




Infrastructures of reparative description

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Abstract:

Following the release of the Guidelines for First Nations Collection Description for the Australian library sector, institutions across the country are grappling with how to translate the Guidelines into local policy and practice. This paper will not, and cannot, give a universal translation. However, it will offer a case study of Deakin University Library's approach to reparative description, what we are doing, what we are thinking about and what we are planning next. It will also explore the work of the national Reparative Description Community of Practice.

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Introduction

In my role as Metadata Strategy and Standards Coordinator at Deakin University Library, I am paid to think very deeply about library metadata, an activity I had long been doing for free. Until recently, this involved screeching from the rooftops to anyone who would listen about the systemic racism of catalogue records describing First Nations collections, people and histories. These days, to my great relief, I no longer have to screech.

The composition and release of the *Guidelines for First Nations Collection Description* (Raven, 2023) has galvanised the Australian library sector into acknowledging the scale of this problem and the kind of work that is needed to begin addressing it. The *Guidelines* are necessarily high-level and system-agnostic, designed to be applicable across a broad range of library sectors and contexts. Importantly, the *Guidelines* recognise that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution for the respectful description of First Nations collections, because different communities and contexts will have different priorities.

This means that institutions must figure out for themselves what best practice looks like for them. If you were hoping this would be a paper where I give you a translation of the *Guidelines* into a shelf-ready set of instructions, well, this is not—and cannot be—that paper. Instead, I can offer a case study of what we have done at Deakin, where we have started, and where we are going. I will also touch on some bigger-picture issues around the technical aspects and infrastructures of reparative description, and explore the work of the national Reparative Description Community of Practice.

What I mean

When I talk about ‘infrastructures’, I am talking about *supportive frameworks*. I am talking about solid, shared, load-bearing agreements that facilitate connection and exchange. Systems and networks. Technology and buildings. People and communities. Shared ways of thinking and relating. Lifeworlds.

When I talk about ‘reparative description’, I am talking about *re-contextualising materials for our common era*, both for materials created decades or centuries ago, and materials published just last week. I am talking about improving our understanding of how librarians and communities relate to collections, and reappraising how those relations are documented in catalogue records. This work has been known by many names: critical cataloguing, radical cataloguing, ethical metadata.

Where we started

The *Guidelines for First Nations Collection Description* are the result of a year's close collaboration between Australian library sectors and organisations, led by ALIA, AIATSIS, CAUL, CAVAL and NSLA (National and State Libraries Australasia 2022). A 2021 audit of contemporary Indigenous collections in selected NSLA libraries revealed a huge unmet need across Australian librarianship for clear descriptive guidelines for First Nations materials. The five organisations established a working group, co-led by Kathleen Smeaton (CAUL) and Sara Davidsson

(CAVAL). Cultural heritage consultant Tui Raven (Yamatji Nyungar) was contracted to lead this work. The *Guidelines* were published to great fanfare in November 2023.

Of course, reparative descriptive efforts in Australia did not begin with the Guidelines. ATILIRN Protocol 5, 'Description and Classification of Materials', affirms that 'there needs to be nothing less than a total paradigm shift away from Eurocentric approaches to categorisation and description' (1993). The development of the AIATSIS topical, people and place thesauri in the 1990s, and the adoption of the AUSTLANG Indigenous language database for cataloguing purposes in the late 2010s (AIATSIS 2015, Holcombe and Cass 2019), has enabled librarians to fully incorporate First Nations topics, worldviews and languages in their catalogue records.

Pre-*Guidelines* activity includes, but is by no means limited to, work by First Nations GLAM leaders Kirsten Thorpe (2019) and Nathan Sentence (2019), community-led work to reclassify collections at Galiwin'ku Community Library in East Arnhem Land to reflect a Yolngu worldview (Masterson 2019), ALIA Sydney's *Saturday School of Critical Librarianship* (2018) where I led a breakout session on critical cataloguing, and the successful joint efforts from Australian health librarians and metadata librarians (led by Gemma Siemensma and me) to propose changes to Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (2022).

