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Decolonizing your library: metadata that empowers

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Decolonizing your library: metadata that empowers

Abstract

This article explores the impetus, progress, and challenges encountered in developing and managing a library-wide decolonial metadata project at Florida International University (FIU) Libraries. The goal of this initiative is to develop inclusive metadata within our digital collections and finding aids that represent the communities we serve and to develop a metadata remediation plan that ameliorates the harm done by antiquated language. In thinking about the current metadata in our collections, we are engaging a post-colonial mindset that incorporates methods of coping with the ongoing oppression of vulnerable communities. In contrast, our metadata analysis and remediation process is focused on decolonial analysis that actively engages us in revealing and dismantling the cultural vocabularies that maintain colonial power hierarchies. This article discusses these different approaches and shares the authors' approach to evaluating digital collections.

Introduction: Decolonial and reparative metadata practices

The first section of this article discusses the challenges in recognizing and locating inappropriate and harmful metadata in the FIU digital repository and the development of a thesaurus. We also include a discussion on our philosophical approach to a reparative practice. Finally, the first section briefly outlines the steps taken towards a library-wide equitable metadata initiative. The second section of the article explores the firsthand experience of the Special collections librarian in creating both equitable metadata and reparative metadata for archives and finding aids and discusses their priorities in creating anti-colonial metadata.

Neutrality and partiality

A decolonial metadata practice is one aimed at creating inclusive metadata that comes from a place of respect for the original creators and their unique experiences as well as respect for the artifact itself. Decolonial metadata de-centers previous perspectives that failed to respect this diversity. Historically, librarians and archivists approached their metadata practice from a place of neutrality, especially in relation to preservation. The goal has been to preserve the artifact and accompanying information in its original form so as not to introduce partiality or bias. Likewise, many information programs in library and museum studies have also taught metadata from this neutral point of view, focusing on an untouched version of both the artifact and accompanying metadata. Itza Carbajal writes that “[this] practice of metadata creation has been tackled without much forethought, concern, or vision for its liberatory or restorative potential, likely a result of metadata serving solely as a management tool for the growing amount of data” (Carbajal, Current anti-colonial approaches to metadata require that we move away from neutrality and work in a space that includes partiality. The ethical practice of inclusive and reparative metadata is dependent on our ability to recognize harmful colonial language and perspectives in our artifacts and introduce new descriptive terminology. And this recognition is a form of partiality that allows us to make an ethical decision that says “this description and choice of terminology reflects a colonial mindset that harms others”. This author argues that archivists, librarians and catalogers must work in a liminal space between neutrality and partiality to be successful.

Librarians and archivists regularly encounter descriptions such as, “450,000 illegal aliens live and work in the city of Miami”. When we come across such phrases in our collections, we need to employ enough partiality to recognize the harmful language choices and still retain enough neutrality to replace the language with something more inclusive; “450,000 non-citizens live and work in the city of Miami”. In California, the approved language would be “unauthorized workers”. It is up to those of us creating the metadata and including artifacts in our collections to make these inclusive and ethical terminology choices that no longer reflect the colonial roots from which our institutions likely come.

The Equitable Metadata Initiative at FIU

The first step in developing our equitable metadata initiative at FIU was to develop a thesaurus of terminology we knew we needed to look for. Our thesaurus includes several sections:

- Ableist
- Ageist
- History & Society
- Homophobic
- Laudatory
- Racist
- Sexist
- Religious discrimination

These categories allowed us to think as broadly as possible and through collection scans using the terms included in each category, we were able to successfully identify records that need reparative work while adding to the thesaurus as needed. In realizing that reparative work would require a significant time commitment from staff in various departments of the library, our next step was to meet with each of these departments. In our meetings, faculty and staff were able to express their concerns with the content in the collections they managed. Issues such as the use of diacritical marks which were not recognized or searchable in the repository came to light from these meetings. The inability to correctly spell a person’s name represents yet another form of marginalizing people and cultures whose names do not reflect the historically dominant culture. Our developers have since resolved this issue and diacritics no longer limit the discoverability of the collections. The main concern that came from our meetings was the fact that this type of reparative metadata practice requires a significant time commitment, which is only exacerbated by short staffing concerns. Some departments, while wholly committed to this process, doubted their ability to scan their collections looking for missing, harmful, and inappropriate metadata with their current workloads. In this case, departments are going forward by creating equitable metadata and doing scans for reparative metadata as time allows.

Recognizing harmful metadata

While it may be relatively straightforward to develop a thesaurus of colonial and anti-colonial replacement terminology, liberatory metadata requires more thought than simply identifying undesirable descriptive choices. It includes recognizing harmful or exclusive language across an entire collection.

Laudatory language

One way we can create reparative metadata and introduce equity into our practice is to notice the laudatory language that may have been applied to historic figures but not applied to those with equal accomplishments but from a marginalized population. In some cases, such individuals may have been equally noteworthy if not for systemic racism and misogyny that dominated the cultural milieu.

An entry about Thomas Edison might include laudatory language as seen below:

- "Thomas Edison was the remarkable/noteworthy/esteemed inventor of the light bulb."

