

Unsettling the Library Catalog

A Case Study in Reducing the Presence of “Indians of North America” and Similar Subject Headings

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As the University of Denver (DU) has begun to accept and wrestle with its history, the DU Libraries have looked for ways it may be perpetuating the harms done to Indigenous populations. An example of this work can be seen in the libraries’ work on changing the displayed terminology used in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) to more current and appropriate headings that respect and correspond to the terminology used by the populations they are meant to represent. This article provides background for this work through a literature review and a more detailed account of how this topic is directly related to the institutional history of DU. A discussion of the specific steps and procedures taken to implement this change is followed by the obstacles encountered along the way and how they were overcome.

The University of Denver (DU) has an institutional history that dates back to the late nineteenth century and includes one of the most egregious atrocities committed by the United States against the Indigenous populations of this land, specifically the Cheyenne and Arapahoe nations. As the institution began to publicly accept and wrestle with its history in 2014, the DU Libraries looked for ways it may be perpetuating the harms done to Indigenous populations. An example of this work can be seen in the libraries’ initiative in 2020 to change or update language used in catalog records to describe Indigenous peoples. Specifically, the project aims to change the displayed terminology used in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) to more current and appropriate headings that respect and correspond to the terminology used by the populations they are meant to represent. This article provides background for the libraries’ initiative through a literature review and a more detailed account of how this topic is directly related to the institutional history of DU. A discussion of the specific steps and procedures taken to implement this change is followed by the obstacles encountered along the way and how they were overcome.

Over the years, information professionals and scholars with various areas of expertise, not just catalogers and metadata specialists, have become aware of the shortcomings of controlled vocabularies, especially LCSH. While it is undeniable that there are certain benefits associated with using controlled vocabularies like LCSH, these shortcomings represent an opportunity for catalogers and metadata specialists to respond to user needs and expectations by altering or using different

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controlled vocabularies when the situation calls for it. One such shortcoming in LCSH are the anachronistic terms used to describe Indigenous populations of North America. Some of these terms are rooted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonialist practices and mentalities, representing language that is now understood to be both harmful and confusing.

The Library of Congress (LC) is not ignorant of the need for change in their controlled vocabulary. They recently announced plans to work on updating subject headings related to Indigenous peoples. According to a report presented to the American Library Association (ALA) Core Subject Analysis Committee during its annual meeting on June 8, 2022, a consolidated approach is being taken by gathering specialists from all over LC that will coordinate the work of updating LCSH authority records. The group tasked with this work includes subject specialists, collection curators, reference librarians, and archivists. Broader and more general headings will be the focus of the project at the beginning (Indians of North America and Eskimos will likely serve as examples). The composition of this group is intended to ensure that consensus throughout the library is reached on any agreed-upon changes.¹

It is fair to ask why so much effort and time should be put forth by libraries to perform this work locally if LC is going to do something along the same lines in LCSH. Why not just wait for LC to finish its work and incorporate the changes into our catalogs? There are several reasons why libraries should continue this work despite LC committing to do so. First, LC themselves admit that this will take time to accomplish. Though it is true that the work will take a while to accomplish locally as well, there is a greater level of control over the speed and number of resources devoted to the task at the local level. Waiting on LC to make a specific change could mean putting the work of improving subject terms on hold for years, possibly decades. Second, there is no guarantee that LC will prioritize the same headings as the local institution. A significant reason for doing this work is to better represent our local users. The local institution is uniquely situated to respond to user needs and requests. Through conversations and tools like user research the local institution can implement changes that are representative of local users' desires. Finally, there is no guarantee that the terminology that LC chooses as a replacement for current LCSH will match what would be chosen by the local institution, or by the peoples represented by the terms. This has already occurred in the case of the LCSH "Illegal aliens" change. While some have been placated with the change, others, including the ALA/ALCTS/CA/MMS Subject Analysis Committee (SAC) and the national campaign to "Drop the I-word," wish that LC had chosen something other than "Illegal immigration" as one of the replacements.² The Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) has even advocated for libraries to be less reliant on a single vocabulary for this very reason. While recognizing the importance of controlled

vocabularies, the PCC is encouraging "its members to explore avenues for reducing reliance on a single controlled vocabulary controlled by LC."³

For these and other reasons, unsettling and interrogating subject headings that describe people is important for libraries to undertake at a more local level. While complete reliance on a single controlled vocabulary is not ideal, a lack of resources often prohibits the development and maintenance of extensive local vocabularies. A careful balance should be sought that considers the needs of the local users with the ability of the library personnel to create and maintain these local headings. It is this model that informs the following discussion and the work that has been done at DU.

