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Authors

Dundon, Kate
Norton, Alix

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Reparative Archival Description Project Assessment Report

UC Santa Cruz University Library
Special Collections & Archives
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A report assessing project outcomes, successes, challenges, and recommendations.
Prepared by Kate Dundon and Alix Norton.

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About

The Reparative Archival Description Project¹ was a two-year long effort to audit and revise the archival description in UCSC Library's finding aids to identify, contextualize, and remediate language that is racist, oppressive, culturally insensitive, outdated, or coded in ways that harm or obscure marginalized people and communities.

In alignment with the Library's vision to sustain an inclusive community, this project supports the strategic direction of Access & Discovery by fulfilling the goal to "assess descriptive metadata for racist, sexist, ableist and other oppressive terminology [and] work to ensure more inclusivity by implementing reparative description and contextual statements in collection descriptions." This project also supports the UC systemwide goal to pursue "inclusive, ethical, and accessible description, metadata, and finding aids," as outlined in the [Statement on Inclusion and Equity in Special Collections, Archives, and Distinctive Collections in the University of California Libraries](#).²

Project Outcomes

The working group fulfilled three primary objectives:

1. Finding aid audit and white paper

The working group began with a literature review³ which members used to build a list of keywords and concepts to support an audit of the Library's finding aids. Executed by University of Washington MLIS student Nicholas Pillsbury, the audit took a three-pronged approach: a review of 18 finding aids that Special Collections staff had previously identified, a review of the top 10 most frequently visited finding aids,⁴ and a high-level search of all finding aids (total of 340 at the time) using the keywords identified in the literature review. Pillsbury documented his research and produced a white paper that summarized the audit process, his findings, and recommendations for reparative edits and/or contextualization. Recommendations were prioritized into high, medium, and low categories.

Deliverable: ["The Word Hunt: Problematic Language in UCSC's Finding Aids and Reparative Archival Description."](#) 2021 white paper by Nicholas Pillsbury

2. Statement on harmful description

Institutional statements addressing bias in archival description have recently become common practice in academic libraries. The working group determined that such a statement would

¹ See [Working Group Charge](#).

² Tennant, E., Hanff, P., Miller, K., Eagle Yun, A., Jackson, A. N, Lin, E. S, et al. (2021). Statement on Inclusion and Equity in Special Collections, Archives, and Distinctive Collections in the University of California Libraries. *UC Office of the President: University of California Systemwide Libraries*. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mq1461d>

³ See Appendix B for bibliography.

⁴ As identified by Google Analytics on the Online Archive of California from 2012-1/2021.

provide context on why bias and harmful language exists and persists in our systems of access, and assert the Library's commitment to respectful and inclusive language. In the statement, we affirm the Library's reparative description work is ongoing, iterative, and responsive to community feedback. The statement applies to all archival description, including finding aids, catalog records, and metadata in the Library's digital collections. The working group was pleased to receive and incorporate significant feedback from Special Collections & Archives, and the resulting statement is truly a departmental group effort. See Appendix A for the full statement.

Deliverable: Public Statement on Harmful Language in Archival Description on the Special Collections & Archives [website](#).

3. Finding aid revisions

The finding aid audit identified **97 finding aids** to review for potential revisions, which represent approximately 30% of the Library's finding aids.

The working group focused their efforts on the highest priority issues first, which appeared in about 60% of the identified finding aids. These included racial slurs, offensive or outdated terminology, and racial or ethnic identification. For example, references to "Japanese American evacuation and relocation", were revised to "Japanese American forced removal and incarceration."⁵ Each working group member researched identified language and presented their findings and recommendations to the other member. The working group discussed findings and made decisions collectively. Members then completed edits asynchronously. The working group repeated this process with medium priority issues, which include married women identified only with their husband's names (e.g. Mrs. John Smith), and finally, low priority issues such as misspellings and other inaccuracies identified in the audit. Through this process, the working group determined that only 50 finding aids actually required edits and/or updating.

Deliverable: 50 updated finding aids that align with current description standards.

Note: Updating metadata in one place invariably impacts other access points. The working group identified 42 catalog records and 272 digital object records in the Library's digital collections that require parallel revisions. Impacted Metadata Services and Special Collections staff have agreed to make these revisions, timeline TBD.

⁵ Per recommendation from the [Japanese American Citizens League Power of Words Handbook: A Guide to Language about Japanese Americans in World War II](#).

