Participatory Description: Decolonizing Descriptive Methodologies in Archival Practice

Lauren Haberstock, MLIS
she | her | hers

lauren.haberstock@gmail.com

"…it is imperative to relational accountability that as a researcher I form a respectful relationship with the ideas that I am studying" (Wilson, 2008, p. 22)

Participatory Archives

"...through arrangement and description of their acquisitions, archivists impart or relay narratives and knowledge structures to explain the relationships among records in a collection."
(Shilton and Srinivasan, 2007, p. 88)

Active participation by communities who have traditionally been marginalized allows for more empowered narratives to exist within the archive and for archival collections to be more representative

Participatory frameworks have the potential to open up the descriptive process and to empower creators and their communities to share their stories and perspectives.

Decolonizing Methodologies

Counter normative approaches to research and information organization

Create space for indigenous peoples and local communities to engage in alternative approaches that reflect their own ontologies and epistemologies.

Decolonizing terminology remains an integral step in the work of decolonization and this requires self-identification by non-dominant people groups.

Participatory Description

Work with originator communities to develop terminology and engage their naming practices

Mixed metadata methods and ongoing metadata enrichment to involve both users and information professionals

Annotations as a way to encourage users', researchers', and archivists' participation in the dialogue surrounding a record or object

Participatory description should not be an extractive process, but rather it should be a relationship-driven process that works to build community ownership of archival records.

Questions to guide descriptive practices

Who is privileged by or within this description?

Who is barred from accessing this description and the record it describes because of the language, script, or medium used?

Should descriptions be written in the language of origin and translated into the language of practice?

Can a record be described visually or orally in order to improve accessibility?

Is space given for the contextualization and explanation of an object's use?

What web of relationships needs to be in place in order to properly situate an artifact?

Participatory Description in Practice

Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities Project at the University of Manitoba (Allard and Ferris, 2015)

A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center, Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (Becvar and Srinivasan, 2009)

Decolonizing Description Project and **Making Meaning Symposium** - Decolonizing Description Working Group at the University of Alberta Libraries (Laroque, 2018)

Memory, Meaning-Making, and Collections Study - Native Canadian Centre of Toronto and FirstStory Toronto (Howarth and Knight, 2015)

References

Alemu, G. (2018). Metadata enrichment for digital heritages: Users as co-creators. *International Information & Library Review, 50(2*),142–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572 317.2018.1449426

Allard, D., & Ferris, S. (2015). Antiviolence and marginalized communities: Knowledge creation, community mobilization, and social justice through a participatory archiving approach. *Library Trends, 64*(2), 360–383. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0043

Becvar, K., & Srinivasan, R. (2009). Indigenous knowledge and culturally responsive methods in information research. *The Library Quarterly, 79*(4), 421–441. https://doi.org/10.1086/605382

Farley, L. (2014). The participatory finding aid and the archivist: How user annotations are changing everyone's role. *Archival Issues, 35*(2), 79–98.

Haberstock, L. (2020). Participatory description: Decolonizing descriptive methodologies in archives. *Archival Science, 20,* 125–138. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09328-6

Howarth, L.C., & Knight, E. (2015). To every artifact its voices: Creating surrogates for hand-crafted Indigenous objects. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly 53(*5–6), 580–595. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2015.1008719

Laroque, S. (2018). Making meaningful connections and relationships in cataloguing practices: The Decolonizing Description Project at University of Alberta Libraries. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, 13*(4), 2–6. https ://doi.org/10.18438 /eblip 29440

Shilton, K., & Srinivasan, R. (2007). Participatory appraisal and arrangement for multicultural archival collections. *Archivaria, 63*, 87–101.

Wilson, S. (2008). Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods. Fernwood Publishing, Canada.