

## **Mahone Bay Museum Reflection Narrative Piece**

### **Introduction**

This work is a reflective narrative on my recent involvement with the Mahone Bay Museum, and its decolonization and indigenization efforts. In her book *Visioning a Mi'kmaq Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy*, Indigenous scholar Marie Battiste (2016) states that decolonization is a process that requires Canadians to challenge their colonial Eurocentric mindset and its normative influence so that Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, history and culture become understood as important ways to understand Canada. Battiste (2016) asserts that decolonization and indigenization require non-Indigenous people to support the privileging of Indigenous Peoples voices and their right to tell their stories across all aspects of Canadian culture and education.

Further, Paulette Regan (2010) provides great insight in her work, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*, on the importance of decolonization of public educational settings such as museums. Regan (2010) maintains that for reconciliation to truly occur, non-Indigenous must begin the process of decolonization of their history and relationships with Indigenous Peoples.

Lastly, Battiste (2016) maintains that when the Canadian narrative is broadened from an Indigenous perspective, Canadians are immersed in the full measure of truth-telling and more accurate stories emerge. This new socially just discourse, that Battiste (2016) and other socially conscious scholars affirm, is part of the Mahone Bay Museum's interest in building relationships with the local Mi'kmaq community and examining local colonial narrative from a Mi'kmaq perspective as a first step toward decolonization and indigenization.

### **History of the Mahone Bay Museum**

From a colonial perspective, the town of Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia, Canada, dates back to the arrival of Foreign protestants from Germany, Switzerland, and Montbéliard, France, who initially settled in the nearby British settlement of Lunenburg in 1753. The new European settlers of Lunenburg were given farmland from 30 to 300-acres throughout the Mahone Bay area. In 1754, the head of the Mahone Bay harbour became the logical location for businesses, and homes and hence the bucolic, archetypal settler town of Mahone Bay was born.

Mahone Bay is a classic example of a Canadian European colonial settlement that has evolved over the centuries and, like many places, has become a destination spot for travellers. Vacationers world-wide are instantly captivated by Mahone Bay's sea-faring legacy, scenic harbour, well-maintained century-old Victorian homes, heritage gardens and the iconic three churches. Recently the town has organized annual Scare Crow, Father Christmas and Pirate Festivals which attract even more visitors. Overall, the town has a sense of pride that is steeped in preserving the original European colonial settlers' lives, values, and legacy.

The Mahone Bay Museum (known as the Mahone Bay Settlers Museum until 2015), began in 1979, when the Mahone Bay Founder's Society formed to organize the 225th anniversary

celebration of the founding of the European settlement. At first, the museum was housed during the summer months of high tourist season in Pioneer Hall, which is located in the basement of the local historic Trinity United Church. Eventually the museum was moved to a permanent site when the Founders Society purchased a colonial home on Main Street in Mahone Bay.

From the beginning, the museum has reflected settler ideology and is led by a Board of Directors, small paid staff, and dedicated local community. The museum provides visitors and the town population with an in-depth understanding of the community's colonial heritage.

When Lyne Allain began working at the museum in 2016 as manager and curator, she immediately noticed the lack of museum documentation on what life was like in the area prior to European colonization. Specifically, Allain observed that there was virtually no representation of the history of the local Indigenous Peoples known as the Mi'kmaq.

Mahone Bay is an integral part of Mi'kmaw territory, known as Mi'kma'ki, which includes present-day Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, parts of Maine, Newfoundland and the Gaspé in Quebec, which the Mi'kmaq, have inhabited for over 13,400 years. The Mi'kmaq called the area of Mahone Bay Mushamush because the river and lake system that is known as Mushamush empties into the Mahone Bay Harbour.

