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CRKN's Decolonizing Canadiana Metadata Project

by Caroline Winter | 15 July 2022 | English, Observations, Observations and Responses | 0 comments



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At a glance:

Title	Decolonizing Canadiana metadata
Creator	The Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CRKN-RCDR)
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In January 2022, the [Canadian Research Knowledge Network \(CRKN\)](#) announced that the first phase of its efforts to decolonize the metadata in the Canadiana collections was complete. This three-phase project was initially set out as part of [CRKN's 2019–2024 Strategic Plan](#) and falls under its first strategic goal, to “transform scholarly communication.” Specifically, CRKN aims to “lead by example by increasing the accessibility and decolonized discoverability of the dynamic Canadiana collections, ensuring that this unique content is available for research and personal use, now and for future generations” (CRKN 2019, 3).

The Canadiana collections—comprising the [Canadiana collection](#) and the [Héritage collection](#)—entered CRKN's care in 2018, as part of the [merger between CRKN and Canadiana.org](#) (see Bengtson and

Shepstone 2020). The Canadiana collection includes more than 96,000 titles or 19 million pages of digitized historical records, most published before 1921. The Héritage collection is developed in partnership with [Library and Archives Canada \(LAC\)](#) and includes roughly 40 million pages of primary-source documents from the 1600s to the mid-1900s (CRKN 2022a). Current efforts to decolonize Canadiana metadata apply to the Canadiana collection, but future efforts will include Héritage as well. In its announcement, CRKN explains that,

The Canadiana collections contain content created over five centuries that tell an incomplete, oftentimes distorted, and sometimes harmful, story of Canada. The content, metadata, and resource descriptions in the Canadiana collections contain language that reflects the biases, norms, and perspectives of the time in which they were created. (CRKN, 2022b)

The goal of updating the Canadiana collection's metadata is to replace inappropriate and harmful metadata and, as Natalie MacDonald states, to “ensure fair and equitable representation within our records by aligning descriptions with the way groups of people wish to be represented” (CRKN RCDR 2019). These revised descriptions will be incorporated into the MARC (Machine-readable Cataloguing) records for the Canadiana collections and shared with the institutions that ingest those records.

Phase I, completed in 2021, focused on replacing “Indians of North America” with “Indigenous peoples” and “Indiens d’Amérique—Amérique du Nord” with “Autochtones.” “North America” has been replaced with more specific terms as appropriate (CRKN 2022b). The project is guided by [CRKN's Preservation and Access Committee \(PAC\)](#), which reviews and makes recommendations regarding the development and management of the Canadiana collections and [Trustworthy Digital Repository \(TDR\)](#) platform and the associated services and capabilities (CRKN 2021).

In preparation for the second phase of the project, CRKN has developed a [spreadsheet of interim subject headings](#) that builds on the labour of various Indigenous and GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) organizations, including the [Greater Victoria Public Library](#), [Manitoba Archival Information Network](#), the [National Indigenous Knowledge and Language Alliance](#), the [Canadian Federation of Library Associations](#), the [X̱wi7x̱wa Library](#) at the University of British Columbia, and Indigenous community organisational websites. It is a living document, and CRKN invites input and feedback.

Phase II of decolonizing Canadiana metadata is underway and includes removing the term “Indian” from subject headings indicating individual communities and updating Indigenous names and terminology using guidance from Indigenous communities and pre-existing work from GLAM organizations (CRKN 2022b). Future phases will include revising uncontrolled vocabularies, such as in the notes fields of the metadata records (CRKN RCDR 2019).

CRKN's efforts to decolonize the metadata of the Canadiana collections occurs in the context of broader decolonizing efforts by the international GLAM community, including work undertaken by LAC. In its [2015 calls to action](#), for instance, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Call to Action no. 69 asks LAC to “[f]ully adopt and implement” the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (12), which states that “Indigenous peoples have the right [...] to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons” (United Nations 2007, 13). Since the LAC's metadata decolonization initiative is currently in progress—as described in its [Indigenous Heritage Action Plan](#) (LAC 2019)—CRKN's spreadsheet of interim subject headings was “developed as a stop-gap measure” (CRKN 2022b).

These actions build on previous efforts to improve representations of Indigenous peoples in classification systems. In the 1970s, Alex Brian Deer created the [Brian Deer Classification System](#) as an alternative to the [Dewey Decimal](#) and [Library of Congress](#) classification systems, which perpetuate a false understanding of Indigenous peoples as historical artifacts by listing them alphabetically under History (Szeto 2020). The Brian Deer Classification System has been adopted by various Indigenous

communities, including the [Xwi7x̱wa Library](#) the [Carrier Sekani Tribal Council Archives](#), and the [Aanischaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute](#).

