

Addressing Cultural Insensitivity in Archival Description: A Literature Review Examining Collaborative Approaches

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Abstract: Issues surrounding inappropriate language use in library cataloging and archival

description have a history of discussion. This literature review examines biased language in library and archive use for collection description and explores collaborative approaches for combatting the issue.

Collaborative, community archiving practices and the use of folksonomies or user-generated metadata offer potential solutions to alleviating some of the pain points evident in description practice and protocol. This paper advocates that further research into the use of user-generated metadata needs to be undertaken for archives to truthfully, respectfully, and justly represent the diverse histories held in their collections.

Keywords: *user-generated metadata, folksonomies, cataloging, description and access, community archiving, archives*



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The rise of social justice in the mid-20th-century sparked discourse regarding biased and culturally insensitive language in traditional library and archival description. Sanford Berman's 1971 book, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A tract on the LC Subject Headings concerning people*, was seminal in challenging the problematic ways in which Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) described marginalized communities. In 2002, Hope Olson's book, *The Power to Name: Locating the limits of subject representation in libraries*, further elucidated this discussion and explored the power of language and its representation in the library through traditional classification systems, i.e. Library of Congress (LOC) and Dewey Decimal. The work of Berman, Olson, and others, has pushed the field to reevaluate the use of controlled and standardized classification vocabularies in library description, while contemporary literature documents the continuing issues with the LCSH (Greenblatt, 2010; Campbell, 2013; Drabinski, 2013; Hope, 2002; Roberto, 2011; Baucom, 2018; Tai, 2018).

In 2018, the Society of American Archivist's (SAA) Technical Subcommittee on Describing Archives: A Content Standard invited comments on a proposed revision to DACS Statement of Principles. These revisions were influenced by archival community feedback received in 2017-2018. The proposed revisions seemingly provide a more flexible framework, which could allow for more inclusive practices to take place in the description process. It is imperative that issues of insensitive archival description are addressed and practices evolve to more respectfully describe marginalized communities in the archive. The revised DACS principles are more focused on the experience of persons who present themselves in the archive, whether as a user or as entity being archived. The revisions also explicitly state a commitment to the values and ethics of the profession, which would include promotion of SAA's commitment to diversity and inclusion (SAA, 2018). The Association of Canadian Archivists' *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct* specifically includes a statement promoting the "balance between the needs of an open and democratic society and those of the *Journal of New Librarianship*, 4(2019) pp. 505-515 10.21173/newlibs/8/3 505

in the archive, particularly for researchers who identify with the LGBTQ+ community. The inability of LCSH and other controlled vocabularies to appropriately describe marginalized populations silences and renders these groups invisible in the archive.

LCSH uses “transsexual” or “transgender people” to describe non-gender conforming individuals. These communities often describe themselves with terms like “trans*,” “gender queer,” or “gender fluid,” and view the term “transsexual” as offensive (Baucom, 2018). LCSH has a wide series of issues related to its conflation between the concepts of “gender” and “sex” (Greenblatt, 2010). “Queer” is an ambiguous term which defies any single definition, but one that has been reclaimed by many in the LGBTQ+ community and is a term of identification commonly used (Greenblatt, 2010). “Queer” is not included in the LCSH, though “queer theory” and “queer community” are given as variants of the term “sexual minority community.” This poses an interesting question of what “queer theory” can mean when there is no acknowledgement of “queer” as an entity in and of itself (Greenblatt, 2010).

The term “internment” is frequently used to describe collections that document the forced imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II. However, the Japanese American community more widely prefers the use of the term “incarceration,” to more appropriately acknowledge the trauma inflicted upon the community during this time (Tai, 2018). Berman (1971) also made note of this issue, pointing out that the profession’s denial of grievous offenses, like the incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII, creates the illusion that only *other* nations (e.g. Nazi Germany) are susceptible to committing such atrocities, rendering ourselves as blameless. A collaborative project between Zuni tribal members and the A:shiwi A:wan Museum of Zuni heritage found that 83% of the items described in the museum’s collections held incorrect information (Mathe, 2014). This large discrepancy is problematic. Considering the use of inaccurate, biased description

becomes imperative when description information, as presented through an oft trusted institution, like the museum or archive, is taken by the general public as truth and fact (Tai, 2018).

