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Time and the Bibliographer

A Meditation on the Spirit of Book Studies

Matt Cohen

ABSTRACT

In light of the global return of tribalism, racism, nationalism, and religious hypocrisy to power's center stage, it is worth returning to the question of the relevance of bibliography. It is a time when, at least at the seats of power in the United States and some other places, books seem to have become almost meaningless. Bibliographic pioneer D.F. McKenzie's strategy was not to constrain bibliography in self-defense, but to expand it, to go on the offense. What is our course? This essay explores bibliography's past in order to suggest ways in which it can gain from an engagement with the methods and motivating concerns of Indigenous studies. The study of books has often functioned within a colonialist set of assumptions about its means and its ends, but at the same time, having been at times in something of a marginalized position themselves in their professions, its practitioners have developed unique tools, passions, and intellectual focuses with decolonial potential. That unusual "spirit", in dialogue with Native people and Indigenous ideas — about media, about what constitutes a "process", and about the historical and political meanings of recorded forms — may be key to transforming the imagination of the study of books and to enriching its place in the world.

The two kinds [of editions, facsimile and critical,] must always coexist, for they represent two indispensable elements in approaching the past: the ordered presentation of artifactual evidence, and the creation, from that evidence, of versions of past moments that are intended to be more comprehensively faithful than the artifacts themselves — random (and perhaps damaged) survivors as they are.

— G. Thomas Tanselle, "Editing without a Copy-Text" (1994)

And then I pack a bag containing all of my baby's books, many of which I've laboriously blotted with Wite-Out, removing the English, and replaced with Ojibwe words written in Magic Marker.

— Louise Erdrich, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003)

Or take the example of the Quatzoli, who found the Caru'ee repurposing one of the lost Quatzoli stone brains as a research complex. The tiny chambers and channels, where ancient, watery thoughts once flowed were now laboratories, libraries, teaching rooms, and lecture halls echoing with new ideas. The Quatzoli delegation had come to recover the mind of their ancestor, but left convinced that all was as it should be.

— Kenneth Liu, “The Bookmaking Habits of Select Species” (2012)

THE TITLE OF MY ESSAY, WITH ITS ALLUSION TO JOHANNES FABIAN’S book *Time and the Other*, positions the bibliographer as the aboriginal Other — stuck in an earlier time, unable fully to engage the present, and destined, if not to disappearance, to irrelevance. It is intended as a double provocation: to center the varieties of media temporalities, but also to spur thought about the dependence of bibliography upon conceptions of time that may in fact be less colonially coordinated than internally inconsistent. My definition of “bibliography” is consequently the very broad one advocated by D. F. McKenzie, embracing textual scholarship and book history, with the presumption that the close material analysis of books developed by bibliographers is a shared basic part of all book studies.

Here I explore the relationship between historicity and desire in the activity of studying books — its emotional animation, as it connects to the feeling of recovering a lost history, something I’m calling the “spirit” of book studies. The overlap of that feeling with the animating force of “salvage ethnography” is patent, but I am not making the case that bibliographers are stuck in a pre-modern, moribund state like anthropologists thought Indians were. Nor am I saying that the spirit of connecting with and recovering the past puts bibliographers at odds with Indigenous studies. There is a seduction, a kind of eternal present, in maintaining a certain relationship to the past, it’s true: that feeling, which Arlette Farge describes so well, of having pulled the thread not just from around a bundle of documents no one has looked at in a century but the thread dangling from a story that will reveal itself, for the first time, to *you*, as you apply your hard-earned bibliographical vision. But I believe that there are several spirits haunting the study of books, several kinds of relationship to time, that allow us to see ways it can respond to the serious political challenges posed by an engagement with indigeneity.

In the mid-1980s, when McKenzie’s Panizzi lectures began to circulate, it was Reagan’s reactive United States and Baroness Thatcher’s Britain that framed their urgent message about cultural preservation and the pivotal

role bibliography could play in that effort.¹ In today's moment, with the global return of tribalism, racism, nationalism, and religious hypocrisy to power's center stage, it is worth returning to the question of the relevance of bibliography. It is a time when, at least at the seats of power in the United States and some other places, books seem to have become almost meaningless. McKenzie's strategy was not to constrain bibliography in self-defense, but to expand it, to go on the offense. What is *our* course? Bibliography will need new allies in order to survive the effects of the current collapse of the old conservative order (and perhaps of the liberal one as well). Indigenous ideas about media, about what constitutes a "process", and about the historical and political meanings of recorded forms, are key not just to transforming the imagination of the study of books, but to growing and enriching its life in, and in relation to, the world.

Bibliography, I will contend, has for the most part functioned within a colonialist set of assumptions about its means and its ends. But at the same time, having been at times in something of a marginalized position themselves in their departments or professions, its practitioners have developed unique tools, passions, and intellectual focuses with decolonial potential. The marginal position not just of the field itself, but also of its methods, and the way it creates space and time for obsessiveness as method, can induce self-indulgence, but it can also create wonders, unprecedented insights, and cultural and professional rapprochement. To imagine a decolonial bibliography isn't to run faster toward the quantifiable in hopes of transcending cultures. It is rather to bring our feelings as bibliographic practitioners into the field's methodological core in hopes of realizing a newly transformative way of doing our work. What I offer today is neither a call nor a prescription for doing more bibliographical work on Indigenous subjects, though under certain conditions that would be beneficial. Nor is it even mostly about the rigorous rethinking of book studies' theories about materiality or form that are entailed by a profound examination of Indigenous media. I will argue that to think about bibliography in relation to Indigenous studies is less about introducing particular *systems of thought or analysis* than it is about *relations and an orientation toward time*. Rather than demanding the assimilation of an unfamiliar episteme or attempting to synthesize

1. McKenzie's "Printers of the Mind" was first aired in 1967 before being published in 1969; the Boston Rare Books and Manuscripts pre-conference on "Books in History and Society" in 1980 heralded, in Michael Winship's words, "the beginnings of book history as a bibliographical endeavor for American scholars" (2007, 6).

intercultural textual theories, this meaning of indigeneity for the practices and the stances of those who study books entails considering many forms of kinship and exchanges of words, resources, and trust that are inflected by a range of conceptions of time and history. I hope that this meditation will be of use to any kind of bibliographer studying any kind of material.

