

# **Critical Librarianship: Examining Indigenous Cataloguing**

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## **Abstract**

Our group is broadly interested in social justice in libraries and archives. Our individual interests span community archives, Indigenous cataloging, the value of Black archives and archiving current social movements. All of these topics are centered on how to make collections more inclusive and accessible wherever users are. Our group project will focus on exploring critical librarianship. We will take up what this means and offer concrete examples of the theory and practice. Elliott will do research on community archives, specifically how social justice and activism shape their systems of knowledge organization. This will look at how the needs and usage patterns of a community influence the resulting organization systems, and the strengths/limitations of these systems to reflect community knowledge. Diana will be researching Indigenous cataloging, specifically looking into how this group has been marginalized over time within libraries, archives, and museums. Research into Indigenous Cataloging will also look into what is being done today to better the way Indigenous knowledge is organized, classified, and shared. Melissa will be focusing on liberatory memory work in archives. She would like to think about how archivists can integrate, prioritize, and organize narratives of marginalized people that've been minimized or written out of history. She's interested in focusing on preservation of black cultural heritage in the US and the work of archivists like The Blackivists and Archives for Black Lives. Mariame will research how archivists are collecting and cataloging the ephemera, objects and other materials generated by contemporary social movements (particularly the Movement for Black Lives). She's interested in the digital collections that are being created relying in part on social media and hashtag activism.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Cataloging, Critical Librarianship, Indigenous Knowledge Organization

## Indigenous Cataloging

According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, an estimated 2.5 to 6 million Indigenous people live in the United States, not to mention the millions more who live in neighboring countries and across the world. (*Indigenous World 2020: United States of America*, 2020) Indigenous communities in this part of the world and internationally have contended with considerable social, economic, and political challenges. These ranged from oppressive policies, discrimination, the chipping away of cultural traditions, and in some cases, native communities driven or relocated from their ancestral lands. These obstacles result in lost or forgotten cultural heritage and practices over time as those in power imposed their language and traditions simply because they were deemed different. The colonization of Indigenous people has never ceased to effect generations of Indigenous Knowledge organization. In the matter of libraries, museums, and archives, institutions such as these which hold material or knowledge by or about Indigenous communities have generally failed to provide proper representation and accessibility, due to standardized practices that do not conform to Indigenous ways of thinking. The situation is evidential when investigating cataloguing practices, one of the core foundations of Knowledge Organization. For libraries, it is commonly known that certain structures within library cataloguing systems hold inherent bias towards Indigenous people. These systems marginalize Indigenous Knowledge through inadequate terminology and representation in the stacks. For museums and archives, many cultural objects with ambiguous histories are not rightly attributed, hindering proper access of material to the respective Indigenous community. Nevertheless, today a rise in awareness and developments by information professionals continue to make these institutions more inclusive where they can.

Strategies for the improvement and integration of Indigenous Cataloguing are ongoing as professionals in cultural institutions become increasingly conscious of the challenges Indigenous groups face within western Knowledge Organization systems. Numerous methods have been implemented and are continuing to develop, deriving from the critical work librarians and information professionals are incorporating to make cultural institutions more equitable. According to Drabinski (2019, p.51), “critical librarianship interrogates the work of power in structures and systems”, therefore when assessing Indigenous Cataloguing we must begin by asking why Indigenous related information has not been suitable with knowledge organizations of the ‘majority’. Additionally, critical librarianship must continue to challenge established practices that make information unequitable for certain groups of people because it can influence the way museums and archives catalog their materials as well.

First and foremost, we are obliged to recognize cultural institutions and the professionals who work in them have never been neutral, and as a result the systems which were created for knowledge organization do not function neutrally as well. At the heart of knowledge organization for information retrieval is cataloguing, a fundamental process of creating a bibliographic record through descriptive cataloguing, subject cataloging, and authority control. The process is highly significant for the accurate retrieval of information by means of the metadata created, and the creation of access points for resources through classification schemes, controlled vocabularies, subject headings, etc. A major challenge for institutions is finding a way to work around well-established cataloguing systems developed in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which for some groups created barriers to information because these systems were biased due to their white, male, heteronormative perspective. Kam (2007, p.18) appropriately points out that the “systemic bias is even more problematic when it is used to classify and

describe materials from cultures that subscribe to different worldviews”. As I’ve come to understand, a major point of contention in the world of cataloguing for Indigenous Knowledge are the Library of Congress Subject Headings and Classification System, due to their western worldview of organization. It is important to acknowledge not only because the Library of Congress as an institution is highly influential to libraries within and outside our country, but also because they have the propensity to marginalize vast Indigenous groups worldwide. Author Kam (2007) attests that the Library of Congress Classification System classification of Indigenous materials are inappropriately classified in the Class E group, a category labeled as the *History of Americas*. The classification of records in this context essentially preserves Indigenous materials in a place of history, completely negating their present-day existence. LC Subject Headings can be problematic as well for their outdated terminology, such as the use of ‘Indian’ to represent a vast majority of Indigenous groups worldwide. While it is clear, there might not be one system that can accurately represent such a diverse community, there are individual institutions working towards implementing changes to established cataloguing practices. As Parent (2015, p.704) suggests we should “explore cataloging and classification from an Indigenous perspective, one that values relationships over individuality.”

