City Library continues work to decolonize and update treatment of Indigenous materials

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City Library is changing how it organizes, catalogues and displays Indigenous authors, creators and content are getting a refreshed treatment at City Library.

Collections staff have begun the process of decolonizing the library's catalogue and updating it in order to make items easier to discover. The project is also undoing some of the inaccurate and harmful colonial language historically used when cataloging materials.

"Often, the subject terminology used by libraries to describe works by and about Indigenous peoples is outdated and inaccurate," Chief Librarian Deb Hutchison Koep said. "For example, the Library of

Congress Subject Headings use the term ‘Indians of North America’ to describe Indigenous peoples on this continent. In our catalogue, that term has now been replaced with ‘Indigenous Peoples – North America.’”

The Library of Congress also uses terms like “Indian art” and “Indian authors,” which have been updated to “Indigenous art” and “Indigenous authors.”

Subject headings may also perpetrate colonial perspectives on Indigenous culture — for example, works about traditional knowledge and ways of knowing may be catalogued as “Indian mythology.”

In addition, names used by library catalogues to represent individual Indigenous communities often do not reflect the names that Indigenous peoples use for themselves based on their own histories. City Library staff are working to update these terms, beginning locally.

More than 1,800 records in the library’s current catalogue have been updated since October 2022.

Library staff are also working to increase the visibility of Indigenous-authored materials, and highlight resources that are reflective of Indigenous perspectives and experiences.

“The collections at the library are evolving to include more Indigenous works and authors,” head of acquisitions Walter Zicha said. “We want to ensure Indigenous content is present and visible in all parts of the library’s collections.”

The library as an institution is working towards a more accurate and respectful treatment of Indigenous materials throughout the collection, he added.

Customers at the library will notice Indigenous-related items are currently marked with a salmon head sticker — a piece of artwork designed for the library by Raven Grenier (Gitsxan, Cree, French-Canadian) in 2013. In the coming year, the library will be working to update the artwork to be reflective of local Coast Salish artistic forms.

Searching for items in the online catalogue will also be more inclusive: searches using outdated language will be redirected to current terminology.

“The work of revising subject terminology to current, culturally appropriate and accurate language will be ongoing and iterative as we continue to learn,” Hutchison Koep said.

To learn more about Indigenous materials in the library’s collection, speak with a librarian or check out the Indigenous Peoples’ community hub for resource guides and self-directed learning.

This ongoing work — we want to do it in a good way. We invite the community, especially Indigenous community members, to give us feedback at info@nvcl.ca or by phone at 604-998-3453.