

Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Lillian Agnes Jones Fellowship

Dagugan Woakide Akide Hnegigan Echin Bathtabi (The People Studying Museums & History in a Good Way)

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Introduction

A group of storyteller-artists and I applied for the Lillian Agnes Jones Scholarship in summer 2022 as I was summarizing a pilot study to ascertain acceptable research practices with the Îethka community. As a white settler person with family ties to the Îethka community I have been trying to fulfill the obligations of residence of this land and I feel that it is important to do this in personal as well as professional ways. I work as a museum professional, and for years I have been sometimes approached by members of the Îethka community with concerns they have with museums, ranging from interest specific artifacts (which I currently refer to as belongings and living kin) to large scale concerns over museums in general. I recall a crowded meeting of the Big Horn District Municipal Council to determine the fate of an application to rebuild the McDougall Church; the room was packed with Îethkabi (Stoney Nakoda people) who each held personal, complex, and nuanced perspectives on the church, by no means was there a consensus on community opinion. Just as we were about to get up for a break, one of the Elders present tugged on my sleeve and whispered, “this is why we need our own museum” to which the row behind us nodded. This comment and many others like it, as well as my awareness of the diversity of opinions in the community on museums, led me to ask permission from Elders that I work with to explore Îethka interests in museums through a PhD study. As a result of my positionality I was encouraged and gently told that it would be a good way to be responsible to the community to use my privileges and access to museums to do this work. The pilot research, and much reading of Indigenous scholarship, illuminated several key aspects for consideration in research with Îethkabi including the importance of engaging community in

thoughtful ways, the privileging of their interests, and the need for the work to be of practical use. As such, I began to work with community members to envision a methodology, and, with the story-teller artists, applied to the Lillian Agnes Jones Fellowship as a means to test some of its components out. In this report I will outline the context and rationale of the broader research project actual work undertaken during the project, some of the lessons collaborators and I learned from our time in the archives, and the next steps for the research project and the collaborators beyond the Fellowship.

Research Context

The story of Indigenous advocacy in museums likely begins when museums first collected items, and Indigenous people became aware of how their material culture was being used. Indigenous people have a sustained an intense history of museum advocacy and activism (Cooper 2008). One of the most influential incidents of Indigenous museum advocacy in recent memory occurred in the Treaty 7 region in 1988. Calgary's Glenbow Museum opened an exhibit, *The Spirit Sings*, which coincided with the opening of the Winter Olympics and was intended to celebrate the culture of Indigenous people in Canada (Conaty 2015). However, Indigenous leaders and community members from across Canada protested against the exhibit for weeks, demanding that their communities' priceless belongings be removed from display (Bell & Napoleon 2009). When the exhibit traveled to Ottawa, George Erasmus, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations noted: "We want to leave behind situations where...the last people they consider are the very people whose way of life is going to be presented" (Cooper 2008). Since this exhibit, Indigenous communities across Canada have been working

collaboratively and strategically to make museums aware of the problematic conditions under which they possess, display, and control Indigenous cultural belongings and material kin (Clavir 2002, Conaty 2015, Phillips 2011, Sleeper-Smith 2009). The effective advocacy of Indigenous people in response to *The Spirit Sings* led to a national Task Force on Museums and Indigenous people, and ushered in a new era of collaboration between museums and Indigenous communities (Bell & Napoleon 2009). Locally, Glenbow hired a new curator of ethnography and embarked on relationship building, especially with the local Niitsitapi peoples (Janes in Conaty 2015). This work was not without conflict, as museums face complex challenges in reconciling with Indigenous communities because of their history as institutions, and their ability to entrench western cultural thought and superiority (Abt 2006, Bennett 2017, Clifford 1997, Smith 2006).

