



# Whose provenance? Plurality of provenance and the redistribution of archival authority

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## Abstract

Since the end of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Mandate in 2015, archives and archivists are now acknowledging both the role that archives played in the colonization of Canada and the urgent need to decolonize archival practices to accommodate the marginalized voices of those silenced by traditional archival theory and practice. In the case of the archives at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, these are the voices of the residential school Survivors, their families, and their home communities. These voices have the power to fill gaps in historical narratives and confront the millions of colonial records created by the government departments and religious entities that ran the schools for more than a century. That said, how do we transition from acknowledging our past role as protectors of colonialism's documented "success" to successfully implementing decolonizing practices? This paper deconstructs colonial records and colonial "truth" to understand the plurality of provenance in archives. This is especially important as Indigenous communities develop their own archives in pursuit of Indigenous data sovereignty and the power associated with archival authority and whose provenance we choose to recognize and preserve.

**Keywords** Indigenous archives · Data sovereignty · Plural provenance · Colonial records · Decolonization · Community engagement

## Introduction

I first started my work in archives in 2008 as a student at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba. I was new to the concept of archives save for some minor engagement with microfilm reels for an undergraduate history course assignment. Soon after this student position began, something became very clear to me: information on Indigenous peoples was scattered throughout both government and private archival collections with

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little regard for who they were or where they came from. Conversely, the government agencies and individuals who donated materials were documented and described using finding aids, publications, card catalogues, and other ways of documenting the context and content of the records from a narrow and singular viewpoint. This stuck with me throughout my four years working in that environment until I went to graduate school to further my career in archives where I discovered how archivists can move away from a singular model of provenance to one that is more nuanced and reflective of the people and places documented in archival records. My identity has also helped shape my thinking on this topic. Being a person of mixed ancestry (French Canadian, Métis, and Scottish), and a person with a disability (visually impaired), I see the world through multiple lenses (pun intended). It is the understanding that our identity is an ongoing and evolving process that I apply to my understanding of provenance.

This article combines my work experience, existing literature on expanding our understanding of provenance, and current day examples of re-imagining provenance to expand archival provenance theory from the singular (singular creator or event of creation) to the plural (multiple creators or contexts of creation). This article is timely as the proliferation of Indigenous community archives is leading to yet another round of re-imagining colonial records related to the history and legacies of the residential school system in Canada, as well as other components of colonialism such as the child welfare system, Federal Indian Day Schools, medical treatment centres, and detention centres that intended to remove Indigenous children from their families with the goal of severing them from their cultures, languages, and traditions. What lies ahead is an opportunity for all forms of archives from government to religious to community to better understand and document the relationships between residential school records and people over time for the benefit of current and future generations. As Michelle Caswell puts it, “Archival pluralism is difficult, demanding, and messy, but the challenge is too much to ignore” (2013, pp 289).

This article will first review the current archival climate in Canada to set the stage for an overview of what has already been written on re-imagining archival provenance. I will then combine contemporary archival views with my work experience as the Senior Archivist at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) deconstructing colonial records to demonstrate a practical application of plural provenance using descriptive standards, leading into a discussion on creating a “complete” record relating to an event or time period. I will conclude the article with an open discussion on the shifting of archival authority and power from the archive itself to those holding the keys to unlocking the full potential of a plural provenance methodology. This includes how Indigenous data sovereignty is being implemented by Indigenous scholars and practitioners to ensure that Indigenous people have a say in how their data is created, described stored, and made available.

## Current archival climate in Canada

Before delving into the evolution of contemporary provenance theory, I want to reflect on the current state of archives in Canada, and more specifically the relationship(s) between colonial archives and Indigenous peoples. Since May of

2021 when Tkemlúps te Secwépemc, First Nations Government formally known as the Kamloops Indian Band, announced the identification of 215 potential unmarked graves at the former site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School, many archives holding records related to residential schools in Canada have been approached by more than 100 Indigenous communities, commonly referred to as lead or caretaker communities,<sup>1</sup> needing access to records to assist in their investigations at former residential school sites. This includes government archives, religious archives, archives holding religious records, vital statistics agencies, coroners' offices, community archives, as well as the NCTR as the central repository for residential school records in Canada. This list represents well known record holding institutions but does not encompass all those who hold records required by communities for their ongoing investigations.

As many gaps exist within the documented record of residential schools in Canada, residential school Survivors and their recorded experiences and memories offer a counter-narrative to the millions of colonial records being pulled together by Indigenous communities to aid in their efforts around not only investigating burials sites, but also in the commemoration and memorialization of the missing children. The term missing children was adopted by the NCTR from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) to represent a child who passed away while under the authority of residential schools. It can include a child who went missing and has never been accounted for, but for the most part it refers to a child who passed away and was buried either at the school or in their home community. During its mandate, the TRC gathered more than 7,000 statements from residential school, Survivors, their descendants, and former staff. Statement gathering efforts in Canada are currently underway at various levels (NCTR, government, legal, community) to provide opportunities for Survivors and their families to share, not simply for archival purposes, but also as a form of healing. The announcement of the 215 in Kamloops brought to the surface a mix of emotions for everyone, in particular Survivors and families, who were not ready to share their experiences during the mandate of the TRC. This is important to note as Survivors are ageing, and with the existence of gaps in historical records these Survivor memories are becoming more and more precious.

To complicate matters, it is becoming well known in Canada that additional institutions, while not considered a residential school under the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, or IRSSA<sup>2</sup> (IRSSA 2006), played a role in the life and death of children at the schools. These include institutions such as Indian

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<sup>1</sup> An Indigenous community sanctioned by their community leadership and stakeholders to lead investigations on behalf of its people. This could be a team of community researchers, a 3rd party research firm hired by the community, or a combination of the two. Examples also exist of communities working with universities with capacity in research and anthropology to help guide the work on behalf of the community.

