

## Viewpoint

### **Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin: Wanichigewin gaye Wijiwiidiwin gii-ayaag COVID-19 / Transforming Grief: Loss & Togetherness in COVID-19 Exhibition at Fort York in Tkaronto/ Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 24 March 2023 – 07 January 2024**

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#### **Abstract**

This viewpoint is a participatory reflection and response to the exhibition *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin: Wanichigewin gaye Wijiwiidiwin gii-ayaag COVID-19 / Transforming Grief: Loss & Togetherness in COVID-19*, displayed at Fort York in Tkaronto/Toronto, Ontario, Canada, from March 2023 to January 2024. A graduate class from the University of Toronto visited the exhibition as part of the Winter 2023 ischool Information Management course 'Museums, Archives and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', taught by Phillips. This piece includes observations and photographs from the students, as well as details of the process of creating and curating the exhibit from Armando Perla and Raven Spiratos, former-Curator for Toronto History Museums and exhibit curator (respectively). The content from the course discussions, readings, and assignments are put into conversation with this innovative community-based exhibition, giving students a rich understanding of ways to prioritize the needs of communities to activate decolonizing, Indigenizing, and new ways of thinking about museums, galleries, and archives.

**Keywords:** Participatory museums, decolonizing museums, Indigenizing museums, community-centred exhibition processes, LGBTTTQI+

#### **Introduction**

In what is now known as Canada, museums, archives, heritage locations, and other cultural entities are responding to the 2015 *Calls to Action* by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC]. This commission investigated genocide attempts by the colonial government (and before 1867, the United Kingdom) to facilitate land theft to benefit European settlers (Regan 2010). While the TRC process has critics, the resulting Calls to Action should be taken seriously across all sectors of society, including government agencies (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC] 2015). Anyone who is not Indigenous to this Land should be reflecting on the ways we benefit from colonial structures, and reckoning with the reality that our presence is authorized by colonial powers, rather than the Original Peoples whose Land

settlers have stolen (and now claim as our own) (Smith 2014; Garneau 2016; Morton 2022). As all of the authors identify as non-Indigenous to this Land now known as Canada, when we use 'we' and 'our' we are referring to ourselves as settlers. We realize conflating all of our diversity and ways of arriving on this Land is less than ideal but using 'settler' at least shares our commonality as 'not Indigenous' to this place and makes space of difference for readers who are Indigenous (Smith 2012; Vowel 2016).

Cursory studies of treaties from the 1800s, when the bulk of the Land was taken from Indigenous Nations by colonial entities for division amongst settler arrivals, show inequities in amounts paid and gifts received for the vast mineral-rich territories. The legitimacy of these transactions has faced (and is facing) legal challenges. Many settlers (non-Indigenous people) are only beginning to realize that what has been sold to us, through education and literally as real estate, has very dubious and fraudulent origins.<sup>1</sup> White settler scholars Carla Taunton and Leah Decter (2022) state recognition of treaties in contemporary contexts are essential to decolonizing and Indigenizing work: 'To embody treaty principles is to refuse to be complacent in colonial violence and to commence working in collaborating with Indigenous leadership, as well as to harness reciprocity and responsibility as the creative, operational, or research method' (Decter and Taunton 2022: 102). This is the backdrop to our discussion.

This exhibition response and reflection begins with the context to our graduate class's field trip to *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief*, which was the last class of the Winter 2023 term.<sup>2</sup> In 1827 what is now the University of Toronto (then King's College) was imposed on the territory of many Indigenous Nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit River, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples.<sup>3</sup> At that time, Toronto was known as York, a colonial settlement founded in 1793 by John Graves Simcoe as the capital of Upper Canada. Upper Canada later became part of the Province of Ontario. These colonial names and divisions were imposed on lands that were, and continue to be, home to many First Nations. The contemporary Indigenous diaspora today includes Inuit and Métis peoples as well as Indigenous community members from across Turtle Island (also known as North and Central America), and South America. Simcoe also established Fort York in 1793. The Toronto Purchase of 1805 (also known as Treaty 13) was signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit. The Williams Treaty of 1923 was signed with multiple Mississauga and Chippewa Nations.<sup>4</sup>

This Land, like all of what is now Canada, the USA, and the rest of the Americas has been, and continues to be, cared for by, and lived in relationship to, Indigenous Nations since time immemorial (Steeves 2021). Today we gather, work, play, and live through the goodwill and words of friendship expressed through the Dish with One Spoon wampum (Simpson 2008). This wampum is an agreement between Indigenous Nations addressing how to share the Land around the Great Lakes. While there has not yet been a formal extension of the wampum to settlers, many non-Indigenous people and entities acknowledge the Dish with One Spoon in land acknowledgements and gratitude statements as part of the process of Reconciliation or perpetual conciliation, as described by Métis scholar, artist and curator David Garneau (2016).

Our participatory reflection on, and response to, *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin: Wanichigewin gaye Wiijiwiidiwin gi-ayaag COVID-19/Transforming Grief: Loss & Togetherness in COVID-19* focuses on these core questions:

- How does the exhibition successfully challenge colonial norms, cis-heteronormativity, whiteness, and ableism?
- How does the exhibition de-centre (often unstated) hegemonic positions to open space for voices that mainstream society shuns to the margins?
- How does the exhibition act as a practical example of decolonizing work in the process and production of an exhibition?
- How does the exhibit operationalize relationality and relationships?