In terms of meaningful efforts to properly represent Indigenous material in a library setting, the Xwi7xwa Library, an aboriginal branch at the University of British Columbia, Canada, is a model example of a library implementing structures from an Indigenous perspective. The library uses a “unique aboriginal classification system and subject headings” customized for their Indigenous community (About Xwi7xwa Library | Xwi7xwa Library, n.d.) The classification system created for this library was directly inspired by librarian A. Brain Deer’s influential Brian Deer Classification System. The BDCS was distinctively created for

indigenous communities by “bringing like materials together, based on socio-linguistic and geo-spatial relationships as the principle of division”, a distinct difference from western classification systems (Doyle et al 2015). While widely seen as a tremendous representation of what can be done regarding cataloguing practices, the BDC “was originally intended for use with small, specialized collections and is not meant to represent all topics of interest to all Indigenous communities everywhere” (Xwi7xwa Library, n. d.). This speaks to the diversity within Indigenous groups where one system may not accommodate all. The Xwi7xwa Subject Headings similarly function in an alternative way, by means of using the heading ‘First Nations’ instead of ‘Indians of North America’ found in LCSH, and additionally using the given names of tribes and nations. (*Indigenous Knowledge Organization / Xwi7xwa Library*, n.d.) Similar changes are being implemented at individual institutions which use LCSH as a framework, such as the Manitoba Archival Information Network database. As a result of the community they serve, the Association for Manitoba Archives chose to remove the outdated term ‘Indians’ and replace it with ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Indigenous peoples’, the main heading ‘Indians of North America’ was also converted to ‘Indigenous peoples—North America’ to create a geographic subdivision, and lastly the term ‘Indian’ was dropped from a nation or tribe name such as ‘Dakota ~~Indians~~’ so as to use terminology used by Manitoba people themselves. (Bone et al., 2015) The modifications made by the Xwi7xwa library and the Manitoba Archives to their cataloguing practices, are beneficial not only for accurate representation but also for overall accessibility, authors Doyle et al (2015, p. 108) explain “Indigenous classification and metadata are fundamental to Indigenous user-centered information and instruction services, including teaching, learning and research.”

As you can surely tell by now, approaches to Indigenous cataloguing are not one-size-fits-all. Challenges to Indigenous representation in libraries, museum, and archives continue to be

prevalent because up to this point there has not been an overarching method which accurately represents such a diverse group of people, attempts discussed have largely been at regional and institutional levels. But of course, this is the dilemma with traditional Knowledge Organization Systems because they do not accommodate the information needs of all, however we must try to be as inclusionary as possible. Such was the case for the Mashantucket Pequot Thesaurus Project, initiated in 1995, it was a reaction to inadequate terminology used by popular knowledge systems to catalogue Indigenous materials. The purpose of this project was to create a controlled vocabulary, “designed to be user-centered and to reflect the information-seeking behavior of Native and non-Native scholars” and to “develop a thesaurus that may be used by the Library of Congress in order to be more precise when creating their subject headings” (Littletree & Metoyer, 2015, p.641). The heart of this project would bring about much needed change to language used by Library of Congress systems to catalog Indigenous information. Nevertheless, the project remains in a conceptual stage and has not been implemented, however developments to controlled vocabularies seem to offer targeted ways to broaden informational access. For example, in New Zealand, we see this occurring with the implementation of the Māori Subject Heading Thesaurus, “designed to meet the information needs of Māori speakers and people from Māori communities”, establishing a precedent for future thesauri projects (Littletree & Metoyer, 2015, p.642).

At the core of strategies for equitable representation and access for Indigenous cataloguing is the ability to create solutions via direct communication with the community. To further the resolve of equitable Indigenous cataloguing, practices towards issues in the digital landscape are also an area needing to be transformed. Especially by museums and archives because of their history of inaccurately representing Indigenous cultural materials and objects.

To solve this, TK labels, an initiative by *Local Contexts* were developed as a series of digital tags, for the use of restoring authority and control to Indigenous communities in managing their cultural heritage, commonly found in the hands of outside institutions. The creators of TK labels emphasize, nothing can come close to actually repatriating cultural objects to the hands of their rightful owners, however they believe through digital repatriation, it can be a pathway to conversations with people from Indigenous communities themselves. (Mozilla, 2018) Traditional Knowledge (TK) Label's work as an alternative license giving context to Indigenous materials found in the digital landscape. As of 2021, 18 TK Labels have been developed for use by Indigenous communities wishing to educate their audience on the use and access of their Traditional Knowledge online, or by libraries, museums, or archives wishing to attribute their collections appropriately. (TK Labels – Local Contexts, n.d.) Notably, TK Labels can already be seen in use, the Library of Congress in partnership with *Local Contexts* and the Passamaquoddy Nation worked together to update the descriptive metadata of 31 wax cylinder recordings of Passamaquoddy ancestors in their collection. (*About This Collection* / *Library of Congress*, n.d.) TK Labels are innovative solutions institutions can use to attempt to bridge the divide between Indigenous communities and their cultural heritage by means of restoring their authority to what is put out in the digital landscape for others to consume.

To conclude, I want to emphasize much needed change within cataloguing for Indigenous representation is largely a continuous process. As a result of cases discussed, we can deduce local or regional solutions to cataloguing practices may work best for some situations due to the diversity within Indigenous communities. The restructuring or developments of controlled vocabularies may also help to better establish access points for information retrieval by and about Indigenous people. Lastly, in the creation of an equitable catalog and digital interfaces,



input by Indigenous representatives is imperative for institutions to adhere by, whether that be through directly reaching out to communities or by the hiring of Indigenous professionals. While there may be challenges to come, the work by critical professionals in creating awareness of unfair systems and practices is imperative in the struggle for inclusionary Knowledge Organization.

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