

*Perspective*

# Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description

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## ABSTRACT

This essay argues for the necessity for mainstream archival institutions to audit for oppressive, euphemistic or misrepresentative language within their archival description, and will advocate for the redescription of collections to be undertaken through a framework of cultural humility. Prioritizing critical self-reflection, institutional accountability, and by recognizing and challenging power imbalances, archivists can facilitate the rectification of false historical narratives and oppressive language that continues to be created and remain in the collection description of mainstream archives. This article will examine what steps are necessary to describe and re-describe material through a lens of cultural humility, foregrounding the development of an ethical descriptive practice as an iterative and cyclical process rather than one that is linear with a finite date of achievement. The resulting recommendations will serve as a call for archivists and archival institutions to continually develop a descriptive practice that is transparent, critically self-reflective and community-centered.

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## POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

Working within a cultural humility framework, I feel it vital to be transparent of my own positionality. I identify as a mixed-raced, Chinese American cisgender woman who works as a processing archivist in a special collections library at an academic institution.

## INTRODUCTION

While conducting a survey of the collections held at the special collections library in which I was previously employed, I began to notice the prevalence of euphemistic language used to describe communities of color. Of particular note was the ubiquitous use of the term “internment” to describe collections documenting the federal government’s incarceration of more than 110,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. Terms such as “internment” and “relocation center” have been publicly denounced by a number of Japanese American advocacy groups and incarceration camp survivors, pointing to the way such language minimizes the history and ongoing injustice and racial discrimination of Japanese American communities.<sup>1</sup> Discovering euphemistic and harmful language within the collection description of a mainstream archival institution prompted further considerations: what role does language play in further marginalizing the subjects of records? To what effect can oppressive archival description become a barrier to patron use? How does the perception of archival neutrality contribute to misrepresentation and continual oppression? And moving forward, what framework can be applied in order to move towards the creation of transparent, community-centered archival description?

In this article, I will articulate the enormous potential that archival description holds—both for empowerment as well as for harm. I will highlight the need for mainstream archives to audit for oppressive, euphemistic, or misrepresentative language within their archival description, and will advocate for the redescription of collections to be undertaken through a framework of cultural humility. Building from archival literature that introduces cultural competency as a skill that provides library and information science (LIS) professionals with the working knowledge and understanding to engage with diverse communities, cultural humility posits that building such a skill set should be approached as a lifelong process. Cultural humility emphasizes the need for process-oriented approaches that are iterative, flexible, and acknowledge the inherent biases that

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<sup>1</sup> See: Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, “Words Can Lie or Clarify: Terminology of the World War II Incarceration of Japanese Americans,” 2009. Retrieved from [http://www.nps.gov/tule/forteachers/upload/Words\\_Can\\_Lie\\_or\\_Clarify.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/tule/forteachers/upload/Words_Can_Lie_or_Clarify.pdf); Sue Kunitomi Embrey, “Concentration Camps, Not Relocation Centers,” paper presented as part of a panel discussion by the Manzanar Committee at California State University, Fullerton, March 25, 1976. Retrieved from <https://manzanarcommittee.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/embrey-terminology-1976.pdf>.

impact both our everyday work, and the structures from which that work is carried out. An archival practice undertaken within a framework of cultural humility entails actively denouncing archival neutrality, requiring the continual and visible disclosure of one's own positionality. This involves acknowledging the ways such perspectives can shape archival practice, including archival description. Of equal precedence is the need for institutions to exercise the same level of self-assessment and self-critique in acknowledging and making visible the past and present ways they are infiltrated and impacted by bias and unequal distribution of power. Of critical importance to this process is the implementation of redescription initiatives that aim to audit and revise harmful and oppressive archival description. Furthermore, this article will argue for the need for institutional transparency in supplying public-facing documentation to highlight redescription initiatives and making archival interventions accessible and visible to users.

From within a framework of cultural humility, archivists understand that redescription is not just about revising language but about implementing a practice of critical self-reflection, as well as recognizing and shifting power imbalances. In emphasizing co-learning through community engagement, collaboration and partnerships, cultural humility refocuses archivists to be fundamentally user-centered. A pivotal step in doing so is to *normalize not knowing*. Cultural humility prompts archivists to acknowledge that they will never have all the answers, therefore opening space for other voices, and allowing nontraditional forms of expertise to inform decision making. Through outlining actionable steps towards developing anti-oppressive archival descriptive practices and drawing upon personal and community initiatives as case studies, this essay challenges archivists to work towards dismantling the veil of neutrality that mainstream archival institutions have traditionally projected. In doing so, the harmful effects that such perceived neutrality often perpetuates—namely oppression, white supremacy, and silencing—can begin to shift towards more ethical, collaborative, and community-centered forms of representation.

## FROM CULTURAL COMPETENCE TO CULTURAL HUMILITY

Within the LIS field, there has been a small but growing section of literature focusing on the development of cultural competence in LIS professionals. A seminal text by Patricia Montiel-Overall defines cultural competence as:

...the ability to recognize the significance of culture in one's own life and in the lives of others; and to come to know and respect diverse cultural backgrounds

and characteristics through interaction with individuals from diverse linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic groups.<sup>2</sup>

Stemming from the growing realization that the needs of culturally diverse communities are not fully understood or met by the LIS profession, Montiel-Overall, along with a number of other LIS scholars advocate for the integration of a cultural competence framework in the delivery of library and archives services.<sup>3</sup> While it is critical for the archival and larger LIS field to strive towards inclusivity, it is important to take precautions in framing cultural competence in a way that insinuates that one is actually *able* to become competent in another's culture. This is why a growing number of LIS scholars are advocating for the term cultural humility to be used in place of cultural competence, and for the remainder of the article, will be the term used to indicate the continued learning and measures taken to understand, advocate for and facilitate the representation of marginalized communities.<sup>4</sup> First, it will be necessary to further explicate the differences between cultural competence and cultural humility.

