Reconciliation Framework: Response to the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce

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Released in February 2022, the Reconciliation Framework is designed for non-Indigenous archivists in Canada who manage Indigenous holdings in their repositories, from acquisitions to outreach and all processes in-between. The document positions itself well amongst other related international standards that advocate for a reciprocal, ongoing relationship between archival institutions and the Indigenous communities they purport to represent and serve. The journey to final publication reaches back not only years and decades but also centuries, considering it was borne out of the aftermath of the terrible history of residential schools in North America. Recent formal calls to action demanded redress through equal parts respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. This new framework provides archivists with additional tools to begin difficult conversations and engage in hard (but rewarding) work of participating in this critical reconciliation process.

Background

There are many similarities between Canada and the United States. Both countries share a wide range of social, cultural, linguistic, political, and economic partnerships. They are divided by the world's longest undefended international border. Their histories are also significantly intertwined, most notably in the indefensible deployment of residential schools and the impact these had for Indigenous children and their families in both countries. This dark and painful history has resulted in a linguistic and cultural gap that significantly impedes the transmission of language and knowledge to future generations. Shockingly, the last of Canada's 139 residential schools only closed in 1998.

Though both countries are reckoning with this cultural genocide, the Canadian government has arguably demonstrated more accountability toward redressing this history than its southern neighbor. In 2008, as one of the mandated aspects of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement,[1] a $60 million budget (CAD) was

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[1] Canada, Plaintiffs, Independent Counsel, Assembly of First Nations and Inuit Representatives, General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, the Presbyterian Church of Canada, the United Church of Canada, and Roman Catholic Entities, *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*,

allocated to establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). From 2008 to 2015, the TRC's primary purpose was to document the history and lasting impacts of the Canadian residential school system among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students and their families. Residential school survivors shared their experiences in both public and private settings, with the TRC leveraging and publicizing these stories openly to all Canadians in an effort to expose the injustices imposed on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples by the Canadian government and the Catholic, Anglican, United, and Presbyterian Churches. Also in 2008, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly apologized for the government's role in the residential school system; Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau followed suit in 2017. More recently, in January 2022, Canada announced two agreements totaling $40 billion (CAD) to compensate First Nations children who were taken from their families. While these actions are a positive step forward, critics continue to point out the TRC's singular focus on redress and reconciliation for the history of the residential school system, while ignoring the broader impacts of colonialism on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

In June 2015, the TRC released a summary report of its findings along with 94 Calls to Action to redress this history and advance a reconciliation process. These calls were divided into two categories: "Legacy" and "Reconciliation." Whereas the "Legacy" section focuses on redressing harms (including in the areas of child welfare, education, language and culture, health, and justice), the "Reconciliation" section focuses on fostering better relationships between all levels of government (federal, provincial, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis). The "Reconciliation" section is further divided into 17 subsections and associated actions. Of these, the library and archives community paid close attention to a specific subsection, "Museums and archives," as it dovetailed with Call to Action #70, which urged the "Canadian Association of Archivists" to undertake, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, a national review of archival policies and best practices to:

- "Determine the level of compliance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the United Nations Joinet-Orentlicher Principles, as related to Aboriginal peoples' inalienable right to know the truth about what happened and why, with regard to human rights violations committed against them in residential schools."
- "Produce a report with recommendations for full implementation of these international mechanisms as a reconciliation framework for Canadian archives."[2]

Although the authors of the Calls to Action seemingly confused Canada's official Association of Canadian Archivists with a slightly reworded Canadian Association of

Residential Schools Settlement Official Court Notice, May 2006, https://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/settlement.html.

[2] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 12.

