DISCUSSION SECTION:

INDIGENOUS LIBRARIANS: KNOWLEDGE KEEPERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

This article discusses reasons why there are so few Indigenous librarians in Canada and proposes some solutions to this situation including by shining an interesting and favorable light on the profession. Many Indigenous people have a poor understanding of librarianship and how libraries and their staff can help communities reach self-determination. These misunderstandings are the result of a long over-due lack of advocacy for the profession. The purpose of this article is to change that invisibility by incorporating unique quotes of more than two dozen Indigenous librarians interviewed by the author and other techniques to promote a career in librarianship to Indigenous people.

Résumé

Dans cet article on examine pourquoi on compte si peu de bibliothécaires autochtones au Canada et comment l’on pourrait modifier cette situation (entre autres, en soulignant les aspects intéressants et favorables de cette profession). Beaucoup d’autochtones comprennent mal la bibliothéconomie et ne perçoivent pas comment bibliothèques et bibliothécaires peuvent aider les communautés à parvenir à l’auto-détermination. Cette méconnaissance provient de ce que, depuis trop longtemps, on ne fait pas de promotion de la profession. Cet article vise à mettre fin à cette invisibilité en offrant plus de deux douzaines de citations uniques de bibliothécaires autochtones qu’a consultés l’auteur, ainsi que d’autres techniques visant à promouvoir la bibliothéconomie chez les autochtones.
Introduction

Little is known for sure about why there are so few Indigenous librarians in Canada; certainly, very little has been published on this topic. Based on raw data collected by the 8R’s Research Team in a nationwide study, Deborah Lee noted that in 2004, “there were fewer than 25 librarians with the professional designation (Master of Library and Information Studies, MLIS) in Canada who identified as Aboriginal” (Lee “Indigenous” 149). This number is very low compared to more than 400 Maori library workers in Aotearoa / New Zealand according to a former president of Te Ropu Whakahau, the national association of Maori people working in libraries (Morehu). Further, the American Indian Library Association (AILA), founded in 1979, is a very active organization that meets twice a year at the national American Library Association conferences (mid-winter and summer); has several active committees and awards groups; and has an ever-growing list of members, to a total of 300 people in August 2015 according to the AILA Executive Director (Gray). Indeed, Patterson has also written a compelling history about Native American librarians.

Unfortunately, Canada does not have this kind of support in the form of an active nation-wide association for its Indigenous librarians. We do have a listserv for Aboriginal information needs in Canada, known as Abin, and is located here: https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/abin/info. It currently has a membership of 87 people but it is very inactive. A quick look at the activity within this group indicates that there have been 16 emails in the first eight months of 2015 and there were 16 email messages for the whole year in 2014. The geographic size of this country and the low numbers of Indigenous people in the profession contribute to a sense of isolation when working in this field and the difficulty in creating a nation-wide organization for Indigenous library workers in Canada. There has also been a lack of support from the national and provincial library associations in terms of assistance in forging bonds among Indigenous librarians. One exception is the British Columbia Library Association’s First Nations Interest Group (FNIG).

This article discusses the barriers that prevent Indigenous peoples in Canada from entering the profession and attempts to find solutions to these barriers. In particular, I propose that even bringing these issues to the forefront in an article is one step towards resolving this issue. Part of the discussion in this article will include responses to one question from the questionnaire that I used during my sabbatical research in 2014, when I interviewed more than two dozen Indigenous librarians from across Canada. Their voices speak to the question: “Why are there so few Aboriginal librarians in Canada?”
Background Information:

For those unfamiliar with the topic of Indigenous librarianship, it is focused on providing culturally competent library services for Indigenous peoples:

Indigenous librarianship unites the discipline of librarianship with Indigenous approaches to knowledge, theory, and research methodology. It has a developing bibliography and local, national, and international professional associations devoted to its growth. A focus of Indigenous librarianship is the provision of culturally relevant library and information collections and services by, for, and with Indigenous people. (Burns et al. 2330)

Many readers may also not be aware of the history of Indigenous librarianship in Canada; consequently, it is necessary to provide some context for understanding the article that follows. Except where otherwise noted, the content in this backgrounder comes from the report commissioned by the National Reading Campaign, Aboriginal Peoples and Access to Reading Materials in Canada (Stonepath Research Group), from personal communications with Indigenous librarians, and from common knowledge.

Libraries, other than school libraries, in Aboriginal communities were largely non-existent until the 1960s and 1970s (Edwards). One exception was the community library on the Cape Croker reserve, now the Neyasha ninmigming - Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation in southwestern Ontario, which celebrated its 100th Anniversary in October, 2013. The Ontario government was a frontrunner in the development of public libraries on reserves: they saw that establishing library services on reserves was a priority in the 1960s and found funding through the Ontario Ministry of Culture. Currently, the Ministry of Culture is now the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport, and receives casino monies through the Ontario First Nations Limited Partnership funding according to the Wikwemikong First Nation Public Library Director (Mishibinijima). But casino monies were not intended to fund all the costs associated with running a library, but rather was a “Salary Supplement” (Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport, para 4). This supplement was for one staff member; with the idea that perhaps, federal funding (given jurisdictional issues) could also be obtained. Unfortunately, this has never materialized even though Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development (now Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada) was lobbied for funding by the National Aboriginal Public Library Organization (NAPLO) in 2010 (Mishinibijima). NAPLO operated as a volunteer ad hoc group with representation from four provinces for about four years but folded due to lack of funding to support it.

