

Unsettling the public library: A conversation on decolonization with anthropologist Kieran Way
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Aaniin, Boozhoo Samantha nitishinikaas Peguis First Nation nitoonci. Hi, my name is Samantha and I'm from Peguis. I'm Anishinaabe and Swiss German. And I work here at the Thunder Bay Public Library as the Indigenous Relationship Supervisor. And I'm sitting here with Kieran Way.

Kieran way (K.W.)

Hi there, my name is Kieran Way. I am an anthropology student at the University of Cambridge in the Department of Social Anthropology. I'm here in Thunder Bay at the public library to do a study for my dissertation. And fundamentally, the research is on how decolonization manifests at a place like the Thunder Bay Public Library. I wasn't always in Anthropology. My background is actually development studies and social policy and so I've worked overseas, I've worked in India, I've worked in Cambodia. And I think one of the most interesting things for me when I was working in the NGO sphere was coming across good intentions, well-intentioned professionals who are trying to solve some of the world's most intractable issues but constantly facing this dilemma of good intentions persisting in the face of resistance, in the face of failure and it was interesting for me to try and untangle how good intentions can persist when those intentions so consistently fail to realize the objectives that they set out to realize.

S.M-B.

And so how exactly did you transition from international development sector into working with the Indigenous-settler stuff?

K.W.

I wanted to understand that contradiction between good intentions and the persistence of failure. And there are a lot of anthropologists who write on the NGO space and I found that the way that anthropologists, because of their method, work through their studies of any type of social life to be the most compelling because they were able to sort of dwell on the, the complexities of social life, of the challenges that things like NGOs or spaces like the Thunder Bay Library are trying to address. And I didn't feel as though other disciplines that I'd been part of were equally as well equipped, especially methodologically, to try and develop a really detailed understanding of some of the things I was interested in. So that kind of caused me to shift over toward anthropology as a discipline.

But I also recognized that within what people were, were writing on in the discipline of anthropology, there was a tendency to study down so studying community didn't possess much power. And there was a inclination therefore to avoid studying up. To looking at or examining institutions through which things like colonial power manifest. And there was especially a bit of a gap when it came to studying how settler colonial institutions in a place like Canada operated and articulated their power. That's sort of

where the seed of my interest originates from. But then I was, I was looking for an institution that was also very much committed to decolonizing itself.

There was an article written by Tanya Talaga, I mean she's a very prominent Indigenous writer, Indigenous activist in Canada. She had written an article on the TBPL and it was in the Toronto Star and I actually got a photograph of the article sent to me, to my phone in Cambridge by my mother. She had read the article over her morning coffee and she knew that I was interested in how sort of public institutions are trying to think through something like decolonization and reconciliation. The fact that Tanya Talaga had identified the TBPL as a space that was doing worthwhile work, it was imperfect but there was still something important that was happening in Thunder Bay. That kind of struck my interest. And so I reached out to the staff here but I wanted to also make sure, as a non-Indigenous researcher, it, I was doing field work on decolonization that the Indigenous stakeholders of the library were also on board with the research.

I know you looked over my proposal and it was, in fact, it was critical to me that if there Indigenous staff at the library, if there were Indigenous communities who were stakeholders to the library, that they were comfortable with me arriving here and trying to understand what the library was trying to do through their eyes because I think that any Indigenous person also has, it's well within their right to refuse the gaze of a researcher.

That sort of double approval of somebody like Tanya Talaga identifying the TBPL as an interesting for working through some of these complexities related to decolonization and also the willingness on the part of someone like you and other Indigenous staff members here at the library, that was quite important to me from the outset.

S.M-B.

So from what I understand when you began your research process, your intent was to focus on how do non-Indigenous people conceive decolonization is at work in the library and how are they participating in that. And then since getting here at Thunder Bay, how has your research process evolved?

K.W.

My focus was originally on non-Indigenous staff members.

S.M-B.

To go back to what you were saying about how historically the field of anthropology was about studying down, by studying down you mean like studying those with less power and privilege than the researcher?

