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Reimagine Descriptive Workflows: A Community-Informed Agenda for Reparative and Inclusive Descriptive Practice

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REIMAGINE DESCRIPTIVE WORKFLOWS

A Community-informed
Agenda for Reparative
and Inclusive
Descriptive Practice

Rachel L. Frick and Merrilee Proffitt

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Reimagine Descriptive Workflows project convened a group of experts, practitioners, and community members to determine ways of improving descriptive practices, tools, infrastructure, and workflows in libraries and archives. The result, this community agenda, is offered to the broad library and archives community of practice. The agenda draws together insights from the convening, related research, and operational work that is ongoing in the field. All institutions hold power to make meaningful changes in this space, and all share collective responsibility.

The agenda is not a “how-to guide,” but it is constructed to instruct and chart a path toward reparative and inclusive description. The agenda is divided into two distinct parts. The first part provides contextual information regarding the project, the convening, and the methods used to create this agenda. It also frames the historical, local, and workflow challenges and tensions to consider when approaching inclusive and reparative metadata work.

The second part, “A Framework of Guidance,” and the Appendix, suggest actions and exercises that can help frame local priorities and areas for change and also provides examples to inspire local work. Inclusive and reparative description work is highly dependent on local context, and therefore a specific course of action must be created that is unique to each institution’s readiness and position relative to communities.

We have endeavored to be respectful and accurate with the terms that we have used, but we recognize that some words carry regional and community-based differences. Readers are advised that this report does contain a handful of illustrative examples of descriptive language that can and does inflict harm or offense.

The urgency to address past harms and correct harmful behaviors and workflows must be tempered by proceeding at a speed that supports building trust, promotes continuous learning, and embraces iterative effort. The work of reparative and inclusive metadata will never be finished. Stewarding the data about library and archive collections for users today and into the future will require ongoing refinement to practice.

OCLC, as an organization that plays a significant role in the stewardship of library metadata, is very pleased to be able to facilitate the production of this community agenda. The agenda and its recommendations will also be an important guide for OCLC as it charts its own way forward.

The work of confronting and addressing harmful descriptive practices is not easy, and we are grateful for community contributions that have informed and shaped this project and publication.

INTRODUCTION

OCLC, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, sponsored the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows project to better understand and address harm caused by cultural institutions' collection descriptions. This project was designed to have two deliverables:

- A convening of experts, practitioners, and community members to determine ways of improving descriptive practices, tools, infrastructure, and workflows in libraries and archives.
- A community agenda that draws together insights from the convening along with related research to chart a path forward in this work.

Work on reparative and inclusive descriptive practices is underway in the libraries and archives field, but it tends to be siloed, divided by organizational workflows, collection types, and professional identities. Reimagine Descriptive Workflows sought to address this challenge by creating a collective, community-centered effort that explores opportunities for reforming descriptive systems and approaches to chart a path toward implementation of anti-racist and inclusive descriptive practices at scale and driven at a community level.

Because of the recursive nature of the processes that informed, refined, and defined the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows project, the introductory section to this report will serve as a map and compass for the reader. Like nesting dolls, each effort along the way in this project provided context that informed the next step, sometimes in a linear fashion, but more often in a series of iterative loops. Here, we define the activities, processes, and key concepts used to develop the framework of guidance for acknowledgment and repair in descriptive practice, the core outcome of this work.

The process informing Reimagine Descriptive Workflows

This section provides details about the process of designing and executing the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening and resulting community agenda: how the convening was organized, the principles informing the convening's design, and the iterative process of writing this report.

Every country and region has a specific history of oppression and exclusion that has shaped today's descriptive landscape, which means the needs for repairing and reimagining descriptive practice is determined locally. For the purposes of this project's effort, the regional focus of Reimagine Descriptive Workflows was centered on Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the United States—countries whose history and origins are rooted in settler colonialism.

Although the nature of reparative and inclusive description is intersectional, this effort centers specifically on race and Indigeneity. The work presented here can be viewed as a step within an iterative process that can be extended in subsequent phases either to other aspects of harmful description or other geographies.

The context of who led the project and wrote the report matters as well. The project principal investigators and report authors are white women who have considerable privilege. While we sat with the discomfort of confronting the truths around the harms of descriptive practices, we did not experience those harms directly. We acknowledge that this work is built on decades of intellectual efforts as well as action by those who have worked against deeply flawed infrastructure. Learning from those who contributed collaboratively on this project, our role has been to listen and learn, as well as to synthesize and share.

ORGANIZING THE CONVENING

The Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening was structured to surface issues and opportunities to effect lasting change in descriptive practices. By bringing together those working independently within their organizational or operational contexts, the assembled individuals explored current efforts, synthesizing the lessons of diverse initiatives and mapping these activities to inform and encourage the movement to disassemble inequities as they appear in descriptive practice.

At the center of the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows project was a strong commitment to community design principles to establish a basis for trust among project organizers and participants. OCLC worked with Shift Collective—an organization with a proven record of successful community-centered activities—and a committed [advisory group](#) to create an immersive three-day virtual gathering. The convening design was built to address high-level objectives articulated in the proposal to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation:

- Build trust between communities
- Ensure that all participants are heard and incorporated into the creative process
- Capture proceedings in a way that provides clear direction toward future action

Project Team Members	
<p>Shift Collective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jon Voss: project lead, project design, convening design, facilitator, reporting • Tayo Medupin: lead convening designer • Jennifer Himmelreich: domain expert, convening design, facilitator • Asante Salaam: convening design, facilitator, cultural immersion • Gerry Himmelreich: evaluation, convening design, reporting • Bergis Jules: project design • Lynette Johnson: facilitator, reporting • Bernard Voss-Potts: technical support 	<p>OCLC:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rachel L. Frick: grant principal investigator, OCLC project lead, author • Marti Heyman: grant principal investigator* • Mary Sauer-Games: grant principal investigator • Bettina Huhn: project manager • Merrilee Proffitt: author, facilitator • Chela Scott Weber: facilitator • Mercy Procaccini: facilitator • Kendra Morgan: grant administration

* At the time of the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening, Marti Heyman was the Executive Director, Metadata Strategy and Operations at OCLC. At the time of publication of this community agenda, Marti departed OCLC and is an independent consultant.

The project team engaged an advisory panel of domain experts and practitioners who advised on the convening format and set the agenda for the meeting by establishing the following goals for the event:

- Create a safe space to share and connect honestly as humans
- Lay the foundations for relationship building and repair
- Build a basis for reciprocal relationships between communities and centers of power
- Inspire radical thinking to rebuild a more just metadata infrastructure
- Build a road map for change in the sector and keep conversation going

These goals were shared with [convening participants](#) ahead of the meeting.

Advisory Group

An essential component of this project was the advisory group. This group prioritized areas of focus for the convening, identified how the work should be structured, provided essential feedback on early drafts, and guided a final draft. We appreciate this group for their critical advocacy, patience, honesty, directness, and encouragement. Their contributions were at the heart of this project.

- **Dr. Stacy Allison-Cassin:** Dr. Stacy Allison-Cassin: Citizen of the Métis Nation of Ontario; Assistant Professor Faculty of Information, University of Toronto; Chair, IFLA Indigenous Matters Standing Committee, Member of IEEE P2890™ Recommended Practice for Provenance of Indigenous Peoples' Data
- **Jennifer Baxmeyer:** Assistant University Librarian for Metadata Services, Princeton University; Chair, Program for Cooperative Cataloging Advisory Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- **Dorothy Berry:** Digital Collections Program Manager at Houghton Library, Harvard University
- **Dr. Kimberley Bugg:** Associate Library Director, AUC Woodruff Library Center
- **Camille Callison:** Tahltan Nation member; University Librarian, University of the Fraser Valley; Chair, National Indigenous Knowledge and Language Alliance (NIKLA); Chair, IFLA Professional Division H and past Chair of IFLA Indigenous Matters Section; Board of Directors of Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CRKN); Member of IEEE P2890™ Recommended Practice for Provenance of Indigenous Peoples' Data; NISO Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Accessibility Committee; Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce on Archives
- **Lillian Chavez:** Library Director, Mescalero Community Library; President American Indian Library Association 2018-2019; Chair of ASCLA Tribal Librarians Interest Group
- **Trevor A. Dawes:** Vice Provost for Libraries and Museums and May Morris University Librarian, University of Delaware
- **Jarret Martin Drake:** Liberatory Memory Worker and PhD candidate of the Department of Anthropology, Harvard University
- **Bergis Jules:** Senior Consultant, Shift Collective
- **Cellia Joe-Olsen (Ngāti Kahugunu of Wairoa, Ngāti Pāhauwera):** Heritage Advice Coordinator, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand. National Council Te Rōpū Whakahaui IFLA Indigenous Matters Standing Committee Member
- **Katrina Tamaira (Ngāti Tūwharetoa):** Research Librarian Māori, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand
- **Damien Webb:** Manager, Indigenous Engagement Branch, State Library of New South Wales

In planning the convening, the project team prioritized the need to establish trust between organizers, participants, and the convening facilitation team. The project team also wanted to lay a foundation for future work. Shift Collective focused on the convening design while the OCLC team worked on inviting a diverse and balanced group of attendees.

