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# From collection to community to collections again: Urban Indigenous women, material culture and belonging

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## Abstract

First Story Toronto – a community organization dedicated to the Indigenous histories of Toronto, Canada – is steward to a collection of items mostly made and collected during the 20th century. With origins in the Anglican Church Women, the collection reflects a time when policies and actions of the state and churches internalized colonial processes within Canada. Yet the donation of the ACW material to a Native woman and housing advocate in 1976 hints at the shifting political and cultural contexts of this collection. Native crafts were used by Indigenous women in the city in displays of both Indigenous sovereignty and multiculturalism. Recently, the collection has been taken up by another group of Indigenous women in the Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections project. Handling sessions with artefacts and ‘talking circles’, initially designed to research the role of objects in collective memory and life-history processes, have been appropriated by the participating seniors toward their own goals. The collection has become a source of continuing education, sparking the women to teach and learn beadwork and quillwork; compare life experiences among urban Indigenous people; question history-making processes; and visit museum stores to handle collections and learn with curators. The histories intersecting with this collection thus push back against a range of tropes, provide more nuanced insights into

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the lives and values of urban Indigenous women in Canada, and the ways collections are used in articulations of belonging among Indigenous peoples.

### **Keywords**

Anglican Church Women, belonging, collections, Indigenous women, urban Indigenous

## **Introduction**

Please convey to the Anglican Church Women's Association our sincere appreciation for their beautiful gift of Native artifacts along with the glass show case. We cannot fully express our inward appreciation for this generous gesture that you have made to us. We will always treasure the beautiful beadwork done by our people so many years ago. (Mildred Redmond to Mrs NR Clarke, 1976)

Mildred (Millie) Redmond, whose letter is excerpted above, was a significant figure in the development of Indigenous community organizations in Toronto during the latter half of the 20th century. Her letter to Mrs NR Clarke of the Anglican Church Women's group (ACW) is rich with insights about the multiple roles and agencies of the collection at the heart of this article and an on-going partnership involving the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (NCCT), a group of Anishinaabe and Cree seniors, and researchers at the University of Toronto and Michigan State University.<sup>1</sup> The materials received by Redmond became the foundation of a collection now stewarded by First Story Toronto (FST) at the NCCT. The collection is the focus of a seniors program we are involved with called Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections (MMMC). This initiative set out to explore the role of artefacts in collective and individual memory, heritage processes, and recent urban Indigenous histories in Canada. Since September 2013, our research team<sup>2</sup> has gathered with seniors every other week for artefact handling sessions and talking circles designed to encourage the seniors to speak about their life experiences and histories. We (the research team) adapted the project significantly in response to participating seniors' interest in material heritage and opportunities to develop their cultural and historical knowledge: visits to museum collections became a central component of the project. We continuously witness seniors connect to various Indigenous collections – not just those of their home territories. The connection is often expressed as an appreciation for the makers' ingenuity and craftsmanship. These are positive qualities that the Indigenous women in the 1960s and 70s, and the seniors today use to assess authenticity of objects. More importantly, ingenuity and craftsmanship come to define valuable cultural traits for each group of women, albeit in different ways. In the hands of Indigenous women in Toronto, the collection has helped people express cultural values they identify with and want to belong to. We begin with an examination of the ways Redmond and her peers utilized the collection to negotiate emerging multicultural senses of belonging in Canada in the 1970s. We then turn to the MMMC seniors' interactions with the collection and material culture more broadly to understand current expressions of belonging in the Toronto Indigenous community.



**Figure 1.** Footwear ‘made and worn by girls of JWA Hay River’. 2012.I.43.1.-2. © Photograph: Michael O’Rourke (MMMC).

### **From collection to community: The women’s auxiliary**

There is a history and consistency to the Toronto Indigenous community’s use of this collection (Figure 1), centred upon women and craft as educators and perpetrators of cultural practices and Indigenous identities. The collection received by Redmond originated with the ACW’s Costumes and Curios Department, established at the beginning of the 20th century and formed from items collected by missionaries throughout the world.<sup>3</sup> The items in the collections of the ACW were used ‘for instruction of the children in our junior branches’ (Anglican Church of Canada, 1936), missionary exhibitions, talks, pageants and plays. These activities were prolific. The ACW recorded in 1932, for example, that ‘The curator reports a very busy year, the curios having been borrowed 43 times and the costumes 70 times ... The total number of curios is now 1271’ (Diocese of Toronto, 1932). The ‘Curio Department’ raised funds for missions through loans of costumes and ‘curios’ and occasional sales of objects from around the world. In 1935, the range of countries, in addition to Canada, from which items came included India, Japan, Egypt, Palestine, ‘Africa’, British Guiana, China and ‘South America’ (Diocese of Toronto, 1935).

By the 1970s, the ACW could no longer ‘undertake the formidable task of looking after these valuable articles and co-ordinating bookings’ (Baker, 1985: 83), and decided that ‘these artifacts could be better preserved for posterity under controlled conditions and by experts’ (*Of interest*, nd). Materials were sent to major museums including the Royal Ontario Museum, Museum of Man (now Canadian Museum of History), and the Canadian Museum of Carpets and Textiles (now Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto),

while others were sold or given to the parishes who had often borrowed them (Baker, 1985: 83–84). The ‘North American Indian and Eskimo’ curios were discussed at the ACW meeting of 9 June 1976 where it was agreed the materials would be dispersed quickly and at the discretion of the Executive Committee. Indigenous materials were deposited at the Royal Ontario Museum and with Redmond; it is unclear if Indigenous items were sent elsewhere (Toronto Diocesan Anglican Church Women, 1976).

