

Ethics in the Practice of Public History with First Nation Communities

In my Parks Canada work with Yukon First Nations over the last two decades I am regularly challenged about what I am doing. First Nations are sometimes sceptical about both government and cultural researcher interest in their affairs. In attempting to understand and address their concerns I have spent a lot of time considering the different roles that national commemoration has and/or could fulfil for first nation communities and my own responsibilities to my employer, my profession and, most of all, to those communities that encourage me to connect with them.

In all cases the work I do for Parks Canada is trying to do "right". Ethics is the practise of a morality, of aiming to do the "right" thing. This is never as easy or clear as we hope since the "right" thing sometimes means different things at different times and for different cultures. Nevertheless the engagement between aboriginal and non-aboriginal cultures means we have to try and figure out what this means. My personal reflections on what is "right" are shaped by my family history and identity and what they mean to me as an individual, as a father and as member of a culturally distinct group in Canada.

The following piece is an attempt to outline the way I understand my work and its purpose. My research and writings do not attempt to be "right", neither do they pretend to advocate for a point of view. They are not aimed at bettering relations between the Government of Canada and a Yukon First Nation. Rather my purpose here in the Yukon and, I believe, the purpose of Parks Canada in work with first nations across Canada, is to contribute to the general transformation of the attitudes, or ethos, amongst Canadians about first nations. It is to make for better relations between the non-aboriginal citizens of Canada and the citizens of Canadian First Nations.

- David Neufeld

Public history research across culture boundaries, particularly with disenfranchised groups such as aboriginal peoples, challenges public history professionals to integrate the techniques of craft with the advocacy demanded by the standards of ethical behaviour. The cultural relativism of "good" often makes this a particularly difficult question to address. Understanding the appropriate role for public history research in a community setting is the key to a successful program.

The practise of public history with aboriginal peoples in North America over the last century and a half has been generally destructive of their communities and identities. This practise has almost always included elements of fervent advocacy along with professional work. Originally pursued as the collection of cultural relics, including the bodies of their ancestors, from dying cultures, subsequent efforts have worked diligently to fit indigenous peoples within the meta-narratives of European settlement and the domestication of empty continents. The presence of aboriginal peoples in such commemorations is usually noted either as another of the natural obstacles to be overcome in settlement or, at best, as pliant guides for the newcomer exploitation of their own lands. Even when contemporary social justice practices demanded ethical review of research, the models drew heavily upon the western medical research idea of informed consent by the individual subject. This individualistic approach further undermined the tight social and extensive familial networks that are the fabric of many aboriginal civilizations.¹ With

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only a few notable exceptions, aboriginal peoples have come to view outside cultural researchers as trouble.

What are the ethical requirements shaping public history research with aboriginal peoples? How can funding agencies, the academy, cultural institutions, government departments and researchers ensure their work does not undermine the communities and peoples they work with? How can the notion of service be meaningfully introduced into this type of work? From almost twenty years of work with northern Canadian aboriginal communities three basic principles appear to offer guidance for responsible public history work:

- the recognition of an alternative cultural context for the analysis of the past and identity,
- the equalization of the power balance between the researcher and the researched, and
- advocacy for change in the professional discourse.

Percy Henry, an Elder of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in in the central Yukon, speaks of his community's "Treasure Box". The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Treasure Box is the collection of places, memories and stories that give meaning to their life. These treasures are the heritage and history of the community. *Heritage* defines cultural identity - language, creation stories, associations with place and the relationship with ancestors maintained by accepting their gifts to the present. Heritage includes those values families instil in their children to ensure they will be decent and respectful members of their community. *History* explains how things happened, it is the set of skills enabling a community to change or control the world around them. Knowing history allows the community to be more effective in sustaining positive relationships with the world around them and in maintaining a safe and desirable home for their children. The Treasure Box is the understanding of who they are and how they connect with the world.

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elder Percy Henry with his theme tie showing Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Chief Isaac welcoming and guiding the missionary, and with a wink, "you government fellows" into his traditional lands.

D. Neufeld photo



Effective and informed community participation in a project is possible only with a mutual understanding of the service public history method offers and the cultural interests and needs of the community. The protection and celebration of the Treasure Box is the highest responsibility of the community, in some respects it is the purpose of community. Initiating a meaningful public history project with an aboriginal community therefore requires a detailed knowledge of the Treasure Box and its expression of the community's ideas of themselves. To ensure acknowledgement of and respect for the Treasure Box the public historian must maintain direct and regular contacts with the community. This is best achieved through the establishment of a community heritage committee made up of knowledgeable elders, community heritage staff and others to direct the work and facilitate broader community participation, confidence and support for the project.²

