Decolonization in the Archives: At the Item Level

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Abstract

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report on residential schools has heightened mainstream attention to institutional archives and their handling of records concerning Indigenous and other marginalized communities. In addressing the larger systemic issues within the institution, archivists can focus decolonization efforts on daily processes, such as description. This paper looks at how archivists have begun to adapt their description practices in light of these efforts, and the forms that this revised and reimagined description takes—both in archival institutions' physical and digital holdings as well as in community-based alternative projects. Communities have often been at the forefront of these efforts, as advisors in institutional practices and as leaders of community-based projects, and archivists can and continue to learn from their example in working towards decolonization and reconciliation.

Keywords

archives, description, decolonization, TRC, community archives
INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (hereafter TRC) report on residential schools, many institutions have been compelled to act on the TRC’S recommendations to address Canada’s history with Indigenous peoples. Archives, as keepers of society’s history—albeit a selective history as dictated by the colonial state they were founded under—are among those that the TRC identified as needing an overhaul of their current practices in order to work toward reconciliation. Decolonizing archival practices has been ongoing for many years, particularly via efforts fronted by Indigenous peoples, but the TRC’s report has spurred on and raised awareness of such efforts.

The report offers some guidance as to how to precede with this work within the realm of archives, focusing on collaboration with Indigenous peoples and increasing accessibility of records. Yet, the ways in which these decolonization efforts are being realized and interpreted has differed across institutions and communities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). We cannot arrive at reconciliation and the development of mutually respectful relationships without first tackling the decolonization of our institutions and the colonial foundations they are built from (Antoine et al., 2018). While this process will take many years and will require many groups’ and organizations’ involvement, we can work to improve relations between Indigenous peoples and archives by starting small—as the title of this paper suggests.

This paper, therefore, will look at how archivists have adapted or begun to adapt their description practices in light of decolonization efforts, and the forms that this revised and reimagined description takes, both in archival institutions’ physical and digital holdings as well as in community-based alternative projects. As we contend with our basis in colonial society, I argue that communities have long been leading decolonization efforts and archivists have much to learn from their examples, both in adapting daily processes and in imagining a systemic restructuring of the archival institution as a whole. While the effects of colonialism and resulted shortfalls of description impact many marginalized groups around the world, this paper will look specifically at North American practices and Indigenous peoples’ interactions with and inclusion in the archives, with a focus on recent work in the wake of the TRC’s report.

ARCHIVES AS SITES OF COLONIALISM

Before discussing efforts to decolonize description, it serves to present a brief history of archival practice so as to explain why such efforts are necessary. Several scholars have addressed the colonial history of institutional archives and their continued marginalization of Indigenous peoples (Bastian, 2006; Genovese, 2016; Wood et al., 2014). As Bastian (2006) points out, colonizers have been the creators of the majority of our historical record, leaving many marginalized peoples without a voice in their own history. Wood et al. (2014) likewise argues that this silence creates another form of oppression and marginalization when the record descriptions do not reflect the complicated context of their creation and further ignores the subjects contained within them (pp. 398, 403). Both authors challenge traditional archival practices that propagate such discourse and further subjugate Indigenous peoples.

While the TRC’s report has certainly brought these issues of marginalization in archives to the forefront (and focuses on residential schools and the records about, rather than created
by, Indigenous children), the work of decolonizing description and the discussion around such practices has been ongoing for many years. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (hereafter UNDRIP) and similar commissions formed around the world have informed much of the TRC’s work (Bak et al., 2017, p. 5). As well, Indigenous peoples spearheaded the movement for many decades, although it has more recently gained recognition in the wake of the adoption of UNDRIP and the formation of the TRC. Hagan (1978), a non-Indigenous scholar, writes of these ideas forty years ago as he challenges the lack of agency allocated to Indigenous peoples concerning their own records. In similarly structured arguments to his current counterparts, Hagan (1978) recognizes Indigenous peoples’ position as a “captive of the archive,” finding that archival holdings of Indigenous records are “almost exclusively the product of white men” (pp. 137-138). This one-sided conversation has allowed for a biased reproduction of history to permeate throughout society, as archival records present a narrative that ignores this absence of Indigenous voices (Hagan, 1978). As made clear by Hagan’s work, and others who have made similar efforts in the past, the push to decolonize description is neither a new idea nor a recent shift. Rather, the TRC report seems to have given these efforts a larger platform; those who have been lagging in implementing revised practices can no longer ignore the importance of this work.

