

Interview Transcript With Aaron McCanna and Timothy Kenney

RR: Rowe Reddick

AM: Aaron McCanna

TK: Timothy Kenney

RR: Could you each please introduce yourselves and tell us a bit about yourselves? Let's go alphabetically.

AM: I'm Aaron McCanna. I am Yupik, Mexican American, Irish and Scottish. I come from a very mixed race family. I'm the Decolonization Manager at the Burke Museum of Natural History Culture. Someone described it as a permanent on staff consultant for decolonization, which is probably better than what I could say. But largely speaking, I use relationships to help our staff come up with new ways to do good work.

TK: And I am Timothy Kenney. I am the Assistant Digital Communications Manager at the Burke Museum, which means I do a lot of photo, video, social media, writing about things going on at the museum. I'm very interested in using media tools to help people better understand the world around them.

RR: So if you had to give an elevator pitch for *On Our Terms* video project, what it's all about, what would you say?

TK: I would say that *On Our Terms* is a way to understand commonly used terms not through platitudes or bumper sticker slogans, but through people's actual lived experiences. The stories people told show that these words are not only important to doing good work and moving institutions forward, but also shouldn't just be discarded like we do so often with words.

We chose ten words that we found to be either poorly understood or used in a variety of different ways and asked 12 different people what those words mean to them, how they've shown up in their lives, and what they would like to see done in that sphere, both in museums and also the larger world. We then took everyone's answers from those interviews and put them all together so that people could get a nuanced, diverse set of stories and perspectives about what these words mean to the people on screen and encourage people to reflect on what these words mean to them in their own lives.

AM: Since Tim gave the practical version, I'll give the conceptual one. *On Our Terms* is a self-reflection for us and an experiment of basically what happens if we focus on emphasizing decolonial practices in the process of something and we don't focus too much on what the end result is. So we had an idea of kind of how we would gather these conversations, but we didn't know what was going to be said and we didn't have an idea of what we wanted to be said. So the project for me is all about exercising a decolonial process.

TK: Yeah I think one of the guiding principles was that there is no one right answer to any of these questions, that these world words are malleable, that they mean different things in different communities.

RR: Could one of you take me through the genesis of the idea? What inspiration were you drawing from when you were first conceiving of *On Our Terms*?

TK: So the genesis for this idea came about when I first started at the Burke and started learning more about the work people we're doing and this word decolonization, that was being thrown around a lot. I didn't feel like I had a great understanding of what it was or the way colonization was tied in with museums, so I went searching for different resources about what decolonization was and the way it is put into practice. I was coming up empty for most of my Google searches or trying to find books and videos. I found that the times where I made the greatest leaps in understanding was when I was just talking to people. Visiting researchers or artists or staff members at the Burke would tell me about a project or a story from their own life that was related to decolonization, and that's when I personally learned the most.

So I started thinking about how we could provide a way for everyone to hear these kinds of stories that help ground these concepts in people's lived experiences and not just ideas in a book. Another inspiration was a video project by the Seattle Times called *Under Our Skin*. I wanted to put those things together as a way to say, what do people think of these words? Are they useful? Or are these things that have shown up in your life? It's just a good way to get a lot of different perspectives in one place where everyone's placed on the same level. There's no hierarchy of opinions. You just listen to what everyone's saying and consider it, see what resonates with you, and then reflect on what that means for you and your community.

I knew I knew this was something that I wouldn't be able to do alone and that's when Aaron came into my world and I was like, "this is the person that I've been waiting for to do this project with." And luckily he was interested in doing it, so from there, we were off to the races.

AM: When we sat down first, we definitely reviewed whether or not that idea was going to work in terms of practicing decolonization. And that's really what I brought was questions. What do I do when somebody has a pretty good idea of what they want to do, you know, and how do you analyze and negotiate the process, which wasn't without challenge at times. But I think we did handle it pretty smoothly, due in large part to Tim's open mind and also the fact that he'd been trying for a few years already to understand these terms, so he was able to step back with what his creative vision was originally and negotiate and figure out what that process was actually going to be like. I felt like there was space for me in there. In thinking about how decolonization would apply to the project, I was very cognizant that if I were to go out and just tell everybody what I think, that would actually be a colonial approach, because I've been validated by a colonial institution as a decolonization manager. So the questions and editing process were really a practice of including as little of our perspective as possible.

RR: I'd be interested for each of you to describe what role you see yourself playing on this specific project.

