

From Gatekeepers to Facilitators: Transforming Metadata for Equitable Knowledge Access

Demetrius Currington

DC Public Library

Laura Farley

DC Public Library

Robert LaRose

DC Public Library

Maya Thompson

DC Public Library

ABSTRACT: Metadata is necessary for intellectual control of materials, providing context, and facilitating findability. In the creation of metadata, information professionals may inadvertently act as gatekeepers, perpetuating the marginalization of people and identities through the use of complicated and outdated descriptive practices. The People's Archive, the local history department of the DC Public Library, set out to revise our metadata practices for digital collections to prioritize inclusivity and findability in our collections. Addressing the role our profession has played in perpetuating harmful social structures is hard and uncomfortable, but it is also overdue and necessary if we truly want to provide the best access to our users. In this article, the authors review the methodology and outcomes of a yearlong effort to update our metadata practices.

Keywords: teams in the work place, libraries--special collections--social justice, subject headings, reparative descriptions, alternative vocabularies



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Journal of Radical Librarianship, Vol. 10 (2024) pp.112-132. Published 28 August 2024.

Introduction

Information professionals are called to libraries, archives, and cultural heritage institutions because we believe in access to knowledge and the pursuit of learning. However, this calling makes it easy to diminish the role our profession has played as the gateway that controls access to knowledge and has too often perpetuated social structures that affect communities in uneven ways, especially based on identifiers of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender expression, class, and disability.¹ This is not to say that as a profession we have intentionally set out to perpetuate marginalization, but it is tremendously difficult to be aware of our roles in reinforcing privilege and inequality. We are often unaware of our roles in reinforcing whiteness, especially white maleness, as the default; and how our choices in metadata description may cause further silencing of everyone else.²

The People's Archive at the DC Public Library (DCPL) underwent a yearlong evaluation of our metadata practices to prioritize inclusivity and findability, resulting in a pivot in our approach to describing people, communities, and identities. Access for all is the guiding light of services and products in a public library. With that mission in mind, DCPL strives to make our special collections findable not just for academics or professional researchers, but for all members of the public. This includes patrons who may be less familiar with subject heading searching and more likely to use vernacular keywords to find materials. It is our responsibility as information professionals to provide the best metadata our resources allow to aid in searches, a combination of The Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), custom controlled vocabularies, and descriptions created in partnership with communities to ensure accurate representation. Beginning a major rethinking of descriptive practices is daunting, but by assembling a dedicated working group; reviewing available guidance in the field; identifying areas of opportunity in current practices; and setting goalposts for change, it is possible to create meaningful change in descriptive practices over time.

Project Background

The People's Archive is the local history department of DCPL and has been documenting the social, cultural, and political life of the District of Columbia since 1905. There are three major collections with differing scopes that comprise The People's Archive. Washingtoniana documents the history and culture of the entire District of Columbia and is the original collection founded in 1905. This collection includes printed materials like pamphlets, posters, and ordinances; maps and atlases; telephone directories and business records; newspapers and zines; letters; photographs; oral histories; music recordings, and born-digital materials including web archives, and social media posts. In 1935, the independent Peabody Library of Georgetown merged with DCPL, creating the Peabody Room. This collection covers only the Georgetown neighborhood and includes primarily printed materials and photographs. The Black Studies collection was established in 1972 with the opening of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library. This collection contains material about the African American experience, emphasizing civil rights and

¹ Kauffman, Rhonda Y. and Martina S. Anderson, *Library Technical Services: Adapting to a Changing Environment*, ed. Stacey Marien (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2020), 215.

² Kauffman and Anderson, *Library Technical Services*, 221.

social justice within the United States. All three collecting scopes include a reference book collection. Together these collections represent 309 processed archival collections, over 25,300 books, 69 digital collections in the digital repository Dig DC, and 28 collections of archived websites in Archive-It.

Located at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library central branch of the DCPL system (except for the Peabody Room located at the Georgetown Neighborhood Library branch), The People's Archive serves patrons with varied historical research experiences. The DCPL system includes 26 branches and serves all eight wards of the District. We are a diverse city with residents whose families have lived in the District for generations, people drawn to the capital city to serve in the Federal government, students attending one of the many universities in the area, as well as several international communities. We are also a city grappling with rapid gentrification and rising income inequality. All these factors impact the collecting priorities of The People's Archive and the services we provide. As a special collections division within a public library, the staff of 12 librarians and archivists prioritize access to materials and community involvement. The changes in descriptive practices primarily impact our digital team that leads the creation and editing of metadata for our digital repository Dig DC and our instance of ArchivesSpace, manages an Archive-It web program, selects, and digitizes materials from our collection, and cares for the long-term preservation of our digital assets.

In 2019, The People's Archive began discussing problematic LCSHs, a growing desire to provide context to collections that contain historically harmful content, and the need for improved guidance on preferred terms in descriptions - with the hope of revising our metadata standards someday in the future. Three catalysts moved our department's metadata guideline revision forward. The first came through work creating metadata for several local newspapers, some of which were created by and for the LGBTQIA+ community, and all of which covered news of the day, dating back to the early 1960s. We believed the LCSHs to describe LGBTQIA+ persons and lifestyles to be outdated and often offensive. As we work toward acquiring more collections from the LGBTQIA+ community we believed it was time to provide subject headings that reflect the current preferred terms of the community. Additionally, we found ourselves grappling with what public notes to add when summarizing the contents of newspaper issues that included outdated language. We wanted to create guidelines to provide context on the collection creation and contents.

