


Describing Disability in Houghton Library's Collections

Annalisa Moretti, Project Archivist
Houghton Library, Harvard University
annalisa_moretti@harvard.edu









Rosie Wolff, Theatrical cabinet cards of women with dwarfism, ca. 1866-1929. TCS5. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.



Project Description



SCORE
Sheet music by topic, ca. 1800-2000
1800
[Available at Theatre Collection b \(TCS 90\) >](#)

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Details

Title	Sheet music by topic, ca. 1800-2000
Description	1,946 items (25 boxes) 8 linear feet. Arranged alphabetically by topic.
Summary	Includes printed sheet music, many with illustrated covers, relating to miscellaneous subjects.
Language	English
Notes	In English.
Subjects	Popular music. >

Project Description

- Learn about current research on disability studies as it relates to archives
- Evaluate the language currently in use to describe disability in our collection
- Create a set of best practice guidelines for current reparative processing and future processing

Disability Studies: Facts About Disability

- People with disabilities are the largest minority group in the US*
- 26% of American adults are disabled (61 million/1 in 4 adults)*
- Historically "normal" vs. "defective"
- Immigration Act of 1907

"SEC. 2. That the following classes of aliens shall be excluded from admission into the United States: All idiots, imbeciles, feebleminded persons, epileptics, insane persons, and persons who have been insane within five years previous; persons who have had two or more attacks of insanity at any time previously [...] persons not comprehended within any of the foregoing excluded classes who are found to be and are certified by the examining surgeon as being mentally or physically defective, such mental or physical defect being of a nature which may affect the ability of such alien to earn a living..."

*Source: CDC, "Disability Affects Us All"

https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic_disability_impacts_all.html

Disability Studies: Ways of Understanding Disability

- Medical Model
 - defined by diagnosis, often focuses on limitations
- Social Model
 - disability rights, struggles against discrimination
- Complex Embodiment
 - Combines medical and social issues

Analyzing language in our collections

- Restoring names to individuals when possible
- Accurately describing medical conditions and their contexts
- Participatory appraisal
- Person first vs. identity first language

Disability Language Style Guide <https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>

ADA National Network Guidelines for Writing about People with Disabilities

<https://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing>

"Identity First Language," Autistic Self Advocacy Network

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/>

Analyzing language in our collections

- "committed suicide" (implies a crime) - "died by suicide"
- "deformed"/"disfigured" - describe physical changes or medical condition, i.e. "limb difference" or "facial injury"
- "hearing impaired/impairment" - deaf/hearing loss
- "victim of" - "person has ____"
- "wheelchair -bound"/"confined to a wheelchair" - "wheelchair user"

Analyzing language in our collections

Title:	Human curiosity prints, playbills, broadsides and other printed material
Identifier:	MS Thr 736
Date:	1695-1937
Physical Description:	1.5 linear feet (3 boxes)
Language Of Materials:	Collection materials are in English and French.
Overview:	Collection of printed material concerning human curiosities, chiefly people exhibited in and around London and the United States.

Biographical / Historical

Human curiosities, usually referred to as "freaks," are persons with something extraordinary about their appearance or behavior. A "freak show" is an exhibition of such persons. Changes in popular culture and entertainment led to the decline of the freak show as a form of entertainment.

Scope And Contents

The collection consists of images, chiefly intaglio prints, but also some photographs; broadsides and playbills of shows; and other materials concerning human curiosities. Most of the human curiosities are medical anomalies, giants, dwarfs, etc., such as Józef Borusawski and Patrick Cotter, but collection also contains images of people known for unusual activities or feats, such as Captain Robert Barclay, who walked 1000 miles in 1000 days; André Garnerin, inventor of the frameless parachute; and Laura Dewey Bridgman, an educated deaf-blind woman.

Collection title	URL	Terms used	Notes
Human curiosity prints, playbills, broadsides and other printed material	https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/resources/3437	freak, (might be okay in context of "freak show" with existing note) giant, dwarf, medical anomalies? What about "human curiosity"?	
Pamphlets featuring intersex performers	https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/resources/8634	"half-man half-woman" (if text from materials put in quotes?) medically curious	
Bernth and Judith Lindfors collection concerning Ira Aldridge, Paul Robeson, African, and African American performers	https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/archival_objects/993611	In scope - "celebrated giants"	
George Brinton Beal papers, circus collection, and other theatrical collections	https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/archival_objects/1795258	giant	Might be title, but if so could use context
Harvard Theatre Collection cartes-de-visite photographs of men in popular entertainment	https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/archival_objects/2656574	Onondaga Giant	
Harvard Theatre Collection cartes-de-visite photographs of women in popular entertainment	https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/archival_objects/2656723	In scope - "Giant Lady"	Most likely title, needs contextual note - also include performer's full name as well as stage name (Mary Martha Sherwood)
Harvard Theatre Collection cabinet photographs of men in "freak shows"	https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/archival_objects/2604088	Giants - scope contains more detailed information including stage names etc that need note	
Harvard Theatre Collection popular entertainment playbills, posters, prints, and clippings	https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/archival_objects/2618073	(The Celebrated French Giant), Chano, The Chinese Giant, Uffner's Enormous Giants, General Tiny Mite, Alhambra Babil and Bijou, Giant Amazon Queen	
Harvard Theatre Collection theatrical portrait prints (visual works)	https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/archival_objects/2712388	Mack, Vantile. The infant Lambert, or giant baby!!	

Creating Guidelines

- Processing new collections
- Reparative processing
- Processing notes - when should we make them?
 - When terms are not replaceable
 - When they appear in official titles and names
 - When they appear in the materials themselves
 - To explain our process

Reflections

- What is the role of the archives in preserving and presenting these materials for use?
- What is the goal of collecting them if they are part of our collection priorities?
- The danger of the archives as "cabinet of curiosities"

Selected Sources

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