<sup>2</sup> The settlement agreement that laid out the terms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process in Canada,

including but not limited to compensation for harms caused, and the establishment of a permanent archive (the NCTR).

Hospitals,<sup>3</sup> tuberculosis (TB) sanatoria, orphanages, juvenile detention centres, and others. Collectively, these institutions were used as tools by the Canadian government and church organizations to assimilate Indigenous children into settler society. Because institutions such as Indian Hospitals and TB sanatoria were not considered “residential schools” under the IRSSA, the records that relate to them were not included in the TRC’s collection mandate that saw the transfer of more than 4,000,000 records from more than 100 different archival sources to the TRC. These non-IRSSA records remain unidentified, scattered, and inaccessible to the lead and caretaker communities tasked with finding answers to questions regarding the deaths and final resting places of the missing children. McKemmish and Piggott note this same issue in Australia as it relates to records of the Stolen Generations. They attribute this to “the lack of uniform rights of access across jurisdictions, and difficulties with discovering relevant records linked to poor or inconsistent descriptive systems and the lack of contextual metadata” (2013, pp 132).

This current state example of Indigenous communities looking for answers in archival holdings to questions regarding how their family members passed away at residential school in Canada speaks to the complexity of whose provenance we aim to understand, document, and learn from. It is also a reminder of who we serve as archivists as we contemplate the future of our profession. As this article moves from a review of existing theory to potential ways of transitioning into practice, I urge you to keep the families of the children who passed away at residential school in your thoughts as they represent who I am doing this work on behalf of, and why I feel it is the right time for me to participate in the re-imagining of provenance.

## From parallel to societal to plural provenance theory

In the *Encyclopaedia of Archival Science*, Tom Nesmith outlines the concept of archival provenance as “the idea that the origin of archival documents or records, or their provenance, must be known if the purposes of archives are to be achieved” (2015, pp 284). Records are then arranged based off this documentation of a record’s origin to create the basis of how an archive makes these records available and accessible to users. Archives have marginalized certain groups by interpreting and applying a narrow or singular view of provenance. The definition provided by Nesmith, if interpreted through a pluralized lens, can account for multiple origins of any given record or sets of record as “like the origin of any human creation, the origin of records is equally multifaceted and ever open to new insights and explanations” (2015, pp 287). The International Council on Archives (ICA) *Records in Context Conceptual Model*, or RiC-CM, acknowledges the current transitional state of archival provenance moving from the more traditional understanding tied to “Respect des fonds and Respect for original order” to an understanding that “provenance is much more complex, that the origins and history of records include not only the person or

<sup>3</sup> For much of the twentieth century, Canada utilized a segregated hospital system to keep Indigenous patients separate from non-Indigenous Canadians. For more information refer to *Separate beds: a history of Indian hospitals in Canada, 1920s–1980s* by Maureen Lux (2016).

group that accumulated a body of records, but also other persons and groups directly related to the records, and the activities that were and are being performed in relation to the records.” (RiC-CM 2023, pp 7) More attention will be given to RiC-CM and the RiC ontology (RiC-O) in the upcoming section on relationship mapping and archival descriptive standards as it aligns more closely with my analysis of existing theory and proposed application to residential school records, including additional layers of provenance not tied to origin.

The concept of rethinking archival provenance is not new. Chris Hurley provides us with multiple articles related to provenance, dating back to 1995 when he explained that, “archivists’ rules ensure that a single records entity coincides with the creative action of a single person or corporation because they have not teased out the different strands which make up ideas of provenance” (1995, pp 236). In this same article, he provides three reasons why archivists have “inadequate ideas about provenance: they cannot articulate the variety of different roles or relationships a corporation or person may have with the records creation process, they are bound by their theory to identify one and ignore the rest, and their definition is tautological” (1995, pp 240). Hurley continued to build on these theories over the next decade, further entrenching traditional provenance theory as a method of silencing archival subjects: “Our view of an exclusive provenance establishes truths we need to believe by ignoring things we don’t think about from day to day. It is our story: we are used to telling it, and we believe it. Like our title to land, we have forgotten how arbitrary it is. Now there are other stories to tell... We must learn to recognize and recount those stories too” (2005a; b, pp 57). This is important because it does not call for a complete abandonment of Western provenance theory, but rather an acknowledgment that other perspectives need to be woven in. Much has changed since 2005 in terms of how we recount the stories of others, and the upcoming section on Indigenous data sovereignty will address this more closely in terms of data ownership and stewardship.

In 2006, Tom Nesmith published his influential article on the concept of societal provenance in the context of nineteenth century Western Canada and the relationship between Indigenous peoples and European settlers (2006). Building on his earlier work looking at archives “From the Bottom Up” (1982), Nesmith urges us to dig “more deeply into archives to deal with ever more complex concerns” (2006, pp 352) to better understand the societal forces that shaped the records. The example provided by Nesmith of a historical photograph of the Battleford Industrial School football team in Saskatchewan and how its provenance depends on who or how we interpret the photograph is an important reminder of how users of archives must not take archival sources at face value as representing the truth. Photographs are a powerful tool to unlocking memories hidden within those represented in photographs, or even memories passed down to family members. This ongoing exchange between archives and the stakeholders they represent shows us the power of societal provenance and who archivists should be engaging with as we look to further develop descriptive standards to capture this ongoing exchange. As Nesmith concludes, “Since provenance is the provisional sounding in an ongoing process of understanding, there can be no final and full statement of what a given provenance is” (2006, pp 359). This idea of a never-ending evolution of our understanding of provenance is

a stark contrast to the singular provenance approach that looks to a record's origin to validate the purpose of archives. The influence of Nesmith's writing on provenance can be seen and measured by the volume of literature published on provenance by influential archival thinkers over the past 20 years.

