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The Historical Loss of Indigenous Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the historical background of Indigenous culture and the loss of intangible and tangible heritage to understand the challenges Canadian and US museums are confronted with. Through centuries of colonization, Indigenous communities have experienced theft of their cultural belongings that has left a profound sense of loss across communities. Through European hostilities and war, Indigenous communities were entwined in conflicts that contributed to the loss of their heritage. The curiosity of European museums and private collectors further impacted pillaging of Indigenous belongings which has played a role in the loss of cultural knowledge systems and breakdowns in ways of knowing between generations. Indigenous communities have consistently been excluded from financial gains that museums and private collectors have greatly profited throughout the centuries. Repatriation offers a way for Indigenous communities to benefit by redirecting funds to the appropriate communities. Some museums have pushed for new strategic initiatives that have encouraged the engagement of repatriation processes within their organizations. However, repatriation is a highly complex topic that presents many barriers in the return of Indigenous belongings and ancestors. Challenges include determining rightful ownership, unclear international and national laws, lack of funding, and who is responsible for initiating repatriation processes. Through efforts such as more ethical and collaborative practices, museums can help address the injustices of the past through decolonizing practices to assure Indigenous culture is displayed and represented accurately through programming and exhibitions.

Definition of Terms:

Intangible – non-material form such as ideas, traditions, cultural practices, and languages.

Tangible – Item in a material form that can be physically touched and seen such as an artifact or object.

Keywords: Cultural Belongings, Repatriation, Reconciliation, Canadian Museums, American Museums

Introduction

For centuries, Indigenous communities have been confronted with looting and pillaging of their cultural heritage, primarily through colonization. Looted Indigenous belongings was a consequence from the numerous hostilities and wars between Indigenous groups, European settlers, and later Canadian and American governments. European conflicts were often followed by the displacement of Indigenous peoples, the removal from their ancestral lands, or possession of culturally meaningful elements. The relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums in Canada and the United States is highly complex as it is tangled with colonial injustices. The practice of collecting Indigenous belongings was compelled by museums and collectors' fascination in conserving what was viewed as a nation that was inferior to Europeans. One of the most considerable impacts was the loss of Indigenous knowledge and heritage since cultural belongings are fundamental to traditional ceremonies and beliefs systems. The removal of these sacred objects has interrupted the continued transfer of cultural knowledge through generations and has contributed to the destruction of cultural identities among many Indigenous communities.

In the last few decades, there has been a growing acceptance for the need to address the historical injustices caused to Indigenous peoples in correlation to their cultural heritage. Today, museums

in Canada and the US are working towards decolonizing this history through collaboration while working to return tangible and intangible heritage to their rightful owners. However, repatriation presents major challenges that make it difficult to undertake. This essay investigates the colonial legacy of museum practices in Canada and the United States to understand the loss of cultural heritage and long-term harm to Indigenous communities. This loss of heritage underlines the urgent need for museums to decolonize collections and support the return of Indigenous belongings to restore Indigenous ownership, agency, and cultural continuity.

Colonial Conflicts

By the 18th century, European nations had been claiming Indigenous lands across Canada and aggressively competing for territory for over a hundred years. Extensive looting and appropriation became more intense throughout the 18th century as European nations expanded their territories and defiled Indigenous heritage through war and conflict. During the American Revolutionary war, Indigenous graves were violated as symbolic acts to challenge and undermine Indigenous claims to lands that the newly established United States sought to obtain (Midtrod, 2019, p. 299). In May 1780, a US officer devoted much time and effort during conflict to find the burial place of a newly killed Indigenous soldier to desecrate the grave that was fueled by hostility between Americans and Indigenous groups (Midtrod, 2019, p. 299). The Northwest Rebellion in 1885 was an uprising led by Métis and other Indigenous peoples against the Canadian government to protect their lands, language, and heritage. After the suppression of the rebellion, soldiers stole items from the neighbourhood, including the Bell of Batoche (Barkwell, 2011, p. 39), which at present has become an important symbol of Métis resistance within the Métis community. That same year the Canadian government banned the practice of potlatches on the Northwest coast to suppress further Indigenous discontent (Jacknis, 1996, p. 275). These ceremonies, which were crucial to Pacific Northwest culture, were generous banquets that gave away possessions to celebrate important milestones like births, adolescence, marriage, and death. (Jacknis, 1996, p. 275). Ultimately, European conflicts had significantly impacted Indigenous communities as they were often caught up in the hostilities.