Building upon the work that LIS scholars and professionals have developed on cultural competence, Nicole A. Cooke introduces the concept of cultural humility as a next step in advocating for LIS professionals to approach cultural competence as a lifelong commitment as opposed to something that has a finite date of attainment.<sup>5</sup> Cultural humility is a multidimensional concept that is based on three central tenets: 1) lifelong learning and critical self-reflection 2) to recognize and challenge power imbalances, and 3) institutional accountability.<sup>6</sup> Cultural humility was first coined in the health sciences by Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García, and has been employed as a framework for medical professionals to examine the systematic and structural issues that may influence the care they deliver to their patients.<sup>7</sup> Tervalon and Murray-Garcia state that cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Montiel-Overall, "Cultural Competence: A Conceptual Framework for Library and Information Science Professionals," *Library Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2009): 189-190.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Engseth, "Cultural Competency: A Framework for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the Archival Profession in the United States," *The American Archivist* 81, no. 2 (2018): 460-482.

<sup>4</sup> For more on LIS scholar's use of the term cultural humility, see Nicola Andrews, Sunny Kim and Josie Watanabe, "Cultural Humility as a Transformative Framework for Librarians, Tutors, and Youth Volunteers: Applying a Lens of Cultural Responsiveness in Training Library Staff and Volunteers," *Young Adult Library Services* 16, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Nicole A. Cooke, *Information Services to Diverse Populations: Developing Culturally Competent Library Professionals* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017): 19.

<sup>6</sup> Vivian Chávez, "Cultural Humility: People, Principles and Practices," August 9, 2012, YouTube video, 29:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaSHLbS1V4w&t=53s>.

<sup>7</sup> Tervalon and Murray-Garcia proposed the idea of cultural humility out of a call for medical professionals to produce training with measurable outcomes for cultural competence. Seeing the issue in advocating for cultural competence as something that is able to be mastered or

humility is an “ongoing, courageous, and honest process of self-critique and self-awareness,” and that it forces the examination of, “one’s own patterns of unintentional and intentional racism, classism, and homophobia.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, cultural humility invites both the uncovering and foregrounding of individual as well as institutional positionality on an ongoing basis, in order to best serve people of diverse backgrounds. Although self-reflection is also advocated for through a cultural competence framework, the transparency of individual biases is not as heavily emphasized. Nursing scholar Amy Levi states, “the approach of cultural humility goes beyond the concept of cultural competence to encourage individuals to identify their own biases and to acknowledge that those biases must be recognized.”<sup>9</sup> Within the context of representing and supplying services to marginalized communities, it is apparent how this distinction becomes especially critical.

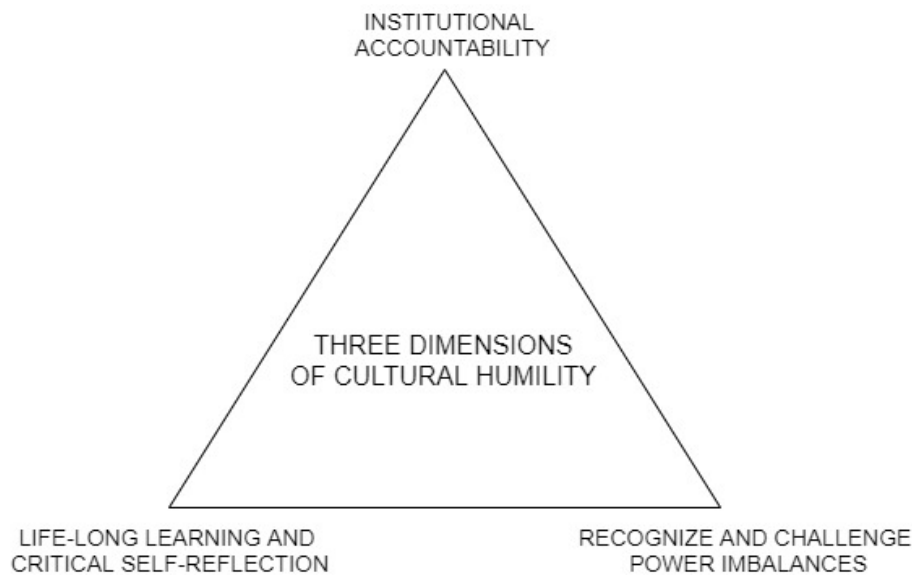


Figure 1. Jessica Tai. “Three Dimensions of Cultural Humility,” 2019.

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demonstrated, Tervalon and Murray-Garcia proposed the framework of cultural humility as a more holistic goal within multicultural medical education.

<sup>8</sup> Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García, “Cultural Humility Versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education,” *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 9, no. 2 (1998): 120.

<sup>9</sup> Amy Levi, “The Ethics of Nursing Students International Clinical Experiences,” *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic & Neonatal Nursing* 38, no. 1 (2009): 97.

