

# The Respectful Terminologies Platform Project and Envisioning Indigenous Governance (Paper)

## **Abstract or Résumé:**

This paper will discuss the Respectful Terminologies Platform Project (RTPP), a project focused on creating a system of Indigenous terminologies, and questions of governance within cataloging and other descriptive practices. As an emerging Indigenous-lead project created through years of advocacy work, RTPP is engaged in work to vision a means of Indigenous vocabulary development focused on community governance and protocols. At the same time, existing governance systems for terminology and vocabulary systems such as the Library of Congress, and the Canadian Subject Headings, and projects such as the Homosaurus serve as examples of different models of governance. This paper will explore concepts of governance, the role of UNDRIP in systems of terminology, and Principles such as CARE. Woven throughout the paper will be moments to envision a system which human rights as the central guiding consideration for systems of terminology.

## **1. Introduction**

The Respectful Terminology Platform Project (RTTP) is an emerging project built on many years of advocacy and work within the Indigenous library community. This Indigenous-led initiative is a project organized within the National Indigenous Knowledge and Language Alliance and it proposes to create an open access, multilingual platform to hold subject terminology related to Indigenous peoples, communities, and related cultural and other terms for use across a wide range of data and domain applications. The project has received support from organizations such as Library and Archives Canada, Heritage Canada, the Canadian Association of Research Libraries, the Canadian Knowledge and Research Network, the Canadian Urban Libraries Association, the Internet Archive Canada, and OCLC. Key considerations and questions within the project revolve around questions of governance. Questions such as: what would a system be like that rather than strict control, focused on community? What would it mean to be wholly Indigenous-led and Indigenous controlled? What protocols need to be put in place to ensure community needs are met? This paper will focus on the critical need to envision and enact new ways of practice.

## **2. Context**

Numerous widely used terminology systems in Canada in the cultural heritage sector are known to include inappropriate naming, misnaming, and categorization of Indigenous peoples, knowledges, cultures, and communities within inappropriate colonial systems (Cherry & Mukunda 2015; Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015; Littletree & Metoyer 2015; Littletree et al. 2020; Sandy & Bossaller, 2017; Turner 2020). The terms used to describe objects, peoples, places and other documents within collections databases are outdated, racist, and frequently have their roots in colonial information systems developed by governmental agencies (Turner 2020).

Indigenous librarians and other Indigenous people involved in the description of cultural materials have pointed to the problem for almost fifty years (Lee 2019). While such systems are widely recognized as problematic and the issue of inappropriate terminology with descriptive practice is urgent (Frick & Proffitt, 2022), change has been slow. How can we look beyond the terms themselves to the policy and governance structures that continue to prop up harmful terms, prevent community intervention, and prevent justice.

While the terms themselves have garnered the most attention in the research literature it is also important to look beyond the names themselves to the policies, practices, and governance structures that form key pieces of systems for the creation and application of subject terminologies. For more than 150 years library collection subject terms have been primarily drawn from the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), Canadian Subject Headings (CSH), and the Répertoire de vedettes-matière (RVM). These terminology systems are bolstered and supported by a complex and engrained system of formal professional bodies, pipelines for subject heading development such as the Subject Access Cooperative Program (SACO), and for-fee systems that enable and ease the exchange of bibliographic metadata such as OCLC. These systems, with both LCSH and CSH located within governmental agencies, have governance and systems of policy rooted in colonial bureaucracies making structural change extremely challenging.

Theorists such as Adler (2020) and Turner (2020) have pointed to the link between systems of classification and government policies mean to disenfranchise and control non-white members of society. Alder traces a link between the publication and release of key cataloguing and classification codes in 1876 with the end of Reconstruction to suggest the need for “taxonomic reparations.” (2016) Turner ties the development of cataloguing techniques at the Smithsonian to document Indigenous peoples to moves of control and erasure through government policy. Within Canada there is a connection between classification and the control and regulation of Indigenous peoples. Thus, a clear line can be drawn between technologies and techniques of information management, policy, and governance within government institutions and system issues of discrimination. The RTPP seeks to decouple the development and maintenance of subject terminology from government infrastructures thus severing a harmful situation.

### **3. Ethics and Policy**

The recent development of the Cataloguing Code of Ethics (2021) and increased attention to the role of ethics and human rights within descriptive practice (Caswell 2021; Snow and Shoemaker 2020) point to a not only a greater awareness of the harm perpetuated by systems of description (Frick & Proffitt, 2022) but a strong desire amongst the cataloguing community to reform practice. This awareness and desire are evidenced by the January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023 release a *Guiding Principles for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for Metadata Creation* by the Program for Cooperative Cataloging, a major body which governs policy and standards with cataloguing in North America. In the context of this discussion point four is of particular interest: “Take

responsibility for our metadata and advocate for transparency in our cooperative and institutional practices and policies.” Ethical practice must extend to policy. Considering emerging and existing principles of ethical practice will aid the RTPP in developing a way of working that is strongly centered toward accountability.