Because this was a virtual convening spanning time zones from Australia to the eastern United States and Canada, convening participants had a maximum of three hours of synchronous time together. After more than a year of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the project team recognized that participants were experiencing serious virtual meet-up burnout. To support a welcoming, engaging, and participatory environment, the planning team included cultural inclusion and immersion activities.

Cultural Inclusion and Immersion Activities

Recognizing that travel was impossible during the COVID-19 global pandemic and that a goal of the convening was to foster a sense of connection and camaraderie, the convening planning team considered ways to engage participants so that the meeting felt immersive, personal, and distinctive from other virtual meetings.

Welcome packages were sent to all participants. Package contents included the cookbook *Recipes my Daddy Never Wrote Down: A Collection of New Orleans Recipes from My Childhood* by Sheryl Aramburo Boudy, treats from the Black- and woman-owned New Orleans business Loretta's Authentic Pralines, mixed nuts from the Crema Nut Company, a convening-branded notebook, and a plastic tumbler, all to encourage a sense of connection, sustenance, fun, and to lend a taste of travel to the "host" city, New Orleans.

"Cultural immersion" segments were designed by Asante Salaam, who served as the cultural advisor for the project. These activities supported the online meeting experience and gave participants a sense of having traveled to a space and place beyond their desks. Each day opened with a welcome video message from one of the locations represented in the convening (New Orleans, New Zealand, and British Columbia). At the end of each day, participants were invited to socialize and learn about a local artist. A prerecorded video was created about the artist and their work. This video was shared and then followed by a live interview and Q&A session.

- Day One: artist Édgar Sánchez
- Day Two: artist, writer, storyteller, and chef specializing in authentic traditional New Orleans Creole cuisine Shawanda Marie
- Day Three: New Orleans poet, author, filmmaker, and teacher Kalamu ya Salaam

Music played a role throughout the convening, providing background context for breaks, helping celebrate the day, and lift participant energy. A celebratory playlist was shared at the conclusion of the convening.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES INFORMING THE CONVENING: BUILDING TRUST AND BEING HEARD

After receiving substantive guidance from the advisory group, the project team needed to decide on one of two directions for the convening: either focus on big ideas—which has the potential to be uplifting and expansive but may lack more tactical outcomes—or focus on change—which has the potential to be more emotionally taxing and detail-oriented but would create outcomes that point the field toward actionable next steps. There was a consensus among stakeholders that people are hungry for more directive and actionable next steps that begin with taking solutions to scale.

Accordingly, the project team designed the convening to include space for critical trust building, but also move quickly toward exploring roadblocks and opportunities for change and workshopping ideas for moving forward as a field.

“Working at the speed of trust”¹ was the project’s motto. For the convening, this meant that OCLC and Shift Collective chose a human-centered design process to create time and space for project staff and participants to get to know each other and foster common understanding, providing fertile ground to establish trust. The plan created at the start of the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows project provided a blueprint for our activities, but the project team found that both organizations significantly underestimated the time and work required to create an environment for effective trust building between major centers of power in the library and information sciences landscape and local and marginalized communities. To lay the groundwork for the convening, the project team created a process to better understand the power dynamics at play in the field and address the needs of a variety of stakeholders.

The project team took the following steps to build trust:

Make time for cultivating project team relationships

OCLC and Shift team members scheduled a meeting where the only purpose was to meet one another. This preceded any discussion of “getting the work done.”

Establish stakeholder trust through relationship building

Shift and OCLC met with the advisory group three times before the convening. Again, it was important to allow time for the advisory group to come to know one another, as well as members of the Shift and OCLC team, so that the advisory group could honestly share concerns and constructive feedback as well as hopes and dreams. The work of the advisory group was critical to shaping convening goals and design principles.

Prepare event and facilitation logistics in advance

Facilitators from both teams met at length prior to the convening to discuss and review a detailed “run of show” document, practice using the technology that was employed to support the meeting (Zoom, Google Drive, and Miro), and identify the norms that would be used to support productive conversations. Both OCLC and Shift team members had engaged in facilitator training prior to this meeting and were practiced facilitators.

Clarify the role for facilitators in conversations

Having facilitators with experience supporting conversations about race and Indigeneity was critical. Within their primary role as “guides,” they served as timekeepers and notetakers, provided a light hand in keeping discussion groups on topic, and ensured adherence to agreed-upon community norms. Facilitators played

a critical part in supporting trust building. In the post-convening evaluation survey, participants stated that the facilitators did “an amazing job” and “set the stage well to establish trust and ensured there was a safe space for conversations.”

Keep the convening’s purpose central to discussions

When energy flagged or there were difficult conversations about potential misalignment of cultures, the teams would return to the “why” of the convening, reiterating the purpose and goals of the work that brought us together.

This process required time for discovery, equity analysis, and trust building that is rare not only in the cultural memory field, but also in most sectors today. An eight-month project turned into 12 months, with the convening planning and synthesis phases extended to include previously unplanned check-ins with stakeholders and community members, and the publication writing process expanded to be transparent and include moments to report out to stakeholders and gather feedback.

Relationship building, communication, and developing a shared understanding in the reparative and inclusive description space should not be rushed if the ultimate goal is to open up descriptive practice to be inclusive by building trust and reciprocal relationships with contributing communities.

WRITING THIS COMMUNITY AGENDA

The activities and learnings from the convening informed the importance of not only the content, but also the process for producing the community agenda publication. Just as community-centered design informed creating the convening, the writing and editing of this community agenda was also informed through an iterative, consultative, and transparent process.

Following the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening, Shift provided OCLC with an evaluation of the event and an initial synthesis of the convening’s outcomes. Using this report as a starting point,² the authors leaned on other work done within OCLC Research to create a draft report that was circulated to the advisory group for review to provide feedback on accuracy, key takeaways, and next steps shared in the agenda.

Just as community-centered design informed the creation of the convening, the writing and editing of this community agenda was also informed through an iterative, consultative, and transparent process.

The authors revised the publication based on this advisory group feedback, and a second draft was used in a series of “Leadership Circle” interviews. This process included 20 interviews with [41 individuals](#) from standards organizations, national libraries, national archives, consortia, and professional organizations. The purpose of these interviews was to check in about how the findings aligned with organizational leaders’ institutional priorities, identify gaps, and seek advice on strengthening the findings. A final version of the draft report was provided to the convening participants for comment and again to the advisory group for consultation.

Words matter

Language is powerful. It conveys meaning, framing, and sets intentions. In writing this document, we, the authors, have tried to use language that is accurate and respectful, but words are imprecise and, in many cases, may not adequately communicate to every reader in every context what we wish to say. Together, with the advisory group, we spent much time and discussion struggling to come to a consensus for a range of terms used in this agenda, exemplifying the challenge of the work of changing descriptive practice itself.

For example, although words like “acknowledge” and “repair” are used in discussions about desired action and outcomes, these terms are imperfect. It is important to recognize their shortcomings: that acknowledgment and apologies are not substitutes for redress, and that “repair” implies that you are fixing something that was fine before. The authors acknowledge the inadequacy of language, but we use the imperfect words that we have to move on to the work at hand. We encourage readers to adapt the ideas presented in this report, using language that is meaningful and appropriate.

The Purpose and Structure of the Community Agenda

This community agenda aims to capture the proceedings of the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening in a way that provides clear direction toward future action for metadata managers, collecting organization leaders, and metadata services providers, as well as for the broader information profession community of practice.³ Convening participants defined key next steps toward future action as:

- Acknowledge a need to change the current system
- Connect with others doing similar work
- Identify opportunities to engage in collaborative problem-solving
- Develop concrete approaches to enable reimagined descriptive metadata practices

When the project was developed, the final output originally was envisioned as a report that would provide direct, operational guidance. However, during the project, it became clear that a necessary precursor for desired, lasting change is a shared foundational understanding of the problem space and the systemic changes that our field needs to make. Going straight to “fixing things” only addresses symptoms of an underlying issue.

This report seeks to tackle the larger fundamental culture change issues by clearly articulating:

- Challenges of the current landscape by acknowledging and describing the current harms enacted by existing practices
- How decades of technological advancement toward centralized and standardized workflows have created an infrastructure that resists adaptation
- Fundamental actions needed to support transformative change in our professional culture and workflows

Acknowledged tensions and contradictions

Throughout this document, the reader will encounter points of seeming contradiction, highlighting how difficult it can be to chart a path forward. Some contradictions include:

- This work requires community consultation / This work should be done in a non-extractive fashion and requires that everyone take responsibility
- This work is urgent / This work takes time
- This work is important for our general collections, shared and used by everyone / This work is important for special and unique collections
- This work needs to be understood at a local community level / This work has broad and even global implications
- Change is best accomplished at the local level / Change is best accomplished through networks
- Language must be precise to demonstrate respect and inclusivity / In a diverse world, there will never be full agreement on the same words

It is important to take note of these contradictions. Tensions are inherent in complicated work and should not inhibit, but rather guide actions. Understanding the risks and trade-offs will help decision makers identify where to place effort within these “tension ranges” in alignment with their organization’s mission, values, and goals.