Like many other Indigenous communities in Canada, the colonial experience has left Îlethka with complex relationships to their traditional culture, especially due to the role of Christian missionaries, the displacement of traditional decision-making and social systems, and the introduction of systemic corruption and mistrust (Cardinal 1999, Dempsey 1978, Jonker 1980, Steckley & Cummins 2010). Museums are both the benefactors of the colonial period (as the recipients of artifacts), as well as contemporary symbols of its legacy and continued dominance (Clifford 1988, Jenkins 1994, Lonetree 2012, Phillips 2011). Canada is experiencing what has been termed a national era of reconciliation that motivates official policy impacting Indigenous people in myriad ways (TRC Canada 2015, CIRNAC 2019). The momentum in the wake of the TRC, combined with the fallout from *The Spirit Sings* has spurred a growing body of

research around Indigenous contributions in museums (Clavir 2002, Cooper 2008). Despite this growing body of knowledge, there have been relatively few measurable changes of Indigenous experiences in everyday lives (Bell & Napoleon 2009, Conaty 2008, Midler 2011). More than thirty years after the Museums and First Peoples Task Force Report few of its recommendations have been implemented (Dickenson & Martin 2020). In the United States although NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) legislation supposedly paved the way for the reclaiming of ancestors stolen by museums, few repatriations have been registered, and over seventy-five percent of human remains in collections have been marked as unavailable for repatriation (Chari & Lavallee 2013). Likewise, some processes of reconciliation also constitute ongoing coloniality through continued displacement of cultural values and lifeways by forced engagement with western contemporary systems and structures. For example, the TRC public hearings were not considered a culturally appropriate way of sharing by all the participants (Henderson & Wakeham 2009, Nadasdy 2017, Niezen 2017). Indigenous and other scholars question the value of processes that proclaim reconciliation, without a thorough understanding of the underlying power dynamics, history, and differences between western and Indigenous worldviews (Atalay 2006, Niezen 2017). Museums have been actively asserting their participation in reconciliation, but the impacts of this on Indigenous communities has not been made clear.

The power that museums have is normative, challenging the very premise of the museum, its practices, or its actions, is difficult in this context. When communities or their members are asked to engage with museums, they do so in relation to these complex forces of

power. Acknowledging and understanding the ways power operates through museums is an important aspect of this project; since at least the Museums and First Nations Task Force Report (1992), museums have been working to improve relations with Indigenous people. Considering the structure and power in museums may help provide clarity on the complex trajectory of these changes and why some have resulted in gains and others are critiqued or ignored by the communities they are intended to serve.

Logistics and Accomplishments of the Project

One aspect of community practice that I've learned through time working with Îethkabi is principles of inclusion. This has been made apparent to me especially in learning situations, where I have seen Îethka knowledge keepers welcome people of all knowledge levels and ages to take part in learning activities in ways that were appropriate for that individual. During the pilot I asked Elders and community experts about this practice, and came to the conclusion that research that might generate knowledge about Îethka people, belongings, or material kin needed to be inclusive of Îethkabi who were also interested in those things. I approached young people who I knew identified as storytellers and artists, and who had completed work in museum exploration previously, about participating in research in some way. Together we identified areas of interest to their personal practices, and ways they might like to work together. Having strong personal relationships with these young adults was key in our ability to come to agreements about this work, because we had built trust, as well as knowledge of each other's working interest, communication styles, and lifeways.

Based on our discussions I wrote the application for the Lillian Agnes Jones Fellowship. We agreed on \$25.00 per hour pay for all the storyteller-artists, which is equal to the wages I earn as a student researcher, in recognition of their expertise. The initial group that agreed to the project included four storyteller-artists and one mentee but two more asked to join in and we were happy to welcome them. Transportation was another key element of the project as the majority of the group did not have access to their own transportation to the Whyte. The need to pick up and drop off the storytellers meant that everyone's day was quite long. This also necessitated meals being provided; meals also helped us have precious time together for discussing and unpacking the events of the day as well as our anticipations and expectations. It was clear that the project could not continue without transportation and meals, and that it was important to be as welcoming as possible to those who wanted to join, so I covered extra costs from my wages (provided by a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship). There were three individuals who also approached about joining during the last session; one of these was able to attend, and did not request compensation.