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First Nations public libraries were also expected to engage in individual fundraising efforts organized by the libraries' governing bodies and staff to cover other operational costs, including additional salary costs, and the purchasing of books and other materials for the enjoyment and benefit of their community members. It was also generally taken for granted that if the province provided for partial funding for a staff salary, then the onus was on Band Administration to find a suitable place to house the library collections and to cover utilities and maintenance costs for the space dedicated to the library. Given this type of responsibility put on the Band Administrators, it is not surprising that libraries were established on fewer than half of the reserves in Ontario, or approximately 50 libraries are located on-reserve (out of a total of 126 census-enumerated reserves) in the province (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada).

Other provinces have not fared as well. Since the 1970s, Saskatchewan has had a few public libraries (up to ten) on reserve, primarily in the northern part of the province due to its remoteness and lack of bigger centres that could provide library services to these communities. Manitoba has recently established at least three public libraries on reserve. Alberta's first public library was established on the Kainai First Nation in 2013 with the help of a three-way partnership between the Chinook-Arch Regional Library System, the Kainai Board of Education and the Kainai Band Administration. With thanks to the recent Write to Read Project/ phenomenon and the British Columbia Rotary Clubs, there are now about ten public libraries on reserve in British Columbia with several more to open in the next couple of years. For more information on Aboriginal library services across Canada (including in urban centres), please refer to the Stonenath Research Group Report. There are also a number of public, college and government libraries in the northern Territories (Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon Territory) that serve primarily Indigenous populations. Information about library services in the North is difficult to come by but for those interested there is a brief account in the Stonenath Research Group Report.

School libraries on reserve have not been a focus in this background for a number of reasons, primarily because information on them is difficult to find, and unfortunately, most are not well-stocked. (There has also been a devaluation of school librarianship across Canada in mainstream institutions in recent years.) Notable exceptions are: The Tatsiki-isaapo’s Middle School Library on the Kainai First Nation in Alberta, the Senator Myles Venue School Library in Air Ronge, Saskatchewan, and the Peguis Central School Library on the Peguis First Nation in Manitoba.

Given that there are 633 First Nations communities in Canada and that there are fewer than 90 public libraries on reserves across the country, it is easy to see that First Nations people are not well served by public
libraries. But there are some urban public libraries that are reaching out to provide library services to First Nations. The Regina Public Library has been a frontrunner in this endeavour (since the late 1980s). More recently, the Edmonton Public Library (2005) has made a similar commitment with their Task Force Report and the hiring of an Outreach Librarian for the Aboriginal community shortly thereafter. Barbara Clubb noted that Ottawa has also made strides in improving library services for the “diverse community” of urban Aboriginal peoples through their public library system (qtd. in Stonepath Research Group, 9)

About the Participants Interviewed in the Study

Of the 27 interviewees, 12 were academic librarians (six of whom worked in First Nations college libraries) and 15 were public and special librarians (including those working in school libraries, government libraries and in non-profit organizations or cultural centres). The interviews ranged from one hour in length to 3.5 hours in length. Approximately two thirds were from the Western provinces and this was primarily due to funding constraints (the author lives in Western Canada), but also because there were no identified Indigenous academic librarians situated in the eastern half of the country (that is, east of the Manitoba/Ontario border). Funding restraints also prevented the author from traveling to the North (i.e. NWT, Yukon Territory and Nunavut). Many Indigenous groups were represented, including Cree-Métis, Plains Cree, Heiltsuk, Métis, Mi'kmaq, Mohawk, Ojibway, Tahltan, Wet'suwet'en, and more (some tribal groups cannot be disclosed due to the eight participants who opted to remain anonymous, and some of whom are the only librarian representative from their particular tribal group).

Only about half of the participants in the study had obtained their Master’s degrees (13 of 27). Those that did not have their Master’s degree had been running libraries (mostly on reserve) from anywhere between 10 and 30 plus years and had valuable contributions to make on the topic of Indigenous librarianship. In some situations, having the Master’s degree is seen to put one at a disadvantage, that such a person would be educating themselves out of a job because, in working on reserves, salaries for librarian positions is primarily at a technician level or sometimes only at the minimum wage level. Obviously, this circumstance demonstrates a lack of understanding by some Band administrators of the potential that libraries can offer when they are staffed with trained and qualified personnel. This situation will be discussed in greater depth later.

The range of library work experience of the librarians interviewed was from five years or less to more than 35 years and a few of the participants had retired from the profession. The length of time that many of
these individuals have worked in libraries speaks to their commitment to both their libraries and their communities, and a more in-depth discussion on what was shared through their interviews (such as challenges and successes) will be disseminated in a future publication.