In 2017, Allain was able to hire a summer student to start collecting Mi'kmaw heritage books and information. The museum started working with a couple of local Mi'kmaq in an effort to include the Mi'kmaw community and determine how to proceed forward with the museum exhibit. By the end of the summer, the curator realized that it would be best to actually create a sub-committee for the Mi'kmaw Exhibit. The goal was to have Mi'kmaw sit alongside non-Indigenous peoples who were knowledgeable and passionate about the Mi'kmaw history and begin the process of creating some type of exhibit for the following year.

In 2018, Katie Dauphine was hired as a summer student to specifically work on the Mi'kmaw exhibit and one of her goals was to network with the Mi'kmaw community and get the sub-committee started. Curator Allain and Dauphine quickly realized that the representation of the Mi'kmaw in the Mahone Bay museum would be more complex and evolved than they imagined. Working with an Elder, in September they put together a committee that will oversee the Mi'kmaw museological practices. They are now working to schedule the first meeting of the committee. The committee members are Elder Ellen Hunt, local Mi'kmaw, settlers who are interested in learning about Mi'kmaw history, curator Allain and myself.

Since my current research is about becoming an Indigenous ally through building relationships with the local Mi'kmaw community and unsettling historical settler ideology in Lunenburg County, I was very interested in how I could contribute to The Mahone Bay Museum's vision of inspiring interest in local Mi'kmaw history and heritage preservation. Thus far my role has been to be a liaison between the Mahone Bay Museum and the local Mi'kmaw Elders that I know in the community as well as the Nova Scotia Indigenous Tourism Enterprise Network (NSITEN). It is both exciting and an honour to be included in the team of individuals who are in the throes of revolutionizing and transforming how museology is carried out in Lunenburg County.

In addition, I have shared with museum staff my own process and journey of becoming an Indigenous ally within the Mi'kmaw community so that they can understand how to build this important relationship. I have also been assisting in researching general historical Mi'kmaw and settlers (non-Indigenous people who settled Mi'kmaw territory) versions of Eurocentric oral narratives. This combined collection of oral and written colonial narratives will be collaboratively shared and analyzed so that a truer, more balanced, and just story will emerge.

I was able to introduce the museum to Elder Ellen Hunt who I have worked with, in the past. Since Elder Hunt has made it her life's mission to record local Lunenburg County Mi'kmaw oral history, she was a natural fit for working with the museum.

Elder Hunt relies on the Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmuk) methodology created by Albert Marshall in 2004 as a guiding principle for integrating Indigenous and mainstream research frameworks (Institute for Integrative Health and Science, 2004). This research methodology is a type of Mi'kmaw epistemology that celebrates an integrative co-learning journey between the Mi'kmaw People and others. According to Marshall (Institute for Integrative Health and Science, 2004), Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmuk) is a gift of multiple perspectives treasured by many Aboriginal Peoples which is a requisite for genuine transcultural, trans-disciplinary and collaborative work to occur between the Mi'kmaq and non-Indigenous people. Marshall (Institute for Integrative Health and Science, 2004, np.) distinguishes this way of knowing as "learning to see from one eye with the strength of Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strength of mainstream knowledge and ways of knowing for the benefit of all."

By following Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmuk), Elder Hunt uses a combination of Indigenous oral history and western written document analysis to validate what she is researching. Her local Mi'kmaw knowledge of the area and ability to do research in both Indigenous and western frameworks will be instrumental for the museums decolonization and indigenisation efforts. Elder Hunt has also been helpful in finding the right partners to join committees.

Part of supporting Indigenous allyship was introducing the museum staff to Mi'kmaw Elder Joe Michael who is on the NSITEN Board of Directors. NSITEN is a volunteer based, not for profit cultural tourism organization that works towards supporting the growth of authentic and Mi'kmaw cultural, tourism businesses and community enterprises in Nova Scotia. The acronym NSITEN is a Mi'kmaw word meaning "Understand." Since the Mahone Bay Museum receives over 6500 tourists every season, I felt it was important to include Elder Joe Michael from this organization, as NSITEN's objective is focused on sharing the right path of tourism towards the process of creating an "Understanding" through the Mi'kmaw cultural knowledge transition.