#### **4. Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Principles**

Considering colonial systems in the context of Indigenous governance is a complex problem. However, continuing to use data infrastructures, systems, and ways of working without consideration of ethical practice in relation to Indigenous peoples’ data is no longer option. There are critical gaps and potential blind spots within governance structures for cataloguing data, particularly around Indigenous data and extending considerations of Indigenous data to established systems of terminologies and vocabulary.

Carroll et al. 2021 have stated: “Indigenous data are data, information, and knowledge, in any format, that impact Indigenous Peoples, nations, and communities at the collective and individual levels; data about their resources and environments, data about them as Individuals, and data about them as collectives” This definition of Indigenous data touches a range and depth of coverage that promises to fundamentally change data practices writ large. With the passing of Bill-C15 and the beginning of the enshrinement of UNDRIP within Canadian law, it should mean that policies and practices associated the CSH should be compared and aligned with UNDRIP. Furthermore, policies should seek to align with Indigenous data governance frameworks such as OCAP<sup>®</sup>, and the CARE principles. The RTPP takes UNDRIP and CARE as critical components of its emerging governance structure. In the vision for the future of RTPP are modelling new forms of practice based on the strong presence of these frameworks.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Implementing the RTPP is a key component of a laying important groundwork not only in relation to the terms themselves but to governance. Focusing especially on ways such policy can and should align with UNDRIP and principles of Indigenous data sovereignty. As Rowe et al. (2021) suggest: “Indigenous data and its applications such as transfer and linkage can further empower Indigenous nations by unsettling colonial, governmental, institutional, political, and legal systems that are historically designed to undermine Indigenous self-determination.” Thus, creating such policies and practices promise to bring closer an imagined future.

## References

- Adler, M. (2017). Classification Along the Color Line: Excavating Racism in the Stacks. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.17>
- Carroll, S. R., Herczog, E., Hudson, M., Russell, K., & Stall, S. (2021). Operationalizing the CARE and FAIR Principles for Indigenous data futures. *Scientific Data*, 8(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41597-021-00892-0>
- Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee. (2020). *Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee Website*. A Code of Ethics for Catalogers. <https://sites.google.com/view/cataloging-ethics>
- Cherry, A., & Mukunda, K. (2015). A Case Study in Indigenous Classification: Revisiting and Reviving the Brian Deer Scheme. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 53(5–6), 548–567. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2015.1008717>
- Duarte, M. E., & Belarde-Lewis, M. (2015). Imagining: Creating Spaces for Indigenous Ontologies. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 53(5–6), 677–702. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2015.1018396>
- Frick, R. L., & Proffitt, M. (2022, June 6). *Reimagine Descriptive Workflows: A Community-informed Agenda for Reparative and Inclusive Descriptive Practice*. OCLC. <https://www.oclc.org/research/publications/2022/reimagine-descriptive-workflows.html>
- Lee, D. (2019). *Research and Indigenous Librarianship in Canada*. <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v5.29922>
- Littletree, S., Belarde-Lewis, M., & Duarte, M. (2020). Centering Relationality: A Conceptual Model to Advance Indigenous Knowledge Organization Practices. *KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION*, 47(5), 410–426. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2020-5-410>
- Littletree, S., & Metoyer, C. A. (2015). Knowledge Organization from an Indigenous Perspective: The Mashantucket Pequot Thesaurus of American Indian Terminology Project. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 53(5–6), 640–657. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2015.1010113>
- Program for Cooperative Cataloging. (2023). *Guiding Principles for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for Metadata Creation*. <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/resources/DEI-guiding-principles-for-metadata-creation.pdf>
- Rowe, R., Carroll, S. R., Healy, C., Rodriguez-Lonebear, D., & Walker, J. D. (2021). The SEEDS of Indigenous Population Health Data Linkage. *International Journal of Population Data Science*, 6(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.23889/ijpds.v6i1.1417>
- Sandy, H. M., & Bossaller, J. (2017). Providing Cognitively Just Subject Access to Indigenous Knowledge through Knowledge Organization Systems. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 55(3), 129–152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2017.1281858>
- Snow, K., & Shoemaker, B. (2020). Defining Cataloging Ethics: Practitioner Perspectives. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 58(6), 533–546. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2020.1795767>

Turner, H. (n.d.). *Cataloguing culture legacies of colonialism in museum documentation*. Retrieved August 19, 2021, from <https://books-scholarsportal-info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/en/read?id=/ebooks/ebooks5/upress5/2020-06-13/1/9780774863940>