In discussing the archival and custodial history of the personal papers of Sir Richard Fanshawe, Yeo raises the concern of using the terms fonds and collection interchangeably. For Yeo, there is a fundamental distinction between the description of the fonds as it relates to the provenance of the creator and the description of the collection as it relates to the custodianship of records over time: "The fonds of a deceased person is conceptually stable, but collections are shaped and will continue to be shaped by their adventures over time and by the actions of their custodians. Both creation contexts and collection histories inform our knowledge of archives, but the archival profession needs descriptive systems and tools that neither confuse origins with custodial development nor privilege one above the other" (2008, pp 61). Not dissimilar to Nesmith, Yeo makes a case for the influence of how we interpret and manage records over time to be documented in descriptive practice, yet his distinction between this and the need to document provenance through the lens of the original creator represents the initial building blocks of the pluralization of provenance to represent multiple perspectives on the same record.

Building on the work of Helen Samuels (1992) who looked to the impacts of institutions on individual members of society, Greg Bak refers to an archival "counterweight" to help balance corporate and private perspectives in the documentation of provenance. Bak also suggests that "multiple archives, with mandates for official records and private records, are required to document many activities in contemporary society and that careful planning and coordination are essential (2021, pp 422). Adding the element of institutional influence to the societal impacts on provenance is of particular interest to this article as institutions played a major role in the administration of the residential school system. More attention should be paid to how residential schools shaped the lives of not just the students, but also the administrators and others who played a role in the running of the schools, including the creation of records. The upcoming section on redistributing archival authority will address Bak's call for better coordination amongst various types of archives serving the same stakeholders.

McKemmish and Piggott provide us with "ideas drawn from records continuum, postmodern, and postcustodial archival theory developed in Australia and elsewhere, Indigenous ways of knowing, and emergent thinking on co-creation, the multiple simultaneous provenance of records" (2013, pp 131) to try and differentiate between the various types of provenance and how they apply to the work of archivists. They do so while simultaneously cautioning against differentiating between personal and corporate archives as "psychological factors involved when individuals make and keep and destroy documents do not suddenly disappear in corporate settings" (2013, pp 128). This duality between personal and corporate, and other examples such as written vs. oral, has contributed to the imbalance of power within colonial records and the individuals and communities documented within them. So too has our narrow understanding and documentation of provenance. One could argue there exists a duality between western archival provenance and Indigenous knowledge, and the

need to move “towards the archival multiverse” to blur the lines between the two and avoid tokenizing the value that Indigenous peoples and others bring to our collective understanding of provenance.

Whether we look to implement societal provenance, the multi-simultaneous provenance of records, or any future proposition to pluralize provenance, “post-colonial scholars are now recognizing that traditional archives are only one path for discovering the voices of the colonized” (Bastian 2006, pp 277). For residential school records in Canada, what could these additional paths to discovering the voices of residential school Survivors and their descendants look like? If the colonial records created by residential school authorities represent the attempted assimilation of Indigenous peoples in Canada through the forceful removal of children to eradicate culture, language, and traditions, then could the cultures, languages, and traditions of Indigenous peoples today provide us with a representation of those voices of the past and present currently missing in the documentation of residential school records? Although the aim of this article is to examine the rethinking of provenance and what that may look like in practice, it is important to think beyond the archive in the traditional sense as the sole path to identifying and documenting plural provenance. Ceremony, dance, art, and other mediums represent alternative non-archival paths that should be considered when discussing the completeness of a record. As observed by Verne Harris, “the archival record is but a sliver of social memory. It is also but a sliver of the documentary record” (2006, pp 64). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s recounting of the 2013 event that saw 600 Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples coming together to erect a sign atop Mount Douglas in British Columbia Canada without asking permission from the city to celebrate a piece of land that has been an important gathering place for generations offers a sliver of social memory that teaches us to look at archives as Simpson looks at the land; as a place that was meaningful in the past, a place that means different things to different groups, and a space for people to reconnect with their cultures and identities (2017, pp 240).

## Deconstructing colonial records

What makes a colonial record a colonial record? This may seem like an obvious question, but it is an important step in deconstructing archival records created by colonial authorities. Is it the simple fact that a colonial entity is the creator of a record, or is it the colonial lens through which we interpret and describe records? Just because the initial intent of a record is marked by a singular event of creation, it does not mean that the record’s provenance should be seen as singular or unique. A government record from the late nineteenth century documenting the transportation of Indigenous children from their home communities to residential school reflects a successful step in the assimilation process through the lens of the Canadian government, yet this same document seen through the lens of the children listed in the record represents the loss of culture, identity, and language. It also represents the families left behind, and the future generations affected by family disruption.

