

Centering Indigenous Perspectives in Library Collections

A Collaborative Approach to Cultural Humility

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University of Nevada, Reno



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University Libraries
University of Nevada, Reno

Overview

Research Question

How might we center Indigenous perspectives in circulating and special collections at the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries?

Method

Originally a Participatory Action Research study, we ended up doing mixed methods through a collections analysis and a focus group with Indigenous students and alumnae.

Results

Our Indigenous collections are old and problematic and largely inaccessible to our study participants.

Takeaway

This study highlights the importance of cultural humility for library and archives professionals.





Centering Indigenous Perspectives in Library Collections

STUDY DESIGN



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Feedback from Indigenous Students

Concerns about collections:

- Fact vs. fiction
- Colonial and anthropological perspectives
- Age and relevancy



Participatory Action Research



Abandonment of PAR

Our Hope

Findings that would result in genuinely helpful and appropriate future actions rather than just what we, as library employees, thought was best.

The Reality

True PAR hinges on the persistent time, energy, availability, and -- for non-white participants -- working biculturally in traumatic settings.



Metabolizing Pain

What often happens for Indigenous peoples when discussing colonialism is a reopening of brutal historical traumas, in which non-Indigenous actors are often caught in a guilt/shame/blame cycle with Indigenous actors once again taking on the role of mute noble listeners, while at the same time metabolizing the pain of recognizing that much of our ways of knowing have been lost, subjugated, censored, and stolen from our communities, with no substantial return of documents, artifacts, institutions, or status in the foreseeable future.

Marisa Elena Duarte and Miranda Belarde-Lewis. 2015. "Imagining: Creating Spaces for Indigenous Ontologies." *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 53 (5–6): 677–702.



Focus Group

1 Hour

- Zoom focus group in the fall of 2022

5 Participants

- Self-identifying Indigenous members of the University: 2 alumnae and 3 undergraduates

8 Questions

- Library experiences, Indigenous research, and future directions for libraries



Focus Group Findings

The library and special collections were largely inaccessible to our participants due to a lack of **awareness** about library discovery, a lack of **relevant materials**, or due to deeply embedded **colonial structures**.

“Overwhelming because I don’t even know where to start to find something that I need.”

“One Native book is just lost in the sea of other books in the library.”

“There needs to be more conscientious effort to talk about....these books, how they're deeply embedded in racist ideologies. What could replace them?”



Concerns about Archives

The focus group also yielded feedback on the archives and manuscript collections. The colonial context of academic archives, both in terms of collection provenance and professional practice, was keenly felt.

"There's a lot of gatekeeping"

"Stolen knowledges are sitting in Special Collections"

"...not the best experience because of all the policies that have been set in place, and I understand you guys are just doing your job, but it also feels like it's just essentially the product of colonialism and trying to chop our people off and make us an outside group, whereas you have our materials that are ours"



Collections Analysis

- Search of all books with subject of "Indian"
 - Captured general subjects, "Indians of North America" as well as specific Tribe names, "Shoshoni Indians"
- Captured 12,313 titles in total
 - 11,052 titles were assigned generic "Indian" subjects without a specific Tribe name
- Identified 470 Tribe names in total through both subject and title heading analysis



Collections Analysis Cont.

- Due to concerns about visibility from the focus group, we compared titles held in the open stacks to closed stacks/remote storage.
 - Of the 12,313 titles, 42% were in the open stacks, 35% were held in Special Collections, and 23% were in remote storage
- Books on the regional nations whose lands we occupy comprise approximately 10% of Indigenous monograph titles in our collections
 - (Wášiw (Washoe), Newe (Western Shoshone), Numu (Northern Paiute), and Nuwu (Southern Paiute))
- Age of collection
 - 66% of titles were published in 1970 or later. Users wanting recent books on Indigenous topics would only have 233 titles published since 2015 to choose from



Collections Actions

- Based on the suggestions in Aase's 2020 chapter on managing biased collection materials
 - Analyzed titles for "loaded words"
 - 103 titles contained words like "red," "savage," and "wild"
 - 36 of these are in open stacks
- Extended the analysis to sensitive or private materials such as captivity narratives or items cataloged under "massacres"
 - 28 titles were found in the open stacks with "human remains" as a subject heading
 - 32 captivity titles were found in open stacks
 - 31 titles had variations of massacre in the open stacks
- Finally, looked at topics that might relate to stolen knowledge
 - 113 titles in open stacks include "rites and ceremonies" subjects
 - 80 titles included ritual or ceremon* in the title
 - Others included "divination," "peyote," and "shaman*"
- In all cases, we are considering moving these materials to remote storage and/or closed stacks



Future Directions



- Continue building trust in the Indigenous community
- Work closely with our Office of Indigenous Relations
- Attempt a focus group with faculty/staff on campus that might have a stake in the monograph collection
 - Learn more about what concerns they may have from their work on campus and with the Libraries



Cultural Humility

The ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other oriented in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the other person, the ability to recognize the context in which interactions occur, and a commitment to redress power imbalances and other structural issues to benefit all parties.

David A. Hurley, Sarah R. Kostelecky, and Lori Townsend. 2019. "Cultural Humility in Libraries." *Reference Services Review* 47 (4): 544–55.



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