

A 15-POINT GUIDE:

Standards of Achievement for the Relationship Between Indigenous Peoples & Cultural Institutions in Canada

from the Yellowhead Institute Special Report by Lindsay Nixon,
A Culture of Exploitation: "Reconciliation" and the Institutions of Canadian Art

The following suggestions represent what UNDRIP calls a "standard of achievement to be pursued in a spirit of partnership and mutual respect" for cultural institutions working with Indigenous communities in Canada. These 15 points draw on the voices of generations of Indigenous voices – but those who are currently grappling with this pandemic specifically – and the work of the handful of inquiries that have investigated these challenges. It is the hope that we continue this conversation and that it results in meaningful and long-term change for our communities.

1. #ReturnOurAncestors! The Canadian Museum Association and its partner institutions must uphold its responsibilities to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations, and the promises they made to the AFN, to digitize and make private archives and holdings accessible for transparency. In no uncertain terms, Indigenous museums must repatriate the bodies of Indigenous ancestors. There needs to be immediate expert and Indigenous-led audits of collections to assess what exists in collections; the primary goal being to find sensitive materials such as bodies, which museologists quietly know to exist within many of Canada's major institutions.

2. No more Indigenous advisory committees. Integrate diverse Indigenous peoples and knowledges throughout corporate structures, on both the creative and business side of organizations, and not just in moments of increased fiscal attachment to monetized identity politics.

3. Put the onus of learning on the actors within cultural institutions. Avoid tasking the decolonizing of an entire organization on one employee, especially within Canada's long running heritage institutions, museums, publications, and galleries, which will have deeply entrenched cultures of white-supremacy.

a. Avoid the single Indigenous hire into segregated positions. Only diverse, block hires of Black and Indigenous peoples moving forward, coinciding with the realization that this might mean the radical restructuring of institutions (such as retirements and staff changes), and the implementations of Indigenous and Black peoples throughout organizations in self-determined ways.

b. Respect the interests of diverse Black and Indigenous peoples, and their varying desires to participate in diversity and decolonizing measures (i.e. Indigenous specific departments and programs, or self-determined integration into wider institutional spaces away from a focus on Indigenous issues).

4. Always centre care, capacity, realistic timeframes, and meaningful responses when addressing the concerns of Indigenous employees, and only request those perspectives with the expressed consent of employees.

a. Make culturally sensitive supports available to employees. Take every of harm claim seriously, and centre genuine concern towards healing and mediating those facets of the institutional culture. Never gaslight employees.

b. Always consult from within as opposed to without the organization, putting less focus on tokenistic measures such as business consultants and more focus on the integration of anti-racist structures and cultures, and Black and Indigenous decolonial ideologies and peoples throughout workplaces.

5. Ensure the growth of Black and Indigenous cultural workers into senior positions. Ensure Black and Indigenous staff are given the opportunity to interview for senior positions and foster a practice of hiring from within. Where possible and appropriate provide mentorship to those employees and include explicitly in succession planning.

6. Recognize that competition is endemic within art industries and ensure that policies and structures are implemented that ensure management, senior curators, senior editors, and other high-level positions are held accountable for gatekeeping, racist and misogynist micro-aggressions, preferential treatment of white employees and men, and workplace bullying, gossip, and other toxic cultures of white supremacy and misogyny in the ways they work, and the cultures they thereby promote within their organizations.

7. Restructure provincial and national arts funding in Canada.

Funding initiatives for Indigenous peoples are still immensely important. But they need to be managed by Indigenous peoples and redesigned in a way that decentralizes institutional modes of power.

a. Indigenous juries should have demographic qualifications, based on Indigenous consultation and development, that will ensure that all juries consist of diverse generations, backgrounds, fields, geographies, and other considerations.

b. Granting bodies should shift to Indigenous board, panel, peer-reviewed, or jury led adjudication of professional status.