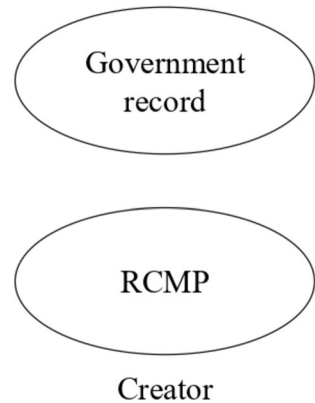
In the context of a government record from 1894 from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) fonds entitled “[Recovering Possession of a Boy Taken from School by Standing Buffalo]” 46a-c002808-d0011-001 (1894), the original title and intent of the document is only one side of the story. Taken at face value, this letter is a colonial record documenting the retrieval of their “possession” in the form of an Indigenous child from his father. Following the regulations laid out in Canada’s Indian Act LM-002–003-001 (1876) the principal of the Qu’Appelle Industrial School (Lebret) sought to arrest the father for theft of the clothing on the child’s back as it was property of the school:

I requested Standing Buffalo to bring the boy back, as he was properly attended to here. He refused. I then sent the Assistant Principal who brought back another refusal, so yesterday I went myself, taking a Policeman with me, but Standing Buffalo refused most determinedly to let his son go, and used threatening language; when we saw that we could not get the boy without using force, the Constable decided to report to his Superior Officer before doing so. This Indian, as Mr. Agent Lash can inform you, has on former occasions behaved in a very obstinate manner. In this case unless something is done at once to break his obstinacy, it is likely to have a deplorable effect on the Indians with regard to their children in these schools” (46a-c002808-d0011-001 1894).

This is 1 letter in a file of 18 that depicts the resistance efforts of Standing Buffalo to keep his sick son at home with his family. But how do we include these perspectives in our documentation of provenance? The reconciliation framework for Canadian archives written by the Steering Committee on Canada’s Archives (the Steering Committee) includes a section on arrangement and description in which they state, “The Canadian archival community shall integrate Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, languages, histories, place names and taxonomies into the arrangement and description of Indigenous-related archival materials and collections” (2020, pp 22). A strategy they suggest is to “Reassess the foundations of archival arrangement theory and practice. Current archival arrangement structures are based on the idea of individual authorship. Engage in critical discourse to understand the implications of this assumption when working with Indigenous-related archival materials” (2020, pp 24). Figure 1 provides a view of the RCMP record related to Standing Buffalo as seen through a singular authorship lens. In this example, there is no room to accommodate the perspectives of those whose lives are documented in the record as the record in question is only linked to the RCMP as the singular creator of the record. Crystal Fraser and Zoe Todd posit that “if Indigenous people are present in historical records, they are often depicted as passive bystanders, rarely free agents in their own right and far removed from narratives that highlight agency or sophistication” (2016). They also question “if other less-known historical actors—such as Indigenous people, women, and children—are able to “speak” in archival documents (2016).

Deconstructing archival records allows us to confront colonial truths and narratives to create space for the aforementioned passive bystanders. By understanding how the meanings of these records evolve over time for the individuals and

**Fig. 1** A colonial government record traditionally described using a singular creator view of provenance

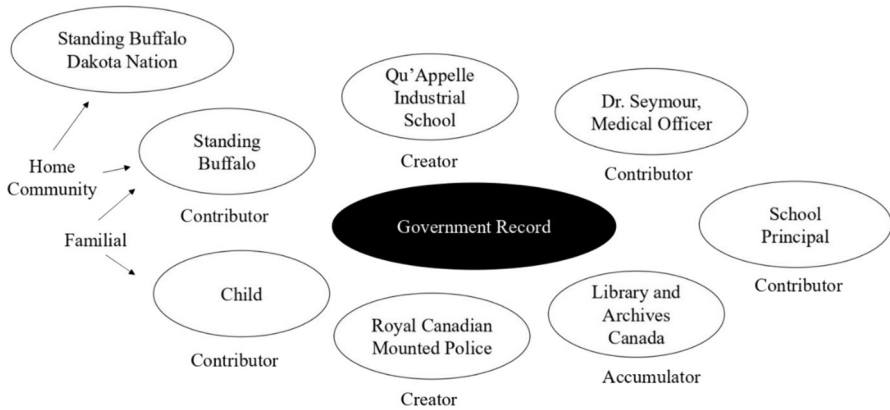


communities being documented, we create a shift in the dynamics around archival authority, or authorship as pointed out by the steering committee. This forces us to look beyond the creator of a record as being the sole participating authority in the lifecycle of an archival record. The following section will further visualize this deconstruction exercise to reveal areas where plural provenance can be documented in archival practice through the use of descriptive standards.

## Relationship mapping and the role of descriptive standards

When trying to understand the multi-faceted nature of archival records, breaking down records to identify and describe all related entities is necessary to create a blueprint for plural provenance. As mentioned by Bastian, “Reading the records of colonialism in ways that truly illuminates all facets and all participants in colonial society speaks not merely to political correctness but, more to point, to the ability of records to reflect, to mirror, to define and to uncover the communities that create them” (2006, pp 286) While Fig. 1 and its singular view of provenance excludes any aspect of community involvement, Fig. 2 retains the colonial context of the RCMP as the creator of the government record while simultaneously challenging this context with the related authorities, or authors, who played an active role in the events leading up to the attempted removal of the child from his home community. These authorities, or event actors as listed in the international archival descriptive standard ISAAR (CPF), include the child and his father Standing Buffalo as contributors to the government record, and by association there is now a link between the record and their home community of Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation.