Literature Review

"Radical Cataloging." "Critical Cataloging." "Decolonizing the Catalog." "Indigenizing the Catalog." "Words matter." These concepts have been written about for decades. In one of the earliest critiques of LCSH that addresses historically minoritized and underrepresented groups, Sanford Berman calls out LCSH as only serving "jingoistic Europeans and North Americans, white-hued, at least nominally Christian (and preferably Protestant) in faith, comfortably situated in the middle- and higher-income brackets" and embedded with "'racist/colonialist bias,' double standards, and 'self-serving euphemisms.'"⁴

In the decades that followed, most research and writing on the representation of Indigenous peoples in the library catalog focused on classification schemes or developing thesauri, rather than seeking solutions for institutions that are essentially tethered to LCSH. These include the now well-known Brian Deer classification scheme. Brian Deer classification was developed by a Kahnawake librarian and is used at several Aboriginal libraries in British Columbia, including the Xwi7xwa Library at the University of British Columbia.⁵

Most institutions that have developed their own subject thesauri either are outside of the United States or house highly specialized collections. These include the National Indian Law Library (United States), Aboriginal Thesaurus (Australia), Māori Subject Headings (New Zealand), First Nations House of Learning Thesaurus (British Columbia), Mashantucket Pequot Thesaurus (University of Washington), and the National Native American Thesaurus (University of California-Berkeley).⁶ The diversity of knowledge structures and languages among tribal entities in the United States means that a thesaurus developed by or for a collection specific to another country or specific to a tribal entity in the United States cannot be applied to all.

Despite Berman's 1970s call to action for LCSH, many outdated and offensive terms still exist. In his ALISE Xchange presentation in 2015, John Burgess called out this inaction in

librarianship as “complicit, if not responsible, for perpetuating colonial approaches to knowledge by replacing traditional knowledge with Western knowledge, especially in physical libraries established under colonial regimes.”⁷

The reasons for widespread use of LCSH include the ability for users to use the same terms when searching at various institutions, for resources to be easily incorporated into a union catalog or federated search, using cohesive terminology for multilingual and nonverbal works, and providing authority records that include alternative terms for the same concept.⁸ However, in representing Indigenous peoples, LCSH is rife with “inappropriate terminology” and “glaring omissions” of “terms and concepts.”⁹ Another critique of LCSH and Indigenous representation derives from the idea of *literary warrant*. According to LC, literary warrant means that “headings are proposed as needed for new cataloging” and “headings are based on usage in resources being cataloged and reference sources.”¹⁰ In other words, concepts that do not yet exist—or are not yet acknowledged as existing—in the LC collections do not warrant a subject heading. However, Beghtol points out that *cultural warrant* is more at play. Cultural warrant “arises from the presumed information needs of the potential users of the system,” establishes terms and categories based on “the personal and professional cultures of information seekers and information workers,” and “means that a particular knowledge representation and organization system is more useful for some people than it is for others because each system is predicated on the assumptions made by a particular small or large discourse community, knowledge domain or culture.” Thus, Indigenous representation in LCSH is not lacking due to literary warrant, or the lack of content on Indigenous topics and knowledge, but rather is lacking due to cultural warrant, or the exclusion of such topics and terms from the dominant discourse.¹¹

Background

While making local changes that improve representation and decrease the presence of damaging language in the catalog or discovery layer is important across all institutions, it is especially urgent at DU due to the university’s history and current campus climate. DU is a predominantly white institution (PWI) founded by John Evans in 1864. Evans served as the governor of the Territory of Colorado from 1862 to 1865, as well as the superintendent of Indian Affairs for the territory. On November 29, 1864, the Third Colorado Cavalry under the command of Col. John Chivington, a founding member of the DU Board of Trustees, murdered and mutilated over 150 peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho people encamped along the Sand Creek, mostly women, children, and elders. Because of the investigations that occurred following the Sand Creek Massacre, Evans was forced to resign his governorship in

1865. In 2014, a committee of faculty, students, and Sand Creek descendants produced the John Evans Report, which found Evans culpable for the Sand Creek Massacre.¹² Along with the report, the committee produced recommendations for confronting DU’s history and promoting healing for Indigenous community members. As of 2022, some of the recommendations have been met, but most have not. In 2019, Righteous Anger, Healing Resistance (RAHR), a student-led group on campus, submitted several demands to the chancellor, some of which reiterated those of the John Evans Report. As of 2022, the RAHR demands have not been met. In 2022, following desecration of a recently constructed tipi on campus that belonged to the Native Student Alliance, a set of demands was released by a joint group consisting of Native Student Alliance members, Undergraduate Student Government members, Native and Indigenous faculty, and Indigenous community members.¹³ Many of these demands echoed those from RAHR in 2019.

