Decolonial Sensibility and the Archives: A Case Study at the Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

*My only wish is that who reads the work I have written realize I opened my heart and soul to reveal my innermost thoughts. I was like a book with no cover telling it as it is, and remember always this is my story, the Mi’kmaq in her misery the Mi’kmaq in all the glory, whatever you come out with in your thoughts, I like who I am, I hope you like me as well.*

-Rita Joe, Deed of Gift, Condition of Donation

Background

The archival field has been entrenched in rich discussion around the concept of decolonising archives for many years. The literature contains a number of articles speaking to the need for re-evaluation around core archival practices. How archivists approach appraisal, arrangement, description, preservation and access needs to be viewed through a lens of decolonisation to identify where there is room for adaptation to a more inclusive process. However, as Fraser and Todd explain “given the inherent colonial realities of the archives as institutions, any effort to decolonise or Indigenise the archives in Canada can therefore only ever be partial.” (pg.2/8)

The Beaton Institute is nearing its 60th anniversary in 2017. As with most cultural archives in Canada, the trends in preservation and collecting have followed a trajectory that generally mirrors advances and shifts in related academic professions such as history, folklore and anthropology. Archives are usually the repository for the research output of these professions and collections. Additionally, early archival theory didn’t reflect on the benefits of working with or understanding marginalized or underrepresented populations. This colonial, patriarchal and elitist approach certainly captured some historically significant fonds and collections and helped preserve records that otherwise would have been lost. However, this approach silences the voices of records creators and removes the ability to truly understand cultural differences in a meaningful way. Again Fraser and Todd state that “if Indigenous people are present in historical records, they are often depicted as passive bystanders, rarely free agents in their own right and far removed from narratives that highlight agency or sophistication.” (pg.3/8)

The above quote from poet Rita Joe reflects the difference in receiving a donation from a Mi’kmaq person compared to Mi’kmaq collections donated by a non-Native donor. Not only is this condition statement on a generic deed of gift form the most eloquent in the archive’s administrative records, but it also provides insight into the creation of the records and the author’s motivations and feelings. Rita Joe’s fonds is relatively unique in our holdings but we are currently working toward a more inclusive and participatory approach to collecting and preservation of Cape Breton Island’s heritage.

The nature of our work has been slowly, over a number of years, shifting toward a new paradigm. Through a series of partnerships and projects the archive has been working toward adopting a decolonial sensibility but had not formally defined these actions. As post-secondary institutions across Canada work to incorporate the concept and actions of Indigenization and decolonisation as an integral aspect of...
campus work and life, the archive is committed to adopting pro-active policies and procedures to formalize the work that has been started.  

**Working Towards a Decolonial Sensibility: Projects and Partnerships**

The holdings of the Beaton Institute archive at Cape Breton University have always reflected the multicultural communities on Cape Breton Island. The collections and fonds are multi-lingual and culturally diverse. However, in 2009 there was recognition that much of the Mi’kmaq related materials were difficult to access as a whole. With an increase in reference questions related to Mi’kmaq heritage and culture as well as faculty looking for specific Mi’kmaq resources, the archive worked on a number of projects that included community and academic partners:

- **2009**: Nova Scotia Historical Newspapers Project  

- **2010**: Music: Cape Breton’s Diversity in Unity website  

- **2012**: Guide to the Mi’kmaq Holdings  
  [http://beatoninstitute.com/mikmawguide](http://beatoninstitute.com/mikmawguide)

In all cases we did involve consultants from the originating communities and/or representatives from Unama’ki College or the Mi’kmaq Resource Centre. For example, with the Music website, we did try to involve families and content creators even if they didn’t hold legal copyright. In essence, this would constitute moral copyright and was very important to staff that Mi’kmaq artists or the artist’s estates knew the recordings would be online with their permission.

However, the archive entered into these projects without clear policies around a decolonised approach. We may have changed our methods around how the content is accessed, described and ultimately used if we had been more aware of existing discussions around Indigenization before beginning the projects.

