ARTICLE
Anti-Racist Archival Description

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Abstract

For those whose stories are in the archives, accessing them can prompt many emotions and reactions. People accessing these records, and those processing and providing access to them, may be affected by their contents.

There are many things we can do as archivists and archival institutions to make this process easier, more accessible, and safer for those who experience direct or intergenerational trauma. The profession has access to a growing selection of tools to guide our protocols and practices, such as the Tandanya Declaration, the ATSILIRN protocols and UNDRIP, as well as case studies for high-level institutional changes and cultural shifts, though this process is arguably only at the beginning of its collective journey. However, there are often immediate and practical ways in which we can implement anti-racist archival practice, including the way we describe archival materials.

This paper will discuss practical ways in which archivists can actively undertake anti-racist description work, and why it is imperative that this work becomes a priority in our collection management work. It will draw on the comprehensive document Anti-Racist Description Resources, authored by the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's (A4BLiP) Anti-Racist Description Working Group, as well as other standards and sources.

Keywords: *Indigenous archives*; *Decolonial archives*; *Archival description*; *Autoethnography*

For many, accessing records can bring about a swathe of emotions and reactions, and our understanding of trauma in and around the archives is growing. People may be traumatised by the ways the records have been arranged and described, the process of physical access, and the information withheld from the records through redaction or other processes related to third-party privacy.[1] There are plenty of things we can do as archivists and archival institutions to make this process easier, more accessible, and safer for those who experience direct and intergenerational trauma – both users and those who work directly with records such as archivists or access workers. Our profession has access to a growing selection of tools to guide our protocols and practices – we are

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slowly implementing the Tandanya Declaration (2019), the ATSILIRN protocols have existed in Australia since 1995, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) continues to be a great tool for archivists in formulating protocols and policies. However, there are often immediate and practical ways in which we can implement anti-racist archival practice, including the way we describe archival materials.

I hope this paper serves to be a practical guide to ways in which archivists and other collections professionals can actively undertake anti-racist description work – work that can be done immediately but still with power – and why it is imperative that this becomes a priority in our collection management work. It will draw on the comprehensive document *Anti-Racist Description Resources*, authored by the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's (A4BLiP) Anti-Racist Description Working Group, as well as other standards and sources. Although this resource was written in the United States, it is easily adaptable to our work here in Australia – anti-racism work can be conducted the world over.

The first half of the article will outline the idea of autoethnography and, for settlers who are doing this work, why we need to make the effort to truly acknowledge the trauma and emotion inherently within colonial and settler-created records.

The second half of the article will identify how archivists can use language, voice, style, and tone to describe records with anti-racism in mind – this section of the article can be used as a practical guide for archival description. Finally, the article will outline the importance of re-description in racist legacy descriptors, the care we need to take when using standards and classification, and the importance of transparency in description.

The use of autoethnography in archival practice
Adams, Ellis, and Jones stated that:

> Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno'). Autoethnographers believe that personal experience is infused with political/cultural norms and expectations, and they engage in rigorous self-reflection – typically referred to as 'reflexivity' – in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life.[2]

The way that this practice intersects with our work as archivists is to analyse our own personal and cultural experiences and use this as an active backdrop to our work. Archivists can use this standpoint as a beginning place in practising all parts of our professional lives; not only technical work such as appraisal, preservation, description, and access but flowing into post-custodial and immaterial work such as care for people whose spirits remain in the records, both living and passed; care for our colleagues, especially those from marginalised backgrounds; and care in thinking about the future of records as we look to communities for their guidance and collaboration in data sovereignty.

Jessica Tai speaks of the use of autoethnography in archival practice, when she states that in developing a liberatory descriptive standard, there must be an emphasis on self-reflection, and in surfacing the power that archivists hold through description.[3] When we reflect on our positionality and our own lived experience, we can begin to understand the positionality of others – of those within the materials, of the creators and of the caretakers. Simply put, we cannot conduct the decolonising and anti-racism work we need to do as archivists unless we have done this personal work, and truly work towards

understanding how self-reflection and empathy fit into a theoretical and practical archival framework.