K.W.

Exactly.

S.M-B.

And then what you were attracted to was flipping that and studying those that have the same power and privilege as you or more?

Yeah, as is often the case at a settler-colonial institution like the TBPL, it's white people who have institutional power, it's white people who sit in the directors' chairs, it's white people who are the chief librarians, the mayors, the chiefs of police. So it's incumbent upon non-Indigenous researchers in Canada, if they're interested in decolonization, to really engage critically with how other non-Indigenous people in positions of power are wielding that influence and are thinking through things like decolonization. I also didn't want to make the assumption that ah I had the right to come in and work with or collaborate with Indigenous staff because anthropology is a discipline that has a number of ideals towards it strives. It's a study in what makes us human but there's also a checkered past within the discipline of anthropology. It is a fundamentally colonial discipline and it's also a discipline that therefore that does not have the best track record when it comes to working collaboratively with Indigenous peoples.

And so it was really important to me that I built a relationship with any Indigenous staff or any Indigenous stakeholders before I presumed that they would be willing to work with me on my research project. Ultimately, as you said, my research approach has sort of been unsettled through my time here and that's been mostly due to the fact that yourself and Robyn have been very willing to sit down with me and it's been incredibly useful to try and understand what the library is doing as much as I can through your eyes and through your knowledge so that I can really put the ambitions of the library into critical conversation with your perspective on what is required for an institution like the TBPL to decolonize itself.

S.M-B.

Ah, one of the things that we've sort of talked in that is the term decolonization. Do you want to talk a little bit about like how you conceived of that term before getting here in an academic sense and then maybe how its been challenged since doing your research here?

K.W.

I think that in preparation for being here, as much as possible, I read work on decolonization by Indigenous scholars and indigenous activists. The works of people like Glen Coulthard, Leanne Simpson, Audra Simpson, and a number of other Indigenous scholars in Canada have been really informative when it comes to designing my research. At the same time, I recognize that there could be a disconnect between how academics write about decolonization and how decolonization is understood at the ground level. I mean, anthropologists, they try to work from the ground up and if they're going to build theory, they try to build through the context that they're working in, they try to situate their work locally. And so although I was very interested in keeping this work on decolonization in the back of my mind, I also didn't want to assume that there would be a symmetry between what I had read on decolonization and what I would find at the library.

And so I think that also, that embrace of uncertainty is something that comes from the literature on decolonization. I don't think that I have the right as a non-Indigenous scholar to demarcate what constitutes decolonization but I do think it is incumbent on all non-Indigenous researchers to commit themselves to a what will be uncomfortable embrace of unlearning, of uncertainty and of openness to a future of many unknowns. And it was really interesting because I had come to TBPL with the intent of framing everything through the lens of decolonization. I know that we had a chat one evening about some of the discomfort that you had with the concept of decolonization. That's one of the ways which I had to sort of confront a presumption that I had arrived, had to necessarily had to be unsettled and open to other ways of looking at things. You had a different understanding of the work that you were trying to do here at the library that maybe wasn't captured by decolonization.

S.M-B.

Yeah, I think that in the thick of my work here at the library, what's at the forefront of my mind is not decolonization. Not that I'm necessarily against decolonization. I have a whole degree in Indigenous Studies and we talked about it a lot and that's sort of the language of our action plan is about decolonization of the library. What I'm trying to do at the library as the Indigenous Librarian is kind of go beyond just decolonization, figure out, "What does it mean to be *anishinaabe kwe* in this space?" and to make it a space that is increasingly moving towards becoming a safe space for Anishinaabeg. There's so many layers to that. Part of that means at the Thunder Bay Public Library we've placed all the Indigenous authored, and the Indigenous-themed content into one area, which right now is being called the Indigenous Knowledge Centre, until we can come up with an appropriate name for it in Anishinabemowin.

