Unsettling Our Practices:
Decolonizing Description at the University of Alberta Libraries

Sharon Farnel, University of Alberta Libraries
Denise Koufogiannakis, University of Alberta Libraries
Ian Bigelow, University of Alberta Libraries
Anne Carr-Wiggin, University of Alberta Libraries
Debbie Feisst, University of Alberta Libraries
Kayla Lar-Son, University of Alberta Libraries
Sheila Laroque, University of Alberta Libraries

Abstract

Post-secondary educational institutions figure large in the *Calls to Action* of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) for the important role they can, and must, play in advancing reconciliation in Canada. For as Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Commission, reminds us, the educational system has contributed to the negative relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, and it is the educational system that will help us change that relationship (2015). Libraries, as sites of learning in and of themselves as well as key units within post-secondary institutions, have a responsibility and opportunity to contribute to reconciliation through collaborations and partnerships but also, and perhaps more importantly, through their own initiatives. The Canadian Federation of Library Associations (2016) recognizes this role, and has created a Truth and Reconciliation Committee to "promote initiatives in all types of libraries to advance reconciliation by supporting the TRC *Calls to Action* and to promote collaboration in these issues across the Canadian library communities" (p. 1).

The University of Alberta, like many institutions, has taken up the Commission's *Calls to Action*. The recently approved institutional strategic plan, *For the Public Good* (2016), affirms that the University is "committed to respectful relations with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples" (p. 8), and includes as an objective to "develop, in consultation and collaboration with internal and external community stakeholders, a thoughtful, respectful, meaningful, and sustainable response to the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada" (p. 8). While the University of Alberta Libraries (UAL) has a long history of engaging with Indigenous individuals and communities in partnerships, service provision, and professional placements, we recognized one foundational aspect of our work which had yet to be fully interrogated with regard to improving service to our Indigenous users: our descriptive practices for all of our collections, including those locally digitized.

Like most large academic libraries in North America, UAL currently relies heavily on Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Library of Congress Classification (LCC) for subject access to both our print and digital collections. While the use of LC standards comes with many

recognized advantages, it understandably causes challenges in terms of adequate and appropriate representation of the Canadian context. Increasingly, descriptive metadata is the first, most frequent, and in some cases the only interaction point between us and our users (Schaffner, 2009). And so it is vital that all of our users can see themselves appropriately and respectfully represented in our metadata records. The fact that this is not always the case, particularly with the use of standard vocabularies in describing Indigenous peoples, is certainly well documented (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015; Moulaison & Bossaller, 2016; Tomren, 2003).

In the fall of 2016, UAL struck a Decolonizing Description Working Group to investigate, define, and propose a plan of action for how we could more accurately, appropriately, and respectfully represent Indigenous peoples and contexts through our descriptive metadata practices. The group included members from technical and public service, as well as UAL's coordinator of Indigenous initiatives and an Indigenous intern (MLIS student). Over the course of its term (approximately seven months), the group undertook several core activities. A literature review sought out publications or presentations describing practical implementations of reformed or customized descriptive practices within an academic library. An environmental scan was aimed at discovering similar initiatives proposed or under way in institutions across Canada, and to seek opportunities for collaborations and partnerships. An analysis of metadata from the ILS and local digital/digitized collections was used to estimate the scope of work required to enhance existing metadata, and to revise workflows for metadata yet to be created.

These activities revealed that while there were few examples of implementation of substantial reforms within Canadian academic libraries, the University of British Columbia's substantial work at the X̱wi7x̱wa Library being the exception, there was great interest in undertaking reforms, and a sense that the ground for such reforms is more fertile that it ever has been. The importance of focusing on one's local context was recognized, and the notion of regional work combining into something national was often expressed.

Armed with this enhanced understanding and seeing opportunities for collaboration, the Working Group will submit a set of recommendations to UAL's senior leadership team this April. The symposium paper will provide an overview of the activities and findings of the Working Group, a summary of the recommendations and the rationale behind them, and report on projects and activities under way or planned since the group's report was submitted.

The following references were consulted in the preparation of the abstract and poster.

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Sharon Farnel (sharon.farnel@ualberta.ca) is Metadata Coordinator at the University of Alberta Libraries, and a part-time Interdisciplinary PhD student researching the development of a framework for designing and applying culturally aware and appropriate metadata in digital libraries.

Denise Koufogiannakis (denise.koufogiannakis@ualberta.ca) is Associate University Librarian responsible for Collection Strategies, Bibliographic Services, and Access Services at the University of Alberta. She holds an MLIS from the University of Alberta, and a PhD in Information Studies from Aberystwyth University.

Ian Bigelow (bigelow@ualberta.ca) is the Cataloguing Coordinator at the University of Alberta Libraries and is currently a member of the Canadian Linked Data Initiative Metadata Working Group and the PCC Task Group on URI in MARC.

Anne Carr-Wiggin (anne.carr-wiggin@ualberta.ca) is NEOS Manager, and coordinates Indigenous initiatives at the University of Alberta Libraries. She also serves on the Guiding Council of RISE (Reconciliation in Solidarity Edmonton) and is a team co-lead on the CFLA-FCAB Truth and Reconciliation Committee.

Debbie Feisst (debbie.feisst@ualberta.ca) is Acting Head at the HT Coutts Education & Physical Education Library, University of Alberta, where she specializes in Secondary Education and the Faculty of Education's Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP).

Kayla Lar-Son (verbicky@ualberta.ca) is a Metis student currently enrolled in the Master of Library Studies, University of Alberta. Interested in issues of diversity, human rights, intellectual freedom, social responsibility and libraries, and alternative forms of knowing, Kayla is part of the de-colonizing description working group, which focuses on implementing the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission within the UofA Libraries. She is also an Indigenous Intern in Rutherford Library, UofA, who works actively with Indigenous students through library information sessions at the Aboriginal Student Services Center and participates in Indigenous and diversity initiatives off-campus. She brings a treasured firsthand perspective into the discussion of diversity, empowerment, and traditional knowledge.

Sheila Laroque (laroque@ualberta.ca) is an Academic Resident Librarian in Bibliographic Services at the University of Alberta Libraries. Sheila is originally from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where she finished her BA at the University of Saskatchewan in 2010. She finished her MI from

the University of Toronto's iSchool in 2016. She is happy to be in Edmonton; a city with more than one professional sports team, but still back home in Treaty 6 territory.