Autoethnography in the archival profession

The first aspect of autoethnography, or looking within our own stories to inform our values and the way we work, is to identify our cultural positionality, now and in the past, and how these inform our patterns of thoughts and cultural lens. While this may sound a simple task, it is important to note the lack of autoethnographic practices taught in tertiary information management courses, and the historical lack of introspection encouraged in professional settings, perhaps underpinned by a historical view of archives as a neutral space. While many professional settings may offer basic cultural competency courses as professional development, it could be argued that these often do not account for the diversity of professionals and their backgrounds, as well as targeting the direct link between our biases and our work.

Some questions we can ask of ourselves when thinking of our professional and personal biases are:

What is our cultural background and how do we identify?

Looking at our cultural background allows us not only to start to understand our own behaviours and biases, but also how we interact with those around us and the material that we work with. Understanding our cultural identities allows us to situate ourselves in proximity to others, to the ideas and behaviours we experience in other people, and in archival work, the creation of and content in archival material.

As an example of looking into our own stories to underwrite our current biases, I am the daughter of both European settlers and an Asian migrant, and I was raised in a middle-class, Christian, culturally Eurocentric and mostly English-speaking environment. I identify as Thai-Australian, a member of the queer community, as engaged politically yet not as deeply as I feel obliged to be. I feel aware of my cultural biases; however, I am also aware that my upbringing underwrites my behaviour without my consent at times, and that it is my responsibility to be aware of this when I am working.

Understanding the above factors allows me to begin to understand how I can relate to archival material that was created by other communities. I can ask myself how my own community relates to the creators of the records, and how my identity intersects with the ideas of the record creators.

What values were instilled into us as young people?

What were the values of those who taught us in formative years, whether they be parents and family, friends and their families, teachers or religious leaders? Why were these values held by these people? Did they explicitly or implicitly pass these values down to us? Were these values cemented by our environments? How do these values compare to the values we hold now?

How have our experiences shaped us?

Similar to how the values instilled in us as young people have affected our thinking as adults, our lived experiences shape how we view the world now. Are there any experiences in our lives that contributed to how we see other people, or how we move through the world? Have the places we have lived in or visited changed us? Have we experienced trauma in our lives, or have we witnessed others experiencing trauma? Do we have privileges that others do not?

What are our social and professional environments?

In our contemporary lives, what are the environments that we live and work in? Who do we look to for personal and professional advice, and what are the values and lived

experiences of those people or groups? Do we feel comfortable and at ease in our environments, or do we feel unsupported? Do we socialise or work with people different from ourselves? And how do we react to being in those environments and with those people or groups of people?

Have we undertaken any unlearning?

'Unlearning' has been very broadly defined as abandoning or giving up knowledge, ideas, or behaviours.[4] This process is linked to the notions listed earlier, of instilled values, lived experiences, and our environments. Unlearning can take time and persistence and is often uncomfortable. It could mean unlearning internalised racism, the way privilege informs thought patterns and behaviours, and many other values. Have we had the opportunity or reason to be introspective throughout our lives, either alone or with others, and has this introspection led to any unlearning?

While traditional ideas of professionalism and professional life revolve around the absence of personal values in a work environment, a post-custodial approach to both professionalism and practical archival work insists that we bring our personal experiences to the work that we do as archivists. Decolonisation work in the archives is inherently personal: memory workers need to do the work so that others, users of the archives, and our professional colleagues, do not experience further trauma when they access the archives. Furthermore, Michelle Caswell, in her work on feminist archival appraisal, calls on archivists who inhabit dominant identities to acknowledge their oppressor standpoints and actively work to dismantle them.[5] Without acting upon self-reflection and understandings of our own identities and biases, archivists risk inhabiting the same standpoints as those who created unsafe conditions within the archive that we are working to dismantle.