The second push came from the participatory collecting project Archive This Moment D.C. When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down life in D.C. in March 2020, The People's Archive called out for Washingtonians to submit materials documenting their day-to-day life during the pandemic. We received thousands of submissions, many of them images, and most with minimal metadata. As we began creating metadata for the materials, we discussed our discomfort with assigning gendered pronouns to individuals in images of whom we had little to no information. The third push came when George Floyd was murdered by an officer of the Minneapolis Police Department while other officers stood by and watched on May 25, 2020. Like many other institutions, this moment demanded that we reflect on our role in perpetuating racism in our work and actions. Washington, D.C. became the first large city to be majority Black residents in 1957.³

³ Office of Planning. n.d. "African American Heritage." District Government Website. District Government. Accessed May 30, 2024. <https://planning.dc.gov/page/african-american-heritage>.

The District has a complicated history with race including the sale of enslaved people within walking distance of the Capitol building, discriminatory employment practices in the federal government, redlining, and a lack of voting rights. It is also a city where communities of enslaved, free, and migrant Black people built homes, businesses, educational and religious institutions, and a thriving arts culture.⁴ The staff of The People’s Archive come from diverse backgrounds ranging from native Washingtonians to recent arrivals to the city. With these contexts in mind, the murder of Mr. Floyd and so many others necessitated that our department examine our contributions to the cultural narrative and make changes to descriptive practices.

These impetuses prompted the department to review how and why we describe things the way we do. Initially, we set up a Slack channel to share thoughts and resources but decided we needed to create a formal group to take a deep dive into our metadata practices on providing context about collection creators and contents; assumptions about any form of identity; and addressing the perpetuation of whiteness as the default.

The project's scope was to evaluate the metadata guidelines in use for our digital repository Dig DC, our Archive-It web program, and our instance of ArchivesSpace. At the time of this project, Dig DC metadata was built on MODS records derived from Dublin Core, and Archive-It and ArchivesSpace also followed Dublin Core. LCSH was used as the controlled vocabulary for subjects in all three platforms. However, some collections had local controlled vocabularies for terms like band names, performance venues, and neighborhoods. Inclusivity and findability go together in providing users with the best access to collections. Metadata schemas rely on controlled vocabularies paired with searchable descriptions, but those controlled vocabularies can be limiting, rigid, and dated. Many libraries utilize LCSH, a thesaurus of controlled vocabulary used internationally in a variety of metadata schemas. There are plenty of criticisms of the LCSH, chief among them being the arduous process of adding new or revising existing terms.⁵ The result is a controlled vocabulary well behind the popular vernacular and a mismatch between standardization and the inability of users to find representations of themselves within the library. The goal of the project was to revise and strengthen documentation on metadata creation and to provide recommendations to the department.

Gathering Information

The process of reviewing and updating our metadata practices required an immense amount of learning and reflection about various identities, from both theory and practical standpoints. For the basis of this work, we turned to the well of literature about race, sexuality, gender, religion, indigeneity, and disability, with special attention to where they intersect with archives. As librarian-archivists, we not only drew on the work of theory-based scholars but also took inspiration from our information practitioners peers at academic and museum libraries, and archives who have already embarked on the work of transforming their description work. The Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia’s Anti-Racist Description Working Group, for example,

⁴ Myers, Chris. 2019. *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*. The University of North Carolina Press.

⁵ Howard, Sara A. and Steven A. Knowlton, “Browsing through Bias: The Library of Congress Classification and Subject Headings for African American Studies and LGBTQIA Studies,” *Library Trends* 67, no. 1 (2018): 74-88, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0026>.

created and updated a list of resources and recommendations for librarians and archivists working with Black archives. The 36-page document that emerged from their endeavor lists several recommendations already being practiced by archivists across the country that move away from neutrality, aim to reduce harm, and center humanity of oppressed communities through radical archival description, classification, processing, and collaboration. Similarly, the Rubenstein Library at Duke University published a style guide on their description writing method, offering a method that is anchored by their guiding principles that center accessibility and inclusion, accuracy, feedback, and transparency in their descriptive practice. These tenants and recommendations, in addition to those made in the statements of harmful content of Brandeis University, Drexel University, Harvard University, Yale University, and Temple University served as compasses for our reparative description project. Statements of Harmful Content from institutions such as these were helpful examples of how academia has navigated the harm inherent in their materials. All of these institutions engaged in what “radical cataloging, address[ing] the root issues that can make access to information problematic.”⁶ See Appendix I for a full list of articles and resources we reviewed.

Our research into identities and how these categories are shaped and function helped us to revise our metadata practices and to create our Statement on Harmful Content.⁷

Assembling a Team and Project Workflow

We approached this project from a shared desire to see a change in our metadata practices but with no framework for how to enact the change, especially given that at the time of this project team members were early to mid-career and considered ourselves practitioners, not theorists. We were unsure how long this project would last or what products would result. From the beginning our tactic was to meet regularly, document decisions and reasoning, and immediately put into practice updated guidance. Ultimately, we met for one year of rigorous discussions and made significant changes to guidelines for digital collections metadata creation in Dig DC, Archive-It, and ArchivesSpace, as well as staff training. These changes were only possible with the buy-in of our leadership who valued this use of staff resources.

No ambitious project is without its share of obstacles. and we had several significant challenges that occurred while completing this work, chiefly, assembling a knowledgeable and consistent team, balancing the needs of the project with routine job duties, and limiting the scope of work. Building a team and deciding on an organizational structure was the first major obstacle we faced. Since this project was initiated by The People’s Archive, it followed that staff from that department made up the bulk of the team and provided the project manager. Initial members included the Coordinator for Digital Initiatives, a Digital Curation Librarian (and project manager), the Coordinator for the Memory Lab Network, and two Library Associates. Over time some members left the project due to changing career roles and those vacancies impacted the team synergy and expectations, but the project manager made sure to fill those gaps with qualified staff who had previous experience with The People’s Archive in some capacity. This

⁶ Lember, Heather, Suzanne Lipkin, and Richard Lee. “Radical Cataloging: From Words to Action.” *Urban Library Journal* 19, no. 1, 2, (December 17, 2013).

