

Indigenous Artists and Wikidata:

EXPLORATIONS AND
CONSULTATIONS REPORT



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Angela Gladue, also known as Lunacee, Miss Chief Rocka ([Q107230356](https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q107230356))
Photo credit: Candice Ward, ©.



Summary

BACKGROUND

CAPACOA's Linked Digital Future Initiative (LDFI) has been working closely with artists and organizations in the Canadian performing arts sector to increase the amount and quality of performing arts information available in open databases such as Wikidata. In their initial research report, members of the LDFI team identified several challenges related to the representation of aspects of diversity as linked open data (Estermann and Julien 61). It became very quickly obvious that focused consultations with Indigenous and racialized artists would be a necessary next step to ensure that the sector's underrepresented voices are heard to better understand their barriers; specifically how Wikidata's parameters bump up against culturally specific needs.

A project team made up of Frédéric Julien (CAPACOA), Brit Johnston (Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance) and Anju Singh (independent consultant, arts administrator) was formed, and this exploration and consultation project was initiated in October 2020.

<https://linkeddigitalfuture.ca>

INTRODUCTION

In his 1994 book on the Huron-Wendat Nation, author/historian Georges E. Sioui describes the relationships of the Wendats to one another and to all things in the universe. He notes that for the Wendats, the first organizing social principle is the acknowledgement of the Great Sacred Circle of life, or of relations. The Wendats look at the universe as a long chain of relationships between an infinite number of beings belonging to one large family. All of these beings are expressions of the same Greater Will that engenders movement and life – and the place of human beings in the Circle is no more no less important than that of all other forms of life; all are free and equal: men, women, animals, plants, minerals, air, sun, water, land, fire, moon, stars, and spirits (Sioui 118-119).



As a source of data that is constantly read and processed by humans and machines alike, it is important that Wikidata hold information about Indigenous Peoples, including Indigenous artists and their works.





This concept works well as a metaphor for Wikidata. Wikidata is the sister project to Wikipedia that stores open data describing all things in the universe, from human beings to stars to [spirits](#). Wikidata holds more than 100 million items that anyone can edit for free.

As a source of data that is constantly read and processed by humans and machines alike, it is important that Wikidata hold information about Indigenous Peoples, including Indigenous artists and their works. This would be consistent with Article 15 of the United Nation Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which affirms:

Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information (14).

This begs the questions:

- “Can Wikidata appropriately reflect Indigenous artists and their practices?”
- “Should it?”
- “How?”

Upon examining the Wikidata record for Georges E. Sioui ([Q386744](#)), it’s striking that, at the time of consultation, none of the 20 data statements about him attested or even suggested that he is Indigenous. For a bot crawling¹ this record, Georges Sioui is a human being of male gender identity; he has Canadian citizenship; and he practices philosophy. However, it is not possible for that bot to know or to infer that Georges Sioui belongs to the Huron-Wendat Nation, with which he shares an oral tradition.

Sioui’s cultural identity is a critical piece of information that contextualizes his work and the perspective he brings as an author and historian.

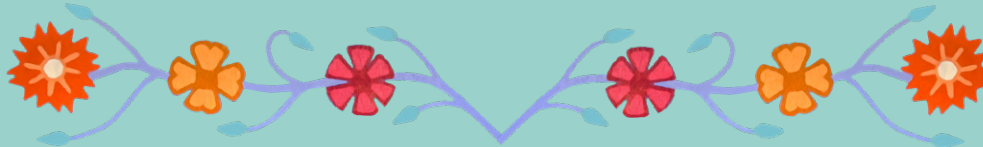
Our intuition was to ensure that information such as Georges Sioui’s Nation is included in his Wikidata entry and we wanted to test this assumption through our explorations and consultations with Indigenous artists and organizations directly. As identified in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Peoples have the right



As identified in the UNDRIP, Indigenous Peoples have the right “to determine their own identity” and the right to “control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions”.



¹ crawling robot: a software that crawls and indexes the web, looking for information that can be served in response to search queries.



“to determine their own identity” (24) and the right to “control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions” (22-23). As a larger community of Wikimedians looking to work with data in an ethical and respectful way, we feel strongly that we must certainly abide by these rights. Our consultation process aimed to find out how we might do this best.

We formed this exploration and consultation project to verify if and how descriptive information about Indigenous artists can be accurately and respectfully populated in Wikidata, in a manner that respects the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Research Questions

How can descriptive information about Indigenous performing artists, their practices and their works be accurately and respectfully represented in Wikidata?

We also wanted to explore more specifically:

1. What markers of Indigeneity are needed to represent – and to be able to query/ retrieve – an Indigenous person, organizations, works and practices in Wikidata.
2. Which properties (i.e., relationships) and classes (i.e., concepts) in Wikidata pose barriers for the participation of Indigenous artists in Wikidata?
3. How can we increase participation of Indigenous artists and organizations in our efforts to better populate Wikidata? How much engagement can we expect from Indigenous artists and organizations around this initiative?
4. What can we bring forward to the Wikidata community to improve the experience for Indigenous artists?
5. Who should or could be leading this work and how can we support them?
6. What parallels will we find between the experience of Indigenous artists in Wikidata and other underrepresented artist communities? What might these consultations reveal for us that we might expect or plan for in our consultations with other underrepresented artistic communities in the future?



Olivia C. Davies ([Q107277484](#)). Photo credit: Dayna Szyndrowski, ©.



ASSUMPTIONS

We began this endeavour with four main assumptions:

- Indigenous artists would think of being present in Wikidata as a form of *digital discoverability*², which would benefit them;
- The country of citizenship statement would be an area of concern;
- The ethnic group statement might not be a correct fit to denote Indigenous identity;
- Some artistic or cultural practices specific to Indigenous artists would be missing or incorrectly described.

OBJECTIVES

We had three main objectives for these consultations:

1. Ensure that the perspectives of Indigenous artists and their experiences with Wikidata were included as we continued our work and advocacy for better representation of the performing arts in Wikidata.
2. Surface the main pain-points for Indigenous artists as editors or users of Wikidata.
3. Bring forward a list of recommendations to the larger Wikidata community based on our findings.

