited from this relationship or the land acknowledgement is recognized in the museum. The participants responses were limited to the exhibition experience,

A.: I think on the part of the museum staff, they were really respectful and listened to the voices of the advisory committee. For the most part, we really tried to accommodate and follow the direction that they set.

B.: The museum transformed as part of the relationship with the community. The museum is on indigenous land. We have a land acknowledgement of all the things you're supposed to do but, I think, through learning more about the Indigenous community and just like the

way that borders don't exist in the same way that they do in many other cases.

C: We have relationships now that weren't in place in 2020. This is something that will be built upon for years to come. Not only for the curatorial department across the whole museum, I would say the program programming department as well.

D: Our best practices of how you can work with the community in a deep, meaningful way and working with people again compensates them, because often I have to say that we try to get people to consult with us, but they're not paid like how they would pay an outside consultant.

#### *Request of additional resources and support*

All of them considered the need for additional resources like getting more funds to preserve the collections, establishing connections with other organizations and being a better host for the communities. The lack of funding restricts the relationship between the curator and the communities, where the timeline and resources are limited to a grant or a short period of time to work with indigenous communities. Relationships also are built outside of the museum and need additional resources to support the collaboration efforts like food, transportation, hiring more staff and outreach to the community:

A: There should be more of an investment in taking care of the collection, the Native American collection at the museum does not have an endowment. Some of the other collections have an endowment that's dedicated to preserve the specific collection. We need stable funding for the care of the Native American collection and for increasing the access to that collection by native communities.

B: We need more time because that is the limited resource working with the community, everyone is so busy. Also, I've learned more tools to work with the community like to be a good host: We're going to feed you, we're going to make sure you have a parking space or you can bring your kids, it just makes it so much easier for people to show up.

C: I mean, just believing in the project, supporting it, getting the word out, making sure that people know that these sorts of initiatives are happening. Connecting us with people that are eager to support this sort of work. Those are the things that just logistically can happen on the organization side.

D: Hiring more people to work on that and include the fundraising for projects like this. Establishing a permanent fund that will bring consultants and curators, community curators that can work on projects that should be budgeted in a sense that it's not.

## Implications

The purpose of this study is to understand how curators at non-Tribal museums work with indigenous communities in developing exhibits that show expressions of indigenous systems of knowledge. The results contributed to the discussion proposed by Onciul (2019) and Haakanson (2021) where the curators are actively engaging in the role of facilitating spaces by offering more opportunities for Indigenous communities to participate in decision making and collaboration in changing outdated exhibits.

Finally, this research contributes to show the work of curators has been impacted while working with Indigenous communities. It showed that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators recognize the work that needs to be done regarding additional collaboration.

The limitation of this study was the lack of the community perspectives. Their insights would be critical to strengthen collaboration through in-depth feedback on museum practices. Therefore, the relationship aspect is another layer of study to analyze in depth how communities

are considering museums as safe places to build trust and repair the harm. There is still work to be done for museums making these spaces more accessible and giving more authority to Indigenous communities.

### **Recommendations**

One of the recommendations for future research in this topic is to create prior relationships with Indigenous communities and compensate them for their time and knowledge. First, museums should invest more time, effort and resources to build relationships with a community beyond a specific project. Second, if a researcher is interested in having the community perspective, the researcher should be aware of time constraints, create personal connections with the community if it is permitted and compensate them for their time and contributions. Collaboration, from the researcher's perspective it is essential to use methodologies that equitably include both perspectives; museum staff and indigenous communities. Researchers must give back to the community, making sure that community contributions are acknowledged, being compensated for their time and knowledge, therefore expressing their discrepancies when museums don't meet their expectations in order to improve the museum's work.

Collaboration should be part of a long-term practice in a healthy way to prioritize Indigenous perspectives and narratives in gallery spaces, as well as educating staff and visitors about the impacts of colonial legacy in these communities.

### **Acknowledgements**

I want to thank my family and friends first for their emotional support during my journey, without them it would be impossible for me to make it. I want to thank you, Meena, for your overwhelming support in each phase of this thesis, always grateful for your mentorship. I also want to thank Aaron McCanna for his valuable insights to this project and Dr. Miranda Belarde-Lewis for giving me the inspiration and feedback from her class to write about this topic. Finally thank you to my therapist Armando and my support group for your love and care.

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## Appendix A

### **Topic: Centering collaboration in exhibitions**

#### *Interview Guide*

Good morning, dear curator. Thank you for attending this interview, my name is Marcela Velandia, I am a museology master's student at University of Washington. First, I will give you a brief background of my research. Before we start, can I have your permission to record, just so that I don't have to type while we talk?

#### **Warm-up questions**

##### *Process behind the exhibit*

1. What's your name and can you share what was your role in this exhibit?
2. In your own words can you describe what was the motivation to develop this exhibit?
3. Please share if and how this exhibit has been influenced by other practices
  - within your museum
  - other museums / practitioners in the field
  - academics / scholarly work
4. What was the process of establishing relationships with the tribe or indigenous individuals?
5. What was the role of consultation during the designing and development of the exhibit?

##### *Within the exhibit itself*

Before we continue it. I will share a brief definition of Indigenous System of Knowledge based on the framework; I am using for this research. This definition will give you a general overview of my research.

#### **Definition of Indigenous System of Knowledge:**

Indigenous system of knowledge refers to the essential knowledge of cultural traditions, beliefs, and worldviews passed down by indigenous elders through younger generations. It shapes community relations with their environment, nature and social world. (S. Littletree, M. Belarde-Lewis and M. Duarte, 2020)

6. How were indigenous ways of knowing or expression of knowledge represented in the exhibit? What are other ways are you sharing indigenous ways of knowing?

7. Can you share examples on how the wishes of the community were prioritized in the exhibit?
8. How was this exhibit process different from traditional curation?

*Outcomes and contributions to the field*

9. How has your curatorial work been impacted by working with indigenous communities?
10. What other ways did work with indigenous communities inform other practices within the museum (visitor services, programs)?
11. How has this work benefited the indigenous communities?
12. In what ways has your museum been transformed as a result of this relationship with the community and vice versa?
13. What are the ways the organization can better support the work of the curatorial team?