**Barriers / Themes Overview**

There are many reasons why Indigenous people do not become librarians. Most of these fall into these seven main categories:

- lack of financial resources to obtain the education
- other barriers to obtaining a library education
- lack of knowledge about the profession and that it is a career option
- lack of advocacy for the profession
- the emotions factor
- sometimes the pay is not great
- the issue of self-identifying

What follows is a close look at each barrier.

**Lack of financial resources to get a library profession education**

Almost all participants in the study mentioned how costly it was to obtain an education related to working in libraries, even for the library technician programs, but especially for the professional librarian designation, which requires a Master's degree. The formalized library technician program is a two-year program, does not require an undergraduate degree for admission, and is offered at a number of post-secondary institutions across Canada, usually situated in larger centres. The Alberta Association of Library Technicians provides a listing of library technician programs across Canada. In addition, there is a new online Library Technician program available through Confederation College based out of Thunder Bay.

Some Aboriginal peoples have taken the technician diploma program with or without a university undergraduate degree. Others have been able to take non-residency programs offered online in the past, such as the Excel: Managing a Small Public Library program in Ontario, which was offered by the Southern Ontario Library Services and the Ontario Library Services while they were working in the library in their reserve communities. This was considered an effective and practical way to get the training they needed to feel competent in their jobs. Sadly, there were not other similar programs offered in other provinces, with
the exception of the Credenda Library Technician program, now offered online through the Red River College in Winnipeg.

In terms of the Librarian Master's degree program, there are only eight library schools across Canada. What follows is a brief description on each of them (more information is available on the Library schools' websites):

- University of British Columbia: School of Library, Archival and Information Studies (SLAIS) or the iSchool, offers the First Nations Curriculum Concentration program. Aboriginal students at SLAIS can apply for the Gene Joseph Scholarship, co-sponsored by the First Nations Interest Group, British Columbia Library Association and the UBC First Nations House of Learning.

- University of Alberta: School of Library and Information Studies, which offers a combined degree program in Master of Library and Information Studies / Master of Arts in Humanities Computing (HuCo), a combined MBA/MLIS program, and an online MLIS program (effective September 2013)

- University of Western Ontario: Master of Library and Information Science offered through the Faculty of Information and Media Studies in London, Ontario.

- University of Toronto: The Faculty of Information offers a Master's in Library and Information Science, Museum Studies, Archives and Records Management, or Critical Information Policy Studies. Also, the program’s Grace Buller Aboriginal Student Scholarship ($8000-$10,000), is co-sponsored by the Ontario Library Association.

- University of Ottawa: The Master of Information Studies, which offers a bilingual program, with 25% of the courses taken in the student’s second language, i.e. French or English.

- McGill University: The School of Information Studies offers a Master’s in Information Studies, and a graduate certificate program in both Digital Archives Management and in Information and Knowledge Management in Montreal.

- Université de Montréal: École de bibliothéconomie et des sciences de l'information offers its two graduate library de-
degrees totally in the French language:

- Dalhousie University: School of Information Management offers four graduate programs including a combined Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) and Master of Public Administration (MPA) in Halifax.

It should be noted that the University of Saskatchewan's University Library began an Aboriginal Internship program in the fall of 2014 that covers all tuition for any online American Library Association (ALA) accredited MLIS program (given that the University of Saskatchewan does not have a library school), and provides part-time employment for the Aboriginal students employees in various sectors of the University Library. In addition, the University of Alberta has also started an Indigenous Internship program, with the option of taking their School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) courses onsite or online, and provides their interns part-time work experience opportunities.

Despite some scholarships and internships, graduate degrees in librarianship are very costly for any interested Aboriginal person (including the prerequisite 4-year undergraduate degree). This is the case especially because not all Aboriginal students are funded by their Bands or communities because their community does not have enough funds to go around for each potential student, or because they do not have a status Indian card (the Certificate of Indian Status Card). Nor do all Métis students have financial support from a Métis organization. Most readers are likely aware that, due to gender discrimination in the Indian Act, a large number of Indigenous peoples lost their Indigenous status when their Indigenous mothers married non-Indigenous men (see Lynn Gehl for more information about the gender discrimination of the Indian Act). And even if some Aboriginal peoples do get some funding through their Bands, most Aboriginal post-secondary students struggle to make ends meet financially and often work one or more part-time jobs to make it through.

Some Aboriginal peoples who have made a career out of librarianship have done so without a Master's degree. As stated earlier, only 13 of the 27 people interviewed had obtained their MLIS degrees. It is worth repeating that others made their careers with far less education because they were able to work in their reserve communities and obtained training on the job or were able to take non-residency courses such as the Excel program in Ontario. Some interviewees also attest to the barrier created by the high financial cost of getting post-secondary education in librarianship:

U of T offers a scholarship for any Aboriginal person who wants to do their MLIS ... but I just don't have the time to commute.
because it's very expensive. (S. Saunders)

It's expensive. You need an undergrad and a Master's and there's not a lot of scholarships, especially for Indigenous peoples...in Canada anyway. (Participant AP)

Because many First Nations communities cannot afford to pay a degreed librarian's salary, it would make sense to try to educate people in First Nations' communities on the basics of how to run a small library and to meet the cultural preservation needs of the community. As one participant stated:

We need to give basic skills in library, archives, and cultural preservation and management to community members without having that degree. Maybe once they have the basics, maybe they'll go on to do the Master's. (C. Callison)

Providing that training within the community would also alleviate many barriers. One participant, who received minimal training on the job, states that if she were to quit her job running the public library on her reserve, her community would have no problem replacing her:

...there's a lot of people from the community who come in here and say, 'Geez, this is a nice job you have. I wouldn't mind working here.' A lot of people. You'd be surprised. If I left this job, I think there'd be a line-up of people. I get that often. ... And there's a lot of people who come in and ask if there's jobs available. ... We get a lot of positive feedback here. So yeah, I'm sure somebody would jump in my shoes right away. (Participant A)

One solution then for library positions on reserve is to provide basic skills on the job; then the barriers of financing an education and leaving home to obtain that education are removed. More importantly, a job in a well-functioning community library can then become very appealing.

Other Barriers to Accessing both Online and Residency Library Education Programs

For those that are interested in obtaining a library education, there are other barriers besides funding. These include a lack of programs offered; many Indigenous people are unwilling to leave their communities to obtain that education, and the lack of job opportunities within the community to come back to. Others do not want to leave their communities behind in order to get educated because of family, community or
ceremonial responsibilities. Some interviewees speak to these barriers:

There are lots of barriers to education – money, timing, family responsibilities, community responsibilities. It's a lot to give up. (S.G)

They don't want to travel away from home or to leave their communities. (P. Lerat)

The idea of leaving your community to do an undergraduate and then a Master's program (that's six or seven years) is intimidating if you're living in the North or if you've got family or feasting or other ceremonial responsibilities. (C. Callison)

Some might think that the online Master's degree programs would be an easy solution but it is not necessarily the case. It might be okay for some people but others might want to have that face-to-face interaction with other students and their professors while doing the program. And some Indigenous people struggle with the online learning environment:

You have to be familiar with [technology and the online environment] and I don't think they are, do you? No interest maybe? I know some people start it but I don't hear of them finishing. It's two years right? (P. Lerat)

In addition, one participant who was actually taking an online program had this to say:

I'm in my first semester right now. I'm taking two courses online with the University of Alberta and online takes more time than face to face. If you just did face to face, you go for your three hours, and you do your studying and your reading on your own, but you only have to put in your three hours when you're there.... [In doing the online program] I have to go back online, reading posts, responding to posts, log out, go back three hours later, read the posts, and respond to the posts. I would have been better off driving, doing the commute. I didn't want to do that, no, it's an hour each way” (S. Saunders)

Still others offered these insights about actually being in a graduate program:

Once you get there [to library school] even staying in the program can be extremely difficult. Once you get to library school, you're the only one, you're all alone. (S.G)

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Not a lot of library schools have First Nation related courses. Their curriculum might not seem relevant. (A.P)

And if there are no library jobs to come home to, Aboriginal peoples who might be interested in working in a library might not follow that dream if they really want to come back to work in their communities:

...if you have band funding but libraries aren’t considered a priority by your nation, then you are on your own, so you might consider another path based upon that. ... if they want to work with and for Aboriginal people, they might not associate libraries as doing that necessarily. Although you and I know libraries are trying to do quite a lot of that, but that’s not on other people’s radar. (A. P)

This sentiment provides a nice segue to the next barrier.

**Lack of knowledge and awareness about libraries and library careers**

Many of the participants talked about a lack of knowledge and awareness about the profession, whether it was via a library technician program or the professional Master’s degree program. One of the library profession’s most common anecdotes coming from those outside of the field is: “You have to have a Master’s degree to check out books?” This is, of course, untrue. Many people who work at the circulation desk in libraries are library support staff or students.

Even for mainstream librarians, it is also common knowledge that people often accidentally fall into the profession. For instance, one participant stated:

I don’t think people really know about [the library profession]. Like I didn’t know about it til something else fell through and I started doing more research into it. ... I didn’t use a library growing up. I was quite lucky because my parents bought me my books...taking me to Chapter’s so I could pick out my books. ... I built my own library in my own room. I think I would have thought more about libraries had I used them as a kid. (P. Knockwood)

The sentiment that not a lot of Aboriginal children and families used libraries on a regular basis was expressed by a number of the participants. One couched it in terms of not getting into “the library habit,” the way that many non-Aboriginal children and families do:

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Part of it is non-familiarity, Aboriginal people not having a life-long association with libraries. They didn’t go to libraries as children or have those memories of going to programs or puppet shows. I don’t think a lot of Aboriginal people have that accumulation of positive library and book experiences that non-Aboriginal people do. (T. Million)

Others had similar comments:

Maybe libraries were not a focal point in their communities when they were growing up. (Participant G)

There’s not really that culture of reading in a lot of Aboriginal communities...it’s not firmly ingrained in a lot of communities. ... Those sorts of childhood memories aren’t there to draw [Aboriginal] people into librarianship. (S. G)

Some offered a rationale as to why Aboriginal peoples did not (and do not) use libraries:

I think they don’t know what libraries have to offer, they think it’s a building with books. A library is so much more. It’s a meeting place for the community. It’s a place where you can access computers free of charge.... It’s a place where you can take your kids and it’s a place where you’re going to be safe. ... You can go there to learn your language. ... You may have an Aboriginal person behind the desk and they may have similar life experiences as you have. (W. Sinclair)