Why Radically Reimagine

The University Libraries, like any institution, operates through a set of legacy systems that have been in place for decades. **These systems implicitly and explicitly perpetuate inequity because they have been traditionally centered on whiteness and patriarchy as a default.** . . . Although we aspire to be inclusive, we often miss the mark because we do not focus on the systems that create and perpetuate inequity.⁴

—Vice Provost Elaine L. Westbrooks
UNC Chapel Hill Libraries

The word “reimagine” in Reimagine Descriptive Workflows was chosen intentionally to communicate the level of creativity and problem-solving logic required to address the challenge of transforming current descriptive practice, infrastructure, and its supporting community of practice. To *radically* reimagine descriptive workflows is to examine foundational, systemic changes needed to transform the profession at its core. But the radical reimagining required for transformative change to the profession is not new nor does it take place in a vacuum. It is based on decades of work by many who have applied energy and effort through research and advocacy in this field of librarianship and archival practice. It is to those in the vanguard that the greater library and archives profession owes a debt of gratitude, so that we can *radically* reimagine today.

All peoples deserve to live rich and full lives so they can thrive and contribute back to the communities to which they belong. When that opportunity is denied to some, everyone’s lives are

affected. Those who work in libraries and archives have an obligation to live up to their mission and vision statements to provide a welcoming environment for all that are served; this includes how communities are reflected and participate in our descriptive practices.

The values expressed by libraries, archives, and related fields of knowledge aim to affirm the desire to welcome and embrace all peoples. The information communities of practice have embraced this set of values while continuing to operate using systems and structures that were developed during the nineteenth century and reflect a Western white male hegemony.⁵ These current systems and structures do not support the kaleidoscope of races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientation, religions, abilities, and more that are reflected in the communities that are served by libraries and archives today. By applying white-centered, Western concepts to items representing a wider, diverse world view, there is the risk of hiding knowledge in plain sight. A user familiar with terms based in their communities' culture and knowledge may never connect to objects described using terms based on the dominant culture, effectively silencing these diverse voices in collections.

The presence of power and bias in collections is hard coded from the beginning of the descriptive workflow process, both as institutions identify and acquire materials and as libraries and archives support publishing and knowledge creation. Libraries exert significant power through naming and labeling processes in bibliographic description. This includes:

- Controlled access points (such as subject headings, place names, personal and corporate names)
- Language used in the body of the description (supplied titles, notes fields)
- Classification systems, which determine how resources are categorized and can dictate where materials may be found in the library
- Language in which the description is made available

Moreover, content standards and data communication formats themselves can create systemic imbalances beyond the inherent problems of labeling and description.

“To remain neutral about these systems is the very opposite of what it means to be a librarian in the twenty-first century.”

The terminology used to describe library collections in catalogs is the entry point for many who may be searching for information about their own history, heritage, culture, and spoken or written language. When those library patrons encounter racist, sexist, homophobic, insensitive, or just plain erroneous terminology in the library catalog while conducting a search or while receiving assistance during a reference interaction, it damages credibility and trust in the library and damages our collective brand. As Crystal Vaughan succinctly stated:

Librarians must recognize and reflect on their own internal biases when cataloguing and make it their job to deconstruct language and decolonize the systems that perpetuate the continued marginalization of others. To remain neutral about these systems is the very opposite of what it means to be a librarian in the twenty-first century.⁶

The same practices that are harmful to library patrons are also harmful to building, retaining, and promoting a diverse workforce. The most recent statistics offered by the American Library Association (2017) show that, as a profession, librarianship is overwhelmingly white (86.7%).⁷ For two decades, libraries have been enacting diversity plans, yet the demographics of the library workforce have not changed substantially. As the library and archives profession seeks to expand the diversity of the workforce, it is imperative to disengage from harmful practices that make workers feel unwelcome in positions as catalogers, in public services, and elsewhere.

This requires a systematic examination and calibration of library and archival practices. American writer and social commentator Roxane Gay said in a keynote address at the 2017 ACRL conference, “We think by using the word ‘diversity,’ we’re somehow contributing to change. Change takes effort.”⁸

The goal is to break down current systems
and to rebuild our workflows and our
profession in a way that minimizes harm and
also honors and includes.

Without education, action, and intervention, understanding issues around minoritized communities that libraries and archives purport to serve cannot be achieved. The call to action is to develop a shared understanding of the challenge space with clearly defined terms and concepts. The goal is to break down current systems and to rebuild our workflows and our profession in a way that minimizes harm and also honors and includes. As Gay further stated, “I don’t want your shame. I want your fight.”⁹

The need for more inclusive descriptive practices

More inclusive descriptive data drives a more inclusive discovery experience. However, the current state of collections descriptive data, developed over generations of changing practice, is falling short of the goal of a fair, just, and inclusive discovery experience. Library catalogs and finding aids are rife with terms described as “deliberate, bureaucratic euphemisms,” such as those describing the history and experiences of Japanese Americans who were forcibly removed from their homes and incarcerated because of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1942 Executive Order 9066.¹⁰ It is important not only to notice the flaws in our current descriptive and discovery systems, but also to witness and confront the harm and the very real pain it causes.

As libraries and other collecting institutions seek to build deep and meaningful relationships with community members, they find that their efforts are impeded by the metadata in library discovery systems (which are a representation of our processes and values) that force users to search with or encounter harmful terms, which negatively impacts the reputation of institutions who seek to create bridges to underrepresented communities. As Jo Pugh from The National Archives (UK) said at the DCDC Conference in June 2021, “Nobody should be compelled to use a slur to search a catalogue.”¹¹

In 2017, results from an OCLC Research Library Partnership survey on equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts demonstrated that institutions were struggling to find traction in describing items and collections in a respectful and inclusive way.¹² Primarily, the reasons for this have to do with vocabularies and lack of systems support as well as fear of deepening harm through action. Since that time, there has been an explosion of efforts in this area. Based on the popularity of OCLC webinars, discussion sessions, and blog posts on these topics, library professionals are hungry for tools and models to advance their own work.

STORIES OF HARM: CHANGE THE SUBJECT

The 2019 documentary *Change the Subject* follows a group of students at Dartmouth College into the library.¹³ There, they encounter anti-immigrant terms in the catalog in the form of authoritative subject headings. To discover information about topics that are relevant to their research, they are forced to engage in a system that utilizes oppressive language (“illegal aliens”)¹⁴ as opposed to more neutral terms (“undocumented immigrant”). Viewers then travel with the students to the United States Capitol in a (futile) effort to have the term replaced with something more accurate and respectful. At several points in the film, the pain endured by the students is plain to see, as is their struggle to understand why the changes they request are outside of the library’s control.

STORIES OF HARM: UNDERMINING COMMUNITY TRUST

In 2020, OCLC Research conducted interviews with catalogers and metadata professionals at 21 institutions in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand. The interviews focused on the desire of library professionals to engage in respectful and inclusive metadata practices for materials related to Indigenous peoples. Among the many frustrations expressed by interviewees were those around description and discovery.

Many interviewees shared stories of harm that they experienced in confronting current descriptions. The story below is just one example, shared by a cataloger at a public library in Canada.

I think every [Canadian] librarian or library worker could probably tell you a story of their discomfort, or the look of horror on the face of a customer who’s asking how to search for material about Indigenous peoples, and you have to tell them that it’s under Indians of North America. I think that sense of the inappropriateness and the wrongness of that is still with us and unfortunately, despite the strides that we’re trying to make there doesn’t seem to be movement at the institutional level to make those changes happen in a widespread kind of systematic way.¹⁵ [Canada, public library]

The interviewee shared this story with a sense of shame and embarrassment because this type of negative user interaction with a library’s collection undermines community trust with libraries. This harmful interaction with their institution conflicts with how library staff view themselves as positively contributing to communities and supporting community members.

Typically, there is no apparatus to support user feedback mechanisms incorporated in library catalog discovery layers to report description errors. This lack of feedback may create a sense of distance from harm. Those interviewed by OCLC Research in 2020 also expressed a degree of powerlessness and frustration as the default systems and standards used in general bibliographic descriptive practice are governed by organizations outside of their direct control or are difficult to change due to complicated processes or lack of transparency. Without shared appropriate language, librarians and archivists must make significant investments in developing reparative strategies or wait for shared solutions.

Network-level practices: challenges and solutions for more inclusive description

As in other areas of our activity, we need to think about how activities whose natural level was once local are now moving up to the network level.¹⁶

—Lorcan Dempsey

In the 1970s, libraries began to leverage networked computing to share information about library collections, streamline metadata workflows, and consolidate practice. In the United States, several regional networks were formed to organize and centralize management of the networking of library collections. These early efforts informed or provided the foundation of several of today's regional, national, and global library networks and aggregations, like the University of California libraries, Europeana, Australia's Trove, and OCLC. The Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening identified network-level practices that offer both challenges and solutions to more inclusive descriptive practices, which are outlined below.