While his Black counterpart, without whom the lightbulb would not have been successful, has neither the name recognition nor the laudatory language applied to his entry.

- "Lewis Latimer was the inventor of a long-lasting filament for the light bulb."

We are presented with two choices, either apply the same laudatory language to both individuals or remove it for both people. Either choice could presumably be appropriate, but in the interest of avoiding unconscious bias, we recommend removing unnecessary laudatory language from such records and leaving estimations of greatness to the historians.

Erasure

Erasure can appear in several different forms. It can be as simple as failing to name an individual in a photograph, failing to describe their existence in a photo, or giving them a name that reflects their male counterpart rather than them; a practice that was commonly employed to show male ownership of women.



In a thorough scan of our digital collections at FIU, the following example of erasure was found. The metadata for this image reads: "An unidentified man rides in a carriage drawn by a black horse in front of a large house".

In this example, the rider, a white man was mentioned, the carriage, house, and the horse are all described but the Black coachman did not receive a mention, much less a description of any sort. These records present a unique challenge since

it is difficult to search for something that isn't there to begin with. A search for Black or Black man would not have brought us to this record. This is an example of how an in-depth knowledge of what is held in a collection is imperative to developing a robust reparative and anti-colonial collection. Ideally, we would like to include the names of both men present in the photograph, however, with or without names we can still move forward with an equitable description of this scene in our reparative metadata practice.

Another common issue for many collections, including ours, was the naming of women by using their husband's name only (Mrs. John Smith) or simply not bothering to identify women in photographs at all. These records are often easier to find since a search for "women/woman" will often pull up the record. However, women also commonly suffer the invisibility fate of the coachman in the previous example. At FIU, we have been in discussion with various library departments about how best to engage our community in identifying the individuals in our collections that currently lack a name. We are exploring options that involve our community partners and working to help them take an active role in engaging with the collections. It is through these types of conscious metadata practices that we can finally include, on a level playing field, those that have been marginalized, forgotten and purposely ignored throughout history.

Creating Finding Aids: Opportunities and Challenges to Decolonize the Archives

When talking about the role archivists have in the processing of collections, Douglas (2016), recognizes that a processing archivist influences the final shape and representation of an archival finds. This theory breaks with the traditional descriptive standards that support the idea that archivists should have a passive and neutral voice when processing the collections. In the same article, Douglas states that archivists have presented themselves as neutral, even trying to downplay or hide their roles in shaping the archives. However, recent racial and social movements have brought to light the biases and influence that archivists insert into each step of the archival process including acquiring, accessioning, describing, providing access and publishing the finding aids. We will focus on the progress and challenges of applying a post-colonial mindset that incorporates methods of coping with the ongoing oppression of vulnerable communities and developing a metadata remediation plan that ameliorates the harm done by antiquated language in finding aids.

As a starting point to decolonizing finding aids, the FIU Special Collections Department prioritized two principles.

- Remove or re-describe colonial language that marginalizes ethnicities, minorities, and genders.
- Prioritize description in the language of the creator, materials, and users of the collection

Case Study: Remove or re-describe colonial language that marginalizes ethnicities, minorities, and genders.

The **Abril Lamarque Collection** dates from 1904-2002. The collection documents the life and career of Cuban-born cartoonist, designer, illustrator, graphic artist, caricaturist, and art director Abril Lamarque (1904-1999) through printed materials, scrapbooks, writings, and original artwork. While processing the collection, the archivists found photographs taken after the aftermath of the earthquake in Santiago de Cuba in 1932. The photographs included written and printed descriptions on the back side. One photograph included a newspaper clipping with the caption: "Pascual Lozada es el "lisiado" que aparece en carrito, rodeado de sus familiares. El terremoto le echó encima una pared que se derrumbó en su residencia de la calle D número 13 en Sueño, escapando milagrosamente con vida. Sufrió una herida en el cuello." (Translated into English: Pascual Lozada is the cripple who appears in a cart, surrounded by his relatives. The earthquake hit him with a wall that collapsed in his residence on Calle "D" number 13 in Sueño, miraculously escaping with his life. He suffered a neck injury.)

This caption reflects the colonial wording and representation of a disabled person. In this case, because the word was used in a primary source – a newspaper caption - the archivists decided to include the original colonial word in the translation description for historical context while addressing the harmful language by creating and applying a statement to address the harmful language used in its content. In addition, when creating subject/keywords for the collection, we used the terms recommended by the National Disability Authority (NDA) which endorses to use the term “Disabled people/people with disabilities instead of the disabled”. To reflect our commitment to transparency and to communicate that we had an active role in describing collections we created the following statement which we included in the Finding Aid and digital collections:

Please note: Transcriptions of handwritten notes on photographs in the collection and their English translations have been provided for context. This text may reflect biases and prejudices or terms that are outdated, offensive or insensitive.

Case Study: Prioritize description in the language of the creator, materials, and users of the collection.

The Julián Peláez del Pozo Papers contains personal and professional documents related to Julián Peláez del Pozo, a Spanish Magistrate who was assigned to the Overseas Courts in Cuba and Puerto Rico during the 19th century. It compiles more than 200 hundred pages of documents related to different aspects of the court system applied by Spain in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Every document in the entire collection is written in Spanish.