AM: I think when we started out the project, we had pretty clear ideas of what our roles would be. I would handle a lot of the decolonization guidance and the communications with our interviewees and then Timothy would handle all the logistics and creative stuff. And what actually ended up happening is we just did everything together, which was far better and more fun. We wrote the questions together, we interviewed people together, and we edited all the footage together. Talking through decisions together made us both feel really good about how the project was moving forward.

RR: So I think we acknowledge 10 words is a lot. But you guys actually narrowed it down to those ten words from a much bigger list. I'd be interested if you guys could describe that process. How did you settle on those? And now that you've kind of been through the interviews, through the into the production process, do you have any regrets or would you have chosen differently if you could go back?

AM: Originally, the centerpiece of the whole project was the term decolonization. It is a word that is used a lot but can be hard to understand which I think led to it being more under attack now than when we started this project. There's more debate about just abandoning that process, which is not something I agree with. As we were going through the interviews we realized that people felt very strongly about all the other words too, so we broadened the approach to include all these terms equally. So we wanted to allow people to talk about whatever they wanted to instead of putting our own limits on the conversation.

TK: I think the initial list of terms that I wrote tended toward a lot more negative words. So instead celebration, like we ended up doing, I wrote appropriation or instead of reciprocity, I initially wrote extraction. But then through conversations with Aaron and us kicking around different terms, I think we wanted to flip those more toward the positive side of it because the initial focus was around decolonization. I am really glad that we ended up focusing more on positive, constructive terms because I see that there is a hunger for that, for ideas and understanding around constructive terms about how do we move forward when we've done harm? How do we promote healing when we've hurt relationships and communities in the past?

AM: It was fascinating because oftentimes the ones we thought were going to be super positive weren't, and the ones we thought that were going to be negative were not that way at all. In retrospect, I think it's a really good group of ten terms, but the goal was never to be exhaustive. One last detail is we mixed up positive and negative terms because we didn't want to overwhelm our interviewees with having to share all these deep, hard stories and wanted to give the opportunity for them to share, you know, stories that made them laugh and smile too.

RR: Let's talk a little bit about recruitment. What was the thought process around getting folks involved with the interviews?

TK: Yeah, I think when we first started talking about that, we very much did not want to operate on any kind of quota system. We really wanted to lean on relationships we already had or recommendations from people that we had relationships with. I think the throughline of everyone we ended up talking to was just people who had thought deeply about these terms and were excited to share their perspective on them.

AM: We did try to get as much of a diversity of perspectives as we could, and we did rely on diversity of ancestry too. So we wanted to make sure that the baseline diversity was still present, but not performative. It is by no means exhaustive though. With everyone we did talk to, we wanted them to feel like they were all on a level playing field and that no one person's perspective was more important than another's.

One piece of feedback we heard was that we didn't interview any white people, which is something that I ended up having to reflect on. And I was like, "well, you know, that's okay, it's okay. We didn't interview a lot of people. We interviewed these people and that's all right." But after thinking about it, I realized we actually did interview a lot of white people. They're just also something else. They're mixed race like me. I caught myself doing the exact thing that I say I don't like: erasing people's identities and defining people's identities for them. So I had to reflect on that a little bit and change the way I talk about it.

TK: One other criteria that we were very specific about was interviewing people outside of the museum and UW. That proved a little bit more challenging just because of timing and getting in touch with people and explaining the project. But I'm really happy with the people that we did end up talking to outside of the University. Campus can feel very siloed and like things matter a lot that actually don't to most people. So I'm very glad that we were able to get outside of that bubble with a few people and kind of make a larger tent.

RR: Over what period of time did the interviews take place?

TK: The interviews took about 8 months altogether. We started the interviews in January of 2023 and ended in August or September of that same year.

RR: Okay. Could you just talk us through a little bit of how you envisioned the interview set up and the intention behind setting it up this way? And then more or less how the interviews were structured?

TK: As much as possible, we wanted to help people forget that they were on camera and kind of treat it as a conversation between that person and Aaron. So we had a big room, we wanted to make it feel cozy and dark and kind of a nice reflective space for people to share stories. So primarily it was Aaron asking the questions, running the interviews, treating it like a conversation where they would be vulnerable and tell a story, and in return, Aaron would offer stories of his own, be vulnerable right back to them. I think that was a huge asset of the project

because it made people feel seen and comfortable and that this was a reciprocal conversation, not just an extraction of stories for us to blast onto the Internet.