We were also hoping that our consultation activities might lead to an increase in engagement of Indigenous artists in Wikidata. We were, however, careful not to set this as an expectation of participants. We opened a door, we invited people in, and we were ready to accept “no, thank you” as an answer.



Digital discoverability: the ability of information or content to be a) found when specifically searched for (i.e., *digital presence* or findability), b) spotted along similar information/ content (i.e., *visibility*), and c) proposed by a recommender system (i.e., *recommendation*).



² Digital discoverability: the ability of information or content to be a) found when specifically searched for (i.e., *digital presence* or findability), b) spotted along similar information/content (i.e., *visibility*), and c) proposed by a recommender system (i.e., *recommendation*). This definition is loosely inspired by the work of the Laboratoire de recherche sur la découvrabilité et les transformations des industries culturelles à l'ère du commerce électronique (LATICCE) and the Centre d'études sur l'intégration et la mondialisation (CEIM). Digital discoverability is a field of research that explores the benefits for content creators of carrying out their activities in the digital economy.



Methodology

PRE-CONSULTATION PROCESS

In advance of the consultations, we met to determine the best practices we would implement during our consultations. With the understanding that we were meeting with a historically underrepresented and vulnerable population we wanted to ensure our methods were equitable and respectful of Indigenous contexts. We met with leadership and representatives from the Indigenous arts and culture sector, including the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance (IPAA), during the pre-consultation process to review the project's mission and to help inform our best practices. Best practices include: acknowledging gathering protocols; use of decolonized language and; ensuring transparent and informed consent throughout the process.

We released three public open calls to Indigenous artists and organizations. The participants were selected based on diversity of geographic location across Canada, artistic disciplines, gender identity, and Indigenous identity and intersectionality. We defined “Indigenous” in the Canadian context, calling for participants belonging to one or more of the three federally recognized groups: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Following IPAA’s lead, we relied on self-identifying practices and did not request documentation evidence of participants’ specific ancestry.

BIASES

Consultation Team Biases

When we started the project, it was important for us as a team to acknowledge evident biases. With LDFI being an arm of CAPACOA, our work began with an already established level of trust in the performing arts and research communities. Further, the Wikidata performing arts research project, led by Frederic Julien, had already gained traction and support on a national level due to its outreach and information sessions. As such, there was strong support for the project by the consultation team. Intentionally, the team was made up of three individuals with differing backgrounds and life experiences: an Anishinaabe/Italian woman who works as an artist and arts connector, living in Ontario; a South Asian woman who works as an



We defined “Indigenous” in the Canadian context, calling for participants belonging to one or more of the three federally recognized groups: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.





artist and arts administrator, living in BC; and a Québécois white man who works as an arts researcher. While the selection of this project team was intended to strategically reduce bias while bringing in necessary professional expertise for the project, we recognize that the team represents a narrow scope of lived experiences.

Participant Biases

In our role as testers and researchers, we recognized the consultation call for participation would by nature attract artists who were already interested in building their digital profile - and perhaps more so those with an interest in technology tools - and wanting to learn more. We developed a direct consent process so that participants understood and agreed to sharing their data into Wikidata and, importantly, that their entry would be used as an example for future group consultations with Indigenous artists. We also noted that the team would be sharing their responses, behaviours and input in the final report, though the artist related to these items will not be named.

We also predicted two cognitive biases that could affect our research work:

THE HALO EFFECT: Because the majority of participants are active members of either CAPACOA or IPAA membership programs with positive relationships with these organization(s), we expected that participants could view what we presented to them in a more positive light, something which could encourage quicker acceptance of Wikidata as-is. As facilitators, it was important to us to open up and encourage critical space for participants to more readily interrogate Wikidata structures, so that we may tease out what is not working in Wikidata for Indigenous artists and organizations.

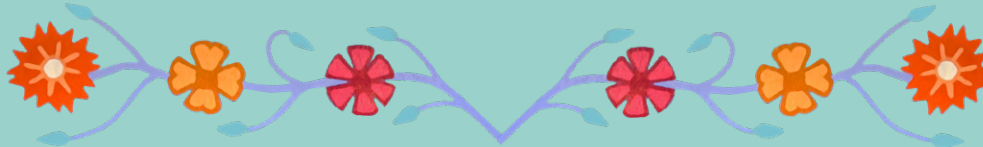
SOCIAL-DESIRABILITY BIAS: We expected this bias to be present in both the individual consultations (vis-a-vis the facilitators) and in the group consultations (vis-a-vis both the facilitators and peer participants). Especially in group consultations, we expected that there may be more discomfort to express opinions or perspectives that may differ greatly from the majority in the group.

Keeping these biases in mind, the project team worked to develop a consultation process that acknowledged biases at the top of presentations and created space for expressing various perspectives and providing critical feedback.



We developed a direct consent process so that participants understood and agreed to sharing their data into Wikidata and, importantly, that their entry would be used as an example for future group consultations with Indigenous artists.





CONSULTATION PROCESS

The Indigenous artist consultations took place in three phases:

Phase 1: Initial Group Consultation - February 2021

SIX PARTICIPANTS

This consultation's main focus was to provide space for exploratory discussions about the challenge of increasing the digital presence of Indigenous artists by making their works and information about the artists available as open data. A key topic was about respectful representation of the artists and the protection of knowledge. Digital and discoverability tools, such as Wikidata, are ripe with colonial overtones that dominate the experience of the user when creating an entry; language and labelling especially create barriers and inaccurate representations of Indigenous artists, their works, and Indigenous cultural practices.

Phase 2: Individual Consultations - June 2021

INDIVIDUAL SESSIONS WITH FIVE INDIGENOUS ARTISTS

Influenced by our learnings from the group consultation, we wanted to better understand the firsthand experience of Indigenous artists on the Wikidata platform. As a group, we decided to adopt the User Acceptance Testing format for our consultations – a method that tests technology interfaces or tools with users to better understand their experience with the tool and whether changes need to be made. We invited five Indigenous artists to create a Wikidata entry for themselves during each of their sessions. We worked one-on-one with each artist, requesting that they share their screen over video conference, allowing us to observe their process. Throughout the consultation, we asked the artist specific questions about the main tension points they experienced as they built their Wikidata item. Out of these consultations, we were able to identify five key areas that required further consultation.



