

“The pictures do not change, but we look at them through the favorable or unfavorable prevailing public opinion.”

(Frederick Douglass, “Lecture on Pictures,” 1861)

In a lecture on the social and moral power of images, the African American abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass encapsulated in one line the complexity of the interpretive act: the images don't change, but how people interpret them does, and this is a function of societal influences that change over time.¹ How humans perceive images has been the subject of many scientific studies since Douglass' time, and the consensus confirms the two truths that he already knew and used to his advantage: not just that visual perceptions are malleable social constructs, but also that images are potent carriers of meaning.²

In 21st century cultural heritage institutions, these two truths meet and intertwine with increased energy. First, people are more drawn to the power of visual culture than ever, and cultural heritage repositories are seeing rising percentages of visual formats. Second, after more than a century of prejudice and racism during which institutions and researchers alike tended to devalue and underrepresent the history of people of color in favor of attention to white history, researchers and their allies are now doubly energized to uncover materials illuminating the lives of African Americans and other marginalized groups. They are increasingly interested in seeking out historic images of people of color, which offer rich visual details into social histories, but are more difficult to find – and sometimes more challenging to describe – than paper records.

The ability to connect users with what they seek relies heavily on good description - subject headings, tags, narrative, and structured metadata – created by catalogers and other information professionals; furthermore, inclusive, equitable description is crucial in bringing to light under-represented histories. This article will attempt to describe one institution's efforts to analyze and reshape its descriptive practices as part of its commitment to connect researchers with previously under-described materials, with a focus on photographic collections, and will suggest practices that may be helpful to others on the same path. The author acknowledges and indeed hopes that the list of questions provoked by this essay is longer than the list of sure answers.

¹ Douglass gave this lecture on photography and society in December, 1861 in Boston. It has a number of variant titles; Douglass originally titled it “Lecture on Pictures.” The Library of Congress has published a manuscript copy available online: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mfd.22004/?st=gallery> [Accessed 05/02/2021]. Douglass sat for many portraits, as did his fellow activist, Sojourner Truth; they both distributed these carefully managed images as part of their strategy in the fight for civil rights for enslaved and free people of color. See also Henry Louis Gates' marvelous article, (2015) “Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura: Representing the Antislave ‘Clothed and in Their Own Form.’” *Critical Inquiry* 42:1, 31-60 (<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/682995>)

² There are many studies on racial bias and visual perception. A few to start with: Blair, Irene V., C. M. Judd, M. S. Sadler, and C. Jenkins (2002), “The Role of Afrocentric Features in Person Perception: Judging by Features and Categories.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83 (1): 5–25. Maddox, Keith B. (2004), “Perspectives on Racial Phenotypicality Bias.” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8 (4): 383–401. Todorov, Alexander, Chris P. Said, Andrew D. Engell, and Nikolaas N. Oosterhof. 2008. “Understanding Evaluation of Faces on Social Dimensions.” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 12 (12): 455–60.

Good descriptions of photographic materials fill in as much basic context as possible: who created them, when and where, their explicit visual content, as well as possible implicit functions or meanings - their “aboutness” (it must be noted here that the need to record as much contextual information as possible exists in a tensioned, shifting balance between available institutional resources – time, funding, and space – and the need to get users to within striking distance of the information they are seeking).³

When describing photographic works, archivists and others who create the metadata are confronted with two main challenges specific to images. First, unlike textual works, photographs often come with little or no explanatory context. In the professional world, many photographers choose not to title their works or identify locations or the people appearing in them. In the case of personal collections, as most of us can relate from looking through family photos, individuals and locations may not be identified, dates are absent, captions may be lacking. Over time, human memory fails, or the documentation that existed is lost from its object.

Second, when viewing images, people react much more quickly and present stronger responses (many of them unconscious), than when reading a text.⁴ Physical features, expressions, dress, posture, and other traits prompt viewers to form instant, deep-seated, and often divergent judgements about the person in the photograph.⁵ This is the power of the image – and especially of the interpretive act – that Frederick Douglass understood so well.