It’s a profession you don’t see regularly...if you grow up on the rez, that’s not a profession you’d commonly see, not a profession that’s visible in the (rez) community, not like social workers or police officers are. (S. G)

We haven’t been exposed to the structure of a library in the way that, say, a European might be. ... Our [information places] have been very immediate. You know, you go out and learn what plants are good for you and what’s not good for you. It’s not less knowledge; it’s just a different way of acquiring knowledge. We go to Elders. We’d ask our families...how we learn is different. ...It’s just not there in our communities for us to see as a career, or as a job, or as a possibility. (D. Johnston)

It’s not a traditional role. ... When I went to residential school, there was no library anywhere. ... I don’t remember a library in
any school I went to other than high school. (H. Roy)

Another participant speaks similarly but in terms of not having Aborigi-

nal role models in libraries:

So many people growing up didn’t see First Nations people in

the library, like staff positions, and if they weren’t there, why

would you as a kid think that’s a place you can be? ... The more

variety of people you will get in the library as staff, the more

variety of people you will get in the library as patrons.

(K. MacLeod)

One participant, who works on populating an Open Government web-

site, also brought up the notion of librarianship as a dying profession.

This underscores another aspect of how people who are not in the pro-

fession do not understand the profession:

There’s this cultural perception that we all have Google, so why

do we even need the library? I’m working in an office that has

physically replaced the library. The Internet does have a lot of

information but it doesn’t tell you how to get it .... And for

people going to grad studies, they don’t necessarily realize how

much applied work is out there and how valuable that library

degree can be and instead they’ll pick a different kind of degree,

that connects more to their interests. But they don’t realize, well

you can also do that with a library degree. ...half of us in my

current workplace have our [MLIS] degrees...the decision-makers

are aware that if they want to deal with the dissemination

of information, they want to get people whose background is in

libraries. (K. MacLeod)

Other interviewees have brought up this same topic:

...it still bothers me when people say to me, “Oh, you’ve picked

the wrong profession. There’s going to be no libraries in the

next ten years,” because of digital whatever, and I say, “Well, if

you’ve got a calculator, does that mean that you’re a math

professor?” You know, just because you have the Internet, it

doesn’t mean that you know how to navigate it. (S.G)

If you think that libraries are a dying art because of e-books,

then you don’t need to have a library or we can put you in a

smaller space .... it’s all on the computer, we’re good. And yet,

we’re all asking for more books and more programming space.

(S. Saunders)

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Some participants discussed this lack of knowledge about the library profession from a different angle, i.e. that people just do not know about the different environments that they can work in if they have a library education:

Once people know the importance of libraries, that it can work for the whole community then maybe the young people will pursue a library education. ... When I was younger, I never heard anyone say, 'Oh, I'm going to go to SAIT to be a library tech! ... Another thing Native people don't realize is that there are so many kinds of libraries a person could work in. They might think it's only for public and school libraries ... in Calgary, they have a special library for Elders, anything to do with geriatric issues and their health care. (N. Stabs Down)

Indeed, there are libraries in hospitals, law firms, at airports, in cultural centers, and in non-profit organizations. There are also libraries in federal government departments, like Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. The Victoria Native Friendship Centre operates a lending library out of their space “to support literacy programs in the community” (par. 2).

This lack of awareness of the range of library spaces and opportunities is very common even for those who are not Aboriginal. A blog entry written by Mia Breitkopf, an MLIS student at Syracuse University in 2011, tracked down a number of MLIS job titles that did not seem to be very associated with librarianship and called the blog entry, 61 Non-Librarian Jobs for LIS Grads. Some of these job titles included: Web Analytics Manager; Information Resources Specialist; Geographic Information System Map Specialist; Curator in Media Resource Centre; Director of Emerging Technologies and Community Services; Discovery Metadata Librarian; Associate Archivist for Digital Initiatives and Records Management, and many more. With rapid technological changes impacting on so many aspects of life across society comes a wide range of careers to meet the technological needs associated with it. For those Indigenous people interested in a career in Digital Librarianship, the future appears to hold a great deal of potential.

Lack of Advocacy for the Profession and the Need to Do it Right

A related issue brought up by a number of interviewees was the lack of promotion or advocacy for librarianship that results in a lack of awareness about the profession. Some comments include:

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Maybe they don’t realize this job is there, maybe it hasn’t been marketed enough. ... I didn’t know much about library opportunities before I went to library school. (Participant G)

Because we’ve been promoting Education and Legal programs. That’s all we do. You look at programmes where the universities and colleges are going into First Nation communities and it always seems to be Education and Law [until recently]. ... There’s just not enough promotion of librarianship. ... I don’t think it’s being brought to the people’s attention that this is a possibility. (G. Joseph)

We need to have librarianship booths at Aboriginal career fairs. (A.P)

I don’t think [librarianship] has been represented as a job. ... There aren’t any [promotion events] for librarians. ... There’s no marketing plan, there’s no: “This is a job for you: Librarianship.” (S. Mishinibijima)