Another primary difference in cultural humility is through its framing as a perpetual process of self-critique rather than an objective of “achieving” cultural competence. Levi states, “cultural humility does not have an end point of understanding; it mandates a lifelong commitment.”<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on cultural humility as a continual *process* is particularly vital considering that the identities, values, and needs of diverse communities are ever shifting and continuously evolving. Cultural humility emphasizes the need for our practices to be flexible and iterative, capable of accommodating the evolution of preferred terminologies and need for revision and redescription over time. This also emphasizes that cultural humility should not be limited to the individual level, but that “self-reflection and self-critique at the institutional level is also required.”<sup>11</sup> Cultural humility at the institutional level accounts for the need for archives to continuously examine their practices at macro- as well as microlevels, thinking critically about the ways that bias infiltrates and shapes their underlying structures and systems.

Tervalon and Murray-García emphasize that cultural humility is “a process that requires humility to develop and maintain mutually respectful and dynamic partnerships with communities.”<sup>12</sup> A critical component in doing so is being cognizant of the power dynamics that exist while engaging with community members, and being willing to relinquish one’s role as “expert.” Levi states, “cultural competency implies that one can function with a thorough knowledge of the mores and beliefs of another culture; cultural humility acknowledges that it is impossible to be adequately knowledgeable about cultures other than one’s own.”<sup>13</sup> Dismantling traditional conceptions of expertise requires flexibility and humility in being able to accept the limitations in serving as the authoritative voice on another’s experience. From this point of transparency and self-awareness, meaningful and impactful relationships with community members can begin to develop. Tervalon and Murray-García point to the importance of working relationships with community members and organizations to be “mutually beneficial, non-paternalistic, and respectful.”<sup>14</sup> A central tenet of cultural humility is engaging in, “community-based participatory research,” which grew out of “demands for authentic and locally-based research partnerships.”<sup>15</sup> Departing from traditionally one-sided partnerships between mainstream archival institutions and marginalized communities, the implementation of a framework of cultural humility would recognize the requisite to first remedy power imbalances before engaging in meaningful partnerships with communities.

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<sup>10</sup> Levi, “The Ethics of Nursing Students International Clinical Experiences,” 97.

<sup>11</sup> Tervalon and Murray-García, “Cultural Humility Versus Cultural Competence,” 122.

<sup>12</sup> Tervalon and Murray-García, 118.

<sup>13</sup> Tervalon and Murray-García, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Tervalon and Murray-García, 121.

<sup>15</sup> Chávez, “Cultural Humility: People, Principles and Practices.”

## DECONSTRUCTING THE POSITIVIST FOUNDATIONS OF ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

In order to understand the need to revise contemporary approaches to archival description, it is necessary to first examine the foundation on which our present-day frameworks have originated. In the nineteenth century, Enlightenment era philosophy gave way to the development of “archival science” and the subsequent practices within archival arrangement and description.<sup>16</sup> The enlightenment era fostered the growth of positivism, out of which archival science was further shaped. Verne Harris defines positivism as a philosophical theory that “posits a universe governed by natural laws, and a reality which is knowable.”<sup>17</sup> A positivist conception of archival science proposes that the empirical methods of the archivist are able to preserve a neutral record of history. Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook sought to shed light on the positivist origins of the archival field, noting the profession’s foundational belief that “archives as institutions are guardians of truth; archives as records contain the pristine evidence of past acts and historical fact.”<sup>18</sup> In their exploration, Schwartz and Cook reference British archivist and archival theorist Hilary Jenkinson, who held an enormous amount of influence in establishing the archival field as a profession and a firm belief in the objectivity of the archivist. Jenkinson proclaimed, “The archivist’s...aim [is] to provide, without prejudice or afterthought, for all who wish to know the Means of Knowledge...The good Archivist is perhaps the most selfless devotee of Truth the modern world produces.”<sup>19</sup> This ideology, positing that archivists must strive to produce an objective record of history, has been embedded into the field’s professional identity since its inception. Unearthing the groundwork on which foundational practices lay is an essential step towards resisting the persistent inclination to value the “neutral voice” within archival description.

The awareness of the need to resist neutrality has been a slow, but steadily growing discourse within the archival profession. This is due in part to the heightened recognition that the impact of present-day archivists operating within antiquated, Jenkinsonian frameworks is both incredibly harmful and negligent, especially when it comes to describing materials documenting marginalized communities. Bergis Jules notes, “in the name of neutrality, we’re erasing people, communities and their humanity

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<sup>16</sup> Wendy M. Duff and Verne Harris, “Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings,” *Archival Science* 2, nos. 3-4 (2002): 263.

<sup>17</sup> Verne Harris, “Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 132.

<sup>18</sup> Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (2002): 11.

<sup>19</sup> Hilary Jenkinson, *English Archivist: A New Profession* (London: H.K. Lewis, 1948), as quoted in Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 11.

from the historical record.”<sup>20</sup> In the twenty-first century, a burgeoning group of archivists and archival scholars began to explicitly call for the denouncement of an archival practice that claims to operate free from bias and subjective influence. Seeking to shift away from positivist-centered theory, archival scholars called foundational concepts into question, dissecting and disproving the notion that archivists are able to remain neutral agents in the preservation and access of records. This body of theory was referred to as a postmodernist approach to archives, with scholarship brought forth by Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, as well as Brien Brothman, Tom Nesmith, and Richard Brown as formative contributors to postmodern archival discourse. At the core of this notion is the belief that archivists are unable to escape their own biases as they relate to the making and retention of records. As Cook notes, “Archivists inevitably inject their own values, experiences, and educations, and reflect those of various external pressures, into all such research and decision-making.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, the barrier of archives being situated within the protective layer of “archival science” began to be broken down, the legacy of the neutral, objective archivist no longer remaining unchallenged.