Ivanie Aubin-Malo ([Q115563564](#)) and Barbara Diabo ([Q37489408](#)) performing the fancy shawl and the hoop dance. Photo credit: Jeangagnon, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#).



Phase 3: Group Consultations - October 2021

TWENTY PARTICIPANTS OVER THREE SESSIONS

The participants for this round of consultations were split up into groups of artists and organizations³. During these sessions, we shared each item that we wanted to discuss with visual examples from the individual artist Wikidata entries. The group was then able to interact with the live examples of Indigenous artists and their artistic and cultural practices in the Wikidata environment. We encouraged participants in these groups to take on an advisory role, proposing recommendations we might bring forward to the larger Wikidata community.

Key Findings

HOW TO READ THIS SECTION

In Wikidata, there are items (i.e., entries), properties, values, and identifiers to describe information. The following is a short list describing how these Wikidata concepts are referred to in this section:

- “property name” – we have inserted property names in quotation marks for easy identification;
- P_____ – this code is the unique identifier of a property;
- Q_____ – this code is the unique identifier of an item.

INDIGENOUS IDENTIFICATION

The “ethnic group” property (P172)

A “People” and an “ethnic group” are two distinct concepts in Wikidata, even though their definitions share a few similarities. Many Indigenous Peoples in Wikidata are stated to be “instances of” both [people](#) (or [Indigenous people](#)) and [ethnic group](#). A band is a First Nation government, which is yet another concept in Wikidata.⁴


³ One of the “organization” consultation groups had an artist in participation as the artist could not make the “artist” consultation group. This artist works as a community organizer so also brought perspectives that are relevant to organizations.

⁴ The Wikidata item for [First Nation band](#), is claimed to be a subclass (i.e., a sub-category) of [ethnic community](#), a loosely defined concept associated with both the notion of an ethnic group and that of a diaspora. Sometimes bands and their reserve have the same name. This can lead to misclassification of band items as reserves. For example, the Wikidata item for [Serpent River First Nation](#) is stated to be an instance of a reserve. The authors wish to thank Stacy Allison-Cassin for her guidance on Indigenous identity concepts in Wikidata.



Many Indigenous artists are present in Wikidata, but none of the statements about them indicate that they are Indigenous. One example that we can refer to is the Wikidata item for [Kevin Loring](#). At the time of writing this report, even though his Wikidata item states that he is Artistic Director of the National Arts Centre's Indigenous Theatre department, there's no way to say for sure from his Wikidata item that he is Indigenous (or to which particular Nation he belongs).

Kevin Loring (Q16214959)



Canadian playwright 

[In more languages](#)
Configure

Language	Label	Description	Also known as
English	Kevin Loring	Canadian playwright	
French	Kevin Loring	dramaturge canadien	
Chinese	No label defined	No description defined	
Cantonese	No label defined	No description defined	



[All entered languages](#)

Statements

instance of  **human** 



[1 reference](#)

[+ add value](#)

sex or gender  **male** 

[0 references](#)

[+ add reference](#)
[+ add value](#)

country of citizenship  **Canada** 

[0 references](#)

[+ add reference](#)
[+ add value](#)



Crawling bots are unable to match search keywords with data about an artist's Indigenous identity.





This information gap poses a barrier for people searching for Indigenous artists in a search engine, such as Google, because crawling bots are unable to match search keywords with data about an artist's Indigenous identity. This is also a barrier for people querying Wikidata about Indigenous artists: if Indigenous identity is used as a search criteria and Indigenous artists' entries are missing this critical piece of data, then these artists will be missing from the query results.

In Wikidata, the only way to affirm that someone belongs to or identifies with a socially-defined group is to make a statement (i.e., add a data point) using the [ethnic group \(P172\)](#) property.

When we introduced this property as an option for participants to self-identify as Indigenous, we were met with mixed reactions to the label “ethnic group” as it pertains to Indigenous identity. First, it was shared that the label for the property is loaded with colonial connotations. The term was coined by the science of ethnography which in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth-century focused on the study of social groups from a Euro-centric perspective. The term “ethnic group” has also been used over the last few decades to designate Indigenous and racialized people as minority groups, further marginalizing them and upholding colonial and white supremacist structures.

In our sessions, we noticed that while some of the participants in our one-on-one consultations appeared to be willing to accept and move ahead with the “ethnic group” label, most participants in the group consultations noted the problematic nature of the label, as well as its simple inaccuracy. Participants reinforced that the term “ethnic group” is not an accurate way to describe or represent Indigenous identity. Among other things, they noted that a Nation is not an ethnic group. They instead proposed terms such as “ancestry”, “ancestral group”, “affiliation”, “tribal affiliation”, “traditional homeland”, “traditional territory” or “home community”.

We then attempted to go beyond the label. We described the intention of the concept “ethnic group” in Wikidata to the participants, which is defined as:



Participants reinforced that the term “ethnic group” is not an accurate way to describe or represent Indigenous identity. Among other things, they noted that a Nation is not an ethnic group.





- a socially defined group of people who identify with each other on the basis of:
 - Common cultural referents (i.e., sets of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features, including artistic expressions, value systems, traditions);⁵
 - Common ancestry;
 - Common territorial origin;
 - Common history;
 - Common language or dialect.

We informed the participants that as a multilingual platform, the definitions for the ethnic group concept in Wikidata also vary across languages.

Once we were able to share the purpose and function of the ethnic group (P172) property in Wikidata, participants in the one-on-one consultations were able to conceptually connect with the “ethnic group” property as a means of Indigenous identification.

In addition to exploring the “ethnic group” property we also inquired into which particular “People” values (e.g., [Huron-Wendat Nation \(Q27691986\)](#), [Wyandot people \(Q213396\)](#)) one could use in conjunction with it.