Local efforts have also been inspired by critical cataloguing movements in North America, from Sanford Berman's *Prejudices and Antipathies* (1973) to K.R. Roberto's *Radical Cataloging* (2008), the film documenting the movement to *Change the Subject* (2019) and Violet Fox's online *Cataloging Lab* (2018-present).

What we are doing locally

At Deakin Library, we are guided by our 2022–2025 strategic plan, an ambitious and deeply principled document with a strong progressive ethos. Of relevance to my work is section 3, 'Advancing human-centred and inclusive knowledge systems and spaces', which reads, in part:

The structures and ideologies underpinning many library systems, protocols, practices and spaces are based on white, colonial and patriarchal ways of knowing. These protocols and practices continue to shape our engagement with information and knowledge today. Deakin Library is committed to critically analysing its own practices and systems, to uncover and dismantle aspects that enable and perpetuate systemic biases and exclusionary practices. (page 18)

This commitment is borne out in strategic objective 3.3, 'Critically interrogating library protocols and practices and dismantling those that perpetuate exclusionary ideologies', and objective 3.4, 'Auditing collections, metadata, systems and services through a diversity and inclusion lens'. (Deakin Library 2022).

The *Guidelines* provide a framework for delivering on this strategic goal. Their stated purpose is:

[...] to facilitate a shift in practices, ensuring that descriptions are respectful, accurate, and considerate of historical biases, and thereby contribute to a more equitable representation of these communities' perspectives and experiences. The Guidelines are created to be system-agnostic and can be adapted for use across the sector. They are not intended to function as a set of strict rules, or the only resource required for cataloguing materials. Instead, their purpose is to provide support in developing and implementing internal cataloguing practices. This approach allows flexibility, interoperability, and the ability to adapt to evolving technological environments. (page 6)

Guideline G2.B, 'Subject Headings/Controlled Vocabularies', instructs us to:

[U]se subject headings that give agency to people and communities. Using subject headings that give agency to people and communities means the terms used in the catalogue represent the way groups and individuals self-identify, rather than being imposed by external sources. (page 27)

Like many other libraries, Deakin Library's Metadata and Discovery team are progressively improving the subject analysis in our catalogue by adding headings from the AIATSIS topical, people and place thesauri to our records. The team began with prescribed and recommended texts used in courses, followed by other catalogue items on reading lists, as well as materials included in the Library's Indigenous Knowledges Resources Collection (Deakin Library 2024). Where an item has previously been catalogued by AIATSIS, the team will usually adapt those headings for our needs; where an item is not held by AIATSIS but has relevant headings in the Australian National Bibliographic Database (ANBD), we will consider including them in our record. Any original subject analysis done by the team is quality-checked by me. We were fortunate to receive specific training in applying AIATSIS vocabularies from Jaimie Solomons, senior cataloguer at AIATSIS.

The team holds a fortnightly 'reparative description workshop' where we discuss records we have been working on or issues we have encountered. This work is just one of our many responsibilities as a team; holding space in our calendars enables us to hold space for each other.

While access protocols are expressly beyond the scope of the *Guidelines* (Raven 2023, page 7), Deakin Library is taking steps to mediate access for a small group of relevant materials. In consultation with Tui Raven, who conveniently is now the Library's Senior Manager Indigenous Programs, we added two access notes in a 506 - *Restrictions on Access Note* MARC field for First Nations materials in our Special Collections: one specifically pertaining to a series of papers that are of interest to the local Wadawurrung Traditional Owners, and another for the remainder. These notes advise that access may be restricted pending an audit and reparative description of materials. We are very fortunate at Deakin that Tui's role exists to lead outreach and consultation with stakeholders, meaning that the Metadata and Discovery team can focus on applying those decisions and instructions to our metadata.

As one of the few Australian libraries still using the Sierra ILS by Innovative Interfaces (now part of Clarivate), we are required to manage our authority files in-house. AIATSIS generously provided us with MARC files of their three vocabularies, which we have loaded to Sierra. This helps us maintain a tidy database by running headings reports against these vocabularies, in order to identify typos or errors. We also concurrently maintain local copies of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) authority files, which we aim to update yearly.