Add to this the fact that of course photographs also can be accompanied by text-based information contributed by photographers, editors, and collectors – titles, captions, keywords, and artists’ statements; this information must also be considered image metadata and must be preserved as an integral part of the image object – and may carry with it its own human-generated biases and assumptions.

The challenge of overcoming biased reactions belongs not only to researchers and other end-users: archivists are in no way immune from this process and may consciously or unconsciously introduce bias in their descriptions of historical materials. Given this common challenge, how do we go about choosing ways in which to describe race in images – or for that matter, any personal identities such as ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity? Who decides what constitutes a “problematic” term? How do we avoid the pitfalls of previous generations’ descriptive practices? One activity is to analyze the language of past descriptions and recognize patterns of description that result in inequitable, judgmental, or incomplete description.

³ For an excellent guide to describing photos and photo collections, see: Zinkham, Helena (2006), “Description and cataloging”, in M. L. Ritzenthaler & D. Vogt-O’Connor (Eds.) *Photographs: Archival care and management*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists: 164-206.

⁴ The science of visual processing is clear: humans recognize images thousands of times faster and retain the memory much longer than for text. Mary C. Potter et al., “Detecting meaning in RSVP at 13 ms per picture.” *Attention Perception & Psychophysics* 76 (2), 2014: 270-279. https://www.academia.edu/5618048/Detecting_Meaning_at_13_ms_per_picture [Accessed February 10, 2021]

⁵ Again, one can choose from many studies that investigate how people generate social inferences from images of others. See: Todorov, Alexander, Chris P. Said, Andrew D. Engell, and Nikolaas N. Oosterhof. (2008). “Understanding Evaluation of Faces on Social Dimensions.” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 12 (12): 455–460. <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195316872.001.0001/acprof-9780195316872-chapter-4>

Ethical missteps in description can be summarized as three behaviors to be aware of:

- Making assumptions about the identity or character of a person or persons;
- Perpetuating structural racism and inequity by consciously or unconsciously using the same language and terms;
- Erasing or suppressing identities and voices by not referring to them when they are present.

Correcting these patterns of behavior means facing history in its completeness and presenting sometimes uncomfortable truths to the public eye. For example, if an image clearly conveys a stereotype or is clearly meant as propaganda, then the description can and must state this underlying functional meaning.

At the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University, the Technical Services Department has long been committed to inclusive descriptive practices, but recently its staff has undertaken a more formalized effort outlined in a newly released “Guiding Principles for Description.”⁶ As part of this work, the staff are reviewing thousands of catalog records and collection guides (inventories or finding aids) for collections which contain outdated, incomplete, or offensive description, particularly in race-related materials. Some of this work is termed “reparative,” addressing harmful past practices and rectifying them: in some cases, the staff are changing or adding subject terms and editing descriptions; in other cases, they are inserting contextual notes regarding offensive but historically accurate terms and names, rather than erasing them.⁷

This work of creating more inclusive descriptions extends to the photo archivist and other staff who work with photographs. We have targeted image collections containing photographs of African Americans and other people of color, reviewed their descriptions, and modified them as needed to call attention to the presence (or absence) of identities who previously might have been misidentified, overlooked, or suppressed. What follows are examples of photograph collections which received this retroactive work.

An early digitization project at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library made visible to the public a compelling set of early 20th century portraits taken by Michael Francis Blake, one of Charleston, South Carolina's first African American studio photographers.⁸ The digitized collection can be viewed here: <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/blake>. The Blake collection is an example of a collection that came with little item-level contextual information – because of the lack of captions, just 36 individuals out of the 118 photographs have been identified.

⁶ <https://blogs.library.duke.edu/rubenstein/2020/09/14/now-live-guiding-principles-for-description/> [Accessed January 2, 2021]

⁷ It may be interesting to note here the commonalities between the discussion over whether to eliminate or keep offensive language in archives and the debate over what to do with statues of U.S. Confederate soldiers and officers.