CATALOG IT ONCE

The backbone of library metadata is standardized, uniform descriptions. This consistency in structure and content facilitates shared metadata infrastructure and record reuse, which has helped to drive down or contain costs for libraries. Libraries rely on a “catalog once” model, using records from vendors, publishers, the Library of Congress, OCLC, national libraries, or from other sources to support shared cataloging and other functions such as discovery, interlibrary loan, and shared collection development. Libraries routinely represent their collections metadata in union catalogs (e.g., WorldCat) or other aggregations (e.g., HathiTrust or Trove). The shared infrastructure that has been enabled by standardization and uniformity makes it difficult to accommodate local variations of records in aggregations such as union catalogs.

Another shift toward efficiency has been the increased prevalence of streamlining library operations through the adoption of “shelf-ready” services. Today, a large percentage of current circulating materials' acquisitions and cataloging is outsourced. Publishers or vendors provide materials that are stamped and labeled, accompanied by catalog records to be bulk loaded into local library systems. Interrupting descriptive practices in this workflow is not within the power of local librarians, but it was identified as an opportunity for system-wide change by engaging in radically reimagining descriptive workflows alongside vendors. This is especially important for the many organizations that no longer have cataloging staff, where vendor-provided services account for all—or nearly all—of their catalog records.

CONTROLLED VOCABULARIES AND STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

There are several dimensions to the role of metadata in the network of libraries. One dimension where standardization inhibits variation is the controlled vocabularies themselves. National and other agencies, such as the Library of Congress, the National Library of Medicine, and the Getty Vocabulary Program, maintain vocabularies on which the metadata creation and maintenance communities depend. The Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), Medical Subject Headings (MeSH), and the Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names (TGN) are all examples.

Individual institutions may wish to adapt or change individual headings, but this can be extremely time consuming and resource intensive. For example, numerous libraries have spent substantial time removing occurrences of the LCSH heading “illegal aliens,” preferring an alternative (and less harmful) term, “undocumented immigrants.”¹⁷

There is a tension between the need for local variation and the efficiency of network-level standardization. Institutions may desire local variation to respond to local communities or to undo harmful practice, however, the efficient sharing, aggregation, and reuse of data benefits from network-level standardization. It is likely that future systems will need to accommodate elements of both.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH AGGREGATED DIGITAL COLLECTIONS

Descriptive practices related to different material types vary considerably. For example, archives and special collections utilize different and more flexible encoding standards, in part because there are fewer efficiencies to be gained when describing unique materials. Archival and special collections metadata is typically less standards-driven than traditional bibliographic cataloging. Repairing or remediating archival description can provide additional challenges because of the iterative nature of archival description, which leaves behind layers of legacy description to be examined and addressed in a similarly iterative fashion.

When library collections are digitized, a different set of descriptive practices are applied, supported by digital asset management systems. In many cases, metadata for individual objects is drawn from a collection-level description and is not adequate for discovery. Additionally, meaning is lost when these digital objects are disaggregated from the full collections' context. This is especially true when there is harmful language on an individual item (a transcribed title or caption, for example) that has been contextualized in a collection-level description or finding aid. This is evident when that data is shared in aggregations such as the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) or other hubs. Dorothy Berry writes about this conundrum:

“[D]escription sufficient to promote use” in a physical setting, where human mediation is possible, is entirely different from “description sufficient to promote use” by both computer systems looking for records to aggregate, and by users searching for individual files amongst hundreds of thousands of digital records. Aggregation by its nature contradicts what has been referred to as the guiding principle of archival theory: *respects des fonds*. . . . The *entire* appeal, however, of an aggregation platform like *Umbra Search* or the Digital Public Library of America is to group by mixing archives of selected establishments, persons, and corporate bodies. But the metadata created and provided by the owning institution, becomes less viable at an aggregate level, when trying to identify commonality.¹⁸

Descriptive practices reflected in aggregated digital content do not currently support the identification of content representing minority communities, whether by shortfalls in vocabularies or in the record creators' expertise. As noted in recent work done by the DPLA in the context of building its Black Women's Suffragette Collection, there are a variety of ways identity concepts are communicated in metadata records:

The team had to develop enough subject expertise for specific people, events, publications and organizations. And then had to learn how each of these concepts was expressed using different vocabularies and standards . . . [there] is an intrinsic difficulty in building a collection of predominantly Black voices with the majority of DPLA's materials [being] by and about White people.¹⁹

COMPUTATIONAL USE

Participants at the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening raised the potential for careful application of data science as a solution to description and discovery conundrums. For example, the aggregation of large datasets and application of data science tools can homogenize, shape,

and disambiguate varied terms and descriptive practices. New models (e.g., linked data) can also further distinguish contextual and descriptive metadata, leading to new descriptive practice that is supported by less centralized vocabularies.

Promising applications of Artificial Intelligence and other aspects of data science can be seen in the United Kingdom as part of the Towards a National Collection Discovery initiatives, specifically in the project, *Transforming Collections: Reimagining Art, Nation and Heritage*.²⁰ This effort “aims to enable cross-search of collections, surface patterns of bias, uncover hidden connections, and open up new interpretative frames.” After the program’s two years of work, it will be exciting to see what was learned, developed, and what can be replicated at scale.

However, as is illustrated in the Berry paper (2018) as well as in *Responsible Operations* (2019), homogenized data descriptions, or metadata descriptions derived from machine learning and data science algorithms based on past norms, may in fact increase the amount of biased data in large centralized systems.²¹ Libraries and archives require a model for managing bias, enduring transparency, explainability, and accountability, and they depend on broadly distributed data science fluency.²²

Library networks were developed to maximize efficiencies around shared practice, reduce the rate of rise of library operational costs, and increase access to collections. The principal methods of these networks are centralizing effort, adopting standardized practices, and consolidating workflows. Reimagining descriptive workflows introduces a new challenge for library networks, which must adapt to support new capacities, including leveraging expertise to support the uncommon workflow, discovering and celebrating individual voices, and fostering new models of community-based codesign and collaboration.

Defining key concepts for shared understanding

We’re trying to create just, equitable, anti-racist and anti-oppressive descriptions within a structure and worldview of describing which is conceptually unjust, inequitable, racist, and oppressive. How might we create the conditions for / support a radical rethink of the very concept of cataloging and metadata description, to lay the foundations for an approach that will better serve us for the next 200 years?

**—Reimagine Descriptive Workflows
Design Challenge**

The first step in collectively addressing harm is to be clear about key concepts informing this community agenda. This report defines four concepts:

- White supremacy
- Power-holding institutions
- Relinquishing power
- Building trust

KEY CONCEPT: WHITE SUPREMACY

For some, the term “white supremacy” may call to mind events of the past and not the present; for others, dealing with the repercussions and impacts of white supremacy is a day-to-day reality. While the phrase may conjure difficult emotions for many, the convening participants strongly believe that the concept—defined by Frances Ansley (Professor Emeritus, University of Tennessee School of Law)—needs to be central to this current conversation. This report utilizes Ansley’s definition of “white supremacy”: “a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.”²³ This definition importantly defines white supremacy as systemic and not as individual acts of hatred. A notion that white supremacy is expressed as explicit acts of overt hatred prevents us from seeing the many ways that white supremacy is upheld in very ordinary ways.

Library organizational culture unintentionally upholds racism and white supremacy through current cataloging practice, tools, and workflows. The January 2021 Cataloguing Code of Ethics, reflecting the views of professional library associations and practitioners from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, identifies white supremacy as one of the factors that influences cataloging standards and practice.²⁴

Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening participants and the advisory group noted that this tendency to view white supremacy as a “historic” concept is a mischaracterization that prevents progress. White supremacy is a present and ongoing system that will not be easily undone if it is presumed to be a thing of the past. While the term “white supremacy” may be unsettling for some readers, the group felt it was important to be clearly named here. To quote James Baldwin, “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”²⁵

KEY CONCEPT: POWER-HOLDING INSTITUTIONS

Institutions such as government bodies, schools, churches, libraries, archives, and other organizations that serve communities are entrusted with considerable power to act responsibly on behalf of society. Typically, the larger (in wealth, status, profile) the organization, the more power it wields. Within the library community, there are many power-holding institutions that help to fuel and provide infrastructure; OCLC is one such example, as is the Library of Congress, Library and Archives Canada, and many other organizations serving libraries and archives. Libraries and archives are also power-holding institutions within the communities they serve. All institutions (and individuals working within institutions) can and should consider the power they hold and their ability to dream and enact change. Not taking any action perpetuates the *status quo*.

KEY CONCEPT: RELINQUISHING POWER

Historically, collecting institutions hold all power in describing, naming, organizing, and managing collections and discovery ecosystems. To repair harm and build trust, communities must be enabled to share the power to describe and manage collections related to their own history, heritage, and culture. This could be accomplished by opening existing description workflows and providing the scaffolding to actively involve communities in the naming and organization of collections. This is not a call to cede all power but a redistribution of accountability and responsibility. In this model, the choice to give an organization power is the result of a trusted relationship, and it is not a predetermined outcome due to legacy systems and past practice.

KEY CONCEPT: BUILDING TRUST

Trust is built between organizations and communities through experiences, and it is diminished or increased with each interaction. Trust is cumulative and communicated in every action. As demonstrated in the activities of planning the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening, building and maintaining trust should be a guidepost activity throughout the workflow process, similar to doing equity or accessibility audits. “How does this action build or break trust?” is a great alignment question to help gauge risks, gains, and repercussions of actions.

