



Public libraries in Canada now purport to be for the whole public, but for some provinces in Canada this wasn't always the case. Lorne Bruce, author of *Free Books For All: The Public Library Movement in Ontario, 1850-1930* wrote that the term "public library" fell out of favour as libraries evolved to an educational tool for lay persons and a "professional cadre and as a modern service ethic," from "a grand Victorian vision of beneficial societal change." In 1901, James Bain then-president of the Ontario Library Association spoke to this shift in the library's image.

"The time is propitious," he said. "With the beginning of a new century we venture to look forward to new lines of work, to vast increase in the number and sizes of our libraries, and to extension in every direction which aims at the development to their true end -- the mental advancement and culture of the people and of this province."

Although libraries are often thought to be champions of banned books and the freedom to read, that wasn't always the case either. Egerton Ryerson, a public education advocate in Ontario was all for tax-supported libraries -- just as long as his personal standards were met for the collections. According to Bruce, the "range of political literature was restricted on the basis of immortal, controversial, subversive, risqué, or sectarian grounds."

Ryerson is a complicated character in Canadian history. Although a fervent supporter of public education, he was also one of the architects of the residential school system, which erased the language and culture of many Indigenous children. Like the public schools across Canada, many of these residential schools were equipped with libraries of their own.

Now libraries in Canada are trying to reconcile the colonial history of this institution and how to best address the needs of marginalized patrons previously neglected by the library -- including Indigenous peoples.

Librarian Desmond Wong saw this first-hand even before he started on his path to librarianship. Before completing his master of library and information studies degree at McGill University, Wong worked in Oujé-Bougoumou, a Cree community in northern Quebec. He also worked as a librarian at the land claims office of what was then called the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs in Ontario. While with the Archives of Ontario, Wong became involved with the Indian Residential School settlement, tasked with digitizing materials to send to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

During his formal librarian education, Wong recalls that library school wasn't necessarily a place of critical thought, that there wasn't much instruction in the way of working with Indigenous communities or how the library could become a reconciliatory space. Now, Wong serves as a liaison between the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education's library system and Indigenous users or Indigenous studies students. He also serves as the chair of the Indigenous matters committee.

In 2017, Wong co-wrote **"Moving in the Circle: Indigenous Solidarity for Canadian Libraries"** (<https://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/perj/article/view/3781/4060>) -- an article reflecting on the Indigenous peoples-settler relationship in the context of the library, published in *The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*. Although he works out of the University of Toronto libraries, Wong says public librarians offer incredible benefits to the masses since they work directly with the public -- not just with academics, researchers and students.

"It's just so important that we are prepared to even come to the table to talk about services like programming and the way we collect things and the way we describe things and how we interact with Indigenous people," he says. "But in order to do all of those things we need to understand our role in colonialism."

In June 2018, **the Ontario government cancelled a rewrite** (<https://twitter.com/clclyne/status/1016086979337785344>) to its public education system that would have increased the amount of Indigenous content taught in classrooms. As a response to the cancellation, Wong published a resource for teachers called **"Infusing Indigenous Perspectives in K-12 Teaching"** (<https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/aboriginaleducation>) on the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education website. According to the site, it's designed to "help teachers find materials to supplement First Nations, Métis and Inuit worldviews."

"Personally, as a librarian, I think public libraries are the sites of intervention that are the most important and most critical in librarianship," he says.



According to Wong, one of the biggest challenges librarians face when diving into reconciliation is an "absolute paralysis" and wanting to do something but feeling overwhelmed. He says this "non-action" actually perpetuates harm to Indigenous library users.

"[They've] been unequivocally clear that what is currently going on, that the status quo is not working for them," he says. "In not doing anything we're actively promoting the maintenance of settler-colonialism and oppression of Indigenous peoples."

Wong says many elders and knowledge-keepers he's met with don't expect librarians to know all of their cultural practices by memory. Instead, they should understand terms like colonialism, treaties and the history of the lands where they live and that librarians who are resistant to change or development can often be in "vocational awe."

The term, coined by librarian-activist Fobazi Ettarh in early 2018, explains that **vocational awe** (<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>) is a "set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique."

### **The Toronto Public Library was scrutinized in July 2017**

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/lawyer-memorial-library-barbara-kulaszka-1.4201302>) for allowing a controversial event to take place on its grounds. The memorial was for Barbara Kulaszka -- a former librarian and also legal counsel for Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel and white supremacist group leader Marc Lemire. Since then, the Toronto Public Library has changed its policies so it can now **refuse the space for groups that promote discrimination or hate.** (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-library-board-hate-room-booking-1.4443914>)

As a queer, Asian man, Wong says he's not sure what he would do if he had to work in a library that was "fundamentally unsafe" because groups such as white nationalists could use the library space to organize events.