When we do this work we can come to acknowledge the real and visceral trauma that viewing records and reading descriptions can hold. Archival description is not just about technical description and metadata standards, but about creating an emotionally and culturally safe space to access records, and also a welcoming and appropriate physical space to access records. Anti-racist archival description lends itself to trauma-informed archival practice, a notion defined as a practice that provides a way for archivists to practically implement many ideas such as liberatory memory work, radical empathy, and participatory co-design.[6] Caswell defines radical empathy in archives as empathy that allows us to define archival interactions even when our own visceral affective responses are steeped in fear, disgust, or anger. Such empathy is radical if it is directed precisely at those we feel are least worthy, least deserving of it.[7]

For an archives user who enters an environment which they know can hold trauma, for that user to know that the archivist, the librarian, the access worker, or whoever is facilitating access acknowledges that trauma and understands their perspective, goes towards making that space safer. To acknowledge the fact that before we start any description that addresses anti-racism, we must fully acknowledge the trauma that can be inflicted by racist description, and we can then work to reduce the harm. To honestly and fully understand the intent behind our work is to provide the safest and most open anti-racist archival practice.

It is also important to understand the ongoing nature of autoethnographic work in archival practice. Just as self-development is a never-ending process, so is the practice of self-reflection within the paradigms of our archival and collective memory work.

Enlisting anti-racist description in day-to-day archival work

With the notions of autoethnography and radical empathy in hand as well as having access to anti-racist resources and communities of practice, it is up to the archivist and the institutions

they work for to apply them in their day-to-day work, or advocate for the resources to begin and train for the work.

Archival description and reparative metadata remediation is work that is tangible, practical, and can be applied to all formats within the archives. Some aspects of anti-racist description work, such as that of community collaboration and description co-design, are long-term and highly specialised decolonial work. While not all archivists will be able to implement immediate changes without discussion and differing levels of advocacy, much of this work does not require significant resources or significant shifts in policies or systems. Shifts in standards, protocols, and procedures will assist in cultural change and therefore easier access to this work, though often archivists can work within the frameworks they already have to advocate for and make changes to their thinking when it comes to descriptive practices. In this way, anti-racist description is a tool that archivists can enlist in their own efforts to 'decolonise the archive'. It can be a personal effort and while we can acknowledge that it is best underpinned by the notions outlined of autoethnography and radical empathy, anti-racist description can also be used to spark the shift in thinking about the way an archivist views material. In this way, the practical work can push the theoretical work, as much as the latter can push the former. Either practice can be an entry point into the work.

This second part of the article will identify some resources to help with beginning this work, as well as outlining some ways in which archival description and metadata can easily be created or amended to facilitate anti-racist work. This will lead to safer access to records for users and future archivists working on the records.

Anti-racist archival resources

Many practising archivists are often working in underfunded and understaffed community archives, with little time for research and professional development, and often no funds for access to national or international networking and learning opportunities. Community archives are just as likely as large institutions to hold material in need of metadata remediation, and often struggle with a history of outdated description, arrangement and appraisal practices, underpinned by the notion of the archive as 'historical truth' and 'neutrality'. While advocacy for professional development in the areas of data sovereignty, truth-telling in recordkeeping and archival spaces, and research into notions of 'decolonising the archive' are growing in the wider profession, practising archivists are often left feeling burnt out purely from their day-to-day work, leaving little to no energy for advocating within their own institutions. In these situations, communities of practice can be instrumental in providing support for those working with little to no resources. Communities of practice can not only exist as organised groups of professionals coming together to share stories and ideas, but can also extend to locally and informally sharing and using resources where possible, including within international and external communities that may be creating resources on similar issues and working within similar paradigms and methodologies.

One such resource, which has been instrumental in my own thinking about this topic and has also heavily informed the practical part of this article, is the document 'Anti-racist description resources', first created in 2019 by Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's Anti-Racist Description Working Group.

The document was put together over the span of 2 years, with an update a year after its initial publication. Its recommendations are intended to 'combat the racist structures inherent in predominantly white institutions, (which we also all work at) and in archival description of underrepresented and marginalized groups, in particular those in the Black community'.[8] While its immediate context and audience is situated in North America, the ideas and content are particularly relevant and appropriate in Australia. Indigenous

records and those of other marginalised groups also suffer extensively from racist description practices, not only in the past but through ongoing practice which has not changed over many years.