The repercussions of incorrectly describing communities with LCSH or controlled vocabulary should not be denied. “Subject headings assigned to any given work do not change the work’s content,” (Roberto, 2011, p. 63), nor will inaccurate classification change an individual’s identity, but it marginalizes, alienates, and causes harm to individuals and communities by reinforcing a status quo of what constitutes the “normal” (Knowlton, 2005; Tomren, 2004). No language can be entirely unbiased or neutral. Particular languages, cultures, and customs are built from the subjective view of the creator(s) and users (Tomren, 2004). When describing marginalized communities in the archive though, who is better equipped to do so than the communities themselves. The problem with the dominant language used in archival and library description is that these practices are based in Western, Eurocentric tradition and ideology, despite the diverse cultures they are applied to.

Centering the Community

The emergence and rising use of community archiving practices has helped to address some issues of misrepresentation in the archive. A community stewardship model focuses on collaboration between archives and communities, more evenly distributing institutional power (Zavala et. al, 2017). In some instances, the authority of description and access remains directly in the hands and control of the community. It is not difficult to bring community input into descriptive practices, as long as institutions and archivists are willing to share their inherent power and control with the community (Tai, 2018; Zavala et al., 2017). Centering the voice and input of the community can happen at different points during the archival description process. Archivists can consult with communities beforehand to develop inclusive and respectful descriptive practices before description even takes place. Community

members can also be composed for the review of completed finding aids and other descriptive materials (Tai, 2018).

Many archives and institutions are in a transitory state of critically rethinking the role and practices of archival description. This has led to archives addressing issues that may have been ignored in years past. There are ways in which grassroots and institutionally-based archives are actively integrating collaboration into their description processes in an effort to combat culturally insensitive description. Often, these archives are specifically focused on the collection of marginalized communities or individuals, making collaborative practices essential to an honest representation of these groups. These archives may look to content standards like DACS or Dublin Core in deciding what information should be included in description, but they look to the community in determining the precise terminology to describe these communities.

Sometimes, archivists are able to ask donors for assistance in creating adequate and appropriate description. The Gay Center, GLBT Historical Society, Chicana por mi Raza Digital Memory Collective, the Teenie Harris Archive at Carnegie Museum of Art, and the Austin History Center Latinx Community Archives and Asian American Community Archives all work with donors during the archival description process (Luster, 2019; P. Delara, personal communication, September 17, 2018; C. McCarthy, personal communication, September 17, 2018; M. Seiferle-Valencia, personal communication, September 20, 2018; M. Hults, personal communication, September 24, 2018; A. Khan, personal communication, October 7, 2018). Unfortunately, donors are not always an easily accessible resource for archivists to refer to, which then requires flexibility in procedure and practice. When donors are unavailable, The Austin History Center reaches out to relevant community members and relies on previous writing and community knowledge to create culturally sensitive archival description (A. Khan, personal communication, October 7, 2018). The time and research that an archive is willing to

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put into the creation of culturally appropriate and community-centered archival description is key to promoting inclusion within the archive.

The Austin History Center, which includes distinct Latinx, African American, and Asian American Community Archives, still uses LCSH, but not exclusively. LOC vocabulary does not stay as up-to-date with current terminology usage in ways the Center prefers, so they have created their own internal controlled vocabulary and guides, used in conjunction with LCSH (M. Hulst, personal communication, September 24, 2018). The Chicana por mi Raza oral history digital archive eschews use of LCSH altogether, due to the particularly outdated and offensive terminology used for Latinx communities (M. Seiferle-Valencia, personal communication, September 20, 2018). Chicana por mi Raza does not currently adhere to any internal or external controlled vocabulary for description. Metadata and description terminology are pulled from interview notes or interviewee's own descriptions of artifacts included in the digital archive. Subject expertise is also provided by one of the project's leads, University of Michigan Professor Maria Cotera. Professor Cotera is able to provide subject knowledge to the students who help with description and cataloging. Descriptions are reviewed for both clarity and intellectual content, with expert reviewers adding context as appropriate (M. Seiferle-Valencia, personal communication, September 20, 2018). Chicana por mi Raza uses a particularly strong model of collaboration that involves the community and subject experts at multiple points across the archival process.

