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# Ethical and Anti-Oppressive Metadata: A Collaboration Between Catalogers and Archivists at George Mason University Libraries

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## Abstract

Systems of library and archival resource description have historically reinforced the societal power structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and cis-heteronormativity. Following the framework of critical librarianship and acknowledging our positionality as predominately white departments, George Mason University Libraries' Metadata Services (MS) and Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) have been engaging in a variety of projects of reparative resource description. To discuss points of collaboration between the two departments, the Task Force for Ethical and Anti-Oppressive Metadata (TEAM) was formed, consisting of staff and faculty members from both groups who work with resource description. Although the departments have a history of collaboration, TEAM has provided us an opportunity to work together in a holistic way, giving us a space for learning, exchanging ideas, and sharing insights and resources. The particular focus of this group has been the identification of existing harmful and biased language in resource description and the exploration and installment of alternatives.

In this Field Report we demonstrate how MS and SCRC have been collaboratively engaging in reparative description within the university libraries, discuss our theoretical framework, approach its impact outside of the library, and share examples of ongoing projects. This report provides a model for collaborative work that addresses and interrupts the perpetuation of harm in resource description.

## Keywords

reparative metadata, critical cataloging, antiracism, collaboration

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*From the Field*

# Ethical and Anti-Oppressive Metadata: A Collaboration Between Catalogers and Archivists at George Mason University Libraries

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**Abstract**

Systems of library and archival resource description have historically reinforced the societal power structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and cis-heteronormativity. Following the framework of critical librarianship and acknowledging our positionality as predominately white departments, George Mason University Libraries' Metadata Services (MS) and Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) have been engaging in a variety of projects of reparative resource description. To discuss points of collaboration between the two departments, the Task Force for Ethical and Anti-Oppressive Metadata (TEAM) was formed, consisting of staff and faculty members from both groups who work with resource description. Although the departments have a history of collaboration, TEAM has provided us an opportunity to work together in a holistic way, giving us a space for learning, exchanging ideas, and sharing insights and resources. The particular focus of this group has been the identification of existing harmful and biased language in resource description and the exploration and installment of alternatives. In this Field Report we demonstrate how MS and SCRC have been collaboratively engaging in reparative description within the university libraries, discuss our theoretical framework, approach its impact outside of the library, and share examples of ongoing projects. This report provides a model for collaborative work that addresses and interrupts the perpetuation of harm in resource description.

## Introduction

Diversity has long been a core value of George Mason University (GMU).[1] Metadata Services (MS) and the Special Collection Research Center (SCRC) staff at GMU Libraries began discussing and addressing harmful language in their resource description in 2019. However, the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and many others in mid-2020 and the ensuing protests for racial justice caused us to reckon with our complacency and underscored the urgency of addressing the systematic oppression reflected in our metadata. This work was initiated by staff at the department level, but we were further emboldened by several initiatives from the new university president, Gregory Washington, that promoted his vision of making GMU a "national exemplar of anti-racism and inclusive excellence in action."[2] This university-level strategy has empowered various units in the University Libraries to tackle anti-racism and bias in their areas. For MS and the SCRC, this work has focused on ethical resource description that is mindful of the persons and events being described. While SCRC and MS regularly collaborate on smaller-scale, routine work such as creating catalog records for archival collections and rare books, this is the first time we have worked together on an ongoing project of this scale that questions and reimagines the fundamentals of our cross-departmental descriptive practices.

At the core of our work has been the notion of reparative description. The Society of American Archivists (SAA) defines reparative description as "remediation of practices or data that exclude, silence, harm, or mischaracterize marginalized people in the data created or used by archivists to identify or characterize archival resources."[3] Reparative description can apply to both archival description (i.e., finding aids) and traditional cataloging (i.e., MARC bibliographic records). Reparative description aligns with other reparative practices, including reparative archival collecting and processing.[4] We also have drawn from Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor's feminist archival theory and its ethics of care, as well as the notion of cultural humility.[5] These theories prioritize self-criticism, care for the subjects of records, and an attentiveness to power. This attentiveness to power and the human relations underpinning libraries and archives led us to consider the real harm that description could cause.