We worked together with the staff at the Whyte to find days that suited everyone and settled on five Tuesdays in fall of 2022; one day for an orientation to the museum and archives, and another four to explore the content of the archival collections. We were also invited to spend some time in the museum collections, and historic houses as well. We were incredibly fortunate to have almost no illness during these sessions (this was significant due to the COVID-19 pandemic and severe flu season of fall 2022), although some of us did chose to mask on

occasion. The archives sent a calendar invite for each date, which was a useful doubling of our email confirmation that reminded me of the days and helped us correct miscommunication in a timely manner. As each day approached, I sent reminders to the storyteller-artists, checked their need for a ride, then updated them as best I could about their pick-up times. Days often started at 8:00 AM, with an anticipated arrival of 1:00 PM at the Whyte, and I don't think there was a single day we made it on time. The nature of picking up several people across the city and reserve meant for unpredictable timing; thankfully the storyteller-artists were gracious about the logistics of transportation and generous with their time. They were not paid for transportation time, and this took hours away from their family and other duties. Likewise the archives staff were understanding of our lateness.

We made a quick stop for lunch before arriving at the Whyte to ensure our minds and bodies were prepared for the work ahead. After the initial orientation we each shared our areas of interest with librarian & reference archivist Kayla Cazes, and each filled out forms which listed our interests as well as the materials we were interested in. These were helpful for us because they were reminders of what we had done last time we were in, and allowed us to get started exploring materials quickly upon our arrival.

As we worked, we held an awareness that the Fellowship was awarded to us, and we had limited time in the archives, so we felt a pressure to be "productive" and to use the archives in particular ways. Additionally, some norms of the archives (regardless of their clear purpose, such as food restrictions) shaped the ways that we worked. We had to spend some

time and energy to find ways that felt comfortable and appropriate for us to work, including utilizing different spaces, and allowing ourselves to take breaks. The artist-storytellers reassured each other that regardless of what their progress or work style may look like, they are the ones who decide what “productive” means in terms of their arts and storytelling practice. Things like discussing together, taking walks to be outside, or even simple mental breaks to check in with loved ones, were key to everyone’s ability to process the knowledge we were getting, and our ability to handle some of the difficult material the Whyte holds. When the museum and archives closed for the day we left, and went for a quick meal together in Banff. Again, we used the time to discuss, plan the next session, and to visit and process. We returned home through Morley, and again, due to the time to drop everyone off, this journey generally took over three hours.

Some Lessons Learned & Reflections from our Time with the Whyte

One of our early lessons was that the expertise of the staff was very helpful, as materials of interest to us could be labeled in a lot of different ways. There have been several terms used to describe Îethka people over time, and while the Whyte has attempted to transition their material labels to Îethka preferred titles, this is a large task, and titles continue to change as Îethka people gain access to expression of more autonomy (for example in fall 2022 the Wesley Band changed its name to Goodstoney). Even getting used to the labeling system, and navigating it took us some time. We learned that there are different places that catalogues are stored (online, in duo-tangs, in binders, in drawers) and each contains different ways to access

materials. It was a lot for us to take in and navigate. Although we had much appreciated support from the archivist, there was still so much to learn, and much to go through to find materials. Every storyteller-artist found plenty of sources to explore, but with the volume of materials at the Whyte we wondered how much we were missing out on. Every moment of the project was packed with inquiry, communication, processing feelings, and sharing, but we still felt that there was so much to see and to understand at the Whyte. We also learned that even the looking for materials was a substantial component of the work, and that our time was spent divided between sifting through the archives to learn what was in them, and then looking at the actual materials. I had planned the project to compensate the storyteller artists only for their time spent in the actual archives, but in hindsight, it also may have been beneficial to consider a scheduling arrangement that also gave everyone time to explore the archives online and request materials before going in. While the archives does have a computer, card catalogue for photos, materials out on display, and laptops, the storyteller-artists may have also benefited from time exploring the archives online on their own. In order to do this, we'd need to confirm internet and computer availability, or set that up for them, and to support them to learn to be comfortable with the search tools and experimentation (as noted above, terms are varied) but it may have been something useful to consider, and we have built this into the next phase of the project.