⁷ “About Dig DC and The People's Archive at DC Public Library,” Dig DC, DC Public Library, updated March 8, 2022, <https://digdc.dclibrary.org/content/about-dig-dc-and-peoples-archive-dc-public-library>.

challenged our team to be more flexible with deadlines and open to inviting fresh perspectives into an established workflow. Ultimately, bringing in voices from outside the department created a richer scope of experiences that benefited the project.

We recognized the need to keep the group at a size that encouraged all members to participate and feel heard, averaging five people at any given time. Some of the conversation topics were unfamiliar to the group (both generally and in the context of archival work) and may have affected group members in significant and different ways. This unfamiliarity was an opportunity we embraced, and we acknowledged that it is impossible to approach this work from a neutral place. Each member of the working group entered the space with perspectives informed by our own identities and life experiences and with varying levels of knowledge of identities and life experiences outside of our own. This work forced us to confront the unique power we wield as information professionals who decide how peoples, communities, and identities will be named and described in the historical record. We faced this confrontation of our power by relinquishing some of it, deferring to and learning from members of various communities before we made description decisions. We all carry unconscious biases as a product of our unique cultural experiences, and coming to terms with areas of opportunity for our growth can feel painful, especially in a field that prides itself on inclusiveness. We strived to provide a safe place to lessen the stress that working through these complex topics may cause.

The people that worked on this project held a variety of roles within DCPL and were a group of racially diverse, cisgender women and men, comprising a combination of straight and queer identities. The organizational structure of the team was a hierarchical mix; there was an established leader who acted as the project manager. However, individual members were given the chance to lead portions of the project, and rotated as moderators for the group discussions, allowing each member to sit as a leader on their topic and present their findings to the group.

We recognized it was imperative to meet regularly not just to move the project forward but to commit to a practice of evaluation, reflection, and engagement to bring social justice into our daily practice of librarianship. Meeting attendance was integral and helped to establish rapport among members who worked at various branches and departments in our organization. Each member did their best to commit, but schedule conflicts did occur. Meetings were rarely canceled, and typically only canceled due to extenuating circumstances. Most meetings were attended virtually by all team members, especially as members joined from different branches within the DCPL system. Digital coworking spaces were important in keeping all members abreast of the status of the project. We utilized a Google Drive folder with multiple Google Docs and Sheets, and a Box folder for saving and storing selected articles and links for discussion. Meeting notes were extremely helpful with keeping everyone on track as well as introducing new members to the progression of work.

During our first meeting, we collected all the thoughts from Slack and put them in a Google Doc. From there, other concerns and considerations ballooned to a degree that felt unmanageable. So, we started with the goals of the group, to increase inclusivity in metadata and findability within our collections. We agreed that race, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, indigeneity, ethnicity, religion, and disability were all identities that warranted revision and documentation in descriptive practices. Each one of these identities is so massive in scope and layered in nuance

that it can feel overwhelming to produce guidelines. Our approach was to turn to the work of the groups and organizations that have already compiled alternate controlled vocabularies and tools for metadata guidelines like [The Cataloging Lab](#),⁸ [Homosaurus Vocabulary Terms](#),⁹ and [Archives For Black Lives in Philadelphia](#).¹⁰ Every other week we read articles and then met to discuss two to three pre-selected topics, document decisions, and assign action items to make changes. It would have been easy for a sprawling, intellectually demanding project like this to fall away after the initial excitement, but we combated the fade with standing meetings to keep this project from getting stuck. Even if only two of us could meet, we still gathered for discussion.

Bringing in Outside Perspectives

Although our team brought diverse perspectives to this work, we recognized the need to gather feedback from people outside our group, and especially communities being described, about their experiences with The People’s Archive digital resources. Given that this was a small team of people working on a passion project, our resources to conduct this information gathering were limited, but we knew we could count on our DCPL colleagues and members of the public attending our programming to share their experiences. To gather more voices, we turned internally to our colleagues throughout the Library system in an LGBTQIA+ focus group, and externally to the public in Describe-A-Thon events.

LGBTQIA+ Staff Feedback Session

In our digital resources are several LGBTQIA+ collections including two renowned periodicals that are widely used by researchers. Because of these collections’ high use and ongoing partnership with the periodicals’ publishers, we recognized the importance of gaining input from the LGBTQIA+ community. As previously mentioned, DCPL is comprised of 26 branches that serve all eight wards of the District, so we turned to our colleagues for input. After sending out an announcement to all DCPL staff we enlisted over 20 volunteers who identified as members LGBTQIA+ community to participate in a discussion to assess our digital collections to learn more about what was working well and where improvements could be made. All means all! The group consisted of public-facing staff as well as back-of-house administration staff. Before the session, we asked the participants via email to provide feedback on a draft Statement on Harmful Content and to assess a sampling of our LGBTQIA+ periodicals in Dig DC. A member of our working group had experience facilitating feedback sessions and volunteered to be our host. We utilized a detailed agenda and Jamboard for virtual collaboration.¹¹

What resulted was a 55-minute thoughtful discussion in which the group gained insight into how legacy metadata of LGBTQIA+ periodicals in Dig DC may be perceived by members of the community. Overall, feedback was positive though participants encouraged us to prioritize removing offensive subject headings from periodical descriptions. Participants shared a range of reactions to historical language used to describe their community. For many participants, it was

⁸ “Cataloging Lab,” Cataloging Lab – Experiment with Controlled Vocabularies, Cataloging Lab, accessed April 25, 2023, <https://cataloginglab.org>.

⁹ “Homosaurus,” Homosaurus Vocabulary Site, Homosaurus, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://homosaurus.org>.

¹⁰ Faith Charlton et al., “Archives for Black Lives,” Archives for Black Lives – Archivists Responding to Black Lives Matter, accessed April 25, 2023, <https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com>.