We have taken the *participatory* aspect of this work quite literally, as demonstrated by the

diversity of our references and by the number of authors. We have selected academic publications alongside those that some readers may think are unconventional or out of place in academic publications (YouTube, Facebook, etc.). We have purposely done this to demonstrate how much participatory information from diverse communities can be found in social media. We want to remind readers that academic sources are not available to everyone. Barriers can come in a variety of formats, from bandwidth limits to costly subscriptions and lack of translated texts. Our reflection and response paper contains elements of how Phillips approaches her goal of teaching Reconciling, decolonizing, and Indigenizing for diverse post-graduate students (as unmetaphorically as possible). We used this opportunity to think deeply about the elements of un-learning required by decolonizing and Indigenizing pedagogies, and how to re-learn from contemporary curators and marginalized communities well versed in challenging positions of power and authority.

Phillips, as the instructor for the class, acknowledges the power differential present in the classroom structure. She did expect the students to attend the class trip as it was planned during regular class time and paid for Uber transit for students (as required/requested) – due to the distance of Fort York from the University of Toronto St. George campus. Phillips did not penalize students who could not attend nor was participation in this reflection tied to the course mark. Indeed, most of the work on the viewpoint took place after the in-class portion of the term ended and has been offered as an experiential learning opportunity for students to gain an academic publication credit, as well as observing the process of submitting a paper – from concept and writing to print.

As we are writing for an international journal, we do understand that some communities *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief* highlights may face persecution, death or other types of violence in many countries, so inclusion in an exhibition is not safe or practical. We encourage museums and the wider Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums [GLAM] sector to become accomplices in challenging oppression, while recognizing that our freedoms in Canada are not shared by everyone.<sup>5</sup> Latinx scholar and curator Armando Perla's 2020 application of the Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) to curatorial activism, centered on the United Nations *Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations 2008),<sup>6</sup> provides guidance and resources for change:

The HRBA promotes empowering people – especially those most marginalised – to participate in all processes and phases of a project and to hold accountable those who have a duty to act. Under this framework, human rights are not considered as just one element or dimension in mainstream processes. Rather they constitute the foundational framework and basis for the entire process of socio-political organization and development (Perla 2020: 200).

Our reflections of and responses to *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief* starts with connecting our class trip and subsequent written piece here to the course outline and goals. We then turn to details about the context and development of the exhibition from the curatorial forces at the hosting organization and the exhibition curator. We present an overview of the exhibition and the students' participatory responses before closing with discussions for carrying the learning opportunities offered through the exhibition into our futures.

### **Teaching Museums, Archives, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

In the winter of 2023, white settler scholar Phillips taught a graduate workshop, offered to students in the Master of Information Management and Library or Information Science programs at University of Toronto's ischool (INF1005/1006 'Museums, Archives, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission'). Phillip's doctoral research looked at ways to decolonize and Indigenize museums and other cultural spaces across this Land, especially locations that might not seem to have an obvious or immediate potential for hosting these conversations (Phillips 2022a, 2022b). Phillips includes decolonizing and Indigenizing approaches in her

teaching, in an attempt to open space for conversations that need to happen as prerequisites to the literal decolonizing actions as outlined in Unangaʷ scholar Eve Tuck and settler scholar K. Wayne Yang's article 'Decolonization is Not a metaphor' (Tuck and Yang 2012) and called for by Indigenous led 'Landback' movements.

The pedagogical objectives for this course introduced students to a range of decolonizing and Indigenizing topics that relate to museums and archives, to actively explore practices of reconciliation and truth-telling, and to develop the practical, analytical, and critical thinking skills essential to working in museums and archives. In 2022, the museum and archival communities in Canada released guidance for responding to the 2015 TRC *Calls to Action* and the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Danyluk and MacKenzie 2022; The Steering Committee on Canada's Archives 2022). The new standards for museums listed in the Canadian Museums Association's *Moved to Action* report most relevant to our discussion include the need to '...think beyond the simple engagement / consultation framework that has come to be the standard approach for these partnerships,' and to 'Bring museum engagement and partnership activities beyond formal museum space by going into the community with whom the museum wants to engage' (Danyluk and MacKenzie 2002: 34). The hidden curriculum of INF1005/1005 was to encourage students to reflect on their role in perpetual conciliation. Even though museums and archives have solid colonial foundations, with self-awareness, self-reflection, humility, and love, it is possible to find cracks to sow seeds of change.

## Exhibit Context and Development

The context and development for this exhibition highlight how curatorial practices can centre decolonizing, Indigenizing and Reconciling actions – from personal connections and relationships to giving over authority for self-representation. For example, upon being appointed as Curator for the City of Toronto in early 2022, Armando Perla (he/they) prioritized meeting with the diverse communities that have historically not been engaged by Toronto History Museums (THM). Drawing on his early career as a human rights lawyer and established curatorial activist practice that centres on 'the human' (Perla 2020, 2021),<sup>7</sup> Perla asked how the sites belonging to THM could use their resources to meet the needs of these communities. Perla was met with some elements of distrust and suspicion due to this 'sudden' interest. Perla's belief in human rights-centred approaches to community engagement work, and their past experiences in collaborative and equitable relationship-building, positioned them well to build engagement and trust. Perla has referred to this period as being '...transformational on so many different levels'.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of going to communities with projects that extract stories and belongings under the guise of partnerships in their curatorial process, Perla asks communities 'What do you need?', 'How can we serve you?', 'What needs do you have that are not being met?'. These are important questions all institutions seeking community partnerships should start with. The answers ranged from a safe space to practise queer ballroom from Toronto Kiki Ballroom Alliance; to money and a location for a film by a collective of queer racialized non-binary performance artists; to a celebratory ball. Before asking communities to produce anything, Perla presented solutions and opportunities. Only then could discussions be broached around how collaborations can produce outcomes like those found in *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief*: 'The outcome to me doesn't matter – it's the process, building community at every step along the way that is important'.<sup>9</sup>