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Michael Francis Blake photograph collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

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In the original collection-level overview, the 118 original photographs of men, women, and children were described at the group level as representing African Americans. However, as seen in the illustrations above, there are also portraits of people who are racially ambiguous, and in fact, at the item-level, these images were not tagged as “African American.” Thus, 104 portraits out of the 118 are actually tagged as “African American.” The reviewing archivist changed the collection-level narrative descriptions in the catalog record and online collection guide to read “The *majority* of the subjects *appear* to be African American” [italics added]. To support keyword and subject searches, the reviewing archivist also added the Library of Congress subject heading (LCSH) “Racially mixed people” in the catalog record and added natural language narrative in the collection and series-level abstracts in the collection guides, indicating the presence of multiracial people in the photographs.

The choice of terminology is critical. While one goal is to provide standard subject terms found in controlled vocabularies and shared amongst international bibliographic databases, another goal is to include keywords in more widely accessible natural language, while also maintaining ethical standards of respectful language and non-pejorative terms. Following the guidance gleaned from many workshops on the best practices for equitable, inclusive description, the Rubenstein Library staff have agreed to use a set of controlled vocabularies for terms describing personal identities, relying on mainstream authority records (LCSH, [TGM](#), [AAT](#), NACO), while borrowing from other, more recently generated vocabularies for terms and concepts not yet accepted into the mainstream. A list of suggested mainstream and alternate vocabularies follows this article. Closely following additions and proposals for new subject headings is also important. Recently, the Library of Congress was forced by the U.S. House of Representatives to keep the heading “Illegal aliens,” for which alternative, less negative terms had been proposed; the Rubenstein Library decided to adopt the term also chosen by other institutions, “Undocumented immigrants.”⁹

⁸ Michael Francis Blake, a graduate of Avery Normal Institute, was one of Charleston, South Carolina's first African American studio photographers. He was born in 1879 on Johns Island, S.C., and moved to Charleston with his family around 1900. He began to work professionally as a photographer in 1912, setting up a studio downtown as well as photographing in outdoor locations. Blake died in Charleston in 1934 at age 55.

⁹ For an overview of the conflicted events related to one subject heading, see the blog post, “Controversies in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH): the Case of Illegal Aliens.” (2020), Librarianship Studies and Information Technology blog site, April 13, 2020 (<https://www.librarianshipstudies.com/2020/04/controversies-in-library-of-congress.html> [Accessed March 12, 2021]). It also includes a link to the documentary about the struggle over changing pejorative subject terms, “Change the Subject,” produced by Dartmouth College student activists.

When working with collections lacking accurate data in the form of names, titles, and so on, choosing aggregate-level terms for race and other identities seems the best course, leaving the detective work of individual identity to others. It is also very time-consuming to change item-level tags in legacy digital collections. If one has the resources, and the collection is small, this kind of detailed work may be possible. In the case of the Michael Blake portrait collection, there are some intriguing single portraits. One Charleston, South Carolina family appears to be of Asian descent, but any contextual information has been lost. There is a woman who could pass as white, but considering that Blake seems to have had only people of color as clients, she may have identified as African American. Another family which appears in multiple portraits goes by the name “Rodrigues.” Although due to lack of information or time constraints it is not always possible to investigate further, in the case of the latter family the archivist was able to easily find this family through an Ancestry.com search, and found that “Rodrigues” spelled with an “s” is commonly a Portuguese name. The family had a Scottish ancestor (apparently there was a significant population of Portuguese Jews in Scotland) who emigrated to South Carolina from the Caribbean. The Rodrigues family was classified in the late 19th century as “mulatto,” and by the 1940s as “negro,” an excellent historical example of the social malleability of racial identity.