Influenced by postmodernist frameworks, Australian archival theorists Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward have established their viewpoint from within a records continuum model in which records are “always in the process of becoming.”<sup>22</sup> Building on postmodern theory, the archivist is seen as an active shaper of historical narratives. McKemmish explains, “The records continuum worldview...is a place where it is understood that recordkeeping and archiving professionals play their part in forming society's structures of remembering and forgetting.”<sup>23</sup> Within this model, records are recognized not as static, inert objects, but as continuously evolving and capable of taking on accumulated meaning over time. A records continuum model expands upon traditional conceptions of *what* defines a record, thus opening up the possibility for archivists to rethink the role that records subjects can hold in the creation and maintenance of records. T-Kay Sangwand further expanded on conventional archival practice through her proposal of a justice-based framework for postcustodial transnational archival partnerships. Sangwand advocates for a contributive justice approach that entails local descriptive and organizational practices, thus enabling collaborators to “exercise agency

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<sup>20</sup> Bergis Jules, “Confronting Our Failure of Care Around Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives,” *On Archivy*, November 11, 2016. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/on-archivy/confronting-our-failure-of-care-around-the-legacies-of-marginalized-people-in-the-archives-dc4180397280>.

<sup>21</sup> Terry Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms” *Archival Science* 10 (2013): 102.

<sup>22</sup> Sue McKemmish, “Placing Records Continuum Theory and Practice,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 4 (2001): 334.

<sup>23</sup> McKemmish, “Placing Records Continuum Theory and Practice,” 358-359.



on the historical record.”<sup>24</sup> By involving community members in ways that empower them to become stewards of their own cultural history, archivists not only acknowledge the subjectivity inherent within archival description, but identify it as something that can be leveraged in order to enrich our records.

Livia Iacovino has also brought forth alternative approaches to the relationship between records subjects and records creators through her proposal of a participant model of record subjects as co-creators.<sup>25</sup> Iacovino emphasizes that this model holds particular applicability to Indigenous Australian record subjects and explains, “Our participant model entails a change of archival understandings of the record subject in order to give Indigenous ‘subjects’ specified rights and corresponding responsibilities to other parties involved in the record. The model involves repositioning record subjects as *records agents*—participants in the act of records creation through time and space.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the participant model disrupts the traditional role of the records creator, granting agency and recognizing the role of record subjects as participants, thus enhancing Indigenous rights and seeking to rebalance power structures between archivists and record subjects.

More recently, Michelle Caswell has proposed a new methodology of feminist standpoint appraisal to challenge the postmodernist viewpoints that, while acknowledging the biases and positionality of the archivist, often do not directly encourage the individual to leverage, challenge, or place them at the forefront. Caswell states, “Even when archivists influenced by postmodernism acknowledge the subjectivity of the archivist in creating value, such subjectivity often is seen as an imposition to be documented, balanced, and tempered.”<sup>27</sup> Caswell points to the “view from nowhere” from which much of archival description is purportedly written from, but which in fact supposes a dominant white male positionality. Feminist standpoint epistemology therefore seeks to dismantle the notion of neutrality, and to provide a, “vocabulary to describe how who you are, or the position you occupy in relation to the larger society and its structures of power, largely determines how and what you see.”<sup>28</sup> As Caswell details, the capacity to understand the role of archivists, not as passive mediators, but as active

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<sup>24</sup> T-Kay Sangwand “Preservation is Political: Enacting Contributive Justice and Decolonizing Transnational Archival Collaborations,” *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 8.

<sup>25</sup> Livia Iacovino, “Rethinking Archival, Ethical and Legal Frameworks for Records of Indigenous Australian Communities: A Participant Relationship Model of Rights and Responsibilities,” *Archival Science* 10 (2010): 353-372.

<sup>26</sup> Iacovino, 362.

<sup>27</sup> Michelle Caswell, “Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* (2019): 22.

<sup>28</sup> Caswell, “Dusting for Fingerprints,” 13.

agents, collectively encourages those undertaking the care of records to leverage or challenge, instead of obscure or temper, their positionalities.<sup>29</sup>

The neutral voice as one of presumed whiteness is a central point that Mario H. Ramirez emphasizes when he states, “whiteness functions as a ‘generic or colorblind norm’ whose status *as* a norm indicates privilege itself.”<sup>30</sup> Beyond maintaining the falsehood that neutrality is in fact attainable, Ramirez speaks to how reinforcing this notion perpetuates irreversible harm to those who do not occupy dominant identities. As Ramirez states, “An unexamined whiteness, no matter its political leanings, continues to support and replicate structural inequalities that inevitably marginalize people of color and maintain the status quo.”<sup>31</sup> Todd Honma similarly points to the need to acknowledge and challenge whiteness in order to dismantle its association with neutrality. As Honma explains, “The identification of whiteness and its structuralizing principles is necessary in order to combat its invisibility and normative effects.”<sup>32</sup> What both the work of Honma and Ramirez highlights is that by not naming whiteness, we continue to contribute to the power whiteness holds and the subsequent damage it inflicts.