Successes

The working group met all three goals/criteria for success as outlined in the charge:

1. The Library will have expanded skills and knowledge of reparative and anti-oppressive archival description practice.

Working group members developed a deeper understanding of bias in archival description, and methods for recognizing and overcoming this bias, which will serve ongoing description work in the Special Collections department and Library for years to come. This expanded knowledge also brought a greater self-awareness of the positionality and privilege of the individual working group members, and a humility in acknowledging the limits of our knowledge. Throughout the project, the working group consulted on Indigenous terminology with Community Archivist Dr. Rebecca Hernandez, a scholar of Native American history, who is an asset to the Library in this area.

2. The Library will have up-to-date finding aids and a public statement contextualizing harmful language in archival description.

See project outcomes above.

3. The Library will have an articulated direction for maintaining anti-oppressive archival description practices over time.

See recommendations below.

Deliverable: [UCSC Library List of Reparative Description Style Guides and Community Thesauri](#)

Additional successes

There were unanticipated successes as well, including the efficient structure for dividing labor and managing the project developed by the working group. This included twice-monthly meetings, which maintained momentum in the midst of competing priorities, and a GitHub project board, which tracked the status of each finding aid as it moved through the workflow. Working group members performed research asynchronously, and brought new knowledge and recommendations to the other members. Meetings were reserved for discussions and decision making, while wordsmithing and editing were accomplished individually. This collaborative and streamlined project management approach will be applied to future departmental projects.

Another success was the high-level of interest and involvement from SCA student assistant and recent graduate Amy Nair. Nair took seriously her assignment to research married women's full names, utilizing her growing genealogy research skills (even visiting local cemeteries to identify names not available in online resources), and succeeded in identifying the names of approximately 100 women represented in the Library's collections.

Challenges and Opportunities

While this project aligns with Library values and strategic directions, it is also true that labor was nevertheless invested in collections that largely maintain dominant historical narratives and document the already well-documented. At times, working group members questioned if this resource investment would be better spent surfacing underrepresented people and cultures in existing collections, developing strategies for revealing silences and gaps in the Library's archival collections, or supporting the acquisition and processing of materials that better reflect the Library's values of inclusion and equity. The corrective work and discussions around representation conducted by the working group are a step toward these directions.

This project scope was intentionally limited to archival description in finding aids in order to create a defined project to pilot reparative description within current staff capacity. There is an opportunity for larger-scale reparative description efforts across the Library, including metadata in Library Search and Library Digital Collections, as well as iterative improvements to archival finding aids. It is worth recognizing that Library staff working with bibliographic and digital collections metadata stores are aware of and have made efforts to prioritize inclusive description practices. Metadata Services is currently actively engaged in this work, and similar efforts have been proposed in the past to revise subject headings in Digital Collections metadata. The working group looks forward to building on both this project's accomplishments and prior metadata work in collaboration with Library colleagues.

An important value of reparative archival description is inviting conversation between the institution and the user, which can be realized by creating mechanisms for communication in the space where archival description is accessed. Current feedback mechanisms include a contact link in the Library's finding aids, and an email address included in the statement on harmful description on the Special Collections website. The working group acknowledges that these feedback mechanisms are somewhat invisible to many users; therefore, there is an opportunity to develop more effective ways to invite feedback and engagement from the Library's user community.

The Library was fortunate to be able to engage MLIS student Nicholas Pillsbury in undertaking the finding aid audit. Pillsbury was in need of a project in order to complete his required capstone for his degree, and the working group was pleased with his dedication to the project and his resulting report which shaped the remainder of the project. However, the ethical disconnect between the working group's commitment to this essential work and the fact that we assigned a large portion of it to an unpaid intern is not lost on us. We hope to avoid unpaid labor in future engagements with reparative description in the Library.

Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations for future reparative description efforts in the Library and integrating anti-oppressive archival description into standard practice:

Align efforts with forthcoming Library strategic planning, departmental goals, and EDI initiatives. There is opportunity to align nascent reparative description efforts with Library-wide strategic planning, Library EDI Team priorities, and goal-setting at the department level. For example, library staff development around issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion, namely through regular reading and discussion groups, is a current initiative put forth by the EDI Team. Reparative description and conscious language usage would be relevant topics for future discussion, in order to engage all library staff with this work.

