



## Towards Braiding

### **For organizations starting this journey...**

If you find yourself in a position to “include” Indigenous peoples and perspectives in your organization, then there are many practical, ethical, and educational dimensions and implications to consider before and while doing so. In particular, it is important to consider how your invitation might end up reproducing harmful patterns of relationship and representation, even if your intention is to do just the opposite.

The following questions may help you think through your expectations, your intentions, and the impact of your choices, and to think systemically how these are rooted in a larger social and historical context. We offer both general guiding questions for reflection and discussion, as well as point to some “red flags” that commonly emerge in the context of these engagements and which warrant pause and further consideration before pursuing efforts to include Indigenous peoples and perspectives.

### **What do you expect the Indigenous perspective to do for you? [integrity]**

Think about why are you compelled to seek an Indigenous perspective in the first place, and what assumptions and investments your expectations are rooted in. These expectations will significantly shape what you are able to hear, and not hear, and the sense you make of what you do hear. They might even shape who you invite to present their perspectives, and how you create space for their presence.

Do you want to deepen your understanding of colonialism, learn about/from/with other knowledge systems, or acknowledge or right past wrongs? Or perhaps you are motivated by some of the “red flag” reasons for engagement: making a benevolent gesture seeking redemption, forgiveness, or gratitude from the Indigenous person; generating an alibi to draw upon when your organization comes under critique for colonial actions; affirming your innocence, virtue, social or material capital, or credibility as a ‘good ally’; enhancing your CV and becoming more employable; securing funding or employment stability. These reasons for engagement are likely to recreate rather than interrupt colonial patterns of relationship. What you want, hope, and expect from the experience may be imposing projections on the person(s) you chose to invite, and may also be limiting other, generative possibilities for engagement by keeping you from inviting other perspectives.

Once you have thought about the expectations that are driving and shaping your invitation, then you might consider how you would respond if you were exposed to Indigenous perspectives that do not meet your expectations and projections. What is lost in selectively engaging Indigenous perspectives that will not challenge your expectations? What might be gained from loosening your expectations and opening up to other possibilities? What are the risks to the invited Indigenous people involved in *both* of these scenarios? What

strategies do you have for noticing and interrupting your projections when they emerge? How can you try to ensure that this strategy does not create additional burdens for Indigenous people?

### **What kind of learning are you willing to do? [commitment]**

If engagements with Indigenous peoples are not going to reproduce inherited patterns of relationship or be organized around an instrumentalization of Indigenous perspectives toward your own preconceived ends, then it will require a different approach to learning than many non-Indigenous people are used to engaging. Before you invite anyone to speak, you might therefore ask: How much effort are you, and others in your organization, willing to put into your own learning (and unlearning)?

Indigenous communities and peoples are diverse. Institutions usually privilege perspectives that align safely with the objectives of their stakeholders (e.g. Indigenous people/communities invested in social mobility and economic growth rather than those fighting against pipelines). Institutions also tend to hire Indigenous people who embody familiarity in terms of middle-class language, logic, and sensibility and in terms of normative bodies (e.g. white skin, thin, able and heterosexual bodies). Knowing this, you might ask yourself: Do you want only an Indigenous perspective that is understandable from your point of view? How much will the perspective need to be translated into your sensibility for you to feel satisfied? How equipped are you to have difficult conversations without relationships falling apart? How do you usually respond to having your assumptions challenged? How do you usually respond to being called out on harmful practices that are perceived as normal? How will you respond to Indigenous perspectives that may make you feel uncomfortable, guilty, rejected and/or hopeless? Are you able to engage with and hold space for multiple, competing, or even contradictory Indigenous perspectives among Indigenous people? Individual Indigenous people, like all people, are also complex and contradictory; are you able to engage with and hold space for the full, complex humanity of the Indigenous individuals you work with?

Depending on your answers to these questions, it may be that your organization has not yet done the internal preparation work and self-study that would be necessary for the Indigenous engagement to be generative and to create new possibilities for relationship rather than reproducing existing patterns of harm. If this is the case, do not be discouraged, but do recognize that there is important work to be done by the organization and its members before initiating engagements with Indigenous people. That said, having “good” answers to these questions does not guarantee that mistakes will not be made and harms will not be reproduced. Thus, continuous opportunities for self-reflexivity and honest feedback from both internal and external parties should be intentionally built into your organizational plan for engagement. We consider both the necessity and the challenges of creating these opportunities in the next section.