## MOVING TOWARDS LIBERATORY, RIGHTS-CENTERED, AND REPARATIVE ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION

Seeking to deconstruct traditional fonds-based approaches to archival description, Wendy Duff and Verne Harris have introduced the concept of a liberatory descriptive standard, which at its core, advocates for transparency, and the acknowledgement that description cannot escape the inherent biases of its creator.<sup>33</sup> A liberatory descriptive standard mirrors the central concepts of cultural humility in that there must be an emphasis on self-reflection, and in surfacing the power dynamics that archivists hold over record subjects when composing description. Duff and Harris state, “The power to describe is the power to make and remake records and to determine how they will be used and remade in the future. Each story we tell about our records, each description we

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<sup>29</sup> Feminist standpoint appraisal calls for the valuing of standpoints of archivists from oppressed standpoints, while encouraging those occupying dominant identities to acknowledge their oppressor standpoints and actively work to dismantle them. See Caswell, “Dusting for Fingerprints,” 7.

<sup>30</sup> Mario H. Ramirez, “Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative,” *The American Archivist* (2015): 341.

<sup>31</sup> Ramirez, 352.

<sup>32</sup> Todd Honma, “Trippin’ Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies,” *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005): 5, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nj0w1mp>.

<sup>33</sup> Duff and Harris, “Stories and Names,” 284.

compile, changes the meaning of the records and re-creates them.”<sup>34</sup> A liberatory descriptive standard not only requires transparency and self-awareness in the acknowledgement of the archivist’s individual bias, but also recognizes the critical need for other voices in archival description.<sup>35</sup> In line with cultural humility’s emphasis on developing mutually-beneficial, respectful partnerships with community members, a liberatory descriptive standard focuses on user-driven and participatory-models of creating description. Duff and Harris state, “We need descriptive architectures that allow our users to speak to and in them.”<sup>36</sup> Practical initiatives proposed by the authors include having users annotate finding aids or adding in their own language to archival description. This approach expands the scope of voices represented within archival description, therefore opening up the possibility for records to be activated in the liberatory service of their users.

In their paper, Stacy Wood, Kathy Carbone, Marika Cifor, Anne Gilliland, and Ricardo Punzalan propose that archival description holds the potential for profound human rights uses and consequences. The authors reference Duff and Harris’ liberatory descriptive standard as a “valuable contribution to the mobilization of archival description within a human rights framework,” but note the lack of concrete plans offered to put these theories into action.<sup>37</sup> The authors thus propose the need to “mobilize records through value-added description for human rights purposes.”<sup>38</sup> Through a human rights framework, the authors offer a critical reading of the foundational archival concept of provenance in which the subjects of records documenting oppressive regimes or human rights abuses are denied a voice. The authors ask us to consider, “How can archival description allow and make room for the multiplicity of voices in archives to speak?”<sup>39</sup> A starting point in approaching this question is beginning to look at the limitations of the structures and systems in which archival description is undertaken.

Scholarship in critical librarianship has pointed to the promotion of oppressive and harmful language within controlled vocabularies used in library catalogs, such as the Library of Congress subject heading, “illegal alien.” Melissa Adler has called for taxonomic reparations, likening the library classification systems that have been built to uphold

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<sup>34</sup> Duff and Harris, “Stories and Names,” 272.

<sup>35</sup> Jessica Tai, “Retelling as Resistance: Towards the Implementation of Community-Centered Frameworks in the Redescription of Photographic Archives Documenting Marginalized Communities,” *VIEWS* 32, no. 1 (2018): 14.

<sup>36</sup> Duff and Harris, “Stories and Names,” 279.

<sup>37</sup> Stacy Wood, Kathy Carbone, Marika Cifor, Anne Gilliland, Ricardo Punzalan, “Mobilizing Records: Re-framing Archival Description to Support Human Rights,” *Archival Science* 14, nos. 3/4, (2014): 400-401

<sup>38</sup> Wood et al., “Mobilizing Records,” 399.

<sup>39</sup> Wood et al., 401.

whiteness, to the monuments meant to commemorate slaveholders.<sup>40</sup> Instead of overt symbols of white supremacy, classification systems are both invisible and ubiquitous, making their effects even more imperceptible to those not directly affected. Considering how classification systems have become so deeply embedded within information infrastructures, it is understandable how they cannot simply be dismantled. Therefore, Adler proposes the creation of local reparative taxonomies that focus on community-based ways of organizing knowledge, such as augmenting the catalog with local subject headings, encouraging participatory and social cataloging, and challenging catalogers to imagine a classification system based on, “something other than an unnamed whiteness as a universalized norm for its essential framework.”<sup>41</sup>

In her critique of hegemonic library classification structures and controlled vocabularies, Emily Drabinski proposes that instead of overhauling these systems, we shift our examination to their origins in order to reevaluate them through a queer lens.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, we facilitate a critical reading of the catalog itself, and can engage in cataloging interventions through open and transparent workflows. Drabinski implores us to “leave intact the traces,” arguing that by making these revisions visible, we can “highlight the constructed nature of classification structures and controlled vocabularies,” and “emphasize the discursivity of classification and cataloging by engaging in critical reflection with users about what they do and do not see in the library catalog.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, the traces of interventions within archival description could readily be implemented as teaching tools, using previous versions of finding aids in instruction. Such practices necessitate transparency and cultural humility in disclosing the need for continual review and redescription of archivist-supplied description. Additionally, in order to signify revisions, further descriptive notes and revision statements could be supplied with explicit language to indicate that changes were undertaken, as well as providing links out to an external page on the main library website with more contextual information on the wider scope of the redescription work being undertaken.<sup>44</sup> These radically

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<sup>40</sup> Melissa Adler “Case for Taxonomic Reparations,” *Knowledge Organization* 43, no. 8 (2016): 630-640; Melissa Adler, “Classification Along the Color Line: Excavating Racism in the Stacks” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.17>.

<sup>41</sup> Adler, “Classification Along the Color Line,” 27-28.