We are not alone in this work. Many other institutions are implementing individual plans and strategies to tackle reparative description. Dartmouth University is one of those institutions.[6] Famously in the field, students and librarians at Dartmouth University petitioned the Library of Congress to change the subject heading "illegal alien" that was used to describe non-citizens that had entered the United States without government authorization. Students led this fight after finding the subject heading to be both personally offensive and a misleading description of a large group of people. Their petition to change the subject heading began in 2014, but the Library of Congress did not announce plans to change the term until November 2021. Subject headings "aliens" and "illegal aliens" have now been replaced with "noncitizen" and "illegal immigration."[7]

Yale University's Reparative Archival Description Working Group (RAD) is another group doing similar work to ours. They are tasked with recommending new and updated practices and standards concerning description of archival materials. Our work has been partially inspired by their recommendations for removing and/or explaining the use of harmful language used in descriptions and in finding aids. Their guiding principles of cultural humility, slow archiving, dismantling white supremacy, transparency, iteration, and collaboration and consultation have

been inspiring to us and our work.[8]

## Task Force for Ethical and Anti-Oppressive Metadata (TEAM)

### Formation of TEAM

The impetus to form a working group devoted to reparative description arose from the subunit of Metadata Services dedicated to digital collections metadata. Comprised of a Metadata Librarian and a Metadata Specialist, this subunit works with the creation and transformation of metadata for the library's digital collections platforms. Currently, the library's digital collections are housed and made available across a variety of platforms, including DSpace, LUNA images, and Omeka. Metadata in these platforms differs slightly but follows a common Dublin Core schema. Metadata for digital objects is contributed to the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) via the Digital Virginia's hub network, and records from the institutional repository as well as finding aids appear in the library's Primo discovery layer. Since metadata travels between systems and shares aspects like controlled vocabularies, we strive to standardize the use of metadata across these diverse systems.

Before mid-2020, MS and SCRC mostly pursued antiracist and reparative projects independently. To encourage information-sharing and standardization of different projects, the Metadata Librarian suggested the creation of an informal working group. The Task Force for Ethical and Anti-Oppressive Metadata (TEAM) was initiated with eight members, including the Metadata Librarian, Metadata Specialist, two Cataloging Librarians from MS, two Archivists from SCRC, and the heads of both of those departments. As a volunteer group it is open to additional membership, including those from other departments. The group benefits from the expertise of both catalogers and archivists, who

share common concerns about ethics and harmful language despite approaching resource description differently. TEAM meets regularly and shares resources through the Microsoft Teams platform. This group has strengthened the relationship between MS and SCRC and provides a space for discussions of trends in critical librarianship and reparative description practices at other institutions.

### Benefits and Challenges of Collaboration

The main benefits of a departmental collaboration through TEAM have included providing a forum to share different views and ideas, as well as reviewing existing workflows, knowledge, experience, and resources. Recognizing that the demography of our group is mostly white, we have been careful with representing various voices and views in our reparative metadata efforts. Having extra sets of eyes and hands from other departments has been key to keeping our work inclusive, reducing the risks of making mistakes, being efficient, and avoiding repetitive work. Additionally, by making this reparative work an interdepartmental project, we have been able to stay focused on the bigger picture, rather than individually working on small projects. Furthermore, TEAM has fostered the opportunity to work with colleagues with whom we might otherwise not work closely or frequently. It is worth noting that having shared goals also has helped develop a sense of unity and solidarity, which has been invaluable especially during reduced in-person contact during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A few major challenges of this collaboration have included difficulties in coming to a decision, scheduling meetings, and delegating work. While different ideas and views have been important to keeping the team and our work more inclusive, they have also created tension and frustration, making it harder for the entire group to come to a decision in which everyone is satisfied and in agreement. Establishing clear goals

and action items has helped guide conversations to stay focused on our main, shared goals. Another challenge has been scheduling meetings. During the pandemic, with many people working remotely, sometimes in different time zones, choosing a time for a meeting has been extremely difficult. Thanks to Zoom, we've been able to record meetings for those who were unable to attend, and we stay connected via Microsoft Teams and emails.