What we are doing nationally

In my capacity as a member of the ALIA Community on Resource Description (ACORD), I was nominated as a member of the advisory group for the *Guidelines* project in 2022. The advisory group were essentially proofreaders and sense-checkers, consulted at regular intervals during the project.

It became clear to me that the Australian library community would benefit hugely from some sort of formal community to help practitioners understand, process and apply the *Guidelines*. Anecdotal evidence suggested that practitioners often lacked confidence in First Nations librarianship and were so afraid of making mistakes in such a sensitive area that they were reluctant to take even a tentative first step. I first raised the idea with ACORD in June 2022; Tui also later made a similar suggestion independently in a meeting with CAUL. The first group meeting was held in December 2023, ably steered by Phoebe Weston-Evans from ALIA, and in this meeting, prospective members were consulted on the name and scope of the group.

We eventually settled on 'Reparative Description Community of Practice (RDCoP)' and established a team of three co-convenors: myself, Michelle Rusiniak (University of Melbourne) and Donna Leech (Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads), with oversight and support from Tui Raven (now Deakin Library), Jaimie Solomons and the late Anthony McLaughlin (AIATSIS) and Phoebe Weston-Evans (ALIA). The RDCoP operates under the auspices of ACORD and reports regularly to that committee through a liaison officer (yours truly). Meetings are held monthly on Microsoft Teams, with a set of Teams chat channels available for further discussion.

None of the co-convenors are First Nations. The RDCoP is overseen and supported by both First Nations and non-First Nations practitioners, with our monthly meetings open to all. As a non-First Nations cataloguer, I see this as taking responsibility for the mess my cataloguing forebears left behind, humbly using my technical expertise to advance cultural safety in descriptive practice.

So far, the RDCoP has been a home of respectful and insightful discussion, with members from all over the country and all areas of GLAM work; it is clear that the group is meeting a real need for practitioners to discuss reparative description in a supportive environment. In particular, the culturally-informed advice offered by Tui Raven and Jaimie Solomons is deeply appreciated by the group.

What I keep thinking about

The critical cataloguing movement, as it was formerly known, has brought renewed focus and energy to this under-recognised area of librarianship. As discussed above, there has been sustained, small-scale activity in this area for decades, exemplified by the 2019 documentary *Change the Subject* (for which a screening was held at RMIT University in Melbourne). In my view, however, the primary trigger for our institutions' sudden interest in this work was the Black Lives Matter movement in mid-2020, sparked by mass uprisings in the United States following the murder of George Floyd, a Black American, by a White police officer. These events prompted (among other things) a wave of corporate soul-searching and public promises to address systemic racism, including from major American library institutions such as OCLC and the Library of Congress. For better or worse, events in the United States have a disproportionate impact on cataloguing activities in Australia, because many of the cataloguing standards in use, including MARC, LCSH, RDA (in part) and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), are administered by entities headquartered in the United States.

The OCLC *Reimagining Descriptive Workflows* report (2022), the result of an eight-month project to 'better understand and address harm caused by cultural institutions' collection descriptions' examined a series of 'acknowledged tensions and contradictions' in this work. Those that speak to me most loudly include:

- This work is urgent / This work takes time
- This work needs to be understood at a local community level / This work has broad and even global implications
- Change is best accomplished at the local level / Change is best accomplished through networks (page 8)

It is this last one that I have struggled with the most. We are exhorted to think globally and locally at the same time, but how can our work accomplish this?

The post-2020 shift in language from 'critical cataloguing' to 'reparative description' illustrates both a desire to speak inclusively of metadata work across the GLAM sector and the rapid institutionalisation of a movement that was hitherto largely underground. With that institutionalisation have come questions of priority and expectations of scale, as if paying close attention to one item or record at a time is an unaffordable luxury. More than once I have been asked, 'How will you make this scale?' My answer is often 'Well, maybe it shouldn't'.