<sup>42</sup> Emily Drabinski, “Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 83, no. 2 (April 2013): 97.

<sup>43</sup> Drabinski, 109.

<sup>44</sup> The level at which notes should be applied will be determined in accordance with the level of processing being undertaken. Processing information notes can be applied at the collection, series, file, or item level, but should rely on external documentation to provide the full contextual information of the redescriptive work being undertaken. Also consider using internal revision statements to document the alteration of finding aids for staff.

transparent actions facilitate conversations between users and archivists, not only around the need for redescription, but also in encouraging users to think and respond critically to both legacy and archivist-supplied collection description.

## ENACTING ANTI-OPPRESSIVE DESCRIPTIVE PRACTICES AND WORKFLOWS

How can a liberatory archival standard, as well as a framework of cultural humility, be practically integrated into archival description? The following section will outline initiatives that are centered on developing guidelines for community-generated and anti-oppressive description, with a particular focus on Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's Anti-Racist Description Resources. I will also draw from my own experience of developing a project to survey archival collections documenting the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II in order to audit for euphemistic language not in line with the preferred terminology advocated for by the Japanese American Community.

Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP) is a group of archives professionals in the Philadelphia and Delaware Valley area that formed in response to the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. One of their working groups, the Anti-Racist Description Working Group, has published recommendations for archivists to address racist and anti-Black archival description.<sup>45</sup> The resources offer metadata recommendations to, "combat the racist structures inherent in predominately white institutions and in archival description of underrepresented and marginalized groups, in particular those in the Black community."<sup>46</sup> The resources provide concrete steps that archival professionals can integrate into their development of anti-oppressive descriptive practices, in addition to the redescription of racist and oppressive language found in archival description. The working group demonstrates cultural humility in multiple aspects, first in their disclosure of positionality. As a group composed primarily of white women, they acknowledged the criticality of disclosing their perspectives by publishing positionality statements within the resources. Secondly, the group acknowledges the importance of lifelong learning and self-reflection through the framing of the work of the group as iterative, calling for the resources to be regularly reassessed for impact and omissions.<sup>47</sup> Lastly, the group exercised the integral tenet of cultural humility, that of community collaboration and mutually beneficial partnerships. The working group

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<sup>45</sup> Alexis A. Antracoli, Annalise Berdini, Kelly Bolding, Faith Charlton, Amanda Ferrara, Valencia Johnson, and Katy Rawdon, *Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources*, October 2019, [https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr\\_final.pdf](https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Antracoli et al., i.

<sup>47</sup> Antracoli et al., i.

accepted the limitations of serving as the authoritative voice on anti-Black description, and successfully raised over \$1,000 through a GoFundMe campaign to pay Black archivists to review the recommendations and annotated bibliography published in the Anti-Racist Description Resources. While the resources were specifically developed to remediate anti-Black archival description, the group highlights the potential for broad applicability to a wider scope of records documenting marginalized communities.

Other groups, recognizing the need for community-generated resources for describing marginalized communities, have developed guidelines that outline preferred terminologies, media reference guides, and language style guides, among other resources. A sampling of these guidelines that have been developed include the Chicano Thesaurus<sup>48</sup>, the Densho Terminology Guide,<sup>49</sup> the Gender, Sex, and Sexual Orientation Ontology,<sup>50</sup> the GLAAD Media Reference Guide,<sup>51</sup> Homosaurus,<sup>52</sup> the Indigenous Peoples Terminology Guidelines for Usage,<sup>53</sup> National Center on Disability and Journalism Disability Language Style Guide,<sup>54</sup> the Power of Words Handbook,<sup>55</sup> and the Subject Headings for African American Materials.<sup>56</sup> Moving forward, as these guidelines begin to be utilized in service of archival description, further work is needed to uncover how mainstream archival institutions can best support, uplift, and implement the resources being produced by communities. A key component in sustaining this work is directly

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<sup>48</sup> Committee for the Development of Subject Access to Chicano Literatures, *Chicano Thesaurus for Indexing Chicano Materials* (Berkeley, CA: 1979). A digital version of the Chicano Thesaurus is available at: <https://eslibrary.berkeley.edu/chicano-studies-collection>.

<sup>49</sup> "Terminology," Densho: The Japanese Legacy Project, <https://densho.org/terminology/>.

<sup>50</sup> Clair Kronk, *Gender, Sex, and Sex Orientation Ontology*, v2.0.1, July 22, 2020, <https://github.com/Superraptor/GSSO>.

<sup>51</sup> GLAAD, *GLAAD Media Reference Guide*, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition, October 2016, <https://www.glaad.org/reference>.

<sup>52</sup> "Homosaurus: An International LGBTQ Linked Data Vocabulary," v2.1, June 2020, <http://homosaurus.org/>.

<sup>53</sup> "Indigenous Peoples Terminology Guidelines for Usage," Indigenous Corporate Training, Inc., July 20, 2016, <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-terminology-guidelines-for-usage>.

<sup>54</sup> "Disability Language Style Guide," National Center on Disability and Journalism, <https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>.

<sup>55</sup> Japanese American Citizens League, *Power of Words Handbook: A Guide to Language about Japanese Americans in World War II-Understanding Euphemisms and Preferred Terminology*, April 27, 2013, San Francisco, CA: Japanese American Citizens League, <https://jacl.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Power-of-Words-Rev.-Term.-Handbook.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Lorene Byron Brown, *Subject Headings for African American Materials*. (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1995).

putting the recommendations for preferred terminologies into practice in collaboration with communities and guideline creators.