The recommendations and demands put forth in 2014, 2019, and 2022 call for specific, direct, and timely action from the administration at DU. In the meantime, various departments on campus, including the libraries, have sought ways they can support Indigenous students, faculty, staff, and community members. Seeking ways to improve representation in the libraries’ tools and services is just one part of a multi-unit effort. Other actions taken by the libraries include increasing the presence of Indigenous voices in our collections by expanding the purchasing of works by Indigenous authors (not only for scholarly and nonfiction works, but also for graphic novels, poetry, and zines); establishing procedures for lending to any individual with a tribal ID, regardless of whether they have a DU affiliation; programming that includes Indigenous author talks; and a No More Pios exhibit in the library, which traces the history of the DU moniker—the Pioneers—and the widespread support on campus to change the moniker.

During the 2018–19 pilot project of adding more Indigenous voices to the collections, the libraries’ Collection Diversification Task Force also wanted to look at ways to improve metadata for these items. After consulting with Indigenous faculty on campus, it was decided that the Design and Discovery unit and the Cataloging unit would look at the 581 Library of Congress Name Authority Records (LCNAF) for Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)–recognized tribal entities, doing online research to find how these entities currently name themselves. This resulted in the local creation and updating of 118 name authority records to add name variants that did not exist in the LCNAF record. This local name authority work led the libraries to start considering what other access points could be improved upon for these materials, which ultimately resulted in looking at LCSH.

In sharing the following process that the DU Libraries used for reducing the presence of “Indians of . . .” subject headings in our discovery layer, the authors hope others will

find ways to start similar work at their libraries. There still is much work to be done by both the libraries and the university, and the authors welcome any feedback on our procedures and efforts.

Why “Indigenous Peoples”?

In their work on creating space for Indigenous ontologies, Duarte and Belarde-Lewis put forth “the question for us now, as researchers and practitioners in the field of knowledge organization is not, how do we fit more vanishing ‘Indians of North America’ into the boxes we made for them, but rather, how do we create new spaces for Indigenous ontologies to emerge?”¹⁴ The application of a single, broad term to cover the diverse groups and peoples that the land currently known as the United States belongs to is a colonizing tool that fails to acknowledge differences in language, culture, and ways of knowing. “American Indian” and “Native American” became the widely accepted terms starting in the 1960s, but these terms have been looked at as outdated and colonizing for decades. In his writing from 1999, Michael Yellow Bird avoids “using ‘Indian,’ ‘American Indian,’ and ‘Native American’ because they are ‘colonized identities’ imposed by Europeans and European Americans” and instead uses the terms Indigenous Peoples and First Nations Peoples.¹⁵

In fall 2020, with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the design and discovery librarian surveyed and interviewed librarians and staff at tribal libraries across the United States. When asked what term participants would rather see used in lieu of “Indians of North America,” most responses replaced the term “Indians” with “Indigenous”; some responses indicated no preference between “Native American” or “Indigenous”; one respondent indicated they accepted “Indians of North America” as is and saw no need to change it. Some participants opted for follow-up interviews. All interview participants stressed that there is no proper term to encompass all tribal entities and members in the current United States, and ideally all individual entities covered in a work would be listed in the subject headings instead of a broad term to replace “Indians of North America.” They also expressed the understanding that historical works might not refer to specific entities by name, making it difficult to move away from an incorrect broad term. They support a replacement for “Indians of North America” as a more immediate action but asked that over time even the replacement be phased out in favor of recognizing specific tribal entities.

Description of Research Methods

This project used a multifaceted approach to gathering data and existing research to inform the terms used. Project

members looked at existing projects at various institutions. These institutions ranged from those specializing in materials and archives by and about Indigenous groups to medium- and large-size predominantly white academic institutions (similar to DU). These projects helped inform the process and provide ideas for terminology.

