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Decolonizing Descriptions in Library Archives

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INF 7780: Description and Access for Archives

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Introduction: Problematic Terminology in Archive Descriptions

Descriptions in a library archive are the anchoring guide to all information that's available to those who are researching a subject of their choosing. For hundreds of years, estates, historical documents, artifacts, moving images, and sound material have been donated to libraries and universities for the use of higher education, but without a tool to help one navigate the endless amount of information, knowledge will become doormat if there's no organizational means of looking it up. With the use of Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS), this system can help provide direction towards what you're looking for to the point of eventually becoming the standard digital design of library archives for both public and academic standards. However, through the transfer of information of analog media towards electronic internet access, historical documentation and descriptions are not only present for easy user access, but a lot of this information remains intact from the original notes of both the creator and donator of an archive.

For the sake of historical accuracy, it is still a unique perception that researchers can observe the point of view of early explorers, historians, and archeologists, however, this same unchanged language also contains a dark cloud of colonization. Through this lens, the approach towards a non-western populace, especially for indigenous people, is characterized with not only an opinion that is racist, but it's also dismissive towards native people as anything other than an exploitative capitalist commodity. Furthermore,

as the world slowly moved on from European imperialism, the depictions towards ethnic minorities are still being used in the descriptions of archives that today are considered outdated, offensive, hateful, and contemptuous. Despite this knowledge, archive descriptions from all over the world still contain unfiltered terminology that's slipped through the cracks and can be easily found while researching through prominent university archives.

The process of cleaning up problematic historical terminology along with changing the narrative of who was being written about is not only a matter of decolonizing academia, but in the long run, it's also about acceptance, tolerance, education, and treating people like human beings. Fortunately, steps have been taken to chip away at the toxicity of racism that are contained within the descriptions of archives. This process is slowly ongoing, but the examination of how this problem is still persistent can also lead us to improved methods of cleaning up hateful language and biased viewpoints without erasing history and more importantly, to help create an improved tolerance for a better future.

The Remains of Colonized Archives Passed Down to a Digital Format

Digital archives have made access to all information significantly easier for anyone who's within reach of a smartphone and wi-fi connection and with this means of research being the new normal, it's also put a spotlight on controversial opinions that

are present in the most unexpected places within university research tools. New generations of patrons have given added attention to this specific issue that's led to enquiries throughout academic institutions on to why this language transferred over digitally in the first place; it also examines the idea of what terms are considered inappropriate and why. One example that was recently examined was contained within the Alfred Boyd papers in the Duke University MARC archives, which are dated from 1831-1865. According to Cress (2021), the first offensive term she came across during her research was when a girl was described as "mulatto" (para. 6). Although this case illustrates when a detail in an archive should remain in place as lesson for what was considered the unfortunate standard at the time, the harmful words contained in this format should also have an explanation to go with this. "'Mulatto' was an offensive term used during the era of slavery in the United States to refer to people of African and White European ancestry. It originated from the Spanish work 'mulato' and its literal meaning is 'young mule'" (Cress, 2021, para. 6). For the sake of historical context, this word should remain within this archive, but there's no reason for it to be contained in the archival description. In addition to this, Duke wasn't the only prominent school that had an archive that contained racist terms as this problem was also found in other examples such as The Walters Museum of Art, Princeton, University of Denver, Stanford, and Yale (Cress, 2021, papa 3).

Offensive language can also extend to locations and scientific data throughout the notes of early anthropologists who have had their records kept intact at a museum

or university. Examples of left behind racist terminology can be found on common and biological classifications, geographical areas or, according to Briscoe et al (2022), “descriptions and depictions of ethnic groups can be captured in photographs, books, notes and letters, or on the labels accompanying specimens” (Introduction section, p.4). And although there is an importance to maintain this word for word accuracy for the sake of historical evidence, according to Briscoe et al (2022), “it is equally important to recognize the archival record as a source of colonial violence and potential trauma for people accessing these data” (Discussion section, para. 1).

Additional examples of colonized descriptions can be found within historical geography that’s associated with European capitalist exploiters and slaveholders. Before gaining its independence in 1957 for example, Ghana was known by English settlers for almost a century as the “Gold Coast” which came from a time when white Europeans settlers stole resources from this region (Scott, 2023, Colonial Language section, para.1). History has preserved this knowledge of Europe’s destructive colonial past, but the documented artifacts that are found in the record of a university or museum should not be contained in an introduction section that was written by a contemporary archivist, even if this information was carried over from the original author.

Decolonizing academic records is also a process that needs to extend towards the Native American population as the use of Western language to classify their culture and history contributes to the bankruptcy of their heritage. According to O’Neil (2015),

“the majority of this difficult history stems from the divisive settler relationship between Native Americans and Europeans, who invaded and claimed native land through military action (killing thousands of Indians in the process)” (p. 4). In addition to genocide, the decimation of Native Americans culture was further erased by forcibly pushing tribal communities to reservations and taking children from their families to attend boarding schools. Because of these crimes and relocations, not only were families and communities wiped out, their history, music, traditions, language, and stories also vanished which is an absence that still impacts generations of Native Americans to this day (O’Neil, 2015, p.4).

