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“HISTORICAL TRAUMA, & REPATRIATION AS A COUNTER-NARRATIVE IN NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY”

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So, I should begin this presentation by first answering: what is Historical Trauma?

Historical Trauma is defined as intergenerational or multigenerational trauma, and refers to the concept that trauma not dealt with in previous generations, must be dealt with in subsequent generations

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What are the effects of Historical Trauma?

Specifically for Native peoples, there are disproportionately higher rates of mental health issues, alcohol & substance abuse disorders, physical & sexual abuse, depression, suicide, poverty, violence & high school dropout rates than among any other ethnic groups in the U.S.

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Native American mortality rates are 524% greater than the national average due to alcoholism; over 103% greater due to homicide; and 66% greater due to suicide

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Within the fields of mental health & psychology, it is surmised that these numbers reflect the outcome of historical trauma

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It is suggested that the loss of Native American culture & positive identity has resulted in the negative behaviors, feelings & patterns *associated* with historical trauma, which is passed on to each generation in an accumulative manner

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- Historical trauma, and its related negative outcomes, are extremely difficult topics to discuss
- For one, as with any traumatic event, there is a sense of shame over the negative results of the event; for Native communities, whose cultures have been oppressed, if not outright annihilated, there has been generations of imposed “shame” over the fact that you were, born, Native

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- This shame manifests itself through self-denigration, negative self-image, and low self-esteem
- In the field of psychology, “trauma shame” can only be combatted by realizing that “it wasn’t your fault.” The treatment for historical trauma shame for Native peoples, then, “requires a change in the deeply held beliefs about oneself”

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Repatriation as a Healing Process

One of these “treatments” of “historical abuse” has been the Native American Repatriation Movement...so,

- What is repatriation?
- The dictionary definition it as “to send someone back to their own country;” this is usually used to describe the return of a prisoner-of-war, or their remains, from another country where they were either captured or killed, during war

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- As used by Indigenous peoples across the world, repatriation is defined as the return of human remains, grave objects, ceremonial objects, and objects “owned” by a whole community rather than one individual (also known as, objects of cultural patrimony) from museums, universities, and other institutions that have collected them – and held them
- The Repatriation Movement is the political movement that demanded that these institutions return these ancestors and cultural heritage – based upon basic, civil rights

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The Repatriation Movement has marked a definite change in the relationship between museums and Native peoples; In the United States the culmination – to date – has been

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the passage of two key pieces of federal legislation: The National Museum of the American Indian Act (NMAI Act) of 1989 and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990

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The repatriation of human remains and sacred cultural objects *from* the museums and college institutions that held them *back* to the peoples from which they originated from (the originating communities) came about because of (or more accurately, in spite of) the history between Native groups and academic communities, as well as their contentious relationship between each other

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During the late 1800s two national phenomena were occurring that set the stage for the *need* of a repatriation movement:

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First, was the development of museums as large and very prominent institutions of “collecting”...now, prior to this – during the Victorian Age and during European expansion and colonization – fine art collecting was the passion of the monarchial elite, and these art collections were only viewed within palace walls *by* other upper-class elites...

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...but by the late 1800s the collecting of fine art had expanded to institutions of higher learning, and those collections were made- more or less -accessible to the public...in the form of museums

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As America and Europe encountered other cultures from around the world, both private collections and museums began to focus more upon the culturally “unusual” and “exotic,” and museums began actively collecting cultural artifacts from Indigenous cultures...

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At the same time, the Native peoples of North America had been decimated both culturally and in population numbers; after hundreds of years of imported disease and

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military conquest, of federal policies that forbid ceremonial and ritual life that had sustained Native communities over millennia, and from the removal of Native children from their communities to boarding schools for the specific purpose of deculturalization...

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...Native peoples were seen as what anthropologists of the time were referring to as the “vanishing race.” What emerged in the anthropological field, then, was what was called “salvage anthropology”

Museums and universities sent out anthropologists, ethnologists, and hired help across the nation, to collect any and all cultural objects that could be collected from tribes; These objects were seen as the last physical vestiges of dead or dying cultures and peoples; some objects were bought, but a vast majority were stolen

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AND, human remains were actively disinterred from gravesites, and collected from the battlefields of the “Indian Wars;” these remains made their way to the medical collections of the U.S. Army and the physical anthropological and archaeological collections of museums

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By the early twentieth century several large public and private museums – including the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History, New York’s Heye Foundation Museum of the American Indian, and the Field Museum in Chicago – held collections of Native human remains & objects that counted into the millions...***the millions!

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“Salvage anthropology” itself became one of the greatest injuries to Native cultures; necessary ceremonial objects were taken and so their accompanying ceremonies were often lost; WHOLE burial sites were looted, plundered and destroyed, and even traditional utilitarian objects (such as pots, baskets, knives, cradleboards, moccasins, clothing) were taken away by the thousands from their communities...while European and Euroamerican remains and cultural & religious objects were left unmolested – respected and cared for

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But Native American tribes, in fact, survived; cultural re-stabilization accelerated during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, and developed into a cultural renaissance in the 1960s, where a pride in one's culture became more open – rather than hidden - with traditional stories, ceremonies, and cultural activities being openly celebrated

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And although repatriation attempts have occurred for hundreds of years, in the 1960s Native communities once again looked at all their material culture that was stored in the country's museums and colleges – but *this* time, as an empowered people – and began to approach these institutions for access and the return of these items; now, initially, museums were not responsive to requests regarding these human remains, funerary objects, and sacred and ceremonial objects...and attempts were stalemated for a number of years

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But, basically, Native interest groups persevered as they sought redress from Congress and the result was the passage of the NMAI Act and NAGPRA

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And so, a fundamental shift began in the philosophical mind-set of museum staff, specifically from the idea that museums have the legal authority to hold their collection for the benefit of the broader public (and please read that as “dominant culture”), towards the philosophy that museums have a trust obligation to the cultures and peoples they collect from, and exhibit about...and that obligation includes support, collaboration, and interaction

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Under the provisions of both the NMAI Act and NAGPRA, human remains and *certain* – not all – cultural materials must be returned to Native communities – the communities of origin

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Repatriation & Cultural Healing

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- While Native-owned museums & cultural centers *have* existed since the 1800s, a great growth occurred during the 1960s, and,
- After the passage of the two acts, those institutions and their host communities began actively repatriating: human remains (in order to re-inter them)...

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...and ceremonial objects and objects of cultural patrimony, that have either been brought back into use – resulting in the strengthening of traditional religious activity – or allowed to return to the Earth as they were meant to be

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Tribal museums and cultural centers have become repositories for culturally important objects...displaying them when appropriate (and appropriately – for example, Lakota pipes *can* be displayed, but they should *never* be displayed with their stems and bowls attached, for they are then “awake”), and these institutions care for ceremonial objects for community use, storing them for the communities until they are needed for ceremonial use, away from public eyes

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- What these tribal museums and cultural centers are doing is something new – acting more as “interactive” museums than previous museums – or even, as holding repositories
- Community-based and community-centric events & activities occur here (pow-wows, cultural artist demonstrations, elder storytelling...and exhibits defined and planned out *by* the community, often specifically *for* the community)

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- In these spaces, the healing of historical trauma occurs – new stories are being told about Native cultures and histories
- Youth are exposed to their own heritage in positive and dynamic ways
- Elders are allowed to heal
- They are, in a very real sense, a “treatment for historical shame;” and a very important part of this is the repatriation processes that have taken place to return ancestral remains, and sacred and ceremonial objects, back to their originating communities.

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Miigwetch. Thank you.