Elder Joe Michael was very pleased with the museum's intentions. He stressed that he felt the museum required more in-depth thoughts regarding how to secure funding for hiring a local Mi'kmaq as well as showcasing the Mi'kmaw history both in the past and present. He offered to lend a small teepee to the museum and suggested that it be placed outside to attract people to come inside and visit the museum building.

## **The Problems of Museums, Decolonization and Indigenization**

In order to provide some context on museum decolonization and indigenization I have identified a variety of sources that scrutinize this process. The following is a summary of some of the peer reviewed literature that examines relevant museology practices.

In her book *Liberating Culture: Cross Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation*, Christina F. Kreps (2003) asks difficult questions about the decolonization and indigenization of western world museological practices. Kreps' (2003, p. 7) approach to critical museology directs attention to issues of power and authority and contradictions embedded in dominant ideological structures and how this impacts the inability of multicultural democracy to become ubiquitous museum infrastructure and curation. Kreps (2003) says that problematic to museums in general is that their purpose has been to help further influence thought and domination of western thought and basic values.

Therefore, Kreps (2003) maintains that, important to museum decolonizing and indigenizing efforts, is a museum's willingness to change western world museological practices that foregrounds the privileging of Indigenous knowledge-based systems and world views. To that end Kreps (2003) argues that a beginning step to this long-term process for museums is to first examine their own hidden biases. Kreps (2003) notes that these biases include entrenched preconceptions of what constitutes a museum in the first place, Eurocentric based museological behaviour and thinly veiled cultural differences that go unnoticed. As well, Kreps (2003) underpins the many cultural differences that exist between Indigenous communities and western views on artifacts, what constitutes a museum object, curation and heritage preservation.

Indigenous scholar Amy Lonetree's (2012) book, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native American and Tribal Museums*, examines why contemporary decolonization museological approaches are inadequate. Lonetree (2012) states that key to decolonization is a museum's ability to include, address and realize how colonization has impacted an Indigenous group.

This research suggests that, while collaborative in nature, The Mahone Bay Museum's redevelopment structure for decolonization must include indigenization similar to what Kreps (2003) and Lonetree (2012) mention, which places the Mi'kmaq in curatorial control of how to best represent historical and contemporary colonization. For example, following Lonetree's (2012) suggestion, it will be important to include the Indigenous narrative, their knowledge-based systems, culture and heritage as well as acknowledging hard truths of the impacts of colonization from the Mi'kmaw point of view as well. Further, Lonetree (2012) argues that the good intentions of museums are so steeped in colonial ideology that it is difficult to understand how multi-faceted and object based Indigenous museology perpetuates stereotypes.

In her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013) states that decolonization is not a box that settlers get to check off, accomplish or claim. Smith (2013) asserts that decolonization is a lifelong process of continually examining, re-examining, confronting and challenging how one's privilege is tied to the oppression of others.

Traditional archival institutions, like the Mahone Bay Museum, can learn from Tuhiwai Smith (2013) and how to use their space for decolonization and social justice initiatives that are tied to their historical legacy. Tuhiwai Smith (2013) suggests that decolonization is an on-going process involving intersections of local colonial history and the inclusion of the Indigenous perspective on this history. If one applied this literature to the Mahone Bay Museum, consideration should be given to including the transposition of how new knowledge is produced to involve the mainstream divesting of its power to include indigenization of the overall museum and its infrastructure.

Bryony Onciul (2015) stresses this very fact in *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement*. Onciul (2015) considers the intersections of the public realm, museum community engagement, and privileging Indigenous voices in museology framework. Onciul's (2015) work critically examines mainstream discourse on Indigenous engagement in museum and highlights the importance of both Indigenous and settler community involvement to change curatorial and academic perspectives which will better represent Indigenous community voice, viewpoints, and reflections.

