



Decolonizing the Authority File: Creating Contextualized Access to the University of Calgary's Indigenous Authors Collection

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Abstract

This article examines decolonization efforts at the Indigenous Authors Collection at the University of Calgary in Canada. The 47-book collection is an example of a decolonization attempt by the University, which aligns with the institution's Indigenous strategy. This project enhanced the Indigenous collection by adding Canadian authors and providing culturally appropriate metadata to increase visibility and access in the library's catalogue. The authors discuss the problems they faced with current metadata standards not allowing the use of special characters, enhancements made, and the implications of cataloguing policies and workflow for other collections. The authors also demonstrate how users view and access their changes and show new ways that users can interact with the collection. They also explore future possibilities that linked data practices offer to display enhanced author information from local authorities and broaden the collection's reach even further.

Keywords: Canada; cataloguing; decolonization; Indigenous; linked data; metadata

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Introduction

This paper examines the Indigenous Author Collection at Libraries and Cultural Resources (LCR) at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada. Respectfully, we wanted to start by acknowledging the land where the University is located. Likewise, we would like to take this opportunity to recognize the traditional people and territories from the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta. Namely, the Blackfoot Confederacy comprises the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations. Also, the Tsuutina First Nation, the Stoney Nakoda, the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations. In addition, the city of Calgary is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta in Region III.

One of the ways a library can decolonize is by bringing in Indigenous voices. This can be through hiring staff or selecting relevant and meaningful materials for the library's collection. Gyebi-Ababio (2021) posits that "decolonisation is about reimagining education and all aspects of our societies; education is the key that unlocks knowledge, fuels passions and curiosity, and defines the truths that allow students to carve out their identity in the world" (p. 8). Since the University of Calgary is an academic institution, we examine decolonization through an educational lens.



Having a collection of books dedicated to enhancing the Indigenous voice is nothing new. Publications such as IBBY Canada's (2023) *From Sea to Sea to Sea: Celebrating Indigenous Picture Books* and Read Alberta's (2021) *Prairie Indigenous eBook* collection confirm that collections highlighting Indigenous stories are perpetually needed and relevant. Public libraries often highlight Indigenous items for Indigenous history month (Toronto Public Library, 2023).

Academic libraries are now creating and highlighting these collections; this can be seen with Simon Fraser University's Lutz Collection of Indigenous Poetry (Delanowski, 2022). The Indigenous Authors Collection (IAC) at the University of Calgary contributes to the discourse of Indigenous collections by ensuring we showcase contemporary Indigenous voices within our library's corpus of materials. It is important for the community to see themselves reflected within library walls.

Canadian Context

In Canada, the term Indigenous is used to describe the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people (Statistics Canada, 2021). First Nations is an umbrella term describing a variety of nations like the Innu people of Quebec or the Wesley people in Alberta (Gadacz, 2022). The Métis people are a distinct culture and mixed heritage of those born from French-speaking and Indigenous heritages (Gaudry, 2023). Inuit is a term used to describe all the Indigenous people of Northern Canada and parts of Greenland and Alaska (Freeman, 2023). Canada is a member of the Commonwealth (Hilmer & McIntyre, 2022). There are 11 numbered treaties between Indigenous peoples and the British Crown (Government of Canada, 2023). However, this research does not include all Indigenous groups in Canada or cover all of Canada.

Case Study: Indigenous Authors Collection

The IAC is a newer collection at the University of Calgary's LCR. The collection focuses on contemporary Indigenous authors from Canada. The Rare Books and Special Collections Librarian explained the selection process:

Through its various approval plans and established collections in Canadian Literatures, the University of Calgary has always collected the writings of Indigenous authors from Turtle Island. However, I wanted to create a dedicated, named research collection in our Special Collections that would recognize the achievements and the variety of works being created by Indigenous authors living in Canada. I also wanted to create a place in our rare books vault for these books. Rare books and special collections departments tend to be oriented around European book traditions; they become rarified spaces that can exclude new non-European or settler voices. (A. Murray, personal communication, June 8, 2022)