¹¹ See Appendix II for the focus group agenda.

their first encounter with digital humanities, and watching them interact with Dig DC further enforced the need to consider how people outside the professional researcher and academic realm interact with digital collections, as many were tripped up by subject headings and facet searches. Action items from the session included adding content warnings to the collection pages, continuing work on batch-replacing outdated subject headings, refining metadata workflows to be clearer about describing identities, and providing enhanced training to staff and volunteers who work on metadata.

Describe-A-Thons

An additional way to enhance metadata is by turning to the public to participate in the description. A program to boost community involvement and crowdsource metadata became a monthly programming staple in The People’s Archive beginning in February 2020. Part crowdsourcing, part history programming, part preservation 101, the Describe-A-Thons have connected the public to materials at The People’s Archive in a fresh way that encourages conversation, community, and a greater understanding of the work of information professionals. As information professionals, we have observed that the public is grappling with many of the same questions about historical language as we are.

These metadata crowdsourcing programs began in person in February 2020 and transitioned to virtual platforms during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since their inception, Describe-A-Thons have allowed members of the public to assist in describing approximately 125 newspaper issues, including the Washington Blade (DC’s primary LGBTQIA+ newspaper since 1969), the Washington City Paper (a leading independent newspaper first published in 1981), and Women in the Life (a magazine devoted to issues faced by the Black lesbian community in DC and beyond), and 361 images from the Black Lives Matter Memorial Fence Artifact Collection, that are now available in Dig DC.¹² The programs give history lovers and curious members of the public a space to gather and contribute to the story of DC while helping our department make collections accessible more quickly.

Before a Describe-A-Thon, staff prepare a Google Folder with the files to describe and a Google Sheet for each participant with their assigned files and metadata fields to be completed. During the two-and-a-half-hour-long Describe-A-Thon, participants receive training from The People’s Archive digital curation staff on the basics of metadata, why metadata is important for enhancing access to archival material, and an explanation of The People’s Archive’s specific descriptive metadata standards. This training includes a discussion of how the archive’s practices both align with and diverge from LCSH (the divergence primarily applies to our description of race/ethnicity and gender identities, which was heavily influenced by our literature research and the focus group sessions discussed above). Participants then record metadata in Google Sheets, applying The People’s Archive’s standards. In the majority of these events, each participant is

¹² See “Washington Blade,” Dig DC, DC Public Library, accessed June 18, 2024, <https://digdc.dclibrary.org/islandora/object/dcplislandora%3A2841>; “Washington City Paper,” Dig DC, DC Public Library, accessed June 18, 2024, <https://digdc.dclibrary.org/islandora/object/dcplislandora%3A272345>; “Women in the Life,” Dig DC, DC Public Library, accessed June 18, 2024, <https://digdc.dclibrary.org/islandora/object/dcplislandora%3A237215>; “Black Lives Matter Memorial Artifact Collection,” Dig DC, DC Public Library, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://digdc.dclibrary.org/islandora/object/dcplislandora%3A337948>

tasked with describing three or four issues from one of the periodicals collections, or 20 images. Although they mostly work independently, participants are encouraged to seek support from their peers and the digital curation staff leading the event. Staff try to create a collaborative atmosphere by checking in periodically with participants on what they are encountering, to give space for participants to voice comments and questions about how to accurately represent the digital object they are describing in a way that will help users search for and find it online. How much participants wanted to dig into questions around descriptive practices depended on the group of attendees. Overall, we observed that participants were more eager to share personal experiences and reflections on how the materials resonated with them than to engage with descriptive theory, which makes sense.

After a Describe-A-Thon concludes, the digital curation staff performs quality assurance on the metadata that participants created. This mostly consists of fixing minor typographical errors, checking newspaper issue summaries for completeness, and adjusting tags in the subject field to align with either LCSH or our local alternatives.

These events were promoted primarily via the DCPL website, where attendees were required to register in advance. Staff also included announcements for the Describe-A-Thons in The People's Archive monthly email newsletter, *The Intelligencer*.¹³ Many of the participants approach these events with a supportive attitude toward libraries, recognizing the value they bring to their local communities, and they are curious about what goes on behind the scenes. Some are journalists or other types of professional writers who are simply interested in looking back at older decades of news reporting. Occasionally, we partner with local library graduate programs to host a Describe-A-Thon for a course or student group. In several cases, participants have commented on how the work they do during a Describe-A-Thon helps them think more critically about how they search any online system, from the library's catalog to search engines with a much larger scope such as Google. Participants also note how certain articles or columns in the newspapers spark fond memories from earlier decades, especially when they encounter reporting on historical or social events that they were personally involved with or affected by.

Documentation and Outcomes

The three envisioned outcomes from this project were the updating of our internal metadata guidelines, providing documentation on department metadata practices, and recommending changes in donor relations. Establishing trust with donors and researchers by highlighting how we handle and make decisions about data helps to reinforce to stakeholders that our practices are based on enriching their experience while interacting with our collections. We updated our internal metadata guidelines as decisions were made, and the reasoning and sources for the decisions were documented in our project notes. When this project commenced, we publicly posted documentation that states the benefits and limitations of the LCSH, how and why we use alternate controlled vocabularies to supplement LCSH, and provided context about collection creators and contents.¹⁴ Identity is unique and personal, so it has become clear that donors need to be consulted during the donation process about how they would like to be described. We have

¹³ Sign up for monthly newsletter from The People's Archive, *The Intelligencer*, <https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/DCLIBRARY/signup/35586>

¹⁴ DC Public Library, "About Dig DC," 2022.

already begun to consult collection subjects on their preferences and provided the archives team with formal recommendations after the project.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of this project is the training of interns and field study students in our department. Each cohort receives training and documentation that includes The People's Archive's stance on describing people, communities, and identities. Through this work, we are challenging the next generation to consider how their work impacts not just collection use, but people and even social justice movements.

Our full recommendations to the staff of The People's Archive are shown below.