Part of like creating safe space means I want to make that space look as aesthetically pleasing and in general, like create an atmosphere that is conducive towards like Anishinabe people wanting to be at the library. Recently, I had a local Indigenous artist paint some of the shelves. I knew that I could not be trusted to know about like which colours would look best. I just knew to find an artist. She did an amazing job and so now there's this really great space for us to like feature new Indigenous content or if we want feature things like themes as well. That's part of the work.

But then also for me, when I think about decolonization more, I'm thinking about just like being Anishinabe in this space. It means creating community. The library is, is like transitioning itself from being like a traditional library to being a community hub. For me, like that's all about community building and so for instance at the end of July we're hosting our first, assuming it's the first, the first one I am hosting at least [they laugh], Indigenous book club, which I'm like super excited for because we're already registered to like max capacity. We're going to be reading #Indianlovepoems by Tenille Campbell. And it's great because I've only invited Indigenous people and Tenille's Dené and Métis so it's Indigenous content. And I'm just really excited for the atmosphere, space, community, that is going like be a part of like what that evening will entail.

And I'm also really excited for what we'll see, like going forward, the possibilities of more relationships like with the men and women that come. It will be like two sides of the same coin. That just inherently decolonizing like a space that is otherwise quite colonial but it's not the way I'm thinking about when I'm going into it. It's more about how do I create community for Anishinabe women around Indigenous literature.

K.W.

I think what you're saying is really important because what it articulates is that non-Indigenous people, even in a space like the library, you know, historically libraries have been imagined as these epitomes of democratic space that are open to all. But I think that what you're suggesting is that even within spaces such as the library, it's important to also carve out space that non-indigenous people don't have an entitlement to access.

S.M-B.

Yeah, I know, it sort of unnerves white people, you know, when you tell them they're not welcome to a particular space [laughs]. But you kind of have to because there are some ways that a neutral space can be inherently privileging towards particular people, i.e., like white people. And so by, by hosting a program and saying like, pretty much if you're not Indigenous you're not really welcome into the space. The point of that is to create safe space for Indigenous people that would not exist in a neutral space. Whereas the sort of the neutral space of the library is quite safe for white people in particular. And so that's kind of like the thinking behind doing it in this way.

And I've had really positive feedback from the people who have registered because I've had people who have registered who've said like, "Hey can I bring a friend along with me?" Like asking like "Well, are like are they Indigenous?" [laughs] and they're like "Yeah" but they've been really supportive, they're like, "Oh I hope it continues to be this way." [Laughs] Because I, I think I phrased it at one point like "We're just going to keep it Indigenous only for now." And they're like, "Let's keep it that way." [Laughs.]

K.W.

From a lot of the conversations that I've had, historically maybe the TBPL hasn't been the most welcoming space to Indigenous people.

S.M-B.

That's such a divisive thing to say because you'll have staff who say, "Well, we've always been welcoming." Like it raises a question mark. Book clubs are this thriving industry in Thunder Bay. For whom are they thriving? Maybe there are secretly like tons of Indigenous book clubs out there that I just don't know about but my impression is that the books clubs that Thunder Bay Public Library makes available to patrons, like are being used predominantly non-Indigenous folks. Yeah, it raises a question about whether or not people are, staff, are being mindful of how to best recruit Indigenous people. Like, that was what I was hired to do so I'm going to try to do that but I think that it's not everyone.

K.W.

One thing that's struck me about being here is for a non-Indigenous person who on a daily basis, they typically never encounter a space that they're not welcome in. And there can be some apprehension around having a boundary drawn. A space they would like to enter but someone's telling them can't and.

S.M-B.

Yeah, I know so they get like, a little taste of what it's like for, for racialized folks [laughs].

K.W.

What, what I have learned while I've been here is that it's important if, if you have that reaction, that apprehension and you feel unsettled by suddenly not having access to something, sit down and have a conversation with the person who has created that space and ask them why it's important.

S.M-B.