GOALS AND METHODS OF DECOLONIZATION

Addressing the silence or misrepresentation of Indigenous histories in archives is one of the main goals of decolonizing an institution—a process of which decolonizing description is a part. Understanding the broader goals of this process allows us to better contextualize decolonizing description and thereby, understand the practices archivists have undertaken. The TRC’s calls to archives identify some of these goals and offer guidance in how to approach them. However, this guidance is largely left up to individual organizations, as the main recommendation is to design best practices in incorporating respect for Indigenous peoples into archival processes (TRC, 2017, p. 8). Respect is another goal that the TRC’s report highlights, as well as increased accessibility, and an understanding of Indigenous peoples’ rights to records concerning their own history. Boiteau (2017) recognizes decolonization as an inclusive practice and one that will ultimately work towards increasing Indigenous peoples’ trust in archives (p. 43). With this trust and respect, institutional archives can create meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples and communities and demonstrate their commitment to improving practices.

While these goals can be quite broad, authors and archivists have identified several ways to address them in archival description. The first of these is to address the language archivists use, both in terms of vocabulary and the actual language of description. Along with including Indigenous languages for traditional place and individual names, the description of records can also be modified where derogatory or offensive language has been used (Duarte & Belarde, 2015; Lougheed et al., 2014; Wood, 2014). Moreover, the dominance of Western forms of organization can be countered by incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems and subject headings, allowing different perspectives to be represented in the records (Caswell, 2014; Duarte & Belarde, 2015; Genovese, 2016). A final consideration here again hearkens back to Bastian’s (2006) and Wood’s (2014) concerns with the lack of representation of marginalized peoples in the records. Both authors recommend an expanded idea of provenance, so as to reflect all those who were involved in the creation of said records. By recognizing both the writers and those
written about as creators in the description of the records, researchers can gain a better sense of this contextual history.

The following discussion will look more in-depth at how archives have put these methods into practice in more traditional as well as digital spaces, and the differences in adoption and attitude between institutional archives and community initiatives.

**CHANGING INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE**

As discussed above, one of the TRC’s recommendations is for archival institutions to develop best practices in working to address a colonial history in archives. While the findings of the commission and the recent adoption of UNDRIP by Canada have provided more direction and a historical understanding for the development of such guidelines, several groups have already developed best practices to advise archivists in the handling of Indigenous records (Fontaine, 2016). Boiteau (2016) and Genovese (2016) draw attention to one such group—the First Archivist Circle—and their development of Protocols for Native American Archival Materials in 2006, which the authors tout as an important resource for archivists to consult. The first notable aspect of this group is that the development team is made up of predominantly Indigenous information professionals, where of nineteen participants, fifteen identify as Indigenous (First Archivist Circle, 2007). The composition of the group addresses, in part, the concern around a lack of Indigenous voices in archival holdings. As both the TRC’s report and these protocols recommend collaboration with Indigenous communities, a first step is to initiate that collaboration in the planning stages of decolonization efforts.

Two additional areas within the Protocols document to make note of are as follows: the emphasis on inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and cultural knowledges, and on recognizing cultural differences among Indigenous communities (First Archivist Circle, 2007). With the first, this again hearkens back to the discussion above of the TRC’s and other authors’ recommendations to broaden the discourse of the archive. Rather than continue to promote solely a Western understanding of records, including various viewpoints (related to description, in the arrangement of these records, and in the larger structure of the archives) will allow for a more inclusive space. The second area serves as more of a soft warning for archivists and researchers in moving forward with this work. With respecting Indigenous peoples and cultures also comes an understanding that each community will have different cultural values and protocols. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all approach’ that can be applied across the board; as Walker says, “there is not a single homogenous Indigenous community but many,” so consultation with communities to best determine how to handle their records is essential (Bak et al., 2017, p. 13). Duff and Harris (2002) highlight the challenges of standardization in their article and its limitations with collections. While standardization does not necessarily imply uniformity in descriptions across institutions, there is perhaps still room to broaden what we as archivists understand as a ‘standard’ and certainly to include more perspectives in designing such standards. Yet, a complete upheaval of archival description is not out of the question, as the community alternatives discussed later will show.