Sarah Jilani (2018) points out that museum structural injustices can prevent a meritocratic line up of candidates for hiring in *How to Decolonize a Museum*. Therefore, Jilani (2018) stresses hiring and privileging the voice of Indigenous Peoples in museums. Moving forward, the Mahone Bay Museum should consider Jilani's (2018) suggestion by including the Mi'kmaw and providing a method for compensation. Currently, Mi'kmaw Elders have been volunteering their time, helping the museum and travelling over two hours to assist and share their Indigenous knowledge.

### **Becoming an Indigenous Ally, Decolonization and Indigenization**

Anne Bishop (2006) defines what an ally means in *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression*. Bishop (2006) says that part of being an ally is recognizing the inherent privileges that one easily receives from society that are tied to patterns of injustice to others. Upon recognizing these unequal relationships, Bishop (2006) states that allies take active responsibility for changing these hegemonic structures. By referencing Bishop's (2006) work within an Indigenous context, it would suggest that an Indigenous ally is an individual who begins the personal process of decolonizing oneself by acknowledging their settler privilege. Indigenous allies stand with those who are affected by the harms of colonialism and realize that to effect any social change, the real work must begin within themselves.

As the Mahone Bay Museum embarks upon this decolonizing and indigenizing journey, they should consider incorporating Bishop's (2006) ideas on allyship. Part of the process of allyship is understanding one's inherent privilege and its relationship to unsettling one's colonial history with the dispossession and oppression of Indigenous Peoples. When the museum delves into the intersections of socially just truths, colonial narrative, Mi'kmaw knowledge-based systems and world views there will be discomfort. This uneasiness stems from the original conflict, between the Mi'kmaq and settlers, that resulted from early British colonization in Lunenburg County, that carries into present day.

As well, Bishop's (2006) notion of allyship includes developing genuine relationships and friendships with Indigenous Peoples. The Mahone Bay Museum has already begun this important step by reaching out to the local Mi'kmaw and their Elders in an effort to understand how to respectfully include the Mi'kmaq in their museological practices. Instrumental in the museum's decolonizing and indigenizing efforts will be to continue to build on these important bonds and relationships that privilege the Mi'kmaw voice.

One of the contributions that the Elders will bring is the understanding of an Indigenous perspective on the shared history of Mahone Bay. For example, the Elders will share their knowledge with the museum on the many Peace and Friendship Treaties and the term "We are all Treaty People" and the importance of recognizing how treaties are living documents that still apply today.

### **Truth and Reconciliation in Canada**

The mandatory Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada Calls to Action 67th through to 70, asks Canadian Museums and Archives "to undertake, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, a national review of museum policies and best practices to determine the level of compliance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and to make recommendations, (Government of Canada 2018)." The Mahone Bay Museum should be commended for steps they have taken in meeting the recommendations set out by the TRC.

When understanding museums as sites for social justice, the Mahone Bay Museum's function will be to create space for the Mi'kmaq to have a privileged voice and democratic access to how the museum operates. Key to the museum's new role is developing relationships with the Mi'kmaw narrative which requires hard truth telling to occur. The new stories that emerge between themselves and the local Mi'kmaq can then expand to the public to create awareness about the negative impacts of colonial discourse on the Mi'kmaq which is still affecting them today.

Through these decolonizing museum practices, settlers and visitors have a chance to understand the local colonial history from a Mi'kmaw perspective. The colonial legacy of museums shifts from a place which in the past prioritized settler social norms and values to a site for cultural politics and social action which is ultimately connected to the TRC.

Honouring the TRC calls to actions for museums and archives is an opportunity for this local museum to be at the foreground of Canadian truth and reconciliation which will change how Canadian society understands the original peoples of Turtle Island. Important to the truth and reconciliation process is that the museum views this as a decolonizing transformation of current museology practices that is part of the TRC calls to action which the federal government has requested. Since Kreps (2003) has also observed that museums can be seen as a site for cultural politics as well, this is an opportunity for the Mahone Bay Museum to demonstrate to other institutions the practice of museological decolonization and indigenization. The Mahone Bay Museum can be an example for other museums of how to meet the requests of the TRC and head in new directions by challenging the current museological colonial infrastructure.