This process culminated in widespread participation in the exhibit *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin: Wanichigewin gaye Wijiwidiwin gii-ayaag COVID-19 / Transforming Grief: Loss & Togetherness in COVID-19*, curated by Black curator Raven Spiratos:

Every part of the show speaks to the love and care that each of these artists has for their communities and how much sticking together during the pandemic helped them cope with so much loss. They also speak about some of the unexpected

positives that also came because of the pandemic. Transforming Grief: Loss and Togetherness in COVID-19 is a testament of love, the radical love each member of these communities has for each other.<sup>10</sup>

Our class started with an overview of the context for the exhibition development by Perla, followed by a tour through the exhibition by Spiratos. Perla explained that he comes from 'the margins of the marginalized' himself, as a Latinx HIV+ queer person who sought refuge in Canada.<sup>11</sup> From this unique positionality, Perla wanted to present lived realities of queerness and LGBTTQI+ communities – rather than sanitized versions made palatable for consumption in public places:

As LGBTTQI+ folks, we have been told that queer sex and our experiences of sexual intimacy are dirty and perverted and that we should hide them and feel ashamed. Most history museums have only presented white and sanitized versions of our lives, desexualizing us and erasing such an important part of who we are. Hearing from the community how this work has made them feel seen and how true to many of our experiences it is, makes me really proud.<sup>12</sup>

Spiratos, in collaboration with artists, community members, and the collections team at THM, pulled these expressions of trust and community together into a narrative of grief that reminds us of our collective experience living through the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the ongoing HIV pandemic.

### **Our Participatory Reflection and Response: Exhibition Discussion and Tour**

With processual and contextual information provided at the start of our class trip from Perla and Spiratos, we had an in-depth understanding of the many forces that intersect within this multi-faceted exhibition. It is almost impossible to visually present the community building and relationships forged by the process of pulling such a dynamic exhibition together. For this reason, we have drawn quotes from Perla's social media to share the care and detail that went into this exhibition – every choice was thoughtful and purposeful.

The exhibition starts with displays in the corridor area as you enter Fort York, then a series of connected rooms, and concludes in a space of reflection. The exhibition introduction takes up multiple wall panels, with the local Indigenous Anishinaabemowin centred. There are many Indigenous languages spoken on the lands that are now the city of Toronto, including speakers from the wider Indigenous diaspora. Perla explains the decision to select Anishinaabemowin:

The choice to use Anishinaabemowin came about because when we consulted with the Indigenous Affairs Office at the City of Toronto about which Indigenous language to use, they suggested finding a good reason to justify a choice of an Indigenous language. The reason behind it is that Fort York had already established a previous relationship of trust with this community based on the location of the Fort and we wanted to continue to honor that.<sup>13</sup>

This area displays many of the signs and items we suddenly became familiar with at the onset, and throughout, the most critical days of the COVID-19 pandemic – Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), and signage to encourage social distancing. In Canada an ice hockey stick was used as a familiar item to help people understand what the recommended 2 metres distance looked like (See Fig. 1).



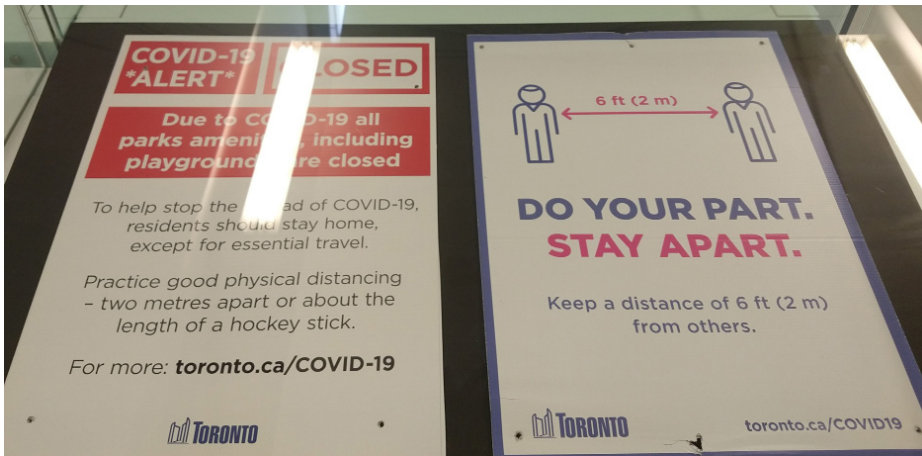


Fig. 1: COVID-19 signage. Photo taken at the exhibition (copyright Faizan Rana).

Crip Collective's *Gichi-es, Anami'e-atoopowin, gaye Izhichigewin / Chrysalis, the Altar, and Performance* transformed beautiful textiles, some the colour of water, along with used face masks, into a memorial art piece that can be repurposed and transformed (see Fig. 2). This was created in memory of their beloved friend Amelia R.V. Nelson. This work is accompanied by an altar of belongings, and a video showing water crashing over rocks.



Fig. 2: *Gichi-es / Chrysalis*, by Crip Collective. Photo taken at the exhibition (copyright Faizan Rana).