Another aspect of scheduling that would have been beneficial is building in discussion and decompression time. Again, the norms of the archive combined with desires to be productive and the limited time we had there, shaped the ways we interacted during the

sessions. Some of us spent the time in the car talking about the things we learned, or over a meal at the end, but neither are ideal spaces for discussion. It may have helped us all to learn more, share more, and process in different ways if we had built some intentional and perhaps structured reflection and sharing time into the sessions. We have also talked about doing this in the next phase of the project. However, we noted that although it might be a best practice, it might not always be feasible; this is a structural challenge for people who live in conditions of poverty, there are so many pressures on peoples time.

Coming to terms with the difficult materials at the museum was a three-fold endeavor. Firstly, grappling with the volume contained in the Whyte (thinking of all forms of collections, including archives as well as belongings and material kin) is challenging in and of itself. Although it is an everyday violence, encounters such as visiting the museum brings into focus the poverty of reserve communities in relation to settlers who have amassed various forms of wealth by alienating Indigenous people from their relationships to land and to each other. We all felt grateful for the access that the Whyte, and the Lillian Agnes Jones Fellowship provided, but were also mindful that this generosity would not be necessary under more equitable circumstances past and present. The second challenge that the storyteller-artists observed was the weight of museum history and knowledge of past relations. Although the Whyte has been working hard on the project of reconciliation in different forms, the history of Indigenous-museum interaction is shrouded in complexity and conflict. We were all aware of some of this history, and it was a weight we carried when we engaged with the collections. For example, we were shown a photo of exquisite moccasins with beading on the bottom, which we learned was

because they were made for someone who has passed away to wear into the afterlife. Immediate thoughts and questions arose regarding how the museum acquired such belongings. While we eventually learned they were purchased by the museum and not used for their intended purpose, the stress of wondering hung over the storyteller-artists. In his classic book, John Snow¹ relays the history of the quest for a reserve at Big Horn (which was still ongoing at the time of his writing); although he doesn't dwell on the emotional impact of living under constant threat of removal from traditional lands, it is apparent that in the Îethka pursuit of recognition of their treaty agreement for a reserve in their traditional territory, there was an enormous emotional burden on the people. The emotional weight of uncertainty that Îethka are forced to carry on a regular basis (in financial, legal, and infrastructure terms for example) is enormous, and often goes unaccounted for. I was ashamed of my role in adding to this by not advocating that the information about the moccasins be shared with the group sooner. At the time, I didn't appreciate the weight it had on the storyteller-artists.

The third challenge was in approaching the complexities contained in archival materials. We looked at the permission forms (passes) that Indigenous people were forced to obtain before they could leave reserve, we looked at letters from so called "friends" of Îethka who were blatantly shaming the storyteller-artists kin into Christian beliefs and practices, we looked at photos of family members and neighbors passed away, and we read writing from the perspectives of youth-that we knew as adults who had lived hard lives. This was emotionally

¹ Snow, John. *These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places: The Story of the Stoney People*. Second edition. Calgary: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005.

challenging work. Iñethka people have many strengths and successes, and some of these were documented too. Many stories made us feel lots of things, not only sadness, but also pride, excitement, and connection. We know that some sources have been biased to tell the most difficult stories of Iñethka lives (such as newspapers that have focused on Iñethka challenges) but were also interested to see the complexity of the items in collections, that each told many stories about who we (all) were. The challenge of absorbing some of the harder stories found in the archives was definitely tempered by some of the lighter moments, such as seeing cherished ancestors and beautiful work made by them.

As this project is part of a larger research endeavor, I have been paid through student grants for my time administering the work. Although some aspects of the project came from my pocket (gas, meals) others I was compensated for (administrative time, and transportation time, over and above what the storyteller artists were paid for just the archival time). This is an important inequity to consider the impacts of. If this concern is seen on a spectrum, the other end of it is that administration is often overlooked as an expense. Due to my proximity to this group of storytellers, and their peers, I am often asked to provide support to projects in administrative capacities for organizations that wish to “engage Indigenous youth” or “provide opportunities to Indigenous youth,” which I take on as a volunteer. Sometimes these appear to be earnest thoughtful organizations and projects, and other times they are transparent attempts to access Indigenous specific funding on behalf of projects for and by non-Indigenous people. When the storytellers agree to projects, I chose not to accept funding for this work as a part of my personal commitment to more just outcomes for Indigenous people. Yet, we