Other image collections in the Rubenstein Library have undergone similar retrospective editing to account for racial identities and to call out under-represented groups. A similar portrait collection targeted for a review is the Hugh Mangum photographs collection, which contains turn of the 20th century images of people who were originally tagged as African American but who may be of other ancestry. Some of these images appear below. This collection’s glass plates were also digitized and published and can be viewed at <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/hmp>. The item-level photograph metadata in the digital collection has not been altered, but again, to support keyword and subject searches, the reviewing archivist has added the LSCSH “Racially mixed people” to collection and series-level descriptions, and has added natural language keywords in the collection overview and abstract to indicate the presence of multiracial individuals.



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The [Frank Espada collection](#) offers an example of assigning descriptive metadata when a community self-identifies as a single ethnicity but may include multi-racial individuals. The photographer Frank Espada was of Puerto Rican heritage, and spent a considerable part of his career documenting the Puerto Rican diaspora. In this case, the archivist has respected the community's ethnic identity as Puerto Rican (established by the photographer) but has added language in the collection overview and series-level description, as well as subject headings, indicating that individuals of racially mixed heritage may be present in the photographs.

Finally, one of the more unusual examples of self-determined identity is found in the series "Wesorts" in the [Henry Horenstein photographs collection](#). The name was coined by a Maryland (U.S.) community whose inhabitants are almost all tri-racial (Black, Native American, and white); the single word "Wesorts" is how they commonly refer to themselves, as in "*We sorts* of people." The photographer documenting this community used their term as a mark of respect; the cataloger also chose to add contextual mainstream subject terms to reflect the presence of multi-racial people.

Another challenging ethical issue is whether or not to keep original descriptors now considered to be outdated or pejorative. What if a photographer had chosen the term "mulatto" to describe a person? What can a cataloger do with outright offensive descriptions that sometimes appear in titles or captions? Even if they are biased or offensive, keeping original descriptions and terminologies makes it possible for researchers and others to study past patterns of racism as they were originally presented to audiences. For images, racist elements and stereotypes can be transmitted through the visual content, but may not be specifically called out in the original title or caption. To mitigate either the presence of racist language or visually offensive subjects, one solution is to add the subject term "Stereotypes (Social psychology)" (LCSH) or "Ethnic stereotypes" as a facet (TGM).¹⁰ Other strategies to call attention to potentially offensive language are to include a general alert in the collection inventory, and in the case of some graphic imagery, to attach warning labels to manuscript boxes

¹⁰ The scope note for the TGM term reads: "Images that depict stereotypical traits of people classed according to shared racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural background... Also index under name of ethnic group."

Conclusion

These examples of how archivists at Duke University's Rubenstein Library have initiated retroactive cataloging serve as a glimpse into the challenging work of re-examining our catalogs and our descriptive practices for all materials, whether visual or textual, and creating an inclusive space for all histories and voices in our collections. It will keep us occupied for a long period of time – a time in which we can reflect on what it means to be human. We are made to tell stories, as flawed as they are, and in telling these stories we can also come to grips with painful national, regional, and local past histories.

As Frederick Douglass looked out on his mostly white Bostonian audience in December 1861, he left them with this thought: "...the great cheapness and universality of pictures must exert a powerful, though silent, influence upon the ideas and sentiment of present and future generations." If archivists and librarians desire to connect researchers and other users with long-hidden or newly acquired images of people of color in our collections, and if we desire to "influence the ideas and sentiment of present and future generations" of students, researchers, and members of our own professions, then we must move these collections into the light of public opinion. At the same time, we must be aware of our own assumptions and biases when we create the language that describes them, so that we no longer contribute to the systemic prejudices of the past, and respectfully prepare the way for new conversations about race.