This relationship mapping exercise connects related records and authorities in archives where such relationships were never made in the past. For example, if someone is looking at a residential school record created by a Canadian government department, the description itself has been provided by the government from their perspective, yet this can be juxtaposed by navigating to a related Indigenous community authority record for added context. From there one could access Indigenous



**Fig. 2** An overview of expanding archival authorities related to an archival record from the singular to the many

perspectives through audio-visual testimonies from Survivors of that residential school. It is important to note that in the Canadian residential school system, there was a many to many relationship between Indigenous communities and the schools themselves, meaning there exists unlinked connections between multiple communities and multiple schools in archives holding residential school records. **There was never a one-to-one relationship between a single school and a single Indigenous community.**

Hurley urges us to look beyond seeing provenance as the “characteristics of entities” and more as “relationships between entities” (1995, pp 254). He also makes a distinction between provenance as the relationship between entity and record, and ambience as the relationship between entities. Figure 2 provides us with a roadmap to making this distinction, which moves beyond the original intent of ISAAR(CPF) as seeing authority records simply as “descriptions of corporate bodies, persons and families that create records” (ISAAR 2004, pp 7). Figure 2 also pulls language from the international archival descriptive standard ISAD(G) to help differentiate between the various relationships that an authority can have with a record. Although the examples of records in this article focus on item level description, the same methodology could be applied to parent level descriptions such as files, series, or fonds. As suggested by Nesmith in *Reopening Archives* (2005), archives and archivists could look beyond traditional archival description and incorporate the use of essays to document the history of records, including the actions of archivists to process collections as well as the societal forces that shaped them.

The decisions made in Fig. 2 such as seeing a “subject” of a record as a “contributor” rather than a “creator” may seem arbitrary, however they are important when contemplating an expanded meaning of authority records in archives. Jennifer Douglas identifies 5 distinct forms of creation based on her doctoral research: “creation by the individual traditionally named as the creator of a fonds; (2) creation by communities to which creators belong; (3) creation by custodians (here excluding archivists) of the archive; (4) creation by archivists; and (5) creation by subsequent

“activators” of the archives” (2018, pp 33). Taking these 5 distinct forms of creation proposed by Douglas and applying them to the RCMP record, we have the RCMP as the individual or entity traditionally referred to as the creator (1), Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation as the community to which the creator (Standing Buffalo as the contributor) belongs (2), Library and Archives Canada (and to an extent the TRC) as creation by custodians (3), the NCTR (and other repositories holding copies of the same record) as creation by Archivists (4), and finally we now have a myriad of Indigenous communities as “activators” engaging with records for ongoing burial site investigations and acts of commemoration (5). Complicating matters in Canada is that Indigenous communities could be seen in Douglas’ view as representing both creation by community and creation by custodian, as having communities reclaiming copies of colonial records for investigations into unmarked burial sites represents creating and recreating “new versions of the archive for their own particular purposes and ends” (2018, pp 39).

While Fig. 2 illustrates how the NCTR interprets and bends ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) to describe and visualize archival record and authority descriptions, how would the RCMP record example look if described using the Records in Context Conceptual Model (RiC-CM) and the Records in Context Ontology (RiC-O)? On paper, RiC (the grouping of documentation for the Records in Context standard including RiC-CM, RiC-O, RiC-AG, and RiC-FAD) allows for more complex mapping between archival records, entities, and attributes to address the challenge of describing provenance in a pluralized way: “RiC-CM recognizes that provenance is much more complex, that records originate and continue to exist within a complex network of dynamic relations with other records, activities, persons, and groups. (RiC-CM 2023, pp 7). What sets RiC apart from ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) is that it was drafted when expanding the concept of provenance was more widely accepted in comparison to ISAD(G) that was developed in the 1990s and “reflected archival practice and consensus that existed at that time (RiC-CM 2023, pp 8). However, what also sets RiC apart is that commonly used archival content management systems (CMSs) for archival description, such as AtoM (Access to Memory), were not built around more complex relationship mapping between records and entities, meaning extensive overhauls of existing CMSs will be required to implement an archival descriptive practice based on RiC. The focus of this section is not to crack the code on implementing RiC from a technical perspective, but rather how it could be interpreted and applied to the examples presented in this article. Figure 3 uses RiC’s ontologies to visualize the relationships between the RCMP record and the related authorities and places identified in the previous deconstructing exercise.

As the RiC-Application Guidelines (RiC-AG) have yet to be published at time of this article, I have taken some liberties and made some assumptions about implementing RiC. RiC-O (RiC’s Ontology framework that supports Resource Description Framework (RDF) datasets for use in linked data) does not address all the needs of every organization, but rather offers “a high level framework and an institution or project implementing RiC-O can apply only such a subset of properties as meets their needs, or extend the specification according to their particular requirements, or do both” (RiC-O 2023). This is important as the documentation and example diagrams of RiC will appear daunting to many, myself included, and knowing that it



In this interplay between content, structure and context where the content are the enslaved or the population, the structure is the list or the census form and the context may be a ship plying the slave trade between West Africa and the West Indies... How far should archivists go in establishing a context that will enable the full interpretation of the record? Without expanding the context of the record beyond its immediate provenance, the record and its meaning have not fully come together. The full story is not told unless the cargo has a voice and the population speaks (Bastian 2006, pp 283).

To apply this interplay between content, structure, and context to the RCMP record, the content would be those listed in Fig. 2, such as the child and Standing Buffalo, the structure would be the 18 letters that make up the available correspondence documenting the incident, and the context would be pluralized from the principal enforcing the Indian Act in collaboration with the RCMP to the resistance efforts of Standing Buffalo. What RiC allows us to do is articulate these various forms of relationships and standardize them across archives, and ultimately across other heritage institutions, to lay the groundwork for future cross-institutional linking. Going back to the current state analysis at the beginning of this article, having a mechanism to link between originating archive, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR), and community archives as records are being created and recreated over time is a powerful proposition. To me, this is what former Co-Chair of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and President of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation Georges Erasmus called for at the 2011 National Research Centre forum held by the Truth and reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in Vancouver British Columbia Canada, when he stated that “If the stories of our people are not accessible to the general public, it will be as if their experiences never occurred. And if their voices are rendered as museum pieces, it will be as if their experience is frozen in time. What we need are open, dynamic, interactive spaces and participatory forms of narrative, knowledge, and research. This would be a fitting way to step into the twenty-first century and into a new kind of relationship” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015, pp 265). This article is my attempt to share best practices, regardless of what archival descriptive standard is being implemented, and my response to Erasmus’ call to action.

