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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 Bibliothèques (CFLA/FCAB)'s report from its Truth and Reconciliation Committee (n.d.) recognize the significant role of education needed to address changes. 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 and information science (LIS) curriculum falls short in preparing students for working with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous resources. Finally, I examine how libraries can decolonize their services. Canadian academic library staff cannot continue to be so ill-equipped to serve Indigenous students and faculty.

Keywords

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

Introduction

The time is past where the Canadian population can remain ignorant of their country's colonial history, ignoring past and present contributions to trauma inflicted on its Indigenous populations. 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 (Heller, 2016; "Really Harper," 2009). Denying the colonial roots of Canadian history, and its present-day consequences continues to perpetuate the idea that Canada's Indigenous populations have no value to Canada and Canadian society. This viewpoint can be found in government legislation throughout Canadian history, particularly in the Indian Act, which governed all aspects of life for Indigenous populations. It remains a current piece of legislation.

This paper is going to examine the Indian Act, the history of Indigenous education, and the recommendations (Calls to Action) put forth by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015. Particular attention will be placed on the role of academic institutions as places of assimilation and how academic libraries can work towards decolonization using the Calls to Action (TRCb, 2015).

In 2008 the federal government formed 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), but 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 (Stó:lō), 2006; Edwards, 2005), and therefore can be viewed as needing to undergo a decolonization process as recommended in the TRC's Calls to Action (TRC, 2015b).

At this time I would like to situate myself within this paper using the Indigenous axiology concept of relational accountability as outlined by Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree) (2008). I am undertaking this research as a settler-Métis 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 (MLIS) 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 parents' four children to pursue a bachelor and master's 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 (Gwawaenuk), 2018; Justice (Cherokee Nation), 2018), the term *Indigenous* will be used when discussing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Older and outdated terms may be used in context when discussing practices (e.g., Library of Congress Subject Headings that begin with “Indians of North America...”) or as stated by an author. Additionally, where possible, I have included the name of the community that authors use to identify themselves with, the first time I reference them. I am responsible for any omissions or mistakes and apologize for them.

Colonialism and education

To understand why academic libraries need to go through a process of decolonization, it is important to understand the role that educational institutions played in colonization. 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 systems 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.

In the nearly 50 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. Learning within their communities allowed for content to be shared between adults and children in context, based on seasons and age, and often rooted in relationships with the land (Burton & Point, 2006). This community-based education system was broken with an amendment to the Indian Act in 1884 which banned the practice of ceremonies (Burton & Point, 2006; Wilson, 2008).

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 (i.e., 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 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 (Ahousaht First Nation), 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 is worth noting that some communities embraced books, and viewed them as a way to find common ground with European settlers (Edwards, 2006). This proved to be 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), though it dictated nearly all other aspects of their lives (Joseph, 2018). 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), allowing someone not only an education, but also the right to vote, and move off reserve. Yet 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 subsequent amendments that increased enfranchised Indigenous populations, it appears this assimilation tactic was not working.

It was through 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 separated children from their families, often taking them hundreds of kilometers away, and forcing both English and Christianity on them while forbidding the language and spiritual practices of their nations. At the same time these children were exposed to physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Despite amendments made to the Indian Act in the 1920s which required children between the ages of 7 and

15 by law to attend residential schools (Joseph, 2018), the reality was that children as young as 5 were being apprehended, and they often stayed until 18 (TRC, 2015a).

