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 is a research report published by OCLC as one of the deliverables for a project supported in part by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Aimed at addressing harm caused by cultural institutions' collection descriptions, the project (also titled Reimagine Descriptive Workflows) convened a diverse group of stakeholders to determine ways to improve descriptive practices in library and archives. The report is formatted as a community agenda for a target audience of "metadata managers, collecting organization leaders, and metadata service providers, as well as for the broader information community of practice" (p. 7). The agenda includes insights distilled from the stakeholder convening as well as examples of research and projects related to reparative and inclusive description undertaken by institutions from around the world. Although the report focuses on inclusive description with respect to race and indigeneity, the authors acknowledge the intersectionality of descriptive practices and the need for reimagining within other areas. They chose to focus on race and indigeneity to reflect the settler colonialism that has shaped descriptive practices for the regions involved in the project.

The introduction provides contextual information about the Reimagine Descriptive Workflows project, the stakeholder convening, and the methods used to produce the document. The convening included OCLC project managers; facilitators from Shift Collective, a New Orleans–based nonprofit consulting and design group; and professionals in libraries and archives throughout Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. This group worked together over three days to identify issues in the current landscape of reparative description work. Specifically, project leads Rachel L. Frick and Jon Voss of OCLC and Shift Collective, respectively, focused the convening on identifying "outcomes that point the field toward actionable next steps" (p. 5).

The first section of the report, titled "Why Radically Reimagine," begins with a description of the problem space, which is the harm that institutional systems and structures have caused through perpetuating inequity. While a foundational value of the information profession is the belief that libraries and archives are for everyone, the report acknowledges that many practices within these institutions "were

developed in the nineteenth century and reflect a Western white male hegemony" (p. 9). Because libraries and archives serve diverse communities, there are many cases where hegemonic standards cause harm and obfuscate information for users. Libraries and archives must therefore reimagine descriptive practices for cultural heritage materials in their holdings with an eye to removing internal biases.

While the need for more inclusive descriptive practices is urgent, there are several challenges for institutions to consider before beginning reparative metadata work. The remainder of the report's first section explores these challenges in three categories: 1) the current harms caused by existing descriptive metadata; 2) network-level practices that resist the adaptations necessary to accommodate local needs; and 3) the need for a shared understanding of key concepts such as white supremacy, power-holding institutions, relinquishing power, and building trust. The last concept, building trust, is so central to these efforts that the project leaders adopted "working at the speed of trust" as their motto for structuring the community agenda (p. 5).

The second part of the report, titled "A Framework of Guidance," suggests actions, exercises, and models for reparative description work that the participants hope will lead toward systemic changes to the descriptive process, resulting in "more just and equitable systems of knowledge organization from diverse and equally valued perspectives" (p. 16). Each item in this framework includes specific examples of related work from a variety of institutions and is categorized under one of the following themes: 1) organizational shifts; 2) operational workflows; and 3) professional and personal development. Actions at the organizational level include acknowledgments of harm, intentions to amend this harm, and commitment to building scaffolding for long-term institutional change. For example, the report cites the efforts of Carnegie Mellon University Libraries' exhibition "What We Don't Have" as an instance of an organization recognizing the exclusive effect of collecting practices as well as presenting a plan for action.[1] Operational changes, the largest section of the framework, include recentering workflows on human relationships, supporting new values such as collaboration with traditionally racialized or minoritized stakeholders in the cataloging process, working to transform descriptive practices at a speed that allows for reflection, and seeking community-centered engagement. As a model of new, more collaborative operational practices, participants at the convening highlighted the development of the Library of Congress Demographic Group Terms (LCDGT) and its reliance on the expertise of an Advisory Group whose members belong to one or more of the LCDGT categories.[2] Finally, the framework directs readers to systems of support like the Digital

[1] Carnegie Mellon University Libraries, "What We Don't Have: Confronting the Absence of Diversity in the University Archives," Fall 2020 Exhibit, https://exhibits.library.cmu.edu/whatwedonthave.

[2] Library of Congress Demographic Group Terms PDF Files, https://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeLCDGT/freelcdgt.html. LCDGT categories capture terms relating to multiple demographic characteristics, such as Ethnic/Cultural terms; Medical, Psychological, and Disability terms; and Social terms, to name a few.

Preservation Coalition (DPC), an organization based in the United Kingdom whose membership includes professionals involved in reparative description work and provides opportunities for accountability at organizational, professional, and personal levels.[3]

The report concludes with an appendix that provides a more granular list of eleven design challenges for reimagined, inclusive descriptive workflows that informed the structure of the Framework of Guidance section. Identified and refined during the three-day stakeholder convening, these challenges are formulated as prompts that can be used as starting points for conversations and changes at the local level. For instance, one prompt focused on cultivating communities asks, "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'?" (p. 32).

As a professional working in a small special collections institution with limited staffing, the comprehensiveness of this report gave me a greater understanding of the landscape of reparative description work and the challenges affecting the pace of change. Like many institutions, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga has made efforts to revise metadata practices and work toward reparative description, relying on resources such as the *Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources*.[4] Some of the examples and recommendations in OCLC's report, such as the acknowledgment of harm, are efforts already underway at institutions that have published harmful language statements and acknowledgments on exhibitions and discovery platforms. Other elements from the Framework of Guidance, such as the example of a dedicated Cultural Advisor in Residence position created at the University of Sydney Library, will be more aspirational for smaller institutions. Finally, the clearly stated need for transformation of workflows and standards at the highest levels from power-holding institutions such as national libraries, standards bodies, and professional organizations will be helpful for smaller organizations when making appeals for change at the local level. For example, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Special Collections and the Digital Library of Tennessee both recently published harmful language statements that were modeled after those at other, larger institutions. Initiatives by national, well-established institutions are often referenced as justification for similar efforts at local levels where they might otherwise not get priority. The report's conclusion notes that there is "considerable trust-building work that power-holding institutions need to do to build confidence that change will occur" and lists examples of actions that can be taken to increase trust, like establishing feedback loops for community contributions and lowering barriers to professional development and

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[3] Digital Preservation Coalition, "About the Digital Preservation Coalition," https://www.dpconline.org/about.

[4] Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Working Group, *Anti-Racist Description Resources* (Philadelphia, PA: 2019), https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf.

collaborative opportunities (p. 28). The articulation of this need in a published research report by a key figure in the landscape of library metadata promises to be galvanizing for individuals in any setting wanting to make the case for reimagining descriptive workflows.