I want our reparative efforts at Deakin to be visible at the national and international level, but ultimately we are not a national or international organisation – we are a university in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria, with a large cohort of students studying exclusively online (and soon overseas). Our community might be physically dispersed and virtually constructedⁱ, but our priorities must be continually informed by local needs. Ultimately, our metadata needs to work for us—our local communities and the institutions who serve them—and not the other way around.

What I wish I could fix

The OCLC report goes on to state:

The backbone of library metadata is standardized, uniform descriptions. This consistency in structure and content facilitates shared metadata infrastructure and record reuse, which has helped to drive down or contain costs for libraries. Libraries rely on a “catalog once” model, using records from vendors, publishers, the Library of Congress, OCLC, national libraries, or from other sources to support shared cataloging [...] The shared infrastructure that has been enabled by standardization and uniformity makes it difficult to accommodate local variations of records in aggregations such as union catalogs. (page 12)

Library cataloguing has historically been situated as a cooperative enterprise, where data is designed to be reused across institutions. In a reparative context, this cuts both ways: if one library initially described an item in insufficient detail or with inappropriate language, that data would have propagated in hundreds of library catalogues across the country. Individual libraries may have each made local edits to those records and may have contributed those improvements back to the union catalogue, but in a traditional MARC copy-cataloguing environment those edits would not ripple across to libraries that had downloaded older versions of the record.

In contemporary contexts, particularly in public libraries and other under-resourced sectors, metadata is increasingly commodified and sold as a ‘shelf-ready’ product, where all the descriptive work happens elsewhere and metadata workers are pushed beyond the physical and ontological bounds of the library (McCulloch 2022). This runs the real risk of leaving libraries unable to identify systemic issues with their metadata, specify necessary improvements to their vendors, or make local edits themselves. This poses an obvious risk of long-term degradation of metadata quality and relevance, which in turn imperils the ability of any library to account for, and connect users with, the resources it holds.

I believe strongly in the power of cooperative cataloguing to improve material metadata conditions for all contributing libraries: a rising tide lifts all boats. However, we are often hampered in our efforts at Deakin to contribute our reparative catalogue record amendments to the national and international datasets from which they came. Australian libraries maintain bibliographic records and holdings in two separate union catalogues, which do not always talk to each other.

Unusually among predominantly English-speaking countries, Australia has retained our standalone national bibliographic infrastructure—the Australian National Bibliographic Database (ANBD, formerly part of Libraries Australia, now part of Trove). The national libraries of New Zealand and Canada have both outsourced their union catalogues to OCLC WorldCat, while the British service Jisc Library Cataloguing (formerly Copac) includes records only from academic, research and special libraries (NLNZ n.d., LAC 2024, Jisc 2024).

Furthermore, Australia’s relationship with OCLC is uniquely managed at the national level, whereby all libraries with a subscription to Trove Collaborative Services (which now oversees the ANBD) are automatically members of OCLC. Under the terms of

the agreement between the NLA and OCLC signed in 2007, new records in the ANBD are regularly added to WorldCat (NLA 2008). However, representatives from both OCLC and Trove have confirmed to me that any subsequent changes to records in the ANBD are *not* transferred to WorldCat.

At Deakin, we source records for the overwhelming majority of our ebook and streaming media collection from OCLC WorldCat, but we do not upload eresource records or holdings to the ANBD, nor to WorldCat. In order to enrich the WorldCat dataset, any reparative edits need to be made upstream using OCLC Record Manager. Conversely, records for our print titles have come from all over the place, and we do send these records and holdings to the ANBD, so it currently makes the most sense to edit these records locally in Sierra, our ILS. Under this model, edits to our eresource records would be reflected only in WorldCat, and edits to our print records would be reflected only in the ANBD.

This is not a satisfactory outcome, so I have been forced to instruct my team to repeat their print record enhancements in OCLC Record Manager to ensure maximum visibility and discoverability in WorldCat. While we have heard from colleagues at other institutions that these enhancements are noticed and welcomed, from a technical and workflow management perspective the inability to enrich both union catalogues at once is simply not sustainable.