During our individual consultations, we did not have the opportunity to consult with Inuit or Métis artists to validate if [Inuit \(Q189975\)](#) and [Métis \(Q262457\)](#) are appropriate Wikidata values for “ethnic group”. This being said, these terms are frequently used in self-identification information in Inuit and Métis artist biographies, which lends to our assumption that these two Wikidata values are valid options. It should however be noted that the Wikidata item for Métis is subject to frequent revisions of its description. Furthermore, the term “ethnic group” is sometimes used within descriptions of the items for the Métis and other items for Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples are not “ethnic groups”. They are Peoples.

In the case of First Nations artists, our consultative process found more questions than answers.

⁵ UNESCO defines culture as the “set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.” UNESCO, Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001. This definition is also an important foundation for The 2009 UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics.



Typically, self-identification information in a First Nations artist's biography states the specific Nation the artist belongs to. If the biography comes from a trustworthy website, then a Wikidata contributor could use it as a reference to state the artist's Nation as a value under "ethnic group" property. For example, Kevin Loring's biography on the National Arts Centre's website identifies Mr. Loring as "A Nlaka'pamux from the Lytton First Nation", which begs the question: which value would the artist, in this case Mr. Loring, like to see on their Wikidata item? Would it be the [Nlaka'pamux](#), an item describing a People (and also stated in Wikidata as an ethnic group)? Or would it be the [Lytton First Nation](#), an item describing a band? One might presume that Nlaka'pamux may be the most appropriate value to use with the "ethnic group", because a People and an ethnic group are similar concepts, but only Mr. Loring himself could say.

We learned from the one-on-one interviews not to presume that an artist's specific First Nations band will be their preferred value for the ethnic property. When asked what Nation they were from, one participant first named "Swan Lake First Nation". But then, when we explained that kind of information the ethnic group property attempts to describe, this artist adjusted their reply and chose a different value for this property, preferring to be identified as Anishinaabe.

We did not explore if First Nations artists would like their band affiliation to be stated in Wikidata or which property should be used to affirm this aspect of their identity.

Group consultations reinforced the necessity of consulting with Indigenous artists directly before entering information about their identities in Wikidata. One participant affirmed: "It's up to us to decide how we would like to be identified or not identified."

We also learned that some Indigenous artists may not be ready to identify using such narrow and specific terms, words, and concepts. One participant shared: "*For me personally, I'm at a place of discovery of my identity. We are at a time of reconciliation. I hear others saying how we should identify. I'm still in a learning stage.*" What this means for us is that the work of ensuring that Indigenous artists are included and represented in Wikidata includes working closely with Indigenous communities and providing space, time, and opportunities for collaboration with the Wikidata community. There was expressed interest from the consultation participants to take a leadership role in this work in a future phase.

We did not explore the concept of clans, which is another important social structure among many First Nations.



Margo Kane (Q6760632). Photo credit : University of the Fraser Valley, [CC BY 2.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#).



IPAA's Indigenous Data Sovereignty Solution:

Recognizing that the benefits of including Indigenous artists in Wikidata outweighed the potential negative outcomes, the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance (IPAA) has invited their members to provide permission for IPAA to release their information as open data in Wikidata. In the first iteration of their [Indigenous Data Sovereignty](#) initiative, IPAA is proposing to use the Indigenous group identification umbrella terms currently implemented in their database (First Nation, Metis or Inuit) for the “ethnic group” values in Wikidata. This means IPAA members will be identified as either First Nation, Metis or Inuit in Wikidata when IPAA uploads their members’ information to Wikidata. Stating < ethnic group: First Nations > in Wikidata is far from being as accurate as IPAA and the participants in our consultations would prefer. However, at the same time, IPAA determined that this statement is still true (even though it lacks precision), and they deemed this information worth disclosing in Wikidata as a first step towards having Indigenous artists represented in Wikidata. At the time of writing this report, IPAA had already started to collect finer self-identification information that could eventually be integrated in subsequent iterations of the Indigenous Data Sovereignty Initiative.

Key take aways:

- As a property denoting someone’s affiliation to a group of people who identify with each other, the ethnic group property appears to be a conceptually acceptable way of representing Indigenous identification.
- The label for the ethnic group property is riddled with concerns for Indigenous communities, as ethnic is not the term that most Indigenous artists would use to describe their identity. Participants suggested alternative labels such as “affiliation”, “ancestral group”, “home community” or even as broad as “background”.
- Descriptions of Wikidata items for Indigenous Peoples can be the subject of frequent edits. Those descriptions should be defined by the [WikiProject Indigenous peoples of North America](#) and documented in the discussion page for each item to prevent (and to revert, if necessary) undesired edits.
- Even if there is public information available about an Indigenous artist’s identity, Wikidata contributors should verify with the artist themselves if and how they would like to be identified in Wikidata.



Participants suggested alternative labels such as “affiliation”, “ancestral group”, “home community” or even as broad as “background”.

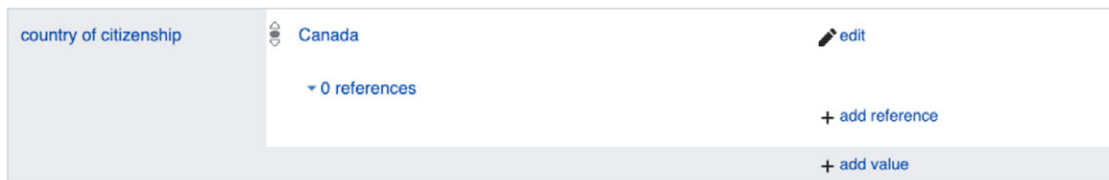




- Some First Nations artists identify with both their People and with the First Nations band in their home communities. A People and a band are two distinct things in Wikidata.
- Further consultation and research will be needed to determine if and how band affiliation should be stated in Wikidata.
- The IPAA Indigenous Data Strategy is a good example of seeking prior and informed consent before disclosing Indigenous identification information as open data.