Nicholas Thomas reminds us that “colonial cultures are not simply ideologies that mask, mystify or rationalize forms of oppression that are external to them; they are also expressive and constitutive of colonial relationships in themselves” (1994, 2). The most straightforward definitions of bibliography appear in a new light, considered from the perspective of indigeneity under this view of colonialism. Philip Gaskell describes bibliography as “the study of books as material objects”, including “the science of the transmission of literary documents” (1995, 1). In the move from books to documents, one territorial expansion has occurred. But Gaskell expands further, using an apt metaphor of dominion: “All documents, manuscript and printed, are the bibliographer’s province”, he writes, indeed, more expansively still, any case in which “reproduction is involved and variant versions may result” (1995, 1). A more recent generation has begun to tweak definitions like this one by introducing insights from feminist, Indigenous, and African American studies. Michelle Warren, for example, asks in a recent essay on textual scholarship that we always consider the question, “What does editing have to do with the community, the *polis*?” (2013, 119). A demanding question. Still, the *polis* is not the community; it is greater than some communities, smaller than others, and irrelevant to yet others. The question of the politics of bibliography and textual scholarship cannot be confined to Western definitions of the sites of benefit for philological work.²

By way of an introduction to the history of the dialogue between book studies and indigeneity, but also as an acknowledgment of my intellectual ancestors, I begin with bibliographic efforts in relation to American Indians. Then I turn to the more expansive field of the intercultural study of media across Indigenous and colonial societies. Scholars in the last few years have tried to introduce Indigenous epistemes and priorities into this kind of study, and it is in the light of such work that we can turn back to bibliographic theory and its animating desires and historical thinking, looking for places where these two spirits might begin to inform each other. As Fabian so elegantly revealed, underpinning the colonialist mentality toward Indigenous people and their cultural expressions was a certain need

2. On the limitations of the concept of the *polis* as community, see MOUFFE 2000.

to believe in a small set of historical models, premised on linear transformation over time of some societies and practices, held against an unmoving backdrop of primitive frozen development. And so in unearthing the expressions of desire or spirit in bibliographic theory we must attend to the conceptions of time and history that undergird those desires and spirits. The movement in my essay, back and forth in time and across a range of disciplines, is meant to exemplify the heterochronicity and transmedial narration induced by working in both Indigenous studies and book studies, whose different pasts and motivations but shared potential to function against the grain of colonization I hope to dramatize in a small way.

(Kind of) Like a Book

Bibliography, like other metrical tools of colonization, has long both been trained on Indigenous people and appropriated by them. Extensive efforts at bibliographies of publications by and about American Indians began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Anglo-Americans trying to establish a “native” cultural past on the continent sought out and republished early colonial documents by the hundreds. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft’s 1849 *Bibliographical Catalogue* and Thomas Field’s 1873 *Essay towards an Indian Bibliography* exemplify this endeavor, gathering a list of publications about and sometimes by Indians; others include Samuel Drake’s 1833 *Book of the Indians* and the prolific Daniel Brinton’s 1883 *Aboriginal American Authors and Their Productions*. Recent decades have seen an explosion of Indian bibliography, including more Indigenous-centric versions of it in electronic formats. Notable are Francis Paul Prucha’s foundational lists relating to Indian law and history, including *A Bibliographical Guide to the History of Indian-White Relations in the United States* (1977; 1982), Phillip M. White’s *Bibliography of Native American Bibliographies* (2004), and the massive bibliographic series by the Newberry Library’s Center for History of the American Indian, which published 30 bibliographies from 1976 to 1987, and which, from 1988, was published as the D’Arcy McNickle Center bibliographic series. There is the rich multi-volume *Ethnographic Bibliography of North America* edited by Timothy O’Leary and George Peter Murdock in the 1970s, and hundreds of specialized bibliographies are available as well.³

3. There are also the editions in the Scarecrow Press’s Native American Bibliography Series, and for periodicals, see LITTLEFIELD and PARIN, 1984. Specialized bibliographies relating to Indigenous issues are appearing at a rapid rate online. See, among many others, JUSTICE, ET AL, 2004–2016; HERBERT 2017; and

Long predating these more recognizably bibliographical texts were hundreds of attempts, across the Americas, to catalog, describe, and decipher the recording devices of Indigenous groups. These descriptions mapped such media in accordance with competing historical frameworks of the evolution of human language (usually a falling away from the unitary, pre-Babel godly tongue) and technological capacity, yielding, most of the time, a judgment that European communication systems were superior — even when, as in the case of the khipu, Europeans were utterly baffled about how the machine worked.⁴

After centuries of stadialist thinking about the march of human progress past hieroglyphics and fetishes and painted codices and wampum toward alphabetic literacy, and significantly in the wake of the rise of comparativist anthropology and global decolonization and Indigenous people's movements, the analytical tide began to turn. The post-progressivist conversation began with folks comparing Indigenous media to the book or writing in well-wished hopes of raising Native systems to equivalence with Western ones. It helped break down, and usefully, the trans-cultural utility of Western terms for media forms. This kind of scholarship taught us lessons, but ultimately failed to bear lasting fruit. The Comanche art critic and curator Paul Chaat Smith explains why:

Let me crudely characterize the existing discourse. The winter count calendar is (kind of) like a book. The quipu is (kind of) like a computer. The petroglyph is (kind of) like words. The subtext is not so buried; what we're really talking about is this: Indians are, on a good day, (kind of) like Europeans. Just as the structure of these sentences about books and computers embeds a clear point of view on what is understood to be superior, the underlying assumption applies to the users of these things as well.

(2014, xi)

Analogy has its drawbacks, in short. “An unbroken, centuries-long written history [. . .] is difficult to find north of the Rio Grande”, writes Germaine Warkentin, “where the many Native systems of knowledge transfer vary so

WHYTE 2019. See COHEN 2014 for an overview of North American Native book history.