## The notion of a “complete” record

Since May of 2021, a major focus of the Canadian archival community, and those engaging with archives, has been the idea of a “complete” record documenting the residential school system and experiences in Canada. Countless conferences, gathering, and community hearings have focussed on the idea of collecting *all* records in existence that document a particular residential school or region. Often referred to as a puzzle, this exercise being undertaken by more than 100 Indigenous communities looks to the completeness of a record as being a complete set of records to help document a series of events tied to a school or community. This exercise is a necessary step in these ongoing investigations into missing children and unmarked

burials, however this study into provenance plurality argues the need to understand and document the provenance of these records through the lens of the Indigenous communities using these records for reasons that differ from how they were originally intended to be used. As previously stated, these colonial residential school records were created and retained for the purpose of documenting the successful assimilation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The societal provenance of these records, to borrow the term from Tom Nesmith, not only at the time of creation but how they are being used today, provides us with a much different picture; one that is painted by thousands of Survivors, families, and home communities.

Gracen Brilmyer discusses the reality of pulling together a complete record in the context of the 1893 Chicago World Fair in which “records were created by multiple individuals, organizations, or governing bodies; they were duplicated for different purposes; and they were dispersed across different archives with various levels of description as well as documentation of their individual histories” (2022, pp 1). Looking specifically to records of persons with disabilities, Brilmyer calls for the use of “crip provenance” to provide context in other ways than traditionally seen in archives. They also caution against the impossible task of recreating provenance as it “may be a misorientation to these records; it might do them a disservice, especially when trying to tell a new history that may lie outside of traditional forms of evidence (2022, pp 19). In this way, crip provenance is the acknowledgment that histories of marginalized groups, such as personas with disabilities, are incomplete, and to accept this reality is to accept the archival absences that can be filled by the people who “experience, interpret, and are impacted by records across time” (2022, pp 19).

In explaining the concept of a digital bundle containing Indigenous knowledge online, Jennifer Wemigwans shares “the notion of a digital bundle acknowledges, by virtue of its deferral to respected Knowledge Keepers, that sharing and disseminating aspects of Indigenous Knowledge online, though important for various reasons, can never fully reflect, let alone replace, the oral transmission of traditions on the basis of real spiritual connection” (2018, pp 66). In applying the concept of crip provenance to Wemigwans’s notion of a digital bundle, we must accept the reality that our documentation of provenance can reflect but not replace Indigenous knowledge of events documented in archival records. That said, Wemigwans explains that we find ourselves in a cultural shift whereas there is an acknowledgement that we must utilize technologies such as the internet “to bring aspects of our knowledge out into the light—in ways defined and supported by our own Knowledge Keepers—so that we can guide our people and transform the world” (2018, pp 227). Archives have an opportunity during this cultural shift to play a role in creating a space where Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups feel comfortable sharing knowledge in a way that reflects their worldviews while simultaneously aligning with archival theory and best practices.

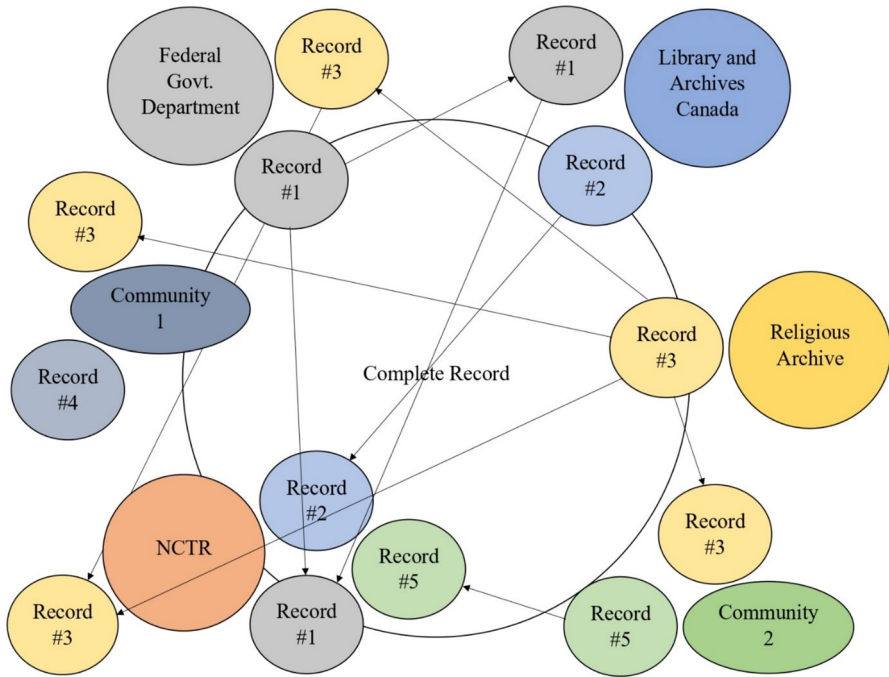
If we think about the completeness of a record, we must think of an archival record more as a container of knowledge. A container that is open to many contributions from varied perspectives. Archives traditionally make appraisal decisions to keep or not keep a record or collection of records based on the archival value of the record(s) relative to the collection mandate of the archive as determined by

archivists, however we do not look at the archival value of the information linked to records. This would represent a shift in our thinking but would be necessary to better understand whose perspectives need to be addressed for this added archival value. An archival value “top up” if you will that would attribute value, especially in the case of colonial records, to not only the coloniser, but also to the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples and others represented in the records. As we continue this journey to create a complete record of the residential school system in Canada, we must remember that a residential school record on its own, devoid of interrogation from Survivors and the infusion of knowledge by those represented in the record, will never be complete. We must also become comfortable with the fact that certain knowledges and pieces of information related to archival records will never become part of the “archive” as explained by Brilmyer and Wemigwans.