Lan's *Gaawiin Majimanidoo Gaa-wiiji'igod Inake / No Devils' Advocate Zone* consists of two sets of LED words that converge, creating cognitive dissonance as visitors try to read two moving texts that are only visible a few words at a time (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Still from a video of Lan's LED text art, *Lan's Gaawiin Majimanidoo Gaa-wiiji'igod Inake / No Devils' Advocate Zone*.<sup>14</sup>

The texts relay Lan's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic:

AT 7PM EVERY EVENING OUR NEIGHBOUR WOULD AWKWARDLY PLAY THE NATIONAL ANTHEM ON A TUBA WHILE MY THEN-PARTNER LEFT FOR HER NURSING SHIFT BUT NO ONE IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD CROWD WOULD TALK TO US OR EVEN MEET OUR EYES

MAYBE BECAUSE THEY WERE AFRAID HER SCRUBS WERE CONTAGIOUS MAYBE BECAUSE WE ARE EAST ASIAN & QUEER MAYBE THEY SAW THAT SHE DIDN'T TREAT ME RIGHT MAYBE BECAUSE THEY KNEW HOW HOLLOW THEIR PERFORMANCE WAS

Spiratos shared that this piece encapsulated Lan's fear, sacrifice, anti-Asian racism, and anti-queerness that represented their experience of the pandemic. Perla explained how Lan came to be a contributor to the exhibition:

I was introduced to Lan by one of the former students from the MMSt [Master of Museum Studies] program, Megan Sue-Chue-Lam, a founder of MPOC [Museum Professionals of Colour]. Again, an example of community relations helping to build an exhibition. I told her I was a big fan of LAN's work and she told me they were friends and that's how it happened. I wanted to show how disproportionately the Asian community had been affected during the pandemic and LAN's work being so intersectional gave us such a great opportunity to intersect with queerness and front-line workers, etc.<sup>15</sup>

Moving into the series of connected rooms, there are photographs from *Bapiiwinan / Passages*; the performance collaboration by white settlers Julie Lassonde and A.M. Matte (known as

FrancoQueer) presented live events at different times as part of their contribution: 'The performance created by FrancoQueer is also another way to make us feel connected through community and to reflect on it through a live performance'.<sup>16</sup>

In the corner of the room, there is a dress on a mannequin that visitors are encouraged to touch (see Fig. 4).



*Fig. 4: Dress worn by Bom Bae, part of the Club Kid Alley and Isolation Mountain installation. Photo taken at the exhibition (copyright Faizan Rana).*



This dress was worn by Indian-Canadian drag artist Bom Bae on Canada's Drag Race Season 3. Most of this room is dominated by *Club Abinoojii Miikana gaye Bezhigowin Wajiw / Club Kid Alley and Isolation Mountain* by Passion Fruit Collective. This barrage of colour and words (some of which are slurs, repurposed and owned as expressions of power and deflection) frames a screen playing a drag film. There is a lounge chair with headsets, surrounded by a mountain of hoarded detritus containing a collage of personal items recognizable as realities of our daily lives that might not be visible outside our homes (see Fig. 5).



*Fig. 5: Club Abinoojii Miikana gaye Bezhigowin Wajiw / Club Kid Alley and Isolation Mountain. Photo taken at the exhibition (copyright Faizan Rana).*

Coded into this assemblage are items recognizable to the creators' communities:

Passion Fruit's installation and video are a reminder of the isolation many queer people experienced when we lost access to community spaces such as bars and dance clubs and how much we longed to come back together to dance and perform.<sup>17</sup>

When I first met Ty, a 2 Spirit artist, and other members of Passion Fruit, they were hesitant to engage with the museums. However, we talked about their needs and how to meet them with the resources we had. They said they'd think about it and get back to me. Later, Ty came back and ask if they could list Spadina House as the venue for a film based on Toronto's Club Kids' history, and the lack of access to community spaces for many queer folks during the lockdowns in a grant application they were working on. When they were awarded the grant, Toronto History Museums matched the funds for additional support. During my conversation with Ty, while visiting the museum and scouting for locations, I just knew they had to be part of Transforming Grief. I wanted something that

was going to be true to many queer stories and many of our lived experiences. I recognized the value of Ty's work pushing boundaries in a really creative way.<sup>18</sup>

On the opposite wall, two paintings by Black artist Gloria C. Swain, *E-onji-noojimoyin Gidakiiminaang / Healing Power of Nature*, remind visitors of the ways we were suddenly restricted from entering buildings during the pandemic (see Fig. 6). Many people turned to parks, lakes, walking, cycling and other ways of being outside in nature to feel free and heal. Tkaronto/Toronto sits on one edge of Oniatari:io (Beautiful Lake in Kanien'kéha), also known as Niigani-Gichigami (Leading Sea in Anishinaabemowin) and in settler geographies, as Lake Ontario.<sup>19</sup> The lake and the sustaining force of water, to clean us, as we washed our hands repeatedly, and to soothe us, flows throughout the exhibition, with wavy lines used as contours of connection.



Fig. 6: Detail from *E-onji-noojimoyin Gidakiiminaang / Healing Power of Nature*. Photo taken at the exhibition (copyright Kai Suzuki-Smith).

This water motif is reinforced by the audio creation *Gii-dagoshinoomagak Aakoziwin, gii-maajibiisaan / When the Pandemic Came, It Started To Rain* by Latinos Positivos, a community organization serving Latin American migrants living with HIV in Toronto, and David Wall. Their contribution uses words and sounds to share experiences of solitude as a soundscape for their personal pandemics.

The *Ozhibii'amawishin / Write To Me* interactive by Lenape and Potawatomi neurodiverse artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher documents a pen pal project for Indigenous people that uses writing to support each other during the pandemic. We are reminded of the power of written words, and how intimate the act of writing and receiving handwritten words can be – especially during the early days of the pandemic when in person contact was forbidden. This installation provides tools for writing and encourages us to remember the love embedded in person-to-person written communications, in acts of sending tangible expressions on paper, and the small thrill of receiving something handwritten in your mailbox (see Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: *Ozhibii'amawishin / Write To Me*. Notice the tactile paving on the floor – this is to guide partially sighted and blind visitors. Photo taken at the exhibition (copyright Faizan Rana).

