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
What is A4BLiP?
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Concerned Archivists Alliance
Archives For Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP)

archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com
# 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/a4bliphilly](https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/a4bliphilly)

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.
1. Collect, support, lift up Black history narratives

2. Work to make archival spaces more inclusive

Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College Reading Room, circa 1968.
3. Education and advocacy around police records

Cataloging is not neutral.

Anti-Racist Description Working Group
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”
Review Process

- Predominantly white group seeking input from black archivists
- Fundraising to support honoraria for reviewers
- Currently incorporating feedback
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?
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.
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.
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.
Racism Audit in Practice

Legacy description

```xml
<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)

```xml
<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)
Challenges / Lessons

- Communities are not monoliths

- Authority to implement institution-wide changes

- Terminology changes, so we’re never done (iterative)
Next Steps / Find Us!

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

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