General recommendations

- Encourage staff to reflect on implicit biases that may impact their interactions with materials, descriptions, and donors and recommend they consult the resources we compiled for this project to learn how to reduce any impact their biases may have.
- Refer to the recommended guidelines regularly when describing identities or communities outside your own experience. Consult with colleagues on descriptive practices and when necessary, engage in research to guide descriptive practices. If needed, contact the donor of a collection for consultation on descriptive practices.
- Utilize a collection intake form to give space for donors/creators to self-identify and provide description guidance.
- Question LCSH when appropriate. In consultation with colleagues, select and document alternative subject headings to describe people, communities, and identities.
- Provide regular training to staff, interns, field study students, and members of the public (when applicable) on the descriptive practices of The People's Archive.
- After extensive debate, subjects that have historically held the privilege of being identified without descriptors will not receive specific subject headings. The reasoning for this is a lack of resources to edit the legacy metadata of hundreds of thousands of digital objects. This group has elected to focus on repairing harmful subject headings and enhancing metadata to aid in the findability of materials.

Content Warning for Materials in Dig DC, Archive-It, and ArchivesSpace

This text may be added at the collection and item level in these platforms to give patrons context into historical language.

- The People's Archive staff seeks to use respectful and accurate language to describe our historical resources. We acknowledge that language, social norms, and library best practices change, and that language that was once considered acceptable may no longer be appropriate (and vice versa). We recognize that, while some of this language was harmful

then and is still harmful today, attitudes about certain other terms and phrases have changed throughout time among members of affected communities as well as outsiders to those communities. We are sensitive to these language changes and seek to keep our description practices as respectful as possible following prevailing attitudes of the present time. We also acknowledge that any descriptions that The People’s Archive staff apply to our collections reflect power imbalances between library professionals and the people represented in the materials.

Disabilities

- Turn to the community whenever possible and never make assumptions about how people identify. Like other identities, people with disabilities describe themselves in a variety of ways.
- Consider the focus of the collection and/or item and assess the importance of calling attention to a person’s disability. It may not always be appropriate to identify a person by their disability if that aspect of their life is not central to the collection. For example, a collection of oral histories created by Deaf interviewers and narrators about the effect that communication barriers with the hearing population have on their employment features disability as a central theme of the collection. Conversely, a collection documenting the work of a local photography group in which one member is Deaf may not warrant a description in which disability is the central focus.
- Focus on expanding collection scope to include collections that focus on the experience of people with disabilities and organizations by/for people with disabilities. Initially, this may be most achievable by expanding the web archive collection.
- Utilize glossaries when appropriate:
 - [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\) Glossary of Terms](#)¹⁵
 - [Americans with Disabilities \(ADA\) Acronyms and Abbreviations](#)¹⁶
- Work toward the long-term goal of making Dig DC, Archive-It, and ArchivesSpace compliant with Section 508 web accessibility.¹⁷ Using accessibility checkers as a reference, Dig DC is about 70% compliant but lacks many descriptors that would make the items easier for those using screen readers and lacks captions for videos.

¹⁵ “Glossary of ADA Terms,” ADA National Network, updated December 2023, <https://adata.org/glossary-terms>.

¹⁶ “ADA Acronyms & Abbreviations,” ADA National Network, updated December 2023, <https://adata.org/acronyms-abbreviations>.

¹⁷ “Developing Accessible Web Content,” Section508.gov, General Services Administration, updated May 2018, <https://www.section508.gov/develop/web-content/>.

Gender

- Do not use outdated terms like “transsexual” or “transvestite” to describe individuals. For materials where these terms are used, they will likely have OCR and therefore will be searchable. Researchers will still be able to find them.
- “Cisgender” should only be used if the creator has identified as cis and it is a vital part of understanding the materials. See point four under General Recommendations above.
- Unless the gender of a person is known, use gender-neutral language to describe people in materials. For example, if a male-presenting person is depicted in a photo, we would write the description as “This photo shows a person walking down an alley in the rain” rather than “...a man walking down an alley in the rain.”

Gender Pronouns

- Unless the gender of a person is known, use gender-neutral pronouns (such as “they” and “them”) to describe people in materials.
- Offer pronoun pins for staff to wear if they choose.
- Add a box to add preferred pronouns to any Library contact forms.

Indigenous Peoples of North America

- When describing people Indigenous to North America, follow the recommendations created by the Indigenous Knowledge Organisation and use the following preferred subject heading instead of LCSH:
 - “Indigenous peoples of North America” instead of LCSH “Indians of North America”.
- Work with donors on how they prefer to be identified and refer to the Indigenous Knowledge Organization.¹⁸

Latino/Latina/Latinx

- When describing people of Latin American heritage broadly, use the preferred subject heading instead of LCSH:
 - “Latino/Latina/Latinx” instead of the LCSH “Latin Americans” or “Latinx”.
 - Specific identities within the Latin American community (such as “Mexican Americans” or “Cuban American”) are used in addition to the broader heading “Latino/Latina/Latinx” when those identities are particular to the person or focus of the resource being described.

¹⁸ The University of British Columbia, “Indigenous Knowledge Organization,” 2021.

- When applicable, add a subject heading for a person’s country of origin or cultural identification.
- DCPL serves everyone and will not describe people as illegal, use the preferred subject heading instead of LCSH:
 - “Undocumented immigrants” instead of LCSH “Illegal aliens”.