Simultaneously, as part of the previously mentioned IRB-approved research, the design and discovery librarian sent a survey to fifty-two tribal libraries in the United States. The survey was sent via United States Postal Service and via email, and the participating libraries had the option to complete the survey in the format they preferred. The survey included open-ended questions about cataloging, metadata, overall barriers the library might have in cataloging, and questions specific to the LCSH term “Indians of North America” and to the LCNAF term for their tribe or nation. Participants were asked if they thought there would be better terms to use instead of the LCSH or LCNAF term.

Survey results were coded, and participants were provided the option of a follow-up interview. Interviews lasted an average of twenty minutes and were conducted via Zoom or phone call. They gave participants the opportunity to elaborate on the answers provided in the survey.

Discussion

When considering the effect of words and representation, it is vital to incorporate the perspectives of the historically overlooked and underrepresented. While engaging Indigenous community members in the process was considered nonnegotiable from the earliest stages of this project, the potential difficulties in doing so were readily acknowledged. Such collaborations potentially target individuals for their time and emotional labor. At institutions of higher education, it has been shown that BIPOC faculty already are often asked to take on extra work and emotional labor on account of their identities—a problem known as “cultural taxation.”¹⁶ While we have engaged with Indigenous community members and library workers throughout various stages of the process, we also tried to limit the burden or stress that would be placed on them in the process—both with respect to emotions and time.

From the initial stages through the completion of the pilot, the execution of the project has not been without hurdles and barriers. An unexpected hurdle in the project was in gaining stakeholder support in the DU Libraries. The libraries’ Metadata and Discovery Committee (MAD) consists of representatives from all units in the libraries who work in the library services platform (LSP), discovery layer, or other online search tools such as finding aids and the institutional repository. In May 2020, following the aforementioned project to add terms to the locally managed LCNAF BIA records and influenced by the work being done at the Archives of

Manitoba, the design and discovery librarian shared the nascent idea of exploring internal replacements for “Indians of North America” and related subject headings. Although the initial proposal was not approved, further conversations with select MAD members revealed that they did in fact support the idea of the project, while acknowledging that many details for the project still had to be figured out. These conversations were very beneficial to the project, leading to the formation of a group of three librarians/faculty members and one staff member (design and discovery librarian, coordinator of cataloging, curator of special collections and archives, and metadata technician IV) who committed to drafting an official proposal for the project and working to gain consensus among MAD.

The group spent one full year compiling information and drafting a robust proposal for a pilot version of the project. The work of other institutions was looked at, including institutions in Canada and Australia, as well as those in the United States who were doing some version of the work. The work of Library and Archives Canada (LAC) heavily inspired and influenced the group. LAC began reviewing Canadian Subject Headings (CSH) in 2019, having found that the language of CSH often does not reflect the terminology preferred by First Nation, Inuit, and Métis Nation communities in Canada. Their process has involved consulting with multiple stakeholder groups, including the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) and their Indigenous Matters Committee (IMC), the LAC Indigenous Advisory Circle, the CFLA-IMC Red Team on Naming and Classification, LAC Indigenous colleagues, and the broader library community. The list of terms they have reviewed and updated is available on the LAC website, which included changing “Indians of North America” to “First Nations” and allowing for geographical subdivisions.¹⁷

In looking at work being done in the United States, the group met with individuals from the Iowa State University Library, who were doing similar work.¹⁸ In addition to the surveying of tribal libraries, the design and discovery librarian also consulted with the Native American liaison and program manager at DU, who in turn sought feedback from other Indigenous individuals on campus. In the meantime, the metadata technician, coordinator of cataloging, and others in the Cataloging unit reviewed subject headings in use in DU’s instances of Alma and ArchivesSpace. They compiled a robust list of all LCSH headings that included “Indians,” making notes about which headings should absolutely be considered for replacement (e.g., “Indians of North America”; “Names, Indian”), which ones needed further investigation because they are a government-used term (e.g., “Indian Courts”; “Indian Reservations”), and which headings would not qualify for replacement because they are formal titles or refer to peoples of India or the West Indies (e.g., “Authors, West Indian”; “Butler’s Indian Campaign, 1778”).

