Decolonisation is not a one-off exercise; it is an ongoing process. Not every indigenous person wants to take on the responsibility. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each group has its own community partners must be involved in collaborative projects (Duarte and Belarde-Lewis, 699).

So, What does Decolonising Special Collections Look Like in Practice?

We will know if a library or museum has been decolonised when Indigenous patrons can both see and experience their own histories, and also identify foundational indigenous epistemologies at play. (Duarte and Belarde-Lewis, 699).

- Decolonisation is not a one-off exercise; it is an ongoing process of changing our cultural attitudes and assumptions.
- There is no one ‘correct’ approach. Each group has its own unique history, culture, values, and system of knowing, which must be acknowledged and respected.
- The ethical imperative to develop more inclusive practices is often at odds with efficiency. Breaking away from long-established methods requires additional inputs of time, energy, and resources.
- The lack of diversity among cultural heritage professionals makes it especially important that more knowledgeable communities are active and equal participants in our curatorial practices.
- Community partners must be involved in collaborative projects from their inception, not as a box-checking exercise after all key decisions have been made.
- Be sensitive to imbalances of power. Your curatorial expertise does not entitle you to more authority and respect than your collaborators’ lived experience.
- Collaborative projects must benefit all stakeholders, not just your own institution.
- Not every indigenous person wants to take on the responsibility and effort of educating non-indigenous people about decolonisation.

Watch Points

- To the extent that indigenous peoples are represented in our collections at all, most of our materials are about native peoples, not by them.
- Special Collections often base collecting priorities on trends in academic research and teaching, which can reflect embedded colonialist attitudes.
- Traditional sources of acquisition privilege materials produced by those already in power. Organisations and individuals with money and power can best afford to assemble and preserve their own archival databases; and booksellers, publishers, and distributors tailor their offerings to the customers with the most money to spend.

Watch Points

- Seek out authors, artists, and other record creators directly instead of relying on well-known distributors to obtain collections materials which present indigenous viewpoints.
- When records do not exist, encourage their creation through commissioned works and oral histories, and by teaching recordkeeping literacy.
- If a group or perspective has been erased so completely that no records survive, our only option may be to mark absences in our collections. By doing so, we are at least pointing out the erasure instead of participating in it.
- Participate actively to incorporate indigenous viewpoints into their curricula.
- To improve accountability, document collection development decisions, acknowledging the subjectivity of the decision-making process and preserving a record of what has been lost.

Further Reading

- Diane Caraccolci (2009) “By their very presence: rethinking research and partnering for change with educators and artists from Long Island’s Shinnecock Nation Cultural Center and Montana State University’s Graduate Qualitative Studies in Education, 22:2, 177-200, DOI: 10.1080/13589730903441830
- Michelle Caswell, Alida Allison Migno, Noah Geraci & Marika Cifor (2017) “To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise: community archives and the importance of representation,” Archives and Records Administration, 4:2, 2016; DOI: 10.5294/arar.2016.4.2.20