In another 'touch me' piece, the ballroom attire work by Malik is accompanied by a video of their performance. This piece was created by FUNCTION, a collective formed after community members started working with Perla to make a safe community space for ballroom (see Fig. 8).

FUNCTION's participation in *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief* was instigated by Perla's initial community outreach activities, well before the exhibition was a reality. As explained by Perla, 'The video done by Malik and FUNCTION is so fabulous but at the same time the text on the wall also reminds us of the stigma that many folks from the Ballroom community still face today due to the AIDS pandemic and it's similarities with COVID-19'.<sup>20</sup>

The Redwood contributed a watercolor painting, a video, and a case of tools collectively entitled *Mazinichigewin, Debiniwewin, gaye Aabajichiganan Ji-onji-Aanjichigaadeg gegoon / Art, Outreach, and Tools for Change* (see Fig. 9).





Fig. 8: Malik ballroom attire, with encouragement to 'Please Touch'. Photo taken at the exhibition (copyright Kai Suzauki-Smith).



*Fig. 9: Contributions to the exhibition from the Redwood, with an explanation from curator Raven Spiratos (far left), as two students look on. Photo taken at the exhibition (copyright Faizan Rana).*

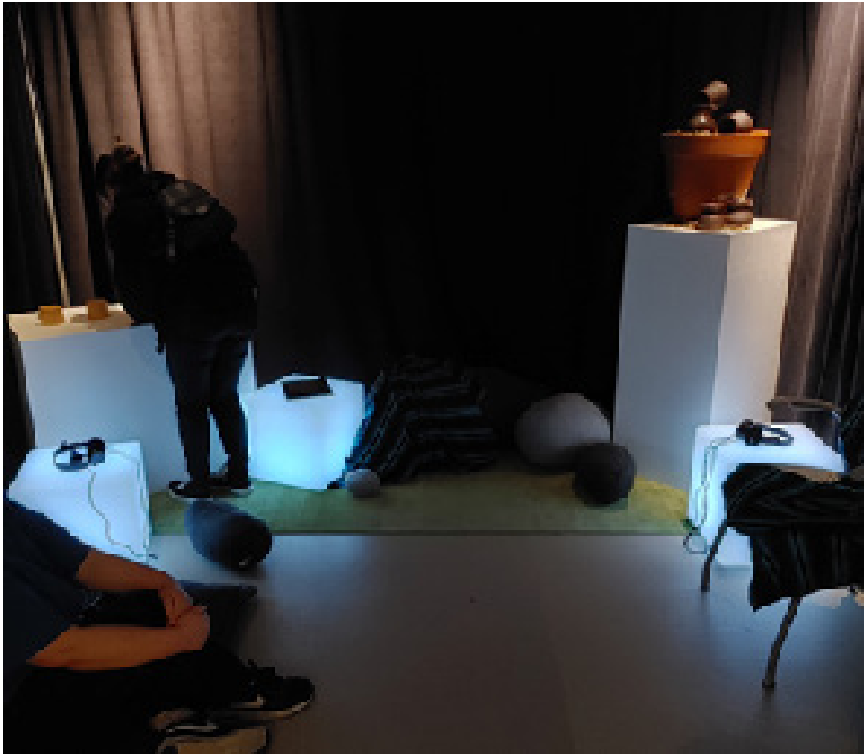
These items may seem somewhat incongruous with the exhibition theme. However, with the understanding that the Redwood is a women's shelter, and many women were subjected to additional violence during the pandemic lockdowns, this area makes sense. The tools are the contents of an HVAC (Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning system) repair kit. Training women as HVAC technicians to ensure their financial independence (and therefore, autonomy and safety) began before the pandemic. Attention to the quality of the air we breathe inside buildings, controlled by HVAC systems, was a positive outcome of the pandemic – making these technicians a high-demand profession. Perla's pre-existing friendship with Evan Tapper, a Toronto-based artist who has volunteered at the Redwood for many years, meant this vulnerable community was willing to participate in the exhibit because they knew they could trust the process and the outcomes. The relationships that fed into *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief* will not end when the exhibition ends – they will be nurtured and maintained into the future. This recalls the CMA standards shared earlier, that encourage longevity of relations over short term, extractive projects (Danyluk and MacKenzie 2022).

The final area of the exhibition is a quiet space, *Gaa-izhi-bangang / Quiet Room*. Visitors can decompress, reflect and bring the exhibition content into their own lived experiences (see Fig. 10).

This room is dark, with soft furnishings, music, and the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address in multiple languages (Kanien'keha, English, French). Curated by Euro-Canadian and Kanien'keha:ka scholar and curator Heather George, Executive Director of Woodland Cultural Centre, this space transformed Fort York's vault from storage for guns and war paraphernalia into a location of tranquil reflection:



...we transformed a place that was used to glorify war, the vault holding all the guns, and the British flag, into a space of healing. We also used the textiles from the women in Guatemala I worked with on the Weaving a Better Future exhibition from 2016. They formed cooperatives like TRAMA Textiles at the end of the genocide there, because many of the men were “disappeared”. Using the textiles in this space curated by Heather gave me the opportunity to continue to strengthen that ongoing relationship with the women. This also created a bridge between Indigenous communities here like Six Nations of the Grand River through Heather’s Woodland Cultural Centre connection, and Guatemala.<sup>21</sup>



*Fig. 10: Gaa-izhi-bangang / Quiet Room. Photo taken at the exhibition (copyright Laura Phillips).*

As expressions of decolonizing and Indigenizing done alongside, rather than as the focus of, the exhibition topic, *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief* surpassed our expectations of what a colonial fortress could contain. Perla and Spiratos transformed a space of ‘colonial hyper-masculinity’ into a space of present realities and new futures.<sup>22</sup> The exhibition puts rich attention to detail in all forms of accessibility (from the multi-lingual and multi-ability texts and navigation aids)<sup>23</sup> into conversation with diverse communities drawn together to share their stories. Phillips, as instructor, was thrilled that Perla and Spiratos were so generous with their time, sharing their presence and their processes as a prelude to the exhibition itself. Their enthusiasm and passion were infectious and inspiring – demonstrating that we can shape society by attention to equity and access needs. The live-ness, the love, the care, the community, the stories, the belongings, the space, the texts, the tangible (‘touch me’), and the intangible – these moments that make us humans all come together in this participatory exhibition.

