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Extract from a Presentation at the Symposium “Indigenous Perspectives on Repatriation: Moving Forward Together,” Kelowna, 29–31 March 2017

WILLIAM WHITE

WY NAME IS TSAMIINBANN. I come from the Tsimshian Nation and I am Raven. My English name is Willy White. “Come to this repatriation conference,” they said. I was like, “What the hell do you want me to come to a repatriation conference for? I’m not repatriating anything.” And then they said, “Well, of course you are. You’re repatriating the knowledge and teaching it.” I never thought about that before in my life. I just thought I need to teach.

I learned everything my aunty knew about weaving, then went on to learn from Haida relatives and others. I learned Chilkat weaving from Anna Brown who is Tlingit from Alaska. I went to Tsimshian, Haida, Tlingit, Nisga'a, Heiltsuk people to help them learn some weaving; I worked with Kwakwaka'wakw friends at Alert Bay and Tlingit friends in Sitka. We had gatherings to discuss what we were learning in the museums, a lot of museums. I don't care what anybody says. You know, we've had our differences, but I've built some really good relationships with museums. I love them. I love the people that work in them. They started to listen. When I was younger, I would be demanding. “I'm not wearing gloves [to handle the museum collections],” I would say, “You can't make me wear gloves. This is my people's stuff. Just because it's in your place, it doesn't mean it's yours.” I was a little bit angry. But then I realized you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar, so I started changing my attitude and thinking: “I need these people. These are good people. They are trained differently than I have been trained, but we can work together for the success of my students and for the success of my people to learn about who they are from the things we own that museums house for us. They're stewards of our things.”

So I've built very good relationships with these people and I continue to build for the future by bringing my students to these institutions. When I bring my students to museums, I have a meeting with the students beforehand. We come together with a good heart before we go into the museum vaults because they have to understand that our people are going to greet us as soon as we walk in that door. I really believe



Figure 1. Willy White speaking at the symposium, Indigenous Perspectives on Repatriation: Moving Forward Together, Kelowna, 29–31 March 2017. Lou-ann Neel, now Repatriation Specialist at the RBCM, sits to his right. Photo by Shane Lighter, courtesy Royal BC Museum.

that our people are standing right beside us: “Come here. Come look at me. Don’t go over there. You don’t want to look at that robe; you want to look at me over here.” It’s amazing how these pieces call us. We can hear them. They call us and they show us specific things. I’ve looked at the same robe half a dozen times, and I have never seen the same thing. Each time I learn something from that robe, which I learn how to do, and I show it, and I teach it.

When I brought my students to Ottawa [to the Canadian Museum of History] one time, I said to them, “We’re going to go in there and you’re going to get burnt out after an hour.” And they’re all like, “Yeah, whatever.” Some of them had been in museums before but most of them hadn’t. I said, “We’re going to have a break after one hour because you’re going to be worn out.” And they go running around, seriously running,

and I'm like: "Stop. Don't run. Just walk. You'll see what you need to see." And sure enough, after an hour, even my aunt who taught me how to weave would have to take a break. I took her to the State Museum in Juneau one time. I said, "You're going to get tired after an hour." Sure enough, an hour later, she's like, "I need to go outside for a smoke. Oh my God." Because it's our ancestors surrounding us completely with their energy and saying, "You're going to learn something and you're here for a reason, so go rest up because I have more to show you." We have to become attuned to the spirit in the place.

My journey has taken me into many museums, not just in North America but around the world. It's funny how you find your people's things in the oddest places, like Canberra, Australia. What? How did this get here? Why is Max Ernst's collection from New York in Canberra? It's just amazing the stories, amazing that our people's works are everywhere. The people of the world look at our art and it says something to their heart. It says, "The West Coast people are unique people." We have something to say to the world. Our art speaks for us. We do this work because we have a message to bring to the people. It's a gift to the world what artists do for you. Over many years, what I've learned in my journey is that I'm here to do what my ancestors want me to do, and that's to keep the art alive.

In the past people tried to claim that our art is savage, primitive, but you know when you look at the art that our people have produced throughout the West Coast, there's nothing primitive about it. It's very complex; it's very deep. The spirit of the people is in that art and it's telling a story. It's saying something to every individual who walks through that museum to look at it. And every time you see a mask used in a potlatch it is bringing a message from our ancestors. It's there to teach our people; it's not just for museums. Our culture never stopped. They didn't stop in 1884 when the government, through the Indian Act, said we can't potlatch anymore. We just told them to go to hell; we're going to be who we are. Our art's living. We're not going to hide it under the table or in the attic. I grew up with my Uncle Charlie, Great-Uncle Charlie Dudoward, carving totem poles. That was just an everyday thing.

One time I worked in a museum for three years. I volunteered, never got paid a dime. Not a dime. I talked to forty-five to fifty thousand people a year about what I was doing, about weaving. I wove two robes on site in the Museum of Northern British Columbia in Prince Rupert. One day one of the kids that I had taught throughout their school career walked by and said, "Uh, it's just another robe." The curator there was just



Figure 2. Willy White shows one of his Chilkat weavings, a dance apron representing Sm'oygiiit Spannaxnox, the Chief of the Supernatural Beings from the Undersea Kingdom, at the Kelowna symposium. Photo by Shane Lighter, courtesy Royal BC Museum.

appalled. But I said: “Are you kidding me? That’s exactly what I want. I want these kids to realize that this is everyday stuff to them. Our art should be everyday stuff to our people.” That’s the goal of every artist, I think. I want people to look at things in museums and to be able to say: “Oh yeah. I’ve got one of those things at home,” or “My granny has one of those,” or “I danced in one of those at the last potlatch.” ... So when you see a weaving on the dance floor, or you see a weaving in the museum, I want you to stop and just be still, and see what that woman wove. And she has a message for you, just for you, when you look at the art. What you feel in your heart is what she wants you to feel.