Endorsing the Reconciliation Framework

Friday, September 27, 2024 by Danielle Robichaud and Rebecka Sheffield

Special Collections & Archives (SCA) is committed to supporting the University of Waterloo Library's reconciliation work. This includes a commitment to making systemic changes to the way we acquire, preserve, and make accessible collections that document the experiences of Indigenous peoples.

SCA recognizes that archives are not always welcoming spaces for Indigenous peoples. Like museums, archives have historically collected records that document the lives of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people and communities without their consent. Conversely, many archives have ignored Indigenous recordkeeping practices. As Krista McCracken writes, "The ways in which archives have collected or neglected the records of Indigenous peoples has directly impacted the work of historians and the ability of historians to discuss Indigenous lives" (186). Archivists have also contributed to harmful systems of professional practice, for example, using racist language to describe collections, allowing non-Indigenous researchers to access sacred or ceremonial records, or denying Indigenous people access to records that impact their efforts toward redress. McCracken explains, "Canada's past has been largely narrated by settlers, viewing the world through a colonial lens and describing Indigenous communities using a non-Indigenous worldview" (186).

Recognizing that the role that archives have had in the erasure of Indigenous histories and mistreatment of Indigenous-focused and -created records, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission called upon archivists as part of its Final Report, released in 2015. Call to Action 70 reads:

We call upon the federal government to provide funding to the Canadian Association of Archivists to undertake, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, a national review of archival policies and best practices to:

1. *Determine the level of compliance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations Joinet-Orentlicher Principles, as related to Aboriginal peoples' inalienable right to know the truth about what happened and why, regarding human rights violations committed against them in the residential schools.*

2. *Produce a report with recommendations for full implementation of these international mechanisms as a reconciliation framework for Canadian archives*

Responding to Call to Action 70

SCA endorses the Reconciliation Framework, developed by the Steering Committee on Canadian Archives' Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce. The result of five years of research, relationship building, and collaboration across the Canadian archival profession with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit partners, the Framework provides a plan for archives to respond to Call to Action 70. It sets out a vision, established principles, and identifies a transformative path forward for the archival profession.

Seven objectives map out areas of archival practice that require immediate change, and offer actionable strategies and activities aimed at:

- creating relationship-building initiatives,
- embracing the intellectual sovereignty of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples over records created by or about them, and
- encouraging the reconceptualization of mainstream archival theory and practice.

SCA acknowledges the significance of this Framework and the care and expertise contributed by members of the Task Force. Rebecka Sheffield, Head of Special Collections & Archives, will work with the entire SCA team and the Library to implement recommendations at the University of Waterloo.

Cover of the Reconciliation Framework: The Response to the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce.

Continuing the work

SCA is committed to making systemic change to the ways we acquire, preserve, and make accessible our rare and distinctive collections. This commitment builds on work first announced in April 2020 regarding changes to the department's approach to language in archival descriptions, aimed at integrating equity and reconciliation informed thinking into the department's archival practice. The approach was the first of its kind at a Canadian academic institution. Influencing similar undertakings at archives across the country, the effort introduced a practitioner-driven perspective to longer-standing discussion about social justice in the archival profession.

In a 2022 paper about SCA's approach to language in archival descriptions, digital archivist Danielle Robichaud explained: "SCA is working to push forward services that improve access to and awareness about its holdings against a backdrop of important and challenging discussions about equity, race, and reconciliation. And staff are doing so as requests for primary resources related to equity-seeking groups and the rhetoric used to push them to the margins are on the rise in both personal research and instructional contexts" (82).

Over the past four years, SCA's approach to archival description has evolved to include more robust content acknowledgements and explanations about why something is harmful and why it remains in place. This came to fruition when the department was asked by campus representatives to remove a photo from the Waterloo Digital Library (WDL) that had 'Slave Day' in the title. The take down request was declined and used as an opportunity to better contextualize the photo record on the WDL and in the Archives Database. SCA has since adapted that approach to address records that use outdated language to address people with disabilities and from various equity deserving groups. Records with titles that include "feebleminded" and "retarded" are two examples.

This more intentional approach to contextualizing records has included the addition of content notes on records in which 'Indian' was used by record creators to describe those of First Nations, Métis, Inuit or other Indigenous lineage. In doing so, an explanation about the use of the term, the harm it may cause, and any additional information known about the individual(s) noted in a record is shared.

One such example is a Kitchener-Waterloo Photographic Negative Collection image with the name "Indian Students". Along with an explanation about the continued use of 'Indian', the caption from the newspaper has been located and transcribed so that the students are named, and their nation clearly identified.

In addition to descriptive remediation and intervention, SCA has made a concerted effort to purchase and collect items that fill gaps in existing thematic areas. In doing so we have been mindful of acquiring items in an intentional and sensitive way.

For example, SCA is now home to a growing collection of contemporary periodicals and zines focused on and produced by equity seeking communities. These publications capture first-hand accounts about the lives, experiences, and teachings of those pushing for change. Combined, they play a central role in supporting teaching, learning, and research on and off-campus, by offering first-hand accounts and ideas that aren't always captured in traditional media or instructional materials.

The department has also put renewed focus on existing collections that offer insight into the history of what is now Canada. Recently redescribed, the Colin Rankin fonds includes journals authored by fur traders working in

northern Ontario between 1799 to 1806 and 1848 to 1854. The earliest journals provide important information about land holdings and operations at a time before management by the Hudson's Bay Company, a period for which little documentation remains. As noted in Jennifer S.H. Brown's *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* [G14778], they also provide a unique look at the role Indigenous, likely First Nations, women played in the survival of early colonial fur traders.

Implementing the Framework at Waterloo

By endorsing the Framework, SCA is committing to continued and sustained equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility rooted in reconciliatory practice.

Over the next 3 years, SCA will:

- Review existing collecting policies and procedures to promote ethical, meaningful, and respectful engagement with Indigenous peoples
- Assess existing holdings to determine which collections may document Indigenous peoples and, where appropriate, work with Indigenous partners to ensure that we are applying ethical and appropriate stewardship practices
- Participate in and guide initiatives across the Library around respectful terminology and descriptive standards

SCA will continue to build partnerships with Indigenous communities that foreground the principles outlined in the Framework: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility.

Further Reading

- Barrera, Jorge. "Ottawa's lack of co-operation over residential school claim records 'tragic,' says Murray Sinclair". *CBC*. June 2, 2020.
- Deer, Ka'nhehsí:io. "Senate report calls for Canada to compel Catholic entities to release residential school records". *CBC*. July 25, 2024.
- Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015.
- Kulha, Shari. "Truth and Reconciliation Centre disputes Trudeau claim all residential schools records transferred". *National Post*. October 20, 2021.

- McCracken K. 2019. "Challenging Colonial Spaces: Reconciliation and Decolonizing Work in Canadian Archives". *The Canadian historical review* 100(2), 182-201. doi:10.3138/chr.2018-0033
- Reconciliation Framework: The Response to the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce, 2022.
- Robichaud, Danielle. 2021. "Integrating Equity and Reconciliation Work into Archival Descriptive Practice at the University of Waterloo". *Archivaria* 91 (June), 74-103.
- Student Records Litigation - Truth and Reconciliation Commission - Research guide. University of Toronto. September 17, 2024.
- "Towards Truth and Reconciliation". Archives Association of Ontario
- "UNBC Archivist Leading National Response to Truth and Reconciliation Commission". University of Northern British Columbia. June 4, 2018.