4. The “khipu” or “quipu” is a record-keeping system invented by the Inca, using bundles of knotted, colored strings. For studies of their function — about which we are still learning — see SALOMON 2004, BROKAW 2010, and URTON 2017.

greatly in their symbolic expression, easily degradable materials, and social functions that, taken as a group, they make an explanatory theory based on traditional concepts of ‘the book’ almost useless” (2014, 55–6). “It is indeed important to ‘recognize supralinguistic ways of presenting knowledge’”, writes Andrew Newman, “but why must that recognition entail a designation as writing?” (2014, 83).

Galen Brokaw, considering the Inca Empire, takes that question a step farther. For the Inca, “the norm [. . .] seems to have been a multimedia context in which the secondary semioses of social, economic, and political interaction took place through various media: architecture, sculpture, ceramic painting, and textiles” (2014, 168). Brokaw takes as his example the Quechua term *quilca*, often translated as *writing* but which seems to have referred to symbolic color patterning more broadly. Its use among Incas “corresponded to an organic conceptualization of Andean media that calls into question the very distinction between semiotic or what we might call ‘rational’ or ‘conceptual’, and nonsemiotic or ‘aesthetic’ media” (2014, 168). Instead we are asked to think in terms of “a continuum in which different media occupy unique positions indicating a particular relationship between, or configuration of, rational/conceptual and aesthetic thought” (2014, 169). Happily, in the wake of such studies, scholars no longer have to compare Indigenous media to books or writing in order to argue for the meaningfulness of Native societies.⁵ As barbarous a civilization as the West had best cast no stones.

So what, then, *do* books have to do with Indigenous media? The resonance for analytical purposes may have less to do with media continuities, and more to do with the concepts of time and the kinds of deep attentiveness and passion required both to preserve and make sense of records of various kinds. Brokaw’s research signals the benefits to the textual-scholarly field of attending to the work that has already been done by those studying the relationships between Indigenous people and book cultures. Consider a recent high-visibility experiment in doing book history collectively, *Interacting with Print*, the product of an extensively iterative compositional process involving 22 author/editors who call themselves the Multigraph Collective. The contributors are mostly British or continental Romantics. Their claim is that “a nuanced and historicized concept of interactivity is key to developing a deeper understanding of print” (2017, 1). This would not come as a surprise to scholars of Indigenous media. From Martin

5. For a recent reconsideration of the question of media in Indigenous studies, see MT. PLEASANT, WIGGINTON, and WISECUP 2018.

Lienhard, Walter Mignolo, and Brokaw in the Latin American context to North American Indigenous thinkers like Christopher Teuton and Lisa Brooks, a whole subfield of media history has taken as its basic assumption that Indigenous American signifying occurred across media, was interactive at its core, and evolved in complex ways in relation to emergent — or invading — media.⁶ Frank Salomon's work traces the social uses of the khipu and painted staffs out of a time when they were encoding devices into the present, in which in certain Andean villages they serve a symbolic function in local governance rituals. This kind of work has a structural affinity with leading modes of book history, and it is particularly reminiscent of recent studies of the "uses" of books in the nineteenth century Anglo-American context. Matthew Brown wrote a magisterial study of the interactivity of printed texts in the American nonconforming Protestant context, and in it demonstrates the significance of the fact that Indigenous people not only printed but helped translate some of the earliest printed texts in North America, including the first Bible imprint, undertaken by the missionary John Eliot.⁷ Lisa Brooks has taken that work even farther in her devastating recent revision of the story of King Philip's War, *Our Beloved Kin*.⁸

Many other scholars' work could be cited here as exemplary, but it is also worth observing that bibliography itself has vanished from *Interacting with Print*: it's not a term in the index, despite the facts that the book covers a crucial period in bibliography's development; that the evidence on which the contributors draw is in many cases discoverable or extant as a result of bibliographic work; and that there's a chapter on catalogs. Moreover, in their enthusiasm about their compositional process *as exemplary of, or a herald of, the new way in which research will proceed in the future*, the contributors to this volume neglect the fact that it has been done before — in 2008, for example, by a group of twelve Indigenous scholars called the Native Critics Collective, in a book called *Reasoning Together*. There are plenty of earlier examples, too, from the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Collective's book *Slaves of Slaves* to the Bay Area's Mission Collective, the Clio Collective, and many others. From the perspectives of Indigenous studies *and* of bibliography, the Multigraph Collective's breath-

6. See LIENHARD 1994–1995, MIGNOLO 1995, BROKAW 2010, TEUTON 2010, and BROOKS 2008; see also SCHRÖTER 2011.

7. See BROWN 2007.

8. See also TONEY 2018.

less proclamations of novelty and well-intentioned anti-establishmentarianism represent a colonial persistence.

Andrew Newman, in a thoughtful book on the relationship between media and history among the Delaware tribe, points to the heart of the methodological tension between bibliographic mood and method and the imperatives that drive Indigenous studies: “The field of ethnohistory, conceived in the mid-twentieth-century judicial context of the Indian Claims Commission, both expanded the archive for the study of Native American cultures and developed a pragmatic skepticism toward documents” (2012, 5). The tools and approaches for that skepticism are of course also the tools of the bibliographer — some of them in fact *developed* by bibliographers, not least because so-called authentic Indigenous texts are extremely valuable in the marketplace and key exhibits in the construction of national histories. You can use these tools to prevent fraud and to assist Indigenous people in their efforts to protect cultural heritage. But they have also been used to deprecate documents that would have provided a measure of self-government to Indigenous tribes in legal battles for recognition and land claims. That “pragmatic skepticism” is more than a method, though: it is, or with time comes to be, a *mood*, an *emotion*. It is an attitude toward history that seeks reassurance, like the New Bibliographers’ notion of authorial intention, in the convergence of evidence with truth about the past.

It is that feeling, that spirit, that keeps the fallacy in place that Newman describes so well: “On the one hand”, he writes, “the fallacy is that an interpretation that excludes unverifiable but possibly significant evidence is less speculative than one that does not. On the other, it is that a representation’s basis in fact is less than crucial to understanding its meaning” (2012, 7).⁹ Consider an often-cited example of this problem in the study of Indigenous texts: the book *Black Elk Speaks*, in which John Neihardt recorded the words of the Oglala Lakota leader Black Elk. A lot of ink and strong feelings have gone into the debate over the “authenticity” of this text. Pointing out that Neihardt was a poet, N. Scott Momaday writes:

The transformation of speech into writing — *this* speech into *this* writing — is a matter of great importance, I believe. And Neihardt believed it, too. He brought extraordinary sympathy and dedication to his task.