PROVENANCE

The “country of citizenship” property (P27) and citizenship information in the disambiguating description



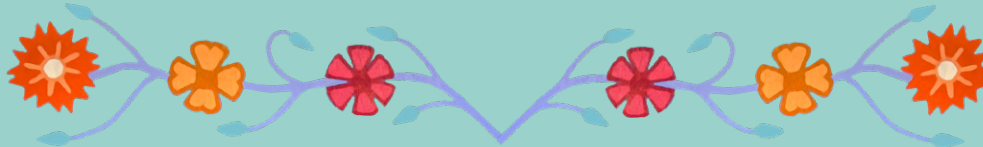
“Country of citizenship” is one of the first suggested statements when creating a Wikidata entry about a person. This had most of the participants feeling uneasy. Specifically, Wikidata requires that the “country of citizenship” property be stated using approved nation states, entities that are determined and upheld by colonial structures. As participants reviewed their options in this property, they were disappointed to see that the allowed options were limited to nation states and did not include territory options that reflect land or traditional Indigenous territory names, such as Turtle Island.

Further, the standard ways of describing Wikidata entries for persons posed problems. The Wikidata guidelines for descriptions recommend the following formula for items about persons: “[country] [career the person is known for]”. For participants in our consultations, the idea of affirming publicly and openly in a Wikidata description that the artist identifies as Canadian felt like a colonial, coercive measure aligned with the notion of citizenship. Participants preferred descriptions that emphasized their Indigenous identity rather than their citizenship. They chose to self-describe as a “First Nations artist”, as a “Canadian



Wikidata requires that the “country of citizenship” property be stated using approved nation states, entities that are determined and upheld by colonial structures.





Indigenous dance artist”, as an “Afro-Indigenous burlesque artist”, as an “Indigenous artist on Turtle Island” and as a “Kluane filmmaker, actor, activist”.

In our group discussions, we also briefly touched upon the impact that citizenship and Indigenous self-identification information may have on work opportunities for Indigenous artists.

Describing an artist as Indigenous rather than as Canadian could impact how the artists are received by engagers in two ways:

- Systemic racism/colonialism could make it detrimental to identify as Indigenous because opportunities can become limited due to type casting.
- International engagers use nation states to understand artists for hiring purposes, and as such, engagers looking for Canadian artists may overlook artists who identify as Indigenous but reside in Canada/Turtle Island.

Key take aways:

- Formulaic disambiguating descriptions based on citizenship and occupation (i.e., “Canadian singer-songwriter”) should not be used as the default description for Indigenous artists. Wikimedians should consider how the Indigenous artists describe themselves in their own words. When in doubt, the following formula could be used: “[Indigenous self-identification (if known)] [occupation(s)] in what is known as Canada”.
- Properties such as [place of birth \(P19\)](#) and [work location \(P937\)](#) can perform the same role as country of citizenship in terms of indicating that an artist is from the territory known as Canada. They are less likely to be considered offensive by Indigenous artists. They are also more granular and more flexible. These properties should be used in place of country of citizenship, unless citizenship is well documented and can be referenced.
- The property [significant place \(P7153\)](#) can be used to indicate a relationship to Turtle Island (such as a claimed citizenship) or to traditional territories.



Nmihtaqs Sqotewamqol / La cendre de ses os (Q115543453), a theatre production by Productions Ondinnok. Photo credit: Myriam Baril-Tessier. Performer: Roger Wylde.



Nmihtaqs Sqotewamqol / La cendre de ses os (Q115543453), a theatre production by Productions Ondinnok. Photo credit: Myriam Baril-Tessier. Performers: Charles Bender, Nicolas Gendron, Roger Wylde.



ARTISTIC & CULTURAL PRACTICES

The “occupation” (P106) & “field of work” (P101) properties

Native American hoop dance (Q1661347)

form of dance practiced by Indigenous Peoples of North America

edit

[In more languages](#)

[Configure](#)

Language	Label	Description	Also known as
English	Native American hoop dance	form of dance practiced by Indigenous Peoples of North America	
Latin	No label defined	No description defined	
French	danse du cerceau	type de danse des peuples Autochtones d'Amérique du Nord	danse des cerceaux
Chinese	No label defined	No description defined	

[All entered languages](#)

Statements

instance of	type of dance	edit
	0 references	+ add reference
		+ add value

subclass of	hooping	edit
	0 references	+ add reference
	indigenous American dance	edit
	0 references	+ add reference

During the individual consultations, we invited participants to state their main occupation(s) and to specify their areas of specialty with the “field of work” property. Participants did not have difficulty retrieving Wikidata items describing occupations and practices associated



with traditional and contemporary forms of artistic and cultural expression. However, the labels and descriptions were not always what they were anticipating.

For example, participants who looked for the practice “beadwork” were able to retrieve it, but the Wikidata item was labeled [beading](#) and the term “beadwork” only appeared as an *also known as* name. One participant questioned the use of “beading” as the main label and affirmed that this practice is called “beadwork” among First Nations.

During another session, a participant found colonial terminology in labels and descriptions in Wikidata items describing “[Native American Hoop Dance](#)”, “[fancy dance](#)” and “[jingle dance](#)”. She found these inappropriate. She further questioned who chose these terms and why people from these cultures are not consulted.

After this consultation, the project team decided to act upon the feedback that had been provided and edited both the label and the description for Q1661347:

Q1661347	LABEL	DESCRIPTION
<i>Before the edit</i>	Native American hoop dance	form of Native American dance
<i>After the edit</i>	hoop dance	form of dance practiced by Indigenous Peoples of North America

The revised label and description above conformed with the terminology used by the participant. The participant had further attested that other practitioners also call the dance form by that name.

We deemed these changes to be consistent with the [Wikidata label guidelines](#). The guidelines state: “*To figure out the most common name, it is good practice to consult the corresponding [Wikipedia article]*”. But they also clearly state that disambiguation information belongs in the description: “*When a page title includes disambiguation, either through commas or parentheses, the disambiguation should not be included in the Wikidata label. Disambiguation information should instead be part of the description.*” (“Help:Label”)



Participants emphasized the multi-faceted nature of Indigenous cultural practices. They described practices that can be both traditional and contemporary at the same time.





In this particular case, “Native American” was disambiguating information and should not have been part of the label, no matter if the matching English Wikipedia article and Commons category carry this colonial name.