Archivists, this lapse benefited the work of the soon-to-be-created Steering Committee on Canada's Archives. The Committee was comprised of representatives from the Canadian Council of Archives, the Association of Canadian Archivists, Library and Archives Canada, l'Association des Archivistes du Québec, and the Council of Provincial and Territorial Archivists, and in 2015, the group established the Response to the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce (TRC-TF). Over the next five years, the TRC-TF spoke with non-Indigenous, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit professionals and citizens to investigate current archival practices and learn more about how current archival theory and practice promulgated colonial practices and restrictive access frameworks. Researchers then developed specific, scalable actions that could be implemented to challenge existing archival practices and, more specifically, could encourage greater collaborations between repositories and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities represented therein. **As such, the resulting Reconciliation Framework's core audience is archivists who work outside of Indigenous communities but nonetheless find themselves tasked with managing (e.g., processing, preserving, and providing access to) archival resources created by or about Indigenous communities.**

Key Principles and Objectives

In the preface to the framework, the authors rightfully drive home a critical message: "Canada's archival communities must respect First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples' intellectual sovereignty over archival materials created by or about them" (p. 8). Further, the authors note that the framework must be viewed as a living document: "Once objectives have been actualized and assessed; First Nations, Inuit, and Métis priorities and protocols have been identified and integrated into professional practices and policies; and respectful relationship building has begun, revisions and updates to this framework will be required to keep its relevance and efficacy intact and to ensure that today's collective action will effect real systemic change in the Canadian archives profession" (p. 8). The authors then acknowledge other national and international declarations, commissions, protocols, and principles that informed their work, including (but not limited to) the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network Inc.'s *Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services* (1995)[3]; the First Archivists Circle's *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* (2006)[4]; and the Canadian Federation of Library Associations/Fédération Canadienne des Associations de Bibliothèques, Indigenous Matters Committee's *Truth and Reconciliation Report and Recommendations* (2017).[5]

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[3] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network Inc., *Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services*, 1995, https://atsilirn.aiatsis.gov.au/protocols.php.
[4] First Archivist Circle, *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*, 2006, https://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p.
[5] Canadian Federation of Library Associations/ Fédération Canadienne des Associations de Bibliothèques Truth and Reconciliation Committee, *Truth and Reconciliation Report and Recommendations*, 2017, https://cfla-fcab.ca/en/indigenous/trc_report.

Guiding the reconciliation process are eight principles, which the authors suggest revisiting as the reconciliation landscape evolves:

1. Acknowledgment that Indigenous peoples are distinct and comprise sovereign Nations
2. Ongoing commitment to the work of the TRC (i.e., truth telling) and to the Calls to Action
3. Acknowledgment of the harm done by the Canadian archival community
4. A commitment to reconciliation-based archival practice
5. Acknowledgement of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis knowledge frameworks
6. Understanding that collaborative and participatory descriptive work is integral to reconciliation
7. Engagement with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis community priorities
8. Recognition of ongoing human and financial resources to do this work

These principles surround and support a series of seven focused objectives:

Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility (the Four Rs)
The authors underpin subsequent reconciliation objectives and strategies with a focus on relationship building, using the Four Rs to serve as foundational tools for success. The authors, informed by their years of research and conversation with impacted communities, offer several strategies and tasks to support this primary objective. Examples included in this section focus on prioritized and sustained outreach and engagement, pre-engagement research, tips for meetings with communities, and the development of collaborative resource sharing to support relationship-building between communities and Canadian archives.

Governance and Management Structures
This objective asks library and archives leaders to provide their organizations with the necessary resources to accomplish reconciliation work. This includes advocacy for sustainable financial efforts; embedding First Nations, Inuit, and Métis partnerships in decision-making; the creation of culturally relevant policies and procedures for all archival tasks; and investigation of human resources practices that have traditionally prevented First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples from securing employment in the field.

Professional Practice
This objective asks archival professionals to dig deep, acknowledge the colonial practices found in all areas of archival practice, and commit to doing better. Among its specific strategies are an encouragement to actively involve First Nations, Inuit, and Métis archivists and memory workers in the work of Canadian archival associations. Positioned under the umbrella of trauma-informed care, the authors emphasize the need to support networks for trauma-informed archival practice. Finally, the authors provide a number of

tasks that can be undertaken to support greater education and advocacy led by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.