The use of Westernized terms in place of indigenous descriptions is an additional means of burying their history by replacing traditional words with a colonial narrative. The English language remains as the standout of imperialism and capitalistic globalization that also contains subtle changes which will have a lasting, biased effect on the recognition of Native American history. Terms such as “traditional clothing” were replaced with “native costume,” which is a small detail, but it can also dehumanize a population (Scott, 2023, Colonial Language section, para.3). Furthermore, changing a language leaves out key details and untranslatable phrases that take away hundreds of years of traditional culture. According to Cushman (2013), “the language used to tell the stories in archives matters a great deal because English has been key to establishing Western thinking and histories” (p. 121).

The main source of where this colonial terminology comes from can be found in the original notes of the writer or estate architect, which for the sake of historical content, had remained unfiltered but kept in the description. However, it is a university's responsibility to consider harmful words and understand why keeping them in place has a long-term negative effect. According to Cress (2021), "the influence of late 19th and early 20th centuries library classification systems can still be found within archival descriptions and metadata in contemporary library collections" (para. 5). With these observations that are now considered archaic and hurtful, the idea that these words are still apart of a modern format still contained within a digital medium will continue to influence negative societal connotations. As Cress (2021) notes, "the use of dated language within library and archival collections encourages the inequality of underrepresented groups through the promotion of discriminatory infrastructures established by these earlier classification systems" (para. 5).

The perception from these original explorers have carried on for centuries and remained in a library system before being electronically available to users without an update, and although the historical accuracy can be toxic, an equally harmful dismissiveness is through ignoring the perception of indigenous people, thus suppressing their voices, history, culture, and society. According to Frederick, (2019), "colonizers have been the creators of the majority of our historical records, leaving many marginalized peoples without a voice in their own history" (p. 15). Omitting the voices of those who were being discovered and researched is also being dismissive of

people who were looked at as anything but human. “This silence creates another form of oppression and marginalization when the record descriptions do not reflect the complicated context of their creation and further ignores the subjects contained within them” (Frederick, 2019, p. 15).

The Means of Decolonization, Conscious Editing, and Representation

The information availability of digital records has given the opportunity to reach out towards a significantly larger audience for the public, thus calling more attention towards the racialized classification used in early scientific journals and labeled identifications. As much as there’s a reliance on new and continually updated technology to help clean up the racism in digital archive descriptions, it can be difficult for a computer to determine what is considered offensive, especially under the context of information that was written hundreds of years ago. Beyond simply replacing racist words with terms that are considered acceptable today, decolonizing an archive should also be updated with information that’s accurate, respectful, and all-inclusive and the means of conscious editing is one method of correcting these issues within a description. According to Chiles & Duplisea (2021), the purpose of conscious editing “seeks to redress historical inequities and injustices in the ways language is used in archives and special collections. These efforts include replacing racist and derogatory language and removing biased language that assumes whiteness as a default” (slide 5). In addition to updating these biased, outdated descriptions, it’s of significant importance

to also bring the voices of marginalized groups front and center after being silenced for so many years. Through this method of uncovering a history that was thought of as forgotten or worse, inhuman, researchers will be able to continually discover new information to better understand chapters of world history that were ignored for centuries (Chiles & Duplisea, 2021, slide 5).

Another approach is to have representation from those who are descendants of the previously ignored marginalized populace who can either work as an editor, supervisor, or consultant to help update these descriptions or if one isn't available, have an expert in that field with high academic expertise who's also respectful of the subject matter. According to Haberstock (2020), "asserting the importance of representation of indigenous peoples by indigenous peoples, research methods must change in a way that allows indigenous peoples to counter the dominant society's narrative of their people, their lifestyle, and their belief systems" (p. 129). This involved process would depend on the expertise of those who are from an indigenous background, but for those who aren't, it would require "that partners from a dominant perspective learn the histories, politics, and contemporary realities of their non-dominant counterparts and take a back seat in the process" (Haberstock, 2020, p. 130). It's also important to note that involving those within the indigenous community as experts of their own history to help capture a balanced representation from multiple sources. After all, some voices and opinions are louder and more biased than others (Haberstock, 2020, p. 130).

Conclusion: There's Still a Lot of Work to Be Done

Even though archivists and educators have spent years researching the methods of how to clean up centuries of bigoted language that are present in digital archive descriptions, this is still a consistent problem contained within many academic and museum research fields everywhere. Activists continue to call to the attention of the historically racist and dismissive treatment of indigenous people from all around the world and although progress has been made over the years with inclusiveness, diversity, and equity being the fabrication of society, there's still a lot of work to be done when it comes to correcting systematic intolerance through centuries of historic colonialism. As important as it is to leave archives untouched for the sake of historical content, there is still no excuse for this language to remain in a digital archive description and it's up to archivists to stay in touch with communities, on-line resources, and historians to help keep up to date with institutions who are continually working on decolonizing public information.

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