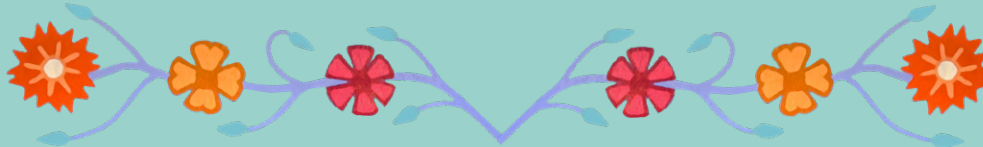
Unfortunately, the label change was reverted by another Wikimedian a few months later. The project team chose not to change the label immediately in order not to start [edit warring](#), which would contravene Wikidata policies.

In our exploration of this item and other traditional dances such as [fancy dance](#) and [jingle dance](#), we noticed the statement < [culture: Indigenous Peoples of the Americas](#) >. This is a way of affirming that a given practice is directly associated with the culture of Indigenous Peoples. This seemed a reasonable solution to indicate that a practice is Indigenous, as per our research question # 1. However, it may be more suited to traditional forms of cultural expressions than to contemporary expressions. The property “[facet of](#)” might possibly be a better property to state the indigeneity of contemporary artistic practices. We were not able to verify any of these hypotheses over the course of the project.

Participants rather emphasized the multi-faceted nature of Indigenous cultural practices. They described practices that can be both traditional and contemporary at the same time. They also described practices that have a strong community component or that are rooted in the land. Such aspects of Indigenous practices are currently not represented in Wikidata..

Key take aways:

- Many Wikidata items borrow colonial labels and descriptions from Wikipedia articles and from subject headings in national libraries’ authority files. These practices do not comply with the Wikidata guidelines for labels and descriptions. Moreover, they are likely to deter Indigenous people from participating in the Wikidata movement, thus interfering with the [Wikimedia vision](#). Efforts should be made by the Wikidata community to decolonize these labels and descriptions in consultation with Indigenous artists.
- Further research and consultation are needed to describe and to name Indigenous artistic and cultural practices.



DENOTING INDIGENEITY OF WORKS

We explored the concept of denoting “indigeneity of works”, by which we mean how we might determine in Wikidata that a particular work (film, painting, composition) is created by Indigenous artists. This exploration supported research question # 1 - what markers of indigeneity are needed in order to ensure that Indigenous artists, works, and organizations are findable in Wikidata.

Through our consultations, we understood that some artists and audiences may want to know whether a film, for example, was created by Indigenous artists. Throughout the discussion, participants also explored other aspects of indigeneity that can be found in works. For example, they wondered whether the genre of the work (i.e., traditional artistic practices), the language(s) of the work, the subject of the work, and intention of the work (i.e., intending a film to be an Indigenous film rather than simply a film) were also factors to consider. However, there was clear consensus these were additional factors rather than defining criteria. Ultimately, for participants in our consultations, *“an Indigenous work is a work created by an Indigenous artist”*.

Three interesting questions arose during our consultations with the groups on the theme of works:

1. Is “Indigenous” too broad a qualifier?

Using a term as broad as “Indigenous” to describe works felt inaccurate and not any more respectful than not having the label. The recommendation was that perhaps instead of Indigenous as a qualifying umbrella term, that the qualifier might instead be referring to the specific nation that the creators or the practice came from.

“Indigenous is a word that was created to lump us all together.”

The word “Indigenous” washes out specific identities. If you want the depth, go specific into the nation or band.”



Would the casting of an Indigenous actor make the film qualify as an Indigenous film or would there be a requirement for more of a leadership role, for example, an Indigenous director?





2. Must we denote works as Indigenous?

Many participants responded with a question about why we need to denote works as Indigenous in the first place, with some participants citing concerns about discriminatory practices and biases that might present themselves against the works in the same ways that Indigenous artists themselves experience.

Further, concerns about potential tokenism also came up with one participant asking *“Do we always have to mention that our art is Indigenous? Will I only be considered if they need an Indigenous actor?”*.

3. What criteria must be met for a work to be considered Indigenous?

One participant noted that the practice of simply labelling a work as Indigenous may become arbitrary, with varying standards and acceptance levels of which works should be given this title. For example, for a film to be labelled as an Indigenous film, would we expect particular roles to be Indigenous? Would the casting of an Indigenous actor make the film qualify as an Indigenous film or would there be a requirement for more of a leadership role, for example, an Indigenous director? Another question that arose is whether there would be a percentage of participants that would need to be included to consider the film to be an Indigenous film.

After the group consultations, we dove into Wikidata to explore how different aspects of Indigeneity of works could be represented in Wikidata.

Some solutions are already available in Wikidata:

- The Wikidata property [language of work or name \(P407\)](#) can be used to state that a work uses a specific Indigenous language. Indigenous languages are already present in Wikidata.
- The Wikidata property [genre \(P136\)](#) can be used to specify the art form of a work. As observed above, many traditional Indigenous practices are already present in Wikidata.
- The Wikidata property [main subject \(P921\)](#) can be used to describe the topic of a work. Whether Indigenous artists are able to find proper Indigenous subject headings in Wikidata has not been assessed.



We couldn't find an existing model in Wikidata for describing that a work is based on the traditional knowledge or the oral tradition of an Indigenous People. The property [based on \(P144\)](#) exists and makes it possible to state that a work is based upon or inspired by another work. The concept of [traditional knowledge \(Q1428168\)](#) is also described in Wikidata (although there are not yet items describing the specific traditional knowledge of each Indigenous group). Therefore, someone could state in Wikidata that a work is based on traditional knowledge and then qualify this statement to indicate which specific people holds the traditional knowledge. Potential qualifiers could include "[of \(P642\)](#)", "[creator \(P170\)](#)" or "[copyright holder \(P3931\)](#)".⁶

Key take aways:

- Our main takeaway and learning from this was that **any work created by an Indigenous artist is an Indigenous work**, however, that "Indigenous" is too generic a term to provide any truly meaningful context and representation that felt respectful to the creators of the work.
- Efforts should be made to state creator and contributor roles to works in Wikidata, especially when such works are created by Indigenous artists.
- Further research is needed to assert if Indigenous subject headings already exist (within and outside of Wikidata), and whether such subject headings should be implemented in Wikidata.

INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Describing an organization as "Indigenous" raised similar considerations and concerns as describing Indigenous works. Participants in the group consultation considered that an Indigenous-led organization can be deemed an Indigenous organization. In Wikidata, properties such as [artistic director \(P8938\)](#) and [director / manager \(P1037\)](#) can be used to state who holds leadership positions within an organization. However, this information representation strategy has a limitation: it is dependent upon information stored in the Wikidata items for the leaders of the organization. Therefore, the indigeneity of the



Elisapie Isaac at Festival des Vieilles Charrues.
Photo credit: Thesupermat, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

⁶ "Traditional Knowledge and Oral Tradition are... Indigenous cultural property owned by the Indigenous Peoples they come from... This recognition has bearing on permission and copyright, even when non-Indigenous laws do not require it." (Younging 38)



organization is not readily visible on the organization item and it must be verified by consulting the Wikidata items of the leaders. Of course, if the persons holding these positions are not explicitly stated to be Indigenous, then it is not possible to run a query to retrieve Indigenous-led organizations.

Full Circle: First Nations Performance (Q112510114)

performing arts presenting organization in Canada
Full Circle: First Nations Performance Society

edit

[In more languages](#)

[Configure](#)

Language	Label	Description	Also known as
English	Full Circle: First Nations Performance	performing arts presenting organization in Canada	Full Circle: First Nations Perfor...
Latin	No label defined	No description defined	
French	No label defined	organisme de diffusion des arts de la scène au Canada	
Chinese	No label defined	No description defined	

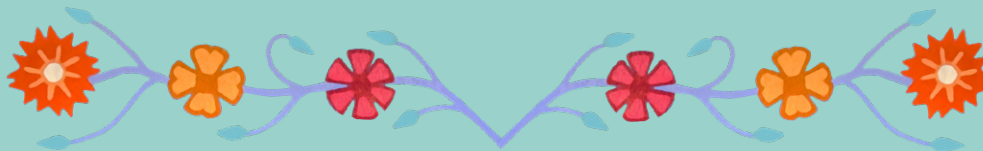
Statements

instance of	performing arts presenting organization edit 1 reference
	charitable organization edit 1 reference
	+ add value
official name	Full Circle: First Nations Performance Society (English) edit 1 reference



Participants in the group consultation considered that an Indigenous-led organization can be deemed an Indigenous organization.





Besides, participants in the group consultation were looking for other means of representing deeper connections with Indigenous cultures. “*I’m interested in value and truth,*” said one participant. The organization’s mission was considered to be important information. Participants wondered if it would be possible to search for organizations with a culture-focussed mission. In Wikidata, the property [statutory purpose \(P6346\)](#) can indeed be used to state the “main statutory purpose of an organization as defined in its articles of association”. Although the content of this text field cannot easily be queried or be processed by machines, it can easily be read by humans and inform them of the Indigeneity of the organization.

During informal consultations, it was suggested that the [property culture \(P2596\)](#) could be used to affirm that an organization’s mandate is closely associated with the culture of a specific Indigenous group. This suggestion appears to have merit. However, we did not have the opportunity to validate it with Indigenous organizations yet.

The description field is another area where the indigeneity of the organization can be affirmed. For example, the Wikidata item for the dance company [O.Dela Arts \(Q107277677\)](#) is described as an Indigenous arts organization in Vancouver, Canada.

Key take aways:

- Multiple strategies must be employed to describe an organization as Indigenous in Wikidata.
- In order to enable queries of Indigenous-led organizations, holders of leadership positions should be stated with the [artistic director \(P8938\)](#) and/or [director / manager \(P1037\)](#) properties.
- In order to inform users consulting Wikidata items, the Indigenous mission of an organization can also be expressed in the description field as well as with the [statutory purpose \(P6346\)](#) property.
- The property [culture \(P2596\)](#) may also offer a means of denoting the Indigeneity of an organization.



Summary of Findings

“NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US”

Endeavours about Indigenous arts ought to be led by, or at the very least conducted in direct consultation with, Indigenous artists. Even more so when defining how Indigenous artists can be accurately and respectfully represented in an open knowledge base such as Wikidata. This project demonstrated the necessity of consulting with Indigenous artists at two levels: group consultations when defining better representational practices for domain-wide concepts and relationships; and individual consultations when stating the Indigenous identity of a given Indigenous artist. Group consultations should ideally include participants that represent various Indigenous lived experiences and should span the different territories of Turtle Island. Inuit artists were not involved in this project and this represents a significant gap.

COLONIAL STRUCTURES ARE A SHARED CONCERN FOR INDIGENOUS ARTISTS

The most commonly shared concern among all participants in the individual and group sessions was the challenge of ensuring that Indigenous identities and cultural practices would not be improperly named or described or else would not become oversimplified or reduced to fit into generic categories in Wikidata, reinforcing colonial structures. Wikidata’s current format requires specificity based on an established structure to serve linked open data so as to ensure cross-cultural and pan-regional information transfer - so that the items in Wikidata show up in searches and queries in a meaningful way. However, Wikidata properties and classes were developed and implemented without full understanding of, or consultation with, Indigenous Peoples. Continuing to reinforce these structures rather than correcting them as we learn could perpetuate unintended yet very real mechanisms of exclusion.



Wikidata properties and classes were developed and implemented without full understanding of, or consultation with, Indigenous Peoples





“ETHNIC GROUP” IS A PROBLEMATIC TERM FOR DENOTING INDIGENOUS IDENTITIES

“Ethnic group” is not a term that most Indigenous artists would use to describe their identity or the Indigenous group of which they are a member. Although a few participants could conceptually understand the meaning of this property, its label is incompatible with common modes of self-identification based on Nation, ancestry, traditional territory or affiliation with a home community such as a First Nation band. In spite of its imperfection, this property can serve critical structural needs such as querying and retrieving works by Indigenous artists or Indigenous-led organizations. Therefore, it may be used with caution and in consultation with Indigenous artists themselves until a better solution is found and implemented in Wikidata.