The recruitment, I don’t know – are the different libraries, are they actively recruiting [Indigenous people]? Are they making opportunities available at Library Schools say, and taking it from there, like we have a job for you? You know. That would be amazing. Or, “There’s an opportunity that you may want to strive for at our library.” (D. Feisst)

We’re not promoting it. ... I see all these industry promotion posters or Government of Canada promotion posters about all these great jobs you can have as an Aboriginal person and they are role models and all that and I never see an Aboriginal librarian on that. (T. Million)

Further, some participants mentioned the unappealing nature of the librarian stereotype. If we are to advocate for the profession, it would have to be done by steering away from well-worn librarian stereotypes (such as the prim and proper, hair-in-a-bun, elderly white lady averse to noise of any kind) to one that showcases the dynamic and thought-provoking work being done by Indigenous librarians:

There’s that whole stereotype of what a librarian is – like who wants to go and be that? ... We have to make [the profession] really appealing. The more they see us [Indigenous librarians because we don’t fit that stereotype], the more they’re going to
go into librarianship. (C. Callison)

That's something we're trying to do, to market ourselves more, outside of the stereotype of a place that's quiet and filled with dusty book shelves. We're vibrant, there's a lot going on, they're loud. You go into the children's area and it's just like crazy mayhem and there's always people on the public access computers. (P. Knockwood)

Everybody is kind of low key as librarians. "I'm a librarian" (soft voice). But it should be, "I'm a librarian" (loud voice). No, we really need to shout it out!" (S. Mishinibijima.)

We haven't proven to our communities that librarianship is an essential skill that is needed in our communities, and that we need to start encouraging people in our communities to become librarians. [Because the Bands don't think about that], shelter and food come first. (C. Callison)

So many of the insights provided by the participants in this section warrant further discussion but perhaps the most salient one is that we need to explicitly show First Nations Band Administrators and decision-makers the value of librarianship to the community. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to showcase the various success stories experienced by the participants, here are a few highlights, to spark a few light bulbs about how librarianship can be extremely beneficial for Indigenous communities.

First, it should be noted that Indigenous communities and their respective contemporary issues are very diverse. If we are talking about a First Nations community that has a public library that meets many basic needs such as a place to type resumes and cover letters for free (and often receive some advice on how to improve their resumes and cover letters in the process), and print/fax the documents for a minimal cost, then these services are vital for an individual's growth and self-determination. These services are extremely important because the library is viewed as a neutral space removed from the politics of the Band office in several reserve libraries in Ontario and elsewhere. Kelly Crawford also speaks to the "big impact" that Ontario First Nation Public Libraries have made over the years:

In addition to day-to-day operations, First Nation librarians rely on their creativity to make programming events happen and their tenacity to show the community the library's importance. Understaffed and overwhelmed, many First Nation librarians look this multi-tasking phenomenon straight in the eye and

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push through the struggles with hopes of coming out the other end having made a difference. (54)

Another type of Aboriginal community, say an urban community, might need easier access to ways of learning about their traditions due to the loss of culture that was one consequence of many families’ multiple generational attendance at residential schools. Consequently, language and culture classes and access to Elders in the inner-city library, such as the Albert Branch of the Regina Public Library, are components of essential services for community members’ well-being. For Indigenous researchers associated with universities and colleges, it would be hard to imagine how their researchers could function without spaces like:

- **Xwi7Xwa Library** at the University of British Columbia (the only First Nations-related physical Branch library space within an academic institution in Canada), or

- The First Nation Information Connection (a virtual library initiated by the University of Alberta providing access to electronic resources) which supports the research needs of students and other researchers at tribal college libraries in Alberta, or

- The Indigenous Studies Portal, a virtual library created, maintained and regularly updated by the University Library at the University of Saskatchewan, and utilized by academic libraries across Canada and beyond.

These initiatives have proven their worth over the last ten years due to the long hours of work by and commitment of staff working in these libraries (many who are Indigenous) and supported financially by academic library administrators.

A last but not least example, no one can dispute the critically important work of Gene Joseph, a dedicated Indigenous librarian (Wet’suwet’an / Nadleh Whut’en) who was head of legal research for an Indigenous law firm and helped make history for the successful Delgamuukw, *et al vs. the Queen* law case in 1997. For those who are not familiar with this case, it set a precedent for the acceptance of oral histories as evidence in fighting an Aboriginal Title Case (see Hurley for more additional information on Delgamuukw). Gene has also been an advocate for the cultural preservation of essential documents, artifacts, sound and video recordings, and other records for Band administrators and community members alike for use as needed. She also stresses the importance of strict observance of cultural protocols, in terms of access to the documents, especially when digitized. It is unknown how many re-
serves across the country have not made efforts to preserve these precious documents and artifacts; indeed, it is common practice to have them stored in unsafe conditions in someone’s basement. Convincing community decision-makers of the necessity of training community members in essential library, archival and records management skills is crucial for community self-determination, particularly when faced with the usurpation of reserve lands by oil and other resource companies for instance.

