

Language, Place Contextualization, and the Limitations in Decolonizing Archives

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It's an interesting time in history to be an Indigenous information studies student.

Research on decolonization within libraries, archives, and museums continues to expand more than it ever has. This growth presents questions and approaches to new methods of knowledge work, and subsequently, better systems of knowledge organization. With so many past practices within these institutions furthering the marginalization of Native American people, the need for an alternative methodology becomes critical. Considering much of Indigenous knowledge depends on the context of place, creating spaces in counter to the traditional unwelcoming state and governmental institutions must be emphasized. It is, of course, not an easy task, but makes way for overdue change and healing. More research is applicable to archives and museums, rather than libraries, as the functions and goals of each institution differ slightly. This is not to say libraries are excluded from criticism, but that the role of artifacts and documents is moreso a concern of archives and museums with their direct hold over both tangible and intangible knowledge. These are the places we see the most disparity in knowledge organization.

Scholarship on Indigenous archives focuses on specific examples of Indigenous knowledge organization efforts, sparking an important conversation about accessibility and standardization's place in a decolonized space. Marisa Elena Duarte and Miranda Belarde-Lewis (2015) present a valuable method of "imagining" in the decolonization effort, highlighting several pertinent ways of creating Indigenous knowledge systems. However, through an examination of the word "imagining," the article raises questions about how the language we use shapes the knowledge that comes to represent "who, what, and how we can know" (684). Our ontologies rely on language contextualization, as it centers Indigenous ways of knowing, and the ability to retain the whole. Furthermore, there is a lack of substance in academic discussions that have turned decolonization into a theoretical answer to every issue, rather than a true and urgent place-based

action for the needs of communities. It must be understood that decolonization in the information field looks different depending on the place and community, and that there are limitations to how it works in these spaces. Again, while critical research, if we are truly aiming for decolonization, we must begin to look beyond “imagining” and into an alternative method that allows us to actively design and facilitate spaces that create new knowledge organization, as opposed to having to shape existing systems to our benefit.

The archivist is the caretaker of identity, history, legacy, perception, and permanence. There are four words in my Indigenous language, Cahuilla, that mean “to take care of”: *méle*, *téceqwen*, *qʷáaviču* and *yáw*. This is just one example that highlights the role language can play in contextualization of artifacts, but also represents care as a fundamental aspect of Indigenous ways of being that is centered on the people and the land and how the two care for each other. This idea about the ways of caring for the people and living landscapes is a key characteristic of decolonization, and thus an irreplaceable procedure in shifting knowledge organization. The context of language, and subsequently care, originate from place. Colonization has separated people from place and the institutions created by colonial ideas continue “the extraction of natural resources and methods from Indigenous peoples while Indigenous peoples continue to experience displacement and dispossession” (Duarte et al. 2019, 173). Theoretically, establishing a decolonized archive or museum would require rejecting particularization—separating the part from the whole—and safeguarding artifacts and documents in their place or community to ensure knowledge is presented intact and context is retained. This is because “at the very basis of Indigenous thought is the understanding that Indigenous knowledges are place-based knowledges, best understood in the richness of context, through the use of Indigenous languages, and conceptualized holistically” (Duarte and Belarde-Lewis 2015, 693). The damage done by

removing parts from the whole and isolating them from their respective places is further aggravated by the physical locations at which these archives exist. Thus far, the Indigenous archival experience has been built upon pain and fear, which, in turn, is amplified by archives being “housed in a church, former jail, former Residential School, or another colonial institutional setting” (McCracken and Hogan 2021, 100). Any trace of context required for true and care-centered Indigenous knowledge organization is replaced by violence, emanating from place, against potential users. There is truth in archives having the capacity to “be spaces of care, community, and reparative processing” (McCracken and Hogan 2021, 101), but the process must be informed by the interconnectedness of place, care, and language in contextualization.

