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Toward Inclusive Description: Reparations through Community-Driven Metadata

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Reparations Through Community-Driven Metadata

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Abstract

This case study covers the process and policies involved in creating accurate and inclusive metadata for a historically marginalized community. The Japanese American Digitization Project was a consortial, collaborative digitization project with the goal of unifying and providing online access to tens of thousands of archival materials documenting the Japanese American experience. Traditionally, the Japanese American experience, particularly the internment during World War II, has been laden with euphemistic language. This article outlines community-driven metadata development, implementing an inclusive controlled vocabulary, and thinking about archival metadata as a process that can contribute to reparations.

Introduction

As archivists, there are many ways we can integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into the work that we do. This might include creating more equitable policies, developing collections that document the histories of underrepresented groups, or hosting programs that promote conversation on DEI topics, just to name a few. In this article, I want to talk about my experience applying DEI and social justice concepts to archival description as part of a large-scale, consortial digitization project.

Japanese Americans at a Los Angeles train station during mass removal from the West Coast, 1942. U.S. Army Signal Corps (photographer). Retrieved from: http://digitalcollections.archives.csudh.edu/digital/collection/p16855coll4/id/5631

Before I get into the case study itself, I'd like to talk briefly (very briefly) about the historical context for the Japanese American archival collections. During World War II, 120,000 individuals of Japanese descent (most of whom were American citizens) residing on the west coast, were forcibly removed from their homes, placed in temporary holding facilities, and later moved into American concentration camps where they spent some or all of the remainder of the war. They lost their jobs, homes, property, businesses, income, and dignity. They were denied

their civil rights as American citizens and forced to spend several years of their lives behind barbed wire. The archival collections that are the basis of this project document those experiences. There is much more to this complex part of American history, and I encourage you to visit the resources below to learn more.

The Collections

The collections that were part of this project include archival materials documenting the history and activities of the Japanese American community before, during, and after World War II. The bulk of the materials document the forced removal and incarceration of individuals by the United States government. Many of the World War II-era documents in the collection were created by an arm of the government called the War Relocation Authority (WRA). Other vernacular materials were created by Japanese Americans who lived the experience of forced removal and incarceration. Archival documents also cover Japanese American life before World War II such as immigration, farming, and the California Alien Land Acts of 1913 and 1920, and post-war events such as the Redress and Reparations movement and the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. Materials in the collection include government documents, correspondence, memos, meeting minutes, camp publications, illustrations and comics, photographs, scrapbooks, art, and ephemera.

The Project

The Japanese American Digitization Project is a grant-funded consortial digitization effort between 15 California State Universities who all hold archival materials on the Japanese American experience. The mission of the project is to improve access to physically disparate archival collections and facilitate new scholarship. For this project, the workflow included selecting items from the physical collections, digitization, item-level description, providing access to collections via a central website, and long-term preservation of the digitized files and metadata. The materials are available on a CONTENTdm instance hosted by California State University, Dominguez Hills. Metadata is also being harvested by the Digital Public Library of America. A website was created to provide contextual information about the project and collections. There are currently over 20,000 items in the digital collection.

This was a large-scale project, so for this article, I am just going to focus on description. In other words, the partnerships, policies, procedures, and practices related to the item-level metadata that we created for digital archival objects. For more about the project as a whole, please see the article, Building a Statewide Archival Collaborative: The California State University Japanese American Digitization Project.

Euphemistic Language: From "Relocation Center" to "Incarceration Camp"

Historically, euphemistic language has been used to describe the Japanese American experience. Euphemistic terminology minimizes the government's punitive treatment of citizens during World War II. I'll provide some examples of this later. It's important to note that, in the

larger community, there is currently no consensus on the most appropriate terminology for what Japanese Americans experienced during World War II. This was another reason that it was important to gather input from a variety of stakeholders as part of a collaborative approach to metadata development.

One example of euphemistic language is the title of the facilities where Japanese Americans were held during the war. The government called these Relocation Centers but in fact, they functioned like prisons. They were often located in remote, desolate areas surrounded by barbed wire, patrolled by armed guards, and designed to contain civilians on the basis of race or ethnicity. Another word for these facilities could be concentration camps. "Internment camp" is the most commonly used and generally recognized term, but "internment" refers to the legally permissible detention of enemy aliens, and over two-thirds of individuals held in these camps were American citizens. For this project, the planning group agreed on the term "incarceration camp." However, cataloging rules allowed for the use of Relocation Center as a proper noun when referring to a specific place, for example, Topaz War Relocation Center. Other examples of euphemistic terminology include "evacuation" (terminology used for the project was "forced removal") and "colonists" (terminology used for the project was "incarcerees").