recognize that if the work was funded, it could be better done by paid Indigenous labor. It is far easier for collectives like the one the storytellers belong to, to get funding for projects, than for administrative support, this and other funding challenges present barriers for equity in the not-for-profit and arts world funding models. One of the strengths of the Lillian Agnes Jones Fellowship is that the budget is flexible enough to support applicants who budget for their own self-identified needs. Through the project we appreciated this flexibility, as it allowed us to add storyteller-artists, and thus respond to the emerging desires and needs of the collaborators rather than be beholden to what I (a white settler) wrote into the application.

The Project Going Forward

There were many lessons learned from our time at the Whyte, and many benefits to the team involved. I can say that personally, I feel so privileged to have had the chance to share in this journey with the storyteller-artists, and to have the chance to spend this time with them. From what I understand, the work was extremely meaningful to the Storytellers, and rippled out from them in conversations with parents, siblings, and Elders. Other participants worried that they were not studious enough for the project, so going forward we will continue to work on deconstructing expectations and embracing our own ways of working. I have much to reflect on about this, as much of my professional practice is informed by a western informed work ethic, I want to be extra attentive to how I express and potentially also impose that on others. After the final session, we went to dinner together, and I was deeply humbled to receive thanks from the storyteller-artists; I also reflected how generous they were both with their praise of

my efforts, and those of the Whyte staff, given that if not for continued dispossession of their birthright as Îlethka, they would not have needed our support or assistance in the ways we gave it during this project. I continue to be astounded by their care, thoughtfulness, and strength.

During our time at the Whyte we learned that an application that the Storyteller-artists had made to the Canada Council was successful providing funding to continue their explorations in museums for up to two years. This grant will give us the chance to implement some lessons learned through the opportunity provided by the Lillian Agnes Jones Fellowship.

To start this next phase of the project we're going to do some research and exploration in museum history; although some of us have a degree of knowledge about museums and their origins, it is a vast history with much for each of us to learn. We feel that learning about the nuanced ways that museums are explicitly linked to (and continue to uphold) colonialism, as well as the ways that some museums and archives have been working to address this, will allow us to build more confidence in different ways of working and exploring in these spaces. We're going to do this by attending workshops, reading, and having discussions together.

We're also going to spend some time with experts, learning how to look more deeply at artifacts and older documents. The larger project has incorporated Elders and knowledge keepers and we'll work with these individuals as well as ones of our own choosing to show us some materials knowledge, and to teach us about community knowledge that will help us better understand the collections in museums. For example, we have planned a project to learn

from hide workers that we know, who could teach us about the ways that people used to and still do work with animals. This will give us more knowledge about the belongings and material kin we see in museums but will also give us a better understanding of how to show respect for them when we encounter them in museum spaces. We'll also seek out expertise of knowledge keepers from outside the Îethka community; for example, we are all planning to become trained in the principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) as advocated by the First Nations Information Governance Centre.

The storyteller-artists also felt inspired by a pamphlet they read in the archives that described traditional harvesting practices of pigments from inside what is today a national park. From there we found several sources that pointed to the pass system, pressure on food sources, and development of the parks, as reasons Îethkabi have lost ties to neighbors across the mountains. Curious about rebuilding, the storyteller-artists have planned a project to go visit the Ktunaxa peoples and conduct some harvesting in summer 2023. Some of the storyteller-artists have also made inquiries with Knowledge Keepers about learning the techniques of making sweetgrass necklaces, like the ones we visited at the Whyte.