Decolonizing Metadata in the Press

Related efforts to decolonize metadata in Canada have been covered in the press. In September 2020, [CBC](#) interviewed the archivist for the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, Kat Louro, who uses the Brian Deer classification system because it, unlike the Library of Congress, allows collections related to Indigenous communities to be organised by location (Szeto 2020).

In 2018, [CTV News](#) spoke to a number of Canadian universities working to remove colonial language from their catalogues and archives, including the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Alberta, and Toronto Metropolitan University (then Ryerson University) (Rizza 2018).

Responses from the INKE Partnership

Like CRKN, other INKE partners and members are taking steps toward truth and reconciliation in Canada, including through decolonizing digital infrastructures such as metadata. In the article “Knowledge Organization for Open Scholarship,” for instance, INKE Partnership member Julia Bullard argues that INKE is “poised to open a conversation on how the infrastructure for open initiatives can include thoughtful, responsible, and transparent knowledge organization systems” and poses the question, “what does it mean to create subject access systems consistent with multiculturalism, openness, and a decolonizing project?” (2019).

In 2019, the University of Victoria Libraries (an INKE Partner) appointed [Ry Moran](#) as Associate University Library – Reconciliation. The Libraries note that, “With the arrival of Moran at UVic, a stronger connection will be made with internal and external stakeholders in deepening Truth and Reconciliation efforts across the university” (Abram 2020).

In 2019, Simon Fraser University hosted [Sorting Libraries Out: Decolonizing Classification and Indigenizing Description](#). The event, sponsored by SFU Libraries (an INKE Partner), University of British Columbia Library, the University of Alberta Libraries, and the Council of Prairie and Pacific University Libraries (COPPUL), brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural heritage professionals, scholars, information professionals, and researchers to discuss and work towards decolonizing and indigenizing libraries, including metadata.

Canada’s [National Heritage Digitization Strategy \(NHDS\)](#) is foregrounding its commitment to decolonization in its ongoing strategic planning process, including a commitment to the TRC’s Calls to Action (see “[Canada’s National Heritage Digitization Strategy](#)”). After its secretariat was transferred to CRKN in 2020, the NHDS began extensive community consultation about its strategic plan with the goal of “fostering an evolving heritage landscape that is driven by inclusion, truth, and decolonization” (NHDS n.d.). Previous NHDS activity includes funding decolonial digitization efforts such as the [Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre’s Healing and Education Through Digital Access](#) project and a [pilot project](#) to digitize content from four Indigenous newspapers published over more than 80 years.

Responses from the Broader Community

Viewing the Decolonizing Canadiana Metadata project from the perspective of law libraries, Michel-Adrien Sheppard points out that it “is one of many projects in the library and archival world to implement what some are calling the ‘decolonizing of the catalogue.’” (2022). For Sheppard, the importance of this project is its connection with the [Canadian Subject Headings](#), a controlled vocabulary for describing documents about Canada maintained by LAC and upon which Canadian law libraries and associations base their subject headings.

The academic community on Twitter responded to [CRKN’s announcement](#) with enthusiasm.

As Dean Seeman and Heather Dean discuss, library and archival metadata is highly collaborative with a strong tradition of “contribution, collaboration and re-use” by experts in cataloguing and metadata creation (2019). Although these practices of re-use mean that other institutions can ingest the revised Canadiana collections MARC records into their own systems, it also means that records tend to be created and shared centrally rather than locally.

This challenge was highlighted at the “Decolonizing Metadata” panel at CRKN’s 2019 [Access to Knowledge Conference](#) (CRKN RCDR 2019), which featured speakers from LAC, the University of Saskatchewan, and CRKN. Annie Wolfe of LAC and Natalie MacDonald of CRKN explained that, although LAC is in the process of creating its own recommendations for decolonizing the Canadian Subject Headings, Canadian libraries and archives also use Library of Congress Subject Headings, which retain inaccurate and harmful colonial language relating to Canadian Indigenous peoples. Deborah Lee, a panelist from the University of Saskatchewan, called on all Canadian library leaders and consortia to advocate for the retention of local changes to subject headings because no researcher should “have to use or be exposed to terminology that is offensive to their own people.”

As Bullard points out, because knowledge organization infrastructures such as metadata are social constructions, they embody the beliefs—and biases—of their creators (2019). They are also the foundation of scholarship, including open scholarship, and for this reason, developing inclusive and accurate subject headings is an essential step in advancing open scholarship in Canada.

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