Who's Describing Whom? The Importance of Community-Driven Metadata

Part of the grant funding for this project included planning, and some of those planning conversations were used to discuss the structure and content of project metadata. In terms of structure, project partners agreed on 24 Dublin Core fields that could capture descriptive, technical, and administrative metadata. Because of historically biased terminology and deep-rooted euphemistic language, the descriptive metadata is what makes this project unique and is the focus of this case study.

One critical aspect of this project was the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in early planning conversations. These included librarians, archivists, and catalogers (some of whom were Japanese American), but also members of the broader Japanese American community, Japanese American scholars, and the national Japanese-American historical organization, Densho. Densho was a particularly important partner in this project because of their extensive work with terminology and encyclopedic documentation of Japanese-American history. These inclusive, cross-disciplinary conversations were critical in order to determine sustainable metadata grounded in current best practices but also terminology that authentically describes-- and to a degree corrects--the historical record about the lived experiences of Japanese Americans.
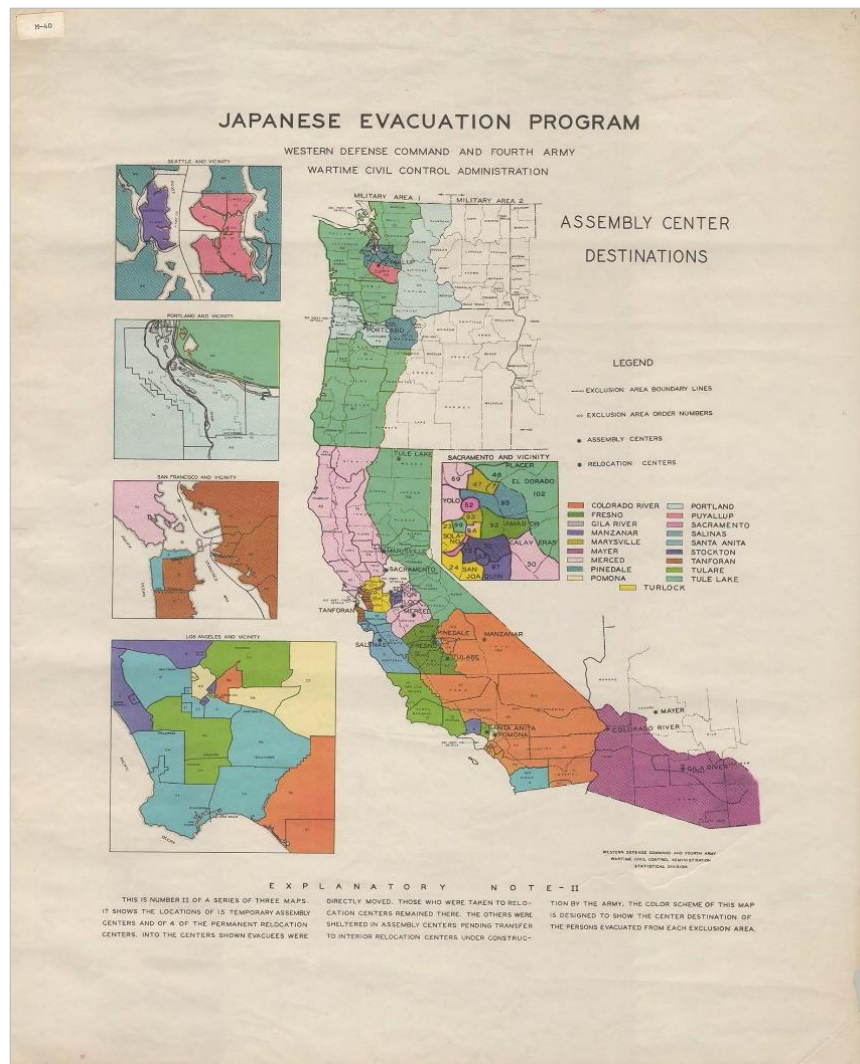
Toward Inclusive Description: The Technical Details

The descriptive fields for this project included Title, Creator, Description, Date, Location, Facility, Subjects, Genre, and Language. Project documentation included a data dictionary outlining standards and/or thesauri for each field. For the "Facility", "Subjects", and "Description" fields the group developed project-specific rules and controlled vocabularies.