At least 67 objects were donated by the ACW to Redmond. This number is determined by tags attached to objects stamped ‘Property of the Toronto Diocesan A.C.W.’ No inventory list accompanying the donation survives; there may have been more ACW objects in the collection whose tags became detached and lost. Unlike many missionary collections, it is unclear exactly who originally collected these objects, from whom, and under what circumstances. Missionary collections tend to reflect the personalities and circumstances of the collector as well as the colonial and cultural contexts in which the objects were gathered (Cannizo, 1998: 166; Gardner, 2002). In contrast, the ACW collection was collected in many communities across Canada by multiple people associated with the Anglican Church whose identities remain largely unknown. In some cases the tags attached to the objects provide an inventory number, an object name, and occasionally an indication of their origin such as ‘Plains moccasins’ or ‘doll made in Pangnirtung’. In most cases, however, the tags simply describe objects as ‘N.A. Indian’. Objects from the ACW collection include moccasins, gloves, dolls, model tikinaagan, moccasin vamps, baskets, and wall pockets. There are also larger items such as an Athapaskan baby belt, a beaded hide shirt, a Plains beaded gunpowder pouch, and a gun bag repurposed into a child’s quiver. The objects in the collection could fall under the categories of curios, personal mementoes, souvenir art and perhaps even trophies of conversion, similar to other missionary collections. Without further documentation on the circumstances of collection, however, these remain assumptions.

Evidence from some of the materials themselves and research carried out by a previous First Story coordinator, Monica Bodirsky, indicate that four of the items were made by children in residential schools, many of which were run by the Anglican Church (Bodirsky, personal communication with Krmpotich, 5 June 2014). For example, one pair of footwear was tagged with the description, ‘made and worn by girls of JWA Hay River’ (Figure 1). The Anglican Church ran a residential school at Hay River, Northwest Territories, and the JWA refers to its junior women’s auxiliary (Claire Wilton, email to Knight, 13 March 2014). There is also a wood etching of the residential school at Carcross, Yukon, by a teenage boy named Moses Tizya<sup>4</sup> (Figure 2). Residential schools were part of a systematic, aggressive assimilation policy under which Indigenous children suffered forcible removal from their families, denigration of their cultures, and well-documented physical and sexual abuse. The residential school experience is one significant factor in the movement of Indigenous peoples to cities (Howard and Lobo, 2013; Janovicek, 2008; McCallum, 2014). There is a confounding irony that at the same time most residential schools were trying to remove all cultural influences from pupils’ lives, they encouraged the production of craft goods suitably Native enough to circulate in tourist economies and public programming (for West Coast parallels, see Krmpotich, 2014: 126; Raibmon, 2005).



**Figure 2.** Moses Tizya's etching of Choooutla Residential School, Carcross, Yukon. 2002.1.7. © Photograph: Emma Knight (MMMC).

It is unclear exactly how materials came to be sent to Redmond but, by 30 June, Redmond had written her thank-you letter for the donation. At the time Redmond wrote her letter to Mrs Clarke, she was the Director of Anduhyaun, meaning 'our home' in Anishinaabemowin. Anduhyaun is a women's shelter she helped found in 1968 – the first of its kind in Canada. Anduhyaun was a refuge for young women moving to the city; they came seeking careers, opportunities, and homes, often after leaving residential school or more remote reserves from across the province (Janovicek, 2008: 21–22). Redmond was also instrumental in setting up the non-denominational 'Ladies Auxiliary' at the NCCT. This Auxiliary included Dorothy Jones, Verna Johnston, and Hettie Sylvester, among many others. They mobilized traditional craft items to raise funds to support Indigenous social events and burgeoning community services, as well as awareness of and respect for Indigenous peoples whose movement to cities from rural and reserve communities was intensifying. In 1951, 6.7 percent of Indigenous peoples lived in Canadian cities, but by 1981 this number had increased to 28 percent (Howard and Lobo, 2013). For the most part, Indigenous peoples were moving to cities to access employment, education, and healthcare. As their presence increased, so too did negative stereotypes, racism, and discrimination (Howard and Lobo, 2013; Sanderson and Howard-Bobiwash, 1997).

One of the significant ways in which the women countered these stereotypes was through their vocalization of ideas about the relationship between craft production, authenticity, and urban Native cultural identity (see Bartra, 2003; Tice, 1995). For example, in a description of the Auxiliary's craft sale displays in the NCCT's newsletter in

1966, the women's vigilance over standards and the types of items desirable for sale were noted:

Mrs. Dorothy Jones personally selects all the articles in the display in an effort to be sure that the handicraft is a true representation of high quality Indian handicraft, indicative of the ability of the old-time craft workers ... Here you may find lovely hand-loomed necklaces of beads, (made by Indians long before the Japanese made replicas for the tourist trade), fur-trimmed moccasins, beautiful woven baskets for various purposes, birchbark and horn rattles, drums and quill boxes ... At the present time, Mrs. Jones could use more birchbark and sweetgrass items, but remember – of careful workmanship! (Canadian Indian Centre of Toronto, 1966)

Audiences for this notice included both Indigenous community members from whom items of 'careful workmanship!' were solicited, as well as a significant number of non-Indigenous readers who could be assured of the authenticity of their potential future purchases. These transactions would in turn bolster recognition of the urban forms of Indigeneity advocated by the Auxiliary who mobilized authenticity in the way Jones (2010: 197) describes it as a powerful 'means for people to negotiate their own place in a world characterized by population displacement and fragmentation of communities'. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Ladies' Auxiliary operated within the political context of social activism in which cultural revitalization played a central role and was manifested in pow-wow dancing and performance, fashion/dress, music, fine arts, and crafts produced largely by women (Lee, 2009; Lobo and Peters, 2001; Manitowabi et al., 2014; Nagel, 1996). In this article, we continue to use the term craft for the items. Following Read (2014), craft is here conceptualized through the maker primarily, with ample space for multiple and combined materials, techniques, practices and functions (Alfoldy, 2009; Risatti, 2007) likely outside the 'traditional' range promoted by the Ladies Auxiliary. Read is particularly interested in the ways craftspeople honour materials through the making process (see also Dewald, 2006). Such honouring resonates with the Ladies Auxiliary's call for 'careful workmanship'; in their handiwork and craftsmanship, makers can honour the materials, themselves as producers, their mentors or teachers, consumers, and spiritual beings. As discussed further below, First Nations women presently engaging with the collection continue to express feelings of honour and pride in the careful and clever workmanship of their predecessors.

