

Colonialism in Libraries: The Disparities of Categories and the Organization of Materials

Indigenous people's knowledge has been cast aside by white settlers as inferior in comparison to Western knowledge and ideologies. Western thought and ideology hierarchized itself as the ultimate and universal knowledge, ranking any other (specifically Indigenous) ways of knowing as fictitious, lesser, mythical, and "other." As the construction of educational institutions commenced, these new (Western) systems of organization upheld these ideologies. Libraries, in particular, were the places where colonizers could preserve their narratives, ideologies, and knowledge. Libraries, in turn, were the epicenters of colonialist thought; and the organization of material in libraries has not changed in over 140 years. The current organizational system of educational libraries is perpetuating colonialism and the miseducation, misattribution, and harmful stereotypes about Indigenous peoples.

To understand how current libraries have perpetuated colonization through the centering of Western knowledge, it is important to understand how this knowledge came to be regarded as superior and in turn, Indigenous ways of knowing as inferior. It is a common misconception that Indigenous communities were illiterate prior to European explorers 'discovering' Turtle Island (Edwards 3). Indigenous communities expressed their knowledge through other types of media than the Western standard of paper and ink; such as wampum belts, birchbark scrolls, hieroglyphs, petroglyphs, and pictographs (Edwards 3). These unrecognizable and unfamiliar materials used by Indigenous peoples caused Europeans to render Indigenous communities as unenlightened and without a history (Edwards 3); and, a people without the Western standard of education or civilization. Because of these beliefs, Europeans justified their actions to assimilate or 'civilize' Indigenous peoples with Western books and ways of education (Edwards 3). With European colonizers came Western structures of education, such as libraries.

Libraries are an institution of knowledge, organized in a way that perpetuates colonialism. In libraries, materials are prearranged in a way that implies the use of many worldviews, however, this is almost never the case; and they often portray a Eurocentric ideology(White 3). As Akena states, European colonizers have defined legitimate knowledge as Western knowledge that imposes a monolithic worldview, and it is often taken as objective and universal knowledge (600). During research for this paper, I found that nearly *all* books about Indigenous communities were placed in the history section. Putting information about Indigenous communities in the history section leaves Indigenous peoples in the past (Worth). Another problematic issue is that information about Indigenous peoples of Canada in the history category written by white authors was found in the non-fiction section, whereas many books written by Indigenous authors or books that were in collaboration with Indigenous communities were categorized as fiction. For example, *Orange Shirt Day*, written by Phyllis Webstad, is in the fiction section even though it is based on the true story of her first day in residential school, where she was stripped of the new orange shirt given to her by her grandmother – an event that was symbolic of her being stripped of her Indigenous identity. This is a substantial event in Canada, given that Orange Shirt Day (also known as National Day for Truth and Reconciliation) is now a national holiday, yet this novel continues to be placed in the fiction section. This is a clear example of the ways in which the current organization of books in libraries perpetuates colonialism. Indigenous stories and authors are being put in the fiction and history section, left to be discredited, disregarded, and forgotten.

Another problem discovered in current libraries is the issue of not being able to tell what stories are authentically Indigenous. Misattributed stories perpetuate ignorance about Indigenous cultures, and confuse non-Indigenous people as well as some Indigenous peoples (Vowel 93).

Stories in Indigenous cultures have origin – meaning one can find where and when the story was told, and who told it (Vowel 95). Unfortunately, many white colonialists appropriated Indigenous stories and did not give credit; other stories were made up and were passed off as “Native American”. As Vowel states, the fabrication of Native American stories is colonialist because it silences the real voices of Indigenous peoples by presenting (non-Indigenous) listeners and readers with something that is safe and familiar (94). Vowel mentions a specific novel called *Raven the Trickster* by Gail Robison, a novel that takes stories from Indigenous peoples and reiterates them in a book written by a white settler without any specific credit to the Indigenous peoples that participated. Here Vowel states her discomfort when she starts reading the novel:

“For example, once a friend picked up a book for me, called *Raven the Trickster*, at a library sale. I immediately became uneasy when I read the inside covers. Here are some partial quotes that stood out for me:

- ‘This book contains nine stories about the wily Raven...’
- No mention of where those stories originated other than from ‘the North West coast of the Pacific Ocean.’
- ‘The tales collected and retold here by Gail Robison, a distinguished Canadian poet who has lived among the North American Indians and listened first-hand to the stories they tell...’