Archivists in the aforementioned archives acknowledge the inequalities and biases inherent the archival institution, and more minutely, the process of archival description. To be dedicated to creating culturally sensitive description in the archive, these archivists must be flexible, creative, unafraid to make mistakes, and continually inquisitive through the actions expressed in their policies,

practices and procedures. The description practices used by these archives don't always present an easy or clear-cut model for description, but they offer an inclusive-focused way forward.

Towards Democratic Description

Studies have looked at the use of folksonomies, crowdsourced and organic assemblages of terminology, as an alternative to traditional methods of metadata creation and organization, both within library and archival description and in the broader digital, information landscape (Trant, 2008; Lu, Park, & Hu, 2010; Ornelas, 2010; Benoit, 2017; Dias da Silva, A. M., 2017; Benoit, 2018). Advocates for the use of folksonomies cite the prospect of more inclusive description and the ability to assist archives caught within the constraints of staffing, money, and time, as reasons to encourage their use (Dias da Silva, 2017). There has not been much of a push, or more wide-spread support for experimenting with folksonomies uses in archival description. However, folksonomies present many characteristics that are valuable in building culturally sensitive archival description, like their offer of current, non-binary, and democratic descriptors (Quintarelli, 2005; Kroski, 2013).

Unlike traditional schemes of classification, folksonomies are not hierarchical. They offer a bottom-up approach to classification which befittingly parallels the grassroots ideals held by many community archives (Quintarelli, 2005). A recent study looked more closely at various factors regarding the use of social tags in the metadata of digital archives and provided evidence for the benefits of these user-generated descriptors. Social tags were found to increase access points to the archive, without negatively affecting metadata with incorrect information (Benoit, 2017). Tags created by participants often reflected terms that were used in real-life searching, thus better reflecting the actions of users (Benoit, 2018).

In the LGBTQ+ community, folksonomies have offered a way for descriptive control and power to be held within the community. In an informal survey that looked at tagging within the LGBTQ+ *Journal of New Librarianship*, 4(2019) pp. 505-515 10.21173/newlibs/8/3 511

community, one specific lesbian user used a myriad of terms to describe herself and her community (Ornelas, 2010). Several of these terms fell out of the purview of the LCSH, such as the use of “dyke,” “butch,” and “boyfriend.” (Ornelas, 2010). It was also shown that LCSH use of “sexual minorities,” as a means to encapsulate the myriad of LGBTQ+ community identifications, is inefficient. This term did not appear as a tag in any searches conducted by the survey’s creator in various test sites, i.e. Flickr, LibraryThing, and the now defunct Delicious (Ornelas, 2010). This highlights the crucial differences in language used by the traditional institution, as presented through standardized classification schema, and the language used by the people who live and identify with these communities. Folksonomies are apt for archival description because of their ability to respond to immediate shifts in terminology and for allowing the voices of many to enter into the description process (Adler, 2009).

Conclusion

Centering the community needs to be key in archiving marginalized histories. The use of folksonomies, and other collaborative description processes, provide ways forward to more respectful and inclusive archival description. Archivists can work closely with donors and communities to establish preferred terminology and review description that has already been created. User-generated metadata and folksonomies do not necessarily need to replace standardized practices in description, but these flexible practices should be used more dispersedly and in conjunction with standardization. Archives and archivists must be flexible and open to new and emerging practices as a means to build a more culturally sensitive archive. More research needs to be conducted surrounding the use of user-generated metadata in archival description and established institutions should encourage experimentation and divergence from traditional practice. It is only in this way that the archival field will evolve to be a more culturally sensitive entity and justly promote the ideals of diversity and inclusion it so often seeks to adhere to in the modern era.

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