Moving in the Circle: Indigenous Solidarity for Canadian Libraries

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Abstract

Libraries face new challenges in an era of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples as First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities are reclaiming their voices and building a new framework for its relationship with other Canadians. In order for libraries to begin the process of responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, library staff should educate themselves on the role that the library has played in the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. As 2017 marked both the 150th anniversary of Confederation and the 140th anniversary of the Indian Act, it is an appropriate time to reflect on the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers, especially in the context of library. This paper aims to introduce some of the systems that define settler-Indigenous relationships and proposes solidarity and relationship building as a path towards reconciliation.

Introduction

Indigenous peoples in Canada continue to be affected by the legacy of the Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop and other effects of colonialism. The very grouping of Indigenous peoples as a single category is problematic as it does not describe the diversity of Indigenous Nations. The term *Indigenous*, in a Canadian context, encompasses 1.8 million people, 615 First Nations communities, 8 Métis communities,

and 53 Inuit communities (Trovato & Aylsworth, 2012). These communities are diverse groups of peoples with differing needs. Indigenous peoples also account for four percent of the Canadian population and the Indigenous youth population is a fast growing segment of the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2011). First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) resistance and resilience are being led by Indigenous activists and communities resulting in such initiatives as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

The Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has stated that education is key to reconciliation (Deerchild, 2015). As such, before the reconciliation process can begin, library staff must educate themselves about Indigenous issues and also what role the library played in colonial history. As settler institutions built on colonial structures, but also as treaty partners with an obligation to Indigenous peoples to build relationships and work with Indigenous peoples towards reconciliation.

Settler-Indigenous Relationships

The relationship between settler peoples and Indigenous peoples is central to understanding existing power dynamics and areas of oppression. Settlers are people who have settled on appropriated Indigenous lands but who are not the stewards of the land (Wolfe, 388). In the context of settler-Indigenous relationships, the same structures that oppress Indigenous peoples may also adversely affect settlers as well, especially people of colour (Unsettling Minnesota, 2009). When considering the role of the library as a settler colonial institution, library staff should analyze their own intersectionality (situating ourselves in terms of race, class, gender, ability and sexuality), juxtaposed with the intersectional identities of the members of other communities (Bishop, 2002). Solidarity and ally relationships are complex and changing. It is the connected quality of power that allows oppressive structures to exist. Thus, moving forward will require a collective effort, as allies, to disrupt discrimination and oppression in our practice (Bishop, 2002). This must begin with a recognition of the place of libraries in settler colonialism.

Settler colonialism is the process in which the exogenous settlers displace Indigenous peoples for access to their lands and resources (Wolfe, 2006). Settler colonialism is a structure with ongoing effects rather than a single or past series of events (Kauanui, 2016). It is the responsibility of settlers on appropriated Indigenous lands to actively dismantle systemic prejudice against Indigenous peoples. As Canadian library practitioners, we should evaluate the library as a colonial institution and build relationships, based on mutual respect, with the Indigenous peoples of Canada. These relationships are already based on the legal framework of treaties (Poelzer & Coates, 2015). Treaties are not simply remnants of history, they are living documents regarding the relationship between settlers, Indigenous peoples, and the Land (Vowel, 2016). Indigenous peoples hold "enormous significance to the moral, legal, and political authority of the treaties they signed with the Crown" (Poelzer & Coates, 2015, p.46). Institutions such as libraries have treaty responsibilities which they can reaffirm by fostering and maintaining respectful relationships with Indigenous communities.

Recognizing the Historic Role of Libraries

Non-Indigenous library staff should educate themselves on the various colonial structures that allow for settler colonial relationships and how non-action works to inherently perpetuate these structures (Bishop, 2002). In order to better serve our Indigenous patrons and to better represent Indigenous peoples within our collections, we should re-evaluate every structure that places settlers in a position of privilege (Barker, 2010). Cultural institutions such as libraries, galleries, archives and museums were built as an extension of colonialism and have a very long and complex history in their relationships with Indigenous peoples (Fitzgerald, 2002). For example, the very existence of libraries in Canada are predicated on appropriated Indigenous lands, the subjugation of Indigenous treaty rights for resource extraction and Eurocentric systems of intellectual control (Olson & Schlegl, 2001). In fact, a majority of libraries are most likely filled with problematic and racist materials that hold views not sanctioned by the communities about whom they are written. Although confronting these issues may cause discomfort, as the realization that the expansion and continuation of settler colonialism are predicated on the oppression of Indigenous peoples and the theft of Indigenous lands, it is essential to confront reality in order to ensure that new initiatives do not inadvertently continue the trend of colonialism through ingrained biases thus building new hegemonic structures (Barker, 2010).

When working with Indigenous peoples, it is important to be mindful of the amount of space allies occupy in consultations and discussions (PeerNet BC, 2012). In one of the first friendship treaties with Indigenous peoples, the Haudenosaunee Two-Row Wampum Belt Treaty, the Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee outline a relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers built on respect and non-interference (Parmenter, 2013). Library practitioners need to give Indigenous peoples the space to express their needs and respect their agency over their own matters and heritage. The communities ultimately know what they need in order to thrive and succeed. A library that intends to improve services for its Indigenous patrons without any input from the First Nations, Inuit and Métis patrons themselves would be misguided. This act would be following a pattern of colonialism that is a replication of the very oppression that allies are attempting to combat.