Our ongoing conversations regarding inclusive metadata challenged us to think of ways to represent our community and give voice to the silenced. How were we being inclusive when we were silencing the community that created the documents? In this section, we focus on how the link between colonial language and archives is represented in our Finding Aid descriptions. We realized we were marginalizing the community represented in the collections and limiting their accessibility due to the language barriers. Archivists have an honored position when we describe a collection. We have an influence on the finding aids as we decide who to represent and identify, who is included and who is excluded from the descriptions which reflect inequalities in the archives. Archivist Armando Suarez uses the *Language Justice Toolkit* definition of language justice “... is about building and sustaining multilingual spaces in our organizations and social movements so that everyone’s voice can be heard both as an individual and as part of a diversity of communities and cultures. Valuing language justice means recognizing the social and political dimensions of language and language access, while working to dismantle language barriers, equalize power dynamics, and build strong communities for social and racial justice.” We agree with his conclusion that the language used in archival description of our collections is tied to the movement of decolonizing the archives. (Suarez) Prior the start of this project, the archivists at Special Collections had never publish finding aids in any other language than English, even when Spanish was the predominant language of the materials. The extent of description was a note on the Language of the Material.

Following this principle, we created a bilingual finding aid for the Julián Peláez del Pozo Papers. Our digital archives management tool does not provide extra fields for bilingual processing. The folder titles have been provided in Spanish while the collection and series level description are written in Spanish and English in the same field.

Julián Peláez del Pozo Papers

Item Identifier: SPC8070

Florida International University | Julián Peláez del Pozo Papers

Collection Overview Collection Organization Container Inventory

Scope and Contents

La colección contiene documentos personales y profesionales relacionados a Julián Peláez del Pozo, Magistrado español que sirvió en los tribunales de Ultramar en Cuba y Puerto Rico durante el siglo XIX. La colección recopila documentos personales y académicos de Julián Peláez del Pozo entre los que se encuentran su certificado de bautismo, diplomas y certificados de estudios realizados en la Universidad de Madrid. La colección también contiene una variedad de documentos relacionados con su carrera profesional y diferentes aspectos del sistema de tribunales de justicia aplicados por España en Cuba y Puerto Rico.

The collection contains personal and professional documents related to Julián Peláez del Pozo, a Spanish Magistrate who was assigned to the Overseas Courts in Cuba and Puerto Rico during the 19th century. The collection compiles personal and academic documents of Julián Peláez del Pozo, among which are his baptismal certificate, diplomas and certificates of studies carried out at the University of Madrid. The collection also contains a variety of documents related to his professional career and different aspects of the court system applied by Spain in Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Challenges and lessons learned

One of the challenges that affect decolonizing the archives is barriers to access. One of the most crucial aspects of access is the support from the institutions. Support should come in the way of funding for outreach and archivist training to preserve and make historical materials accessible to the community. By removing barriers to access, archivists and librarians can enhance their metadata by learning and incorporating local vocabularies into their practice. Finally, policies related to access need to be regularly reviewed and revised based on community and archivist/librarian needs.

Archivist bias

Banks (2019) argues that although archivists take their duty to provide access to their collections very seriously, some institutional repositories contain unprocessed, under-processed, or hidden collections. Some of the reasons for these “Hidden collections” are the lack of more accurate descriptions in the finding aids and the lack of multilingual finding aids. When an archivist is not interested in the subject or is not familiar with the collections a community’s historical materials can remain undiscovered and at risk of being underused by the community and researchers. Share transformative experiences with colleagues and scholars

Lack of training, subject knowledge, and language

Another challenge that affects the effort to decolonize the archives is the fact that archivists, especially the ones from small institutions, face a lack of training, expertise, and access to experts to aid in describing specific collections. With more access to training, archivists can enhance and increase the visibility of and access to materials in special collections. This issue may affect not only their ability to understand the materials, but also influence the information in the final finding aid. Libraries need to engage the community in order to enhance description and ask for feedback when necessary.

Ownership

Finally, the topic of ownership has been extensively debated in the past years. Oliff and Dill (2021) state

that because some community members may be reluctant to entrust their historical materials to institutional archives, their collections are potentially lost to future researchers. This issue brings tension between archival repositories and the community. Community members feel that they cannot make decisions concerning their own historical materials once they are already part of an archival institution. In addition, they feel that archivists misrepresent them when they describe the collections.

Conclusions

Start the conversation! Having discussion group meetings with departments in the FIU Libraries helped to identify biases and subjective language. These activities, including the use of the thesaurus, helped us evaluate the collections with a more conscious mentality. Our next steps are to engage the community in order to provide robust descriptions that are used by the creator individuals or communities and to preserve the original context for historical reasons with a statement of problematic and harmful language or content. This process is both ongoing and iterative. It is important to mention that the changes we have made are not perfect and they should not be considered a permanent solution, however, they are the beginning of a plan that should be regularly revisited and revised as language is fluid and ever evolving.

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