9. Newman’s suggestion is to embrace *possible truths* as we generate interpretations of Indigenous materials from the past — not far afield from the suggestion Momaday makes about understanding Black Elk through Neihardt.

There are the elements of risk and responsibility here; such is the nature of language. And in the oral tradition these factors are crucial and pervasive. It is a principle of oral tradition that words and the things that are made of words are tentative. A song, or a prayer, or a story, is always but one generation removed from extinction. The risk of loss is constant, therefore, and language is never to be taken for granted. By the same token the storyteller, the man who takes it upon himself to speak, assumes the responsibility of speaking well, of making his words count. The spoken word is the means by which he must keep alive his way of life. There is no other possibility of cultural survival.

I am making the case that a certain spirit of language informs the oral tradition.

(1997, 28–9)

The risk of loss is a creative force. *Responsibility, dedication, sympathy and spirit* are the keywords, not accuracy, authenticity, history, or even truth. Counting, making words count, is a metaphor. It is not collation; it is *keeping alive*. Preservation, the task of the storyteller, the textual editor, and the bibliographer, is based in shared principles here in some ways, but with an orientation unfamiliar to us from the writings of many great bibliographers. Mohegan, Nipmuc, and Wampanoag language revivers today are using the translations made by their ancestors and John Eliot to bring back spoken Algonquian languages and to create stronger tribal communities; colonialist preservation is turned to cultural restoration.¹⁰

Newman's work is part of a wave of new scholarship on the techniques of textual transmission that focuses on the mechanisms and social institutions of documentary reproduction in order to tell new stories: about early modern English texts in Whitney Trettien's work; or the desires of bibliographer Charles Evans, erased by digital transcription, illuminated by Molly Hardy; or Indigenous aural worlds in reprints of Roger Williams's books, in an essay by Nicole Gray; or colonial Spanish texts in Indigenous languages in the case of Hannah Alpert-Abrams's many projects. Alpert-Abrams's study "Unreadable Books" began with a careful attention to the case of so-called "dirty OCR" in attempts to transcribe seventeenth-century printed works automatically. She writes, of her moment of inspiration:

10. See for example the *Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project* and *Nipmuc Unnontoowaonk*.

In my work developing tools for the automatic transcription of books from early colonial New Spain, it has become clear that the Anglophone tools of automatic transcription are biased toward English, monolingual, and orthographically regular texts. When faced with Spanish, Latin, and indigenous-language texts from the early modern period, the result was unreadable. In the case of British writers such as Shakespeare, whose work has driven much recent digital scholarship of the early modern period, we might find these errors comical, or irritating, or even expensive. In colonial contexts, however, the naming of an indigenous language “dirty” and the distortion of indigenous discourse is viscerally unacceptable. When an apparently neutral technology of textual reproduction was applied to colonial texts, the ongoing colonial assumptions that informed it were made visible. So was the influence of these assumptions on the ways we access and read the historical record. (2017, 4)

For Alpert-Abrams, those assumptions, out of which many bibliographical desires are woven, remain among the most difficult to transform.¹¹

The dynamics of the encounter between the conditions of dispossession with disciplinary research and traditional historical chronicities have been intensely engaged by African Americanist scholars. A lack of bibliographical evidence haunts this field — haunts not least because of the violence that enforced that lack — as it does that of the genocidal archive of colonial relations with Indigenous people. It would be a mistake to think that even the most basic shapes our book studies stories take — like that of the list, the enumerative bibliographer’s non-narrative form — help us evade the act of re-depicting the violence that characterizes the archives of slavery, racism, and genocide. Lois Brown, writing about the lists she consulted to try to reconstruct the life of leading African American author Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, stops short at her probate records: the cost of clothing Hopkins’s corpse is listed; her “library, letters, scrapbooks and typewriter” are nowhere detailed in the record of the sale of her effects (2010, 138). A quotidian omission, from one perspective; but in the context of a major literary figure in the United States under Jim Crow, also a violent one. Bibliographers are in a unique position to theorize about what kinds of histories are made, or are even made imaginable, by the generation or the analysis of lists.

11. ALPERT-ABRAMS 2017; see also SMITH and CORDELL 2018. See TRETTIEN Forthcoming; HARDY 2017; GRAY 2016.

“Loss gives rise to longing”, writes Saidiya Hartman of our encounters as historians with these records, “and in these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive” (2008, 4). Hartman’s agonistic confrontation with that longing — the desire to tell a fuller story of the lives of the past through books and records, and the impossibility of doing so under the disciplinary rules of historicism — reminds us why those who study books, even enumerative bibliographers, ought to consider carefully how our work tells its stories. Storytelling about books and their production and circulation might begin to redress or repair both history and the relationships that have been built on hitherto absent or incorrect histories. To write bibliography as “a history of the present”, as Hartman puts it, as imagining “a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing” (2008, 4), is one approach — bibliography in the subjunctive mode, you might say. There are other modes, including the speculative (think of Borges, Thomas Ligotti, Kenneth Liu, Henry James). But they all involve rethinking how history works, how time flows, or can be understood to flow, or *could* flow.¹²

To reimagine bibliography’s relation to indigeneity is to be asked to turn to book study’s animating spirits: its attentiveness to the relationship between a desired past and the processes by which accounts of the past were generated; to information production processes that are both material and immaterial — McKenzie’s “printers of the mind”, if you will — and to the desire to preserve, to extend the voices or the labors of the past into the present and future. This may mean doing bibliography with different chronicities and evidentiary standards in mind; with different communities’ protocols and well-being as guides; with different collaborators than customary; and with a more explicit political awareness than has often attended bibliographical work.

12. See MCKENZIE 1961, 1974 and 1978; see also BERGEL, et. al., 2020, and ARBER 1875–1894. Consider, as an example of the potential for list- or catalog-based bibliographical work to enhance our understanding of power in history, McKenzie’s *Stationers’ Company Apprenticeship Directory*, digitized as part of *The London Book Trades* (http://lbt.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/mediawiki/index.php/History_of_the_Project), where it joined information on the Stationers’ Company Register gathered by Michael Turner, Edward Arber, and J.A. Lavin in BERGEL et. al. 2020; see <http://stationersregister.online>. As opportunities arise to connect this resource with other digital bibliographical and book-historical enterprises, our ability to make printing’s labor history a fundamental lens for the larger story of English print during this period grows.

