Indigenous Literatures, Social Justice, and the Decolonial Library

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unceded Musqueam territory
GΛ/wado/thank you

- Musqueam Nation
- Clare Hitchens, Marian Toledo Candelaria, and the whole WLUP crew
- Kim Lawson (Heiltsuk) and Sarah Dupont (Métis), Xwi7xwa Library, UBC (https://xwi7xwa.library.ubc.ca)
- Debbie Reese (Nambe Pueblo), independent scholar and creator of American Indians in Children’s Literature blog (https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com)
Today’s discussion

• Introduction
• Foundations and Contexts
• Challenges and Possibilities
• Key question: What might a decolonial library look like for Indigenous literatures?
Introduction

• Cherokee Nation/ᏣᎳᎵᏔᏲ citizen, born and raised in Colorado
• Professor, First Nations and Indigenous Studies/English, UBC
• 20+ years learning and teaching about Indigenous literatures
• Literature scholar—might have been a librarian or library sciences scholar…
AMERICAN LIBRARIES
SEPTEMBER 1999

TV’s RUPERT GILES:
HERO, LIBRARIAN

While Buffy Slays
Vampires, Her
Mentor Slays
Stereotypes

PLUS
Statistics and How to Use Them
Advocating to Stop Gun Violence
Homework Centers Blossom in L.A.
Hennen’s Public Library Rankings
Responses Indigenous literature scholars hear when people find out what we do...

- “I didn’t know they had a literature.”
- “Oh, you mean like myths and legends, right?”
- “But they’ve really only been writing for the last 100/50/20 years.”
- “Aboriginal people won’t have a literature until they have a Shakespeare.”
Deficit thinking

- In the media, popular culture, public policy, and even academic research, Indigenous peoples are still largely read through a deficit lens or considered in a “damaged-centered” framework.
  - See Eve Tuck’s “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” for a helpful analysis
Why this matters

• The question of who does and does not possess literature and knowledge worth preserving is always deeply political and embedded in power relations

• Reinforced through weaponized education and structures

• By ignoring histories of forced erasure of knowledge, false and damaging stereotypes of Indigenous deficiency are normalized
Foundations: Terminology

• What do we mean by “literature”?
  – Skill (writing) vs. cultural capital (literature)
  – Literature vs. orature: false binary
  – Diverse expressive technologies, transmission practices, preservation protocols
Foundations: Concepts

• Writing: “marks made upon a material base for the purpose of recording, storing, and communicating information” (Germaine Warkentin)

• The idea of cultural “visual code”: “a set of mutually understood symbols and images that communicate culturally-embedded ideas to the viewer” (Penelope Kelsey, Seneca)

• Indigenous writing isn’t only alphabetic, hieroglyphic, or syllabic; the library isn’t only a repository of bound codices, etc.

• Yet even in books Indigenous peoples have long been present: as producers as well as authors.
Why this matters

• **Accuracy**
  – Indigenous peoples have always been literate, in our own ways *as well as* those of colonial societies

• **Cultural capital**: literature vs. writing

• **Cultural chauvinism**: people with literature are seen as “civilized,” those without it are perceived to be in some way less human

• **Deficit thinking impoverishes everyone but has particularly scarring impacts for Indigenous people**
Case Study on Biblioclasm: *The burning of the Mesoamerican libraries*
When the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in the New World [sic] in 1504, he was extremely impressed with the Aztecs. They had built the largest city in the world and were advanced in mathematics and astronomy, but it was their papermaking ability that most impressed him. To the Spaniard, a society that made paper was an advanced civilization.

Mark Kurlansky, *Paper*
In 1521, just under twenty years later, Cortés and his troops destroyed Tenochtitlan, the city that had once so impressed him, along with all its libraries. It was a campaign that specifically targeted Indigenous literature and literary production.
A Mayan observer on the burning of the libraries in Yucatan

“How do we mourn for such a loss? We could not stop the fires. We could only cling desperately to our memories and weep. They took generations of our hearts and minds, the books and they threw them into the fires. And we could not stop them.”
Of the thousands of Mayan codices and other texts that existed prior to the *auto de fe* of 1562, only three (and a fragment of a fourth) survived the fires...to be taken as trophies to European libraries.

This was not an isolated incident. Nor was it limited to Mesoamerica. And it continues today.
“...an act of cultural genocide as one culture finding itself threatened by the profundity of the Other’s literacy. These were illiteracy campaigns, sponsored by the group claiming to be the most literate.”

Craig Womack (Muscogee Creek)
“Symbolically, and literally, this campaign still continues; how many Native writers have commented on their long struggle simply to believe in the legitimacy of tribal voices in racist America [and Canada], where they have been taught that such voices are not possible?”