The document includes the fact that 'metadata recommendations, an annotated bibliography, and an extensive bibliography, which aim to provide archivists with strategies and frameworks for creating anti-oppressive archival description, as well as for auditing repositories' existing description for anti-Black racism'.[9] The document is particularly accessible for practising archivists, is readily available as a free resource, and was not intended as an academic paper, making it a useful entry point into the work of anti-racist description.

Some easy ways to apply anti-racist description

Below are some simple ways to apply anti-racist description in a day-to-day archival setting.

Language

Considering the way we use language in archival description is an easy way to look at archival work through an anti-racist lens. A slight shift in language – the omission of a single word or the phrasing of a sentence – can have lasting effects on the meaning of the descriptor, and in turn on the access experience for a user.

There are many resources at hand which can guide us on safe and inclusive language. One such resource is the 2016 publication *A Progressive's Style Guide*, created by Sum of Us, a global anti-capitalism, grassroots movement of thinkers and activists. This is an accessible guide to inclusive language and while language is constantly evolving and shifting to encompass new spaces and communities, it is a great diving board to jump off from and start bringing meaning into the language we use to describe archives.

There are four central principles in this guide:

People-first language

The notion of 'people-first language' aims to make personhood the essential characteristic of every person. People-first language views other descriptive social identities that people may hold as secondary or non-essential. Instead of focussing on someone's race, sexuality, class, or other social descriptor, describing the person in the record as a *person* first and foremost will lower the risk of exploitation, judgement, or stereotyping.

Active voice

Also used in creative writing, the notion of using an active voice gives people in the records power and humanity, as well as agency and autonomy.

Self-identification

People who are robbed of opportunities to self-identify lose not just words that carry political power, but may also lose aspects of their culture, agency, and spirit. *A Progressive's Style Guide* is an excellent resource, and there are other guides created by and with communities who choose the language they use to identify themselves.

Proper nouns

Names used for and by individual places, persons, and organizations convey respect, understanding, acceptance, and clarity. They should always be capitalised.

In archival description, there is no need to use the language that is used in the material itself, if it is racist or problematic. While it is important to demonstrate and preserve the language used at the time, safer and more appropriate descriptions can be used for access purposes such as umbrella or heading titles. Original titles can be included in metadata with warnings or included on secondary or dropdown entries.

It is also necessary to think about the humanity of a person before describing their circumstances. For example, what is happening to a person, rather than being embedded in their identity? For instance, a person is not born as a homeless person, though they may be experiencing homelessness throughout their life.

Lastly, it is important to be aware of emotional and physical stereotypes, such as 'emotional woman' or 'angry Black man'. These stereotypes can be overt or subtle and are still used in social and media environments today.

Voice, style and tone

As we think about the specific words we use in archival description, we can also pair this with the voice, style, and tone of our descriptive writing. By thinking about language from a place of multiple knowledges and standpoints, archivists can take steps to unpack a western-centric mode of language and semiotics. Unlearning traditional descriptive practices is an essential step towards resisting the persistent inclination to value the 'neutral voice' within archival description.[10]

We can use an active voice when we describe oppressive relationships within archival material. The two statements listed further in the text, perhaps photographic captions, give an example of the shift in meaning by using an active voice:

Original caption:

Four Kent State University students were killed on May 4, 1970, during a clash between the Ohio National Guard and a crowd gathered to protest the Vietnam War.

Active voice caption:

Members of the Ohio National guard killed four Kent State University students during a mass protest against the Vietnam War.

As mentioned earlier, archivists can focus on the humanity of an individual before their identity when describing people. The example listed further in the text demonstrates using an active voice to demonstrate the humanity of the person being described:

Original descriptor:

…documents the business dealings of an Aboriginal Woman named Sally in Ceduna, 1927.

Active voice descriptor:

…documents the business dealings of Sally, an Aboriginal Woman in Ceduna, 1927.

