Applying IDEA Principles to Archiving

FOR MANY YEARS, classification systems were considered neutral; institutional archives were thought of as unbiased repositories of knowledge. In fact, these systems carried societal perceptions and viewpoints of the people who built them, effectively building in bias and harm into our library systems and creating narratives that centered white, European modes of thinking, and marginalized or erased others altogether. "When our narratives and our research collections exclude diverse experiences and histories of those who have been othered," Dean Lim explained in opening remarks of the panel "Centering Black Stories in the Archives," we end up with an "impoverished field" of study, in which "our diversity of thought and our understanding of who we are are damaged."

Interrogating systemic racism, bias, and inequity starts with us, which is why the Libraries have worked to apply IDEA principles (inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility) to our own work at UMD. Through internal reports, public forums, and systemic audits, UMD Libraries has been exploring how bias affects our work as librarians and forging a new path of information stewardship.

FINDING BIAS IN FINDING AIDS

One way the Libraries have reassessed their practices is through a finding aid audit performed by Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) in March 2020.

SCUA staff and students reviewed more than 1,000 finding aids for harmful and outdated language. The team focused on the Maryland & Historical Collections, which includes African American history, agriculture, business and labor history, family history and personal papers, military history, Maryland women's history, and more. They developed a plan to correct language and created guidelines for the conscious editing of finding aids.

The audit did not affect the content of the collection, but instead focused on language used by past archivists. Guided by the principles of "conscious editing," as well as emerging standards in archival descriptions, reviewers noted not just outdated or biased language, but whether or not enough context was given to a particular person, event, or narrative—for example, entries in which a person's history as an enslaver went unmentioned.

Librarians revised outdated language to terms communities use to describe themselves, used person-first language rather than describing someone by a single attribute, and better contextualized historic events.

FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTER

In November 2020, the Libraries held a virtual roundtable in coalition with the UMD English Department that brought together librarians, archivists, and scholars. The panel, "Centering Black Stories in the Archives," celebrated and expanded on anti-racist, Black-centered scholarly, curatorial, and archival practices.

University Archivist Lae'l Hughes-Watkins discussed her work to bring Black stories, especially those from higher ed institutions, from the margins to the center. She explained how she entered the world of libraries "to center my Blackness by re-exploring my past, redefining a present, and the possibility of a future that no longer forced me to view my own experience as a Black woman through a white gaze."

The panel brought out the many ways that traditional institutional archives have been lacking when it comes to Black stories. Scholars Aleia Brown (Assistant Director, African American History) and Zita Nunes (Associate Professor of English and Comparative Studies) discussed their research and their apprecia-

1,051 FINDING AIDS REVIEWED FOR HARMFUL LANGUAGE

ROUNDTABLE: CENTERING BLACK STORIES IN ARCHIVES

ANTIRACISM

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tion for Black archivists of the past, like Dorothy Porter. Brown discussed her research on Fannie Lee Chaney, the mother of slain civil rights activist James Chaney. Brown has traced her history through oral histories and interviews, as well as nontraditional archives sources like textiles and quilts. The histories of women like Chaney would be lost if we only relied on traditional institutional archives.

Many communities have done the work of archiving their own histories for decades because institutional archives did not deem it important. Joni Floyd, UMD Curator, shared tips for librarians who want to do community archiving work thoughtfully and responsibly (see page 24).

Despite racist, systemic ways that Black people have been locked out of traditional archives, today's Black scholars are creating new ways of story-telling and tenaciously seeking out the stories lovingly preserved by communities and archivists of the past.

> "SOCIAL JUSTICE ISN'T SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS OUTSIDE OUR INSTITUTIONS THAT WE SIMPLY RESPOND TO.
>
> IT'S PART OF EVERYTHING WE DO"

CRITICAL CATALOGING

In January 2021, members of Cataloging and Metadata Services (CMS)—Ben Bradley, Neil M. Frau-Cortes, Kathy Glennan, Beth Guay, Sarah Hovde, Emery Patterson—gave an all-Libraries presentation on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Considerations in Cataloging & Metadata.

The presentation included discussions on so-called "neutrality" in librarianship. The Library of Congress Classification system, which was developed in the early 1900s, centered white men and a U.S.-centric worldview. These biases were baked into the primary classification system for academic libraries.