Dismantling the *status quo* to make way for a radical change

Since May 2020, there has been a marked increase in offerings of and participation in professional programming and training opportunities focused on inclusive description by a profession that is clearly yearning to learn and make a difference.²⁶ Among those attending the convening, there was an appetite for radical, transformative change.

Within the convening, participants often leaned toward the possibility of identifying and creating entirely new systems to address inequity and white supremacy in descriptive practices, rather than retrofitting existing systems. But participants also voiced impatience and frustration, eager to see a road map for change in the sector and a commitment from power-holding institutions and institutions at all levels to act.

Reflecting on the broad articulation of the challenge space and the desire to radically reimagine the environment from which descriptive workflows are grounded, a necessary first step toward concrete action is building a new operating foundation for organizations, the profession, and for individuals. What follows is a framework of guidance to build and inform that new foundation that will support a reparative description road map.

A Framework of Guidance

The following framework of guidance was distilled from 11 design challenges that were developed during the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening; these design challenges can be found in the appendix of this document. Each design challenge prompted a rapid ideation for potential pilots and prototypes. The outcomes of this ideation gave strong indications of actionable themes that, together, created a framework for strategy toward system change. These include changes to metadata description workflows and creating more just and equitable systems of knowledge organization from diverse and equally valued perspectives.

This framework is organized into three categories:

- **Organizational shifts:** Changes at the institutional and organizational level in terms of restructuring priorities, budgets, and staffing that require investment from leadership.
- **Operational workflows:** Changes needed in day-to-day practice. These changes require support from institutional policy, priorities, and funding. Organizational leadership needs to support mid-level managers and practitioners in implementation.
- **Professional and personal development:** Investment in education and mind-shift. This work is for everyone in the organization, regardless of role, and must be ongoing.

The proposed framework provides a structure for evaluating how and where to apply effort so that individuals and organizations can identify their role in making fundamental shifts in culture and mindset. These collective shifts across organizational, operational, and personal levels are necessary to enact transformative and sustainable change in the descriptive process.

Following each framework area descriptions are defined action steps or examples, or *radical reimaginings*, to demonstrate practical applications of the framework, highlight current work in this area, and provide recognition of positive change in the field.

Organizational shifts: acknowledge to amend

It is not about a legacy but an ongoing system that continues to support and perpetuate white supremacy. It's not easy to undo it if everyone acts as if it's already a thing of the past.

**—Reimagine Descriptive Workflows
convening participant**

To repair relationships and build a platform for trust and mutual respect, power-holding organizations must publicly acknowledge harm caused by its participation or complicity in systems that uphold racism. Acknowledgment should be followed by a statement of specific actions that the institution will take to repair past and prevent future harm. Institutions should use this opportunity to examine their previous actions and consider what harms have been done and to whom, to identify how those harms have occurred, and to formulate a plan for repair. These steps take time, leadership, and staff commitment.

Radical reimaginings:

In the “Statement Against White Appropriation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color’s Labor,”²⁷ the framers encourage institutions to offer a genuine apology for their actions; this consists of a statement of apology that names the institution’s harmful actions and their impact and commits to not repeating those harms. By those measures, an example that incorporates all of these elements that relate to harmful descriptive practice can be seen at the Abakanowicz Research Center at the Chicago History Museum (CMH).²⁸ In a statement on critical cataloging, the institution acknowledges and takes responsibility for harmful language in metadata that has existed and still exists in their collection and identifies five main objectives in this ongoing project to address and repair these harms. The page also includes updates on specific actions that CMH is taking.

Institutions can take important first steps toward acknowledging harm by surveying and documenting what is (or is not) in their collections and charting a transparent course of action. One example is Columbia University’s effort to document Native American works of art in their collections.²⁹ A detailed inventory, filed with the US federal government in compliance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA),³⁰ discloses item-level records in Columbia’s online catalog, CLIO, and WorldCat that provides transparency and a path forward to work with impacted Native American and Alaska Native tribes. Another example is Carnegie-Mellon University Libraries striking exhibit, “What we don’t have,” which recognizes the many ways that collecting and description practices have excluded voices and experiences.³¹ The exhibit not only notes absences, but also lays out steps that the institution plans to take as “calls to action.”

Organizational shifts: commit to the long game

Libraries and archives are set up to endure for centuries, so long-term thinking and planning is second nature to these institutions. Championing the need for anti-racist and anti-oppressive approaches in descriptive practices needs to be a labor shared by everyone in our organizations. These efforts should not fall to the work of a single committee, and especially not the work of the few individuals and organizations who have already been working in this area.

Organizational structures and cultures resist change, so leaders must provide scaffolding that supports change over the long term while recognizing the urgency of the issue. Even the most committed advocates and allies, when faced with the slower pace of change, can become disengaged, reverting to past default behavior. There is also pressure on organizations to be constantly innovating. Funding models, public interest, and political support tend to favor the new, which encourages a proliferation of projects that never get finished or languish when they hit a maintenance phase.

There is a balance between urgency and mindfulness; the work of reparative description is urgent and should be a top-level priority, but, by its very nature, it cannot be rushed. Ongoing effort, supported by shifts in budget allocation, staffing, workflows, and measures of productivity and performance are needed to sustain the push for foundational changes to operational workflows over the long term. This shift is best achieved when it is supported by a critical mass of institutions throughout the ecosystem.

Radical reimaginings:

The Reckoning Initiative (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill University Libraries) is an example of institutional investment that not only includes support for revising descriptions in the Conscious Editing Initiative, but also a call to action for staff at all levels to invest in ongoing education. The Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) Council is charged with moving effort forward at the library.³²

Another example of long-term organizational investment in this work is the Binghamton University Libraries' Anti-Racism Coalition Keepers Initiative (BLACK Initiative). This initiative is comprised of several subcommittees, including one conducting a talent audit, another looking at collections, and a third seeking to foster discussions and education for staff.³³ It should be noted that the library directors at both of these organizations are Black.

Operational workflows: prioritize a human-centered approach

The work of repairing description and implementing inclusive descriptive terminology must center on people. While process efficiency and technology applications are part of the work of replacing harmful terms with more appropriate ones, shifting descriptive practice and infrastructure goes beyond building technical capacity. Appropriate descriptive language is a complex space that centers on human identity and relationships.

Before imagining new systems and infrastructure to support new forms of labor and engagement, it is necessary to first reimagine relationships between people, institutions, and collections. To sustain this work, the focus needs to be continually re-centered on human relationships and resist the urge to revert to the comfortable spaces of efficiencies, technologies, and protocols.

Radical reimaginings:

An example of an institution engaging in the work to lay a foundation for trust and reciprocity with communities is reflected in the work done by the University of Sydney Library to establish the University of Sydney Library Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols. The protocols grew out of an awareness that the library needed to make a significant effort to make students, faculty, and staff feel safe and welcome in the library. In 2019, the library conducted a cultural audit to gauge cultural competence within the library and to chart a course for improvement, and the Protocols were published in 2021.

Work was led by Nathan Sentance, a Wiradjuri man and cultural heritage professional as Cultural Advisor in Residence. The work done by the University of Sydney Library was not done to support descriptive infrastructure specifically, but it helps to lay a firm foundation by establishing a basis for relationship building. This work provides guideposts for others looking to engage in appropriate action with local communities: recognition of harm, a desire to direct community engagement in a manner deemed appropriate by those communities, and the establishment of a plan to take action.³⁴

Operational workflows: support new values

A key feature of a “reimagined” future is one in which the responsibility for accurately reflecting the stories of community members does not fall solely on metadata staff. Our future includes broader responsibilities within institutions and also should reflect vocabularies and voices from communities, where methods for making changes are part of a shared vision supported by dedicated education, funding, staffing, and prioritization. Culture change will be supported by expanded metrics for success that recognizes volume and throughput as well as celebrates the investment in “cataloging with a purpose.”

Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening participants identified that “cataloging culture” needs to be re-examined and changed. Current cataloging culture prioritizes efficiency, where cataloging workflows have evolved to be low touch to maximize throughput. Additionally, there is a high value placed on compliance with existing cataloging standards, including the application of authorized subject headings. Finally, there is pressure to consider cataloging work as “done once.” There are many cases where efficiency is appropriate. However, it is important to recognize, value, and budget for the times when metadata needs to be remediated, repaired, or handled with more care.

The infrastructure around metadata management is shifting away from systems that support relatively fixed, curated text strings to a more dynamic process of knowledge work that documents conceptual relationships and is continuous. Cataloging has evolved from being a solitary work practice to one that is increasingly more collaborative, and even a community activity that produces catalog records that have been enriched by many hands. The opportunity to move from cataloging as a process confined by restrictive rules to an even more collaborative ecosystem that supports layering multiple vocabularies, identifiers, and rule sets will enable the creation of rich descriptions that maximizes opportunities for discovery.

It is essential that leaders recognize and support the fundamental transformation necessary to realizing the full potential of “next generation” metadata work.³⁵ Understanding that local descriptive cataloging workflows are now more complex, fluid, and have a far-reaching impact on collections’ access is critical so that current and future staffing decisions, workforce development, and budget allocation are in proper alignment to support consistent, sustainable effort.