To kind of explain more fully like why we're doing it this way, it's because the nature of the conversations will be totally different. If non-indigenous or even a mixed group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are gathered around a text, the content of the conversation, the atmosphere in that room is going to be completely different than if it's all Indigenous folks. For instance, when non-Indigenous people gather around an Indigenous text, the conversation could quickly turn to like "Oh, I never things were this bad," or "I was just really grieved [laughs] by what I've learned", so there's a lot of shock and a lot of hurt, which is just not new information for the Indigenous reader and so the Indigenous reader can encounter the text and get a totally different experience out of the book. And in particular, like if I think about Tenille's book, she talks a lot about the politics and the drama sometimes, around dating Indigenous, non-Indigenous, white, Asian, black, fancy brown, like south Asians or like Middle Eastern people [laughs].

And so for Indigenous people to talk about what does it mean as an Anishinaabe person, for me to be in a romantic relationship with someone who's not Indigenous. That conversation looks totally different when there are white people in the room because when there's non-indigenous folks in the room, they can take it as a personal attack and what's a really complicated process because of the *Indian Act*, because of how status works, because of community and identity, it can appear to non-indigenous folks as being racist or [laughs] discriminatory when that's actually like not at all what it's about. It's more about in relationships, finding someone in whom you feel like safe and comfortable. And culture and land and place like plays into that so much so in a way that non-Indigenous folks do not understand.

It's okay that they don't understand, I, I just think that when they're in the room it means the conversation then becomes about educating them on like, what does it mean that I'm a 6.2 under the Indian Act and how does that affect like the prospects for like, well, procreating with you [laughs]. I don't always want to be like in teacher mode.

K.W.

Rather than taking it as an attack, when you hear what you've just outlined, it's very compelling and you, you start to understand why spaces like this are valued. I think it's just important to listen before judging in [Samantha: yeah] situations that one might encounter through the creation of spaces like your book club.

S.M-B.

We have a potential partnership in the works with a college that may end up donating a bunch of like furniture to the library. But part of that process will be to have their students like learn about Anishinaabe culture and the culture of the library in order that they can design furniture that would best uh suit our needs. And so, I remember when we were in the conversation with the college about what some of that might look like logistically, I was thinking immediately that in order for these college students to really begin to grasp our experience, we would have to have land-based activities. You'd only get a surface level understanding of Anishinaabe culture, land, identity by being in a, in a classroom [laughs] and by doing like a brainstorming session, you're only going to get a kind of surface level understanding because I think that a lot of what it means to be Anishinaabe means to be connected to a particular place and land. Not to say that those who are displaced from land are like less Anishinaabe but I think that connection to land is quite important. And then so for here in particular, I think that means like connection to lakes. Like being on the north shore of Lake Superior.

I remember like when we were in conversation with the college I was thinking about this time last summer when we went on a canoe trip just north of the city and I had just moved to Thunder Bay. Before that, I had spent three years in Saskatchewan, and when I first moved to Saskatchewan, like people who are not from the prairies, will understand. They're like, when you first get to the prairies, it's very like unnerving [laughs] and I did a lot of road trips. Just in the beginning, I found it a bit scary, I felt very exposed but after three years, there's a way in which the land, like gets in you and it's like the preferred way [laughs]. I remember like after being in Regina for a couple of years, I spent a summer in southern Ontario, and I, I didn't like how there was no place to go to the horizon. And the closest thing you could really get to horizon in the prairies is by like being on a lake.

Anyway, so I was like on this canoe trip and I was reflecting upon how like the land, of being in the prairies, of being in like Treaty 4 and like Treaty 6 territory, gets in you. I was thinking about that as I was, I was like praying the morning that we landed on this little, like little island, how we camped out. And then in the morning, I was offering tobacco on lake and then I had this gut feeling of oh I feel the way in which the land in Saskatchewan like got in me, I feel like that's how it's going to be here like with the lakes. Like, I think that being connected to water is going to be what it means to live in this territory in a good way. I think I'm still figuring out what does that mean for the library, which is like in a building [laughs] in the city. But I think that for the very least, what I hope is that is that with this potential partnership with the college, when their students come up, that we'll do like land-based activities, like snowshoeing or cross

country skiing or stuff that gets them out on the land so that they can like begin to get it. Place and land is so, so central like to what it means to be Anishinaabe.