The Spirit of Bibliography

It would seem that McKenzie, in his landmark essay on the Treaty of Waitangi between the English and the Maori in New Zealand, addressed back in the 1980s the concerns I have been describing about bibliography's modes of complicity with colonialism. McKenzie's account was a tour de force of how to take the bibliography of his time into a new frame of mind, exemplifying what in the mid-1970s he had termed the "sociology of the text".¹³ It applied bibliographical attentiveness to a history of dispossession and injustice effected by power created through the social uses of Western-style records. At the same time, however, the essay was premised on basic assumptions about the nature of Indigenous preservation that are both mistaken and products of the same Western notions beyond which McKenzie was trying to envision. One of the reasons for the power inequality that resulted from the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi was, McKenzie argued, the difference between the properties of the mediums involved. "Manuscript and print", he wrote, "the tools of the Pakeha [the English], persist, but words which are spoken fade as they fall" (1986, 125). Oral communication in McKenzie's vision was always "flexible", not "binding" — an assumption that is not only inaccurate, as J.L. Austin might point out, but dangerous. Simply put, even when the words of the Maori — their accounts of the matrix of local native sovereignty over the land — *were taken down in written depositions* in the Compensation Courts of the 1860s, those written words were largely ignored in the disposition of terrain. The referential integrity of any communication — inscribed, uttered, or otherwise — is a function of its social enactment or enforcement, not merely its material affordances.¹⁴

But the kernel of a productive shift away from such thinking was provided by McKenzie himself in his use of forms of the term "record" in his foundational redefinition of bibliography. "Bibliography", he declared, "is

13. See the second of the Sandars Lectures, MCKENZIE 1976, 16–34; esp. 16–20. McKenzie first presented his work on the Treaty of Waitangi in 1983 and published a version of it in *The Library* in 1984; a revised version appeared as "The Sociology of a Text: Oral Culture, Literacy, and Print in Early New Zealand", in MCKENZIE 1986.
14. As Andrew Jackson wrote to Brigadier General John Coffee respecting the 1832 case of *Worcester v. Georgia*, in which federal enforcement would have been required to support the court's determination of Cherokee sovereignty, "The decision of the supreme court has fell still born, and they find that it cannot coerce Georgia to yield to its mandate". See GARRISON 2002, 193–4.

the discipline that studies texts as recorded forms, and the processes of their transmission, including their production and reception” (1986, 12). McKenzie thus expanded the usual restrictions on inscription techniques (writing, printing, engraving) to all of “recording”. And he widened the hermeneutic parameters from the static products of those techniques to “processes” of transcription, transfer, and encounter. McKenzie’s insistence that bibliography is a lens applicable to any kind of recording helps shake the obsession with writing as evidence of culture and resists the gravitational pull of Western categories of recording, the book, documents, writing. In the arguments of Indigenous intellectuals, or of performance theorists like Diana Taylor and Joseph Roach, or archival theorists like Kimberly Anderson, it is clear that aural and gestural transmissions are *records*; they are transmitted, verified, and modified in a range of ways that require attentiveness to different histories of preservation and different conceptions of utility.¹⁵ These records are preserved in the way you dance, move, dress, gesture, and speak. Moreover, McKenzie’s declaration that bibliography can “show the human presence in any recorded text” (1986, 29) sings to those systematically suppressed by Western colonialism — but not because of a simple rejection of the Western scholarly commonplace of the irrecoverable past, or a fetishization of material objects over the abstraction of the text, as has been the stereotype. It is because of a history of complicity that bibliography and its practitioners have instantiated mostly at the level of method, of evidentiary selection, and of historiographical practice. To re-admit the human story is to open the door for presences about which McKenzie and his audience weren’t even thinking.¹⁶

But McKenzie’s is only one of many axial essays on the practice of studying books that features this give-and-take, this mixture of colonizing and potentially decolonizing gestures. So I want to work through a couple of the most well-known of these formulations, to suggest that an all-or-nothing judgment of bibliography as a colonial force may obscure the degree to which its own position as an often-embattled field, together with the peculiar desires that motivate its practitioners and the aptitudes to which its methods give rise, have yielded something a bit more complex than the

15. See ANDERSON 2013; ROACH 1996; and TAYLOR 2003.

16. What’s more, McKenzie’s essay became part of a burgeoning conversation in New Zealand about colonial injustices that, in the 1990s, resulted in both enhanced formal recognition of and real-world improvements in Maori sovereignty. For a discussion of McKenzie’s argument in light of the Compensation Courts, see KEENAN 2002.

“colonial culture” that I summoned earlier in Nicholas Thomas’s formulation.

G. Thomas Tanselle begins his 1994 essay “Editing without a Copy-Text” with an insight about the historiographical nature of bibliography and textual criticism: that time and the bibliographer are related “in cyclical fashion”, with governing ideas “losing favor temporarily in one area or another and then returning to prominence in an altered form” (1). That is to say, analytical tendencies have a transtemporal, almost spiritual quality, fluctuating but never entirely disappearing, animating the course of disciplinary change. Thus Tanselle is able to see, for example, the ways in which his predecessor W.W. Greg’s ideas about copy-text were a half-century-delayed resurgence of A. E. Housman’s. In turn, Tanselle situates his own suggestion for editing without a copy-text as a slight recovery of the Lachmannian process of recension (1994, 2).