Several institutions have incorporated decolonizing practices into their description processes; however, whether these have come about from the Protocols or the TRC’s report is not always clear (Genovese, 2016, p. 37). Elizabeth Walker writes of her experience in the City
of Edmonton Archives over the last several years, as recent attention to this work is largely due to the TRC’s calls (Bak et al., 2017). They are currently in the process of developing their own guidelines to aid archivists in working towards reconciliation within the archives, as well as to offer transparency of their actions for the wider community (Bak et al., 2017, p. 11). One of their major projects involves revisiting descriptions of Indigenous records, both by and about them, in addressing problematic and derogatory language use. In these efforts, they have developed terminology they will use to ensure consistency across the records. They have also included traditional terminology and names of specific Indigenous communities when possible (Bak et al., 2017, p. 12). They have continued to include the creator’s title of items, such as photographs, including those in the Title Supplied area—in spite of any possible harmful language. Walker argues that this aids in contextualizing the item and does not hide a history of colonialism; at the same time, it works to provide multiple perspectives on such records (Bak et al., 2017, p. 12).

An important facet of this decolonizing work that Walker highlights is that it should not be contained within archives that hold residential school records (Bak et al., 2017, p. 10). Though these are the institutions the TRC’s report is explicitly identifying, archives have been colonial institutions since their historical inception and through their current collections, which often privilege settler narratives over marginalized groups. Walker found the same to be true of the City of Edmonton Archives, in that Indigenous voices are largely absent from their holdings (Bak et al., 2017, p. 11). Despite their lack of records relating to the main crux of the TRC’s research, Walker still sees significant room for improvement in all archives that claim to serve all users.

The University of Alberta Libraries (hereafter UAL) has also been engaged in description projects to address the TRC’s calls. While the case provided here involves libraries rather than archives, their work has direct parallels with archival processes. UAL created a working group focused on decolonizing description to examine and revise the metadata currently associated with their holdings (University of Alberta Libraries, 2017). Much in the same way that the City of Edmonton Archives found problematic descriptions of their Indigenous records, UAL (2017) found that the subject headings in libraries were severely limiting and contained outdated language. The main recommendations of the working group were to collaborate with Indigenous communities in creating or revising these subject headings—a recommendation that has been oft repeated by the many authors cited here, though for good reason—and to apply these new headings to both future acquisitions and the current collection (UAL, 2017). Future concerns and questions regarding decolonization practices are still under discussion, particularly with respect to the need for contextualization. As Walker explained above, the City of Edmonton Archives’ decision to include creator titles in the description serves as a reminder of the colonial history of archives and the records’ creation. UAL (2017) is considering a similar approach, whether or not to link the revised headings to former ones; as their work is still underway, it is not something they have a clear answer on as of yet.

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, hereafter NCTR, has faced similar questions of description procedures, even though they have had the opportunity to begin via a decolonizing framework. In a rather unique position due to their “fresh start” as it were, as well as their direct connection with the TRC, the NCTR has been able to challenge description as it is currently practiced and deliberate over the best approach to apply to their purposes. Lougheed et al. (2014) discuss some of these early deliberations in the NCTR’s plan for their collections, while Boiteau’s (2017) writing provides more of a reflection following the opening of the Centre and room for further development. Connecting back to other writings on the topic, these authors
all stress the importance of including Indigenous languages and traditional place names in the
description, along with collaboration with Indigenous communities—especially concerning
access restrictions (Lougheed et al., 2014, p. 606; Boiteau, 2017). In particular, Boiteau (2017)
brings up collaboration as a way of gaining knowledge of Indigenous perspectives on description
and arrangement, to work towards alternate ways of knowledge organization (beyond Western
standards) (p. 115).

Drawn from community archives, one method of description that the NCTR hopes to
implement is a type of participatory archives (Lougheed et al., 2014, p. 608; Boiteau, 2017, p.
92). Participatory forms of archiving open institutional decision-making processes to others
besides solely archivists, bringing in ‘outsider’ perspectives to get a fuller picture of an item
(Gilliland & McKemmish, 2014). In the NCTR context, this would allow for collaboration to be
fore-fronted in their archival processes, as participants would be able to supply the description.
By providing their own understandings of the records and allowing for more of a conversation
and discourse to arise, participants will thus enrich the context of the collections. While
communities often serve as the inspiration of such projects, other institutions have offered similar
reciprocal relationships between their collections and users in the age of Web 2.0 (Caswell,
2014).