### **What are the hidden costs and labor involved in your invitation to engage? [harm reduction]**

Indigenous people who work in institutions often feel pressures to conform to the expectations of those who enabled the “inclusion.” There is generally an implicit expectation that Indigenous people should feel grateful for being granted a space, and thus, they are considered ungrateful if they: ask for more space; challenge how the space has

been constructed; or say something that contradicts or challenges those who invited them. Thus, even when a space is nominally open to different perspectives, some Indigenous people might feel compelled to keep their thoughts and concerns to themselves and go along with the dominant organizational logics. Out of respect for the relationship, or concern for the backlash, other Indigenous people might say what they think those who invited them want or are readily able to hear. Still others might express their thoughts and concerns in ways that are less direct than is generally expected by non-Indigenous people, and they might therefore be misheard or misunderstood. Finally, some will be more direct about their concerns, and this directness will not always be well received.

In what ways are you taking these complexities, power relations, and different modes of communication into consideration when you invite an “Indigenous perspective”? In what ways might you be “listening” to Indigenous people in selective ways that prevent you from really “hearing” what they are saying? What kinds of attachments and assumptions might be blocking you from hearing, how might these be related to/rooted in larger colonial patterns, and what is your plan for addressing these blockages, if any? What kinds of mechanisms or processes does your organization have in place for receiving and addressing critical concerns in ways that take them seriously and address them openly? Do you recognize that it may be only through long-term engagement and relationship building that difficult and uncomfortable, but meaningful and important conversations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people might become possible? Do you intend to develop such a long-term engagement, or are you more interested in a one-off transactional relationship? Is your intended form of engagement clear for all parties involved? To what extent are you instrumentalizing and/or appropriating Indigeneity for your own gain? To what extent could your gesture of inclusion be considered tokenistic?

While Indigenous peoples are often saddled with the expectations presumed to come along with “being included,” they also have a lot of demand from their own communities. So, ask yourself: Why should they prioritize your learning needs instead? How much would you pay for the time of an expert in your professional area, and are you paying the same for Indigenous expertise? What do you intend to do with the Indigenous knowledge you engaged with? How can you engage ethically with this learning, rather than treating it as an object of consumption? If you think about the Western education system and its knowledge hierarchies, it takes at least 22 years of formal education for someone to complete a PhD and be considered an expert in a subject area. In Indigenous communities, it also takes several decades for someone to master skills and no one is ever an “expert” as everyone is continually learning until they die. It is problematic for non-Indigenous people to take courses or to spend time in Indigenous communities and to present themselves as “experts” in the communities they gained this (little) knowledge from. In the same way, for Indigenous people who claim their Indigenous identity later in life, or who can and choose to pass as non-Indigenous, it is also complicated to claim Indigenous spaces without having the experience of struggle, pain and resilience that disenfranchised Indigenous people embody.

### **Are you committed to addressing the individual and group conflicts and anxieties that will probably arise? [resilience]**

If you are really committed to undertaking the difficult work of remaking and reimagining relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, then it is important to realize that this is not something that can happen overnight, but rather something which requires

sustained effort, and critical generosity toward oneself and others. If you decide that this is a priority for your organization, then consider the following questions: What practices of engagement might enable relationships to be maintained even in moments of conflict? What strengths are present – or still need to be cultivated – in the organization that can enable difficult, relational work to happen and be shared across multiple people? If you hear something that triggers you or makes you upset, what strategies and group dynamics might help ground you so that you can return to a more generative space, and how can you ensure these strategies don't rely on Indigenous peoples' emotional labour? What kinds of human and financial resources is your organization willing and able to devote to this work? Are you expecting immediate, clear results, and if so, what are the potential pitfalls of this expectation, and how might you frame this engagement differently? How can you prepare yourself and your organization for the frustrations, anxieties, and mistakes that will inevitably arise in the process of strengthening non-Indigenous and Indigenous engagements?

