

Rematriation

Introduction

Rematriation emerges as a transformative and vital practice deeply rooted in Indigenous law, culture, and sovereignty. It extends far beyond the mere return of cultural belongings. It is a complex process that calls for an Indigenous-led approach, urging museums to relinquish control and instead provide support to Indigenous communities in the rematriation process. The term "rematriation" aligns it with Indigenous law and matrilineal traditions, thereby challenging colonial and patriarchal narratives. Rematriation is seen as a decolonial and feminist practice, highlighting its broader implications for Indigenous sovereignty, cultural revitalization, and resistance to colonial systems. At its core, rematriation is a powerful act of reclaiming heritage, restoring autonomy, and advancing Indigenous self-determination in the face of historical injustices.

Dr. Amy Parent

Dr. Amy Parent's Nisga'a name is Noxs Ts'aawit (Mother of the Raven Warrior Chief named Ts'aawit). On her mother's side of the family, she is from the House of Ni'isjoohl and is a member of the Ganada (frog) clan in the Village of Laxgalts'ap in the Nisga'a Nation. On her father's side of the family, she is of Settler ancestry (French and German). Dr. Parent is a scholar, speaker, mentor, educator, consultant and mother. She is an Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Education & Governance (Tier 2) in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University (Ph.D., UBC). She is also Co-Chair of the Indigenous Research Leadership Circle with the Tri-Council Agency (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) and the Inaugural Associate Director for the SFU Cassidy Centre for Educational Justice.

"...it became evident that the term repatriation doesn't apply for us because we are a matrilineal society. And if we are really going to be able to practice some of those important teachings, then we also need to change our wording and challenge some of the colonialism and patriarchy that's inherent in those terms," says Dr. Parent



"... it has been her spirit that's been guiding us and has led to us having this as successful repatriation," says Noxs Ts'aawit (Dr. Amy Parent) of Joanna Moody of the House of Ni'isjoohl.

Rematriation of the Ni'isjoohl Memorial Pole

The Ni'isjoohl Memorial Pole, a revered ancestor of the Nisga'a people, was the first Indigenous memorial pole to be repatriated from Scotland. Initially raised in 1860 to honor the Nisga'a warrior Ts'awit, the pole was stolen in 1929 by anthropologist Marius Barbeau and housed at the National Museums Scotland (NMS). The journey to reclaim the pole began with a Nisga'a delegation's persistence and negotiation efforts, highlighting clashes between governance systems and perspectives on cultural property.

Importantly, the Nisga'a Treaty and frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) informed these discussions, asserting the Nisga'a Nation's self-governing status and rights to their cultural heritage. Throughout the negotiation process, the principle of "Nothing about us without us" emphasizes the importance of Indigenous leadership and involvement. The return of the pole symbolizes a triumph of cultural sovereignty and serves as a catalyst for healing within the Nisga'a community.

The choice to use the term "repatriation" instead of "repatiation" holds profound significance in reclaiming cultural heritage, particularly within the Nisga'a community. Dr. Amy Parent emphasizes the matrilineal nature of Nisga'a society, asserting that the term "repatiation" fails to capture their unique cultural context. By reframing language, Parent challenges colonial and patriarchal norms embedded in traditional terminology, advocating for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach. Parent shares, Joanna Moody of the House of Ni'isjoohl commissioned Nisga'a master carver Oyee to carve the red cedar pole in honour of Ts'awit, "a dear ancestor who died in war defending his family and nation." That matriarch was Parent's ancestral grandmother, and she had that pole commissioned for our relatives. And so to me, it's fitting that we would use the term 'repatriation' to bring it home.

2015 Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, Their Diversity and Their Role in Society

UNESCO's 2015 recommendation is another international standard setting instrument that supports the rightful return of Indigenous belongings. Specifically, Article 18 states:

"18. In instances where the cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples is represented in museum collections, Member States should take appropriate measures to encourage and facilitate dialogue and the building of constructive relationships between those museums and Indigenous peoples concerning the management of those collections, and, where appropriate, return or restitution in accordance with applicable laws and policies."