Research and Documentation

In the 19th century, nations in Europe began empire building through scientific study and military force which prompted documenting what they perceived as a weaker civilization (Ede and Cormack, 2022, p. 205). Europeans used Social Darwinism as justification for warfare against what they viewed as "weaker groups" that "deserved to be exploited and controlled" (Ede and Cormack, 2022, p. 236). Social Darwinism is a theory that applies Charles Darwin's laws of natural selection to rationalize the differences among societies, such as class and race (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Museums and private collectors were eager to obtain as many Indigenous items as possible, often at the expense of spiritual and cultural importance to Indigenous communities. Scientists such as Charles Darwin began compiling pieces of Indigenous artifacts for research and documentation that often involved "sacred, ceremonial, and funerary objects – even human remains" (Lenzerini, 2016, p. 130). The Hudson's Bay Company amassed a substantial number of Indigenous belongings for the Industrial Museum of Scotland which to date are dispersed among collections in the United Kingdom (Lenzerini, 2016, p. 130).

The theft of Indigenous belongings increased with systematic attraction through museums and private collectors. Cole (2016) argues the shift from individual looting to systematic intentional collecting can be traced to 1875 with Spencer Baird, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution (p. 439). An American Indian Agent, James G. Swan, was commissioned by Baird to compile a collection representing the "Indianology" of the Northwest for the United States Centennial Exposition (Cole, 2016, p. 439). These items were sometimes taken without consent, either through outright theft or through uneven exchanges in which Indigenous peoples were persuaded into handing over their sacred belongings. Bruchac (2018) states that "[m]ore than 400 wampum belts left tribal custody without the permission of chiefs or tribal councils, through theft, confiscation, and deceit by unscrupulous individuals" (p. 71). In some cases, Indigenous leaders who could not read or write were persuaded to sign receipts as evidence of payment (Bruchac, 2018, p. 71). The result was the displacement of Indigenous groups through land seizure and possession of their tangible and intangible heritage. The practice of collecting Indigenous belongings was not just a

consequence of colonization, but an organizational coordination to methodically remove objects for scientific research and attraction. Livne (2016) argues that academics not only constructed their own connections between items and ideas, but also created a structure that prioritized Western knowledge and culture (p. 6). This contributed to European attitudes that placed Indigenous communities in an inferior role (Livne, 2016, p. 6).

Impact on the Communities

Looting and pillaging of Indigenous cultural heritage has had devastating impacts on Indigenous communities across Canada and the US. One of the most significant effects is the loss of cultural knowledge systems and ways of knowing. Because belongings are crucial to the cultural traditions and beliefs of Indigenous peoples, the loss has deeply affected communities. Most Indigenous views assert that when the deceased are not laid to rest in their homelands, they are isolated from their nation (Feld, 2022, p. 53). During the 1960s, archeological excavations became common, and all items retrieved were required to be sent to repositories that included items "such as Ancestral remains, as well as maps, photos, field notes, animal bones and soil samples" (Collison, 2019, p. 9). Furthermore, provincial museums received any reported human remains after it was identified that they were not of current forensic concern to the police (Collison, 2019, p. 9).

Indigenous groups have relied on oral tradition for centuries to articulate historic accounts to be passed down through generations. Therefore, gaps in ways of knowing has greatly disrupted the passing of cultural knowledge from generation to generation and has significantly contributed to the breakdown of Indigenous identities to date. The implementation of residential schools is an example of this breakdown in ways of knowing. Residential schools were constructed in Canada, the US, and other countries to forcibly assimilate indigenous children by removing them from their families and communities. As a result, many children lost access to traditional knowledge passed down through generations which has led to a disconnect from their cultural identities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada (2015) defined residential schools as "a systematic,

government-sponsored attempt to destroy Aboriginal cultures and languages and to assimilate Aboriginal peoples so that they no longer existed as distinct peoples" (p. 153).