Delegating work has been another challenge. As a volunteer committee, there is no hierarchy and thus it's up to the individuals to decide the type and the amount of work they would like to do. Unless everyone actively takes on tasks on their own initiative, it may take a while to accomplish goals. Some of the tasks have been taken voluntarily, like the position of "leader," but a sense of discontent can grow even within an informal group if tasks are unevenly delegated and a few people are visibly doing more work than other members.

In her article, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," feminist activist Jo Freeman recognizes the complicated, fragile nature of an informal group where its actions and successes completely rely on various individuals' interests and sense of responsibility.[9] Freeman claims "[t]hose who are concerned with maintaining their influence will usually try to be responsible" because "informal structures have no obligation to be responsible to the group at large." While the lack of hierarchy encourages members to proactively initiate and engage in projects, there remains a question of responsibility. For an informal group to work effectively, she continues, it needs a structure that is "task-oriented, relatively small, and homogeneous," as well as a condition where a high degree of communication exists between members, and specialized skill sets are not required for anyone to jump in and do the work.

We disagree that a group needs to be homogeneous to be successful. On the contrary, given our effort to reflect many voices in our work, we strive to keep our team as diverse and inclusive as possible. We do, however, recognize the need for structure in our informal group to better "establish its priorities, articulate its goals, and pursue its objectives in a coordinated fashion." Freeman calls it "democratic structuring" and lists the following as essential criteria for organizing a healthy working group: 1) Delegation of specific authority to specific individuals for specific tasks; 2) Condition that the group always has control over individuals in the position of authority; 3) Wide, reasonable distribution of authority; 4) Rotation of tasks and responsibility; 5) Rational and fair allocation of tasks; 6) Frequent diffusion of information; and 7) Equal access to resources. TEAM is in an early stage, and we are beginning to discuss how we can best function as a task group with an informal democratic structure.

Currently MS and SCRC are working on several projects related to reparative description, including an audit of harmful language in finding aids, classification revisions, and ethical name authority policies. By collaborating on these projects through TEAM, we benefit from the expertise of both catalogers and archivists. The projects we discuss in the next section are just the beginning of a process that will evolve as TEAM members continue to learn from each other, from peers at other libraries and archives, and from the diverse communities whose lives are reflected in the resources we steward.

**Projects**

*Finding Aid Audit*

Reparative description efforts in the special collections and archives community at large inspired our project to review and revise description of unpublished SCRC manuscripts and uni-

versity archives material. We have been particularly influenced by the work of Princeton University as described by Kelly Bolding in her presentation "Reparative Processing: A Case Study in Auditing Legacy Description for Racism."[10] To broaden our understanding of this work in the archival world, we reached out to Bolding in August 2020, and she generously provided us with files of the lexicon and scripts used at Princeton to audit archival finding aids. In late Summer 2020 through early Winter 2021, we also consulted with special collections staff at the University of Virginia and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on their respective reparative description projects to inform the planning and implementation of our own work.[11]

The initial goal of this project has been to review SCRC's ArchivesSpace database records that describe our manuscript and archival collections for problematic or offensive language. SCRC staff uses these ArchivesSpace records to export XML files that we transform into the finding aids that researchers use to find archival material in our repository. MS has been a key partner with SCRC in the discussions and planning regarding reparative description in finding aids, particularly conversations around establishing MS staff members have professional expertise in description and controlled vocabularies that exceed or complement that of SCRC staff, but they also bring valuable additional personal perspectives to the work. In November 2020, we completed our draft lexicon of terms to search for, and we finished auditing our ArchivesSpace records in December 2021. In Spring 2022, MS and SCRC will work together to determine how to revise our finding aids to address the harmful description that we identified during the audit phase. During this phase, we will use Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's *Anti-Racist Description Resources* to guide our revisions.[12]

*Reparative Metadata for Digital Collections*

In addition to the finding aids, MS and SCRC has taken a closer look at the digital collections housed on the LUNA images platform. We decided that the "Broadsides" collection of student newspaper photographs would be an excellent starting point for our reparative description work. Beginning in 2020, several different components of the metadata fields were examined including the titles and summary statements. Many of the titles were composed by the creators of the collection, which made altering the statements more complicated than summary statements composed by archivists as cataloging standards discourage altering transcribed titles. We are currently keeping a running list of problematic titles that still need to be evaluated.