AREAS REQUIRING FURTHER WORK

As a multilingual knowledge base of everything in the universe, Wikidata holds a lot of potential for storing and sharing information about Indigenous artists and their works. However, in order to realize this potential, changes will be needed to accommodate the nuances and complexities of Indigenous identities and practices in Wikidata. To this effect, this project identified several recommendations for the Wikidata community. These recommendations are summarized in the next section.

In addition, the project revealed areas that require further research and consultation:

- Indigenous artistic and cultural practices should be further explored and documented in Wikidata (and in other Wikimedia projects).
- Relationships such as band or clan affiliation require further consultation to determine if and how they should be stated in Wikidata.



- Future consultations would need to include more representation from Inuit and Métis artists as this was an important research gap in this project. In addition, considering how traditional territories and concepts such as Turtle Island exist beyond nation-states boundaries, Indigenous artists from what is known as the United States should also be given an opportunity to shape a Wikidata that is inclusive of their worldviews. While we primarily focused our consultations on Canadian performing artists, we did receive an application from an interested artist based in the US. As we consider the participants' concerns with the concept of Canada, and a preference for Turtle Island as a regional concept, the idea of consulting with Indigenous artists in Canada or the US for future consultations would seem appropriate.

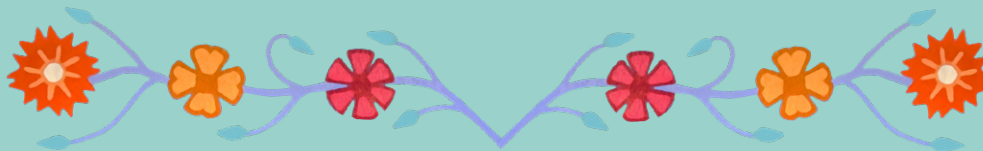
SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WIKIDATA COMMUNITY

- Until a set of better practices for stating Indigenous identities in Wikidata has been defined in consultation with the Indigenous community, Wikimedians should verify with the artist themselves if and how they would like to be identified in Wikidata.
- Formulaic disambiguating descriptions based on citizenship and occupation (i.e., “Canadian singer-songwriter”) should not be used as the default description for Indigenous artists. Wikimedians should consider how the Indigenous artists describe themselves in their own words. When in doubt, the following formula could be used: “[Indigenous self-identification (if known)] [occupation (s)] in what is known as Canada”.
- The Wikidata community should revisit both the property and the class item for the “ethnic group” concept. If the label cannot be changed, then the description and the aliases should be edited to include references to the notion of ancestral group and to the idea of affiliation to a traditional territory. In addition, further usage instructions should be added via the [WikiProject: Ethnicity](#) to encourage Wikimedians to consult with living persons before stating their ethnic group. Finally, the WikiProject: Ethnicity's instructions for the ethnic group class should be enhanced to acknowledge other aspects by which a group of people can identify with each other, including ancestry and traditional territories.



Wikimedians should consider how the Indigenous artists describe themselves in their own words.





- Descriptions of Wikidata items for Indigenous Peoples can be the subject of frequent edits. Those descriptions should be normalized by the [WikiProject Indigenous peoples of North America](#) and documented in the discussion page for each item to prevent (and to revert) undesired edits.
- Properties such as [place of birth \(P19\)](#) and [work location \(P937\)](#) should be used to document that an artist is from the territory known as Canada.
- The property [significant place \(P7153\)](#) can be used to indicate a relationship to Turtle Island (such as a claimed citizenship) or to traditional territories.
- Many Wikidata items borrow colonial labels and descriptions from Wikipedia articles and from subject headings in national libraries' authority files. These practices do not comply with the Wikidata guidelines for labels and descriptions. Moreover, they are likely to deter Indigenous people from participating in the Wikidata movement and they therefore interfere with the [Wikimedia vision](#). Efforts should be made by the Wikidata community to decolonize these labels and descriptions, in consultation with Indigenous artists.
- Since **any work created by an Indigenous artist is an Indigenous work**, efforts should be made to state creator and contributor roles to Indigenous works in Wikidata.
- The property [language of work or name \(P407\)](#) should be used to state that a work is in an Indigenous language.
- Multiple strategies must be employed to describe an organization as Indigenous in Wikidata.
- In order to enable queries of Indigenous-led organizations, holders of leadership positions should be stated with the [artistic director \(P8938\)](#) and/or [director / manager \(P1037\)](#) properties.
- In order to inform users consulting Wikidata items, the Indigenous mission of an organization can also be expressed in the description field as well as with the [statutory purpose \(P6346\)](#) property.

Appendix: Querying Indigenous artists in Wikidata

It is difficult to query Indigenous artists in Wikidata. Those who don't have an [ethnic group \(P172\)](#) statement can't be queried, obviously. In addition, certain Nations are not stated to be subclasses of [indigenous people \(Q103817\)](#), and may therefore also be missed from queries.

- For example, [Anishinaabe \(Q1956640\)](#) is a [part of \(P361\)](#) [First Nations \(Q392316\)](#), which is a [subclass of \(P279\)](#) [indigenous people \(Q103817\)](#), but it is not stated as a subclass of Q103817.
- In comparison, [Cree \(Q117191\)](#), is stated both a subclass AND a part of [First Nations \(Q392316\)](#).

Gregory Saumier-Finch, CTO at Culture Creates, helped the project team write a SPARQL query to count the number of Indigenous artists in Canada. The query was based on three sets of criteria:

- Ethnic group: a subclass of (or part of) **Indigenous peoples** (expressed in SPARQL as `wdt:P172/(wdt:P361*)/(wdt:P279*) wd:Q103817`)
- Occupation: subclass of **artist** or **creator**;
- Any of these statements indicating a relationship to **Canada**:
 - birthplace: within Canada;
 - work location: within Canada;
 - citizenship: Canada.

This query was too complex and timed out. Gregory had to create a local graph with all Indigenous artists globally (<https://w.wiki/55NQ>), and then query this local graph to retrieve artists born in, working in or with citizenship in Canada.

He ran these queries on June 23, 2021, and he found:

- 1516 global indigenous artists (159 of which could only be found with the “part of (P361)” property);
- 215 Indigenous artists in Canada (40 of which could only be found with the “part of (P361)” property).

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