Ownership, Control, and Possession
The authors ask the Canadian archival community to respect and defend First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples' intellectual sovereignty over materials created by or about them. Specific strategies call attention to the shortsightedness of copyright laws that do not translate well into the management of Traditional Knowledge or "TK" (defined as "knowledge, know-how, skills and practices that are developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural or spiritual identity"[6]) and Traditional Cultural Expressions or "TCE" (e.g., music, dance, art). Another strategy asks for a thorough evaluation of the contextual acquisition of TK and TCE, and the consideration of myriad approaches to the ongoing management of materials, including deaccessioning or the collaborative development of culturally appropriate standards of care.

Access
The framework pushes for a more proactive form of access rather than a reliance on passive tools for communities to discover pertinent resources. A key strategy involves informing First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities about holdings that pertain to them; developing access protocols for users who may wish to access (or use) items with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis affiliation; and helping provide resources to assist First Nations, Inuit, and Métis researchers who would otherwise face notable barriers to access.

Arrangement and Description
The authors encourage the inclusion of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis vocabularies, taxonomies, and languages in descriptive practices. In fact, this objective includes several pages each for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples that focus on traditional names and when it is most appropriate to apply them to a descriptive record. The authors recommend retaining historical (often pejorative) descriptions that can run in parallel with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis-led contributions. Among other notable strategies is a focused effort on the development of new standards or revisions to the *Rules for Archival Description*, the Canadian archival community's equivalent to *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*.

Education
Lastly, the authors encourage the deployment of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis educators to teach about community-embedded archival materials and build an interdisciplinary curricular model that addresses the needs of First

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[6] World Intellectual Property Organization, "Traditional Knowledge," *Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property*, WIPO, accessed June 20, 2022, https://www.wipo.int/tk/en/tk.

Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. Another strategy seeks to aid in the expansion of education delivery options.

If the over 100 specific suggested tasks (several with additional sub-bulleted suggestions) nested within the seven objectives weren't enough, the Reconciliation Framework concludes with a helpful "Challenges Encountered, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations" section to help those seeking to implement some of the strategies identified to understand where the taskforce had limitations to their work. A helpful "Glossary and Terminology" section defines important terms that might not be familiar to non-Canadian audiences. Finally, an FAQ section and extensive bibliography conclude the document.

Analysis and Relationship to the Protocols

Many of our United States colleagues, particularly members of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), will immediately think of this document and its functional similarity to the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*, released by an independent group of mostly American (some Indigenous) authors known as the First Archivist Circle. Published in 2006, the Protocols were almost immediately met with concern and criticism, most notably articulated in the 2008 SAA Task Force to Review the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*.[7] Regardless, a long period of quiet adoption and endorsement of the *Protocols* (by many, including some Canadian archives) has taken place ever since they were first published. Formal endorsement by SAA did not happen until 2018.[8]

Significant and notable shifts have taken place in the archival field over the past two decades, and while some of the specific proposed strategies may continue to be met with some discomfort, it is not anticipated that the membership of the Association of Canadian Archivists will react as strongly to the *Reconciliation Framework* as the SAA did to the *Protocols* fourteen years ago. The *Reconciliation Framework* is the product of a purposeful, mission-driven, formal governmental call to action in response to a specific collective trauma, whereas the *Protocols* was a bottom-up grassroots effort by a volunteer group of committed archivists who saw a need to more broadly shift the way archivists engage with Indigenous communities.

In many ways, perhaps the drafters of the *Protocols* (and earlier efforts) paved the way to allow for more widespread acceptance of the *Reconciliation Framework*. Or maybe the passage of time and a new generation of memory workers—fueled by their commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, some of whom are members of underserved communities—have moved the needle. Published just

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[7] Task Force to Review Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, *Report*, Society of American Archivists Council Meeting, February 2008, http://files.archivists.org/governance/taskforces/0208-NativeAmProtocols-IIIA.pdf.