While it is not always simple to change the name of a collection (though not impossible by any means), archivists should refrain from using flowery, valorising biographical notes for colonial collection creators. We can describe oppressed or marginalised people in records at least to the extent that you describe the creators. This gives the people in the records as much of a voice as the creator or collector of records and upends the power imbalance often inherent in collections named after colonial creators.

Use accurate and strong language such as lynching, rape, murder, genocide, massacre, hate mail, etc. Do not let your own discomfort censor the material; it is helpful for archivists to be uncomfortable with racist material, but not helpful to prioritise your discomfort above accurate description.

Archivists should describe relationships of power when they are important for understanding the context of the records. Often, these descriptions can be the only marker for the user to understand the complete context of the creation of the records or collection. Here, it is important for archivists to use their research skills to enhance the meaning and story, further than basic or traditional metadata might allow. An example might be when describing records created by figures who wielded power in multiple ways:

'Andrew Fisher was a known White Australia Policy supporter despite his legacies as Australian Prime Minister and worker's rights activist.'

Audience plurality

It is important to think about a plurality of audiences when writing descriptions, not only the audience who we generally see accessing the collections and finding aids. We might ask questions such as, are there any barriers to accessing this material and metadata for the communities whose stories are within the material? Is there archival jargon in the description or metadata? Is there clear, concise, and accessible wording? Is there academic language that can be removed or amended to be more accessible?

Who has connections to this material being described – are they being centred or even considered? Archivists need to consider the needs of those who seek to find a 'bigger picture' than just the content of the material – to rediscover their identities, understand intergenerational and community trauma, and to find coherence in their own lives.

Archivists can also consider ideas of alternate titles or provenance, acknowledging creators, contributors, and knowledge holders that are not named in collections, but have contributed nonetheless.

Community collaboration

Ideally, archival institutions will establish and maintain participatory relationships with communities to talk about description. This work of community collaboration differs from other reparative descriptive practice in that it demands more resources than most, and to be undertaken with great care, training, and planning. Those who are in leadership positions must acknowledge a responsibility to advocate for community collaboration with descriptive practices. A decolonial future of anti-racist description includes co-design of archival description with community members. Most western collecting institutions – government and state archives, religious archives, and private collections – need to build trust with community as part of this collaborative process. This is a long-term project, with the onus falling on collection leadership to allocate funding and resources towards these projects. While professional archivists have the skillset most suited to undertake collaborative description design and processes, community collaboration also needs a high level of cultural intelligence and training.

While there is much literature being written on this subject (to begin, see projects such as Traditional Knowledge labels and articles such as *Australian Indigenous knowledge and the archives: embracing multiple ways of knowing and keeping* by McKemmish, Faulkhead, Iacovino, and Thorpe, 2010[11]), it is the practical archivist's responsibility to begin thinking about paths for community collaboration, and how they could potentially feed into description projects. We can also take cues from those with longstanding relationships to the communities

within the records and ask ourselves how to begin reaching out to communities through collaborators such as researchers, writers, current historians, linguists, and other community members.

Remediating legacy description

As mentioned earlier, many (if not most) archives are plagued with harmful descriptions created by previous archivists and librarians. Although an archivist may be aware that the descriptions are older and therefore using racist and other harmful descriptions, a user of the archive makes no distinction between new and legacy descriptions. These need to be amended with as much urgency as creating new anti-racist descriptions, and resources for this work advocated for with similar urgency.

It is always imperative to consider the audience when it comes to archival descriptions. Not only are people able to access records in person and through online catalogue records, but through third-party search engines, through an organisation's social media posts, and other methods. We should think about the harm caused by viewing descriptions, the connectedness of communities and shareability of archival records in a digital age, and sensitivity issues such as privacy, current political climate, reasons for incarceration etc. The users who may be affected are not simply those within the community, but those outside the community with similar traumas or experiences with power dynamics.