In addition to recognizing the different cultural perspective that shapes aboriginal agency, the researcher must acknowledge the great differences of social and economic power between Euro-North American society and

aboriginal communities. This power difference is the root cause of the difficulties that public history faces in work with disenfranchised communities – assumptions of truth are culturally centred. In the mid-1980s, when I began research on Chilkoot Trail National Historic Site of Canada, a mountain trail used by miners during the Klondike gold rush, the main story was the experience of the individual stampeders trudging north. The presence of aboriginal people in the region was noted, however they were classified simply as a primitive transportation technology – packers hired to assist the Stampeders. During research with the Carcross-Tagish First Nation to obtain their version of the gold rush story I was surprised to learn that the stampede was barely a footnote in community history, a wild weekend party that came and, thankfully, left. What I learned instead was the importance of the family relations expressed by clan membership, the significance of the land and the animals, both from subsistence and cosmological perspectives and the undiminished desire to maintain their lives in their traditional territory. It took some time to understand what I could do with these findings and there were things I had to let go.

For its part the community shared its knowledge and understanding of the world, gifting me with their past. Access to their worldview relied upon knowledge of their oral tradition and an understanding of their abiding relationship to their traditional lands, the land of their creation. Carcross, the home of the Carcross-Tagish, nestles at the base of *Xóots Tláa Ta.eetí*, Animal Mother Mountain. Animal Mother camped in a cirque near the top of the mountain. There she bore and raised all of the animals of the Yukon sending them to their places as they matured. The epiphany that these peoples never left Eden was a significant shift in my western understanding of possible relationships with the world.³ To ensure my research could “fit” the aboriginal assumptions of truth, I found that I had to define my own Treasure Box and surrender the power it carries. Until I acknowledged this cultural bias, there was little progress in my work with the Carcross-Tagish. The success of the subsequent work also required the surrender of material and professional power – the power of controlling project funding, the power of setting the research agenda and the power of the discipline’s assumptions of research purpose.

Finally, the researcher must recognize that their service to a community may enhance the community’s ability to represent itself. The work in no way makes them a community spokesperson. The researcher however, does bear the responsibility

After leaving her camp at "Xóots Tláa Ta.eetí", Animal Mother moved to what is now known as Four Aces Mountain about 110 kilometres west.

D. Neufeld photo



Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in celebration
of National Aboriginal Day,
June, 2004.

D. Neufeld photo



for providing research findings back into the profession. The researcher must remain aware of where and how the constraints of culturally entrenched method and understandings confuse, compromise or manipulate the voice of the community. They must articulate these limits and bring them to the attention of the practise. Responsibility also lies with the academy, the profession and funding agencies to acknowledge work that extends beyond the boundaries or present constructs of public history activity. Edward Said stresses the importance of this recognition; "[T]he construction of identity is bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society, and is therefore anything but mere academic woolgathering."⁴

The need for advocacy rests in all these places. If our society rests upon ethical foundations respecting the human rights of all peoples, both as individuals and as self-defined cultural associations, then meaningful change in intellectual discourse affecting disenfranchised communities is a pressing need. Making change is no easy task. It depends upon accurate and comprehensive participatory research with aboriginal communities, the effective communication of aboriginal values and interests to outsiders and, perhaps most difficult, the challenging of the culturally entrenched, and comfortable, biases shaping the present disciplinary narrative. All of these are needed to meaningfully enter aboriginal stories and values into the discussion of national narratives and thus, national policy.

Conclusion

Public history at its best is a valued and positive tool contributing to a wide range of community objectives. These range from contributions to local heritage activities, support for the articulation of community identity to visitors, the development of curriculum in public schools, and the shaping of policies and programs available to the community. What remains central to the value of any public history work however, is the service it provides to the community.

Public history does not lend itself well to direct advocacy. Rather, in the skilful integration of multiple narratives in an open forum, public history facilitates participants and observers working together in the construction of new sets of relationships, the reframing of existing understandings to better reflect beliefs in what is right and the recognition and pursuit of multiple visions of a future. Ultimately the purpose of public history work with aboriginal peoples is the presentation of a community's story to ensure its existence is acknowledged and its interests respected. The broader recognition of First Nation agency and the desire to regain control of their future, the protection and celebration of the Treasure Box, is the outcome of ethical public history work.

End Notes

1 M. Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes – The Anthropology of Museums* (UBC Press, Vancouver, 1992) and D. Neufeld, "The Commemoration of Northern Aboriginal Peoples by the Canadian Government", *George Wright Forum*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2002.

2 D. Neufeld, "Working within the Community", *CRM*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2001 summarizes a basic approach to community participation and control of cultural research while *Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Canada Final Agreement* (1998) "Chapter 13 Culture, Appendix iii" prescribes the consultation process for a five year public history project.

3 Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers and the Shaping of the World* (Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver, 2000).

4 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (Pantheon, New York, 1978) p. 332.

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