Continued Colonial Injustices

Through the last few centuries, the loss of cultural heritage has been intensified from the damages of colonization. Public protest has followed the continued display of Indigenous belongings in museums and galleries, as the items are described with Western narratives and/or without Indigenous perspective or consent. Bruchac states that "[i]n museums, wampum belts were largely cataloged and classified as vague rather than specific, secular rather than sacred, and personal rather than tribal property" (2018, p. 72). Colonials ignored Indigenous culture by forcing European notions and values onto Indigenous communities and seizing items, taking ownership, and then applying their own explanations (Feld, 2022, p. 53). The outcome has led to responses of anger, grief, and a deep sense of loss within Indigenous communities and outrage at the continued presence of colonial oppression. The National Museum of Quebec History has recently been criticized for presenting Quebec history from a perspective that begins with French speaking history (The Canadian CTV News, 2024). This narrative has led Ghislain Picard, the Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador (AFNQL), to comment, "We are inseparable from the history of this land, and the arrival of Champlain does not define Quebec. The First Nations have been present here for millennia and are deeply connected to this territory they inhabit" (The Canadian CTV News, 2024). Shannon O'Loughlin, head of the Association on American Indian Affairs, states "[w]hen institutions actually have a conversation with affiliated Nations, they finally learn what they have in their collections" (Schrader, 2024).

The Economic Dispossession

The economic loss should not go unnoticed as Indigenous communities have habitually been omitted from economic profits of the loss of their own tangible and intangible heritage. Substantial revenue has been generated for institutions and private collectors with Indigenous belongings

displayed in museums or sold to art collectors, while the communities to which these artifacts belong have seen very little, if any benefit. In 2005, a San Francisco auction sold over $2.8 million in sales with notable items such as a 1929 polychrome Paiute basket for $336,250 and a Tlingit shaman rattle from the 1800s for $149,250 (Lenzerini, 2016, p. 137). This reflects significant monetary worth of these items among collector markets though financial profits often contrasts sharply with cultural and spiritual value these items represent for Indigenous communities. Giving back belongings to the rightful owners not only honours the community but allows the community to benefit economically. A positive example is the thoroughly recorded repatriation of around 35,000 items from Denmark to Greenland that enabled the Nuuk provincial museum to evolve into a national museum (Buijs, 2018, p. 52). The advantages of repatriation help to ensure profit and compensation are directed to the communities they belong to.

Pathways to Justice

There has been growing recognition for the need to address the historic injustices faced by Indigenous peoples in connection to their cultural heritage during the last few decades, specifically with the enactment of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the US in the early 1990s (Whittam, 2015, p. 501). As Indigenous leader Whiteduck states, “It’s a reclaiming of our ancestry, it’s a reclaiming of our story [and] [i]t’s that reclaiming of what’s been taken away.” (Whittam, 2015, p. 507). Museums in Canada have begun to participate in practices of reconciliation and repatriation by working to return sacred artifacts to their rightful owners. One strategic initiative is the implementation of protocols and policies for the repatriation of Indigenous belongings and their ancestors. Institutions such as the Canadian Museum of History have established guidelines for processing the return of objects to Indigenous communities. The policy pertains to artifacts such as “human remains and associated burial objects, archaeological objects and related materials, ethnographic objects, and records” (Canadian Museum of History). These endeavors are usually handled in collaboration with Indigenous groups and leaders to ensure practices are held with culturally appropriate respect. Reports show that Indigenous management of repatriation practices is fundamental to ensure the wellbeing of the Indigenous community is

taken into consideration throughout the process (Fforde et al., 2020, p. 750). *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Repatriation* argues that “[t]op-down assimilative policies, programs, and initiatives that does not incorporate locally meaningful cultural circumstances, values, and aspirations are likely to be detrimental to Indigenous outcomes and wellbeing” (Fforde et al., 2020, p. 750).