The students were invited to share their reflections on the exhibition as part of the

(optional) weekly feedback/reflection form they submit following our classes.<sup>24</sup> Their responses demonstrate the wide range of positionalities present in our cohort, all of whom are named as co-authors.

It is a healing experience released from the people who left the pieces of their suffering on the exhibition. Each piece showed us the stages of the Pandemic Covid 19, and when I was watching this, I thought that I already forget this stage and that my son won't remember when the world was shut down because I made this experience the best for him. We camped almost every day in the living room because it was only him and me in that one small-bedroom apartment; sometimes, we just ate popcorn because it was fun, and I did not have money to buy anything else. But he will only remember there was a time when he and his mom slept in the living room for a long time and played all video games and ate a lot of popcorn. We also heal with the exhibitions (Student A).

I really appreciate the field trip. I appreciated Raven's commentary – it was excellent. I had gone through the exhibit before, and didn't 'get' it. It felt a bit like covid was too recent. I loved the quiet room. The best. Perfect. The wall quotes in many languages were awesome, braille, touch - all outstanding. But taking up the wall space with translation limits the amount of text commentary... So the limits of a colonial space I guess? The tools were cool. I didn't really 'get' a lot of the art, I'm better with languages (Student B).

I really, really, liked the quiet room. It was so peaceful, especially with the fountain. The boxes of medicinal plants were nice and I got to smell sweet grass for the first time. It smelled so good! The tactile nature of the exhibits was the best part for me. I liked being able to touch the paintings, the fabrics, or even just the relief of the waves on the wall. It was a level of interactivity and immersion that isn't really available at most museums (Student C).

Overall, I was impressed by the inclusiveness and accessibility of the *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief* exhibition. It is clear that the exhibition curators and staff have gone above and beyond to ensure that they are using English, French, and Anishinaabemowin in all of their materials. In addition to that, Braille is featured in all of their artwork descriptions, and they have incorporated tactile elements throughout the exhibition, enabling individuals who are visually impaired or blind to be able to learn about the artwork using Braille and all visitors to experience the artwork through touch. The attention to detail was astounding. As an example, if an individual who is visually impaired visits the museum, they can also feel the waves that we see painted throughout the exhibition, as they have been etched into a tactile surface (Student D).

One of the most memorable pieces for me, as a Latin American woman, was listening to the audio recordings from *Latinos Positivos*, a group of Latin American migrants living with HIV in Toronto as they reflected on the loneliness and grief they experienced during the pandemic. I found it powerful that the community was able to tell stories on their own terms, in their native language (Spanish), and that they had a channel through which they could speak to the solitude they experienced during the pandemic, and be listened to.

The exhibition was also transformative in its representation of queer communities in museums, as they did not follow the pattern that is sometimes seen in museums where queer bodies are often made to abide by respectability politics, and only show hetero-cis perspectives. Instead, as a disruptor to that Western hegemonic narrative, the exhibition showcases the rich diversity of stories from queer

communities, who often face intersecting and complex forms of oppression such as racism, transphobia, and homophobia, which were in many ways heightened through the pandemic. Finally, I also appreciated that the exhibition also had a quiet room, where individuals could sit in silence or listen to the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, listen to the sounds of nature, and small traditional medicines, and reflect on the powerful pieces of artwork they have seen, or sit in silence (Student E).

I was blown away by the attention given in this exhibit to accessibility concerns from Braille, easy-to-read text, translations, and layout of the space. It was also clear that great care was taken to engage the artists and respect their desires and their creative vision while also presenting the works in a multi-modal manner that increased accessibility for visitors to the exhibit. All the senses were engaged with sounds, visuals, tactile pieces, text, and even the scent of the traditional medicines in the quiet room. For me, the ability to touch Bombae's dress and Malik's ballroom jumpsuit as well as sit surrounded by Isolation Mountain were highlights (Student F).

This exhibit was truly a testament to how easy accessibility can be when you make it a priority. The way this exhibit was assembled, and the care and attention that was put into it, should be the standard. I would like to mention that the inclusion of a quiet room at the end was incredibly thoughtful, and a great way to end the exhibit. Overall, it was a diverse, tactile, and engaging exhibit. So much thought and care went into the curation of each installation and left viewers with lots to contemplate. Each piece was beautiful and unique in its own right while also coming together to create a cohesive, whole exhibit. They each played their own role under the theme but were tied together through a motif that left room for the installations to stand as an individual within the collective (Student G).

These quotes reveal the powerful resonance of this exhibition, and how the curatorial forces that shaped it made space for a forum of affective responses (Million 2014). The great strength of *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief* is the layering and welcoming of visitors with unique positionalities as active participants in this exhibition. The broad topic of the pandemic is something that impacted our lives in many similar ways. This exhibition recognizes that we bring ourselves and our lived experiences with us when we visit a museum or gallery. Understanding our unique selves and our ancestries lets visitors answer Peter Morin's (2014: 140) narrative therapy style question, 'When you go to the museum, who do you bring with you?' As seen in other exhibitions like *ćəsna?əm*, the city before the city, exhibitions that focus on listening and building community during their development demonstrate best practices based on UNDRIP and the TRC *Calls to Action* (Muntean et al. 2015; Wilson 2016). This exhibition exemplifies methods that museums and the wider GLAM sector can carry forward in essential decolonizing and Indigenizing work across this Land.