Although this is the name they gave themselves, 'Auxiliary' is a misnomer. During the 1960s and 1970s, these women were central rather than auxiliary to the NCCT's organization, day-to-day activities, and origins in the 1950s YMCA North American Indian Club, the establishment of which is also credited to Millie Redmond (Obonsawin and Howard-Bobiwash, 1997). Not unlike their church auxiliary counterparts, the women organized social events, clothing and food drives, and hospital visiting. The Auxiliary also conducted counseling and inmate-visiting at the Kingston Prison for Women (approximately 250 km east of Toronto), providing the women prisoners with craft supplies to make items which were in turn sold in Toronto (Howard-Bobiwash, 2003).

When Redmond penned her letter thanking the ACW for the transfer of the collection, she was able to detail how the items had already been integrated into the Anduhyaun women's pavilion in the annual multi-cultural festival called 'Caravan'. Beginning in 1969 and running for 35 years, Caravan was a week-long festival during which visitors

purchased a passport that enabled them to attend events, demonstrations, dance and food displays, and exhibits at multiple cultural pavilions throughout Toronto (Javed, 2009).<sup>5</sup>

The Anduhyaun pavilion attracted very large crowds and the Ladies' Auxiliary participated with their own craft sales table alongside demonstrations of basket weaving, singing, drumming, and dancing, and food sampling which included bison burgers, venison stew, moose meat, wild rice, and corn soup (Caravan, 1976). In noting to Mrs Clarke that 7000 people came through the pavilion, Redmond highlighted the 'many comments and compliments on our display' and expressed her hope that ACW members were able to see it, or might in future visit the craft room at Anduhyaun (Redmond to Clarke, 1976). Following on Sear (2000) in her analysis of Australian Aboriginal women's presence alongside their displays of shellwork, Nugent (2014: 78) describes their integration into 'the repertoire of display, in which they served as an authorizing of authenticating presence, proclaiming what the objects they made could not'. In displaying the ACW collection alongside their own creations, the Toronto Indigenous women were potentially aligning the quality of their productions with the admirable past handiwork of 'our people', educating the non-Indigenous public with authenticating conceptualizations of the value of the objects (not 'Japanese replicas for the tourist trade'), and in this process also the 'realness' of urban Indigenous peoples (see Howard-Bobiwash, 2003; Peters, 1996).

Caravan reflects broader Canadian policy trends and hegemonic discourse around the integration of both immigrants and Indigenous peoples into a supposedly inclusive model of multicultural citizenship. This model advanced the construction of a modern Canadian state through a depoliticizing dominant discourse that promoted measured and sanitized 'folkloric' cultural diversity through 'songs, food, dances, handicrafts' (Thornhill, 1999: 85; see also Schreder, 1990: 194–195). However, for many groups targeted by this policy, participation in events such as Caravan also provided opportunities for the production of counter-hegemonic and self-determined representation. Caravan highlights the ways in which relationships across multiple social and political communities shape vernaculars of belonging, or cultural citizenship (Ramirez, 2007), and are particularly salient in creative material cultural expression (Wilmott, 2010: 183). As argued by Ramirez (2007: 23) in the case of Indigenous women:

... race, tribal nation, and gender should be non-hierarchically linked as categories of analysis in order to understand the breadth of our oppression as well as the full potential of our liberation in the hope that one day, we can belong as members of our homes, communities, and tribal nations.

For Toronto's Indigenous women, their homes, communities and tribal nations were (and continue to be) multicultural and inter-tribal.

While the collection came to Millie Redmond in her capacity as director at Anduhyaun, there is no record of when or why it came to be in the possession of the NCCT. It was likely through her close association with its active women's group, among whom were other members with connections to Anduhyaun (Redmond to Clark, 1976; Vanderburgh, 1977). In Redmond's thank-you letter to the ACW, she noted that they lacked space in Anduhyaun's building 'to keep the beautiful artefacts along with our crafts' (Redmond to Clarke, 1976). At the time of the ACW donation, the NCCT had just purchased a spacious and permanent community-owned property. The new space

allowed for the opening of a craft shop, operated by Auxiliary women, most notably Hettie Sylvester. In an oral history recorded in 1982, Sylvester's recollections of how she started and ran the craft shop illustrate how the women's organization of craft production and sales generated not only economic development, but also a space for fostering positive identity, pride and strength among the members of the growing urban Indigenous community who visited her in the shop:

I said, 'Let's get Indian Crafts'. I always had in my mind that I was an organizer. When I got to be president I was the busiest person, there was a project going on every month, fundraising or something ... I enjoy[ed] working there, and not only as a salesperson. A lot of people come in and talk to me as their mother, I think. They come talk to me and tell me their problems. It is really interesting to listen to them and what they go through. I don't know why, there was a counselling room back there, but maybe they see me as motherly, I don't know. I liked it. I enjoy talking to these people. (Native Canadian Oral History Project, 1982: 9–10)

Their authority mediated over the craft shop sales counter and in other craft display venues, Hettie Sylvester and other women ensured the continuity in the city of traditional social structures in which women serve as advisors and cultural transmitters. These roles are carried out in subtle ways not readily captured in concepts of female leadership or activism (Applegate Krouse et al., 2009). They are manifest in the intimacies created and maintained in symbolic relations of kinship – 'maybe they see me as motherly' – and other extended forms such as Nokomis (grandmother), aunties and sisters (see Anderson, 2011). As described in Lobo's (2009) analysis of 'urban clan mothers' in the San Francisco Bay Area, Auxiliary women acted as extended family, as sources of information about cultural matters and community activities, fostered 'a sense of collective responsibility and hospitality, which are expressions of a strongly-held cultural ideal', and provided 'welcoming anchors in the otherwise highly fluid and complex urban Indian community' (see also Robinson and Barnard, 2007, for an Australian parallel).