Prioritize staff development in inclusive description. Department heads can encourage staff who are actively engaged in metadata creation and management to develop an awareness of reparative description. This can be considered for departmental and/or individual staff member's annual goals. A good starting point is reading this report, then consulting resources in the bibliography for additional learning opportunities. Staff development in this area can be considered in the 2022 Library strategic planning process.

Plan staff resources strategically. Reparative description is a resource-intensive, long-term endeavor. It requires curiosity, humility, patience, trust, respect, commitment, consistent and open communication, and detailed documentation. Addressing harm and making space for inclusivity is never a quick fix. Consider staff resources carefully and plan for a significant time investment for any initial project, as well as ongoing description work in the future. Take time to establish shared values and develop trust at the outset of the project. Create space for different learning approaches. Have patience with yourself and your colleagues as you learn.

Use community thesauri resources. The working group created a tool to support the Library in maintaining anti-oppressive archival description practices over time. The [UCSC Library List of Reparative Description Style Guides and Community Thesauri](#) is a standalone list of style guides and community thesauri for Library use. We invite all Library staff to familiarize themselves with this list, and add to it when necessary. The working group envisions this as a living document for shared use, and is committed to revisiting it once a year for revision. This document has been integrated into Special Collections & Archives manuals for Accessioning and Processing and the Center for Archival Research and Training.

Acknowledgements

The project was completed by the Reparative Archival Redescription Working Group, which consisted of project co-leads Supervisory Archivist Kate Dundon, and Center for Archival Research and Training Archivist Alix Norton, as well as University of Washington MLIS student intern Nicholas Pillsbury. The working group thanks the following people for their contributions to this project: Teresa Mora, Marcia Barrett, Belinda Egan, Luisa Haddad, Rebecca Hernandez, Rachel Jaffe, Sarah Lindsey, Jessica Pigza, and Special Collections student assistants Amy Nair, Khushal Gujadhur, Athena Kwan, and Yitong Lei. We thank the Library Management Group and Library Senior Management Team for their support of this work.

Project Timeline and Time Commitment

6-12/2020	Initial project development, working group charge finalized and shared with LMG
5/2021	Finding aid audit white paper completed. Nicholas rotates off working group.
6-7/2021	Audit assessment, statement on harmful description drafted
8/2021	Discussed and refined statement with SCA department
9/2021	Statement published on SCA website
10/2021	Presented project update to LMG
10/2021	Discussed opportunities for reparative description with Metadata Services
11/21-7/2022	Execution of redescription and contextualization
10/2022	Final report completed

The two working group members dedicated an estimated 200 hours each to this project over the course of 2 years. This includes undertaking a literature review, engaging in regular meetings, researching language, completing finding aid edits, and maintaining project documentation. This equates to roughly 4.8% of each staff member's capacity.

Appendix A: Statement on Harmful Language in Archival Description

In line with the UC Santa Cruz University Library's Mission, Vision, and Values, and guided by the UCSC Principles of Community, Special Collections & Archives seeks to describe archival materials in a manner that respects those who create, are represented in, and interact with the collections we steward. However, we acknowledge that Library staff manage archival description that may contain language that is racist, colonialist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise harmful. Archival description appears in collection guides (also known as finding aids), library catalog records, and digital object metadata. In creating archival description, Library staff both create description and repurpose existing description produced by creators or prior stewards. For example, it is standard practice to reuse original folder titles in order to make materials available for research more efficiently. Whatever their source, these descriptions reflect the language, values, and historical contexts of the people and organizations that created, collected, or described the material. Archival description also features controlled vocabularies such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings, some of which are outdated and harmful. Library staff do not have direct control over these vocabularies, but we do aim to utilize them in alignment with our values and make local adjustments where possible.

When we encounter harmful language created by Library staff, we are committed to reviewing and updating it to acknowledge and repair harm, and documenting such updates. However, original description that comes from the archival material itself can provide important context about its creators, custodial history, and/or source, even when the language can cause harm. In such cases, we are committed to providing additional context where possible.

Library staff are currently implementing practices to address harmful language as part of both retrospective and ongoing description work. We acknowledge that language evolves over time and that efforts to create respectful and inclusive description must be ongoing and iterative. As such, we welcome your feedback and questions at speccoll@library.ucsc.edu.

This statement was adapted from the [Princeton University Library Statement on Language in Archival Description](#) and the [Yale University Statement on Harmful Language in Archival Description](#).

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