Adjudication that accounts for alternative forms of professional development such as community knowledge and histories of mentorship. Until this is implemented, there should be greater transparency and dialog regarding the process of professional accreditation; namely, the assigning officers, their races and relationships to Indigenous peoples, and their qualifications to make such adjudications on behalf of Indigenous creative communities.

c. The management of granting organizations and grant officers should meet demographic quotas that shift the minority and majority interest in Canada's arts and culture granting institutions. Recruitment campaigns must widen their understanding of who can, and should, occupy these positions, even if that means investing in mentorship.

d. Granting programs should strive to be discipline specific and include demographic quotas for diverse Indigenous groups such as Inuit, Black-Indigenous peoples, peoples residing in Reserve communities, folks in regions outside of currently over-represented central Ontario and Vancouver such as the prairies and the East Coast, community artists and vendors, first-time applicants, and other considerations.

e. Granting bodies must invest significant resources into strengthening Indigenous self-identification measures, at least when it comes to accessing Indigenous funding lines. This will be a challenging exercise and must be flexible and evolving and ensure an ongoing dialog. Thus, this process requires continued resource investment from cultural institutions.

f. Policy should be developed, in consultation with Indigenous communities, around the threshold of number of Indigenous employees to qualify for and receive Indigenous funding, and what precisely constitutes "Indigenous Art" for funding purposes.

8. Indigenous publications, organizations, galleries, and other cultural institutions should immediately recruit Indigenous editors and department heads, if these positions are still held by non-Indigenous peoples. This might mean investing in mentorship processes and understanding that Indigenous qualifications can look different than non-Indigenous qualifications. This may require re-considering the concept of "quality", production schedules, and other tools for organizational structure and workplace culture.

9. Restitution should be embedded in fee structures. Indigenous artists should receive higher resale fees, especially communities that have been historically exploited by the market (such as Inuit). Regardless of industry standards, Black and Indigenous artists should receive fees for showing in private and commercial galleries.

10. There should be a drive for greater gender and racial equity in gallery exhibitions. For instance, a guiding principle might mandate that Black women artists booking a solo exhibition be paid the same rate as the highest paid white man artist. In fact, institutions should recognize that certain communities deserve to be paid more for their time and adopt an equity payscale. This can be considered another form of restitution for historic and ongoing marginalization of Indigenous and Black individuals and communities, which requires more labour to participate in the industry compared to non-Indigenous, white peers.

11. For the foreseeable future, the acquisitions budget of Canadian art institutions must be solely dedicated to the acquisition of Black and Indigenous art. This acquisition campaign must not be merely history art about Indigenous and Black peoples; even if this means collecting primarily contemporary artists.

12. The executive, governing and advisory boards of cultural institutions in Canada must restructure to include diverse members of Black and Indigenous communities.

13. Cultural organizations should respect the basic human rights and occupational health of Indigenous and Black artists during COVID-19. Arts organizations may consider shifting to a service provision model at this time. But also accepting that artists may not be able to travel in the upcoming months (years even). Organizations should find alternative ways to feature and service the artists they represent.

14. Canada needs to develop its own federal, provincial and territorial repatriation legislation, drawing from the shortcomings of NAGPRA and led by communities of Indigenous artists, curators, cultural administrators, Elders, and other respected Indigenous cultural leaders within Reserve and urban communities. While it must foremost be concerned with "human remains," this legislation should expand the notion of repatriation beyond bodies to funerary objects, "sacred" objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. These laws must be meaningfully co-developed in collaboration with Indigenous peoples.

a. These “Repatriation Acts” must be passed in every province and territory within the borders of Canada, and not simply apply to federal reserve lands.

b. The legislation must have extremely strong compliance measures, with an accountability provision that allows Indigenous representatives to ensure the legislation is being enforced. As Indigenous people are not flora and fauna, Parks Canada should not be involved in the implementation of the legislation. Jurisdiction over “Repatriation Acts” could fall under the Canadian Heritage Portfolio or even the Minister of Justice.

15. Indigenous peoples should have cultural sovereignty over the management of their arts and cultures in Canada.

a. In addition to legislation, federal, provincial and territorial governments should work to support the creation of a network of northern, reserve-based, and urban Indigenous cultural communities that could support a self-determined infrastructure for the direct funding of Indigenous artist-run centres and spaces nationwide. This network should build upon the work of cultural communities already on the ground and doing the work.

Indigenous organizations, cultural centres and/or individuals should also work in good faith on these initiatives to realize their potential.

However, it must be acknowledged that the pressure of COVID-19, and the exploitation of Indigenous cultural contract workers proceeding, means that Indigenous cultural workers can be forced to work in culturally unsafe and exploitative circumstances to support themselves and their families; this is the result of inequity in Canada’s cultural institutions, and not the fault of exploited Indigenous cultural workers.

The management and philanthropic class of Canada’s art industry have been successful in convincing creative labor they are disposable. However, Black and Indigenous cultural workers are driving significant revenue in Canada’s art and culture institutions.

Art would cease to exist if we enacted a politics of refusal and solidarity by withdrawing our work collectively from Canada’s cultural institutions.