When amending racist descriptions or titles which are taken from the material itself, or provenance-led (e.g.: original folder titles), these can be kept as secondary descriptions, with notes or warnings. It is not necessary to keep titles for the primary reason of 'tradition' or practice that has never been changed or criticised. In addition, archivists can advocate for feedback mechanisms so that users and stakeholders can request amendments and additions to descriptions. This idea is underpinned by the notion of Right to Reply – outlined succinctly by the Indigenous Archives Collective.[12] Offering a space for feedback and reply supports ideas of participatory and collaborative frameworks, which in turn work parallel to ideas of anti-racist description.

Standards and classifications

Marisa Duarte and Miranda Belarde-Lewis describe descriptive standardisation as a 'violent process that inherently valorises some perspectives while simultaneously silencing others'.[13] Archival standards such as DACS, Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), Dewey and other Name Authorities are all used to classify information in libraries and archives. This assumes that there are 'rights' and 'wrongs' in ways to identify groups of people and ways of knowing and insinuates binary ideas such as 'the other' or 'universalities'.

Anti-racist description looks beyond traditional descriptive standards and classification, drawing on the ideas of empathy and understanding of the complexity of communities. If descriptive standards are used in archival settings, consider the reasons why and perhaps, the reasons why it can or cannot be changed. If a harmful LCSH must be used, explain why that may be. While there are arguments for standardised language in archival description for accessibility reasons, free text should be used as much as possible, or standardised language can be shifted.

Furthermore, there are growing numbers of alternate descriptive standards that do not rely on harmful binaries and power dynamics. One example of this is the Indigenous subject, Languages and People thesauri *Pathways*, created by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).[14] This standard is freely available online and presents a collaborative alternative to thesaurus created by Western institutions.

Archival transparency

It is important for archivists to think about gaps in the collections they are describing, and whose voices might be missing. While it is not always simple to fill these gaps through long-term right of reply projects, these gaps can be outlined in archival descriptions. If an archivist is describing material created by a collecting institution itself, they should be particularly aware of the gaps and attitudes towards legacy collections. These can still address these as legacy issues.

Part of an anti-racist description project is not only to acknowledge gaps in collections themselves, but to document the positionality of the archivist or institution, where possible. Finding Aids can include acknowledgements and notes such as who processed and described the collection, names of people who added to or made changes to the collection and descriptions, made decisions about the collection and description, and when and where these took place. This transparency not only holds archivists accountable for their work, but also acknowledges the positionality and biases that are inherent in description work.

Archival institutions can consider sharing an online statement regarding the language that they use in their descriptions, or description goals or policies. This is a good way to ensure those who are accessing the records understand why certain language is being used and assists in any questions they may have about the descriptive process. It may demystify the archival process for those who are strangers to the complexities of archival description, but it also solidifies the descriptive team's goals and can help with advocacy and sustainability in descriptive projects. One example of a publicly available language policy is shared by Melbourne University's Find and Connect project, found on their current 2024 website.[15]

Wider collection management policies can also be made available to the public, for similar reasons as discussed earlier.

Conclusion

Archival description is beginning to move from a static technical archival skill to one with an active, empathic, and collaborative framework. Anti-racist description can be used within this framework to bring about safe, inclusive, and reparatory archival access. The first step to an anti-racist archival framework is archivists using autoethnography to consider their own positionality in relation to the material they will be describing. When practicing archivists undertake this personal work, they can begin to understand how their descriptive work can bring new types of access for a wider range of users of the archive.

Part of anti-racist archival work is to acknowledge your own and others' discomfort when undertaking descriptive work, and questioning standard practice and policy, not allowing discomfort or fear to drive decisions. Archivists are encouraged to make their descriptive work community focused, not academia focused. Tools such as archival transparency, challenging traditional standards and classifications, and using voice, style, tone, and language to both amend harmful legacy descriptions and new descriptions are readily available to archivists without the need for heavy resources and significant changes in policy. It is up to each archivist to reflect on their practice, and how we can change the narrative for users – being staunch, open, reflective, active, and caring.

Notes on contributor

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which archivists can work to mitigate ongoing trauma and colonial harm through practical archival work.

Acknowledgement

Notes

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