We can still see these in our catalogs today. You won't find "LGBT" or "queer studies" in the current Library of Congress Catalog. Instead, "homosexuality" is listed alongside the categories of sexual deviancy. Although contemporary scholars will find a variety of modern, progressive, and queer-friendly texts along the shelves, what message does it send that they are grouped within "deviancy"? Librarians and information professionals
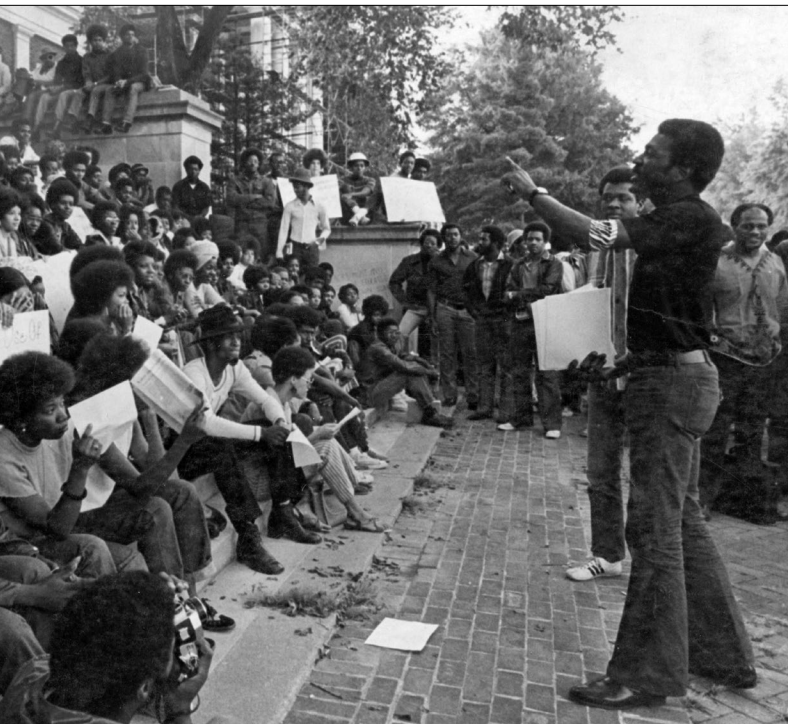
This graphic used by the Libraries and the English Department to promote "Centering Black Stories in Archives" features a photo from our University Archives of a campus protest from the early 1970s.

should consider how this kind of classification affects our users or informs their work as they browse the shelves.

CMS also formed an internal Cataloguing Code of Ethics Review Team, who identified and categorized the statements from the international Cataloguing Code of Ethics into actionable discussion points and developed recommendations for CMS and the Libraries as a whole.

Resolving DEI problems is a process. Change is constant, and new discourse is being published and discussed every day. A guiding principle of the finding aid audit was that it is an iterative project, meaning the work is never "finished," and it can always be further revised.

Social justice isn't something that happens outside our institutions that we simply respond to. It's part of everything we do. Interrogating systemic racism, bias, and inequity starts with us, which is why the Libraries have worked to apply DEI principles to our own shelves, our own systems. "Archivists and memory workers are storytellers," said Hughes-Watkins, "and what are the stories that we tell?"

Critically Archiving

THESE CONSCIOUS-EDITING guidelines helped inform the finding aid audit and are now written into SCUA's archival processing manual.

- **DESCRIBE** communities as they describe themselves. Research and consult communities and community-created guides and resources to ensure the language you are using is used by those in the community you are describing.

- **TAKE INTO ACCOUNT** different perspectives of stakeholders. When describing, ask yourself questions about how different people, such as the record creator, the subject(s) of the record, the community, and the user, would read and respond to the language. Ensure that you are being respectful and cognizant of these different stakeholders.

- **DISCLOSE** your own positionality and be self-reflective. Acknowledging your own position and biases in the world allows for readers and researchers to be aware of who is doing the work and what biases might impact the description.

- **BE TRANSPARENT.** Stating why you are doing the work of redescribing, acknowledging past issues, taking institutional and personal accountability for the work. Mistakes have been made and will continue to be made, but you are actively working to improve and are open to criticism and changes in practice.

- **CONTINUE TO** read, research, and stay informed on changes of description. This work is a continuous process. Be vigilant in ensuring you are describing communities and populations in the way they want to be described and continue to educate yourself on best practices for cultural humility work.