With the collected research and data, the group explored options for replacement terms. For the pilot version of the project, the group would limit the changes to five LCSH terms: “Indians of North America,” “Indians of South America,” “Indians of Mexico,” “Indians of Central America,” and “Indians of the West Indies.” Based on the work of other institutions and feedback from individuals at DU and various tribal librarians, “Indigenous peoples” would be used to replace the term “Indians” in these five headings. The group considered various possibilities for the geographic entity names in the headings and decided to keep the existing geographic terms used in the subject headings (North America, South America, Mexico, etc.) because for these areas, multiple Indigenous groups and languages exist and therefore a single Indigenous-language term cannot be used to replace a term such as “North America.”

The pilot project proposed changing the authorized headings for these five terms to “Indigenous peoples of North America,” “Indigenous peoples of South America,” “Indigenous peoples of Mexico,” “Indigenous peoples of Central America,” and “Indigenous peoples of the West Indies.” At the time of writing, the total number of bibliographic records changed in the LSP and discovery layer using these headings was 660. The authorized LCSH terms would be maintained in the authority record as alternative terms, making them indexed and searchable in the discovery layer, but the replacement heading is what would display in the record—both in the LSP and discovery layer.

Knowing the problematic nature of using a broad term to describe the multitude of Indigenous groups of the land currently called the United States, it was also decided that these terms would be very limited in their use. Catalogers have been trained to not use these terms going forward unless absolutely necessary, but to instead identify the tribal entities that apply and use those LSCH or LCNAF terms instead. A second phase of the project will include retrospective subject analysis of the materials that the library already owns that use these terms, and when possible, replace the broad terms with the LSCH or LCNAF for more specific Indigenous groups.

When the new, detailed pilot proposal was brought to MAD in June 2021, it was met with much more acceptance than it had been in 2020. However, the DU Westminster Law Library, which uses the same instance of the LSP, did not approve of the pilot as proposed. The Law Library expressed concerns that their users would be confused and misled if they were to search for the LCSH authorized headings and instead find the locally preferred heading listed in the record. There was also concern that the term “Indigenous” has a specific meaning in international law and might confuse researchers. The project group arranged to meet with multiple representatives from the Law Library to hear their concerns and seek a solution. It was decided that the LCSH authorized headings would be moved to a locally defined field in the MARC

record. Since the Law Library has their own view in Primo VE, the discovery layer used by the DU Libraries, it was then possible to display this locally defined field for the Law Library only, ensuring that the Main Library could continue with their goal of reducing the presence of these five LCSH terms in their view of Primo VE.

To begin updating the authority records, it was necessary to understand how authority work is handled in the LSP. In Ex Libris' LSP product called Alma, local authority records take precedence over the Community Zone (CZ)–managed authority records that serve as the de facto authority file for Alma. The CZ is a cloud-based centralized system that connects all Alma libraries. It is made up of a Central Knowledge Base, authority vocabularies, and a networked bibliographic catalog of electronic resources found in the Central Knowledge Base. The CZ authority vocabularies are updated by Ex Libris automatically and require very little to no intervention by the institution for authority maintenance. Bibliographic fields with controlled vocabularies are automatically linked to the corresponding authority record in the CZ. The local authority option allows an institution to supersede the CZ managed authority records and modify or replace the references or authorized headings to affect users' search outcomes or the terms displayed in the online catalog. There are certain limitations to using this process, such as the fact that the new authority records cannot be used in the browse subject headings search. Despite this limitation, it was determined that for this project, the benefits outweighed the negatives.

Alma Methodology

Because bibliographic fields are linked to the CZ authority record, changes made to an LCSH record in the CZ are automatically reflected in the LSP and discovery layer. To relink the authority fields in bibliographic records to the local authority records, two jobs in Alma must be enabled to allow for both the re-association of the authority fields in records to the local authority records and for the preferred term to be corrected if a new preferred term is specified in the local authority records. These jobs run on a set schedule and do not require manual intervention. However, for these jobs to perform properly, an additional step was necessary to ensure the job that re-associates authority fields from the CZ to the local authority record performs its function as intended. Utilizing batch processing rules, also called normalization rules, rules were written so that anytime they found the specified LCSH they would change the second indicator from 0 to 7 and add a

Details	
Title	The changing culture of an Indian tribe,
Author	Mead, Margaret, 1901-1978. >
Subjects	Indigenous peoples of North America -- Social life and customs > Indian women -- North America > Indigenous peoples of North America -- Cultural assimilation > Indigenous peoples of North America >
Contents	pt. I. General background -- pt. II. The Indian woman: her place in this changing culture.--pt. III. Tabular and diagrammatic treatment of raw materials.
Contributor	Columbia University. >
Publisher	New York : Columbia University Press
Creation Date	1932
Format	xiv, 313 p. ; 24 cm.
Language	English
Series	[Columbia university contributions to anthropology, vol. xv] > Columbia University contributions to anthropology ; v. 15. >