As of September 2022, there are 47 books in the IAC with room to grow. The University's library ensured there was one copy in our unique collection and another for circulation. Some examples of the types of books in the collection are as follows: Thomas King's (2019) *77 Fragments of a Familiar Ruin*, Eden Robinson's (2017) *Son of a Trickster*, and Jesse Thistle's (2019) *From the Ashes: My Story of Being Métis, Homeless, and Finding My Way*. These books show the variety of literature imbued within the collection. Thomas King's work is poetry, Robinson's is fiction, and Thistle's is a memoir. The IAC offers fiction, non-fiction, comics, memoirs, and poetry. The

University of Calgary’s discovery layer (Primo) has a gallery feature that can create curated online collections. The IAC is a featured collection in the catalogue (University of Calgary, n.d.)¹.

Subject Metadata

Because the IAC is an Indigenous collection, there were specific changes to the metadata we wanted to implement. First, we wanted to utilize the Canadian Subject Headings (CSH) over the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) when it made sense. The CSH is a supplementary vocabulary with terminology focused on Canada that the LCSH would not have. Library and Archives Canada maintain the CSH, and changes were most recently made in 2021, which included changes to Indigenous headings.

Canada and the United States employ different terminology when considering Indigenous peoples. For example, the Library of Congress would use the term “Indian boarding schools,” while Library and Archives Canada would use the term “residential schools.” Each description makes sense in its given context, but as the IAC comprises authors Indigenous to Canada, the appropriate choice is “residential schools.” The same differential goes for specific Nation names. For example, the Cree people are called “Cree Indians” in the LCSH but would be referred to as “Cree” in the CSH. Overall, converting inappropriate or outdated LCSH headings to newly revised CSH headings served the needs of the IAC collection records without creating new local headings. As we continue the process, however, we may need to supplement this work with locally created subject headings, especially for our collections that contain subject matter very specific to our region.

We also started using an external vocabulary called Homosaurus, which is an internationally linked data vocabulary of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and two-spirited (LGBTQ+) terms². In Hardesty and Nolan’s (2021) article “Mitigating Bias in Metadata: A Use Case Using Homosaurus Linked Data,” we see that other institutions, like Indiana University in the U.S., have had success using Homosaurus. The goal of using an external vocabulary like Homosaurus always has the end user in mind. As Hardesty and Nolan (2021) state:

Providing access to controlled vocabularies created by marginalized communities and linking them to existing vocabularies such as LCSH can help make the search process more representative of the people who are using discovery systems and can connect them to resources that better represent themselves and their needs in a complex information world. (p. 1)

This linked data vocabulary arrived in June 2020 and seemed to release new versions yearly. For instance, Homosaurus v.3.1 was released in December 2021, and Homosaurus v.3.2 was released less than a year later, in June 2022. As we created more robust local authority records for each author, we discovered biographical information that could be used to create a better record, including when authors describe themselves as queer, like Canadian poet Billy-Ray Belcourt. In that instance, we could use Homosaurus in Alma by using their code “homoit” and the URL³. Another example, in a catalog record with “Indigiqueer” as a subject heading, a designation within a machine-readable cataloguing (MARC) record on the 650 subject lines would be expressed as follows:

650_7 \$a Indigiqueer. \$2 homoit \$1
<https://homosaurus.org/v3/homoit0001810>

We had the chance to interact with the Homosaurus team when we came across a term that was not in their vocabulary. Joshua Whitehead's (2017) book *Full-Metal Indigiqueer: Poems* had us question the best word for Indigiqueer. We emailed the Homosaurus team and asked if there was a better term that already existed on their list. They acknowledged the gap and quickly added the term "Indigiqueer" so that we could use the term in our IAC bibliographic record.

Author Metadata

In addition to adding updated and more culturally appropriate subject headings to the catalogue records in the IAC collection, we added further context about the Indigenous background of the authors themselves. By allowing the Indigenous Cataloguing Librarian time to focus on this project, she was able to research and present aspects about authors that may not ordinarily have been captured. Researched interviews and bibliography notes were consulted to flesh out the records. Additional aspects discovered include languages spoken or used by the authors outside of publishing, their demographic group or name, and biographical notes.