"That's not my library," he says, matter-of-factly. "I really see libraries as a space for social justice activism, as a space that is inherently not neutral. Libraries are inherently political. But I think we delude ourselves with these ideas of objectivity and neutrality that do harm to our communities."

Library collections "are not a neutral act," Wong says. He says the decision to purchase or not purchase a book for the library's collection could be influenced by the purchasing librarian's perspective and personal understanding of Indigenous issues. This could mean buying a disproportionate number of books by non-Indigenous authors about Indigenous history, whereas Indigenous-authored books may have less copies on library shelves.

Libraries have to push themselves to be more inclusive and diverse their collections, but it can't all be accomplished by just one person -- and that's the problem. Librarianship as a whole is about 87 per cent white "leaving the 13 per cent of us to fight tooth and nail to be heard," says Wong.

"Working on Indigenous programming -- especially when we're doing cultural revitalization -- is an important topic, but it can't be led by a non-Indigenous person at the front of the room," says Teneya Gwin, a Cree Métis woman working in the Calgary Public Library as the Indigenous service design lead.

Gwin says the library hadn't done a lot of Indigenous programming prior to her hiring in January 2017. When she started, she was the only self-identifying Indigenous person of nearly 800 employees at the Calgary Public Library.

She recalls looking around at her co-workers and thinking, "Do I feel comfortable? Do I feel safe?" After the library changed its hiring practices, Gwin says the library now has nine Indigenous staff members -- leading to a bigger conversation about the library spaces and Indigenous placemaking.

Gwin went out into the community around Calgary such as the Treaty 7 reserves and listened to elders and community members about how the library could become a more inviting place for them. She heard that the number one thing was language.

"To revitalize a culture you need that connection to language," she says.

She also noticed that many groups, such as the Aboriginal Friendship Centre in Calgary, were doing grassroots language programs with Indigenous communities and she wanted to find a way they could support each other rather than "reinvent the wheel all the time."

Many activities are partnership-led, like Igniting the Fire, a joint program with St. Mary's University in Calgary. Each class starts with a meal and prayer with an elder. The program specifically looks at different formats to traditional storytelling -- like through beadwork or through song and building of the drum. In the library space, three pieces of Indigenous artwork greet library-goers as they enter the front doors: "Survival Harvesting (Past)" by Roland Rollinmud, "Sharing the Knowledge (Present)" by Keegan Starlight and "Spiritual Changes Through Indigenous Teachings (Future)" by Kalum Teke Dan and can be seen through the large glass windows facing the street.

The inclusion of First Nations culture in the library is momentous considering that before 2016, First Nations people living on reserves, or Métis people living on settlements were not able to access public libraries unless they paid a fee to libraries in Calgary or Edmonton. Thanks to a \$700,000 grant program from the Public Library Services Branch of Alberta Municipal Affairs -- non-resident fees for people living on reserve and settlements were eventually nullified.



With these physical impediments for Indigenous patrons at the Calgary Public Library now gone, Gwin had her own questions about barriers in the construction of the new central library -- would smudging finally be allowed?

While she was initially met with some pushback from the library, Gwin said it was an opportunity for the library to be more inclusive in designing its space.

"We did a lot of research and we were able to come up with a ventilation system that rolls around to each meeting room so you can smudge anywhere in the building," she says. "We call it the 'smudge-eater machine.'"

Making the space more inclusive extended to artwork, serving as an educational piece for non-Indigenous people to get to know the history of the Treaty 7 territory.

"There's a lot of history beneath the building," she says.

Indigenous library patrons expressed that they would want to see artists, or their language reflected throughout the library. Gwin said one artist was so thankful for the project because it was specific to Treaty 7 artists, bringing them a newfound confidence to their work.

The Elders' Guidance Circle is a significant accomplishment for Gwin because it removes the burden from one person and allows for opportunities for intercultural learning. She says that non-Indigenous people have a "thirst to learn more," especially when it comes to being guided in the reconciliation process.

"I haven't heard anything negative yet," she says. "It's been very well received by both [Indigenous and non-Indigenous] audiences."