I am trying to act global and local at the same time, as the OCLC Reimagine Descriptive Workflows report exhorts us. On one level, it makes sense to prioritise an Australian dataset for Australian users; on another level, the relative invisibility of First Nations metadata in international knowledge infrastructure is part of what got us into this mess in the first place. It is important to enrich both the ANBD and OCLC WorldCat. I should not have to choose.

Furthermore, our ability to remediate metadata is limited to MARC records in the catalogue, with no ability to directly edit, hide or change metadata for articles, databases and other eresources supplied to us through our discovery layer, EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS). While Ex Libris Primo and OCLC WorldCat Discovery have incorporated this functionality (Ex Libris 2022, OCLC 2024), EDS has not. This can lead to sometimes awkward conversations with other staff and library users, who quite reasonably assume that the Metadata and Discovery team have a degree of control over our metadata and discovery.

After many years of systematically divesting themselves of cataloguing expertise, and only now recognising the scale of their data-cultural problems, institutions are now crying out for skilled staff that they cannot hire. As a hiring manager for positions within the Metadata and Discovery team, I can attest that comprehensive cataloguing experience is increasingly rare and First Nations cataloguers are few. This is not something we can blindly automate, or farm out to artificial intelligence. The whole point of this work is that people are doing it. The process of developing cultural knowledge and applying it in technical tasks is equally as important as the results of that work. First Nations library users deserve culturally safe infrastructure. People are infrastructure too.

What we are planning to do next

As we develop our reparative descriptive practice at Deakin, it is important that the Metadata and Discovery team document it as part of a formal metadata or description policy. Deakin has never really had one of these and we will need something to point to, for senior leaders, new recruits, community members and others interested in our work. I am inspired by description policies devised for the Auckland War Memorial Museum (Whittaker, 2021) and the State Library of Queensland (2024), which demonstrate a radically inclusive and practical approach.

We will also continue our efforts to lobby library metadata and systems vendors to improve their offerings. Aside from the aforementioned issue of synchronising our record enhancements with multiple union catalogues, our top priorities include the addition of AIATSIS vocabularies to OCLC WorldCat, enabling libraries contributing directly to that database using Record Manager or Connexion to validate these subject headings (as can currently be done with LCSH and MeSH). We are also keen for the ability to locally change the display of certain metadata elements within EBSCO Discovery Service.

The Reparative Description Community of Practice (RDCoP) will continue to meet monthly and support members in their reparative description efforts, with meetings to be a mix of formal member presentations and informal discussion. Any further activities will be guided by members.

Conclusion

In my role at Deakin, I have worked to build cultural knowledge and confidence within the Metadata and Discovery team as we implement the *Guidelines for First Nations Collection Description* and re-contextualise First Nations library materials with AIATSIS subject headings and AUSTLANG language codes. I have also helped to build national community infrastructure, the Reparative Description Community of Practice. I cannot yet implement global and local metadata changes at the same time, because our union catalogue infrastructures do not allow it, but I am very keen to be part of a solution.

Reparative description is a continual process of careful, humble, iterative change: tasks might be completed and celebrated, but the work is never truly done. The infrastructures supporting this vital work must be fit for purpose—technically, culturally, interpersonally, relationally, and at global, national and local levels. There is much still to do.

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Glossary

ALIA: Australian Library and Information Association

AIATSIS: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

CAUL: Council of Australian University Librarians

NSLA: National and State Libraries Australasia

ATSILIRN: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network

Endnote

ⁱ This phrasing is used in the Deakin-endorsed Acknowledgement of Country, which reads in full: 'As we gather for this meeting physically dispersed and virtually constructed let us take a moment to reflect on the meaning of place and in doing so recognise the various traditional lands on which we conduct our business today. We acknowledge the Elders – past, present, and emerging of all the land we work and live on and their Ancestral Spirits with gratitude and respect.'