The Emotions Factor

Some of the library literature discusses the fear or intimidation that many Aboriginal peoples experience in libraries (Lee, 2001; Novak, & Robinson, 1998). So, it was not surprising when a number of the participants mentioned a discomfort that Aboriginal peoples feel in libraries:

[Do you think Aboriginal people are scared of the library?] Certainly, yah. I saw that more so at the public library than I do here [at the university library] because students here are already past the hurdle, one of the hurdles right? But public libraries, they are, there’s a fear associated with the bureaucracy, with the formalization, with the “you’re behind the desk and I’m not”, there’s that separation, I guess. And not really seeing it as a service for them. (D. Feisst)

On reserves, there’s no public libraries. There isn’t much of a library presence. And then the libraries that they do go to, the mainstream libraries, sometimes they’re treated poorly and they don’t want to go back. ... A lot of them won’t go back to [xxx] Public Library because of their attitude...not allowing reserve students to use their [province-wide] library cards. (M. Weasel Fat)

Chiefs and Councils aren’t in the library habit either. They didn’t go to libraries maybe. Or maybe they associated libraries with schools and Aboriginal peoples’ experiences with schools was pretty negative. (T. Million) My mother is very bitter about residential school and libraries were seen as an institution. It was a place that they felt wasn’t for them. (W. Sinclair)

I think it has to do with all the way back to the residential schools, because [Aboriginal people] were forced to learn a language that wasn’t theirs... It was never a cheery experience for
them of how to learn to read, it was forced on them, it was a bad experience and nobody really cared to pick it up. (K. Goodstriker)

I think you have to have that love for the library and the library environment [to become a librarian]. I don’t know what it is. We have a lot of social workers and a lot of lawyers but it’s not our profession that our people are flocking to and I don’t know what it is. Because I love being a librarian. (D.G)

That this might be good for everyone but I don’t see myself here, like they don’t see themselves necessarily represented there … So, it’s one of those cycles, it’s like if there’s no Aboriginal staff and they don’t see themselves represented at the service desks or service points, maybe they would feel excluded. (D. Feisst)

I think the way libraries and the profession see themselves is problematic, being a little blind to the power dynamics … Marginalized people have a perspective that makes things visible that aren’t visible otherwise. The structures, barriers, challenges, limitations and inertia … It feels wrong, to those who don’t understand some of the structural barriers. Something feels wrong. It doesn’t feel respectful, and they might not be able to articulate it. With a lot of internalized racism that people carry around, some people could interpret what doesn’t feel right as an indication they aren’t suited for using libraries or for working in libraries … So for some Aboriginal people, they might not realize they’re not the problem, they just know they don’t feel good in libraries, so go elsewhere. (K. Lawson)

A lot of the changes that happen at big levels don’t serve Aboriginal faculty or researchers or students or communities. … The push is to do that more cost effectively and more automatically in a ‘more data’ way, to serve people more effectively and faster and better. And some of those big endeavors are completely contrary to community needs, for local based information, for parallel perspectives… (K. Lawson)

These last two insights speak to the lack of acknowledgement of white privilege in mainstream libraries and how that influences how library decisions are made. In the field of the library literature, John Berry has noted the concept of cultural competency in the past but it has largely fallen on deaf ears. In more recent library literature, Todd Honma considers the ramifications of a profession with a long history of sweeping diversity issues under the carpet. My hope is that mainstream library

administrators come to understand, sooner rather than later, that much of the “bigger, better, faster,” neo-liberal mantra that has often guided their decision-making works at cross-purposes for what is beneficial for Aboriginal faculty, students, researchers, and community members. The core of Aboriginal workplace success, that is, relationship building, and the time that it takes to build strong relationships are key to workplace success. Castleden et al., highlight the time commitment needed to build trust through positive relationship building when conducting community-based participatory research with Indigenous communities; it is no different when Indigenous faculty (including librarians) and staff engage in workplace relationship building whether it is internal or external to the university.

The pay isn’t great!

Salaries on reserves are notoriously low for most paid employment and this is a factor for library staff as well, perhaps more so than other Band employees. As mentioned earlier, in Ontario, the Ministry of Culture provides a salary supplement, expecting that the band or the federal government will top up the salary. But of course, the federal government does not provide any funding that supports libraries. As one librarian running a reserve library in Ontario states:

It’s not a well-paid job. We are fortunate to get a salary subsidy. It’s meant to be a subsidy and we’re meant to earn more than that [mostly through our own fundraising and grant-writing efforts] but I think maybe some don’t. So they’re only open 20 hours a week. (K. Lewis)

I’m watching people who are senior members [of a group of First Nations librarians running reserve libraries] retiring and the libraries and bands are bringing in young people ... and they’re paying them $11 per hour ... and no benefits. (S. Saunders)

As it turns out, rural libraries do not pay well either:

Rural libraries are small, not well paid, not [open] lots of hours, not really a viable choice if you have to support a family. And if you’re from a rural community, you may not want to move to a job in an urban community...most jobs you can live on...are in urban centres. (T. Million)

Usually, library jobs that require a Master’s degree pay a decent salary. Even looking on Library job websites, one can see that a librarian in an
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urban centre with a Master’s degree and at least two years’ experience can expect to earn anywhere between $60,000 and $75,000 per year, depending on where they live in Canada.

