Unsettling the future by uncovering the past

Decolonizing academic libraries and librarianship

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Abstract

Canada is at an interesting point in its history, where the atrocious assimilation practices that were in place until the mid-1990s are being acknowledged in the hopes for a better relationship between Canada's Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, and the Canadian Federation of Library Associations/Federation Canadienne des Associations de Bibliotheques (CFLA/FCAB)'s report from its Truth and Reconciliation Committee (n.d.) have an emphasis on education, to address the changes needed. Where do academic libraries fit into this? I first discuss the colonial history of libraries, as extensions of education institutions, followed by a look at how library curriculum falls short in preparing students for working with Indigenous peoples and items. Finally I examine how libraries can decolonize their services. Canadian academic libraries are beyond the point of it being acceptable that staff are ill-equipped to serve Indigenous students and faculty.

Keywords Indigenous librarianship, decolonization, colonial history, library history, curricula

Introduction

The time is past where Canadian educational institutions can ignore their contributions, past and present, to the trauma inflicted on Indigenous populations without consequences. In 2008 Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology on behalf of the Canadian government for the country's involvement in residential schools, while a year later he stated that Canada does not have a history of colonialism ("Really Harper," 2009; Heller, 2016). The government also struck the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to take a deeper look at the history of Residential Schools, particularly the abuses and long term trauma suffered by students and their families. A final report was released in 2015 which included 94 Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2015b). Unlike museums and archives, libraries are not expressly mentioned or tasked with any of these Calls (TRC, 2015b). Academic libraries are taking cues from the Education Calls to Action and beginning a process of decolonization. Historically academic libraries have contributed to the colonization and oppression of Canada's Indigenous people by their association with educational institutions (Burton & Point, 2006; Edwards, 2005), and therefore have a responsibility to examine and change their practices. Beginning with a brief history of education and Canada's Indigenous communities, this paper will examine ways in which academic libraries can decolonize.

At this time I would like to situate myself within this paper using the Indigenous aixology concept of relational accountability as outlined in Wilson (2008). I am undertaking this research as a Metis woman, who has a Library Technician diploma and a BA in Adult Education, and who is currently enrolled in a Master of Library and Information Studies program online. While I

do know that my paternal grandmother (Oma) did not attend residential school, I am unsure about her parents and grandparents. My Oma faced significant racism as a child in Manitoba during the early 1940s, prompting her to leave school at a very young age, ashamed of her Indigenous heritage. Growing up I was always made aware of our heritage by my father, and was proud of it, despite not being part of a Métis community. Neither my mother nor my father attended formal educational institutions beyond high school, though while I was in my early teens my mother completed an office administrative assistant certificate. I am the only one of my parent's four children to pursue a bachelor and master degree; one of my brothers has completed his apprentice education for auto mechanics, and has passed his Red Seal exam. Using the Indigenous paradigm of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), it is important for me to build a relationship between my experiences with libraries and higher education and the topic of decolonizing those institutions.

Before we continue to the paper, I want to make a note about the terminology used. Following the government definition and current practice (Joseph, 2018; Justice, 2018), the term Indigenous will be used when discussing First Nations, Metis, and Inuit. Older and outdated terms may be used in context when discussing practices (eg. Library of Congress Subject Headings that begin with "Indians of North America….") or as stated by an author.

Colonialism and education institutions

At first glance it might seem difficult to see how libraries have contributed to Canada's history of assimilation and colonialism. Looking deeper at how books and education were used as tools to force both assimilation and enfranchisement through the *Indian Act* shows a history of Western

ideals pushing out Indigenous knowledge practices. Indigenous ways of knowing, and the transfer of knowledge, were not understood or recognized as legitimate. This first section will look at ways education and books were used to colonize Indigenous communities. Libraries contribute to this even today through unbalanced collection development, outdated and inaccurate cataloguing and classification practices, and the lack of Indigenous librarians.

To understand why libraries need to go through a process of decolonization, it is important to understand the role that educational institutions played in colonization. In the nearly fifty years prior to the 1894 amendment to the *Indian Act* that made attending residential schools mandatory, Indigenous children were attending local public schools with non-Indigenous children with the support of their bands (Burton & Point, 2006). This educational system allowed children to live at home, and receive an education "without losing contact with their own culture" (Burton & Point, 2006, p. 40). By living at home, children were able to keep their language, and learn the history and stories of their community. In their community-based learning, the content being shared between adults and children was contextual based on seasons and age, and often rooted in relationships with the land (Burton & Point, 2006). Education also took place during ceremonies, with information being passed among families (Burton & Point, 2006; Wilson, 2008). The practice of ceremonies was banned by an amendment to the *Indian Act* in 1884 (Burton & Point, 2006; Joseph, 2018), breaking the transfer of knowledge between generations.

It is a common misconception that prior to European explorers "discovering" North America Indigenous communities were illiterate (Edwards, 2006). Literature and stories can be found in more places than the Western standard of ink and paper, extending to the "wampum

belts, winter counts, birchbark scrolls, hieroglyph, petroglyphs, and pictographs" found in

Indigenous communities (Edwards, 2006, p. 5). With this lack of recognizable or familiar textual

materials, Europeans mistakenly declared Indigenous populations to be "a people without

enlightenment, as a people without history" (Edwards, 2006, p. 6). As Justice (2018) writes, the

Western concept of literature means that other people (ie. the dominant society) need to

recognize it as such. This narrow definition discounts stories and histories that were shared and

passed down through songs, dance, art, and the oral traditions (Edwards, 2006). As a result of

Indigenous communities being viewed as illiterate and uneducated, books and education were

seen as tools to assimilate or civilize the population (Burton & Point, 2006; Edwards, 2005).

   Before looking at the effects of residential schools on Indigenous communities, I want to

draw attention to the education of European settlers and missionaries shortly after contact. Early

settlers learned from the Indigenous communities they came in contact with (Atleo, 2013; Burton

& Point, 2006), knowledge that very likely ensured their initial survival. The difference was that

Indigenous peoples did not expect the European people to become like them (Atleo, 2013)

whereas European missionaries and settlers had the goal of assimilation early on. It should also

be noted that within some communities books were embraced, and seen as a way to discover a

common ground with European settlers (Edwards, 2006). This was a one sided desire as

European missionaries and governments were more concerned with "civilizing" Indigenous

populations, than learning from their new neighbours.

Education and the Indian Act

The *Indian Act* came into effect in 1876 (Joseph, 2018) and while it made Indigenous people wards of the government, there was little about education within the document (Burton & Point, 2006). The primary goal of the *Indian Act* was to enfranchise Indigenous peoples, which was the "process involved in giving up one's status as an Indian" (Joseph, 2018, p. 109) making them citizens like the European settlers. When an Indigenous person became enfranchised the Canadian government was no longer financially responsible for them, so the process was both encouraged and forced upon them (Joseph, 2018). In 1880 an amendment was added that enfranchised anyone who went to university (Joseph, 2018). While being enfranchised meant that higher education could be obtained, included the right to vote, and allowed for someone to move off reserve, the underlying purpose of enfranchisement was "to break up reserve land, undermine the collective worldview of the people, and promote the adoption of a European worldview of individual rights" (Joseph, 2018, p. 27). Essentially enfranchisement was the process for someone to renounce their Indigenous heritage in the eyes of the Canadian government, making them "civilized" according to European ideals. Based on the amendments that increased the possibility of becoming enfranchised, it appears this assimilation tactic was not working.

It was in an amendment to the *Indian Act* that the residential school era began (Burton & Point, 2006). It is not within the scope of this paper to examine these schools in detail, however their purpose can be summed up in the Duncan Campbell Scott quote from 1920: "to get rid of the Indian problem" (Burton & Point, 2006, p. 43). These church-run schools forcibly removed

children from their families, often transporting them hundreds of kilometers away, and forced

them to learn English, and convert to Christianity, while exposing them to physical, mental, and

sexual abuse. According to Edwards (2005) many of these schools had fewer than 100 books

(see the 1943 report, pp. 181-188), with collections similar to those for public schools in

Caucasian communities.