GUIDELINES FOR DESCRIPTION OF RACE AND OTHER IDENTITIES IN IMAGES

1. Whenever possible, keep the artist's own captions and titles, and let them serve as the main descriptive elements; supplement or contextualize where needed.
2. Provide explanatory text for language that contains racist, dated, or offensive language. Point out propaganda when obvious, but be careful not to editorialize.
3. When there is no information at all, start with a place name and time period. Avoid guessing at identities; limit descriptive terms to "men," "women," "people," "adults," and "children," if it is accurate to do so.
4. When identities are ambiguous, use nationalities when possible, for example "Cubans," rather than try to assign racial identities, particularly in communities with high racial and ethnic diversity.
5. Rather than attempting to identify race or other identities in individual photographs with no contextual information, note the possible presence of identities at the collection level description.
6. Whenever possible, use terms that individuals or communities use to describe themselves. Recognize that people use different terms in different contexts, and study possible terms before using them.
7. Always clearly state the source for titles, captions, and other descriptive metadata, at multiple levels of description.

Appendix A

David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library
Duke University, Durham, N.C. (USA)
Technical Service Department
“Guiding Principles for Description” (Summer 2020)

The Rubenstein Library Technical Services Department acknowledges the historical role of libraries and archives, including our own institution, in amplifying the voices of those with political, social, and economic power, while omitting and erasing the voices of the oppressed. We have developed these Guiding Principles for Description as the first step in our ongoing commitment to respond to this injustice.

1. We will use inclusive and accessible language when describing the people represented by or documented in our materials. We commit to continually educate ourselves on evolving language and practices of inclusivity and accessibility.
2. We will prioritize facts and accuracy, and resist editorializing, valorizing, or euphemistic narratives or phrases in our description. This includes a commitment to revisit and revise our past description.
3. When describing our collections, we will purposefully seek and document the presence and activities of marginalized communities and voices.
4. We welcome and will seek to incorporate input and feedback on our descriptive choices from the communities and people represented by and in our materials.
5. We will be transparent about the origin of our description, and our role in adding or replacing description. We will also commit to increased transparency about our own institution’s past descriptive practices.
6. We will advocate for and celebrate library description, and the essential labor and expertise of the library practitioners who create and maintain that description, as crucial for any ongoing preservation of, access to, and research within library collections.

Appendix B

GLOSSARIES, THESAURI, AND STYLE GUIDES FOR INCLUSIVE CATALOGING AND METADATA PRACTICES

Anti-Racist Description Resources

Created by the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (October 2020)
https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf

Art & Architecture Thesaurus® Online – Getty Research Institute

<https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/aat/>

When creating authority records for creators, the A&AT uses the “Nationalities” facet rather than racial identity, although they do use the term African American under “Nationalities,” for example, when referring to African American artists’ names.

Homosaurus

<https://homosaurus.org/>

Linked data vocabulary of LGBTQ terms that supports improved access to LGBTQ resources within cultural institutions. Designed to serve as a companion to broad subject term vocabularies.

Library of Congress Authorities and Controlled Vocabularies (LCSH and other authority databases)

<https://authorities.loc.gov/> (The LC’s main subject, genre, title, and name authority search interface)

<https://www.loc.gov/librarians/controlled-vocabularies/> (Includes subjects, rare book and manuscript terms, and the Thesaurus for Graphic Materials)

<https://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeLCDGT/freelcdgt.html> (Demographic Group Terms)

Diversity Style Guide

<https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/>

<https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/topic-glossaries/raceethnicity-glossary/>

From the “About” page: “The Diversity Style Guide is a resource to help journalists and other media professionals cover a complex, multicultural world with accuracy, authority and sensitivity. The guide includes terms and phrases related to race/ethnicity; religion; sexual orientation; gender identity; age and generation; drugs and alcohol; and physical, mental and cognitive disabilities.”

Racial Equity Tools - Glossary

<https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary>

From home page: “Racial Equity Tools is designed to support individuals and groups working to achieve racial equity. It offers tools, research, tips, curricula, and ideas for people who want to increase their understanding and to help those working for racial justice at every level – in systems, organizations, communities, and the culture at large. We curate resources that use language and analysis reflecting an understanding of systemic racism, power, and privilege and are accessible on-line and free to users.”

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