There were a few specific aspects of the summary statements that we decided to change. We removed binary gender pronouns, eliminated unnecessary racial terms, and applied people-first language. For example, when encountering the word "man" staff changed it to "person." Regarding overly general terms for individuals, such as "African" or "Asian," the terms were changed to the specific nation of origin of the photograph's subject or excluded completely if deemed non-essential to the description of the photograph. When using people-first language, for instance, staff changed terms such as "disabled people" to "people with a disability" and "homeless person" to "person facing homelessness." As of December 2021, we are still editing this collection's metadata and so these changes have not yet appeared in the discovery interface.

We also plan to address harmful subject headings in digital collections by making use of domain-specific controlled vocabularies like Homosaurus and creating local alternatives to the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) that we normally use. This work has only just begun and is complicated by the difficulty of making local headings work in our various systems. Ideally these local subject headings will be

used in our catalog, our finding aids, and our digital collections.

*Revision of Harmful Classification*

Another project undertaken by MS has been the reclassification of print materials assigned with call numbers containing the .N Cutter number that refers to the long-deprecated LCSH heading "Negroes." Although this language is harmful and outdated, it remains in the LC Classification (LCC) schedules.[13] In June of 2020, we undertook the project of changing this Cutter number in our collections by creating mapping from the existing LCC schedules. The Metadata Librarian manually searched LCC for instances of the .N Cutter, since it appears irregularly and with varying digits throughout the classification schedules. A decision was made to replace .N in our catalog with .B for "Black people" rather than .A for "African Americans," as the former is more inclusive and accurate.

Around 2,000 items were found in the library's collection containing this Cutter number. We are currently in the process of relabeling and changing the catalog records for these items, but this is going slower than anticipated due to staffing shortages from the COVID-19 pandemic. We have also shared the mapping spreadsheet on the Cataloging Lab website to facilitate use or modification by other libraries.[14] We are currently exploring how these local call numbers might be added to records in OCLC's database; for now, they only appear in holdings records in our local catalog. In the future, we would also like to explore other harmful areas of the LC Classification that could be revised.

*Ethical Name Authorities*

As one of our other reparative metadata efforts, the MS team reviewed our past practices and created a local Name Authority Record Policy for Personal Names, focused on ensuring the privacy and safety of creators, especially

transgender authors and zine artists. This departmental collaborative effort started in the summer of 2019 when we began participating in the Washington Research Library Consortium (WRLC) NACO/BIBCO funnel.[15] In reviewing and discussing our newly created or upgraded name authority records, we came across a few situations where we would question an existing policy and practice which was not mindful of the privacy of those individuals described. As we catalog resources for SCRC's zines, micro-comics, and artists' books collections, we are particularly concerned and disagree with the way in which common NACO practices have handled deadnames, pseudonyms, gender, and racial descriptions. Although an authority record is not supposed to be a person's biography, we found the current NACO guidelines (with updates from Resource Description and Access (RDA), 2010) focus on gathering information about a person, potentially disregarding the person's privacy and safety. Our major concern is the possible dissemination of one's private information without consent. As participants of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) Wikidata pilot project, in 2021 we shared our NACO records for interviewees of the SCRC's Works Progress Administration Oral Histories Collection with Wikidata and experienced first-hand how the data is changed and enhanced by other Wikidata contributors and bots. We do not want to contribute to distributing individuals' personal information in the name of authority control. Group discussions on chapters from *Ethical Questions in Name Authorities*, edited by Jane Sandberg also gave us more insights on current name authority issues.[16] These readings have made us question the current practice even more and have urged us to create our own policy that is mindful of and does not do any harm to people for whom we are creating records.