As a result of attending residential schools, children returned home feeling isolated from

their families and cultures. Similarly, graduates of the schools found they did not fit in with the

dominant society for which they were supposedly being prepared for. This trauma became

cyclical as generation after generation of Indigenous families went through the residential

schools, which were open between 1886 and 1996. It is estimated that of the 150,000 children

who attended, 6,000 died or disappeared (Joseph, 2018). The aftermath of this cultural genocide

through education continues to be felt today within Indigenous communities.

In 1951 the *Indian Act* was revised again, and enfranchisement was removed from the

document (Joseph, 2018). Over the decades since, Indigenous student enrollment in higher

education has been on the rise and Canadian statistics from 2011 indicate that nearly half of

Indigenous people have postsecondary education (Statistics Canada, 2018). Despite this rise in

higher education, it is important not to forget the intergenerational trauma and distrust created by

the Indian Act and through residential schools. Andrews (2017) uses the Historical Trauma

Theory (HTT) to examine how Indigenous communities have been affected by this loss of

language, religion, land, and the trauma of attending residential school. She writes that these

experiences have deeply impacted Indigenous identity, and that HTT should be used to think

about engaging with Indigenous communities at the library. Lee (2017) interviewed Indigenous

librarians, and many commented on libraries being associated with residential schools. In thinking about relational accountability and this horrific history of education for Indigenous populations, Atleo (2013) is apt when saying "the development of trust in education is central to learning and difficult to regain in the face of a colonial history" (p. 39).

Decolonizing libraries

Colonization is the process of taking control of land, and assimilating a culture, often deemed inferior, through political and legal dominance (Schuerkens, 2012; TRC, 2015a). As Schuerkens writes, "Colonization often meant promoting one culture over another, forcing cultural beliefs and practices onto the conquered nation." The Truth and Reconciliation Commission refers to what happened to Canada's Indigenous populations as cultural genocide, considering the policies that targeted language, ceremonies, family and kinship, and spiritual practices (TRC, 2015a).

The words decolonization, and reconciliation have become commonplace since the TRC's report was published. Decolonization has two parts: allowing Indigenous peoples to reclaim "the family, community, culture, language, history and traditions that were taken" (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2017), and requiring non-Indigenous peoples to learn and accept how colonization has affected Indigenous communities (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2017). The TRC refers to this process as reconciliation, and acknowledges that it will take time (2015a). The following sections will examine how the library profession can work towards decolonization and reconciliation.

Indigenous librarianship

Indigenous librarianship is defined as librarianship focusing on collections and services to Indigenous peoples, and is "rooted in long-standing and established practices that Indigenous peoples employ to create, transmit, and preserve knowledge" (Burns, Doyle, Joseph, & Krebs, 2009, p. 2). As an area of study, Indigenous librarianship is relatively new (Andrews & Humphries, 2016): only two MLIS programs and one Library Technician program in Canada offer an elective course on the subject. As a result, students interested in the area of Indigenous librarianship need to be proactive and seek opportunities outside of their formal education to learn about Indigenous knowledge practices, gain cultural competencies, and become familiar with how to best provide service to Indigenous communities (Andrews & Humphries, 2016). The need to seek these opportunities puts extra burdens on a student's finances and time (Andrews, 2017) contributing to stress and burnout.

Both the TRC's Calls to Actions (2015) and the Canadian Federation of Library Associations/Federation Canadienne des Associations de Bibliotheques (CFLA/FCAB)'s report from its Truth and Reconciliation Committee (n.d.) have an emphasis on education. With this emphasis, it is my hope that LIS curricula see a change in the near future. When it comes to recruiting indigenous students into library and information studies programs, it is important for them to they see themselves represented. Without that representation, including increasing the number of Indigenous faculty, library education is continuing a colonial approach to the profession. Indigenous students can feel isolated in their cohorts (Andrews, 2017; Lee, 2017) due to the low number of Indigenous students enrolled in library programs. Changing the curriculum

is only one part of encouraging Indigenous students to consider a career in libraries. There needs

to be more diversity within library staff, so Indigenous children grow up feeling welcome in

libraries and also inspired to work in them.