In 2019, a pilot project was launched within the Center for Primary Research and Training (CFPRT) at UCLA Library Special Collections (LSC). The CFPRT is a program that pairs graduate students from various academic disciplines with archives and special collections projects that leverage their subject expertise and interests.<sup>57</sup> The project entailed developing a survey of existing collection description to update outdated, culturally insensitive, and racist language in order to better reflect self-description by communities. The project was developed in collaboration with Head of the CFPRT, Courtney Dean, as a graduate student position. The pilot phase of the project included hiring a redescription scholar, Rishi Guné, a Master's student in Asian American Studies. We found their background in critical race theory and interest in the representation of Asian Americans and other people of color in archival description was well aligned with the thoughtful approach we planned to employ in the project. The scope of the initial position included the scholar undertaking a survey of LSC collections documenting the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. As a focused collecting area within LSC, I had come across many of the collections during an earlier collection survey, and recognized the proliferation of terms such as "relocation camp" and "internment" within the archival description—terms that have been publicly denounced as historically inaccurate and euphemistic by Japanese American advocacy groups. As stewards of these collections, institutions not only hold a responsibility to preserve and provide access to these materials, but to contribute description that is reflective of the language communities use to describe themselves. Therefore, a primary aim of the Redescription Project was to audit collection description for euphemistic language not in line with the preferred terminology promoted by members and advocates of the Japanese American community, in addition to developing transparent workflows and policies around re-describing collection material.

Recognizing the importance of community self-description, redescription was undertaken utilizing the guidelines published by the Japanese American Citizens League's (JACL), *Power of Words Handbook: A Guide to Language about Japanese Americans in World War II*.<sup>58</sup> JACL's published guidelines seek to highlight the euphemistic and misleading vocabulary often used in historical narratives of the incarceration, and offers a suggested vocabulary that aims to, "facilitate a more accurate understanding of events

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<sup>57</sup> "Center for Primary Research and Training," UCLA Library, <https://www.library.ucla.edu/special-collections/at-this-location/center-primary-research-training-cfpert>.

<sup>58</sup> Japanese American Citizens League, *Power of Words Handbook*.

and actions experienced by the Nikkei during this tragic time.”<sup>59</sup> Through use of this handbook, archival description is not only made more historically accurate, but also shifts towards representing historically marginalized groups in more ethical and consultative ways. Given that developing preferred terminologies in collaboration with communities is a labor- and time-intensive process, the accessibility of guidelines that had already been formulated and published by a community group was a necessary requisite for the pilot phase of the project. However, it was acknowledged that a singular preferred terminology may not be all-encompassing and noted that future iterations of the project should recognize this when formulating redescription guidelines for other collecting scopes. The project’s redescription scholar also recognized the importance for outside perspectives, and pursued consultations with librarians in the Asian American Studies Center and Indian American Studies Center at UCLA. The success of the project is dependent on these collaborative efforts, campus-wide but also from outside the academic community.

Just as a framework of cultural humility informs the need for mutually beneficial and impactful partnerships with communities, it also drives practices to operate on a foundation of transparency. In developing the Redescription Project, it was critical to emphasize that the goal was not to simply erase legacy archival description but to offer proper contextualization, and if necessary, revise language that may be harmful, inaccurate, or euphemistic in describing marginalized communities and their experiences as portrayed in archival records. To ensure transparency of practice, one of the long-term project objectives was to develop a system in which users will have access to previous versions of finding aids. Access could be facilitated through the retention of revised finding aids on GitHub, a code hosting platform for version control. Of equal importance was the development and implementation of public-facing policies and descriptive notes that detail the interventions that were and continue to be undertaken. In doing so, we not only demonstrate transparency to our users but also draw attention to the need for iterative reparative work to take place.<sup>60</sup>

The culmination of the pilot phase of the Redescription Project was a workshop led by Rishi Guné entitled “Redescription as Potential: Navigating Representation and Ethical Description in the Collections on Japanese American Incarceration,” which focused on ethical and anti-racist archival descriptive practices. The workshop, which was open to the UCLA campus community, was intended to foster a dialogue on anti-racist descriptive practices, as well as to provide a space to collaboratively work towards a consensus on

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<sup>59</sup> Japanese American Citizens League, 1. The term “Nikkei” refers to “persons of Japanese ancestry outside of Japan.”

<sup>60</sup> For more information on project specifics, including the development of a processing information note and standardized language included in the 246 MARC field to indicate redescription, see: Courtney Dean, “Redescribing Japanese American Collections at UCLA,” *Descriptive Notes: Newsletter of the SAA Description Section* (Summer 2019): 6-8, <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/descriptive-notes-summer-2019.pdf>.



what the ethical stewardship of collections entails. The CFPRT hopes to undertake future iterations of this project that will focus on other communities and collecting areas, prioritizing engagement with librarians and archivists from the UCLA Ethnic Studies Centers and source communities. Lastly, I'd like to acknowledge that the weight of redescription work should not fall upon students, temporary or project archivists, or people of color, and that it is imperative to disrupt the structures and systems in place that continually drive this unequal distribution of labor.

As of this writing, I am serving as chair of Yale University Library's Reparative Archival Description Task Force, which is currently carrying out a similar initiative auditing collection material documenting Japanese American incarceration during WWII. A component of this project that is particularly in line with a framework of cultural humility includes direct consultations with Densho and the Japanese American Citizens League. As part of our project, representatives have given feedback on our project plan and a local controlled vocabulary resource. We have been able to provide honoraria for both groups for their time and expertise.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In this essay, I outlined why instituting a framework of cultural humility is critical for archivists to produce description and redescription that is transparent, iterative, and rooted in the language communities use to describe themselves. Below are recommendations that have been positioned within the multidimensional framework of cultural humility. By adapting these recommendations into practice, we can take integral steps towards shifting archival description toward its liberatory potential.