K.W.

Are, are there other ways that you've thought through that connection to land at TBPL or you've tried to foster knowledge of land or [Samantha: Ah] particular relationship to land for the creation of particular things like the Indigenous Knowledge Centre?

S.M-B.

What I would like to do is do off-site programming. One of the things I was thinking about for the book club meeting that we're having at the end of the month, we're hosting it in, in one of the library branches but I kind of feel like it's a waste to be meeting inside, like I think we should be like meeting on Mount McKay or like, that's a sacred mountain nearby, or somewhere on the land. I think just being on the land, being in those conversations would be great but then it's sort of it's hard because if I host things in the library, then it helps our stats right? So anytime someone walks through the door, like that counts as a visit to the library. And if they're in the library, and they're here for book club, then there's a greater chance that they'll check out more content from the library and so that helps our stats.

K.W.

So it sounds like decolonizing the library is also rethinking how we imagine impact or imagine participation at the library.

S.M-B.

That's sort of the stats of like, whoever shows up that night, if it's off site it still counts as like off site stats. But what it doesn't get, like it doesn't build their with coming to the library cause the sort of people that I've invited are not, are not like regular library users. If I want them to become regular library users, but we're meeting not in the library, then it won't happen right away.

K.W.

There was a conversation that I was having with one member of Indigenous staff with the AETS, the organization that you partner with. And ...

S.M-B.

So AETS is like the Anishinaabeg Employment and Training Services organization that is one of our strategic partners and they are in our, in the library space.

K.W.

Yeah, and I was walking through the hallways of their space and we walked around the corner and suddenly I was hit in the face with the smell of smoke and I saw a deer hide lying ...

S.M-B.

Oh that sort of smoke [laughs].

K.W.

Lying on the table at a staff event or a staff gathering from earlier in the week and the staff member was talking to me about how even in the office space, having that deer hide present on the table on a sensorial level connected back to land. And so I just thought as a non-Indigenous person it was a very unfamiliar smell to encounter in a very quote unquote “professional” space but I thought it was a really interesting way of perhaps bringing land or a connection to land into a typically settler colonial and also professional space and, and trying to ensure that that relationship is maintained somehow.

S.M-B.

Yeah, there are for sure ways you can bring it in. If I had my way, we could like smudge every day but there's like procedure around that right where you need to give like twenty-four, like forty-eight hours notice so that staff who complain about allergies can be redeployed during that time. It's a big inconvenience is the way smudging is, is viewed here. That's kind of frustrating. I've seen other places where it's, it's much more commonplace. I taught for one of my ed internships on a reserve in Saskatchewan at Standing Buffalo and there, they smudge every single day. I don't they do *O Canada* at that school but part of their morning routine is that every student goes for a morning run down to the Fort Qu'Appelle River part and then runs back up to the school and then smudges on their way to their classroom [laughs]. And so it's just so commonplace and daily. But at an institution like the library is seen as sort of a special, extraordinary thing that you need signage and notices about, that's a little frustrating. But there was a time when smudging never happened at the library, right, so there's progress being made.

K.W.

Yeah, it seems like the practice of smudging is happening much more often now than it was in the past. It seems to kind of, I don't know, be a microcosm of a lot of the things that are happening here at TBPL. That momentum seems to be going in the, the right direction.

S.M-B.

Yeah, and another thing I just thought of, for our Indigenous Knowledge Centre, where all the Indigenous content is, the, the non-fiction is labelled like by, by topic heading not just by like Dewey. What we don't actually have is a sub-heading for land. I was trying to place some books into the IKC a while ago and it was sort of challenging because there there's a few that just belong under land and so I think that's something that I'll be working on for sure.

K.W.

One of the interesting things was that I had the opportunity to be a guest at an Indigenous Advisory Council meeting. Maybe you could quickly explain what the IAC does ...