In December 2020, we drafted a local Name Authority Record Policy for Personal Names. Being

aware that the information we enter in the Library of Congress Name Authority File will be visible, viral, and searchable by everyone, our NACO policy consciously excludes information that is personal and not necessary to disambiguate persons in the catalog. As Table 1 shows below, our policy follows NACO standards but allows us to engage in more conscious cataloging, zentered around the persons and their privacy, and anticipating the consequences of our work.

**Table 1. Snapshot of Local NACO Record Policy for Personal Names at GMU Libraries**

| | MARC Fields |
|---|---|
| **Required** | 100 (Personal Name Heading)<br>670 (Source Data Found)<br>046 (Coded Dates) [Only if it's already in the record or permission is given by the person] |
| **Handle with care** | 372 (Field of Activity)<br>374 (Occupation)<br>377 (Associated Language)<br>400 (*See from* Personal Name)/500 (*See also* Personal Name) |
| **Excluded** | 371 (Address)<br>375 (Gender) |

- **Birth/death dates**: get a consent from the person if possible; otherwise differentiate names by profession, or fuller name of form.
- **Dead names**: do not add, reveal, or link to dead names (unless permission is given by the person).
- **Pseudonyms**: include or link to pseudonyms only if they are well known or permission is given by the person.
- **Gender**: do not describe gender; never ask or assume how the person identifies themselves.
- **Source, Field of activity, Occupation**: do not include gender, ethnic, racial, or physical descriptions in free text and controlled fields (ie. *Black authors, Asian American Actress, Transgender athletes, Blind musicians, Women astronauts*, etc.).
- **Associated language**: Be aware that the person could publish, etc. in additional languages.

To draft a policy we agreed upon, it was essential to work collaboratively and stay open-minded as each of us comes with our own biases and beliefs. Recognizing the nature and ethical dangers of linked data and our power and responsibilities as a NACO contributor, we will continue to seek a healthy balance between providing reasonable access to library resources and protecting the privacy and safety of persons for whom we create name authority records.

*Statement of Principles*

Lastly, TEAM is working on authoring a Statement of Principles for Ethical and Anti-Oppressive Description. The creation of such a statement was inspired by the Duke University Libraries Statement on Inclusive Description and the Cataloguing Code of Ethics.[17] Our statement will clearly define our goals and considerations when undertaking reparative description projects and will link them to existing research and initiatives in the library, information science,

and archives fields. This statement will ensure that ethical considerations are not an afterthought for us, but rather are fully integrated in all of the work that we do. Moreover, it will emphasize the importance of reparative description practices to library and university administration. We will work with the library's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council and publish the final version of the statement on the library's website.

**Conclusion**

Our efforts working towards reparative metadata and archival description at GMU Libraries are part of a broader conversation taking place in academic libraries (and other institutions) around the United States and the world. As we move forward, we will continue to share information on our progress and on the challenges that we encounter with our peers at other institutions, and we will continue to look for ways that we can work across the library and archival professions to dismantle systems that reinforce oppressive power structures through metadata and archival description.

The ongoing protests for racial justice have helped us not only to understand how underlying systemic racism perpetuates inequality and violence, but also how we can act on this understanding. Racism that has lasted for centuries cannot be undone swiftly but needs thorough work in all aspects of human interactions. Racial justice also cannot be accomplished by one person or entity but must be a task for everyone. Working together as a team (as TEAM) makes the work manageable, streamlines the workflows, and provides encouragement for the tasks to be accomplished.

While metadata librarians and archivists work using different professional standards, we are all responsible for describing resources accurately, ethically, and with respect for human lives. We realized that a fundamental reevaluation of our

descriptive practices requires a level of ongoing, regular collaboration between Metadata Services and the Special Collections Research Center that goes beyond cataloging and consultations about metadata for individual projects. No effort to address systemic power inequities in libraries and archives can truly be effective without collaboration between the units that describe both published and unpublished resources. This understanding led staff in Metadata Services and the Special Collections Research Center to create TEAM to hold ourselves accountable and to ensure that our efforts are in line with the systemic nature of the problem. We feel that TEAM is unique because of its focus on cataloger/archivist collaboration and non-hierarchical, flexible structure.