The decolonization of the library is a concept that has been explored by several academics — the idea that the library is naturally exclusionary to Indigenous peoples because for centuries it was built on the written word. The Canadian Federation of Library Associations even called for the decolonization of libraries **following the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report** (<http://cfla-fcab.ca/en/monthly-update/truth-and-reconciliation-update/>).

"With this colonial structure, Western culture is very literature-based, everything is written down, whereas especially in Treaty 7 territory, everything is very oral," says Gwin.

Indigenous languages and cultures were both erased from Calgary for so long during the age of residential schools. Even now, she says it's still difficult to find books written by Blackfoot authors.

Gwin wants people to change the way they perceive the library's collections, that "they're not always books" and that even the Elders' Guidance room can be considered part of the library's collection.

"We're missing that part of history down here in the collections and our collection reflects a certain viewpoint, which isn't Indigenous," she says.

To capture stories from diverse communities, the new central branch of the Calgary Public Library is starting a story studio in collaboration with Richard Van Camp a Dogrib (Tlicho) Nation member. Van Camp is tasked with interviewing elders, then sharing their stories while respecting their traditional cultural practices.

Gwin has some help with the Indigenous placemaking process -- Jared Tailfeathers assists her with this undertaking. He was hired for a contract position during the art process for the first phase of Indigenous placemaking. Tailfeathers is also a practising artist and musician.

Tailfeathers self-identifies as mixed -- his dad is from the Blood reserve, part of the Blackfoot Confederacy, while his mother is Caucasian, which he says has impacted his artistic works to "help people sort with identity crisis."

"It can be hard to navigate a world where your dad's family is mad about your white family being here," Tailfeathers says. "Sometimes it can be a little bit troublesome."

This mélange of identities is reflected in the traditional practices of the library, punctuated with reminders that the Calgary Public Library is on Treaty 7 land. On the fourth floor, there's a tipi adorned with Blackfoot designs beside the "Calgary's Story" section -- a reminder that the city's history is more complicated than some books may say. None of these Indigenous placemaking projects are hidden away in the library -- the Indigenous Elders' Guidance room has a rectangular window that looks out onto the stacks, while Indigenous artwork is scattered throughout the library, instead of being restricted into one area.

Of all the pieces, Tailfeathers' favourite is the buffalo sculpture -- a symbol for prosperity for Indigenous peoples. The life-sized metal structure, crafted by Lionel Peyachew has been placed in the heart of the library, at the top of the stairs so it can't be missed. The "word search" buffalo sculpture -- as Tailfeathers calls it -- comprises Indigenous words from the languages of Treaty 7.

"There was a little Caucasian kid that came out [to the library] and he said, 'Hey, where's Moh-kíns-tsis?' which means Calgary, it means elbow," he explains. "It shows that the education for non-Indigenous people is also becoming better and people are really trying to see from each other's eyes and sort of develop relationships."



The second phase of Indigenous art in the library space will continue to grow the permanent installation of Indigenous art into the children's area of the library. Tailfeathers says Calgary is "sort of a transient place" in that there are Indigenous peoples not all originally from Treaty 7 who have made Calgary their home -- but it's important to also showcase their work and share their stories.

Now, the Calgary Public Library is getting an extra financial boost for language revitalization. In late January 2019, the provincial government in Alberta announced it would give \$1 million to fund the **Indigenous Languages Resources Centre** (<https://calgarylibrary.ca/news/indigenous-languages-resource-centre-to-be-created-at-central-library/>). This new hub will be based out of Calgary's new central branch to help with the promotion and preservation of Indigenous cultures and languages.

For libraries considering including Indigenous placemaking and Indigenous art, Tailfeathers says it's imperative to include Indigenous communities in the decolonization of the library space.

"Talk to the communities. Make sure you do your real community engagement and you make sure they're part of the process."

Desmond Wong echoes this sentiment, especially in the context of librarianship.

"It's a big profession and one where these harmful views are really inherently baked in to some of our perceptions," he says. "And everyone needs to be willing to see them for what they are and improve on them."

**Last week: Part 3 of rabble's series: "How Canada's Largest Library System is Removing Barriers and Advancing Inclusion"** (<https://rabble.ca/news/2019/08/how-canadas-largest-library-system-removing-barriers-and-advancing-inclusion>)"

**Next week: Part 5 of rabble's series: "The Public Library and Reconciliation"** (<https://rabble.ca/news/2019/09/public-library-and-indigenous-reconciliation>)"

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*Image: Olivia Robinson*

*Editor's note, September 4, 2019: An earlier version of this article misstated Desmond Wong's employer as OISE. Wong works for the University of Toronto Libraries.*