

North American Indigenous Languages in the British Library's post-1850 Collections

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Summary:

This CDP project seeks to engage with current debates about the role of cultural institutions in collecting, preserving and promoting indigenous languages, and the ethical challenges that such activities raise.

The British Library is one of the world's leading resources for the print record of North American indigenous languages from the early modern period. These are well documented and accessed by researchers. This project would aim to improve the discoverability of Library holdings in indigenous languages post-1850. The PhD student will focus on identifying these materials and assessing existing collections strengths; exploring the practical and ethical issues in employing and promoting the use of digital research methods, tools and technologies to the study of the indigenous print record; and developing recommendations as to a sustainable future collections practice which balances the interests of the Library, researchers and indigenous communities in this area.

Areas of Study:

The project will combine research questions from Museum Studies, Native American Studies (and more broadly, Indigenous Studies) with institutional research questions that have an information science/digital research element. A collaborative approach, drawing on the strengths and expertise of both the Library and the HEI partner, will establish a basis for robust research outcomes that have a strong theoretical base as well as immediate practical applications.

In particular, we are looking to develop the research theme with an HEI partner with subject expertise in either indigenous issues relevant to Museum Studies or Native American Studies. They would ideally have a good understanding of Native American language revitalisation, and a strong sense of the ethical issues relevant to conducting research with indigenous communities.

Alongside their PhD thesis research, the PhD student would begin the project by surveying existing British Library holdings of indigenous language materials from the US. This would involve a metadata cleaning and analysis of 19th century materials, with guidance from the [Digital Scholarship](#) and Metadata Services teams. They would also work with the North American Collections curators, who would share existing knowledge about materials in indigenous languages, in order to build a more complete profile of relevant 20th and 21st century materials. The curators would provide insight into Library acquisitions processes, how these risk potentially excluding indigenous languages, and strategies for countering this.

The aim of this initial period would be to identify which languages the Library already holds in the collections and which it does not hold, and thematic collection strengths. For example, as a starting point, the Library has holdings of 19th and 20th-century Cree, Mi'kmaq, Mohawk, Navajo, Ojibwe, and others, including bilingual works. Formats that are well represented include dictionaries and language texts, traditional stories, poetry, music, religious texts (traditional and Christian), educational primers, and sociological and anthropological texts. The Library additionally holds some recordings which may be beneficial to the student's research. While the student wouldn't require existing knowledge in a Native American language, the willingness to learn one and understand linguistic principles would be essential. This could potentially be supported through the Student Development Funding that will be attached to the CDP studentship.

Potential research questions, to be refined and developed with the HEI partner and (once recruited) the student, include:

- How can indigenous print language texts in cultural institutions be reinforced by non-print customs and practices?
- What are the practical and ethical issues associated with the continued acquisition of these materials? Possible examples include: how do contemporary collections speak to the historic print record of colonisation? What are the drivers for the continued collection of these materials, and should the British Library be doing this? How does the British Library build equitable relationships with tribal members and leaders of language programmes that could inform the development of a sustainable and ethical curatorial practice? How do current Library collections practice account for the vast range of North American indigenous languages and their overlaps? What are the responsibilities of global cultural institutions to indigenous communities?
- What issues and opportunities arise for holding institutions, researchers and indigenous communities when today's digital research methods, tools and technologies are applied to these collections? What methodological considerations and technological solutions might ensure the interests of these diverse communities remain balanced when providing access for computational analysis and similar approaches?
- What workable solutions can we garner from open source cataloguing platforms, and what problems do they present when working with indigenous materials? Can they assist the Library in relationship building with tribes, and in facilitating access to collections by these communities of users? How might cataloguing standards become more responsive to the nature of these materials?

Theories that the work could build on would vary depending on the focus of the PhD and disciplinary boundaries, but could include Bakhtin's philosophical and semiotic work, and more recent theories around language and decolonisation (particularly in respect of institutional contexts); histories of the American Indian Movement, Native American Colleges, and particularly language revitalization; and museum studies. Additionally, the student would be encouraged to prioritise engagement with indigenous approaches to language revitalisation through, for example, the outputs of the [Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposiums](#).

Given the emphasis on languages that are largely traditionally oral, there would be the possibility to include a component of oral history work. This would be subject to approval by the British Library and HEI partner's research ethics panels, given the cultural sensitivities of the project.

Benefits and training opportunities for the student:

The PhD student would benefit from staff-level access to British Library collections, and the expertise and experience of curators in the Americas section and Digital Scholarship departments as they work through a fascinating research question in a solutions-focused context. They would gain a unique insight into the day-to-day curatorial work at the Library and actively contribute to its acquisitions policy and engagement activities.

The student would be able to take part in the staff training provided by the Digital Scholarship team and also attend the Library's staff training workshop on Cultural Property and Due Diligence. They could attend forums on curatorial practice and ethics and also draw on the expertise of the Conservation team and colleagues from other curatorial areas such as Oral History, who could provide insight into best practice with other material formats, or different geographical and historical contexts e.g. Australasia. There may also be opportunities to work with other organisations and international partners.

Throughout the project, the student would have an opportunity to share insights from their research with the British Library's global audience by contributing to the [American Collections](#) and [Digital Scholarship](#) blogs and other social media channels.

Application deadline: 23 November 2018. For more information about the call and how to apply visit www.bl.uk/research-collaboration or email Research.Development@bl.uk.