Radical reimaginings:

Specific ideas to support cataloging culture change include:

- A feedback process built into library discovery layers that would allow users to report problematic language in library catalogs. For example, in both the National Library of Australia Catalogue as well as in the Trove discovery portal (representing a collaboration between the National Library of Australia and hundreds of partner organizations around Australia), each item has a mechanism for reporting culturally sensitive content and/or problematic language.³⁶
- A cataloging system that allows for many vocabularies and the use of localized, community-based terms as easily as established authority files.
- An assurance that quantity and throughput are not the sole measures used when gauging performance of metadata staff; productivity must be balanced with other factors such as notions of inclusiveness.
- Investment in building and maintaining staffing that supports thoughtful, inclusive, and creative approaches to descriptive work.





Convening participants discussed the concept of whose authority should drive metadata descriptive practices. A process that allows for multiple conceptual pathways to items in a collection would offer a new model for who has authority to inform descriptive practices. This approach would help cataloging workflows move away from a mode of enforcing centralized gatekeeping and authority. As an example of steps forward, in October 2021, the Library of Congress began a new phase in the development and maintenance of the Library of Congress Demographic Group Terms (LCDGT).

Beginning with this phase, the development of LCDGT will be guided by an Advisory Group whose members have expertise in each of the LCDGT Categories. This is a departure from the previous model that centered on the expertise of Library of Congress staff. LCDGT will remain a standard maintained by the Library of Congress, and the Library will still be the final decision maker if the need arises. However, this new workflow model is a shift from how other vocabulary programs have functioned, and it can be seen as a positive step toward a more consultative model in managing vocabularies.

A workflow process that allows for a multiplicity of structured descriptors increases discoverability and access.

This record from the State Library of New South Wales offers an example of the incorporation of multiple pathways via subject headings. The record incorporates First Nations Subject Headings (from the AIATSIS Subject Thesaurus)³⁷ alongside Western subject headings (see figure 1). These multiple subject headings provide important access points and also support First Nations peoples' authority and voice in the catalog.

A concise history of the colony and natives of New South Wales / by Samuel Kittle.

EXPORT  SHARE   SAVE TO MY CATALOGUE 

Subjects

SUBJECTS AND TOPICS
[Aboriginal Australians--New South Wales--Social life and customs](#)
[Aboriginal Australians--New South Wales](#)
[Natural history--New South Wales](#)
[New South Wales--History--1788-1851](#)
[David Scott Mitchell Collection](#)
[Sir William Dixson Library](#)

FIRST NATIONS SUBJECTS (AIATSIS)
[Settlement and contacts - Colonisation - 1788-1850.](#)
[Settlement and contacts - Penal colonies / Convicts.](#)
[Music - Vocal.](#)
[Technology.](#)
[Ceremonies.](#)
[Race relations - Violent.](#)
[Body - Decoration.](#)
[Death - Mortuary customs.](#)
[Religion.](#)
[Hunting, gathering and fishing.](#)
[Initiation - Tooth avulsion.](#)
[Language - Vocabulary - Word lists.](#)
[Weapons.](#)
[Recreation.](#)
[Health - Treatments - Traditional - Clever people.](#)

FIRST NATIONS PLACES (AIATSIS)
[Sydney \(NSW SI56-05\)](#)

FIGURE 1. A section of catalog record demonstrating the integration of [First Nations Subject Headings](#), State Library of New South Wales.³⁸

Operational workflows: slow down to move it forward

Throughout the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening, participants voiced the need to slow down descriptive processes to create opportunity for thoughtful examination of existing workflows. To be clear, the advice is not to slow progress but to work at a speed that allows mindfulness and avoids taking swift action that may have unintended consequences.

The notion that we should pause before proceeding is a challenge for a profession and even a world that values efficiency. Changing the expectation of how quickly things need to happen in institutions can be a major step toward a community-centered approach. When work is happening in a genuinely consultative manner, the timeline and urgency on the side of the institution may not be matched by that of the partner community. Multiple opinions and perspectives may need to be included, especially since—as was underscored multiple times—communities are not monolithic in their viewpoints. Work must happen “at the speed of trust.”

This approach means that workflow managers have the added task of advocating for needed time and space for necessary recalibration and setting expectations for work deliverables during this transformation period.

Radical reimaginings:

Convening participants proposed a model that was structured around unlearning existing methods and biases, fostering conditions for cocreation with individual communities, and developing systems that support multiplicity in all its connotations.

An example is provided by participant Dorothy Berry. This “better workflows map” asks key questions and offers (as an alternative for swiftly and efficiently moving forward) “stop and learn” as a necessary component (see figure 2). This model encourages pausing as necessary for consultation, questioning, and learning. It also acknowledges the journey of learning in doing this work.

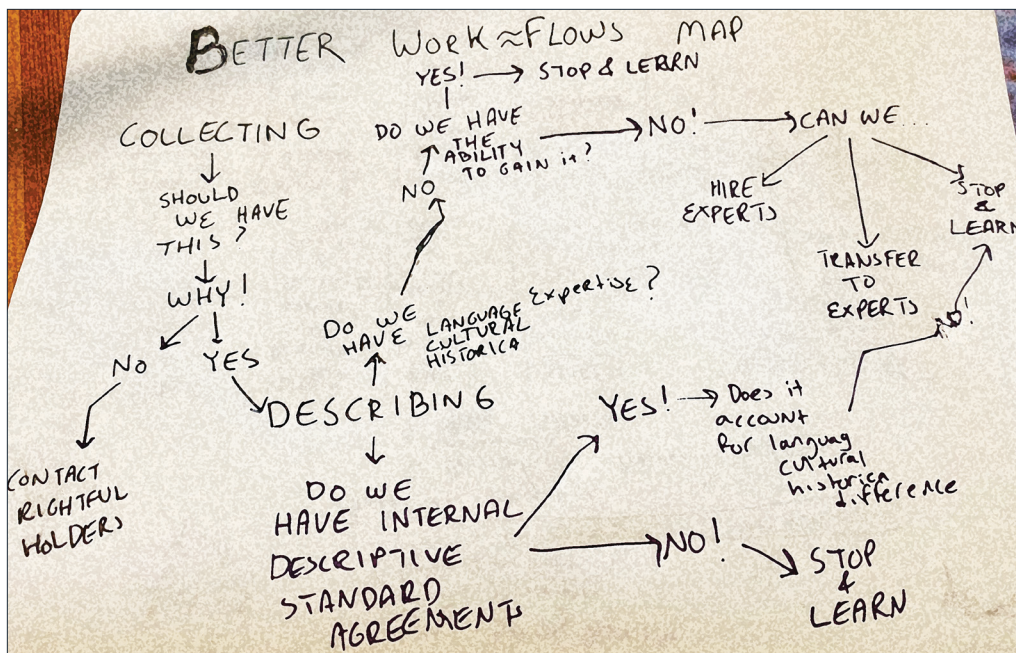


FIGURE 2. Better Workflows Map by Dorothy Berry.

Operational workflows: promote respectful, reciprocal, community codesign

Inaction on acknowledging and addressing inaccurate, inappropriate, and racist descriptions can damage the affected communities' trust in and relationships with the libraries. Libraries and archives must rebuild this trust by involving the communities represented in the process of repairing descriptions. Recognizing and engaging with communities whose identity and culture are reflected in the collections as equal stakeholders in metadata creation and maintenance is a critical step in reparative description work. Essential to institutions' successful and sustained engagement with these communities is ensuring that these relationships are reciprocal between communities and power-holding institutions. When relationships are reciprocal, parties feel valued and honest conversations can occur.

Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening participants described just and equitable workflows where communities had a consultative and codesign role. Some participants suggested shifting existing workflows away from extractive approaches and toward ones that focus on stewardship to demonstrate valuing those who are being asked to do the work. This would require reallocation of resources, both financial and personnel, and rethinking roles of authority and control over the processes. Institutions will need to balance funding reparative description work with decreasing their control in the process, stepping aside to center community frameworks.

Radical reimaginings:

This framework component proposes community engagement approaches that are non-extractive, community centered, and stewardship based. The downside of some of these community-centered models is increased processing time, the risk of burnout for small groups assigned to the work, and the perpetuation of the concept that reparative description is done outside of central, normal descriptive process routines. A key to minimizing these negative aspects could be rethinking how to utilize networks and shared platforms; instead of networks to coerce data and workflows to a common standard, networks would be used to amplify efforts and expertise that supports a richness of protocols and data types.

Examples include the Storylines project at the State Library of Western Australia, Community-Driven Archives Initiative at Arizona State University, the Community-Driven Archives project at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and the Orange County & Southeast Asian Archive Center community archives at UC Irvine.³⁹ These projects empower communities to take responsibility for collecting, describing, and stewarding collections that are important to their history and culture, with the library in a supporting role.

Models vary, but the work is undertaken without an expectation that collections will come to the library and that resources will remain in the control of the community. Note that starting a short-term program or effort is possible with funding, but such programs should be designed with the goal of achieving sustainability to foster long-term community interconnectedness from the outset.