Standardization and open accessibility perform differently in Indigenous archives and museums. They cannot exist in a decolonized space without causing harm. “Standard” description of cultural artifacts and documents in institutional collections exists to further homogenize a vast range of distinct tribes and their practices. This benefits the privileged elite in that this group does not need to exude the effort to learn the inherent differences between tribal nations, and rather is only required to vapidly acknowledge the existence—in a past or present state—of a singular body of people known as “Native Americans.” In a similar vein and as a system of knowledge organization, DNA tests function in the same way, describing ancestry as being a percentage of “Native American, Indigenous, or American Indian.” In reality, identity is something that relies on the connections to specific tribes, cultural practices and beliefs, and shared community experiences. In the case of the term “Native Americans,” an access point is created, not for the hundreds of groups of people who exist within the term, but for the privileged non-Indigenous elite, to consume a more digestible amount of information that fits into their Western systems of power or to further make claim to identities, cultures, and land that is not

theirs. Open accessibility upheld by the majority in the information field, in terms of the artifacts and documents of Indigenous knowledge, is yet another issue nestled between the desire to standardize and the terminology used to describe. The names of tribes and people and the ways historical events are characterized are not separate from the description of artifacts or the ways we characterize their contexts of creation or use. You cannot separate the language from the description otherwise you begin to colonize the context of creation or use. Language has created the impression of “thing of the past” rather than people of the present. Changing ways of thinking, a facet of decolonization, first relies on the language we use to convey knowledge. Control of the language controls the dominant systems of information that affect society’s beliefs and actions. Much of traditional nomenclature is “the articulation of institutions to support this class system and the elite control of the environment” (Duarte and Lewis 2015, 682). This is where the language of using “imagining” as a method to decolonize falters. It is not a defect to imagine a future vision, but it suggests, one, that we have never had working knowledge organization and, two, that the way to decolonize relies on a theoretical mode of thinking, rather than a physical way of being. Studying the stages in the technique of “imagining” evokes a sense that this method is designed to guide non-Indigenous information professionals in a certain mode of thinking without committing to clear approaches of action. A question arises about the role Indigenous information students and professionals play and whether we are to act in the “dominant,” standardized archival practice first in order to begin to change or create our systems of knowledge organization.

On that note, the need to consider a complete rejection of past archival foundations in favor of a new type of institution becomes apparent with a growing trend of “decolonization” representing a more metaphorical construct, rather than a very real and necessary action. It’s also

important to recognize that the archival institution's foundation is built upon and rooted in colonialism, rather than built around these institutions. Conveying that colonialism is a wall built around these spaces, and not within their very being, implies the ability to remove all traces of colonization, exposing an inherently neutral center. Acknowledging this as fact drastically changes how we talk about decolonization because then we must be prepared to consider that it's not possible or applicable to these institutions, and that Indigenous knowledge organization requires creating a space completely separate from these places, or that new terminology is needed to better describe the work being done. The academic language being used to talk about Indigenous ways of knowing and also the theory of changing structures within this field more often serves to reassure non-Indigenous people's conscience, rather than presenting solidarity as it is: "an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 3). Setting aside the complex idea of the anti-archive, it is still worth wondering what the decolonized archive looks like or is called when the word "archive" is removed. Perhaps it removes legitimacy from the place or structure, but it also provides a glimpse into what true decolonization could be.

History, written by the colonizers, is not unchangeable. It too has the capacity to be decolonized, which could have a profound effect on the future and lives of many. It starts with the institutions of information because "if history is to be decolonized, then the archives it is made from must be too" (Buchanan pg 1). The need for Indigenous ways of knowing to have a space built from autonomy is long overdue. Indigenous-written scholarship is paving a major path for the next generation of information professionals to create something to serve our communities in ways that weren't previously possible. Even so, and as a vital reminder, we must consider the limitations and holes in the language we employ in not only decolonization

discussions, but also in our general existence in this field. The ability to recognize the relationship between language and place contextualization is a way of building better knowledge organization and can be an important starting point in *reimagining* the archival space. As Duarte and Belarde-Lewis state, “Understanding place-based ontologies provides insight into the naming and organizing of knowledge specific to any given community. The respect for bounded spaces, deep domain knowledge, storywork, and Indigenous expertise are integral to the work of creating Indigenous knowledge systems” (697). In order to move into decolonizing the archive, we must accept the uncomfortable truths and also take action against deluding the concept into a mere idea. The groundwork is present to build spaces of Indigenous knowledge organizations that function and thrive outside of Western standardization and harmful notions of accessibility by centering care and community to repair damage done by institutions and provide real solutions to neglected problems.

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