The current projects TEAM members are working on represent the start of our commitment to reparative description, and this commitment will continue to grow and evolve within our institution and our professional community. Acknowledging that the task is more than extensive, we have focused on clearly-defined projects, with measurable results visible to the GMU community. Nevertheless, we are aware that our efforts represent only a fraction of the work to be done. Its everlasting nature is described in Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's Anti-Racist Description Resources; we must "[b]e mindful that terminology changes over time, so description will be an iterative process."[18] TEAM provides a model for other university libraries with limited-to-moderate staffing and resources. Since this group was formed from the ground up, it does not depend on library administration making diversity and inclusion a priority to work. While the initial formation of a similar group would require staff to devote time and energy to planning, ideally a collaborative effort such as TEAM will divide responsibilities evenly and work to make it such that reparative metadata work integrates into existing workflows, rather than becoming a side

project. We also hope that the projects outlined here can serve as examples that other libraries can adapt to their local needs. By undertaking this necessary work at separate institutions and sharing resources and knowledge, we can create large-scale change for the better.

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[1] George Mason University (GMU) Libraries serve more than 37,000 students in undergraduate, graduate, and PhD programs at the most diverse and the largest public university in Virginia. The Libraries hold over one million circulating items and make available more than two million electronic resources.

[2] "President Washington Announces Task Force on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence," GMU news, July 23, 2020, accessed June 23, 2021, https://www2.gmu.edu/news/2020-07/president-washington-announces-task-force-anti-racism-and-inclusive-excellence.

[3] "Reparative Description," *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, Society of American Archivists, accessed May 31, 2021, https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/reparative-description.html.

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[6] Charlotte Albright, "'Change the Subject': A Hard-Fought Battle Over Words," *Dartmouth News*, April 22, 2019, accessed December 30, 2021, https://home.dartmouth.edu/news/2019/04/change-subject-hard-fought-battle-over-words.

[7] "Library of Congress Changes *Illegal Aliens* Subject Heading," November 12, 2021, accessed December 30, 2021, https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/library-of-congress-changes-illegal-aliens-subject-heading/.

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[9] Jo Freeman, "Tyranny of Structurelessness," *Jo Freeman.com*, accessed June 22, 2021, https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm.

[10] Bolding, "Reparative Processing."

[11] Particular thanks to Whitney Buccicone, Head of Technical Services for Special Collections at the University of Virginia, and Jackie Dean, Head of the Archival Processing Section in Technical Services at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[12] Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Working Group, *Anti-Racist*

*Description Resources,* October 2019, accessed January 4, 2022, https://archivesforblack-lives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf.

[13] At the time that we initially wrote this article, this was the case. However, ss of June 2021, most of the instances of this Cutter number have been updated by the Library of Congress, aligning closely with the changes we made.

[14] "Replace .N3-5 Cutter for Negro." *Cataloging Lab*, accessed June 15, 2021, https://cataloginglab.org/kb/replace-n4-cutter/.

[15] WRLC's NACO/BIBCO (Name Authority Cooperative Program/Bibliographic Record Cooperative Program) funnel.

[16] Jane Sandberg, ed. *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2019).

[17] "Cataloguing Code of Ethics," Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee, Google Docs, accessed June 17, 2021, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IBz7nXQPfr3U1P6Xiar9cLAkzoNX_P9fq7eHvzfSlZ0/edit?usp=sharing; Natalie Sommerville, "Statement on Inclusive Description," Duke University Libraries, date last reviewed March 4, 2021, accessed June 17, 2021, https://wiki.duke.edu/display/DTSP/Statement+on+Inclusive+Description.

[18] Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia, "Anti-Racist Description Resources," October 2019, updated September 2020, accessed June 23, 2021, https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/ardr_202010.pdf.