The interviews were very long. I think some of our longest interviews were close to 6 hours. Luckily, we got faster as it went along as we figured out the kinks of the process. So most of them were somewhere in the ballpark of 3 to 4 hours, which is still quite a long time. We had to build in some breaks to make sure people didn't get too exhausted. Lots of trips to Off the Rez to decompress and drink coffee. But I think just kind of the camaraderie amongst us and then also the participants that kind of felt like we were all just hanging out, talking about these concepts was really fun to see, if not a little exhausting.

AM: Very exhausting. It's probably my only regret in this whole thing is that I think the interviews were too long. I don't know that there was any other way we could have done this besides just paring back the scope. But we took a lot of energy out of our interviewees. Of course, everybody was compensated, but it was difficult..

RR: Once you guys got into the filming process and actually talking to the interviewees, did it change how you were thinking about the project materially at that point?

AM: It did for me. The intensity of it set in for me. I was excited to have these fun theoretical discussions with people and then people were sharing really personal, powerful stories that really set in what I'd agreed to and the responsibility that I have to take care of these stories and portray them in a way that is true to the storytellers. So that was a pretty significant thing, it was like, okay, this is not fake. I have to take this very seriously.

TK: Completely agree.

RR: Do you guys have any moments of doubt along the way?

TK: I think most of my moments of doubt were just like, "my God, are we ever going to finish this?" When I started downloading the footage and seeing that we're going to have to comb through 60 hours of footage and turn it into 15 minute videos, that's when I started to question things. Like how do we even begin to organize all of these stories and thoughts that people shared with us into something that the audience is going to be able to engage with. But that also ended up being the most fun and rewarding part of the process.

RR: Let's talk about editing. So that's, like you said, 60 hours of footage. Where did you guys begin in trying to figure that out? I think we all acknowledge like this is very personal stuff that was being shared on film, yet you guys have such you have control over how it's being presented. What was the thought process like, where did you start? And kind of, as Aaron said, taking care of these stories?

TK: It was really difficult. I started by going through and watching everyone's interviews again organized by each word. It was striking to see how people brought up similar themes and

perspectives but also where they disagreed. I would usually make a group of selects that was about an hour of the best things everyone said and that's when Aarn would come in to review it with me. We would watch it over and over until, refining as we went until we had something we felt was not only engaging and accessible, but true to what the participants wanted to say.

AM: I think for every interview at the end I asked Interviewee if there was something that they really wanted to make the edit that was important to them, we took that very much to heart. If there was a story that someone wanted to be told, we would find a way to include it in the edit. That wasn't always easy, but that was kind of our rule to ourselves that we can't limit the stories that they really want to be told, the points that they really wanted to make.

RR: So, you guys have been spending an inordinate amount of time editing these things together, just you two locked away. If you feel comfortable, I'd be curious to hear if there's ever moments of creative tension and how that resolved itself in the in the video.

AM: I think like the typical young men we are, we weren't always great about talking about it in the open. We kind of figured our way through that without saying anything, and maybe that's just the moment of personal growth for the two of us in our twenties. There were times, I think, when we both felt like our voices weren't being heard by the other and we were getting stuck in urgency. I count myself in that just as much as Tim to be clear. As time went on, we got better about trusting each other. If there's something that Tim really likes that he's connecting with in the video and I don't understand it, then there is a reason why and he's not going to be the only one that really connects to that. I think Tim learned to do the same thing for me.

TK: People gave us so much great stuff and it was really hard in the end to make decisions about what would make it and what wouldn't. We would just talk through what people were saying in their clips and figure out what the heart of it was and I found that really interesting and fun. It felt like we were splitting hairs at times, but we made sure to have the participants review their sections and hold us accountable.

AM: I think early on in the editing process was one of the more interesting parts to me. Like we said before, we were relying a little more on our colonial categories, on our job descriptions. And so Tim took on a lot, the first edit he got back to me was already roughly sequenced and was maybe 20 minutes over time, not nearly as much as we had at the end. And as we went on, he burned out a bit. It was just too much for one person to handle. The last ones we would go over had a little more than me cut out, but they were an hour or two long and we would cut that down together. Once we got to that process, Tim had to be cognizant of my burnout. And my job's already so emotional that there are times when we would be like, we need to get this done, but I can't do this anymore. So we'd go to lunch.