### **Carrying this Work Forward, in a Good Way**

To further tie this exhibition to the challenges of Reconciliation and settler reluctance, I will relay an incident shared by a student after one of our first classes. The student went to get something to eat during our mid-class break. In the elevator on the way back, an elderly white male professor asked the student what class they were returning to. When the student said the class was about museums, archives, and Reconciliation, the professor responded, 'What if you don't believe in Reconciliation?'. The student was taken aback by this exchange and shared it with me privately after the class. To me this exchange demonstrates how some sectors of society, especially those in positions of power, continue to enjoy their privileged position to

ignore Reconciliation imperatives (Snelgrove et al. 2014). The University of Toronto has a clear commitment to Reconciliation (University of Toronto 2017), yet clearly not all Faculty are choosing to engage with this.

I was reminded of the powerful concept of 'aanjigone' that I was introduced to during my own journey of perpetual conciliation. As relayed by Anishinaabek scholar Leanne Simpson (2011: 54-6),

...one needs to be very, very careful with making judgements and with the act of criticism. Aanjigone is a concept that promotes the framing of Nishnaabeg values and ethics in the positive. It means that if we criticize something, our spiritual being may take on the very things we are criticizing... Critique and revelation cannot in and of themselves create the kinds of magnificent change our people are looking for... Aanjigone, as I understand it, means to focus within...<sup>25</sup>

Applying this to how/if we should respond to people who do not share our beliefs in Reconciliation, we can choose to turn away, to focus our energy on modelling our own beliefs, rather than re-affirming and reflecting colonial violence and authority. This is what *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief* has done for marginalized communities in Tkaronto. By drawing on collective experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, Spiratos brings visitors into a place of common understanding from which we are launched into multiple, disparate, unique experiences. These reflective installations and artworks were created as uncompromising visions that affirm belonging, grief, joy, community, and ultimately, ways we connect through our humanity – even when we were forcibly confined because of the pandemic.

Articulating affect in an exhibition is a powerful way we can find and share joy instead of negativity. Focusing on how institutions can meet individual and collective needs to connect with community weaves decolonizing, Indigenizing, and forces of perpetual conciliation together into forces of change for social justice that are long overdue on this Land. Perla's desire to first meet the needs of communities located on the 'margins of the margins' (where he locates himself), demonstrates that curatorial processes have the power to move the 'centre' to the margins. This purposeful focus other-ward, on community and action, instead of individual career goals and personal gains, removes any final remnants of false objectivity that museums and other GLAM institutions cling to (Reilly 2018).<sup>26</sup> Whether or not we believe in Reconciliation, projects like *Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief* are creating a tsunami of change across this Land.

*Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin / Transforming Grief* is an excellent example of how community groups and ingenuity in activist curatorship, as described by Reilly (2018) can come together for layered narratives that reframe the ethics of this work, to challenge contemporary conversations around inclusion, accessibility, healing, representation, self-care, mental health, and the importance of embracing our unique selves. This exhibition is a successful model of the contemporary shift taking place as museums move from 'temple' to 'forum' modes of representation as encouraged by Southern Cheyenne museum director Richard West (2019). In writing this reflective Viewpoint, we aimed to bring in as many participatory opportunities as possible and to incorporate decolonizing, Indigenizing, and Reconciling actions.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Dan Bertrand, 'Canada, Ontario Governments Reach \$10B Settlement with the 21 Robinson Huron First Nations', CTV News: Northern Ontario 17 June 2023. <https://northernontario.ctvnews.ca/canada-ontario-governments-reach-10b-settlement-with-the-21-robinson-huron-first-nations-1.6445331>, accessed 26 October 2023; and Scott Miller, 'First Nation Wins Ownership of Sauble Beach Waterfront', CTV News: London 5 April 2023. <https://london.ctvnews.ca/first-nation-wins-ownership-of-sauble-beach-waterfront-1.6342060>, accessed 26 October 2023.

- 2 City of Toronto, 'Transforming Grief: Loss & Togetherness in COVID-19', Toronto History Museums 2023. <https://www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/history-art-culture/museums/transforming-grief-loss-togetherness-in-covid-19/>, accessed 26 October 2023. Our words are written in a mix of third person and first person. The first section is mostly in third person as it lays out the context of our experiences. The first person is written by Phillips, with additional quotes from anonymized students.
  
- 3 Anishinaabeg, Anishinaabek, Nishnaabe and Nishnaabeg refer to the same people. Their language is Anishinaabemowin.
  
- 4 Province of Ontario, 'Ontario Treaties and Reserves', 23 October 2023. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/map-ontario-treaties-and-reserves>, accessed 26 October 2023.
  
- 5 Tiffany Jana, 'The Differences Between Allies, Accomplices & Co-Conspirators May Surprise You', Medium 2 January 2022. <https://aninjusticemag.com/the-differences-between-allies-accomplices-co-conspirators-may-surprise-you-d3fc7fe29c>, accessed 26 October 2023.
  
- 6 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', United Nations 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrc-subsidiaries/expert-mechanism-on-indigenous-peoples>, accessed 26 October 2023.
  
- 7 Acesso Cultura, 'The Activist Museum: Going Deeper. With Armando Perla and María Acaso', 13 January 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p4LsFL3ZHo>, accessed 26 October 2023.
  