This spirit, which at first appears as a merely empirical, historical observation, possesses a definably Christian eschatology, one that frames both Tanselle’s sense of the history to be recovered in a bibliographical analysis and the status of the product of that analysis, the authoritative edition, which is never quite finished, still awaiting its millennium. We are told that “the process of critical editing is the ineluctable, if unending, effort to surmount the limitations of artifacts in the pursuit of works from the past” (1994, 6). The spirit here, as it had been in Greg, has a Protestant feel: irresistible, eternal, an agonistic grappling with the fallenness of the material world in pursuit of something never quite recoverable. Greg, like almost all those who followed him, insisted that it would be “impossible to exclude individual judgement from editorial procedure” (1950–1951, 26). Yet this judgment was to be in service to a spiritual ideal: “the judgement of an editor, fallible as it must necessarily be, is likely to bring us closer to what the author wrote than the enforcement of an arbitrary rule”.¹⁷

And yet, for Tanselle, it is not getting closer to God the author but man’s temporality under Christianity that is at the heart of the discipline — not a spiritual exercise, an Ignatian dissolving of the gap in time between Christ the author and the pious imager of his pain, but a temporal one in the fallen sense. “Some kind of guideline is required”, Tanselle insists, “if the operation is to be disciplined and historically oriented” (1994, 6). We might

17. The other evidence of *spirit* in Greg’s text — notably, written for performance — is his use of, and then calling attention to, a line about farting from a Johnson masque. This may represent spirit in its basest sense literally, but it was at the same time a way of creating camaraderie from the pulpit, as it were.

ask, though: Need the discipline of history be the authority or atmosphere out of which such an operational benchmark must emerge? Is *judgment*, in fact, the only thing either forged of or exceeding discipline and empiricism on which we can rely, as Tanselle implies? May we not mistake one editor's eclecticism for another's catechism — and vice-versa?

It would seem at the least that between Greg and Tanselle, in the soul of the canonical bibliographico-theoretical conversation, there are multiple chronicities and orientations toward inspiration. Greg too had referenced the tribal ancestor Karl Lachmann in the essay to which Tanselle was responding, his 1949 “The Rationale of Copy-Text”. The nineteenth-century genealogical fundamentals of scientific bibliography were coincident with the increasing tendency to use archival citation in history, and on the same principle: the establishment of linear chronology. While Greg's notion of the copy-text drew upon the historian's toolkit to establish manuscript precedence and order, clarifications of production context, and so on, such work nonetheless served the end of creating a suspended present of authorial intention, a sort of agential histology whose parameters were an imagined, unified, seldom-ever materially achieved work. The same complex situation of the bibliographer as temporal crux held, in Greg, with respect to the future. The emotional orientation to the future, to the creation of a new story, shared by many bibliographers is salutary, and a form of it is uttered in the concluding sentence of Greg's essay: “My desire is rather to provoke discussion than to lay down the law” (1950–1951, 36).¹⁸

Let us loop forward again to 1985, the year that brought us McKenzie's Panizzi lectures (and, of course, the movie *Back to the Future*). Jerome McGann, in *The Textual Condition*, argued memorably that we should pay attention to the physical properties of texts, because they are inextricable from their linguistic modes of meaning-making. His emphasis on creativity or uniqueness — on generating “ever more rich and strange forms” (1991, 76) — is characteristically Western, as are the categories of “literary” and “poetic” as opposed to “historical” writing central to the claims in *The Textual Condition*. But I want to linger on a moment in McGann's 1985 address to the Society for Textual Scholarship, a virtuosic demonstration in miniature of the pillars of his claims about the nature of textuality, because in it are competing and potentially generative elements of an approach to textual scholarship through the lens of Indigenous studies. “I am not ‘free’ with respect to this text I am writing”, McGann tells us, “Even as I write it I

18. On the mutually enfolded passions of past-recovery and future-making, particularly as they affected the image of antiquarian collectors during the professionalization of historianship and librarianship, see DINSHAW 2009.

am reading it as if I were in another time and place — as if I were here and now, in fact — and my text [. . .] is constrained and determined by a future which at all points impinges upon my present text. This is to be in the textual condition”.¹⁹ The incantatory “I” and the persistence of the future in this formulation point to the orientations I am trying to complicate: freedom and unfreedom need not be the principal dyad; the future and past need not be two parts of a principal triad; textuality need not have a condition, however many conditions it comes with. I do not think, for all that, that this kind of utterance is on the other side of an epistemic wall from Indigenous record-making, or that it need be considered so. Rather, its spirited leap into the stream of time and recording, signaled at the book’s structural level by McGann’s references to Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “The Garden of Forking Paths”, open the potential for negotiating a new means of enacting textual theory. The vaunted immortality desired by the historiographical impulse will be achieved, if it is achieved at all, McGann reminds us, in “the continuous socialization of the texts” (1991, 83). And there are many kinds of socialization — Indigenous, diasporic, and so on — that may be added to, or drawn into conflict with, the Western forms that give shape to the desire for literature.

So in considering bibliography’s future through its potential within the decolonial project, it is less a matter of learning new *textual* concepts by exploring other cultures. That might still be a colonial project. It may instead be a matter of considering basic professional, social, and methodological assumptions of the field on one hand, and on the other, of considering how these have sustained a certain technical and emotional orientation of the field that is in keeping with its animating spirits of humanism, of preservation, and of maintaining a community of fellow-feeling around the material legacies of textuality.

What Can Bibliography Do?

The monotheistic conception of authorship, that idea of the monadic writer giving us access to eternal truths, has broken down to an extent in book studies. It tended to obscure our understanding of the historically specific conjunctions of technology, genre, and human invention that have constituted past modes of reading and writing, of distribution and the cir-

19. McGann’s 1985 address to the Society for Textual Scholarship was published in 1991 in *The Textual Condition*; the passage above appears on page 95 of that work.

cultation of literature and other texts. Other animating spirits for doing bibliographic work are becoming more visible. What is academic book study doing in our culture right now, and what might it do? Given bibliography's longstanding connections with regimes of ownership, access, and monetary recompense whose grounding premise is the individual, what other modes of approaching its work might be available?

Whatever the intellectual-methodological advances against the force of the Romantic authorship model, many of us in literary studies, history, and their related fields are working under a professional regime heavily dominated by that model. This often offers a stark contrast with the unsung experience of rare books cataloguers and archivists composing metadata for libraries and archives. Even at resource-strapped land grant universities, if research is an institutional priority, you don't get tenure and you don't get promoted for writing co-authored books — and the occasional exceptions only prove the rule. Most book-writing fellowships are for individuals, not for collaborations like the Multigraph Collective or the Native Critics Collective. You write your own narrative; if you seem sufficiently like an author or author-to-be to the National Endowment for the Humanities, say, or the Huntington Library, you get a fellowship. If you don't seem like an author, you do not usually get the fellowship. Either way, in the eventual acknowledgments may be found the colleague who asked the question that started it all, the seminar that enriched the idea, the communities that made the writing possible, the graduate student who performed the revelatory collation.