In closing her thank-you letter to the ACW, Redmond wrote, 'We feel very happy that we were given the opportunity to demonstrate to others that as native women we too can show that by working hard [we] can accomplish community involvement in Metro Toronto' (Redmond to Clarke, 1976). In light of the citizenship projects of which Redmond and urbanizing Indigenous people were the targets, her words represent a negotiation and reformulation of powerfully hegemonic rhetorics, as Indigenous women acted from culturally-diverse perspectives which nonetheless held in common experiences of politicized identities, cultural appropriation and devaluation, and the need to affirm Indigenous belonging and build strong self-determined communities in cities. Understood through a framework of cultural citizenship, in Toronto, this engagement in community-making was particularly palpable in women's labour in craft production, marketing and sales, acquisition, teaching and learning among themselves and with others.

Since acquiring the collection from Redmond, the NCCT has accumulated an extensive historical record of the development and evolution of this contemporary community. In addition to the ACW materials, the NCCT collected contemporary Indigenous art, photographic and archival materials, oral history recordings, and artefacts and craft items

from other sources. Important in this history is the development of First Story Toronto (FST), founded in 1995 as the Toronto Native Community History Project by a group of Indigenous community members and non-Indigenous allies, through the leadership of the late Rodney Bobiwash, an Indigenous historian and activist, and Heather Howard-Bobiwash. The Toronto Native Community History Project developed the mandate:

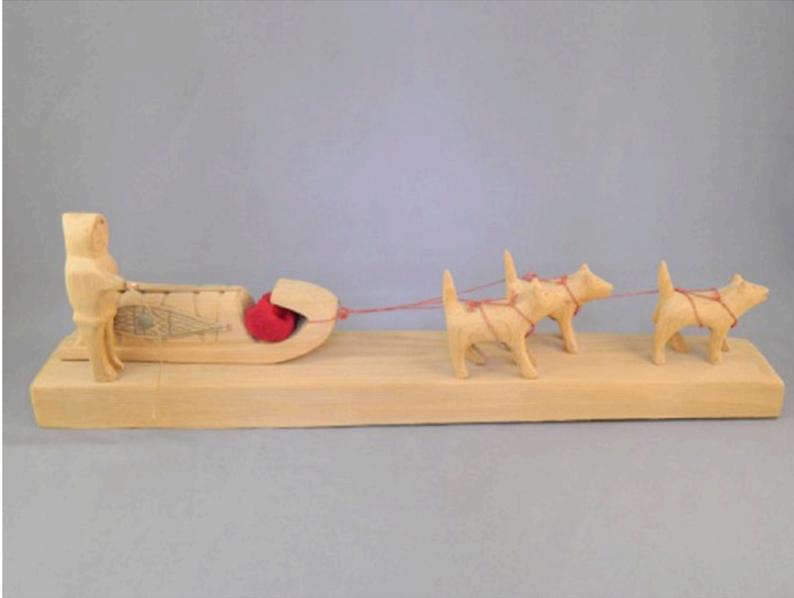
To hold faith with our ancestors. To speak our memory. To promote the history of Aboriginal people in the Toronto area from time immemorial to the present, and for the future. To teach and share in the spirit of friendship, and with the goal of eliminating racism and prejudice. (Boissoneau and Howard-Bobiwash, 2000: 5)

These goals guided the History Project's actions throughout the 1990s and 2000s, which include community history classes, publications, oral history projects, and a bus tour of the city from Indigenous perspectives. These tours continue today and have been adapted to a mobile device app also called First Story Toronto that re-replaces Indigenous histories back onto the geography of Toronto and maps current cultural events. FST is the current steward of the collection.

The representational politics of FST's mandate has roots in the actions of Millie Redmond and her peers whose work in community organizing was entwined with messaging about urban Indigenous people. In particular, craft production and sales generated opportunities for both public education and for building internal community belonging as the interpretation and exchange of materials were utilized to defeat stereotypes and promote the cultural authenticity of urban Indigenous people. Toronto has historically been a gathering place for Indigenous peoples. It is located within the overlapping territories of the Wendat, Anishinaabek and Haudensaunee peoples. In the Wendat language, Toronto refers to a fishing weir and, metaphorically, to the importance of this cosmopolitan site where many people gathered for ceremonial, trade, and celebratory occasions. Indigenous peoples from across Canada and the globe continue to meet in the city, though Anishinaabek and Haudensaunee continue to constitute the majority of the contemporary Indigenous population of some 80,000 people (Sanderson and Howard-Bobiwash, 1997; see Howard and Lobo, 2013, on challenges of determining urban Indigenous population numbers). Within this setting, the NCCT is a multi-purpose social services and cultural organization, with key programs serving youth and seniors. Their constituents include Indigenous citizens, but also non-Indigenous citizens of, and tourists to, the city. The collection thus resides in a site where senses of belonging are continuously being tested, explored and affirmed.

## **From community to collections: The memory, meaning-making and collections women**

Given the historical context just described, it is unsurprising that the majority of the seniors who participate in the Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections (MMMC) project are women. After approximately a year of planning, the project launched in the Toronto Indigenous community in September 2013. The project sought to increase the relevancy of the collection stewarded by FST. The collection has grown to over 150 items. For two



**Figure 3.** Wigwamen Terrace in downtown Toronto, Canada. © Photograph: Michael O'Rourke (MMMC).

decades, much of the collection was on display at the NCCT, but the hides, quills and textiles were becoming vulnerable to light and insects. It became less clear what kinds of engagements with the collection were best for people and for the pieces.