Craig Womack, Red on Red
Why this matters for Indigenous peoples

When we internalize a false idea of our supposed deficiency in cultural and intellectual production, we too often internalize external perceptions of innate inferiority—perceptions that are fundamentally based in error, deliberate disinformation, and state- and church-sponsored violence.
Always more than books:
Diverse technologies/literary texts

- Totem poles
- Codices
- Birchbark scrolls
- Winter Counts
- Quipu strings
- Wampum belts and strings
- Etc., including books
Keep in mind....

• In many if not most cases these diverse literary forms continue to be used in communities, although the materials may not be the same, nor the specific contexts.

• Often imperiled but very much living literary forms
Competing literacies

- What is common to all these discussions of Indigenous literatures/expressive technologies?
  - Each is rounded in cultural values, relations, geography, and material resources
  - Each has been perceived as a threat to monolithic European religious, cultural, economic, and/or political authority
  - Each has been attacked, outlawed, destroyed, persecuted, appropriated, and/or co-opted by settler governments and religious agents
It has never been that Indigenous peoples haven’t had our own literatures or writing—it’s that settler societies have actively targeted our literary technologies and our abilities to use them through direct violence, legislation, social stigma, and weaponized education. The library is part of that system.
Each of these expressive forms has been a focus of community recovery, restoration, and resurgence.

Even our literary expression in English and other European languages—and through orthographic texts from publishing houses and held in libraries—can be part of this cultural recovery.
Challenges/Provocations

• The library is *always* an ideological structure.
• It’s not just what goes *into* the library that matters, but *how* it’s organized and under which norms.
• It’s also, importantly, about *who* does or does not have access.
• In most Indigenous traditions, not all things are meant for all people at all times.
Challenges/Provocations

• In an age of neoliberal austerity and market thinking, incuriosity, and anti-intellectualism, the idea of libraries as a social good is in decline.

• But libraries haven’t only been beneficial or benevolent. They’ve long been sites of harm, too.

• Advocacy of the value of libraries also means their transformation.
Taxonomic Colonialism

• The Enlightenment frenzy to classify creation: mastery through definition
• Indigenous knowledge defined and organized as folklore, myth, legend
• Salvage ethnography and the archive
• Taxonomies define the limits of the (im)possible.
Libraries have long been part of the problem of settler colonialism.

But they can be part of the solutions, too.
Other possibilities

• A decolonial ethic of librarianship and knowledge stewardship—as well as literary studies—must attend to at least three things:
  – **Content:** whose knowledge is included
  – **Classification:** how that knowledge is organized to centre Indigenous perspectives
  – **Audience:** Indigenous peoples and protocols are part of the process at all stages, from vision to realization
Why this matters to academic libraries

• Expanding the relevance of materials to diverse constituencies and acknowledging different histories
• Deepening community commitment and reciprocity
• Opening new possibilities for partnership and meaningful projects
• Undoing damage to which libraries and other educational institutions have contributed
Case Study: Xwi7xwa Library, UBC

Entrance to stairs and ramp.
Photo Credit: Francine Cunningham, 2013.

Sidewalk between Longhouse and Library.
Photo Credit: Ronnie Young, 2016
Case Study: Xwi7xwa Library, UBC

- xwi7xwa.library.ubc.ca
- The only Indigenous branch of an academic library in Canada
- Different classification and knowledge organization logics; collections centre Indigenous perspectives and are explicitly anti-colonial
- Organizing principle: put Indigenous communities first
- “A centre for academic and Indigenous community scholarship”
Is a decolonial library possible?

• If we think of libraries in the “Dark Age bulwark against savagery” model, no.
• If we think of libraries as sites of cultural continuity and exchange, informed by both rigour and respect, and attentive to history, then perhaps, but communities, contexts, and content must be addressed differently.
• The library as living community gathering grounds, not lifeless monument.
What might a *decolonial library* look like?

• Central context: *all libraries in the Americas are on Indigenous lands.*

• Centre living communities and artists

• Understand legacies of harm and actively work to heal them

• Commit to ongoing relationships of intellectual reciprocity and actively contesting extractive practices of knowledge “collection”

• Humility, generosity, openness, adaptation
A few recommended resources

• Doyle, Lawson, and Dupont, “Indigenization of Knowledge Organization at the Xwi7xwa Library,” https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubclibraryandarchives/29962/items/1.0103204


• Reese, American Indians in Children’s Literature, https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com

• Round, Removable Type: Histories of the Book in Indian Country, 1663-1880 (2010)
Why
INDIGENOUS LITERATURES
Matter

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Wado
Thank you

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