All this would be one thing if it were not happening in an institutional context in which, in many other fields, collaboration — publishing with other faculty, postdocs, and students — is normal and even necessary to the same promotion. But book studies and its related humanistic disciplines remain dependent upon this Romantic vision. Bookselling as a profession, the publishing industry — these are also dependent upon the idea of the inspired and inspirational individual author. To challenge this idea may require being more explicit about what we lose when we displace the unitary notion of the author, not just what we gain in realizing that, for example, the history of minority resistance movements is a history of necessarily collaborative authorship, even in the most separatist circumstances. At stake seems to be the degree to which book studies, as currently conceived, can or should continue to articulate itself as a function of the coherence of a profit-driven commodity system, in which books constitute a powerfully flexible kind of capital (new, used, and rare).

And yet we might also ask, What is a thriving bibliographic enterprise in a world that increasingly involves distributed creativity in many forms —

massive-multiplayer online gaming, crowdsourcing, activism, social media reporting? Ownership in all of these activities has to do with participation, endurance, cleverness, intervention, and protocol acquisition, all in a sustained way, rather than merely high scores or named authorship. If a world that isn't just about authors is one we already understand, what might book studies look like in that world? Altering the traditional formal properties of a research or historiographical project, understanding it as fundamentally the outgrowth of shared desires — even if it's not a collaboratively created project — could help make the study of books a different kind of activity. An engagement with indigeneity and its histories under colonialism is one source not just of inspiration to that end but also of mutually beneficial partnerships.

The Mellon Foundation's award of millions of dollars in the past few years to the Rare Book School (RBS) offers an on-the-ground example of both new partnerships and persistent challenges. The purpose of the Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship of Scholars in Critical Bibliography, an early award program, was "to reinvigorate bibliographical studies within the humanities by introducing doctoral candidates, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty to specialized skills, methods, and professional networks for conducting advanced research with material texts" (RARE BOOK SCHOOL 2020). The composition of the Fellows for the most part reflected this stated purpose's tight parameters ("within the humanities" and "advanced research"), being drawn mostly from top-20 institutions, and performing and publishing largely for an academic audience. Within the award's remit, the Fellows are doing great work, from conference organizing to raising difficult questions and amplifying voices not often enough heard in book studies. But conceived as a proselytizing body — missionaries to a rapidly changing, mostly public-funded academy under heavy attack — the body's transformational power seems tenuous to me. The RBS Senior Fellows laudably established a diversity and outreach committee and amended the application process — the 2018–2020 Fellows' cohort shows more racial diversity than previous ones. But among them are only one person working in a non-academic position, and if anything fewer fellows by percentage from other-than-leading institutions than previously.²⁰ Still more encouraging is another \$1.5 million in support from Mellon in 2019, establishing a "Fellowship

20. Based on data from the Mellon Fellows website (RARE BOOK SCHOOL 2020), out of 70 total, as of fall 2018, 40 were from Ivy League or equivalent institutions, 30 from others; 41 were from private institutions, and 29 from public institutions. Among these were no scholars identifying as Indigenous, by my estimate. Of the ten 2018–2020 Fellows, one is a librarian.

for Diversity, Inclusion & Cultural Heritage”, a six-year program with an unprecedentedly broad definition of applicant eligibility that builds on an earlier, smaller fellowship collaboration with the American Library Association (RARE BOOK SCHOOL 2020). The traditional profile of the bibliographical scholar may be a difficult nut to crack, however, because we know from past diversity enhancement attempts that the composition of the existing admitted group with respect to elite institutional status can be a deterrent to applicants from lower-ranked and lower-resourced institutions. And while resources are of course good, they do not guarantee the long-term structural transformation of their allocation — especially given, to take just one example, the extremely uneven, often politically contentious resourcing of Native American libraries and other cultural institutions. The experiment is a crucial one, though, because the question of how RBS reckons with a fundamental shift in its role as an institutional authority in light of the changing audiences, imperatives, and working conditions of librarians, other information professionals, and book-interested publics is one of interest to many book- and manuscript-centric organizations. How should such institutions function at the intersection of book studies and the public in an age when non-STEM academic positions are drying up and, at the same time, distributed custodianship and expertise are catalyzed by minimal computing and world-wide electronic networking?

In an eloquent essay on the spirit of Donald McKenzie, Michael Suarez observed that there was, in McKenzie’s insistence on both deductive scrutiny and a deeply human *love* of the pursuit of bibliographical knowledge, “an ethical dimension that is counter cultural and far-reaching indeed” (2002, 53). In the context of an increasingly instrumentalist academy, Suarez warned, it would be all too easy to mechanize, to quantify, to externalize, to nominalize in the name of preferment within a shrinking professional sphere. So what if in shaping the next emergence of book studies we look beyond the academy? Could we — like McKenzie summoning Karl Popper’s humane deductivism, a new philosophy for his moment — bring the new perspectives of ecocriticism, an Anthropocenic framework, and post-custodial approaches to cultural preservation into the heart of bibliography and textual analysis, into the very structure of its real-world, social endeavors, not just to our methods or attitudes as researchers and writers? If any field could help render a humane post-humanism, it’s book studies.

In the process, bibliography could reach audiences with whom the academy is increasingly losing its social authority. What if some Mellon funds were put toward vernacular bibliographers? These might include filmmakers or dramaturgs who share the passion about books that is the prime

mover of bibliographic work, or the many sculptors that have recently been repurposing books into three-dimensional art. Could public-facing collaborations between bibliographers and neighborhoods, tribal communities, the American Indian Libraries Association, the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, or smaller and local libraries become funding and effort priorities? Rather than assuming that the academy is the generator of book studies, perhaps the effort to nurture our shared passion might begin by asking, Where is the most creative and inspirational work with books happening right now, work that might energize bibliography in the near future?