The Changing Definition of Solidarity

Allyship is defined as an active process in which a person in a position of privilege seeks solidarity with marginalized peoples (Anti-Oppression Network, 2015). Other terms used in place of allyship are 'solidarity', 'standing with', 'supporters' and 'accountable relationships' (Margaret, 2010, p. 11-12). It is important to note that solidarity with Indigenous peoples is not an identity, rather it is a constant process that evolves with new discourse. It is the responsibility of allies to educate themselves based on direction from the peoples with whom they seek solidarity (Peernet BC, 2012). Allies are held accountable to the communities with which they stand and are not afraid to confront systematic oppression and internalized colonialism, especially in their own actions and thoughts (Anti-Oppression Network, 2015). Solidarity work depends on accepting direction by and the acceptance of the community in question (Peernet BC,

2012). When working with marginalized peoples, it is important to be aware of the complex dynamics of power in the formation of any identity.

The Work of Library Allies

Reconciliation is a process and an ongoing relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people. As there is an imbalance of power between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous institutions, the responsibility of reconciliation lies with settlers and settler institutions. In recognizing the role that libraries and library staff have played in the mechanism of colonialism, how can library staff become a part of the reconciliation process in Canada? Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous library staff have been engaged in this work since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In April 2017, the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) released its Truth and Reconciliation Report and Recommendations, prepared by committee organized according to a Medicine Wheel methodology and incorporating an Indigenous epistemology into the very foundation of the Report (CFLA, 2017). The corresponding focuses of the Report were Research and Best Practices (Black), Relationships (Yellow), Analysis (White), and Decolonize (Red) (CFLA, 2017). The report made ten recommendations and is accompanied by best practices, research from Indigenous library leaders, and many other resources for non-Indigenous library staff reviewing their responsibilities around the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (CFLA, 2017).

The legacy of institutionalized racism in collections and intellectual control needs to be evaluated. Libraries must contextualize materials regarding Indigenous peoples that were written with roots in historical biases and do not accurately represent Indigenous peoples (Library and Archives Canada, 2016). Library staff must strategize ways in which patrons can learn about the historical and modern experiences of Indigenous peoples, while understanding that problematic materials exist and why they are inaccurate. Some institutions have already sought initiatives to contextualize their Indigenous materials, such as *The Naming Aboriginal Peoples Project* at Library and Archives Canada (Library and Archives Canada, 2016). In their collections, libraries must work to ensure that authentic Indigenous voices are represented. Indigenous experiences written by Indigenous authors, and resources developed by small community publishers should be represented in the collections as an alternative view to enrich diversity (Woroniak, 2014).

Indigenous histories have been largely omitted and separated from library collections. Continued omission of Indigenous histories, cultures and languages perpetuates stereotypes, and further widens the gap in understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Indigenous lives are more than stories of tragedy. Indigenous peoples' success stories have typically been viewed as individual achievements, instead of as signs of cultural revitalization (Poelzer & Coates, 2015). Indigenous and non-Indigenous library patrons should be exposed to the works of Indigenous authors and scholars in modern contexts to begin the work of education that is so vital to the process of reconciliation. Within the Library of Congress Classification scheme, the segregation of Indigenous materials into history (E 51-99), seeks to temporally separate Indigenous knowledges and experiences from the contemporary era (Olson & Schlegl,

2001). In historicizing these materials, settlers can compartmentalize Indigenous erasure, omission and silencing into the realm of the past rather than focus on issues arising from settler colonialism that continue to affect Indigenous peoples. Though there is a lack of consensus on the proper means to describe Indigenous peoples and issues, it is widely agreed that the LCSH term "Indians of North America" is insufficient. In her article "Indigenous Knowledge Organization: A Study of Concepts, Terminology, Structure and (Mostly) Indigenous Voices", Deborah Lee concludes that a localized terminology, and structures that are not predicated on hierarchy or linearity are preferable (Lee, 2011). Thus, taking descriptive standards into consideration, libraries should devise outreach strategies to communities in order to better describe Indigenous materials within their collections.

Library practitioners should make a concerted effort to learn about cultural heritage and Indigenous worldviews to improve their abilities to assist Indigenous patrons. In Eurocentric conceptions, Indigenous knowledges are seen as stationary and non-progressive systems of information (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Indigenous research methodologies are questioned for their validity and reliability (Wilson, 2001). This does not take into account the fact that Indigenous epistemologies continue to change according to new information and technologies (Anderson, 2005). The idealization of colonial systems' progress and the ousting of other non-normative knowledge systems is a process that Battiste refers to as "cognitive imperialism" (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 13). As institutions tasked with the collection and preservation of information, libraries must create space for Indigenous epistemologies in their collections. Consultations with community leadership will be the best method to move forward with the development of space for Indigenous collections. This may take the form of audio-visual materials, programming and services or oral history dissemination (Anderson, 2005). It is ultimately the decision of the community as to the best practices and which knowledges can be shared with other library patrons.

Conclusion

Libraries are in a unique position to educate their users on reconciliation. Library practitioners should be leaders in the effort to reconcile with Indigenous Nations and communities, and in turn, improve our institutions. Following the recommendations and practices set out in the CFLA report, library staff should consult with and listen to their Indigenous communities and work to educate their non-Indigenous colleagues and patrons. It is vital that library staff do not assume that they already know the needs of the communities without direct consultation. Lack of consultation denies Indigenous agency and follows the historical precedent of non-consultative decision making that may harm the relationship of trust that libraries are building with the Indigenous community. In order to learn the needs of the Indigenous communities, libraries should reach out through direct consultation with Elders and community leadership. In this way, libraries can provide a space for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to come together in the spirit of reconciliation and learn together.

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