LGBTQIA+

- DCPL believes the below subject heading to be offensive and outdated and will use the preferred subject headings instead of LCSH:
 - “LGBTQIA+ people” instead of “Sexual minorities”
 - Replace “gay and gays” in subject headings with “LGBTQIA+”
 - Example: “LGBTQIA+ people in mass media”; “LGBTQIA+ press”, “LGBTQIA+ newspapers”
 - Specific identities within the LGBTQIA+ community (such as “Gay men” or “Lesbians”) are used in addition to the broader heading “LGBTQIA+ people” when those identities are a particular focus of the resource being described.
- Various identities should only be capitalized if they are at the beginning of a sentence or part of a proper noun.
- Whenever possible work with creators and donors on how they would like to be described.
- Refer to Homosaurus for specific LGBTQIA+ identities and lifestyle descriptors.¹⁹

Race

- “Black” should be capitalized when describing those “who identify as Black, including those in the African diaspora and within Africa” per the guidelines of The Associated Press style guide.²⁰
- “White” should not be capitalized. Although there are good arguments to capitalize “white,”²¹ Ultimately, we chose to follow the recommendation of Archivist for Black

¹⁹ Homosaurus, “Homosaurus,” 2021.

²⁰ “Explaining AP Style on Black and White,” AP News, The Associated Press, published July 20, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>.

²¹ Eric Zorn, “Column: Should ‘White’ Be Capitalized? It Feels Wrong, but It’s the Way to Go,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/eric-zorn/ct-column-capitalize-white-black-language-race->

Lives and not capitalize it both because it follows current common practices and because the capitalization of the term is embraced by white supremacists.²²

- In Dig DC, Archive-It, and ArchivesSpace, “Black persons” will be used as a subject heading in addition to “African Americans” to better align current vernacular with how many users search.
- Racial identity keywords are to be added to materials in Dig DC, Archive-It, and ArchivesSpace to aid in visibility and discoverability. Updated guidelines and how and when to add racial identifiers were expanded to the staff metadata guidelines document.

Religion

- Work to expand collection scope to include more collections of non-Christian faith communities- start with web archiving.
- Be vigilant about unconscious bias when describing religious materials. Be mindful of how your relationship with faith may influence how you describe or organize faith-based materials.
- Refer to the [American Theological Association](#) cataloging guide for guidance in describing faith-based materials.²³

Conclusion

Addressing the role our profession has played in perpetuating harmful social structures is hard and uncomfortable, but it is also necessary if we want to provide the best access to our users and repair harm in the archives. Evaluating metadata practices takes time but setting outcome goals, recurring time for discussion, and structuring discussion in manageable increments will move the project forward. It is imperative to foster a safe space for discussion and recognize and appreciate that the topics of discussion may take an emotional toll on some colleagues. All decisions and reasoning must be documented and made available to users to reinforce trust. This project strengthened the metadata practices in The People’s Archive digital portal Dig DC, Archive-It, and ArchivesSpace, setting a standard for the creation of new metadata. The most egregious legacy metadata has been corrected or now includes a statement of harmful content, alerting users to challenging content and allowing the choice to engage or not. Dig DC includes a statement of harmful content, examples of types of historical language left intact, and a list of subject headings adopted in place of harmful LCSH. The statement also encourages users to contact staff with concerns about records. We are proud to host digital internships and field study opportunities for students ranging from high school to graduate level and believe one of the greatest legacies of this project is a dialogue with the future generation of information professionals on their power and the importance of thoughtful, inclusive metadata.

[zorn-20200709-e42fag6ivbazdblizpopsp4p2a-story.html](https://www.atla.com/learning-engagement/cataloging/).

²² Charlton et al., “Archives for Black Lives.”

²³ “Cataloging Best Practices in Religion,” Atla, American Theological Library Association, accessed April 5, 2022, <https://www.atla.com/learning-engagement/cataloging/>.

We are called to this profession because we believe in access to knowledge and the pursuit of learning. Let's put the work in to help everyone find themselves in the library.

Authors

Demetrius Currington (demetrius.currington@dc.gov) is a Collection Services Library Associate at the DC Public Library, who specializes in cataloging and information organization. He holds an M.A. in Library and Information Science from The Catholic University of America and a B.A. in History from Virginia State University. Demetrius' library career can be defined by the quote "It's not the destination, it's the journey." With a melange of unique experiences under his belt, Demetrius routinely collaborates and creates with peers across the library community.

Laura Farley (laura.farley@dc.gov) is an Assistant Manager for The People's Archive at the DC Public Library, overseeing digital initiatives for the department. She holds her M.A. in Library and Information Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a B.A. in History from the University of Iowa. Laura's passion is shining a light on our shared human experience through access to historical collections. She also enjoys a well-organized spreadsheet.

Robert LaRose (robert.larose@dc.gov) is a Digital Curation Librarian in The People's Archive at DC Public Library, focusing primarily on preserving and providing access to the library's digitized and born-digital archival collections. He holds an M.S. in Library Science from the University of North Texas and a B.A. in Linguistics from the College of William & Mary. Robert is also currently serving as the copy editor of *The Oral History Review*, the official scholarly publication of the Oral History Association.

Maya Thompson (maya.thompson@dc.gov) is a memory worker and the Library Program Coordinator at the People's Archive at DC Public Library. Maya holds an MA in American Studies, with a concentration in Museums and Material Culture from The George Washington University, and earned a BA in American Studies with a minor in Africana Studies at Wellesley College. Maya's past projects have focused on Black and queer communities and histories of Washington, D.C. Maya believes deeply in the liberatory potential of archives, and to this end, is dedicated to uplifting and preserving marginalized voices and stories.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to our many DCPL colleagues who provided thoughtful contributions to this project. Special thanks to our colleagues who served on this group but have departed for other opportunities: Julie Burns, Philip Espe, Siobhan Hagan, and Paul Kelly.

Appendix I: Suggested Reading

This is a complete list of resources reviewed during our work.

- Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's Anti-Racist Description Working Group. "Archives For Black Lives In Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources Created by Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's Anti-Racist Description Working Group," 2019. https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ardr_202010.pdf.
- Baucom, Erin. "An Exploration into Archival Descriptions of LGBTQ Materials." *The American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (March 2018): 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-81.1.65>.
- Billey, Amber, Emily Drabinski, and K. R. Roberto. 2014. "What's Gender Got to Do with It? A Critique of RDA 9.7." *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 52 (4): 412–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2014.882465>.
- Bracken, David. 2017. "The Pastoral Function of Church Archives: A Reflection on the Theological, Juridical and Pastoral Context of Roman Catholic Diocesan Archives." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 82 (1): 60–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140016674278>.
- Brilmyer, Gracen. 2018. "Archival Assemblages: Applying Disability Studies' Political/Relational Model to Archival Description." *Archival Science* 18 (2): 95–118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-018-9287-6>.
- Cataloging Lab. "Cataloging Lab – Experiment with Controlled Vocabularies," n.d. <https://cataloginglab.org/>.
- Charlton, Faith, Jennifer Garcon, Beaudry Allen, Palma Alex, and Cairlin Rizzo. n.d. "Archives For Black Lives." Archives For Black Lives – Archivists responding to Black Lives Matter. Accessed April 25, 2023. <https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com>.
- Cifor, Marika, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, and Noah Geraci. "'What We Do Crosses over to Activism': The Politics and Practice of Community Archives." *The Public Historian* 40, no. 2 (2018): 69–95. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26504393>.
- Crilly, Jess. 2019. "Decolonising the Library: A Theoretical Exploration." *Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal* 4 (1): 6–15. <https://sparkjournal.arts.ac.uk/index.php/spark/article/view/123>.
- Digital Transgender Archive. "Homosaurus Vocabulary Site." Homosaurus.org. Digital Transgender Archive, 2021. <https://homosaurus.org/>.
- Disability Archives Lab. "Disability Archives Lab." Disability Archives Lab. Accessed July 12, 2024. <https://disabilityarchiveslab.com/>.

- docs.google.com. “DEI Controlled Vocab Resource List - Google Drive.” Accessed July 12, 2024. https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/1/d/19solOX6tQTYvIF4lr_JNz2WlcsA76CcK3bxvYZ8cHzg/htmlview.
- Dorothy, Berry. “Finding Your Way through Finding Aids: The Hows and Whys of Finding Aids.” *Finding Your Way Through Finding Aids: Archives 101*, 2020. <https://scalar.fas.harvard.edu/finding-your-way-through-finding-aids/index>.
- Drabinski, Emily. “Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction.” *The Library Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (April 2013): 94–111. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669547>.
- Frederick, Sam. 2019. “Decolonization in the Archives: At the Item Level.” *The IJournal: Student Journal of the Faculty of Information* 4 (2): 14–22. <https://thejournal.ca/index.php/ijournal/article/view/32554>.
- “Glossary of Terms: LGBTQ - GLAAD.” 2022. [glaad.org](https://glaad.org/reference/terms/). February 24, 2022.
- Howard, Sara A., and Steven A. Knowlton. 2018. “Browsing through Bias: The Library of Congress Classification and Subject Headings for African American Studies and LGBTQIA Studies.” *Library Trends* 67 (1): 74–88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0026>.
- “Indigenous Knowledge Organization | Xwi7xwa Library.” n.d. xwi7xwa.library.ubc.ca. Accessed July 12, 2024. <https://xwi7xwa.library.ubc.ca/collections/indigenous-knowledge-organization/>.
- Johnston, Lisa N. “‘Gay Is Good’: Digital Collections in LGBTQ U.S. History.” *College & Research Libraries News* 80, no. 8 (2019): 444. <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/23547/30868>.
- Jones, Elisabeth. “The Public Library Movement, the Digital Library Movement, and the Large-Scale Digitization Initiative: Assumptions, Intentions, and the Role of the Public.” *Information & Culture* 52, no. 2 (2017): 229–63. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44667555>.
- Lacey, Eve. 2018. “Aliens in the Library: The Classification of Migration.” *KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION* 45 (5): 358–79. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2018-5-358>.
- Lellman, Charlotte G., and Amber Melodye Maguerite LaFountain. 2024. “Guidelines for Inclusive and Conscientious Description - CHoM Manual - Harvard Wiki.” [wiki.harvard.edu](https://wiki.harvard.edu/confluence/display/hmschommanual/Guidelines+for+Inclusive+and+Conscientious+Description). May 3, 2024.
- Lember, Heather, Suzanne Lipkin, and Richard Lee. “Radical Cataloging: From Words to Action.” *Urban Library Journal* 19, no. 1 (December 17, 2013). <https://academic-works.cuny.edu/ulj/vol19/iss1/7>.

- Reparative Archival Description Working Group. “Yale University Library Research Guides: Reparative Archival Description Working Group: Home.” guides.library.yale.edu. Yale University Library. Accessed July 12, 2024. <https://guides.library.yale.edu/reparativearchivaldescription>.
- Rinn, Meghan R. “Nineteenth-Century Depictions of Disabilities and Modern Metadata: A Consideration of Material in the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection.” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 5, no. 1 (March 20, 2018): 1.
- Presutti, Robert. 2010. “Toward a Greater Discourse: Issues in Religious Archives.” *Theological Librarianship* 3 (1): 15–22. <https://doi.org/10.31046/tl.v3i1.135>.
- Rawson, K. J. “Accessing Transgender // Desiring Queer(er?) Archival Logics.” *Archivaria* 68 (January 2010): 123-140. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13234>.
- Rubenstein Library Technical Services. 2021. “How We Describe Rubenstein Library Technical Services Style Guide.” https://library.duke.edu/sites/default/files/rubenstein/pdf/HowWeDescribe_2021_06.pdf.
- Sapon-White, Richard, Pamela Louderback, and Sara Levinson. *Creating Subject Headings for Indigenous Topics: A Culturally Respectful Guide*. Pala, CA: Tribal Print Source, 2023. <https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/concern/defaults/8c97kz40m>.
- “Special Section: Implementing ALA’s ‘Poor People’s Policy.’” *Librarians at Liberty* 9, no. 1 & 2 (December 2001).
- “Statement on Harmful Content in Archival Collections.” 2021. Drexel University Libraries. March 24, 2021. <https://www.library.drexel.edu/archives/overview/HarmfulContent/>.
- “Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Collections, Cataloging and Description.” 2021. Wwww.brandeis.edu. August 11, 2021. <https://www.brandeis.edu/library/about/services/language.html>.
- “Temple University Libraries | SCRC Statement on Potentially Harmful.” 2018. Library.temple.edu. October 10, 2018. <https://library.temple.edu/policies/scrc-statement-on-potentially-harmful-language-in-archival-description-and-cataloging>.
- Wetli, Autumn. 2019. “Addressing Cultural Insensitivity in Archival Description: A Literature Review Examining Collaborative Approaches.” *Journal of New Librarianship* 4 (2): 505–15. <https://doi.org/10.21173/newlibs/8/3>
- White, Sara. “Crippling the Archives: Negotiating Notions of Disability in Appraisal and Arrangement and Description.” *The American Archivist* 75, no. 1 (April 2012): 109–24. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.75.1.c53h4712017n4728>.