## A redistribution of archival authority and power

With digital archives, and more specifically digital surrogates or copies of records, we have the ability to make more than 1 copy available outside of the original record repository for various uses. Since May of 2021, there has been an unprecedented distribution of copies of records to Indigenous communities looking to investigate the deaths of children at residential school and their burial sites. However, many of these communities are using these copies of records to build their own community archive alongside other forms of knowledge collection, such as oral history recordings. Figure 4 provides us with a hypothetical but realistic view of how this distribution of records looks in Canada. Record #3 is an example of a record located in its originating archive (religious repository) however a copy was disclosed to the federal government for litigation purposes, to the NCTR as a response to the TRC’s collection mandate under the IRSSA, and more recently to multiple communities leading investigations at former residential school sites. From a custodianship standpoint, these copies are being retained in multiple locations, but for varying purposes, once again blurring the lines identified by Douglas between creation by community and creation by custodian. What makes these copies unique is the space in which they are being held, and how unique records (records #4 and #5) held alongside the copies of record #3 can help recontextualize based on distinct community experiences and knowledges.

Ricardo L. Punzalan’s article on virtual reunification helps ground the visual representation of record transference seen in Fig. 4. For Punzalan, virtual reunification is the “strategy of putting together physically dispersed heritage collections in order to produce a consolidated, digitized representation of scattered artefacts, literary and artistic works, and/or archival records attributable to a single origin or common provenance” (2014, pp 294). For the NCTR, this virtual reunification was thematic, based on records related to residential schools in Canada. On the surface, the NCTR itself could be seen as a giant virtual reunification project, as records from more than 100 sources were identified, digitized, coded, and brought together “in order to make these scattered collections accessible as a coherent collection or unit over the Internet” (2014, pp 296). What makes the NCTR and the state of residential school



**Fig. 4** A hypothetical but realistic view of the transfer of copies of residential school records in Canada

records in Canada (Fig. 4) such an interesting example of digital reunification is that subsequent rounds of reunification are still required, moving away from reunification based on theme (residential schools) towards reunification based on community. With Punzalan’s emphasis on collaboration being a key aspect of a successful reunification project, collaboration in the context of the NCTR would differ from the examples provided by Punzalan as reunification would need to be coordinated between the originating archives that hold the original records, the NCTR that holds a combination of digital copies and original materials, and Indigenous communities in Canada seeking to be reunited with records that depict their histories and the histories of their people.

With Fig. 4 and Punzalan’s virtual reunification in mind, how do we connect the various forms of documented provenance being applied to the same records by multiple archives and communities? Do these connections need to be made? Is this sense of urgency to make such connections my internal archival power struggle to give up archival power in how these records are contextualized and described by others, or is it a legitimate concern? I believe it is both. There is an element of giving up or transferring a certain percentage of archival power to others that is necessary, especially when this transfer is going to those most closely affected by these records. Much has already been written on archival power from Harris (2002), Schwartz and Cook (2002), Jimerson (2006, 2009), and more recently Payne (2021), with a general consensus that archives have long been centres of power, and that archivists have the ability to “continuously reshape, reinterpret, and reinvent the

archive” (Schwartz and Cook 2002, pp 1). What we need today is to recognize and use that power to repair relationships in the spirit of reconciliation and social justice. We must also undertake this exercise of reshaping, reinterpreting, and reinventing the archive alongside those marginalized by archives if we are to realize a better balance of archival power. This is not a call for a complete relinquishing of archival power by archivists, but rather a call for an evaluation of how we use that power, and how a redistribution of that power could help marginalized communities feel connected to the archives that document their histories.

When thinking of practical ways of shifting archival power or authority, it is natural to focus on the technical requirements to move plural provenance theory into practice. Technologies such as linked data provide the tools or roadmaps to link records from various sources by using common unique identifiers and ontologies or ways of describing records (Berners-Lee 2006). Ashleigh Hawkins provides an overview of the various kinds of linked data approaches in archives and how they apply to digital humanities, and concludes that linked data “provides a viable means of making digitized and born-digital archives more accessible, producing integrated, enriched, and interoperable large-scale archival datasets available for reuse in multiple ways” (2022, pp 337). Other scholars such as Niu (2016), (Park 2015), Chen (2023), and Davis (2019) have also written on the benefits of linked data in archives and other heritage institutions, specifically around increasing accessibility. But is linked data a solution to implementing plural provenance? Is it even a technology problem? This article is not meant to provide such a solution, or to point to a specific piece of technology to answer these questions. In order to move forward with implementing plural provenance, we must look beyond technology to community engagement and relationship building. We as archivists can build the most robust systems and elaborate ways of connecting multiple perspectives on provenance, but if we do not take the time required to build meaningful relationships with those perspectives we wish to understand and document we will be missing the point. In Canada, as in other countries with colonial histories, these relationships must also be grounded in principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty if a true shift in archival power is to be made.