[8] Society of American Archivists Council, "SAA Council Endorsement of Protocols for Native American Archival Materials," *SAA Statement*, August 2018, https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-council-endorsement-of-protocols-for-native-american-archival-materials.

months before the *Reconciliation Framework* was released, Greg Bak details the broader impact of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its Calls to Action in an article for the *American Archivist*. Bak implores archivists to renew a "social license" when collecting (or documenting) and preserving problematic histories that require multiple perspectives (public, private, individual, collective) to more faithfully capture and combat inaccuracy and bias in the dominant record. Bak argues that the archival profession has already witnessed significant evolution in traditional archival practices over the past few decades and that now is the time to recommit to these efforts. Revisiting archival theorist Helen Samuels' 1980s–early 1990s "documentation strategy," Bak supports archival decolonization by encouraging archivists to "accept that archival theory was influenced by the same modernist drive to totalizing power that produced total institutions, fascism, and colonialism. Archival decolonization should recognize the legitimacy, and in some cases the primacy, of other systems of social memory . . . in managing the archives of racialized, minoritized, or otherwise 'othered' communities."[9] Indeed, the authors of the *Framework* identify at least two principles that best articulate the genuine and purposeful role of reconciliation work and archival decolonization: committing to broadly documenting truth, especially against conscious and unconscious (or systemic) forms of oppression (Principles 2 and 3, p. 18); and committing to reconciliation-based archival work (Principle 4, p. 19).

Scalability
If genuine and purposeful reconciliation is to take place, archivists need a blueprint from which actionable items can be identified and implemented. The *Reconciliation Framework* and other related tools (e.g., the *Protocols*) are lenses through which core archival functions and practices (long held as the gold standard within an institution and the broader profession) could and should be reexamined. Archivists should not look at the *Framework* and immediately feel pressure to implement every item at their institution. Rather, commitment to one or a small handful of the suggestions are a tangible way to examine the visible and invisible barriers that are present in one's own institutions that prevent further action. Starting on a smaller scale may even identify unconscious biases that guide fuller, more wide-scale implementation for individuals tasked with the work.

For example, consider Strategy 5.1.1: "Identify all archival materials created by or about First Nations, Inuit, and Métis governments, communities, or individuals, and promote awareness of their existence and availability to those who are documented in them" (p. 45). This may be the first time an archival institution has communicated with these communities; an understanding of where one's intent may conflict with the impact it makes to those receiving this information is critical.[10] There may be content in these records an institution may want to share (intent) that might not be

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[9] Greg Bak, "Counterweight: Helen Samuels, Archival Decolonization, and Social License," *American Archivist* 84, no. 2 (2021): 435, https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-84.2.420.
[10] Taneasha White, "How Intent and Impact Differ and Why It Matters," *Healthline*, April 2021, https://www.healthline.com/health/intent-vs-impact.

appropriate for specific individuals to receive (impact). The authors of the *Framework* expertly caution about this unintended harm and include several strategies centered around trauma-informed archival practice (Objective 3.3; pp. 37–38) that can help facilitate better communication between institutions and Indigenous communities. Respectful communication and best practices for more effective communication are woven throughout the *Framework*, giving excellent advice to anybody seeking to implement one or more strategies recommended within.

The authors devote an entire section (Objective 2: Governance and Management Structures) to ways in which a leadership-driven, top-down approach to this reconciliation work is particularly efficacious in implementing structural changes to the work archivists do. However, the *Framework* also speaks directly to individuals working within oppressive systems who wish to champion these efforts from the bottom-up. Indeed, these grassroots efforts are how the *Protocols* were first established and is why the *Framework* must necessarily speak to more grassroots efforts. Whether an archivist is working in a small, private nonprofit or they are employed as part of a team in a large governmental archive, the *Framework* is accessible to anybody with the appropriate intent who is open to regular feedback about their short and long-term impacts with this type of reconciliation work.

Finally, it must be noted that scalability and implementation of the *Framework* extends beyond the boundaries of the Canadian border and is a set of best practices that can be easily implemented in the United States (and beyond). As evidenced by widespread adoption of the *Protocols* over the past sixteen years, implementation within each institution is necessarily different and dependent on the context in which the institution functions and collaborates with its Indigenous neighbors. Having more than one blueprint available to archivists as we collectively strive for the goals of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility with Indigenous colleagues and communities is the most important thing we can do as we work toward genuine archival reconciliation.