

Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP) Anti-Racist Description Resources



SAA 2020 Session: Implementing Inclusive (Re)Description at
Predominantly White Institutions (S24)

Faith Charlton, Princeton University Library, A4BLiP Organizing Team
@archivalsliver

Hello, I'm Faith Charlton. I work at Princeton University Library. Today I'm speaking on behalf of and about Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia and the working group that released A4BLiP's Anti-Racist Description Resources last October.

What is A4BLiP?

#ArchivesforBlackLives -Jarrett Drake

A4BLiP statement: <https://github.com/a4blip/A4BLiP>

<https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com/>

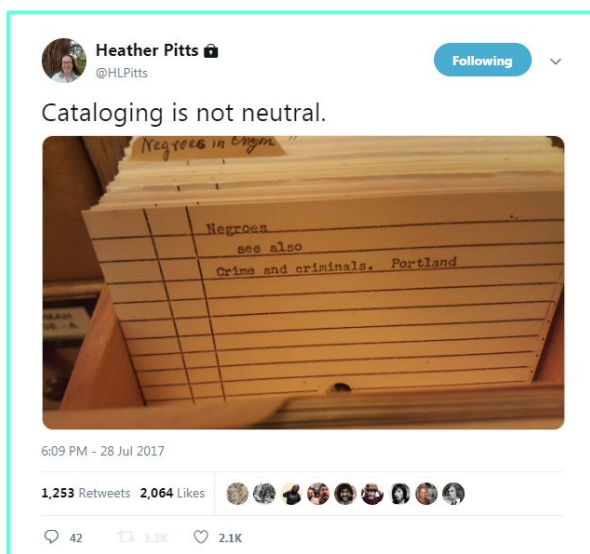
Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (or A4BLiP for short) is a loose association of archivists, librarians, and allied professionals in the area responding to the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. It was founded 4 years ago by Rachel Appel, a librarian at the UPenn, in response to Princeton University's former Digital Archivist Jarrett Drake's 2016 ALA [address](#) in which he talked about his work to end archives' erasure of Black lives and coined the hashtag #ArchivesforBlackLives. Rachel rallied a group of Philadelphia-area archivists to draft a [statement](#), which it released in January 2017, and that group became A4BLiP.

The statement serves as a values statement, mission statement, and call to action. It acknowledges the fact that archives are located within systems of and have perpetuated white supremacy, and urges archivists to actively engage in initiatives that support Black people and Black history as part of their responsibility of creating, preserving, and making accessible the historical record. As a primarily white group, A4BLiP largely seeks to push white archivists to deconstruct white supremacy in their archives and within the profession.

The group is currently managed by a 4-person organizing team or steering committee. We have a website and a listserv that reaches around 90 people, who we consider our membership. Most, though not all, live in the Philadelphia area.

Addressing Racist/Anti-Black Description

A4BLiP Anti-Racist Description Working Group



The anti-racist description working group has seven members, 5 white women and 2 Black women; all professionals who work at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), specifically Princeton and Temple University.

The initiative for drafting anti-racist description resources was inspired by Teresa Raiford, a Portland-based activist and founder of the organization Don't Shoot PDX, with whom A4BLiP had collaborated at SAA's Liberated Archive forum in 2017. 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 had been posted on Twitter.

A4BLiP members realized that this was an area that lacked guidance for those doing archival description. Members of the group were aware of racist description in their institutions' catalog records and finding aids, but none of us knew of any specific guidelines for how to address this in a programmatic way. As a way to both provide a framework for audits of racist description at our own institutions, and to hopefully provide guidance that would be useful to other archivists, we decided to create a set of recommendations.

The group, which had considerably more folks working on it at the outset, not surprisingly dwindled as time went on as all of this work was being done on a volunteer basis. Princeton staff in particular were fortunate in that they had the ability to set aside some time during work hours to concentrate on the project as part of

professional development work.

Resources

- Extended Bibliography
- Annotated Bibliography
- Metadata Recommendations

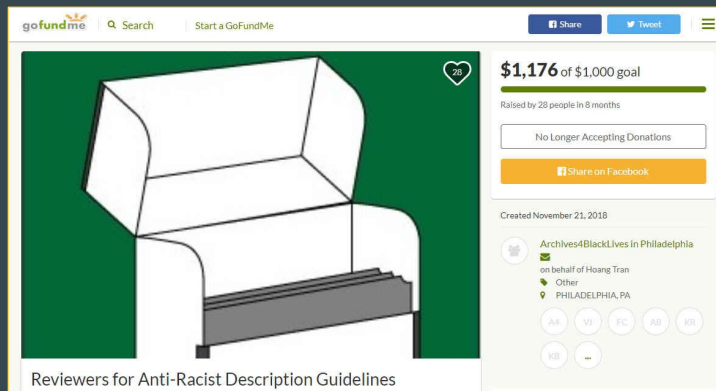


We began by working on a bibliography of sources, recognizing that this issue was not new nor solved. It serves to gather and amplify the work of archivists and librarians across the field who are already theorizing and practicing anti-oppressive description. We incorporated some of these works into an annotated bibliography, which focuses on the broader theoretical frameworks that informed our practical recommendations.

The metadata recommendations are meant for archival professionals to address racist, particularly anti-Black, archival description. The information is 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.

