



## **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?

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