       The need to diversify the library profession has been a subject of much discussion over

the years. Librarians have noted that "librarianship is paralyzed by whiteness" (Galvan, 2015),

and that despite diversity being a core value of the American Library Association (ALA) the

profession is "so lacking in diversity [it] is embarrassing" (Bourg, 2014). Statistics from the 2012

ALA Diversity Counts show that 88 percent of librarians are Caucasian, and less than one

percent identify as Indigenous (Andrews & Humphries, 2016). Canadian information place the

number of Indigenous librarians with their MLIS degree at 30 or under (Kandiuk, 2014; No

Librarians Allowed, 2018); I was unable to locate numbers for Indigenous library technicians.

Lee (2017) interviewed 27 Indigenous librarians, and less than half had their MLIS. Andrews

(2017) points out that there is a "risk of early burnout, given that minoritized librarians are often

called upon to undertake diversity and outreach work in their institution, in addition to their hired

duties" (p. 185). In her interview on the No Librarians Allowed podcast, Tanya Ball (2018)

brings up the emotional labour aspect of Indigenous librarian work, saying that when she leaves

the library she doesn't leave being Métis behind, and that it is exhausting having to "defend your

existence." Ball (2018) stressed the need for self care, and a community of support. One piece of

this community support that Lilley (2015) brings up is recognizing that not all questions coming

from an Indigenous student or about Indigenous topics need to be answered by the Indigenous

librarian, and to not overburden your colleagues.

Does this lack of Indigenous librarians mean libraries need to change their recruitment and hiring practices? Possibly, but there is another factor to consider, and that is library education. In Lee's (2017) survey several librarians mentioned "a lack of knowledge and awareness about the profession" (p. 185) both for technician and masters programs as a reason there are so few Indigenous librarians. Participants also mentioned that with libraries not being a "focal point in their communities" (p. 186, Participant G) that the profession isn't well known. One participant in Lee's (2017) survey brought up how education and legal professions are heavily promoted in Indigenous communities (p. 189, G. Joseph), while another suggested having librarian booths at job fairs Indigenous career fairs (p. 189, A.P.). The combination of few Indigenous librarians, and communities not understanding the importance of libraries contributes to feelings of exclusion (Andrews, 2017; Lee, 2017).

Even with awareness of the library profession, Indigenous students face barriers in achieving library diplomas and/or degrees. Broadly speaking these barriers include finances, location, and employment opportunities. As these barriers are interconnected it can be difficult to parse them out, so I will look at them holistically. Contrary to popular belief, Indigenous students do not automatically get their post secondary education paid for. Rather, students go through an application process within their communities, and due to funding shortages not all will receive any or sufficient amounts (Monkman, 2016). Students may receive funding for one year or one semester, and then need to take out loans or find part-time jobs. Funding might also come with conditions including maintaining a certain grade point average, taking a specific number of courses during a semester, or writing status reports (Andrews, 2017; Monkman, 2016).

Additionally, the funding received doesn't necessarily cover the cost of living (Andrews, 2017; Monkman, 2016).

The cost of living is related to another barrier: location. Often in order to attend post secondary students are required to leave their communities, or enroll in online programs which are not able to offer the same type of relationship-centred education that is valued by Indigenous communities (Andrews & Humphries, 2016). Leaving your community makes you isolated, and can bring up trauma from the residential school and Sixties Scoop practices of separating families. Moving away from your family and support can cause stress, in particular when entering the world of academia which continues to be modeled on Western European ideals (Andrews, 2017 ; Lee, 2017).

The final barrier I want to look at is the one of employment. Graduates are faced with precarious working environments full of part-time and contract work. This situation isn't unique to Indigenous librarians. Lee (2017) points out that in some cases achieving your MLIS is actually a disadvantage because Indigenous community libraries often don't have the funding to pay comparable wages. Since not all communities have libraries, there also isn't always a career within your community to return to (Lee, 2017), further isolating Indigenous librarians who may not be able to return home.