Review Process

Krystal Appiah
Dorothy Berry
Jasmine Clark
Zakiya Collier
Amanda Ferrara
DeLisa Minor Harris
Mosi Kamau
Teresa Raiford
Rachel Winston



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 and successfully raised over \$1,000 to pay Black archivists to review the resources before publishing. We are grateful to everyone who donated money to support these honoraria.

The nine individuals listed here reviewed our drafts and offered feedback. We provided them with 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 working group thoroughly reviewed the feedback together to discuss each comment and suggestion that we incorporated into our draft.

The feedback the reviewers gave was extraordinarily insightful, constructive, and essential to the success of this project. We are very grateful to all of them for dedicating their time and expertise.

Example Metadata 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?

I'd like to briefly review some examples of specific metadata recommendations, which we grouped into 7 main categories.

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.”

In thinking about who you're writing for, 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 Metadata 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,³¹ 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, 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 recommendations encourage describing the subjects of documents about oppressed or marginalized peoples at least to the extent that we describe the documents' creators. 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.

Methods for doing this include:

- *Preserving old hard copies or PDFs of finding aids*
- *Creating a publicly accessible collection of legacy finding aids*
- *Making use of local tools for tracking processing documentation, which could include collection management software, physical or digital collection files, version control software and commit notes, or others, as available*
- *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*

Example Metadata 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 also provided suggestions for addressing racist description in archivist-supplied versus creator-supplied description. In most cases, we recommend preserving but contextualizing creator-supplied description when racism is an important context for understanding records.

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 Metadata 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
 - Use “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 PWIs 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.

Challenges / Lessons



- Communities are not monoliths
- Authority to implement institution-wide changes
- Changing terminology (iterative, continuing, routinized work)
- Dynamics of mostly white working group
 - Need for self study to mitigate harm to BIPOC colleagues

The working group's goal was to try to create resources that would help deepen archivists' understanding of the complex issue of describing marginalized communities and groups, so it's worth noting a few of the larger challenges that this project highlighted, 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; however, 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.

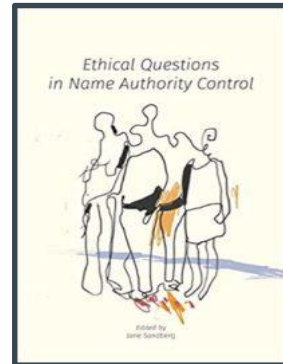
Originally thinking that we would describe the metadata implementation section as guidelines, the group realized that not all archivists are going to have the power or institutional clout to implement all of the actions we advocate for. Some of our recommendations, especially those that expose institutions' own shortcomings and racism, might be controversial. In light of this challenge, we decided to call this section "recommendations" rather than "guidelines," at the suggestion of one of the reviewers. While acknowledging this reality, we hope that the recommendations will provide actionable suggestions for both processing archivists on the ground and administrators or collectives advocating for broader policy changes.

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 still very much embedded in our society, 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 workflows.

Finally, I'd like to address challenges resulting from the fact that the working group is mostly white women, specifically the emotional labor that my Black colleagues endured as the rest of us educated ourselves as part of the process of working on this project. This included times when the learning of white members unfortunately came at the expense of Black members. This speaks to the need for white people to continuously and proactively question and confront how white supremacy shows up for us personally so that we aren't learning at the expense of our friends and colleagues of color. This is especially important for white folks who are involved in projects geared towards addressing racism so that we can produce work that is actually helpful to the communities we hope to support, and to minimize the harm we cause our BIPOC collaborators in the process.

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”



Who’s Missing from This Table? Interview with creators of Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources

[Volume 47, Number 1 \(January 2020\)](#)

[Volume 47, Number 2 \(April 2020\)](#)

I’d like to note that aspects of this project are also recounted in the March 2019 Library Juice Press publication, *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control* in the chapter, entitled “What’s in a Name? Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia and the Impact of Names and Name Authorities in Archival Description” that was co-authored by working group members Alexis Antracoli and Katy Rawdon.

Members of the working group were also interviewed for a two-part article that was published in the January and April 2020 editions of the NEA newsletter.

Publication + Reception



Logo and design created by Valencia Johnson

The working group released the bibliographies and metadata recommendations last October. You can find them on the A4BLiP website under Resources. I'd like to take a second to acknowledge my colleague, Valencia Johnson, for creating the logo and design for the publication.

Since their release, we've received a good deal of positive feedback from the archival community. Many folks have reached out to us to thank us and to let us know that they either have or plan to implement the recommendations into their local practices.

The members of the working group are also very honored to be the recipients of this year's C.F. W. Coker award for description.

In terms of next steps, in addition to publicizing the guidelines through outreach initiatives such as conference presentations, one of the things the group has discussed is distributing a survey to the archival community around the one year mark from when the resources were released to see if and how archivists are using or implementing them.

Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP)

<https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com>

a4blinphilly@googlegroups.com

a4blip@gmail.com

Anti-Racist Description Resources Working Group

Alexis Antracoli, Princeton University

Annalise Berdini, Princeton University

Kelly Bolding, Princeton University

Faith Charlton, Princeton University

Amanda Ferrara, Princeton University

Valencia Johnson, Princeton University

Katy Rawdon, Temple University

The working group is heartened by the positive feedback we continue to receive and more importantly by the fact that an increasing number of archivists and institutions, particularly white archivists and PWIs, are referring to or adopting the recommendations. Even more so, we are encouraged by the fact that they are beginning to privilege routinizing inclusive description work in a thoughtful and informed way.

Again, I'd like to thank our working group members, reviewers, and funders who contributed so much to this project. Thank you.