At the outset of the MMMC project, we sought to understand how physical interactions with a collection of more recent Indigenous heritage could improve our understanding of the role of material culture in collective and individual memory and the construction of heritage. We also sought to provide a space that encouraged urban Indigenous life histories as part of Indigenous histories of Canada. To accomplish this, our team hosted bi-weekly artefact handling sessions paired with talking circles among the seniors who frequent the NCCT, many of whom live in the adjacent seniors' housing, Wigwamen Terrace (see Figure 3). The sessions themselves were held in the events room at Wigwamen, a space that is familiar to the seniors. Our team set a preliminary schedule for 8 months of meetings, identifying groups of people and/or groups of artefacts as focal points for the sessions. For example, we initially planned to bring a wide range of materials out for seniors to get a sense of their interests. We also planned sessions focused specifically on beadwork, and on basketry and quillwork, that might attract craftspeople. The items were laid out in the middle of a large table when the seniors arrived. Tags were removed from objects, and in most cases objects were laid directly on the table. Pieces that needed more gentle handling were prepared by Emma Knight, using foam core, twill tape and/or acid free tissue for support and to visually signal fragility to handlers. We always began by having lunch together and sometimes also began our session with a prayer from elder Jacqui Lavalley if she was able to attend. Two digital recorders were

left running at either end of the large table, and research assistants took notes to track who was speaking at what times (to help with transcription), to track which objects people interacted with and how they did so, and to record participant-observation comments about the sessions. Seniors could choose to be anonymous or named within the record, with the knowledge that the recordings and transcriptions would be used for research and subsequently archived with First Story Toronto.

A handful of male seniors participated on occasion, but a core group of 8 to 10 women attended regularly, began to express dismay if they had to miss a session, and at the start of 2014, committed to an on-going, sustainable schedule of sessions, with their ultimate goal being a visit to the Smithsonian in November 2014, followed by a visit to the Canadian Museum of History in January 2015.

In addition to handling sessions and talking circles, and at the behest of the seniors, we visited behind-the-scenes at the Royal Ontario Museum with curators and collections staff; visited the University of Toronto's Department of Anthropology to learn about a pre-European-contact village site and its archaeological materials with a ceramic expert; invited a respected seer to sit with pieces of the collection and convey to the group what he sensed about the people connected to the objects; had one participant teach others how to do porcupine quillwork on birch bark; had a research assistant and a senior teach others how to make dreamcatchers; practiced how to design and bead on cloth; invited First Nations artist and researcher Phil Cote to speak about his work on chiefs and heroes; hosted a language-learning session where the entire team learned basic Anishinaabemowin sounds and phrases; attended the two-day Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC)<sup>6</sup> second annual research conference; toured the exhibition *Before and After the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes* at the Art Gallery of Ontario; visited the Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives for a curatorial talk with beadwork historian Naomi Smith, a tour of the collaboratively-produced exhibition *We Are Here*, and a session with Inuit artworks; and visited the Museum of Inuit Art for an artefact handling session.

The seniors' requests for additional kinds of sessions are motivated by their interest in learning more about cultural practices and history through material heritage. Primarily, the seniors have taken on this project as an opportunity for their own intellectual growth and personal reward – as a kind of continuing education opportunity that provides stimulation for their minds and bodies. For some, the very ability of the project to get them out of their apartments is valued; that they then engage in an activity they deem worthwhile makes the outing even more rewarding (see also Jacques, 2007: 156). Unlike other projects that sought to connect seniors with common objects from the seniors' youth or early adult years (Jacques, 2007; Phillips, 2008), we were (a) uncertain to what extent objects in the collection would be familiar to the seniors, and (b) found seniors had a greater interest in interacting with objects that preceded their own lifetimes. The seniors are keen to learn with and through material heritage, but also yearn to spend time with, and learn from, 'really old' materials. The collection has few 'really old' materials and so we have endeavoured to connect the seniors with collections featuring a greater number of pre-1880 materials. Through time, the seniors began applying their growing historic knowledge to their own sense of self and their place within broader Indigenous and Canadian histories.



**Figure 4.** Carved wooden scene depicting a hunter with sled and dogs that frequently sparks memories and knowledge of living in the bush and on traplines. 2012.I.75. © Photograph: Emma Knight (MMMC).

The seniors' desire to be with older artefacts sits in tension with their response to the souvenir art in the collection such as moccasins, dolls, small quill baskets, birchbark canoes, small wood carvings and beaded picture frames. All the women we work with have experience making, selling, or watching the production of craft goods. Mary operated the craft store, for example, and discussed her experiences with artists, shoppers and foreign businesses during sessions. Parts of the collection sparked reminiscences of Caravan and the fun the women had staffing craft tables, organizing pavilion activities and visiting other pavilions. Their reminiscences include prominent women, especially Verna Johntson, who are remembered for their community leadership and capabilities. More often, the items formed the focus of family stories: of sibling hijinx and painful encounters with porcupine quills; of a sister's funeral; of the smell of tamarack and the glow of candlelight in wintertime in the family's cabin; of a beloved grandfather's whittling, and his icy, snotty, 'walrus' moustache overhead as they travelled by dog-sled (Figure 4). These are precisely the kinds of stories we hoped the materials would elicit (on the range of responses within object-based reminiscence work, see also Arigho, 2008). The detail, breadth and depth of their responses encourage us to think anew about these objects, not only by the term 'souvenir art', but potentially also as 'kinship objects'. For the seniors, these objects frequently evoke memories of 'unmarked exchanges' of kinship (Cartsen, 2000; Krmpotich, 2014; Weston, 1997). The objects do not mediate their relations with a cultural other (non-Indigenous tourists or shoppers), but rather with their own family lives and relations.

This proximity to the women's lives is what – for the researchers on the team – added such potential to the collection; we saw these pieces as having the capacity to better integrate contemporary urban Indigenous experience into our sense of Indigenous histories in Canada. But for the participants, such proximity to their own lives very often lessens the historic value of these objects.