Crowd-sourcing has become a popular tool in recent years, not only within archives but
across various institutions and projects. Through Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Project
Naming uses such a technique. Originating out of the Nunavut Sivuniksavut Training Program
in Ottawa, and ultimately resulting in a partnership with the national archives, the project has
similar goals to the City of Edmonton Archives in its re-description process (Smith, 2008,
p. 4). Members from Inuit communities—now expanded to the wider society—can provide
identifications of unnamed Inuit people in LAC’s photograph collection. This adds to the
contextualization, whilst also addressing the silence or absence of Indigenous peoples in these
records. While not initiated by LAC, the institution’s support of the project is a clear example of
how collaboration with Indigenous peoples can aid in efforts to decolonize description.

While Smith (2008) refers to Project Naming as a form of “visual repatriation”, to return
these images to their communities of origin, the MacFarlane Collection at the Smithsonian
Institute is part of an ongoing virtual repatriation process that involves objects beyond
photographs (p. 2). In partnership with the Smithsonian Institute, another community-originated
project called the Inuviialuit Living History has set up a website that allows people to view
the items in this collection and their descriptions (Inuvialuit Living History, n.d.). While not
crowdsourced, in displaying this collection in its new digital space, the designers of the site pair
it with accompanying description on the history of these objects; this provides more background
for the user in understanding the collection. These projects both involve a lot of community input
and participation, but are still institutionally-based and thus limited by the structures of these
archives and museums. Indigenous communities have had a lot of influence in the discussion
around and adoption of decolonization efforts, and one way of their leadership in this area has
been through the establishment of their own community archives.

COMMUNITY ARCHIVES

Part of what Boiteau (2017) addresses in his master’s thesis is the lack of trust Indigenous
peoples have in archival institutions. While his arguments for collaborative description may be one way to build on this relationship, it begs the question of whether it is at all possible to decolonize the practices of a colonial construction. The challenge of this question has led many communities to seek alternatives outside of traditional institutions.

Mukurtu is one such example, a project that began in 2007 between the Warumungu community in Australia and the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation at Washington State University (Mukurtu, n.d.). Initially built as a digital archive for the Warumungu peoples’ virtually repatriated items, it has now been developed into an open source platform that any community can use for their own needs. The site’s design was such to allow for a broader understanding of description; this includes input from multiple members contributing on elements and tags, as well as adding narratives or personal memories to particular objects. In addition, Mukurtu also incorporates detailed access restrictions tailored to the community’s cultural protocols, known as Traditional Knowledge (TK) labels (Local Contexts, n.d.). While institutional archives have some access restrictions in place for private materials, the TK labels offer more of an explanation behind the restriction and instruction on how the materials can be used. These labels include gender restrictions, materials considered sacred that are only to be accessed by elders in the community, and materials that are only intended to be circulated within a particular family (Local Contexts, n.d.).

The Plateau Peoples’ Web Portal1 has used both the Mukurtu platform and the TK labels in establishing their digital archive. Thus, their descriptions are more in-depth than typically seen in institutions. Along with the source institution’s original description, a community description is also provided. Although this differs by object, a description may include the name of the community it originated in, the protocols of access and TK labels, a cultural narrative produced by members of the community, and traditional knowledge that contextualizes the object for the viewer. This richer description clearly offers the multiple perspectives colonial records have been ignoring and a more nuanced understanding of this history.

CONCLUSION

As shown with these examples, efforts to decolonize description have been ongoing for many years and long before the TRC’s report was released. Still, the TRC—and now the work of the NCTR—has provided renewed interest and support for such efforts. While there are clear commonalities between the case studies described here, decolonizing description can involve many different methods, especially with the more recent inclusion of new technologies and digital projects. Just as with the recognition that there cannot be a uniform application to all communities, there is also no one way of moving forward with decolonizing description. The examples above emphasize the importance of community involvement, whether as advisors to archival processes or as leaders in developing their own projects. Collaboration is a significant part of the process, in whatever form it may take; this must be the first step in all decolonization projects. Each of the projects work toward change, in light of the TRC’s recommendations. As the TRC’s report continues to inspire other institutions, attention should be paid to how such work is informed by and continues to evolve from the report’s direction.

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1 See the website here: https://plateauportal.libraries.wsu.edu/.
REFERENCES