The "Facility" field was used to document one or more of the facilities associated with the Japanese American experience during WWII. For example, the Department of Justice Internment Camps, Temporary Assembly Centers, and Incarceration Camps were all places where materials in the collection might have been created or otherwise document. This vocabulary included 72 unique terms. It was important to have a controlled vocabulary for this field not only to reduce euphemisms and ensure consistency but also because camps often had both colloquial and official names associated with them. The names of facilities can also be an important access point for researchers.

Japanese Evacuation Program Assembly Center destinations, 1943. Assembly Centers are where Japanese Americans were placed before being moved to incarceration camps during World War II. Western Defense Command and Fourth Army Wartime Civil Control Administration (publisher): http://digitalcollections.archives.csudh.edu/digital/collection/p16855coll4/id/5833

The project team also developed a controlled vocabulary for the "Subject" field. As is the case for many other areas of history, Library of Congress Subject Headings were not sufficient and perpetuated implicit biases. For example, two headings related to World War II are, "Japanese Americans--Evacuation and relocation, 1942-1945" and "World War, 1939-1945--Japanese Americans." Based on collaborative planning conversations, the project team developed a controlled vocabulary of approximately 300 unique terms that more accurately document the complexities and depth of Japanese American history. These terms include, for example, "World War II--Incarceration camps--Facilities, services and camp administration" and "Immigration and citizenship--Anti-immigration sentiment." The controlled vocabulary also built in terms specific to the Japanese American community such as types of leisure activities, sports, or celebrations. It also reflected terminology for different generations including Issei, Nisei, and Kibei.

As I mentioned before, there is a general lack of consensus as to *the* appropriate terminology to use for this part of American history. Also, no matter how inclusive and well planned a controlled vocabulary is, it's often still not going to be sufficient for every type of archival document. There was also the issue that, because so many terms have historically been used, we wanted researchers to be able to find the materials, even if they were using outdated or euphemistic terms in their search. To address these kinds of issues, we relied on the free text description field to catch other terms and keywords. When including euphemistic language directly from an archival document, catalogers used quotes around terms (for example, "colonists" or "non-aliens"). In addition to applying established standards, OpenRefine was used to perform batch clean up and quality control prior to submission.

Relevance after 2016 Election

"History teaches caution and skepticism when vague notions of national security are used to justify vast, unprecedented exclusionary measures that target disfavored classes."

--Lawyers for the Japanese American Citizens League

In February 2017, communities and archives recognized the 75th anniversary of Executive Order 9066. This was the order from President Roosevelt that in 1942, called to forcibly remove and imprison individuals of Japanese ancestry. This also happened to fall days after the signing of Executive Order 13769, more commonly known as the Muslim travel ban. While using our collections to remember and recognize the injustices that occurred in 1942, the project also became an opportunity to draw connections between historic and current events and engage in dialogue on contemporary issues.

As part of the 75th anniversary, the JADP sponsored a digital exhibit and many of the participating universities held physical exhibits and related programming. The standardized, ethical, and inclusive description made it possible for project metadata to be upcycled as part of the didactic information and exhibit narratives, ultimately broadening the project's reach and extending the impact of the metadata.

Conclusion

There are several things that I think were important to the success of the descriptive component of this project. First, community-driven metadata is key when describing the documents of a marginalized community. This requires time and resources, but it will greatly enhance the integrity of the metadata. Second, we can approach metadata not only as standardized, neutral description but also as a tool for doing social justice work. Metadata can be part of the reparations process for oppressed or underdocumented groups. It can be an opportunity for communities to reclaim the language that is used to describe their lived experiences. Lastly, metadata can help us make connections between historical events and current circumstances. It can be a part of deepening present conversations around social justice and contemporary issues.

The Japanese American Digitization Project was a large-scale, consortial effort, but inclusive, community-driven metadata can be adapted for small-scale projects with limited resources too. Metadata is just one way that archivists can incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion concepts into the work that we do.

More information

CSU Japanese American Digitization Project Website: csujad.com
CSU Japanese American Digitization Project: An Exhibit:
    http://scalar.usc.edu/works/csujad-exhibit/index
Willams, Tyson, and Burns (2015). Building a Statewide Archival Collaborative: The
    California State University Japanese American
    Digitization Project:
    https://online.vraweb.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1078&context=vrab
Densho: densho.org

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