## Indigenous data sovereignty and archives

It is irresponsible to discuss the rethinking of archival provenance including power dynamics in relation to Indigenous peoples in Canada without including a discussion on Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS). This section is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis on what the current discourse on IDS means to archives writ large, but rather it is meant to create a bridge between plural provenance theory and models such as The First Nations Principles of OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) and the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance. When OCAP speaks of ownership it “refers to the relationship of First Nations to their cultural knowledge, data, and information. This principle states that a community or group owns information collectively in the same way that an individual owns his or her personal information” (OCAP 2007). When it speaks of possession, it makes

a clear distinction between the two concepts: “While ownership identifies the relationship between a people and their information in principle, possession or stewardship is more concrete: it refers to the physical control of data. Possession is the mechanism by which ownership can be asserted and protected” (OCAP 2007). The CARE Principles also advocates for Indigenous peoples to have control over data that relates to them, but with the added elements of collective benefit, responsibility, and ethics that make up its name. “Control, coupled with a focus on collective benefit and equity, repositions Indigenous Peoples, nations, and communities from being subjects of data that perpetuate unequal power distributions to self-determining users of data for development and wellbeing” (Carroll 2020, pp 2). This use of data/archives in promoting community development and wellbeing is an important use of archives to understand more fully if we are to better understand the impact of IDS and models such as OCAP and CARE.

Maggie Walter and Michele Suina explain that “Indigenous Data Sovereignty centres on Indigenous collective rights to data about our peoples, territories, lifeways and natural resources and is supported by Indigenous peoples’ inherent rights of self-determination and governance over their peoples” (2019, pp 236). They speak of IDS in the realm of health research in the US, and more specifically within the Albuquerque Area Southwest Tribal Epidemiology Centre (AASTEC) and its role as “an intermediary with governmental entities, universities, and other non-tribal serving organizations that produce data about American Indians/Alaska Natives” (2019, pp 240). Although different in terms of setting and mandate, there is a compelling parallel between this intermediary role of the AASTEC and the NCTR as centres working on behalf of Indigenous peoples as a conduit to data relating to Indigenous peoples housed in non-indigenous settings, such as governments, universities, and in the case of the NCTR, religious entities.

In the context of a global movement during the mid-twentieth century to push for the repatriation of cultural artefacts around economic sovereignty, Jamila Ghaddar centers her chapter in *Disputed Archival Heritage on the Vienna Convention on Succession of States in Respect of State Property, Archives and Debts* (1983) that articulates the terms for disputed archives and archival ownership “when there is a union or dissolution of states, when there is a separation of parts of a state’s territory, or when there is a newly independent state” (2023 pp 51). What makes Ghaddar’s analysis so intriguing when comparing it to my own is her special attention to the place(s) and the people connected to archives, and her argument that a “provenance in place” must be understood if we are to move forward on acts of repatriation and archival decolonization, specifically around the ownership of records, and specific to this article, records of colonization. Ghaddar explains that “Provenance in place is about creating archival regimes and infrastructures that begin by asking what land(s) do the records pertain to? What people and nations are connected to that land historically and today? And among them who if any has been dispossessed or colonized, and by whom?” (2023, pp 69). These questions speak to me as they align with the questions I asked when looking at the RCMP record earlier in this article. The answers to these questions place the RCMP record directly at the Qu’Appelle Industrial School, and by association with Standing Buffalo and his child to their home community of Standing

Buffalo Dakota Nation. Complicating the matter of provenance in place is that the records tied to the Qu'Appelle Industrial School relate to many Indigenous communities in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, and even communities in neighbouring provinces. Regardless of where these types of colonial records end up residing long-term, these questions that expand our thinking of provenance are fundamental to understanding what communities or groups archives should engage with and who's provenance is at stake.

## Conclusion: plural provenance is already in motion

While archival theorists continue to grapple with plural provenance theory, plural provenance itself already exists regardless of whether or not it is being documented by archivists. As stated above, Indigenous communities are taking copies of colonial records from more than 100 sources and re-imagining them for new uses never imagined by the original creators of the records. This duplication of records and the creation of digital surrogates for use by various stakeholders provides us with an intriguing case study over the coming years in terms of how we collectively manage the documentation of our unique and collective provenance. Each time a new connection is made between a record or set of records and an individual, community, or other form of agent, an additional provenance relationship is made. At its heart, pluralising provenance is the acknowledgement of the many relationships that make up the context of a record “to enable a fuller, if forever incomplete, description of the contexts in which records emerge and exist, in order to enable multiple perspectives (RiC-CM 2023, pp 7). If we can come together to find a way to successfully link these unique takes on provenance, we will achieve something powerful, groundbreaking, and meaningful to many. If not, we will produce a scattered landscape of duplicate records contextualized in silos, not dissimilar to the state of residential school records pre TRC.

As I finalize this article, I am attending and presenting at a gathering in Whitehorse in the Yukon Territories where Survivors and community members are sharing information related to searches for missing children in the region. A number of presenters, although not speaking of archival theory explicitly, provided statements that resonate with this article. As Survivors pass away, they are “leaving behind their stories and the record... and the youth of today will be the keepers of this memory for future generations”.<sup>4</sup> This message delivered by anonymous Survivors at the gathering underscores the urgency in identifying these relationships, and the need to develop relationships with living stakeholders when identifying and describing plural provenance. Building and maintaining these relationships is complicated and ongoing in nature, but as residential school Survivor and Commissioner of Yukon Adeline Webber put it in her keynote address, “a 100 mile journey starts with a single step” (2024). This article is my first step in sharing my experiences and analysis on the topic of plural provenance, and it is my hope that others will continue to share

<sup>4</sup> Words spoken by a community gathering attendee during day 1 of the gathering.

their experiences and relationship mapping exercises as we collectively embark on this journey of rethinking archival provenance.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

**Ethical approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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