- 8 Armando Perla, 'Over a year ago, I started to get around Toronto with the objective of meeting with many of the amazing communities that have historically not engaged as much with museums...', Facebook 24 March 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/armando.perla/posts/pfbid02tzyCZ6uyotJ9D4ERUViYg5i9hjp1r6fYuNBmZFMYX1ZcMuBpnfMgyrhvQ8kTvo8l>, accessed 26 October 2023.
  
- 9 Armando Perla, former Curator, Toronto History Museums, personal communication, Zoom, 6 April 2023.
  
- 10 Perla, 'Over a year ago, I started to get around Toronto...'
  
- 11 Armando Perla, pers. comm., 6 April 2023.



- 12 Armando Perla, 'Special post about Club Kid Alley created by the Queer, racialized and non binary members of the Passion Fruit Art Collective in Toronto...', Facebook 27 March 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/armando.perla/posts/pfbid02tzyCZ6uyotJ9D4ERUViYg5i9hjp1r6fYuNBmZFMX1ZcMuBpnfMgyrhvQ8kTvo8l>, accessed 26 October 2023.
- 13 Armando Perla, pers. comm., 6 April 2023.
- 14 Lan 'Florence' Yee, 'Signage', n.d. <https://florenceyee.com/signage/>, accessed 26 October 2023.
- 15 Armando Perla, personal communication, review comment, 7 April 2023.
- 16 Perla, 'Over a year ago, I started to get around Toronto...'
- 17 Perla, 'Over a year ago, I started to get around Toronto...'
- 18 Perla, 'Special post about Club Kid Alley...'
- 19 Rowland Keshena Robinson, 'The Land, Space & Place', Maehkōn Ahpēhtesewen 4 November 2015. <https://onkwehonwerising.wordpress.com/indigenous-critical-theory-study-guide/glossary-of-indigenous-terminology/the-land-space-place/>, accessed 26 October 2023; The Decolonial Atlas, 'Haudenosaunee Country in Mohawk', 4 February 2015. <https://decolonialatlas.wordpress.com/2015/02/04/haudenosaunee-country-in-mohawk-2/>, accessed 26 October 2023.
- 20 Perla, 'Over a year ago, I started to get around Toronto...'
- 21 Armando Perla, pers. comm., 7 April 2023.
- 22 Armando Perla, pers. comm., 6 April 2023.
- 23 The texts and interpretation panels are presented in Anishinaabemowin, English, French, Braille, and American Sign Language [ASL].

- 24 The questions posed are: 1) What are you thinking about in relation to this week's topic? 2) What was your main take away from class today? 3) What has this week's readings, assignments and/or discussion inspired in your personal Reconciliation journey (journey of perpetual conciliation)? 4) Anything else to share? These additional questions were added for Week 12: Please share any thoughts, comments or observations if you would like your words included in an exhibition reflection, I will be coordinating for submission to a museum journal in mid-April.
- 25 This is a multi-page passage that I hate having to reduce to a few lines as this is so extractive and itself a violent form of citational appropriation. I include more of this text below, but I encourage all readers to locate the original text. **Aanjigone** 'In exploring this "ethic of non-interference" with Elder Gdigaa Migizi, the Nishnaabe concept of Aanjigone emerged. Aanjigone is the idea that one needs to be very, very careful with making judgements and with the act of criticism. Aanjigone is a concept that promotes the framing of Nishnaabeg values and ethics in the positive. It means that if we criticize something, our spiritual being may take on the very things we are criticizing. It promotes non-interference by bringing forth the idea that if someone else does wrong, the "implicate order" will come back on that person and correct the imbalance in some other way. Take an example for Gdigaa Migizi: if we "destroy the land to build a monster cottage on the side of a lake, we can expect this to come back on us in a negative way". There is no need to criticize or be angry with the perpetrators because they will pay the price for their destructive action, one way or another, and this will be mediated by the Spiritual world. Our responsibility is to live our lives according to the teachings and values that were given to us with great love by Gzhwe Mnidoo' (Simpson 2011: 54).
- 26 Nathan Sentance, 'Your Neutral Is Not Our Neutral', Archival Decolonist [-o-] (blog) 18 January 2018. <https://archivaldecolonist.com/2018/01/18/your-neutral-is-not-our-neutral/>, accessed 26 October 2023.
- 27 This Viewpoint is an expanded version of two short blog posts the class contributed to the ActiveHistory.ca blog immediately after our visit: Kennedy Colalillo et al., 'Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin: Wanichigewin Gaye Wijiijiwiwiwin Gii-Ayaag COVID-19 / Transforming Grief: Loss & Togetherness in COVID-19: Part 1 – Our Review and Exhibit Overview', Active History (blog) 24 May 2023. <https://activehistory.ca/blog/2023/05/24/activating-and-exhibiting-change-a-review-of-dazhiikigaadeg-maanendamowin-wanichigewin-gaye-wijiijiwiwiwin-gii-ayaag-covid-19-transforming-grief-loss-togetherness-in-covid-19-fort-york-24-marc/>, accessed 26 October 2023; and Kennedy Colalillo et al., 'Dazhiikigaadeg Maanendamowin: Wanichigewin Gaye Wijiijiwiwiwin Gii-Ayaag COVID-19 / Transforming Grief: Loss & Togetherness in COVID-19: Part 2 – Student Responses to the Exhibit', Active History (blog) 25 May 2023. <https://activehistory.ca/blog/2023/05/25/activating-and-exhibiting-change-a-review-of-dazhiikigaadeg-maanendamowin-wanichigewin-gaye-wijiijiwiwiwin-gii-ayaag-covid-19-transforming-grief-loss-togetherness-in-covid-19-fort-york-24-marc-2/>, accessed 26 October 2023.

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