No actual communities are listed. No actual Indigenous people are named. There is zero attribution here. I have no idea if these stories are made up, mistranslated, or ripped off wholesale and profited from without any recognition given to those who carry traditional stories from generation to generation.” (95)

This novel is available in the Educational Library in the fiction section of the history category and has no indication that this novel may have misattributed Indigenous people’s stories. This can be detrimental as it perpetuates stereotypes and miseducation about Indigenous peoples. Yes, one can argue that this is in the fiction section, so one should take the information lightly, but as is the novel *Orange Shirt Day*, which has proved to be very real and an important part of

Canada's current and historical social, political, and educational events. As Vowel states, all it takes is asking the right questions and caring enough to bypass the fakes (98). But the issue here is that it is not common knowledge that there are fake and misattributed stories to begin with; let alone how to weed them out. Decolonizing and unlearning our current library system is essential in allowing Indigenous stories to be heard and put in the present.

The Xwi7xwa (whei-wha) Library at UBC Vancouver's campus has been actively pursuing the decolonization of libraries. The Xwi7xwa Library was founded by Indigenous peoples, and uses Indigenous ways of knowledge to organize information (Worth). The library aims to decolonize the way information is traditionally sorted and organized in Western libraries – such as organizing information about Indigenous communities geographically according to region, reflecting a sense of place, rather than alphabetically (Worth). The Xwi7xwa Library recognizes that Indigenous stories often get sorted into the fiction section as folklore or fairy-tales, whereas tales from Western points of view are in the non-fiction section (Worth). We can see this difference in the categorization of *My Name is Seepeetza* by Shirley Sterling and *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System* by John Milloy in the illustration, acquired from novels provided by the Educational Library at UBC. *My Name is Seepeetza* is an autobiography of Shirley Sterling detailing her childhood that was spent in a residential school in British Columbia, Canada. However, this book is in the fiction section. While a book discussing the same topic, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System* by John Milloy is in the non-fiction section due to the fact that it was written by a white author, and contained “facts”. The Xwi7xwa Library has created a system to dismantle the colonial pattern that harms and undermines Indigenous culture by accurately representing Indigenous knowledge and culture in their own way (Worth). They do this by

sorting information by region instead of alphabetically, and they do not use subject headings that sort Indigenous topics into the history-related sections that render Indigenous peoples as historic artifacts instead of a living group of people with present-day struggles (Worth). To further educate those who enter this library, Xwi7xwa has a section dedicated to books that have harmful stereotypes and false information about Indigenous communities (Worth) – this section can help avoid the issues of misattribution that Vowel presented us with in relation to the novel *Raven the Trickster*. Xwi7xwa wanted to keep these harmful novels out of their collections to avoid confusion, but wanted to provide an opportunity to explain to non-Indigenous people why such material perpetuates stereotypes (Worth). The Xwi7xwa Library is a significant contribution to unlearning Western ways of organization and in dismantling colonialism at a systematic level.

We have become so accustomed to the hidden systematic colonialism within the organization of information, that it has become hard to notice. By having more Indigenous authors in the fiction section than white authors perpetuates the idea that Indigenous people's narratives are not as legitimate as Western knowledge or voices. The Xwi7xwa Library's way of organizing information is newer to Western practice, and will most likely be uncomfortable to non-Indigenous people at first – but the librarians at Xwi7xwa are more than willing to teach any student who is willing to learn. It is not just Indigenous students who will benefit from this, the library is intended to serve as a learning tool for all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike (Worth). I hope that our Okanagan UBC campus will provide a space for Indigenous learning like UBC Vancouver's Xwi7xwa Library in the near future. We all have (un)learning to do, and making an effort to decolonize our libraries is a start. While decolonization is far from complete, the Xwi7xwa Library is a step in the right direction. It is safe to say that Western ways of organizing are now the ideologies and systems that need to be left in the history section.

Works Cited

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