Convening participants suggested developing protocols and tools that could be integrated into catalogs. One example that might inspire adaptation is the tagging functionality that is supported through the US National Archives "Citizen Archivist" program.⁴⁰ This content contribution program encourages non-catalogers to directly enhance records, encouraging community contribution to existing records.

Operational workflow and professional development: hold generous spaces⁴¹

Reimagining descriptive workflows to include community codesign and contribution requires that an organization prepare their staff and professional culture for this change. This includes investing in individual professional development that prepares staff to adapt their workflows to a more consultative, community-centered approach. An institution will also need to support a shift in their workplace culture to prioritize building community relationships, which includes rethinking how staff plan and conduct both internal and external meetings, particularly those that help to advance changing descriptive practices and workflows.

Baseline cultural capability training, implicit bias training, and increasing skills for navigating difficult conversations for staff are good professional development investments that will contribute to successful, collaborative engagement work. Training and professional development efforts must avoid perpetuating extractive practices that place undue and uncompensated burdens on the shoulders of Black, Indigenous, or other racialized or minoritized colleagues.

Organizations should also examine how meetings are planned and conducted using a critical lens to maximize inclusivity while equitably distributing work. Meeting planners and organizers, whether it is a weekly staff meeting or a larger forum, should redouble their efforts to pay close attention to how time is structured, how and to whom roles are assigned, and clearly communicate the intentions of the meeting and how the outcomes will be used. A meeting that compensates all participants for their time and expertise, has a clearly articulated agenda, and considers different modes of comfort and learning creates a generous space for people to connect and productive work to be done.

Successfully holding generous spaces includes the following:

- Utilizing collectively established community norms. More about community norms can be found in [Appendix 1](#)
- Budgeting substantial time for iterative meeting planning and preparations to allow for auditing and realigning meeting structure and activities
- Being considerate in making requests of those participants who are being asked to inform this work repeatedly
- Using trained and experienced facilitators

It is important to note that, for those responsible for planning and facilitating meetings, challenging ways of working and norms of practice can feel personal. For those who are not part of an underrepresented or otherwise marginalized community, it is important to bear witness to harms without taking offense. Those who are part of racialized or minoritized groups may need private spaces for reflection and discussion. For these reasons, meetings should include time to decompress, re-center, and refresh. This could be done through shared, celebratory social activities or quiet mindful exercises.

Radical reimaginings:

Staff who are Black, Indigenous, or from other racialized or minoritized groups struggle with having to make unjust accommodations to assuage the guilt, discomfort, or lack of education of white

colleagues or leadership; this must be acknowledged and addressed. There is a clear need for organizations like We Here, which is a safe space for Black and Indigenous peoples, and People of Color in library and information professions.⁴²

There is a similar need for those in the dominant culture to seek out and organize educational opportunities for themselves. These are challenging but necessary first steps toward disrupting cataloging and other library practices away from a harmful *status quo* to more inclusive structures. The Cataloguing Code of Ethics, published in 2021, calls upon librarians to work to “overcome personal, institutional, and societal prejudices” as well as take a critical approach to tools and standards, in addition to education and training.⁴³ For the library profession to adapt and change, both formal and informal modes of education and support are necessary. Libraries and archives are learning organizations, and we are never done learning.

Professional and personal development: create systems of support

The work of confronting histories that include erasure and genocide is emotional and time-consuming. Systems of support must be created, both for those who have been engaged with this work for many years or even decades and for those who are new to it. Recognition, buy-in, and funding from organizations and individuals with power and influence at all levels are critical. Additionally, these systems should include norms that support holding generous spaces and community-centered approaches.

It is essential to build strong and multilayered structures of support for the people involved in this work. There is a significant need for mentoring relationships that provide reciprocal benefit for emerging, mid-career, and late-career professionals, as well as for those in power to help them better understand a diversity of constituents.

It is essential to build strong and multilayered structures of support for the people involved in this work.

Participants at the convening proposed that the profession could build on our abundance through peer-supported resources for the spectrum of information workers, from library school students and educators to practitioners and institutional leaders. This concept provides possibilities for cross-institutional affiliation cohorts (i.e., Indigenous catalogers) as well as spaces outside of institutions like makerspaces to develop toolkits. This offers an array of tools and approaches to balance bigger and smaller organizations in a way that could support bottom-up resource sharing.

Convening participants cautioned that at this stage of field building it is important that the community leads the way. Here, roots and foundational homes for these support networks are not controlled by organizations that currently hold disproportionate power in these spaces. One can draw parallels to this stage of field building to the initial planning stages of the Reimagine

Descriptive Workflows convening. For the convening, organizers provided a loosely conceived agenda that allowed for those gathered to determine topics, their importance, and assign the appropriate amount of time needed to address them.

By resisting usual practice, such as firmly locking topics into place on the agenda prior to bringing participants together, organizers attempted to avoid replicating the very nature of the problem at the center of this work: top-down solutions, where existing power structures determine community priorities, ideas are developed in silos, and thinking is based on past experience. This is the benefit of a community-driven approach and should be emulated in future field building. Future convenings on this topic could be owned by members of the community, with traditional organizers providing support and logistics coordination, such as handling fiscal and logistical support for continued community efforts, grant writing and administrative support, and continued intentional network weaving.

Radical reimaginings:

There is an emerging community of practice in relation to reparative description. The Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening drew on expertise from across the globe, bringing participants out of disparate professional silos and organizational contexts to begin seeding what could germinate into a self-sustaining network. This is the initial phase of “network weaving,” popularized by Valdis Krebs,⁴⁴ a concept that Shift Collective used to develop an informal international collaborative network through the Linked Open Data in Libraries, Archives, and Museums Summits (LODLAM).⁴⁵

In the case of LODLAM, success of this approach to field building can be seen in the continued replication of summit gatherings with over 100 participants from across the world, self-funding and organizing to reconvene every two years to share results of their work and continue to advance the field of linked data. This same approach may be applicable to the field of reparative description.

Another possible replicable model comes from the United Kingdom. The Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC) was first established in 2002, and although its membership is institutionally based, it does offer a model by which institutional representatives work together around a global shared interest, on equal footing, through a well-articulated governance structure, clear mission and values, and transparently documented policies.⁴⁶

Organizational, professional, and personal accountability

We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces.⁴⁷

—ALA Code of Ethics

Acknowledging harm, creating a safe space, building trust, and cultivating reciprocal relationships requires a commitment to action. Reimagine Descriptive Workflow convening participants suggested many ways for doing this, such as an increased transparency regarding workflows

associated with metadata authorities, standards processes, and other metadata decision trees. Another tool for organizational accountability could be public road maps with key performance indicators at discrete time intervals. Organizations could also use an Agile-like methodology⁴⁸ for employing community recommendations in a transparent way.

An example of organizational accountability in action is the “Commitments and Action Items” put forward by Carnegie Mellon University as part of their effort toward Confronting Racism and Promoting Equity and Inclusion.⁴⁹ A dashboard shows statuses for ongoing, short-, medium-, and long-term efforts. The library is specifically committed to expanding collection and processing of archival collections that represent the diversity of the Carnegie Mellon University community.

Then there is personal and professional accountability. In 2020, several working groups representing the cataloging professional communities of the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom were established to develop a set of cataloging ethics “that provide an intentional decision-making framework for those who work in cataloging or metadata positions.”⁵⁰ In January 2021, a final version was published⁵¹ and subsequently has been endorsed by many professional organizations, like ALA Core. This code of ethics was developed in response to a direct call from the community for power-holding institutions to establish clear guidance on how to better conduct, evaluate, and be accountable for their contributions through a just and equitable lens.

Power-Holding Institutions and Their Responsibilities in This Work

In undertaking this project, OCLC acknowledges its significant role in the stewardship of library metadata. OCLC provides infrastructure that allows libraries to describe, build, and share collections. Convening participants were forthright about sharing advice, dreams, and desires, which included the need for institutions to change their approach to metadata infrastructure and workflow processes. The advice and insights gathered from this project and the convening can be applied to OCLC as well as to other power-holding institutions in this landscape, like national libraries, regional collaboratives, standards bodies, and professional organizations.

All organizations hold power, and that power may change depending on the context in which the organization is operating.

Power-holding institutions have a large footprint on the landscape because of budget, prestige, or control of infrastructure or necessary resources. However, size of budget, the number of staff, or depth of collections may not be an indicator of the amount of power an organization has to either effect change or maintain the *status quo*. All organizations hold power, and that power may change depending on the context in which the organization is operating.

Libraries and archives often operate within a larger environment: a university setting, museum network, consortia, or local government. This context can impact the degree and speed by which

a library or archive can address reparative description work. For example, a national library may be perceived as holding a significant amount of power in the context of description and the library ecosystem because it controls key aspects of bibliographic infrastructure. At the same time, that institution may have very limited power in determining budget, resource allocation, or mandated goals when examined within the context of the larger government ecosystem.

