

# Indigenizing Museums and the Move Toward Decolonization:

## Successes and Ongoing Challenges

(Introduction excerpt)

Keynote Lecture

Dr. Amy Lonetree

(Ho-Chunk Nation, Associate Professor of History

University of California Santa Cruz)

April 15, 2016

Decolonizing Curatorial Pedagogies Workshop

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Sponsored by:

University of Winnipeg

Concordia University

Carleton University

Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies (Carleton University)

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (Carleton University)

Centre for Public History (Carleton University)

Carleton University Art Gallery

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

Thank-you, miigwetch, for those beautiful words and wonderful welcome. I'm really deeply humbled. I first need to begin, of course, by following our Indigenous protocols and acknowledge the custodians and ancestors of the land. It is an honour to be here in the traditional unceded territories of the Algonquian Nation. I'd like to thank the organizers and sponsors of this event, including Monica Patterson, Angela Failler, Lauren Bosc, Heather Igloliorte, Erica Lehrer and all of those affiliated with the *Thinking through the Museum* research team. I know it's a huge undertaking to get these types of things off the ground and I'm very impressed by what they have accomplished. It's a privilege, of course, to be asked to deliver this lecture, and thank you all for coming. I also want to give a special miigwetch for that beautiful welcome from Dorothy and Laura, so thank-you very much for your good words. It's such a privilege for me to have this opportunity to address all of you and share some research that I've been working on for a while. I have some prepared remarks this evening and I really hope that we'll have an opportunity for a robust dialogue as well.

I have spent the last sixteen years researching the representation of Native American history and memory in both national and tribal museums. The work has taken me to the British Museum in London, the Minnesota Historical Society and the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, the

Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, the Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways, and reached final form in my book, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*.

This image that you're looking at here is from the Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways, and I really appreciated your point about this shift where historically our communities have seen museums as these places that represent frozen, static cultures. It's really wonderful to see with the tribal museum movement, our communities calling these places cultural centers. That is very intentional, that they have that name; and of course the Saginaw Chippewa community decided to call their museum a Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways

As I said, the book *Decolonizing Museums* focuses on the representation of Native Americans in museum exhibitions at the National Museum of the American Indian (hereafter NMAI) and the two tribal museums I mentioned above: the Mille Lacs Indian Museum in Minnesota and the Zibiwing Center in Michigan. Through an analysis of the dynamic and complex process of determining exhibition content at these institutions, I explore the changing representations of Indigenous history and memory in a diverse group of museums that hold significant Native American collections. In my analysis, considerable attention is given to the

museological shift from curator controlled presentations of the Native American past to a more inclusive or collaborative process, one where Indigenous people are actively involved in determining exhibition content. The work critically examines the complexities of this relationship between Native Americans and museums—both the positive outcomes as well as the challenges that remain. The three museums featured in the manuscript embody this important ideological shift in contemporary museum practice. While the museum studies literature has emphasized the positive new directions these collaborative projects represent, this celebratory literature tends to obscure the neocolonial practices that persist. I seek to complicate this "mission accomplished" type of scholarly literature as it potentially does a grave disservice to Indigenous communities. Hence the title here, I'm looking at both the successes and ongoing challenges because we can't say that this is a "mission accomplished," that the project is complete.

My overarching argument is rooted in the belief that museums should address the legacies of historical unresolved grief that persist in our communities. Central to my analysis is exploring how museums can serve as sites of decolonization through honoring Indigenous knowledge and worldview, and by discussing the hard truths of colonization in exhibitions in an effort to promote healing and understanding. I share your

commitment to art as healing as well. Several of the sites that I examine move us forward in efforts to decolonize museums through the privileging of the Indigenous voice and perspective, serving as sites of knowledge making and remembering for our own communities and the general public, and by challenging stereotypical representations of Native people produced in the past. Further critical discussion and hard work, however, needs to occur. I see the goals of this particular workshop as certainly in line with this commitment, again, to critically analyzing the current state of museum practice; it's really exciting to be here and be a participant. My goal with this project is to advance the dialogue on what a decolonizing museum practice involves and extend our understanding of the potential of museums to be "sites of conscience" and decolonization. This decolonizing project involves more than moving museums away from being elitist temples of esoteric learning and even more than moving museums toward providing forums for community engagement. A decolonizing museum practice must be in the service of speaking the hard truths of colonialism. The purpose is to generate the critical awareness that is necessary to assist our communities in addressing the ongoing legacies of historical unresolved grief.