As stated previously, oral history has been a way to pass on ways of knowing, and so one way museums can bridge the gap with indigenous communities is through oral tradition. Perla (2020), states that museums can integrate oral history “to create meaningful partnerships with community members that can lead to the type of collaborations needed to challenge hierarchical structures and practices that are deeply rooted in museum thought and practice.” (p. 206). However, repatriation comes with various challenges that could delay or prevent actions. Many cultural belongings are kept in museums or private collections around the world which makes it tricky to track down and reclaim. Legal or organizational barriers can hamper repatriation processes as legal conditions embody only the initial phase in assertion of rights (Lenzerini, 2016, p. 134). The burden of proof rests on the claimants which can become challenging due to inadequate historical documentation or because the items cannot be linked to a government recognized Indigenous group (Dekker, 2018, p. 43).

Though updates to NAGPRA now penalize museums for delaying the repatriation process, long drawn-out government practices for funding or lack thereof for indigenous communities continues to create barriers from reclaiming cultural heritage (McCallum, 2024). There are also debates over who should be responsible for establishing and overseeing consultation processes, which can impose significant financial and practical challenges on either the institutions or Indigenous communities (Congressional Research Service, 2024, Issues for Congress, para. 2). Despite these challenges, the dedication of Indigenous communities has gained momentum as more and more cases have succeeded in the return of artifacts and sacred objects to their place of origin across Canada. Overall, the changing practices of museums in Canada and the US have played and

continue to play a significant role in fostering improved strategies so the repatriation process is in keeping with cultural understanding.

Decolonizing Collections through Collaboration

Another key initiative in museums revolves around efforts to decolonize their programming and exhibits by including the ways Indigenous cultures are displayed and interpreted. Memorial names have often resulted in plaques advancing basic assertions that speak to "'unrest', 'order', or the past and decline of Indigenous peoples" (Lenzerini, 2016, p. 134). Partnerships with Indigenous scholars, artists, and communities are becoming more frequent which presents representation that is more accurate and respectful of Indigenous cultures (Lenzerini, 2016, p. 134). Feld (2022) argues that "for museums to claim to be engaging in decolonizing work, a full inventory of the entire collection is imperative to distinguish the artifacts to be repatriated to honor stolen treasures and ancestral remains." (p. 52). In fact, Weiss (2021) argues that museums have no choice in the matter as they need to view repatriation as "a social phenomenon that entails transformation over the longue durée instead of a set of individual case by case incidents" (p. 5). Ultimately Canadian and US museums should be actively decolonizing their collections through strategic initiatives to restructure exhibitions and programming through collaboration with Indigenous groups to ensure full representation of Indigenous culture is presented to the public. For instance, the Denver Art Museum has implemented its Indigenous Community Advisory Council that seeks to ensure Indigenous voices are represented. The 2025 program will feature contemporary Indigenous artists such as Andrea Carlson and Kent Monkman whose work challenges traditional narratives (Carollo, 2024).

Conclusion

Through centuries of looting and pillaging of their tangible and intangible heritage, Indigenous peoples continue to experience the loss of their cultural belongings. In the context of colonization and conflict, the impact has left profound wounds that have had lasting effects on Indigenous

communities. Hostilities and war between Europeans and the Canadian and US government with Indigenous groups was a consequence of colonization. The systematic practice of researching and documenting cultural items was the outcome of European attitudes of superiority towards Indigenous groups that caused the persistent misrepresentation to date. Though repatriation is one approach to restorative justice, many challenges continue to impede groups from seeking restitution. Proof of ownership remains with the group requesting repatriation which can become challenging as many cultural belongings were acquired without adequate documentation and so identifying the rightful owners can be difficult for museums and Indigenous groups. Current practices in Canada and the US concerning repatriation are ambiguous and are often complicated with issues such as limited or no financial resources and who is responsible for implementing practices. These components have all contributed to the continued theft of Indigenous culture and the loss of oral history that has led to gaps in knowledge systems and the breakdown of cultural heritage. Moving forward, museums must continue to play a role in returning Indigenous belongings and decolonizing systematic procedures that are fundamental measures to the healing and justice of Indigenous culture. Preserving and respecting Indigenous cultural heritage is not only critical for the healing process of Indigenous communities but also for the wider understanding and appreciation of the deep and unique histories that make up Canada. A good first step towards restitution is to establish new and balanced relationships that are founded on trust and open dialogue, creating a basis for meaningful repatriation of cultural heritage to the communities from which it was taken.

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