The seniors' efforts to identify for us more precisely what characteristics of 'really old' artefacts interest them touch upon their senses of authenticity, adaptation, and appropriation. 'Things made by hand' (i.e. not with a sewing machine) are perceived with a greater degree of authenticity, as are items of entirely organic materials. Women smell hides to double check for the hand-smoking scent of authenticity, or look inside for evidence of hand-stitching. When with hand-made, 'natural' objects, seniors tend to speak of ingenuity and adaptation rather than assimilation or appropriation. Here it is important to note that it is Indigenous appropriation of Euro-Canadian ways that they are referring to – a practice not always spoken of favourably by the seniors. There is a certain amount of seeking out 'pure' Indigenous cultural items. Through repeated engagements with the objects and with each other, however, the seniors are interrogating their own ideas and biases. The authenticity of beads was a topic for discussion one day, for example, when the seniors gently chided and reminded each other that glass beads are an indicator of European contact and reflect both the adoption of European materials and the adaptation of an Indigenous practice. In closing the gap between earliest traditions of seed beads, glass trade beads and our own attempts at beading, the current group of seniors is moving toward an appreciation of the objects reminiscent of the values of the women in the 1960s and 70s. Careful workmanship (as encouraged by Dorothy Jones), rather than the material of the bead, is becoming a marker of authenticity for them as we look at a growing range of beadwork. As researchers, we are also coming to hear expressions of 'careful workmanship' as an indication of 'clever hands' (cf. Collison, 2006) – a sign of the aptitude of the maker to innovate, problem solve, and thrive in their surroundings, an amalgam of intelligence, environmental knowledge, and skilled hands.

In one case, near the beginning of the project, one senior expressed her interest in those things that look 'cruder', meaning pieces that are more roughly finished – which matched her presumption that this reflected manual rather than mechanical production. After further discussion, we came to understand that, for Orrice, a cruder finish indicates less influence from Euro-Canadian tools. For her, a 'cruder' piece has greater authenticity and allows her to feel as though she is learning more about Indigenous histories rather than Canadian histories. While her opinions are perhaps the most dramatic expression of their kind within the group, they draw our attention to the vocabularies used by the seniors to express their sense of the objects and their makers. As the project continued, Orrice found herself drawn to highly utilitarian archaeological materials. For her, these epitomized the makers' ingenuity and self-sufficiency. 'Crudeness', in her vocabulary, is not negative but rather an indication of the makers' manual dexterity and skill. Other seniors in the group more readily identify ingenuity in highly decorated objects like bandolier bags, and painted hide coats. Still, utilitarian objects like duck-bill 'soothers' packed with maple syrup, fishing hooks, and rice beaters, draw substantial interest among the seniors. These Indigenous technologies were interpreted by seniors as evidence of deep ecological knowledge, dexterity and industriousness, and fulfilling social

responsibilities. Over the course of the project, it also became clearer to us as researchers that these capabilities constitute a collective historical experience the women are extremely proud of. They are willing to be defined by a cultural identity where these are prominent characteristics. In contrast, the seniors actively resist being defined by victim identities tied to residential schooling, or cultural identities defined by stereotypes or a prescriptive list of practices.

The MMMC project has been interpreted by participants as being focused on ‘artefacts’, ‘history’ and ‘heritage’ – concepts that are regularly articulated by the seniors as referring to time periods prior to their life spans *or* to experiences on the land in family territories rather than in the city.<sup>7</sup> Phillips (2002: 62) notes that ‘these useful and personal objects are regarded by contemporary First Nations communities as important and traditional cultural and aesthetic heritage.’ We found it necessary to leave open the question of whether these connections existed for the seniors in the project. During one session, for example, we asked seniors to bring an object from their own lives that they felt would help them share a story about themselves. Few felt they had suitable objects; they told us they didn’t feel they had things that were proper examples of an ‘artefact’ or ‘heritage’. Orrice chose to bring her mother’s hymnal. Her story begins not with the book itself, but from a discussion with the group of her own curiosity and her need to get to the bottom of things. The project as a whole seems to be serving this curiosity for her. She would often describe herself as different from the other women, and felt she was not as Native as they were because of a lack of shared experiences such as living on the reserve or being sent to residential school. The hymnal became a hinge one day that led Orrice to re-characterize her life and sense of belonging:

... if you stop and think of it, I have that book from my mother – my mother played a beautiful piano – and this is a book she carried with her all the time and she could sing and speak in Indian *like their mothers did too probably*. It’s a beautiful, mournful – to hear them singing. It’s more beautiful in Indian than white culture when it comes to hymns. They make it sound so much sadder. It is absolutely beautiful. *That I heard all my life* because I went over [to the reserve] to every funeral going. And wedding. Whether I knew the people or not. (emphasis added)

Another woman at the session, Evelyn, said that that was what she would have brought too – her mother’s hymnal – while another senior responded by describing her father as ‘a Bible thumper’ and recalled loathing him (or anyone) preaching to her. In this exchange, they uncovered a shared experience among them. Whether this is the experience they would choose as the basis for a shared cultural identity is unclear. In their voicing of lives lived, the seniors are expressing concepts akin to anthropological concepts of culture as a verb, as something practiced and lived, rather than as a noun, as something one ‘has’ (cf. Cowan et al., 2001) comprised of a defined set of characteristics. Lingering, however, are their dreams of what their contemporary cultural experience *might* be. Most noticeably in our sessions, these dreams include fluency in their language, and the knowledge and opportunities to make material items like moccasins, mittens, and tanned hides.