As a result of their residential school experiences, 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. This trauma became cyclical as generation after generation of Indigenous families went through the residential school system, which operated 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, intergenerational trauma and distrust created by the Indian Act and through residential schools persists. Andrews (Ngāti Paoa) (2017) uses the Historical Trauma Theory (HTT) to examine how Indigenous communities have been affected by the intergenerational trauma of residential school, specifically their loss of language, religion, and traditional ties to the land. She writes that these experiences have deeply affected Indigenous identity, and that HTT could be used to think about engaging with Indigenous communities, healing, and education. Lee (Cree-Métis) (2017) interviewed Indigenous librarians who are or have residential school survivors in their family and many commented on libraries being associated with residential schools. One participant (H.Roy) mentioned not having libraries in residential schools (Lee, 2017, p. 186), while others (T. Million, W. Sinclair, & K. Goodstriker) linked the negative experiences from residential schools to feeling intimidated or unwelcome in libraries (p. 192). In thinking about relational accountability and the 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 (2012) writes, “Colonization often meant promoting one culture over another, forcing cultural beliefs and practices onto the conquered nation” (p. 248). 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. This process is best undertaken in all aspects of the library profession: education, information literacy instruction, providing public service at the reference and circulation desks, and in how resources are catalogued and classified. This work will go a long way to making Indigenous students feel welcome to study, research, and ask for help.

Indigenous librarianship

Indigenous librarianship is defined as librarianship focusing on collections and services for Indigenous peoples, and is “rooted in long-standing and established practices that Indigenous peoples employ to create, transmit, and preserve knowledge” (Burns (Mixed-blood Nlaka'pamux), Doyle, Joseph (Wet'suwet'en Dakehl), & Krebs (Anishinaabe), 2009, p. 2). As an area of study, Indigenous librarianship is relatively new (Andrews (Ngāti Paoa) & Humphries (Kalinago & Métis), 2016): looking at library education programs in Canada, I found that only two MLIS programs and one Library Technician program 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 Bibliothèques (CFLA/FCAB)'s report from its Truth and Reconciliation Committee (n.d.) have an emphasis on education. Within 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 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. Some 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% of librarians are

Caucasian, and less than 1% identify as Indigenous (Andrews & Humphries, 2016). Canadian information places 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 (Métis) (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 (Māori) (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 library education is another factor to consider. 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 without libraries as a “focal point in their communities” (p. 186, Participant G) 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 and 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 (Lee, 2017). 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 (Monkman, 2016). Rather, students go through an application process within their communities, and due to funding shortages not all will receive any or sufficient amounts leading them to work part time or take out loans (Monkman, 2016). 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 creates the sense of isolation, 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 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.

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 Bibliothèques (CFLA/FCAB), 2 of the 10 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).

In her work, Cree-Métis librarian 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). Using *wâhkôhtowin*, librarians would be more in tune to 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 holistically, recognizing the "mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical" (Loyer, p. 145) aspects of this literacy. My own approach to library service is to adopt a holistic practice by 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. A holistic approach to library services understands 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 (Anishinabe) and Frydman's (2013) book, *Library Services to Indigenous Populations: Case Studies*. 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 (2015a) and the CFLA/FCAB report (n.d.).

In the introduction to *Library Services to Indigenous Populations: Case Studies*, 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 programming (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. 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.

Conclusion

Through their association with higher education, libraries—and particularly academic libraries—have an association with Canada's oppression of its Indigenous populations. In the academic context this oppression came in the form of enfranchisement should any Indigenous person graduate from a post-secondary institution. As a result, for decades there were few Indigenous university graduates, a situation that is changing according to 2011 census statistics (Statistics Canada, 2018). This paper has looked at ways academic libraries can begin the process of Decolonizing and Indigenizing, beginning with library education and extending to how services are provided for Indigenous students.

The Report and Calls to Action released by the TRC (2015a and 2015b) provide a framework for Decolonization and Indigenization in numerous aspects of Canadian society. Of particular relevance to libraries are the Calls related to education, not only for how libraries can assist with this work, but for recognizing the need to educate future library workers on the topic. The need for this change in both professional education and institutions was illustrated by the participants in Lee's (2017) study, and the personal stories shared by Andrews (2017) and Ball (No Librarians Allowed, 2018).

If academic libraries want to serve all students and members of their community, including staff, change is necessary. No longer can institutions and staff be uneducated in such a horrific aspect of Canadian history, nor its effect on libraries and librarianship in particular.

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