TK: I think at the beginning I thought as the, like, "editor," that it was my job to cut these down to the final selects that we would then decide on together. It was really hard to be the only one making decisions about what was going to be seen and what wasn't. I started feeling very uncomfortable being the only person to decide when this was such a collaboration. I would say

95% of the time we agreed on what was going to be cut and what needed to stay in. The 5% where we disagreed was maybe the most interesting part. The clips that confused one of us or confused both of us made us reflect on something we hadn't thought about before.

RR: Can you yet talk a little bit about the kind of collaborative review process you're going through with the interviewees? What does that look like logistically and what's the response been like as you've been sharing the rough cuts?

AM: Basically, we would send out what we think is a pretty good draft. It hasn't been all sparkled up with sound and color grading and whatnot, but the content is how we like. We send it out to the interviewees and they give us whatever edits they want and we do that. We have not had an instance where something we feel really strongly about is something that the interviewee feels strongly about in the opposite direction, but if we had, we would accept their request. We have had some moments where people weren't sure though, and want to talk about why we put in a clip the way we did. Sometimes people actually needed a little bit of coaxing to say what they really believe, and especially younger folks were a little more quick to say, "Yeah, it looks good", when it actually doesn't look 100% good, it looks 90% good. A lot of it was through getting to know these people, getting to know how they communicate and sticking to the idea that we want them to be as proud of the project as we are.

TK: I would 100% echo that last part about the relationships in the process being that foundation for this part. We want people to feel completely confident in saying what they said. It was pretty wild the way that just changing the order of clips could really change the meaning of what someone said, just based upon what you heard before or after. So that's another thing we had to keep in mind is just the way things are sequenced can have a big impact on the way you receive what someone's saying. So we wanted people to see everything in the way that it's going to be presented. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, which has been probably the coolest part of this process, is just seeing people happy with the way they were represented.

RR: It might be like a little too early for reflection, but nonetheless, by the time this is published, the videos will be up. What are you guys going to take away from this personally?

AM: For me, it's that the theory I play around with is practical, and even though it's squishy, it works. Decolonization is practical, and works to improve people's lives. And I think more than anything, I've kind of learned to believe in my own and other's humanity, because I think that what we're talking about really does have very positive implications for the world and very reconstructive implications for society. We have real work to do. But I think we know what we need to do.

TK: I would say even if no one watches this, I have learned an incredible amount from listening to everyone's stories. My perspective on these concepts, on decolonization, even just the way that I move through the world, has been radically changed by what people shared and the intentions behind it. The building blocks for a better world are very much in these videos, and I

feel much more hopeful about the future based upon what everyone said. It's all there. We just have to build deeper relationships to put it all together.

RR: What do you feel the limitations are of doing the project this way, the way that we've done it.

AM: Tim and I both had jobs. I think one of the huge limitations is that it took two years to do because this was kind of a side project that we were working on while we did our full time jobs.

TK: We're very, very thankful to the two groups that funded this, but money is not endless. We could only interview a certain number of people because we only had a certain amount of money. We also only had a certain amount of time because we had full time jobs. So we had to cap the number of people we talked to at 12. They by no means represent the full bandwidth of human experience and identity. But this is really just a starting point for a larger, better conversation to begin.

AM: It's only a limitation if we were ever trying to be exhaustive, which we weren't.

TK: I think another caveat is that, even though we did our best to remove our own biases and perspectives from the project, they're still in there. We chose the ten words, we chose the people we interviewed, we wrote the interview questions, and we edited the clips out of these much longer interviews into the videos that you see on the project. So we made thousands of decisions along the way that affected the end result and even though we meant for it to be in service of what people wanted to say, we still made those decisions. We're trying to start a conversation for everyone to say whatever it is that they think and hopefully this is just a starting point for something larger.

AM: It's not a perfect system. We're trying to do something that's related to decolonization, but we're doing it within a capitalist system. We're doing it within a system where we have full time jobs because we need to make rent. You know, we're not able to subvert all of these systems at once, even though we acknowledge that some of them are colonial. That's the biggest caveat is that we're still in a colonized system, still dealing with all the same pressures that anyone else is. So we found some novel things, but is it 100% decolonial? Absolutely not. You know, that's not really an admission of fault because I don't know of a way that we could have accomplished a project like this without just acknowledging that we can't affect everything. But it is an encouragement for, you know, the next generation or whoever takes up inspiration from this project to try and take it a little further.