In the past, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, some Aboriginal librarians in Canada did not self-identify as Aboriginal if they were working in mainstream institutions. Perhaps they did not see any advantage in doing so. Perhaps they could “pass” as non-Aboriginal, or an ethnic minority. Two examples have come to my attention recently where long-time librarians at academic libraries in the Prairies have now come forward and self-declared as Aboriginal. One participant raised this issue:

Like people may not have self-identified, right? They feel there’s some stigma, I don’t know. (D. Feisst)

If indeed they did feel a stigma in the past in self-identifying, were these individuals in a library position where they were not working with Aboriginal patrons? Did their position not require knowledge of the Aboriginal worldview or of Indigenous knowledge? I do not see a problem with Aboriginal people working in mainstream libraries and where their work is not focused on serving an Aboriginal clientele. I am happy that they have made a living using their library skills after all the work they did to obtain their degrees and have supported their families and are practicing pimatisiwin, a Cree word for “living a good life”. And yes, I know Aboriginal librarians who have done so. One is an Information Technology Librarian in a regional library system and another does collection development in a government library. They are happy with their work, have taken on substantial responsibility in their librarian roles, and they are well respected by their colleagues.

But something that is a concern for me is that, in the past, perhaps there were Aboriginal librarians that would have been more satisfied working with Aboriginal library patrons, or sharing their Indigenous worldview in their workplace, but were afraid of the consequences if they had spoken up. From my own experience, even at Library School in the late 1990’s, there were times when I would bring up diversity as an issue in the library workplace or infuse my assignments with issues around serving Aboriginal library patrons and this was not necessarily respected or well understood. Some people walked out of a class when a film that I had identified was shown in our Management class and which dealt with race issues in a way that favored minorities. So yes, it is understandable that in the past some Aboriginal peoples working in libraries did not self-identify. It is troublesome to know they had to survive that way or that their work environment was not supportive of the gifts they brought to the workplace, but it is understandable that these librarians did what they had to do. Fortunately, times are changing. The fact that six Aboriginal librarians interviewed were working
in Indigenous Librarianship positions in mainstream academic libraries in 2014 shows a difference in statistics from ten years ago (where none were in 2004). That there are now at least three library schools offering scholarships for Aboriginal students in Canada and that some Aboriginal librarians working in mainstream libraries are now coming forward and self-identifying is encouraging. All these examples support the notion that the library schools and library workplaces are becoming more Aboriginal-friendly, which is, of course, another good reason to enter the profession.

Looking to the future

A number of participants had higher hopes for increased future use of libraries by Aboriginal peoples as well as the consequent development of a “library habit” and then an increased possibility of Aboriginal people committing to a career in librarianship. Here are two such comments:

That’s why you need to grab those little ones. That’s the next generation coming up. So maybe this generation doesn’t have much use for libraries, then maybe if they start with the little ones, then they will be the ones to really use libraries.

( Participant A)

We’re just getting up that slope where we’re getting a lot of professional people. ... I don’t think we’ve started to expand out into the different career fields. ... We just need to go out further and develop more of our professionals in different areas. We’ve got our teachers, business admin and finance people, social workers, lawyers, not very many doctors but it’s coming. You’re going to start to see a lot of those people branching out into the specialty areas, in those careers [like in libraries].

( Participant C)

Conclusion

This article has discussed many factors as to why there have been so few Aboriginal peoples working in the field of librarianship in Canada. It has incorporated material from several sources, such as many thoughts in this regard by people interviewed during a research project, concepts surrounding Indigenous librarianship put forward by other researchers as well as some of my own thoughts. After all is said and done, the message that librarianship can be a good career for Aboriginal peoples has surfaced. This is my way of advocating for more Indigenous

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librarians in Canada and it is my way of shouting out: "This is a profession that is out there! That Aboriginal peoples can make a living at and that will help their communities!" A number of us have already retired and there are others who may do so within the next five years or so. We need others to help take up the torch for Indigenous librarianship as there is a lot of work to do in order to convince our communities that library and cultural preservation skills are essential skills, skills that will help us in our efforts to self-actualize and to become self-determined. In urban centres, we need to help make mainstream libraries a more welcoming place for our people, to build culturally relevant collections, to help our people gain research skills, and to guide the process of digitizing cultural heritage in ways that respect cultural protocols. I hope that this paper has convinced you and others to think about it, and act on it. Like your Auntie, I need to be bossy! Tell your Aboriginal students; tell the career counsellors and the Indigenous career fair organizers, that librarianship is a possible career choice. Tell them to read this article, tell your families. Spread the word far and wide that Indigenous librarians are absolutely needed for knowledge-making and knowledge-keeping in the 21st Century!

Acknowledgements / Kinanaskomitin

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Notes

1. The terms Aboriginal peoples and Indigenous are used interchangeably. Aboriginal peoples refers to those First Nations, Inuit and Métis people as outlined in Section 35(2) of the Canadian Constitution. The term Indigenous follows United Nations work to denote First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples as the first inhabitants of this (Canadian) geographic space and acknowledge the geographical, political, spiritual and social connection Indigenous peoples have with the land.

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