Reading the results and discussion of Lee's survey (2017), and the personal stories shared by Andrews (2017) and Ball (No Librarians Allowed, 2018) illustrate the need for change present in both library education and the profession as a whole. More work needs to be done in terms of recruiting and supporting Indigenous librarians. Likewise libraries need to make Indigenous students feel welcome, and respected.

Library services

Decolonizing libraries and the library profession means that library services, collections, and classification systems need to be examined for instances of colonial oppression. In the report issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee of the Canadian Federation of Library Associations/Federation Canadienne des Associations de Bibliotheques (CFLA/FCAB), two of the ten recommendations directly mention decolonization in libraries (n.d., p. 6): Recommendation five addresses access and classification, while recommendation six addresses the inclusion of Indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledges. Recommendation six goes beyond collections by stating the library's physical space and design could incorporate art, language, and territory acknowledgements.

Classification systems are outdated, and contain offensive language regarding all minority groups and there is much work to be done to make them more inclusive. This work includes library staff learning about Indigenous topics because, as Lee (2008) points out, call numbers and subject headings indicate what a book is about, but if a cataloguer doesn't understand the topic a book could be described and classified incorrectly. While I am a strong advocate of changing how items about and by Indigenous peoples are portrayed in library systems, I want to focus this section on library services. For more discussion on decolonizing classification systems see Lee (2008), Duarte & Belarde-Lewis (2015), Dudley (2017), and Vaughan (2018).

The book, *Library services to Indigenous populations: Case studies*, was published in 2013 and edited by Loriene Roy and Antonia Frydman. In the introduction, Roy writes that

Indigenous peoples hold "their connection to the land and their genealogy" (p.8) close to their identities. Libraries can honour this connection by incorporating territory acknowledgements at the start of programing (CFLA/FCAB, n.d.), and treating interactions as relationship-building opportunities (Lee, 2008 ; Loyer, 2017). Establishing relationships with any student or faculty member can be difficult due to time constraints, however doing so can go a long way to alleviating library anxiety and building trust.

Concluding thoughts

In her work, Jessie Loyer (2017) looks at information literacy through the Cree lens of wâhkôhtowin, which uses "kinship as a framework for responsibility and accountability" (p. 145). Under wâhkôhtowin, librarians need to be tuned into how the act of researching, and the topic being researched, can be sources of trauma for students (Loyer, 2017). Both Loyer (2017) and Lee (2008) advocate for approaching information literacy, both in workshops and at the reference desk, holistically - that is recognizing the "mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical" (Loyer, p. 145) aspects of this literacy. Based on my experiences assisting Indigenous students on the reference desk, I take this to mean providing space for processing information, having contact information for mental health professionals on campus at hand, or simply by listening as they work through search strategies or the information they have found. It is understanding the historical trauma that educational institutions, including libraries, have been a part of and respecting Indigenous students and faculty who come in for assistance.

Treating all people with respect is an Indigenous principle mentioned by several libraries in Roy and Frydman's (2013) book. One way to create an environment of respect is to foster

relationships and collaboration between faculties and groups on campus. The Diné College

Libraries case study does that by having an informal event called "Friday Nights @ the Library"

(p. 18) where people gather, share a meal, and build relationships. Staff at Diné College Libraries

found that the relaxed and informal atmosphere helped students with their library anxiety, and

resulted in friendships and "artistic collaborations" (p. 19). Programming such as this creates a

community within the library, something that can be particularly needed for students who are far

away from home.

Another program possibility that can honour Indigenous storytelling while building trust

and community with local Indigenous groups is hosting a Storyteller-in-Residence program, like

the one found at the Vancouver Public Library (Roy & Frydman, 2013). Hosting a

Storyteller-in-Residence is a way to bring Indigenous cultures into the library, and honour the

oral tradition of sharing stories and information. Storytelling events provide an opportunity for

others on campus to learn about Indigenous topics, something that was mentioned in both the

TRC report (2015) and the CFLA/FCAB report (n.d.).

Building community and establishing relationships are two central ways that libraries can

serve Indigenous students. It will take commitment from the library to find the space, and to

recognize these relationships will take time, but doing so will go a long way toward decolonizing

the institution.

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