

The calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) have challenged all Canadian institutions to question and change, especially public institutions like public libraries and universities. These challenges are especially resonant in Thunder Bay, where several recent inquests, books and media investigations have revealed profound racism against Indigenous people. However, while these factors have led to a welcome interest in questions of systemic racism, colonialism, genocide, and while predominantly non-Indigenous institutions appear keen to adopt an approach towards "reconciliation" it is our belief that more is necessary.

While "reconciliation" focuses on the past, it is vital to see (settler) colonialism as an ongoing process of dispossession and oppression against Indigenous people. While most people agree that racism is unacceptable, few understand the way racism operates beyond the beliefs, behaviours and ideas of individuals but also functions in systemic, institutional and structural ways. And while the word decolonization is heard widely today to refer to all sorts of programs, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang make clear, decolonization is not a metaphor: it must mean the repatriation or, better rematriation, of stolen lands.

What is Rematriation?

By "rematriate" we mean "give back," but unlike the legal term "repatriate," which signifies a simple transfer of ownership, "rematriate" means something more profound: a restoration of right relationships and a true action of decolonization, aimed not just at righting a past wrong but transforming our collective future.

Library Rematriation Project

This two year collaboration between The Thunder Bay Public Library (TBPL) and The Re-Imagining Value Action Lab (RiVAL) aims to open up public imagination and to grow political literacy about Indigenous rights, land, "public institutions" and the potential benefits of "decolonization" for all people. The project was proposed in relation to The TBPL's 2019-2023 Strategic Plan, which made "decolonizing the library" and "challenging institutional and systemic racism" key strategic objectives, in parallel with its core mandate of being an inclusive community hub.

Starting in early 2020, our work begins by meeting with local groups, institutions and individuals to discuss and receive feedback on this project. Further work includes interdisciplinary research-creation, which employs methods including Indigenous forms of inquiry and reflection, academic research and creative/artistic engagement, with a focus on generating a body of collective wisdom and public awareness that might, eventually, lead to policies, protocols and practices of rematriation: the "giving back" of the stolen land on which the TBPL now rests in ways that encourage, expand and enrich the TBPL's core mandate, now in right relation with the land, with the treaties, and with sovereign Indigenous peoples.

What is going to happen?

First, three research projects by local graduate students that respond to questions including: what are precedents for the repatriation of land to Indigenous communities in the territories we currently call Canada? How is repatriation different from repatriation? What are the legal barriers and possibilities for repatriation? What are Anishinaabe perspectives on repatriation? How might such a plan be expressed to non-Indigenous people in Thunder Bay? How could repatriation benefit everyone in the long term? Where does repatriation fit within various visions of decolonization?

Next, is a series of art and public engagement aimed at awakening the radical imagination. We believe the most important dimension of this project is to build new relationships and ways of thinking and feeling. To this end, we are planning to hold workshops and consultations with the Indigenous and non-Indigenous library patrons and staff, learn from elders and youth, and challenge ourselves and the community at large to dream big.

What would it mean for the library to return the land

Goals

1. To build good relationships between many communities based on honesty, respect, & learning
2. To develop a thriving conversation with & between communities about pathways to repatriation
3. To develop research and wisdom that might inform the production of policy for the TBPL, the City of Thunder Bay and other bodies towards repatriation



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Who are we?

Our team includes Max Haiven, (Canada Research Chair in Culture, Media and Social Justice at Lakehead University), Cassie Thornton (a participatory and community artist), Sam Martin-Bird (Indigenous Relationships Supervisor at the TBPL), Robyn Medicine (Indigenous Liaison at the TBPL), Adar Charleton (post-doctoral fellow at the University of Manitoba), Matthew Benoit (graduate student at LU) and Liz Ward (graduate student at LU). RiVAL is a workshop for the radical imagination, social justice and decolonization based at Lakehead University and active around the world.

to the Anishinaabe people?

on which its branches sit