### First Dimension: Lifelong Learning and Critical Self-Reflection

- Commit to the development of cultural humility as a lifelong process, as opposed to something with a finite date of achievement. Approach learning about the experiences of others with humility, curiosity, and an ethos of *normalizing not knowing*.
- Emphasize the need for flexible and iterative workflows that allow for revision and redescription over time. Documentation should not be regarded as finished resources but as living documents, able to adapt to the changing and evolving language that communities use to describe themselves over time.
- Employ a framework of cultural humility when describing and re-describing archival collections documenting marginalized communities. Be cognizant of and do not attempt to mask the ways in which your individual bias impacts your approach to description. Encourage and leverage the viewpoints of those from

non-dominant positionalities by framing such contributions as *enrichments* rather than barriers to overcome in creating archival description.<sup>61</sup>

## Second Dimension: Recognize and Challenge Power Imbalances

- Prioritize the redescription of collections that are identified as using racist, oppressive or harmful language. Consider who your description is failing to serve by identifying potential audiences who may be harmed or further marginalized by leaving the current description and/or descriptive practices in place.
- Consult with the communities that your collections document in order to develop local descriptive practices.<sup>62</sup> This could entail archival institutions partnering with community organizations to collaboratively create preferred terminologies that can be shared across repositories and instituted into local descriptive guidelines.<sup>63</sup> Pay communities for their time, labor, and expertise.
- Recognize and continually push back against power dynamics that exist while engaging with community members. A framework of cultural humility in which institutional partners acknowledge their limitation in being able to serve as the definitive voice on another's experience will aid in this process.
- Embrace archival models and approaches such as postcustodialism, record co-creatorship, and participatory engagement with communities that challenge traditional power dynamics. By relinquishing their traditional role as "expert," institutions can open up space for and support the emergence and development of new forms of knowledge.
- Institute a community peer review process for finding aids and catalog records. Enlist the work of community representatives to participate in this process and compensate them for their time, labor, and expertise.<sup>64</sup>

## Third Dimension: Institutional Accountability

- A framework of cultural humility should not be limited to application on an individual basis but should require self-reflection and self-critique to occur at the organizational level as well. In practice, this could include creating institutional policies and documented workflows in regard to harmful and racist language. In addition, organizational change should also be emphasized through prioritization

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<sup>61</sup> Caswell, "Dusting for Fingerprints," 7.

<sup>62</sup> See the entry, "Community Collaboration and Expanding Audiences" in *Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources*, 4-7.

<sup>63</sup> Tai, "Retelling as Resistance," 16.

<sup>64</sup> Tai, 16.

of anti-oppressive archival description within strategic planning as well as mandatory and ongoing cultural humility training for staff at all levels.<sup>65</sup>

- Promote transparency in archival choices, interventions, and revisions. This could entail developing standard notes, written policies, and documentation that communicates archival interventions and descriptive practices to users.
- Transparency of archival interventions should also be promoted internally through the use of revision statements to track and document the alteration of finding aids, as well as tracing those who performed the revisions. For collections undergoing significant redescription, processing plans, event records, or other collection management documentation can be implemented to track the revisions, including developing systems for version control of finding aids.<sup>66</sup>
- Context is critical to disrupt further marginalization of communities. If legacy description is being repurposed, make this known. In addition, repository statements can be published to acknowledge and provide context for the presence of racist language within description.<sup>67</sup>
- Develop systems that allow for feedback loops. Include direct contact information or “suggestion boxes” on repository websites and distribute surveys to researchers in the reading room to encourage user feedback, questions, and concerns. Build workflows to ensure that suggestions are reviewed and develop policies on how feedback is documented, assessed, and implemented.

## CONCLUSION

This essay explored the potential for cultural humility to inform mainstream archives on everything from undertaking reparative and consultative redescription projects, to building meaningful partnerships with communities. As a framework, cultural humility encourages a wider culture of transparency and self-assessment, with the continual goal to recognize and challenge power imbalances. Cultural humility heightens that it is no longer plausible to hide behind the feigned neutral role of the archivist, emphasizing instead, the responsibility for the profession to facilitate holistic collection description through centering community engagement, consultation, and collaboration. Furthermore, cultural humility moves beyond the role of the individual, shifting

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<sup>65</sup> Thank you to Kelly Bolding for her recommendations of more concrete examples of how the burden can be shifted from individuals to organizations.

<sup>66</sup> See the entry for “Auditing Legacy Description and Reparative Processing” in *Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources*, 7-8.

<sup>67</sup> See Temple University Libraries Special Collections Research Center’s “SCRC Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description and Cataloging,” <https://library.temple.edu/scrc/research/harmful-language>.

responsibility to institutions to enact policy change, create public-facing documentation, and cultivate intentional shifts in organizational culture through trainings and revisions in strategic planning.

Further research and future iterations of redescription projects are needed to fully understand and explore the liberatory potential of anti-oppressive archival description and redescription undertaken through a framework of cultural humility. Perhaps the most radical shift needed is broadening the responsibility of change: from individual to institutional. Real impact is possible when the obligation to incite change falls not just on a few select individuals, but through an organizational culture that values and supports anti-oppressive models of practice.

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