We are coming to understand what has heritage or historical value for the seniors, and why. Despite their declared interest in ‘really old’ things, the seniors’ appreciation of

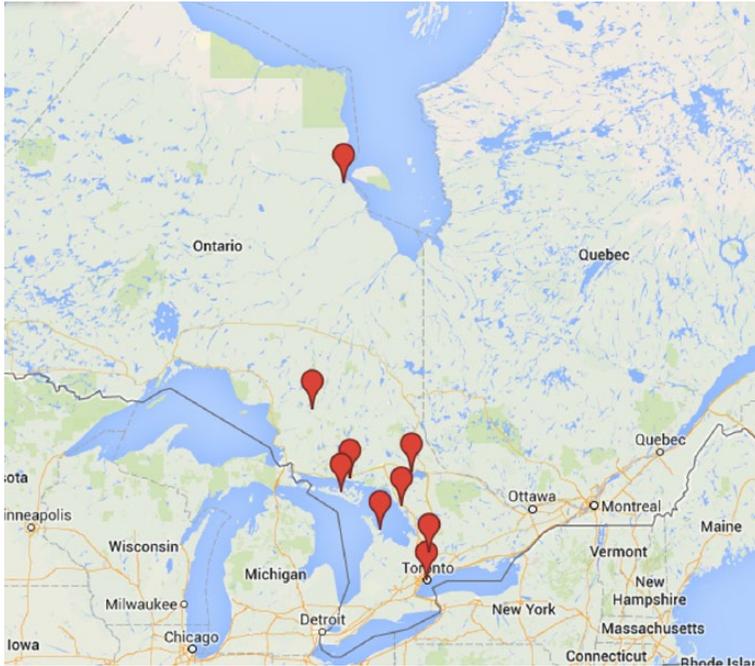


**Figure 5.** ‘Active touching’ and exploring of an unknown artefact during a handling session. © Photograph: Michael O’Rourke (MMMC).

ingenuity cuts across time periods and types of collections. We are respecting the direction set for us by the seniors and doing what we can to develop their sense of Anishinaabe and Cree historical fluency. Doing so respects our research and governance protocol with FST that identifies Indigenous sovereignty as a priority for all the NCCTs activities.

Interestingly, it also means that the seniors themselves are developing ways of ‘curatorial seeing’. As a group, we explore an object for its material clues and for the traces of human thought and action. The project appeals to seniors who value material culture as an entry into historical understanding both in terms of people, events, and places as well as understanding historical processes, and how history itself is made. As the seniors have visited multiple museum collections, they have begun to compare objects to further refine our understandings of their uses, meanings and histories. We collectively research by consulting archives, texts and experts to improve our understanding of the items and their cultural and historical contexts. These are actions taken on by the seniors at handling sessions and talking circles, when we visit museum collections, and in some cases, in their own leisure time.

During one session, we puzzled over the function of what appeared to be a short, narrow shovel (Figure 5): could it be a large ladle for stirring a big kettle or pot, a child’s snow shovel, an early lacrosse stick, pre-netting? Why was it painted, the seniors wondered? Why did it have a slight lip or edge on the scoop part? Our process of curatorial seeing in this case resembled what Bernadette Lynch (2008: 269) has called ‘active touching’. In the intervening week, project member Emma Knight uncovered a very similar item in the online database of the Cree Cultural Centre in Ouje-Bougoumou, Quebec. We printed out the record and brought it along to the next session: the Cultural Centre listed it as a shovel for use on traplines to retrieve animals from under the snow.



**Figure 6.** Map showing birthplaces of seniors from Ontario, Canada, plus their current home of Toronto. Created by Cara Krmpotich using Google Maps (MMMM).

While many accepted the answer, one senior was sceptical: she had done her own research and learned that lacrosse sticks were solid before the use of a netted pouch.

### The effects of belonging

One unanticipated outcome of the project is its capacity to help us re-imagine our sense of ‘source community’ for museums and collections. The population of Toronto (the 4th largest city in North America) is culturally diverse and so is its Indigenous population. Within the project, the seniors come from different communities,<sup>8</sup> both Anishinaabe and Cree (Figure 6). Many seniors were born on the northern and western shores of Lake Huron, while others grew up on trap lines near James Bay and Kapuskasing, before being sent to residential school or a sanitarium. The women all came to Toronto as adults, at various points in their lives. They are not, then, a source community as often imagined in the museum anthropology literature. Similarly, the collection itself is defined by its cultural plurality, rather than a cultural rootedness. The women interact with Anishinaabe and Cree artefacts from a variety of locations, as well as artefacts that are likely Athapaskan, Haudenosaunee, and possibly Métis or Salish. Thus, it is not a ‘Haida collection’ or ‘Yupik collection’ as is often the focus within museum anthropology and within institutional decisions regarding levels of

access to museum collections (see, for example, Richardson in Krmpotich and Peers, 2013: 243).

The plurality of both the seniors and the collection provides for a new moment of study. When asked about the kinds of materials they would like to see, the seniors responded that they would like to see materials made by Indigenous peoples from across Canada – not just materials from their home reserves and territories. They continue to express interest in learning about other Indigenous people and other times, perhaps a reflection of their urban environment and/or the involvement of the Indigenous women who preceded them in multiculturalism movements.

This plurality re-opens discussions about access based on cultural affiliation. Our experiences suggest institutions are willing to provide privileged source community levels of access to individuals not directly related to the materials. Staff at multiple institutions have warmly welcomed the seniors and their interest in material heritage, trusted them to handle the artefacts they are responsible for, and given them the intellectual and physical space to explore objects and histories. When visiting other collections, we discuss with the seniors ahead of time the different expectations regarding handling that we may encounter. However, such preemptory discussions may not be necessary; because the materials we visit with at other institutions often have no direct link to the seniors' families or communities, the seniors do not expect privileged access. The seniors tend to treat artefacts as individual people's belongings, rather than as things that belong to a collective or as part of a discrete cultural heritage. In our earliest preparatory meetings, our Research Advisory Committee (comprised of three seniors who participate in the project and a board member of FST) expressed values of respect for and some trepidation about touching another person's belongings. They also demonstrated a real physical and emotional attachment to one's own belongings, especially gifts and hand-made items, like moccasins.