### **Are you organizing the logistical dimensions of your Indigenous engagements with consideration of different sensibilities?[ethical hosting]**

Organizations seeking to enact more ethical engagements with Indigenous people also need to take account of very practical considerations in ways that anticipate the needs and sensibilities of Indigenous speakers and participants. In non-Indigenous organizations, the logistical dimensions of inviting speakers or participants tend to be implicitly oriented around the norms and expectations of white middle-class people. For instance, there is an assumption that people will have (easy access to) a bank account, that they have regular access to internet, that they have reliable transportation (e.g. to get to an airport), and that they have the financial reserves to pay for their travel in advance and then be reimbursed. Particularly when working with Indigenous elders, and/or with Indigenous people who are living in more rural/reserve areas, these things should not be assumed. Thus, when working with Indigenous people, organizations should rethink these assumptions, and act accordingly – for instance by offering to pay honoraria or food stipends in cash (rather than by check), offering to arrange someone's 'door-to-door' transportation in advance and on their behalf, ensuring that those who are traveling locally but from a considerable distance are offered overnight accommodation, and not delaying paying fees and reimbursements as this can severely affect the communities involved and affect trust and willingness for further engagements. Further, organizations should not wait until Indigenous speakers or participants request these things, but rather anticipate and offer them, as those operating from a thread sensibility may be less likely to voice their needs. In addition, especially when working with Indigenous elders, institutions should task an employee or volunteer to take responsibility for making sure that each elder is escorted to and from different locations, and that their needs are being anticipated and met by someone who is patient and comfortable with the thread sensibility.

### **Is your organization cognizant of the heterogeneity within Indigenous communities, and capable of engaging divergent perspectives?[complexities]**

Indigenous communities have always been heterogeneous. But beyond this internal complexity, colonial apparatuses have also operated in ways to further divide and separate community members. For instance, Indigenous people who live(d) on reserve have different experiences than those who live off; Indigenous peoples who are white-passing have

different experiences than those who are read as visibly racialized; Indigenous peoples who come from middle-class families have different experiences than those who come from low-income families; Indigenous peoples who grew up speaking their language and/or having access to their ceremonies have different experiences than those who did not; and Indigenous peoples who grew up with their Indigenous family members have different experiences than those who grew up in non-Indigenous adoptive families, or in families where Indigenous heritage was minimized or hidden or only 'discovered' or revealed later in the person's life.

None of these individuals is more or less Indigenous than the others, but at the same time, their experiences of Indigeneity cannot be collapsed. Yet, in many cases non-Indigenous organizations fail to recognize this complexity, or feel unequipped to engage with it, and thus they instead invite and expect a single Indigenous person to speak not only for their entire band, tribe, or nation, but also for the entirety of Indigenous peoples. This approach not only flattens the diversity and complexity of all Indigenous people, it also tends to reproduce selective, instrumentalized engagements with Indigenous perspectives. In particular, organizations might tend to either engage primarily: 1) Indigenous people whose appearance and/or sensibility align more closely with white middle class norms; or, conversely, 2) Indigenous people whose appearance and/or sensibility align more closely with the stereotypical image of an Indigenous person. In the first set of engagements, there may be an expectation (that is not always met) that these individuals will be less likely to challenge the organization and disrupt its business as usual. In other words, organizations may be more comfortable engaging Indigenous people who they perceive to be similar to themselves. In the second set of engagements, there may be a fetishization of the individual and a projection of expectations that they will be spiritual, wise, and ecologically conscious in ways that align with Western environmentalism and the Hollywood image of Indigeneity. If Indigenous people do not meet these expectations, then this might be met with disappointment and even suspicion about their 'authenticity'.

There is no prescriptive solution or checklist for how to consider the heterogeneity of Indigenous peoples, and in some cases relevant differences might relate to internal conflicts that communities would prefer to keep internal. At the same time, organizations have a responsibility to develop more sensitivity to these differences, and to think through their implications as much as possible when arranging Indigenous engagements. For instance, who decides who will be invited, and why? Why do certain people tend to get invited and not others? Which Indigenous perspectives are present, and which are absent? This also points to the importance of developing long-term engagements with Indigenous peoples, so that these nuances can be considered and unraveled over time as trust is built, as well as the importance of having Indigenous people on staff who are already more sensitive to these nuances – and who are encouraged, rather than punished, for bringing them to the attention of non-Indigenous colleagues.

Source: Jimmy, E., Andreotti, V., Stein, S. (2019) Towards braiding report. Guelph, ON: Musagetes Foundation. <https://decolonialfutures.net/>