Figure 1. Example record from the discovery layer. The term from the pilot project has been changed to “Indigenous peoples of North America” both with and without subdivisions. This record also includes a subject string that will be looked at in the future phases of the project: Indian Women—North America.

subfield 2 with the code for the local authority configuration previously set up. This made it possible for the two automated jobs in Alma to relink the authorized headings and change the authorized headings if needed. In addition, a set of rules were created to accommodate the Law Library's request to retain the authorized LCSH terms in their view of Primo VE through the use of a local bibliographic field.

LCSH authority records found in OCLC Connexion were chosen as the templates for the local authority file records. These authority records were chosen to maintain consistency and use the metadata already present in the record. The process outlined in the Library of Congress Subject Headings Manual (LC SHM) H 193 was used, moving the current preferred term to a new 450 field and then adding our local preferred term to the 150 field.¹⁹

This has the advantage of providing indexed searching of both the old and new authorized headings while only displaying the new authorized heading to our users in the online catalog.

The changes being made to current records in Alma also had to be made to all records moving forward that would be brought into Alma. Normalization rules were once again used to change the second indicator to 7 and add a subfield 2 with the appropriate code for the local authority configuration. These rules must be created for each instance of LCSH that would be changed, meaning in this case, the five different LCSH terms. The rules were added to every import profile that is used to bring records into Alma from an outside source, including OCLC Connexion. With these in place any record brought into Alma will automatically be re-associated with the local authority record, and the heading in the record will be changed with the new preferred term if one of the five previously mentioned LCSH terms are found.

650 0 \$\$a Indians of North America \$\$x Social life and customs.	b 650 7 \$\$a Indigenous peoples of North America \$\$x Social life and customs. \$\$2 DINPSH
b 650 0 \$\$a Indian women \$\$z North America.	b 650 0 \$\$a Indian women \$\$z North America.
650 0 \$\$a Indians of North America \$\$x Cultural assimilation.	b 650 7 \$\$a Indigenous peoples of North America \$\$x Cultural assimilation. \$\$2 DINPSH
650 0 \$\$a Indians of North America.	b 650 7 \$\$a Indigenous peoples of North America. \$\$2 DINPSH

Figure 2. Image on the left shows the subject headings prior to any changes. Image on the right shows the changes made to the subject headings using the batch processing rules.

150 __ a Indians of North America	150 __ a Indigenous peoples of North America
450 __ a American aborigines	450 __ a Indians of North America
450 __ a American Indians	450 __ a American aborigines
450 __ a First Nations (North America)	450 __ a American Indians
450 __ w nne a Indians of North America x Culture	450 __ a First Nations (North America)
450 __ a Indians of North America x Ethnology	450 __ w nne a Indians of North America x Culture
450 __ a Indians of North America z United States	450 __ a Indians of North America x Ethnology
450 __ a Indians of the United States	450 __ a Indians of North America z United States
450 __ a Indigenous peoples z United States	450 __ a Indians of the United States
450 __ a Native Americans	450 __ a Indigenous peoples z United States
450 __ a North American Indians	450 __ a Native Americans
	450 __ a North American Indians

Figure 3. Image on the left shows the standard LCSH record. Image on the right shows the changes made to the record for the local authority record.

Limitations of Subject Headings: LCSH and Primo VE

The limitations of subject headings in LCSH and Ex Libris' Primo VE affect the decisions made in this process and affect the user experience for researchers. The hierarchical structure of LCSH lends itself to the existence and application of overly broad (and, as such, incorrect) terms, such as "Indians of North America." The ability to geographically narrow down the term with subfields has long made it possible for catalogers to avoid using the names of tribal entities and people. For example, one could use "Indians of North America—Colorado" instead of using the LCSH or LCNAF terms for the various tribal entities for which the land of Colorado belongs to, including Arapaho, Cheyenne, Ute, Shoshone, Apache, and Pueblo. The project team considered changing the examples such as the one above to "Indigenous peoples of Colorado," but the hierarchical and nested nature

of LCSH did not make this a feasible option. It was important that researchers could continue to search and retrieve using the authorized heading, and since subject strings do not have authority records, we would have had to create all new local authority records with our preferred term, adding the entire replaced subject string in the authority as a "see also" reference. Creating such a large and robust set of local authorities may be considered in the future but was deemed out of scope for the size of this team and project.