**Working Towards a Decolonial Sensibility: Core Archival Functions**

**Access and Reference**

Many archives face challenges associated with processing records due to the sheer quantity and expectations around access. Very often records are only half-described and usually by one person. However, in the case of the *Guide to the Mi’kmaq Holdings* we decided to add entries for records only processed to a minimum degree. Once published a few of the entries gained the attention of a researcher. The researcher worked for the Union of Nova Scotia Indians and wanted access to a set of correspondence between Mi’kmaq residents near St. Peter’s Cape Breton and the Department of Indian Affairs. The letters were part of a larger collection from a general store, which at one time provided an office for a local Indian Agent.

Ultimately, with only a few exceptions the letters were forwarded to the researcher based on the early dates of the correspondence as well as the discussion around the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at
the time. The few documents not released held private medical information and the date of the
correspondence was later than the others—which again jeopardized the privacy of the individual
mentioned. It was also decided to retain the letters as part of the collection, despite the fact that they were
copies of Federal Government correspondence.

This was a complicated situation that would have benefitted from clear policy and a participatory
appraisal process. At the time, staff made the decision based on information available at the time, as well
as through the lens of the ongoing Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

**Participatory Appraisal/Description**

A more recent donation of audio recordings and textual documents created by a well-known Mi’kmaw
tradition bearer will be approached in a more participatory manner, although policy and procedures are
still being drafted. The historically significant audio recordings and associated materials will be under the
direction of the donor, who is the creator’s son. Meetings to listen and understand the meaning of the
content are essential and important to the appraisal and descriptive process. Rather than staff undertaking
all of the processing steps alone, the donor will be part of the process guiding the way we work with the
collection.

**Working Towards a Decolonial Sensibility: Faculty and Students**

As materials become more available, it is much easier to engage researchers including faculty and
students. We have worked with various faculty providing recordings and primary source documents for
classes such as Samuel Holland’s map illustrating “Indian Hunting Ground”, historic recordings of the
Mi’kmaw, and documents and photographs showing the King’s Road Reserve. However, it’s very often
the same resources which are accessed multiple times by different researchers. We have recognized the
need to be more pro-active in both processing and making accessible materials while also promoting and
engaging faculty and students with new resources.

Through the Beaton Institution Internship program and the CBU Student Bursary Program, the archive is
currently working to make additional resources related to the Mi’kmaw of Cape Breton Island accessible
and improving descriptions. Once content is more appropriately described and a larger quantity of
archival records are available, we can work toward increasing faculty engagement.

**Challenges and Future Steps**

For most cultural and educational institutions there are challenges associated with funding and human
resources. In the case of the Beaton Institute, it is difficult to set aside our daily work commitments and
focus on policy development to implement change to the core archival functions. As a result, some
collections do not get processed in a timely manner or the policy hasn’t been written to create a
participatory process or the descriptions are brief and lacking context. As well, the participatory process
is completely at odds with other popular recent theories in archival processing such as More Product Less
Process (MPLP) which aims at addressing constant backlog situations through a ‘less is more’ approach
to working with records.
Despite these challenges, the Beaton Institute is dedicated to helping move toward a national strategy outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Archives can no longer be complacent when we have been called to action. As a result, there are a number of initiatives the archive will be working towards over the coming months to help meet our goals:

1. Review our unit using the TRC Scorecard to determine areas of improvement
2. Update policies and procedures following the lead of other archives working toward decolonisation and in consultation with Mi’kmaq consultants.
3. Support staff professional development through courses such as the Knowledge Keepers of Mi’kma’ki at CBU
4. Continue providing course support for faculty and students and promote newly accessible content
5. Engage faculty before course development to include primary source materials
6. Continue improving subject headings, keywords and descriptions through a participatory process
7. Increase community partnerships with First Nations communities

Bibliography:


