

Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's Anti-Racist Description Resources

SAA 2019 Description Section Meeting

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Slides: <https://bit.ly/2yzHOF0>

Introductions; Kelly and I are members of the group Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia as well as one of it's working groups that's focused on anti-racist description.

What is A4BLiP?

Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (or A4BLiP for short) is a loose association of archivists, librarians, and allied professionals in the area responding to the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. Aside from its focus on police murders of African Americans, the movement more broadly calls attention to systemic racism that impacts nearly every aspect of U.S. culture. That includes archives. As a primarily white group, A4BLiP seeks to push white archivists to deconstruct white supremacy in their archives and within the profession.

Rachel Appel, a librarian at Temple University, started A4BLiP three years ago in the summer of 2016. She was moved to action by our colleague Jarrett Drake's 2016 [talk](#) at ALA (American Library Association) that introduced the term and hashtag #ArchivesForBlackLives. Rachel rallied a group of Philadelphia archivists to draft a statement, which I'll talk about, and that group turned into A4BLiP.

Jarrett Drake

Eira Tansey

Michelle Caswell

Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez

Stacie Williams

Marika Cifor

Bergis Jules

Jasmine Jones

April Hathcock

Dorothy Berry

Mario Ramirez

Dominique Luster

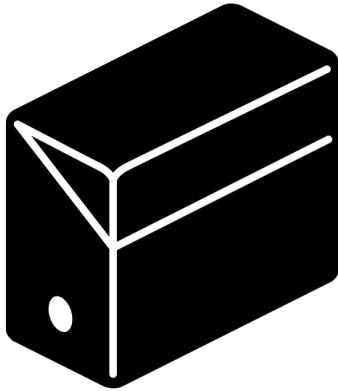
Samantha Winn

Concerned Archivists Alliance

We'd like to take a moment to acknowledge Jarrett Drake's ideas and work, as well as many other individuals and groups in libraries and archives who have influenced us in their efforts to tackle issues related to social justice, radical empathy, community archives, and anti-oppressive description in a myriad of ways. A few are listed here.

(such as Michelle Caswell, Stacie Williams, Bergis Jules, April Hathcock, Mario Ramirez, Samantha Winn, Eira Tansey, Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Marika Cifor (MAHrika CEEfor), Jasmine Jones, Dorothy Berry, Dominique Luster, and the Concerned Archivists Alliance, to name just a few, who have been tackling issues related to social justice, radical empathy, community archives, and anti-oppressive description in a myriad of ways.)

Archives For Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP)



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archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com

A4BLiP is currently managed by a steering committee. We have a listserv that currently reaches over 70 people, who we consider our membership. Most live in the Philadelphia area, but some of our subscribers live in different regions. In collaboration with our membership, the steering committee identified priority areas and formed working groups, including the anti-racist description working group and the community archives group. We held a General Meeting for members last December, and we hope to make that annual. A4BLiP also recently reached a fiscal sponsorship agreement with the Delaware Valley Archivists Group, which will allow us to take on more ambitious projects and initiatives in the future.

The group also recently launched a website that offers a way for people to join the listserv and to access the group's statement. Additionally, it includes a blog and resource page which currently has a list of resources for white folks to educate themselves about anti-oppressive terms, concepts, and norms.

In terms of outreach, steering committee members have presented about the group at several local, regional, and national conferences.

https://github.com/rappel110/A4BLiP

The screenshot shows a GitHub repository page for 'rappel110/A4BLiP'. At the top, there are navigation options: 'Branch: master', 'New pull request', 'Find file', and 'Clone or download'. Below this, the repository name 'rappel110 Rename 20160109 to 20170109' is displayed, along with the latest commit information: 'Latest commit 8718228 on Jul 27, 2017'. A table of files is shown, including '20170109' (Rename 20160109 to 20170109, a year ago) and 'readme.md' (Update readme.md, a year ago). The 'readme.md' file is selected, showing its content. The content of the README file is as follows:

#ArchivesForBlackLives in Philadelphia

Version released January 9, 2017. 40+ archivists, librarians, and information professionals in the Delaware Valley contributed to the creation of this document. Join the conversation at <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/a4blinphilly>

Three years after the #BlackLivesMatter movement began, we continue to be appalled by recurring incidents where killing of and police violence against Black citizens occur with impunity. In a talk at the 2016 American Library Association conference, our colleague Jarrett Drake called on archivists to engage the issues surrounding the #BlackLivesMatter movement and to do better to promote #ArchivesForBlackLives. As a community of Philadelphia-area archivists, we come together to discuss these critical concerns and identify areas for action.

Archivists appraise, collect, preserve, organize, and provide access to archives in adherence to international standards and a professional code of ethics.

Because we have the privilege of choosing what goes into the historical record, we also bear the responsibility to safeguard accurate representations of contemporaneous events. We believe archives exist to hold power to account; to speak truth to power. Because records serve as evidence for factual claims, it is archivists' responsibility, as stewards of records, to stand against their exploitation or abuse.

As archivists, we are committed to anti-oppression values:

- We condemn racist violence against Black people and other people of color.

As I mentioned, the first thing A4BLiP did was draft this [statement](#), which we released in January 2017 on github (see link at top of slide). It argues that, as archivists, we have a responsibility to actively engage in initiatives that support Black people and Black history. There are three major topics within this, all of which are interconnected, and for each we have value statements and action items. It serves as something like a mission statement and strategic plan as well as a call to action.

We'd ask that those in attendance here please read and share our statement, if you're so inclined.

1. Collect, support, lift up Black history narratives



"Black Panther Convention: General, 1970." Friends Peace Committee Records. Quaker Meeting Records at Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections and Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

Point number 1: Collect, support, and lift up Black history narratives. Most collections in archives are by and about white people. In our statement, we call on archivists to support Black history by seeking out such records, and, with a sensitivity to donor preferences and needs, either preserve those records in a traditional archives or support efforts to keep those records in a community archives.

2. Work to make archival spaces more inclusive



Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College Reading Room, circa 1968.

Point number 2: make archival spaces more inclusive. SAA surveys in 2004 and 2017 indicate our profession is around 90% white. Moreover, archives are often situated within institutions of power that have reinforced systemic oppression. Archives have been, and are often still, inaccessible or unwelcoming to marginalized groups.

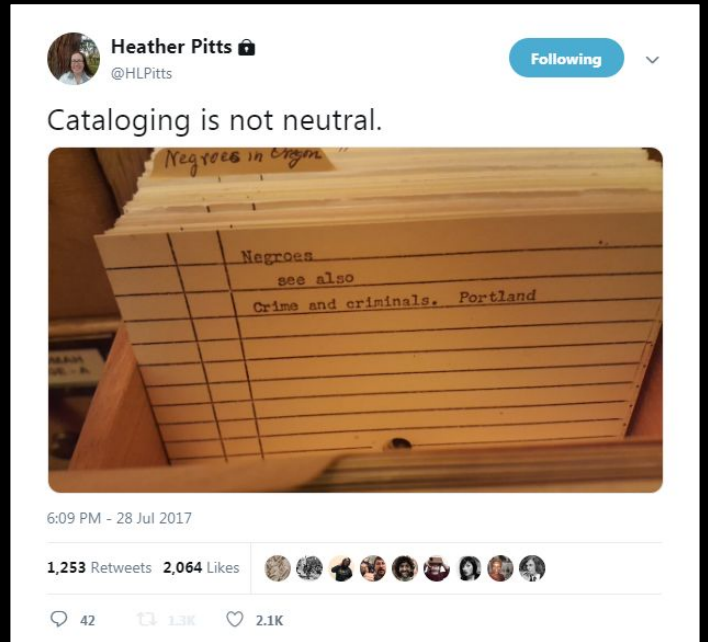
3. Education and advocacy around police records



"Mayor Rizzo reviews first graduates of new mounted unit," 1972-04-28 (P461120B). *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, SCRC 170, Temple University.

The third pillar of our statement is that archivists, as records professionals, have a responsibility to advocate for appropriate policies and practices surrounding police and correctional records. We write in our statement, "We believe archives exist to hold power to account; to speak truth to power. Because records serve as evidence for factual claims, it is archivists' responsibility, as stewards of records, to stand against their exploitation or abuse." We feel this applies to police-worn bodycam footage and other records of police action.

Anti-Racist Description Working Group



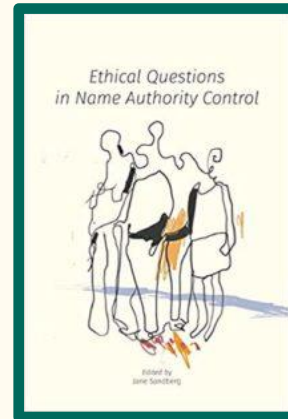
A4BLiP's Anti-Racist Description Working Group formed in the fall of 2017. The initiative for this group was inspired by Teressa Raiford, a Portland-based activist and founder of the organization Don't Shoot PDX, with whom A4BLiP collaborated on a presentation at the Liberated Archive forum at SAA's 2017 annual meeting. Raiford inquired as to whether the group had any recommendations for how she might approach a catalog audit. She wanted to initiate a project at Oregon State Library after learning about a racist catalog card there that Heather Pitts, a cataloging librarian at the library, had posted on Twitter.

After some discussion, A4BLiP realized that this was an area that lacked guidance for those doing archival description. Members of the group could recount instances of seeing description applied in ways that were racist, but none of us knew of any specific recommendations for how to address this in a programmatic way. As a way to both provide a framework for our own audits of racist description and to hopefully provide guidance that would be useful to other archivists, we decided to create a set of guidelines.

The working group is currently chaired by Alexis Antracoli of PUL and has seven members, most of whom are white women and professionals who work at predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

What are we working on?

- Metadata Guidelines / Recommendations
- Annotated Bibliography (“Theory”)
 - Extended bibliography



Alexis A. Antracoli & Katy Rawdon “What’s in a Name? Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia and the Impact of Names and Name Authorities in Archival Description”

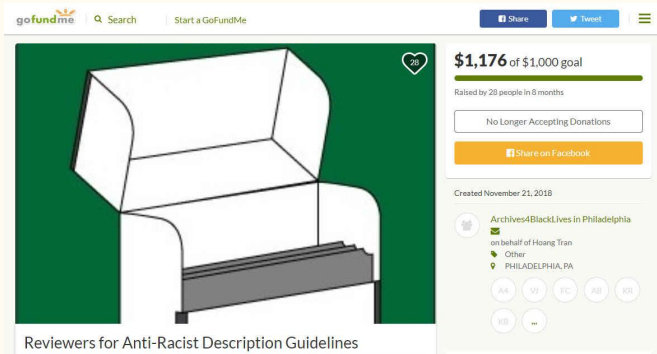
The group is currently close to finalizing two documents we hope will help deepen understanding of the complex issue of describing marginalized communities and groups. One is metadata guidelines or recommendations for archival professionals to address racist and anti-black archival description. They’re primarily intended to combat the racist structures inherent in PWIs and in archival description of the black community, to improve the work of [predominantly white] archivists who handle collections about, by, and for people of the black diaspora.

Recognizing that this issue is not new nor solved, the group also created a bibliography of sources, which serves to gather and amplify the work of archivists across the field who are already theorizing and practicing anti-oppressive archival description. The group incorporated some of these works into an annotated bibliography, which focuses on the broader theoretical frameworks that informed the guidelines.

One tangible achievement related to the working group thus far includes the recent Library Juice Press publication, *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control*, which includes a chapter co-authored by group members Alexis Antracoli and Katy Rawdon of Temple University, entitled, “What’s in a Name? Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia and the Impact of Names and Name Authorities in Archival Description.”

Review Process

- Predominantly white group seeking input from black archivists
- Fundraising to support honoraria for reviewers
- Currently incorporating feedback



Due to the aforementioned nature of this working group (consisting of mostly white women), and in order to get community input, A4BLiP established a GoFundMe last November and successfully raised over \$1,000 to pay black archivists to review the guidelines and annotated bibliography before publishing. We thank everyone who donated money to support these honoraria. Potential reviewers were nominated by working group members (several include those with whom members have professional and/or personal relationships). Nine individuals have reviewed the documents and offered feedback so far, which the group is currently reviewing and incorporating into our drafts. We gave reviewers a Google form to provide feedback to us directly, and anonymously if desired, as well as the option to converse with other reviewers in the comments in a shared Google doc.

The feedback we've received has been extraordinarily insightful, constructive, and essential to the success of this project. We're intentionally going slowly through this feedback together as a group now to discuss each comment as we integrate it into our documents. We thank those who have agreed to dedicate their time and expertise to reviewing for us, and we look forward to thanking them individually in the final draft once we secure their permission to do so.

We expect to publish the guidelines and bibliography this fall on our website. We hope that they will help other archivists identify problematic description in their collections

and remedy it in ways that are faithful to the historical record and respectful of the humanity of marginalized people. They can be implemented in a systematic, repository-wide way or on a collection-by-collection basis.

Example Recommendations

- **Voice and Style**
 - Unlearn the “neutral” voice of traditional archival description. Rather than striving for an “objective” voice, which reinforces existing power structures, base description in the question (as posed by Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor): **“Is the descriptive language I am using respectful to the larger communities of people invested in this record?”** Decenter “neutrality” and “objectivity” in favor of “respect” and “care.”
- **Community Collaboration and Expanding Audiences**
 - Expand the range of audiences considered when writing archival description to include a plurality of audiences. Evaluate local descriptive practices and policies using the criteria: **Which audiences does this description center? Which audiences does it exclude?**

Some examples of specific guidelines, which are grouped into 7 main categories, include the following:

The section on voice and style mentions unlearning the “neutral” or “objective” voice of traditional archival description, which reinforces existing power structures, in favor of a voice rooted in “respect” and “care.” We recommend archivists base description in the question, as posed by Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor (MAHrika CEEfor): “Is the descriptive language I am using respectful to the larger communities of people invested in this record?”

With regards to community collaboration and expanding audiences, we encourage archivists to consider a plurality of audiences when writing description. This involves evaluating local descriptive practices and policies using the criteria: “Which audiences does this description center?” and “Which audiences does it exclude?”

Example Recommendations

- Auditing Legacy Description and Reparative Processing
 - Revisit legacy description to provide better name access for black people where possible, including names of subjects as well as creators of records. Acknowledging the limits of provenance-based description, describe the subjects of documents about oppressed or marginalized peoples at least to the extent that you describe the creators of documents. Consider the extent to which **describing a person by name is an act of affirming humanity**.
 - When updating racist language or contextualization in finding aids, always **preserve a copy of previous description so that future researchers can explore the history of the finding aid**. Provide a note and/or link in the current finding aid that indicates the existence of legacy finding aids, why they were kept, and how to access them.

In the section focused on auditing legacy description and reparative processing, we advocate for providing better name access for black people, including for both creators and subjects of records. Acknowledging the limits of provenance-based description, the guidelines recommend describing the subjects of documents about oppressed or marginalized peoples at least to the extent that we describe the creators of documents. This is based on the premise that describing a person by name is an act of affirming humanity.

We also highlight the need to preserve copies of legacy description whenever we update language, for the sake of transparency and so that we preserve a history of the finding aid that researchers can consult in order to understand how description shifted over time. Along with this, we encourage adding a note or link to current finding aids that indicates “the existence of legacy finding aids, why they were kept, and how to access them.”

Example Recommendations

- Handling Racist Folder Titles and Creator-Sourced Description
 - Make a distinction between the institutional voice/archivist's voice and the voice of the collection creator (ex. don't use the same racist terms a creator may have used in folder titles in scope and content notes or other notes that are supplied by the archivist.)
- Subjects and Classification
 - Consider avoiding LCSH terms if they are harmful to the people they describe. If you are uncertain, do research to determine whether the subject heading is considered harmful. If terms are not used, consider how this may affect access. **Balance access with language usage thoughtfully.** Consider working with groups such as the Cataloging Lab to actively try to change harmful headings.

We've also provided suggestions for addressing racist description in archivist-supplied versus creator-supplied description. In most cases, we recommend preserving but contextualizing creator-supplied original description when racism is an important context for understanding records. We advocate that archivist-supplied description should be updated to match current terminology used by the individuals or communities being described -- or in the case of older records -- terminology used by current historians and allied professionals who are knowledgeable about specific communities existing in a certain place and point in time.

With regards to Library of Congress subject headings, we encourage archivists to balance discoverability with language usage thoughtfully. This can mean avoiding specific terms when they are harmful to the people they describe, as well as working with groups such as the Cataloging Lab to actively try to change harmful headings.

Example Recommendations

- Transparency
 - Description should acknowledge shortcomings with regards to collecting gaps, as well as institutional responsibility for creating those gaps.
 - **Example: “The collection consists of miscellaneous source material... pertaining to the history of the American West and Southwest in the 19th century, largely from the perspective of white settlers”**
- Describing Slavery Records
 - Consider using “enslaved” or “captive” [person/woman/man/child/laborer] rather than “slave” when describing people held in bondage. Consider using “enslaver” to describe people who held others in bondage.

Recommendations also encourage archivists to be transparent about their collections and their work. Especially for predominantly white institutions whose collecting practices have often ignored, erased, or misrepresented the histories of black people and other people of color, we advocate for description that acknowledges shortcomings with regards to collecting gaps, as well as institutional responsibility for creating those gaps.

There are also a set of recommendations for how to address records relating to the institution of slavery; for example, using “enslaved” or “captive” as a modifier rather than the generic and dehumanizing term “slave,” as well as “enslaver” to describe those who held others in bondage. We’re especially indebted to Dr. P. Gabrielle Foreman for her [community-sourced document](#) on writing and teaching about slavery, which heavily influenced this section of the guidelines.

Racism Audit in Practice

Legacy description

```
<c level="file" id="C0605_c0004">
  <did>
    <container type="folder" parent="C0605_i1">1
    </container>
    <unittitle>Sale of 2 Negroes, Louisiana</unittitle>
    <unitdate normal="1812/1812">1812</unitdate>
    <physdesc>
      <extent>1 leaf</extent>
    </physdesc>
  </did>
</c>
```

Current description (as of 2016)

```
<c level="item" id="C0605_c0004">
  <did>
    <container type="folder" parent="C0605_i1">1
    </container>
    <unittitle>Bill of Sale of Enslaved Boy "Jacob" and Girl "Sarah"
      from Samuel Jay to Abraham Wright, New Orleans,
      Louisiana</unittitle>
    <unitdate normal="1812-10-27">1812 October 27</unitdate>
    <physdesc>
      <extent>1 item</extent>
    </physdesc>
  </did>
</c>
```

[PUL, Francis C. Brown Collection on Slavery in America \(C0605\)](#)

This is an example from one of Princeton's collections of slavery records, which was part of an ad hoc description remediation and enhancement project I conducted in 2016. In this case, I replaced the generic and anonymous title, "Sale of 2 Negroes, Louisiana," that was taken from a dealer description, with a more descriptive title that humanizes two enslaved children and implicates two enslavers. I also hope the new description is more useful to researchers and genealogists who are interested in locating and learning about the lives of individual enslaved people. This redescription incorporates the principles of naming the subjects of records to the extent that we name creators, as well as centering black researchers when describing records about black people.

(Example per Princeton's SVN revision history.)

Challenges / Lessons

- Communities are not monoliths
- Authority to implement institution-wide changes
- Terminology changes, so we're never done (iterative)

As we mentioned, we're still in the process of incorporating the feedback we received from our reviewers, which we hope to finish this fall. While this process is nearing completion, we want to highlight a few of the larger challenges presented by this project, many of which were reiterated during the review process.

Much of the literature around ethical approaches to description rightfully focuses on asking communities what language they use to describe themselves and honoring it. At the same time, communities -- including black communities -- are not monoliths. Not everyone has the same opinion about language choices. Different individuals, or different parts of a community, may have conflicting preferences. As a result, we need to be mindful about who we ask for input. As one reviewer suggested, it could be helpful to institute a peer or community review process to gather broader feedback.

Another challenge is that not all archivists are going to have the power or institutional clout to implement all of the actions we advocate for. Some of our recommendations, especially those that expose institutions' own shortcomings and racism, will be controversial. We acknowledge this reality and encourage archivists to take action where they are. We hope that the guidelines will provide actionable recommendations for both processing archivists on the ground and administrators or collectives advocating for broader policy changes. In light of this challenge, we're also considering referring to our final product as "recommendations" rather than "guidelines," at the suggestion of a reviewer.

Finally, like much of archival practice, the work the group has produced, and efforts to

audit description for racism in general, are necessarily iterative. Terminology changes over time, and best practices will evolve. Racism is alive and well, and it will continue to find its way into archival description. A sustainable approach to anti-oppressive description means that we need to center people in all of our metadata practices and adapt our strategies for doing so over time. This involves integrating efforts to address racism into regular metadata curation and cleanup workflows.

Next Steps / Find Us!

<https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com/a4blip@gmail.com>

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So, what's next? Once the reviewers' feedback has been incorporated, the working group intends to share these resources openly online on our website. In the spirit of iteration, members are also considering how they might implement feedback mechanisms so that the guidelines can be continuously improved upon based on input from the broader community. We could also see future iterations of the guidelines including more specific examples of updated description provided by other archivists who are engaged in description audit projects. If you have ideas about how we can facilitate this or otherwise want to chat about this work, please feel free to get in touch with us either personally or through the A4BLiP email listed here. We look forward to sharing the rest of our resources with you shortly, and thanks again to our working group members, reviewers, and funders who have already contributed so much to this project. Thank you!