"The pole's repatriation was significant for the Nisga'a delegation and community. It was a symbol of the power to reinforce the Nisga'a peoples' self-governance, pride, memory and cultural sovereignty," says Dr. Parent.



"Native women are going to raise the roof and decry the dirty house which patriarchy and racism have built on our backs. But first we must see ourselves as women: powerful, sensuous beings in need of compassion and tenderness" (Maracle, 1996, 22).

Lee Maracle

Lee Maracle, a member of the Sto:lo Nation with Salish and Cree ancestry, holds a significant place in Canadian literature and Indigenous activism. Born in North Vancouver, British Columbia, Maracle is a prolific writer known for her poetry, novels, storytelling, and cultural commentary. As one of the earliest published Aboriginal authors in the 1970s, she has since become one of the most esteemed First Nations writers in Canada. Maracle's contributions to literature and cultural relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada earned her the prestigious Order of Canada. Her book "Memory Serves" is a collection of oratories delivered over two decades, reflecting her Coast Salish perspective and addressing themes such as history, spirituality, feminism, and the colonial condition of her people. With eloquence and insight, Maracle offers readers an alternative perspective and a pathway towards a shared understanding.

"Memory Serves" (2015)



Lee Maracle (2015) defines rematriation as an Indigenous feminist concept with decolonial aims, primarily focused on the restoration of matriarchal authority and the reinstatement of male responsibility within these structures to support and respect women. This response to systemic oppression within a patriarchal settler state addresses the erosion of Indigenous sovereignty and the neglect of Indigenous women's needs, ultimately aiming to restore gender balance within governance structures. Rematriation serves as a critical pathway towards challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for gender equality within Indigenous communities.

"the restoration of matriarchal authority and the restoration of male responsibility to these matriarchal structures to reinstate respect and support for the women within them" (Maracle, 2015, 100).



Robin Gray

Robin R. R. Gray is a Ts'msyen scholar from Lax Kw'alaams, belonging to Waap Liyaa'mlaxha, a Gisbutwada House in the Gitaxangiik Tribe. Her Ts'msyen name, T'uu'tk, roughly translates to Always Prominent Voice of Raven. Additionally, Robin has Mikisew Cree heritage from Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, tracing her lineage back to Chief Mikisew, a signatory to Treaty 8. Robin holds a B.A.S (2008) from Bennett College for Women and an M.A. (2010) from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. In 2015, she successfully defended her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, focusing on Ts'msyen reclamation through repatriation and embodied heritage projects. Her research delves into Indigenous concepts of property, settler colonialism, and decolonization, particularly through the lenses of song and dance.

"Rematriation: Ts'msyen Law, Rights of Relationality, and Protocols of Return" (2022)

This article emphasizes the need to reclaim ancestors, belongings, and knowledge that have been stolen or commodified by states and institutions. Using the example of Ts'msyen songs, Gray (2022) demonstrates how rematriation transcends the limitations of repatriation processes, offering greater decolonial potential. By centering Indigenous values and protocols in the return process, rematriation embodies a dynamic understanding of law and ownership on Indigenous terms, challenging colonial narratives and asserting Indigenous sovereignty. This highlights the deep socio-political significance of rematriation as a form of resistance and cultural revitalization grounded in Indigenous lifeways. Gray (2022) "appl(ies) rematriation as both a paradigm and protocol, utilizing it as an analytical framework to reconsider questions of ownership, access, and control, as well as understandings of Indigenous law, property, and nationhood" (p. 2). Through an analysis of rematriation discourse and activism within Ts'msyen society, Gray (2022) identifies its active qualities and emphasizes the foundational role of Indigenous laws and protocols, particularly Ayaawx, in shaping Ts'msyen rematriation efforts and understanding matrilineal kinship structures and hereditary rights frameworks.