## **Mandate for new Committee that Foregrounds Decolonization and Indigenization**

From its recent interest in decolonizing curatorial practices, it appears evident that the Mahone Bay Museum is committed to working as an Indigenous ally with the Mi'kmaq in Mi'kma'ki. The curator requested my input for the mandate and objectives of the committee. Following are some suggestions that reflect the museum's recent decolonization and indigenization museological initiative. It should be noted that these are only my initial observations. Input and approval will be necessary by Elders, and the local Mi'kmaq community for how the committee will proceed.

### **MANDATE (EXPLORATORY):**

The Committee's mandate will privilege the Mi'kmaq voice, so the Museum will be a vehicle for the Mi'kmaq to share their human story of their history and heritage from a socially just perspective.

### **GOALS and OBJECTIVES (EXPLORATORY):**

- The Committee's goals and objectives must serve and engage residents and visitors through the preservation, interpretation, and celebration of the local Mi'kmaq's complex history and culture.
- The goals and objectives, for including the Mi'kmaq, must create space that shifts the mainstream perception of the Mi'kmaq from a people and society of frozen static culture to one that is alive, powerful and dynamic.
- The Committee's goals and objectives must encourage genuine curiosity and interest about the First Peoples of Mi'kma'ki as a sophisticated society and not one that is dying or almost extinct. This can be fostered by hiring Mi'kmaq employees and developing Mi'kmaq expertise in staff and volunteers, so the Mi'kmaq are not objectified.
- The Committee's goals and objectives must indigenize and decolonize current museum standards and best practices and communicate about the Mi'kmaq in ways that are non-stereotypical and mythical.
- The goals and objectives should strive to be truly inclusive with respect to local Mi'kmaq culture and history which celebrates their significance in the past, present and future.
- The goals and objectives should include educating youth and families about local Mi'kmaq culture and history through children's programming.
- Most importantly the museum should genuinely value lifelong partnerships with Mi'kmaq community organizations that reflect democratic participation and social action.

## **Conclusion**

The Mahone Bay Museum's recent initiative to transform local curatorial practices by including Mi'kmaq culture and heritage in the museum and change how museology is normally done should be commended. As the museum moves in this new direction, there will undoubtedly be many learning curves along the way.

The first step in this new museum practice has been to follow Kreps' (2003) suggestion which places the management of how Indigenous Peoples are represented in the control of a committee that has substantial representation from the local Indigenous community. The Mahone Bay Museum did this by building relationships within the local Mi'kmaw community.

If the museum continues to follow the lead of Kreps (2003) and others, their approaches to the interpretations and representation of Mi'kmaw cultural materials will identify more with Mi'kmaw interests and less with current Eurocentrism which traditionally promotes settler interests. This new approach which Kreps (2003) calls "museum mindedness", is a paradigm shift in thinking, which prioritizes a framework for decolonizing and indigenising present museology.

Michael F. Brown's (2008) book review of Kreps (2003) work reminds us that new decolonizing and indigenizing museum approaches cannot be seen as a panacea for democratizing the Indigenous storyline. Decolonizing and indigenizing curatorial practices is complex, multilayered and embedded in dismantling and transforming Eurocentric hegemonic infrastructure which has been complicit in suppressing as Brown (2008) maintains "inconvenient truths" for its own benefits.

I see these liberating attempts by the Mahone Bay Museum as the beginning endeavours of its long-term purpose which is tied to the public good for all Canadians. Ultimately, decolonization and indigenization include Indigenous Peoples and settlers working in solidarity which privileges the voice of Indigenous Peoples, such as the Mi'kmaq, in the hope that education produces constructive social change.

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