Another way that our time at the Whyte informed the next steps was learning to build more time into museum and archive visits for supported advanced research and processing and discussion. As noted above, this will help manage the intense emotional burden of confronting the inequity that is so clearly evidenced in archives and museums, as well as the challenges in dealing with the content of the material itself. When museums and archives hold vast stores of

knowledge about Indigenous communities, it highlights what has been lost, and also what is continually dispossessed from community members today. Programs that the Whyte operates help to address dispossession in some ways, but (despite best efforts) cannot help but be a band-aid on the enormous structural inequality that exists between Indigenous and white settler Canadians. Knowledge of this inequity is inescapable in spaces like archives and museums where vast quantities of materials have been amassed. In addition to this, the content of archives and museums can be troubling (as well as inspiring) to see. Complex feelings arose coming across recordings of songs no longer heard, and stories no longer told. All of this is a lot to manage emotionally. Going forward, we will include compensation for the time that Storyteller-artists spend processing feelings, whether that be in communication as a team, with family or friends, or in other nourishing spaces.

I believe that these interventions, including building more time into both research and processing activities, as well as grounding ourselves in knowledge of museums, and learning with knowledge keepers, will help prepare us for challenges in the next stage. In particular, I think that building capacity and confidence to work in ways that are meaningful to each of us will help us circumvent issues of putting undue stress onto the storyteller-mentors such as (for example) the stress of wondering about the moccasins that we saw. We will be able to carry a reverence for our own knowledge and rights to knowledge that will allow us to have confidence in asking questions, pausing for necessary information, working at our own paces, and voicing concerns. These are important for the storyteller-artists, but also for settler people like me who may be easily swept into the status quo without conscious consideration.

Conclusion

While the experience at the Whyte was our first formal foray into exploring museum collections together in good ways, we know a little about museums, enough to know that the Whyte is a very special place. Where else could a group of Îlethka go off reserve and happen to bump into groups of Elders willing to chat? We know that the staff at the Whyte have thought carefully about the ways that they do things, and about creating an inviting and supportive environment for Indigenous people. Indigenous scholars like Dallas Hunt² suggest that archives cannot themselves be decolonized, but can adopt decolonial sensibilities, and we notice some of what he and Crystal Fraser & Zoe Todd³ advocate in terms of considering archival spaces from racial lenses in the practices of the Whyte staff. We feel that our time at the Whyte provided a good foundation for us to build the project from, and that the supportive and understanding approaches of the colleagues we worked with there have set a bar in terms of our expectations of respect for our interests from museum and archive staff. In conclusion, the Lillian Agnes Jones Fellowship helped us to learn a great deal about how we would like to work in museums and archives, as well as gather information about each storyteller-artist's specific area of interest. This knowledge has already begun to impact their practices. As a researcher, I've learned a great deal about creating a supportive environment with collaborators, and as a

² Hunt, Dallas. "Nikîkîwân 1: Contesting Settler Colonial Archives through Indigenous Oral History." *Canadian Literature*, no. 230/231 (2016): 25–42.

³ Fraser, Crystal, and Zoe Todd. "Decolonial Sensibilities: Indigenous Research and Engaging with Archives in Contemporary Colonial Canada." *Internationale Online*, 2016.

museum professional the opportunity has given me much to reflect on and grow into in my own practice.

Some of the Archival Materials Used

Stoney Indian Band fonds, M344
Frank Kaquitts fonds, M46 / S4
Jack Fuller fonds, M80 / V214 (Stoney Nakoda Syllabic)
John Lee Laurie fonds, S3 / V275

Indian Rock Art, 07.2 D51 Pam
Mythology of the North American Indian and Inuit Nations, 07.2 m73m
Old Man's Garden: the History and Lore of Southern Alberta Wildflowers, 04.1 B81 2020
Object lives and global histories in northern North America : material culture in motion, c. 1780-1980, 07.2 L54o
Indian tribes of Alberta, 07.2 D39ial
The Stonies of Alberta : an illustrated heritage of genesis, myths, legends, folklore and wisdom of Yahey Wichastabi, the people-who-cook-with- hot-stones, 07.2 St7
Indian legends from the northern Rockies, 07.2 C54i
God is Red, 07.2 D38
Stoney Country, 1970-1980, 07.2 St7s

Artifacts Mentioned in this Report

Beaded Moccasins, 103.03.0001 a,b
Beaded Necklace, 103.01.3028

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