This contextual information was captured in local authority records according to the MARC 21 Format for Authority Data (Library of Congress, 2022). For example, the 377 MARC field for Associated Languages could be attributed to more than just English and include Indigenous languages like Dogrib when applicable. The IAC records also used the Library of Congress demographic group term list in the 386 Creator/Contributor Characteristics MARC field, where identifiable traits like "Cree (North American People)" can be listed. The IAC list is far from perfect, and as a pilot project, it is in continual development.

Lastly, we ensured that the IAC records had biographical notes in the 680 Public General Note field; this designation allowed us to use special characters and syllabics. For example, in the IAC record for Dogrib author Richard Van Camp, we added the note: "Richard Van Camp is a Dogrib Tłı̨chǫ writer of the Dene nation from Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, Canada." Other data that can be captured where applicable include geographic places where the authors lived and worked in the 370 Associated Place field. IAC records could also include expressions of these areas in the Indigenous languages used by the author or linked geospatial coordinates to be machine-actionable.

Implications of Local Authority Records

There are advantages and disadvantages to using authority records to present this data and creating local records rather than incorporating standardized ones. Including this data in the bibliographic record for a work rather than an authority record would require repeating the same information in each record if an author has written multiple works. This would work for a smaller defined collection such as the IAC, but it would only be sustainable as a general practice across some collections in a more extensive catalogue. Including author-specific data in bibliographic records would also deviate from including only the metadata that describes and provides access to the work. On the other hand, an authority record allows centralizing all context around an author as an entity together in one record.

Moreover, authority records have dedicated fields to present this type of biographical information in several fields in a structured way. If this type of metadata were added to a bibliographic record, it would most likely be entered as an unstructured written note in a

biographical or historical data field. The loss of structure makes the metadata less useful and machine-actionable in a linked data capacity.

The advantage of using local authority records rather than linking to nationally established authority files is that they offer the possibility of compiling and enriching our records with data that highlights these specific aspects about the authors in the collection, in this case, the authors' Indigenous context. In most cases, data elements of this nature do not already appear in standard authority records. For example, the name authority records for Richard Van Camp from the Library and Archives Canada and the Library of Congress include a cross reference of a variant form of the name along with citations of source data (Virtual International Authority File [VIAF], n.d.). This data supports the functionality of the record of creating an established form of the author's name that will search and gather his works efficiently. In most cases, the records do not go further with other biographical data or context relating to the author. Thus, the functionality of compiling and providing further biographical context for the author is not there.

However, the disadvantage of creating local authority records is that if there is already a standard authority record linked to that author in the catalogue, these new records attached to a locally added authority record become outliers. This affects the user's ability to search and retrieve all bibliographic records for an author efficiently. There will be additional work to reconcile and possibly re-link existing records to the local heading. This will also be the case if local subject headings are created in place of, or in addition to, Library of Congress or Canadian subject headings. A possible solution to this issue would be to submit the local name or subject authorities through the Name Authority or Subject Authority Cooperative Programs, which the LCR's Content Services Department is considering pursuing.

Another more fundamental issue with using authority records to compile this information is how users will access that information in the catalogue. In many current online catalogues, authority records function solely as mechanisms to index authorized headings and link cross-references for users to aid in discovery. The authorized and variant headings are indexed in our library services platform (Alma/Primo). Users who search with a variant term are brought to records matching the authorized heading. The authority record does not display, instructing users to access or link to another form of the term, which happens automatically as part of the operability of the catalogue's interface. The users will not see the information in the authority record. This configuration will cause a problem if the authority record is used for something other than navigation; in our case, the descriptive elements are lost to the user unless other mechanisms are used.