In Primo VE, locally managed authorities are not indexed in a browse search, even if we are using locally managed versions of LCSH records. This means that the five pilot terms and any terms added to the project in future stages are not included in the alphabetical browse list of subject terms. How much this affects an institutions' researchers will vary per institution. At DU, the browse search is used, but not so heavily that it was considered a hinderance to the project. However, that might not be the case for other institutions.

While it is possible in Primo VE to hyperlink locally managed fields, it was decided that the extra steps needed to do so would add unnecessary work to this project. This means that the locally managed field that is used for the Law Library to display the LCSH authorized term does not act as a clickable link that leads to a list of results with that term indexed as a subject-heading, such as is the case for 6XX and a handful of other fields. Since the intent behind adding this field to the Law Library view was for display purposes only, the lack of a clickable link was not deemed a problem in this case.

The most significant limitation to doing this work locally and in a discovery layer, such as Primo VE, is that most discovery layers include records that are not locally managed. The locally managed authorities in Alma only affect the institution's own records in Alma—they do not affect records pulled from Ex Libris' Central Discovery Index (CDI)—which is how DU incorporates most of its e-resource records. This means it is not possible to completely *replace* the “Indians of” subject headings, as the LCSH terms will still exist in the CZ and CDI records, but the presence of the unwanted terms can only be *reduced*.

Conclusion

The rate at which LC updates authoritative terms to best reflect current cultural expectations is at best painfully slow, which can perpetuate offences and reinforce colonialism. Despite having been called out on this by scholars and librarians for more than fifty years, the pace of addressing subject headings that serve to represent historically under-represented groups continues to be glacial, and unexpectedly and inexplicitly controversial or political at times. For these reasons, an increasing number of institutions have sought to make changes locally rather than wait for LC.

The language that libraries choose to use to describe resources can have a positive or negative affect on users. Words can aid users in finding materials that will help their research, or they can cause harm and perpetuate longstanding injustices in our society. While DU had specific circumstances that led to the creation of this project and the sustained effort to implement these changes, every institution of higher education in the United States has benefited from and/or contributed to the oppression of Indigenous people and cultures. Projects such as this do not constitute a major contribution to reconciliation regarding the offenses of the past and present. However, they do represent a small but important step in recognizing the harm of our long-held practices and the need to make changes on our own when the systems we commonly use are not able to pivot so quickly.

The DU Library set forth to examine the LCSH “Indians of North America” and related terms for possible replacement.

The result was a pilot project that took two years to execute. The project is iterative and will continue to expand with more terms. The June 2022 announcement from LC that they will be examining these same terms, starting in fall 2022, may also lead to changes that will affect the work DU has done locally. However, based on the timeline of previous subject heading changes at LC, DU still believes doing this work at the local level is worthwhile. The problems that come with using a broad term to describe hundreds of groups of diverse Indigenous peoples is also making it important for institutions to work with their constituents to determine what terms are best for their desired representation, and research needs.

It is of the utmost importance to make the work of reviewing and changing LC terms for cultural relevance and representation an iterative process. Furthermore, in going through this project at DU, the project group learned the importance of seeking consensus and prioritization of Indigenous perspectives over unanimity. This mindset will continue to be employed as the DU Library moves into the next phases of the project. In sharing their process, those involved in this project hope that other institutions find this informative and take steps to initiate similar work, for these or any number of other problematic subject headings.

Note about Terminology

The authors are intentional in their use of the term “unsettling,” rather than “decolonizing.” Several scholars have explained that using “decolonizing” and similar terms outside of the context of actual decolonization is harmful and can impede actual decolonization, which is still being sought in the United States and other stolen lands around the world.²⁰ While representation and language in the library catalog is important, the authors respect those who believe such work does not move us closer to actual decolonization. It is necessary to acknowledge, however, that there are scholars and librarians doing important work in this sphere who have in the past or continue to use the word decolonization in this context. Therefore, the term “decolonization” is only used when quoting or paraphrasing another work that uses the term.

The authors also recognize the problematic nature of using the term United States and acknowledge that the land commonly and politically known as such is made up of stolen lands of various tribal entities.

When using the term “Indigenous peoples,” the authors are referring to members, historical and present-day, of the hundreds of tribal entities whose ancestral lands make up the United States.

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