To effect this, I suspect that the relationship between book studies and the rare book market might need rethinking. The regimes of property in which rare books obtain value both monetary and cultural are coextensive with the dispossession of whole populations not just of land and sovereignty, but of cultural self-determination as well. There is of course the parasitical set of practices by which many individuals profit from Indigenous artists and well-meaning publishers or galleries alike. But even conventionally, the practice of research bibliography, when it involves tracking down and buying minority-generated materials, tends to increase the value of the objects remaining in the market. In the book world, it is seldom Black or Indigenous people who hold such materials, or most of such materials, and so the profit from the increased value of minority-authored or minority-generated materials tends to bypass those communities and individuals. With an Internet-delivered marketplace, this happens more rapidly than ever before; it is hard to “get ahead” of a book valuation curve. Legislation has been passed, in various places including the U.S. (NAGPRA), to control the circulation and marketing of Indigenous-generated artworks or cultural heritage objects — but *texts* remain in a kind of liminal state between conceptual, intellectual property and material remains. For people coming from ancestral backgrounds of Indigenous and African slavery, cultural erasure, and legalized inequality, in which human beings were made to circulate in a marketplace as commodities (new, used, and rare), the connections between bibliography and the book trades are not ancillary or mutually beneficial: they glow with a radioactive historical menace.

The relation between this essay’s first two epigraphs hinges on the definition of the artifact — the metaphor of the survivor opens up the personification of the artifact in Tanselle’s quotation, and I think many bibliographers do feel the difficulty of treating a textual artifact fully as a *thing*. In the Indigenous case, the damaged survivors are people: so what might it mean, as in the case of Erdrich damaging her book in order to

preserve her language, to convey it to the next generation? and what might it mean for these damaged survivors of colonialism to be thought of as the source of a bibliographical authority equivalent to the scientized, analyzed artifact of Tanselle's imagination?

Each act of textual recovery can be made a social act in connection with an Indigenous community, but as I have been suggesting, it is not just about Indigenous communities. The collaborations with communities more broadly speaking that have always characterized the careful study of books can be increased in number and in breadth of outreach — can become an explicit value, not just a gesture, like the final sentence in Greg's theorization of copy-text. In the era of alternative facts it can be tempting to double down on empiricism — to summon the most powerful forms of fact-based authority and detail work. But it is not clear to me that such an approach will work against this regime, nor, with a longer view in sight, that it will answer to the spirit of an age of reconfigured attention and electronically induced isolation.

This brings us back to McKenzie. For most radical in some ways, among his insights in “Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts”, was his insistence that the reason to rethink the practice was not just that the old definitions of terms were changing or that the disconnection from history that scientific bibliography required meant telling bad or false stories. It was political. “The politics of survival, if nothing else”, he wrote, “require a more comprehensive justification of the discipline's function in promoting new knowledge” (1986, 12). A sociology of the text would salvage bibliography. This subtle double-action of situated awareness of the place of bibliography in the knowledge economy and the expansion of its purview has been powerful medicine for the field, as McKenzie humbly predicted when he refused to be so bold as to “speak of paradigm shifts” (1986, 11). And as Indigenous thinkers keep telling us, reckoning with the ways sovereignty, cultural preservation, and survival are woven together is a basic concern of wise intellectual and cultural work: we are all in this together.

Conclusion: Perhaps Damaged Survivors

In 1970, the Sioux intellectual Vine Deloria, Jr. published a book titled *We Talk, You Listen*. The first half of this book is, in effect, a critical media studies analysis of Marshall McLuhan's work. Deloria is inspired by McLuhan, but also pushes back:

Indian people are just as subject to the deluge of information as are other people. In the last decade most reservations have come within the reach of televisions and computers. In many ways Indian people are just as directed by the electric nature of our universe as any other group. But the tribal viewpoint simply absorbs what is reported to it and immediately integrates it into the experience of the group. In many areas whites are regarded as a temporary aspect of tribal life and there is unshakeable belief that the tribe will survive the domination of the white man and once again rule the continent. Indians soak up the world like a blotter and continue almost untouched by events. The more that happens, the better the tribe seems to function and the stronger it appears to get. Of all the groups in the modern world Indians are best able to cope with the modern situation.

(1970, 10)

The blotter — an old technology of textual production, a means simultaneously of fixing text and controlling excess — turns attention beyond McLuhan's media-tech evolutionary frame. But the key to Deloria's argument, with its last sentence's spectacular refusal of the colonial model of ethnic temporality described by Fabian, is Indigenous time. If you think bibliographers have patience, are seeing things in detail and over a long time span, just imagine: Native Americans are outwaiting the bibliographers.

So what is next for book studies, for those of us raised in the wake of McKenzie's scholarship? What does bibliography do, mean, or look like in a world of digital archives and libraries; the Internet of things; portable computing in the form of the smart phone; a move to the post-critical in humanistic work; and rising contests over globalism, populism, and fundamentalism? In one guise or another, these questions are preoccupying scholars of the book and of the screen, but their very form — their grasping for novelty, evolution, technological transformation, and a sense of location within a historical arc — suggests that McKenzie's criticism of what we might call colonial bibliography has not yet fully registered in bibliographic thinking.

I have tried to re-frame these questions as a provocation about the relationships among bibliographical method, desire, and historical narration. If it helped save book studies on one hand, the spread of digital bibliographical mediation may have impeded the uptake of the most radical

implications of McKenzie's ideas about bibliography's inclusiveness. It made possible heterogeneous cataloging or indexing schema that, despite a few extraordinary exceptions in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, often share a Western orientation. The algorithmic turn has stoked fantasies of a self-curating catalog — in a world persistently filled with erasures, silenced voices, and self-defensively obscured relations. The same may be said for automated systems of text processing and, as I have suggested, even for the latest efforts to renew the social-intellectual community of book studies itself. Yet bibliography engenders a sensibility about the materiality of records, the vagaries of categorization, and the palette of desires that have motivated enthusiasts of the wide range of media forms of different times and places. That sensibility is generative, humane in its own right, not least because of its respect for the give-and-take between historical persistence and the alienness of the past. In spite (or perhaps as a function) of its colonial entanglements, bibliography might give the lie to simple accounts of how colonialism functions, by taking firmer hold of how temporalities proliferate in the varieties of bibliographic desire.

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