- Wikidata.org. “Wikidata.” Wikidata, 2019. https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Wikidata:Main_Page.
- Willey, Eric, Jeremy Berg, Cathy Chapman, Gretchen Neidhardt, Stephanie Porrata, and Jennifer Young. “Social Justice in Cataloging Annotated Bibliography.” *Faculty and Staff Publications – Milner Library*, July 23, 2021. <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpml/141/>.
- Willey, Eric, and Angela Yon. “Applying Library of Congress Demographic Group Characteristics for Creators.” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 57, no. 6 (August 18, 2019): 349–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2019.1654054>.
- Zorn, Eric. “Column: Should ‘White’ Be Capitalized? It Feels Wrong, but It’s the Way to Go.” *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 2020. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2020/07/09/column-should-white-be-capitalized-it-feels-wrong-but-its-the-way-to-go/>.

Appendix II: Focus Group Agenda

Roles:

- Moderator
- Notetaker
- Timekeeper
 - Preferred pronouns before entering the room
 - 10:00 In chat as people are arriving... what's your favorite Halloween candy, why did you want to join today,
 - 10:05 Introductions: First read the rules of the room, Name, and branch, and pick someone to go next
 - 10:10 Opening: background on who we are
 - Overview: What we've done and where we're still going
 - Goal of the session: We are working to revise how we describe individuals and communities, but we cannot represent all identities - therefore we're seeking feedback on representation in our collections
 - 10:15 Jam board 1: (Moderator) Feedback on the statement (timer going, you have 2 minutes, you can keep writing if you want to, 15 minutes for conversation)
 - 10:30: (Moderator) Feedback/discussion
 - 10:35 Jam board 2: (Moderator) What words, subjects, or phrases stuck out to you in the descriptions
 - Divide the board into good and bad
 - 2 minutes
 - 10:55: Wrap up - how we're incorporating this into documentation, training, and outreach
 - Ways to get involved

References

- ADA National Network. “ADA Acronyms & Abbreviations.” ADA National Network. Updated December 2023. <https://adata.org/acronyms-abbreviations>.
- ADA National Network. “Glossary of ADA Terms.” ADA National Network. Updated December 2023. <https://adata.org/glossary-terms>.
- American Theological Library Association. “Cataloging Best Practices in Religion.” Atla. Accessed April 5, 2022. <https://www.atla.com/learning-engagement/cataloging/>.
- The Associated Press. “Explaining AP Style on Black and White.” AP News. Published July 20, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>.
- Cataloging Lab. “Cataloging Lab.” Cataloging Lab – Experiment with Controlled Vocabularies. Accessed April 25, 2023. <https://cataloginglab.org>.
- Charlton, Faith, Jennifer Garcon, Beaudry Allen, Palma Alex, and Cairlin Rizzo. n.d. “Archives For Black Lives.” Archives For Black Lives – Archivists responding to Black Lives Matter. Accessed April 25, 2023. <https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com>.
- DC Public Library. “About Dig DC and The People's Archive at DC Public Library.” Dig DC. Updated March 8, 2022. <https://digdc.dclibrary.org/content/about-dig-dc-and-peoples-archive-dc-public-library>.
- District of Columbia Office of Planning. n.d. “African American Heritage.” District Government Website. Accessed May 30, 2024. <https://planning.dc.gov/page/african-american-heritage>.
- General Services Administration. “Developing Accessible Web Content.” Section508.gov. Updated May 2018. <https://www.section508.gov/develop/web-content/>.
- Homosaurus. “Homosaurus.” Homosaurus Vocabulary Site. Accessed August 10, 2021. <https://homosaurus.org>.
- Howard, Sara A., and Steven A. Knowlton. 2018. “Browsing through Bias: The Library of Congress Classification and Subject Headings for African American Studies and LGBTQIA Studies.” *Library Trends* 67, no. 1: 74–88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0026>.
- Kauffman, Rhonda Y., and Martina S. Anderson. *Library Technical Services: Adapting to a Changing Environment*. Edited by Stacey Marien. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2020.
- Myers, Chris. *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

Lember, Heather, Suzanne Lipkin, and Richard Lee. "Radical Cataloging: From Words to Action." *Urban Library Journal* 19, no. 1 (December 17, 2013). <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ulj/vol19/iss1/7>.

The University of British Columbia. "Indigenous Knowledge Organization | Xwi7xwa Library." Xwi7xwa Library. Accessed June 21, 2021. <https://xwi7xwa.library.ubc.ca/collections/indigenous-knowledge-organization/>.

Zorn, Eric. "Column: Should 'White' Be Capitalized? It Feels Wrong, but It's the Way to Go." *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 2020. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/eric-zorn/ct-column-capitalize-white-black-language-race-zorn-20200709-e42fag6ivbazdblizpopsp4p2a-story.html>.