S.M-B.

Yeah, so the Indigenous Advisory Council is a group of amazing Indigenous, mostly Indigenous, volunteers who contribute to their time to like giving us feedback and direction about how we as a library can become a better space for Indigenous communities. It's one of the ways in which we're trying to become more community driven.

K.W.

As evidence of that, it was really interesting to sit in on a meeting where these exact headings or categories were being discussed by the IAC members and they were looking at a list of the headings and categories and really reflecting critically on whether these were the appropriate headings to list content under. So for example, there was a conversation around the heading of legends and whether that was an adequate heading to list all of the content under. And it was interesting, I, I'm not sure if this will be the outcome of the conversation but the IAC members seemed to establish a, a consensus that there was no English word that could really distill what was being held in that section in terms of books or oral histories. So, the decision was made to put forward an Ojibwe word, the Ojibwe word or equivalent, for legends and to use that as the heading rather than an English word. That I see it's really quite committed quite deeply to reviving and preserving the Indigenous languages, especially local Indigenous languages, and so that just, it struck me as a really interesting example how the community that is helping to drive this decolonization process at the library is having sort of a tangible impact on how things like the Indigenous Knowledge Centre are organized.

S.M-B.

For sure. Like, you mentioned how like they're committed to like Indigenous languages like so much so like Robyn, the Indigenous Liaison here, is, is organizing a language gathering for the fall and I think it's only possible because she has so much backing and support from the IAC members, who are really making it happen. This is your first time to the north. As an outsider, from The Beaches in Toronto, what has stood to you about Thunder Bay, about northern Ontario?

K.W.

Well, I've, I've spent a lot of the past five or six years away from Canada so coming here is sort of in a way to return to Canada for me as well. Thunder Bay is, is such a strikingly beautiful place. I think when you fly in to land at the Thunder Bay Airport, it's stunning, it's such an awesome landscape and it's something that growing up in the city you often don't have the privilege to be around on a regular basis. So we've done a couple of hikes in the local area and that's been, that's been really enjoyable for me. Beyond that, as you say, there's this sort of critical gaze that has fallen onto Thunder Bay recently and many people know it's the, it's the oft-cited set of facts that Thunder Bay is the hate crime capital and the murder capital of Canada. That was part of what that made the work that TBPL is doing so interesting to me. How does something, that an Indigenous writer and activist identifies as a worthwhile project, get started and survive in a place like Thunder Bay?

And I think that one of the most interesting things for me beyond what happens at the library on a daily basis has been to talk to some of the Indigenous patrons who use the library. I've talked to them outside, I've talked to them while waiting for the bus and listening to their experience of what it's been like to grow up in a place like Thunder Bay and what it's like to come into a space like the library. My only advice would be that when you hear the charge that Thunder Bay is a racist city or that library is a racist institution or that other spaces in the city are racist institutions, don't take a defensive posture when that's an allegation that's put forward. I think it's similar to what we were talking about in relation to the spaces that you're trying to create here for Indigenous women to sit down and discuss literature.

When someone uses the word racism, they are doing it deliberately and they are doing it because they have a, a certain set of experiences that they have to confront on a daily basis that have had an incredibly deep impact on their well-being, their psyche, and their relationship with places like the Thunder Bay Public Library. And, I think the city is at a stage and the country is at a stage where it has to really seriously shut its mouth when the word racism is raised and stop and listen and do some introspection on how even unintentional behaviours that have developed over time and that have been inculcated through things like the education system, through the media, are invariably perceived as racists by Indigenous folk in Thunder Bay. And I think that moving forward, the city will be a much better place if non-Indigenous people are willing to sit down, shut their mouths and learn about what it's like to be Indigenous in a city like Thunder Bay.

S.M-B.

I think that's a really good note to end on. [Laughs.] I couldn't agree more. [Laughs]. Yeah, chii migwich for sitting down and yeah, sharing with me about your experiences and perspectives here.

K.W.

Yeah, thank you so much for having me.