No matter the context, the library and archives user community and field professionals are advocating for change at an organizational level. Private and public funders are signaling the increased importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion with grant requirements⁵² and enquiries regarding demographic makeup of grantee organizations and their boards. Cultural and educational institutions are devoting resources to staff readiness, public programming, and organizational audits. All of these factors signal an expectation that library organizations devote resources to equity work, and specifically to reparative and inclusive descriptive work.⁵³

In the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening evaluation survey, participants indicated a willingness to continue working with power-holding institutions who are service providers on reparative and inclusive metadata description projects in the future. When asked to rate individual confidence that these institutions will work toward inclusive metadata description by changing policies, altering workflows, relinquishing power, and/or re-distributing resources, 25% strongly agreed, 33.3% agreed, 33.3% were neutral, and 8% disagreed. The high number of those with neutral opinions and those with less confidence demonstrates the considerable trust-building work that power-holding institutions need to do to build confidence that change will occur.⁵⁴

Power-holding institutions can remedy this ambivalence by committing to and being transparent about advancing reparative description work. Publishing product and policy road maps with key deliverables, or other types of key performance indicators, is one way to communicate organizational commitment to advancing racial equity in general. One convening participant suggested that power-holding institutions should “freely acknowledge that [organizations like OCLC] play a role and externalize plans for improvements (and benchmarks for reaching goals, even if they miss the benchmarks.)”⁵⁵

The high number of those with neutral opinions and those with less confidence demonstrates the considerable trust-building work that power-holding institutions need to do to build confidence that change will occur.

Below are other examples of the types of action that power-holding institutions can take to increase trust with communities and signal a commitment to reparative descriptive work in the near, mid-range, and long term.

- Redefine the notion of authority to recognize community terms as equally authoritative; it is a further benefit if these terms can be used widely and supported across libraries and archives.
- Establish transparent feedback loops for community contributions.

- Create diverse and inclusive working groups across all product lines, discussion forums, and governance bodies.
- Lower barriers like cost to training and professional development activities and collaborative opportunities.
- Develop inclusive language auditing tools similar to accessibility auditing tools used for documents and presentations.
- Develop collection analysis tools to determine future collection development, management, and retention decisions that decenter whiteness.
- Prioritize collections processing to increase accessible content by and about Indigenous and minority communities in consultation with those represented communities.
- Re-examine and adjust fee structures for communities or organizations who either are comprised of minoritized communities or who serve minority communities.
- Lend development and financial resources to support the next phase of reparative description grant writing and project design. This places power-holding institutions in an organizing role that supports community networks and field-building activities.

When institutions make statements regarding equity, diversity, and inclusion work, it is up to individuals to achieve the goals and actualize real systemic change. People in leadership positions need to set the tone by clearly articulating organizational priorities and expectations for team members as well as navigating risk management scenarios, like how to manage negative reactions from the public, press, or potential donors.

Middle managers will be required to provide data, work plans, and manage expectations around the pace of sustainable change. They also need to be responsible for the health and wellness of staff taking on reparative work, sustaining efforts by uplifting and celebrating the small milestones as robustly as they celebrate large transformations. Now is the time for compassionate, empathetic, and vulnerable leadership.

Passionate practitioners are urged to look for small things they can do that feed into the larger ecosystem. Examples include starting or participating in a discussion group or asking for equity, diversity, and inclusion goals to be put into their individual annual development plan.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Organizations like libraries and archives are built to endure. Their structures are, by nature and design, slower to shift course. But change is afoot to support a more just and less harmful reimagined future that is better for everyone. Inspired activity reflected in emerging reparative and anti-racist descriptive practices is largely due to the dedication and actions of passionate individuals often working within a small, informal network of similarly minded peers. Looking across the range and types of activities that are emerging, there is strong evidence that these practices are gaining more attention and support. But more is needed to help these practices grow and be sustained.

There are many pathways that future efforts toward reimagining descriptive workflows can be cultivated and supported:

- Examining other aspects of harmful language, including regional differences
- Exploring technological solutions to scale reparative metadata work
- Defining the personnel implications of reparative description

This project benefited from the wisdom of many who have been active in this space for some time. Readers may be approaching the ideas shared in this report with varying degrees of experience in reparative descriptive work; for some, this may seem like a radical departure in the field, while for others, this may seem like business as usual, or even remedial advice.

We hope that readers will reflect on where they are now and where our organizations and profession might be together in the future. Readers can act, leveraging their own power and capacity for change. What actions can you take to move these issues forward? How can the organization that you work for commit to change?

The Reimagine Descriptive Workflows project sought to be a next step in scaling reparative and inclusive metadata work by providing a means to connect beyond organizational boundaries and professional silos, seeding a community of practice, and raising up exemplary reparative work.

The level of work and effort outlined in this report is far reaching and even daunting. It can be difficult, as an individual, to see that the efforts of a single person, or even a single organization, will make a difference. But time and time again, Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening participants, interviewees, and the project advisory group reported that all work starts small, cumulative effort does have an impact, and even small achievements should be celebrated. But the celebration isn't the end of our work; it just marks another opportunity to contribute, another starting line. It is the fuel of future work.

APPENDIX 1: IMPLEMENTING CHANGE—EXERCISES TO GUIDE YOUR WORK

A result of the three-day convening was the distillation of 11 design challenges. These design challenge prompts are provided here as a tool that can be used to guide local conversations and action plans.

Before you begin these conversations, we recommend establishing norms and structuring the activities in a way that helps establish trust between participants and facilitators.

In the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening, guides established meeting norms that were reviewed as part of each day's opening practice. We checked in with participants to see if any changes needed to be made or additional information was required.

There are many good models of community norms, including the ones from AORTA (See: "Safer Space Policy/Community Agreements." The Anti-Oppression Network. <https://theantioppressionnetwork.com/resources/saferspacepolicy>; AORTA: Anti-Oppression Resource & Training Alliance. <https://aorta.coop>). For the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows convening, we used the following:

- Share the space, step forward/step back
- Listen and share bravely
- Listen for understanding
- Sense and speak your feelings
- Use "I" statements
- Discomfort is not the same as harm
- No alphabet soup (avoid acronyms)
- Be kind to yourself and others
- Take care of your needs
- Feel free to add others in your group

Cultivating Communities

STOP AND LEARN (*CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITIES*)

We're trying to slow down and involve communities in our workflows in equitable ways within a cataloging culture that pushes us to speed up and to spend and value time / resource in ways that can be at odds with slowing down and equitable collaboration.

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions for / support a move toward a cataloging culture that demonstrably values community engagement by making it accepted and even expected to slow down and invest our time and money in this way?

ARE WE DONE YET?

We're trying to catalog and describe a world that is dynamic, fluid, complex, and evolving over time in a cataloging culture that rewards the singular, definitive, and static.

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions for / support a move toward a cataloging culture that embraces the long-term view, valuing and rewarding evolution, deepening, enrichment, and progress over the concept of “complete”?

Nurturing the Network

LIBERATING THE LIBERATORS

There are pockets of the future in the present in smaller institutions and in individuals who are pioneering just, anti-oppressive approaches, but they are often hampered by scale, visibility, recognition, and reward.

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions / support the growth and progress of our system liberators to help them to create and scale the changes and cultures we need to transform us?

CONNECTED ABUNDANCE

We’re trying to change a huge legacy system often in our silos, in isolation, experiencing scarcity and without the clout of a network of others also making strides in the fight.

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions / support the growth of a thriving and resilient network of people, groups, and organizations sharing the energy, bravery, resource, ideas, information, and rest needed for the sector to transform?

COMMON DEFINITIONS

We are trying to work toward a just, equitable, anti-racist, anti-oppressive approach, but are we working within a collective understanding of what this means and should/could look like in the sector?

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions for / support the creation of shared visions and definitions of ‘good’ held by those working toward just description?

Radical Reimagining

THIRD HORIZON

We’re trying to create just, equitable, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive descriptions within a structure and worldview of describing that is conceptually unjust, inequitable, racist, and oppressive.

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions for / support a radical rethink of the very concept of cataloging and metadata description to lay the foundations for an approach that will better serve us for the next 200 years?

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

We have been and will be trying to create just metadata description across multiple generations. We are currently riding a wave of socio-political interest and prioritization that may or may not last.

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions for / support the foundations for a resilient (anti-fragile) system of actors and activity pushing toward just metadata description that will be able to survive the generation to come?

CONTEXT

We are trying to redress hundreds of years of white supremacist colonial describing at scale in a system that is judged and valued on the legacy descriptions and language we can still see right now.

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions for / support a move toward a mutuality of understanding about where we are in the journey and what road is left ahead?

Future Foundations

CHANGE CULTURE

We're often trying to make changes within organizational structures and cultures that can feel resistant or challenging to change.

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions for / support individuals, teams, and collectives to help shape and reshape the cultures of our core institutions to ready them for this long and hard period of change?

POWER TO CHANGE

We're trying to change a huge legacy system in our own ways but many of us in our work, teams, institutions, and sector do not feel we have the power and agency to make the necessary change.

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions / support the growth of a sector where everyone feels the power and agency to drive forward the necessary change?

FEEDBACK CULTURE

We're trying to create just metadata description in a culture that doesn't currently prioritize, demand, embrace, or leave space for external feedback.

Opportunity: How might we create the conditions for / support a move toward a cataloging culture that demands, priorities, and creates room for external / community feedback?

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NOTES

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- **NISO workshop series in 2021 on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA):**
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For more information about our work related to Reimagine
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