The Future: Linked Data

Fortunately, the advent of linked data formats can help to resurrect these more descriptive elements in an authority record that are not readily available to users in the discovery layer. Because we have formatted the elements about our entity in a structured way, we can convert these elements into a linked data format. If we took traditional library metadata that is a human-readable string of text (e.g., an author's name) and added a machine-readable identifier to it (e.g., the link for a VIAF or Wikidata record for that author), users could draw in information about that author from these external sources (Schilling, 2012). In this way, we could enrich our records with external sources and expose our data to these sources as well.

One linked data format that translates library metadata to more web-conversant formats is the bibliographic framework (BIBFRAME) (Library of Congress, n.d.). Converting authority records into BIBFRAME is under development, and there is currently no conversion tool for this in Alma's system⁴. Another possibility is to convert the authority data to a Wikidata instance. A Wikidata instance is a structured, online, open data record that can be collaboratively edited (Wikidata, 2023). In many cases, there is already a Wikidata instance for the authors in the IAC primarily based on the VIAF. We could work on adding or mapping the aspects of language, geography, or demographic characteristics from our authority records that are not in the Wikidata record. Alternatively, we can map our local authority data to create a new Wikidata record if it is not already there. Once there is a satisfactory Wikidata record, we can embed its uniform resource identifier (URI) into our local authority record.

It is then possible to configure our discovery layer to retrieve the data from the Wikidata instance via the URI in our authority record. The interface can then display the information from the authority record in our catalogue in the form of an "author card" or "knowledge card" (Weisman, 2020). In this way, when a work by an IAC author is searched in the catalogue, the added context about the author also displays. This uses our existing MARC authority data in a new way and elevates and recognizes the achievements and variety of works created by Indigenous Canadian authors inside and outside our catalogue.

Workflow Considerations

This collection and workflow offer the opportunity to act as a pilot for testing the creation and use of local authority records and new linked data solutions in our catalogue and discovery tool. Because of the different processes and issues involved with using local authority records, we must consider the scalability of implementing the process further in our catalogue. This process lends itself to specific collections and authors we want to highlight to give them more exposure. However, applying enhanced metadata in local authority records across the entire catalogue would not be feasible. Other methods could be considered to bring in author metadata more efficiently, such as automatic tools to bring in and add author information from other sources. For example, Ex Libris is doing some work on providing a linked data author card feature in a future release (Ex Libris, 2023). We also need to do further work to update and decolonize more of the subject metadata across our catalogue on a larger scale. This project gives us a manageable set of subject headings to update and test. From there, we can tweak the process and test these updated headings' impact on our catalogue.

Outcome

This project has allowed us to test many new ways to present information on a valuable collection for LCR users. We have increased visibility and access to the IAC by presenting it as an online curated collection. We updated the records' subject headings to reflect newly revised and culturally appropriate CSH and Homosaurus headings. We have provided further context about Indigenous authors by including value-added data to local authority records. Finally, we have begun looking into possibilities to incorporate this author information in new ways. Next, we will explore using our Integrated Library System's upcoming features to display author cards to relevant bibliographic records and incorporating this data into Wikidata.

Conclusion

The IAC is an essential collection of LCR at the University of Calgary. These updated headings impact Indigenous authors in our collections and catalogue. Because of the nature of the collection, we wanted to decolonize and enhance the subject and author metadata in these records as we catalogued them rather than wait and develop a large-scale process across our entire catalogue. This collection allows us to test and implement new processes, vocabularies, and technologies that can be applied to other Indigenous records and sets of records in our catalogue. The future research we wish to embark on examines how the collection has been accessed over its first three years.

Endnotes

¹ The full collection can be seen on the library website at:

https://ucalgary.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/collectionDiscovery?vid=01UCALG_INST:UCALGARY&inst=01UCALG_INST&collectionId=81811169880004336

² Homosaurus is an international linked data vocabulary of LGBTQ+ terms:

<https://homosaurus.org/>

³ Alma is an Ex-Libris end to end library software system (ILS).

⁴ Using a linked data standard like BIBFRAME enhances accessibility in the larger metadata and online community, as it increases the use of machine-actionable identifiers.

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