Given census numbers indicating half of the Indigenous population in Canada lives in cities and not on reserves for at least some part of the year, museums and cultural organizations need to prepare for source community visits in which the source community is understood to be culturally plural and desiring interactions with objects that reflect cosmopolitan Indigenous experiences. Doing so will once again ask museum staff to revisit how levels of access to collections are determined, and quite possibly in ways that lay bare tensions between multiculturalism, inter-tribalism, public collections, and decolonizing processes.

Whereas recent museum studies scholars have raised the concept of 'empowerment-lite' in response to neoliberal multicultural agendas for museums to build social cohesion and senses of belonging (cf. Lynch, 2011; Onicul, 2013), we turn to earlier work by Carol Duncan (1991) on citizenship and art museums. Duncan's focus was large, genre-creating, international institutions such as the Louvre in Paris, National Gallery in London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. She attends to the architectural containers holding collections and how they shape civic values through time and space. In contrast, we have presented a collection of objects not housed within a museum, let alone a state-sponsored, national monument. Nevertheless, we see Toronto's Indigenous women creating rituals involving the collection that help to promote their citizenship and civic values in the 1960s and 70s. More recently, we see how the collection continues to be used

in ways that reflect and shape Indigenous women's sense of belonging and identity in the community.

Almost immediately upon being received by Redmond, the collection was brought into public spaces, alongside more recent crafts. Displayed at Caravan, the historic artefacts and the contemporary crafts worked together to communicate Indigenous peoples as evolving, continuing, sovereign and distinct citizens within a multicultural Canada. In the hands of the women, the collection communicated the role of community 'clan mothers' within civic life. These women used the collection within careful public displays that taught as much about the objects as they emphasized that Indigenous peoples were indeed citizens of Canada, and citizens on their own terms. Thus, where Duncan (1991: 94) argues that 'the art museum gives citizenship and civic virtue a content without having to redistribute real power', the portability (if not also the wear-ability) of the old and new crafts were used in subtle ways in public spaces to intervene in and shape the ways both non-Indigenous and Indigenous Canadians thought about the place of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and especially in the city.

More recently, the seniors' interactions with the collection appear more personal than political. Current interactions with the collection give insight into the civic values and aspirations within Toronto's Indigenous community. We have witnessed the women continuing practices akin to community clan mothers, for example, as they take time during handling sessions to ensure proper medical treatment is being received by their peers. Even more noticeable has been the capacity for the collection to help seniors locate themselves within a continuum they are proud to be part of. Their articulations of belonging, however, are neither overtly public, nor political. In the common room of their own home, they are busier building relations with each other and with the ingenious, skilled makers of the pieces in the collection. A telling memento from our group's visit to the Smithsonian Institution is a photograph of a banner hanging in the National Museum of the American Indian carrying Angela Gonzales' (Hopi) words, 'Being an Indian is not about being part something, it is about being part *of* something.'

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## Notes

1. Anishinaabek are also commonly referred to as Ojibway (also spelled Ojibwe) in Canada or Chippewa in the United States.
2. The central research team includes: Cara Krmpotich, Heather Howard and Lynne Howarth as lead investigators; Amber Sandy, First Story Toronto staff and undergraduate student; Denise Booth, former Cultural Programs Coordinator at NCCT, and Jamila Ghaddar, Emma Knight, Michael O'Rourke and Connor Pion graduate students in Geography, Information, Museum Studies and Archaeology.
3. Archival research into the collection's origins within the ACW was largely undertaken by Emma Knight. We also thank Museum Studies graduate students at the University of Toronto

- for prior research into the collection in 2012, and the archivists at Anglican Diocese of Toronto Archives and General Synod Archives of the Anglican Church for their assistance.
4. Moses Tizya was born in Old Crow, Yukon in 1900. He attended Chootla School in Carcross for 6 years, from 1912 to 1918. He and his wife Martha Tizya had six children. He was an expert trapper and well-respected Elder in the community and served as a councillor for the Vuntut Gwich'in First Nation from 1921 to 1954. In 1977 he was one of seven Elders interviewed for the Van Tat Gwich'in Oral History Collection. Moses Tizya's interviews have been used in many publications and he was also interviewed on numerous other occasions by researchers and community members (i.e. Duncan and Carney, 1988).
  5. On the occasion of Toronto's 175th birthday, the *Toronto Star* ran Javed's story identifying Caravan as a key moment that solidified diversity as a defining characteristic of the city. The story is available at: [http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2009/04/04/the\\_couple\\_who\\_put\\_toronto\\_on\\_the\\_map.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2009/04/04/the_couple_who_put_toronto_on_the_map.html)
  6. The Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC) combines visits to museums for community-, university- and museum-based researchers with an online Knowledge Sharing Database to create a multivocal and more holistic approach to understanding Indigenous heritage items (Phillips, 2011). At the GRASAC Second Annual Research Conference, Amber Sandy, a research assistant for MMMC, presented on the project.
  7. In the information sheets provided about the project, the first nouns used to describe the items in the collection were 'craft items' and 'crafts'. The term 'artifacts' was used later in the sheets when talking about the goals of the project. All these terms, plus 'items' and 'objects' were used when describing how the project would work on a practical level.
  8. Occasional participants in the project are further connected to First Nations in the Maritimes and the west coast of Canada.

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Emma Knight is the Ethnology Curatorial Assistant at the Royal Alberta Museum. She previously held the position of Research Assistant for the Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections project. She is co-author with Lynne Howarth of 'To every artifact its voice: Creating surrogates for hand-crafted Indigenous objects' appearing in *Cataloguing and Classification Quarterly*. Her previous research, 'The Kwakwaka'wakw Potlatch Collection and its many social contexts: Constructing a collection's object biography' (MMSt thesis, University of Toronto, 2013) explored the exhibition history of a potlatch collection through the framework of object biography, and examined the multiple roles material culture can hold throughout its life history to multiple parties. Her research interests include the relationships between material culture, memory, and identity, the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into museum collection catalogues, and developing long-term, meaningful research partnerships between museums and communities.