

Premised on Care: Redescription as Restorative Justice in American Archives

The Library and Information Science Program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH) respectfully requests \$359,894 for a three-year Laura Bush 21st Century Early Career Development Grant to study emerging redescription practices in US archival repositories. This research will result in improved approaches to redescription efforts by identifying best professional practices for culturally responsive decision-making with regard to archival redescription. The study asks the following research questions:

1. *What are the existing practices around archival redescription? How and why are redescription practices being engaged?*
2. *When and how does digitization act as an impetus for redescription practices?*
3. *What knowledge, skills, and tools do archivists implementing redescription projects need for their endeavors to be successful?*

Need: The field of Archival Studies has undergone several recent shifts: centering local communities and their unique voices, needs, and recordkeeping practices; expanding how archivists understand context to challenge the idea that context is always bounded and easily knowable; re-examining the role of the archivist and the possibilities and challenges inherent in archival intervention; and, more recently, developing practices with an eye toward harm-reduction such as community-centered archival description and archival redescription. In 2019, Alicia Chilcott, writing for *Archival Science* suggested moving towards protocols for describing racially offensive language in UK public archives, while Sam Frederick, writing for *iJournal* that same year, urged archivists to focus on decolonization efforts by beginning with daily processes, such as description. Similarly, the *Society of American Archivists* (SAA)’s Summer 2019 edition of “Descriptive Notes,” the newsletter of the SAA Description Section, focused entirely on accessible, anti-racist, community-centered description. The newsletter includes references to Archives for Black Lives Philadelphia’s work around community-centered description and a piece by archivist Courtney Dean that reports on a pilot project to survey and redescribe archival holdings documenting the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. The project was undertaken with the stated aim to audit archival description in finding aids for “euphemistic language not in line with the preferred terminology advocated for by the present-day Japanese American Community.” Alongside more informal conversations on social media (e.g. a 2019 #archivisttwitter conversation on #racistrecords), this turn towards rethinking description and developing redescription practices speaks to a growing urgency in the profession to grapple with extant harmful and violent description and to remediate the harm caused by past descriptive practices. This theoretical shift and the factors that have influenced these changes in archival practice are wide-ranging. Early research conducted by the PI of this proposal suggests that in addition to local repository practices, digitization and aggregation endeavors are also worthy of deeper inquiry. For example, as a result of the black- and brownface scandals that have recently caught archives off-guard, including yearbook photos of Virginia Governor Ralph Northam in blackface and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in brownface (just two of several such instances), and now-digitized slavery-era archives that adopt and reproduce the descriptive practices used by slave traders, slaveholders, and colonial officers, archivists and archival studies scholars have begun to name and identify a growing tendency to reinscribe racist ideologies and codify harmful narratives as one potential flaw in the design and execution of digitization workflows. While anecdotal evidence exists, an empirical study is needed at the intersection of description and digitization to determine whether 1) improved access as a result of digitization has a role to play in redescription endeavors; 2) mass digitization results in automated standardization of harmful description at scale; and 3) aggregation amplifies or legitimizes problematic description in ways that may contribute to further harms.

Project Design: This study addresses the distinctive role archives play as trusted sources of information and can play as trusted spaces for community engagement and dialogue: trust is formed when archives can be seen as reliable, confidence-inspiring, and physically and emotionally safe. Restorative justice acknowledges that archival practices have caused harm and centers on repairing that harm. Restorative justice also requires that the people most affected by the harm done be able to participate in its resolution. Framing redescription as restorative justice, this study aims to increase the visibility and transparency of existing redescription practices; identify how and why redescription practices are being engaged; assess the role of digitization as an impetus for redescription; engage and support cultural communities in advocating for preferred terminologies; and offer guidance and assistance for archivists who seek to implement best practices for redescription as restorative justice, thus repairing the harms imbedded in their own collections. To that end, the project’s PI, Tonia Sutherland, along with a Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) will conduct in-depth qualitative interviews, focus groups, and community listening sessions at 20 research sites across the United States. These sites were selected because they have either identified redescription as an institutional or organizational priority or because they have been involved with a public encounter or concern that has resulted in descriptive remediation. Sites have also been chosen with an eye toward geographic distribution, attention to diversity

in cultural representation, and variability in organizational or institutional size and collecting missions. Examples of proposed research sites include the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research at the American Philosophical Society (Pennsylvania) which has used redescription to update representations of Indigenous peoples to be intellectual authorities rather than subject matter; the University of Houston Libraries (Texas) which has worked to update metadata on holdings related to enslaved people; the Clements Library at the University of Michigan which conducted a redescription project focused on gender; and the University of California Riverside, which has piloted using computer scripts to audit for harmful description.

The proposed study engages archivists, users, and the broader community in alignment with the 2018-2022 IMLS Strategic Plan to build capacity, promote lifelong learning, and increase public access. Project activities are focused in the following three areas: **1.)** *Survey existing practices around archival redescription to better understand how and why redescription practices are being engaged.* The PI and GRA will conduct a formal survey of current practices, recruit interview participants at each site, and organize 15 focus groups. **2.)** *Develop a framework for determining when and how digitization acts as an impetus for redescription practices.* The PI and GRA will conduct three rounds of in-depth qualitative interviews with archivists (preliminary, primary, follow-up), conduct focus groups with users, and hold listening sessions with community stakeholders, creating a trusted space for community engagement and dialogue. **3.)** *Create a toolkit for archivists who seek to implement redescription protocols for their collections and a forum for community engagement.* The PI and GRA will analyze and disseminate data, including creating a website to report on findings; designing and circulating a printable visual resource; presenting findings at conferences for iterative feedback and further development; publishing findings in academic and non-academic venues; creating a start-up kit for archivists interested in beginning redescription projects; creating a network for archivists working on redescription and engaged community-members invested in descriptive practices; and hosting a forum for sharing redescription experiences, questions, and advice.

Diversity Plan: This project centers on how people from cultural communities are represented and described in American archives. By seeking feedback specifically from members of these groups in community listening sessions, the PI seeks to attain a multivalent expression of redescription needs and practices. The project seeks to empower cultural communities (especially BIPOC, LGBTQ, and immigrant communities) by creating space to articulate the harms inherent in current practices and to identify ways to remediate those harms. Many extant redescription projects are aimed at correcting historical injury to cultural communities; this study seeks to codify and make visible that work, in the service of those communities. By centering the work of organizations such as Archives for Black Lives Philadelphia, the project takes its lead in making recommendations from those most likely to be injured by damaging description. The GRA working on the project will be given an opportunity to apply a critical theoretical archival lens to a real-life problem at a university known for its strengths in ethnic and cultural diversity, while working to create practical solutions for archives professionals seeking to remediate historical cultural and community harms.

Broad Impact: The following impacts are expected: **1.)** Contribution to theoretical and practical knowledge about traditional redescription practices and the relationship between digitization and redescription, as well as community-based knowledge about the impact of descriptive practices among cultural communities. **2.)** Contribution to practical knowledge about harm reduction and remediation, descriptive remediation, and the practical application of critical theory to archival description in archival repositories across the US. **3.)** Provision of evidence-based, field-tested materials for institutions and organizations seeking to implement archival redescription programs. Research outcomes will be publicized through conference presentations (e.g. *SAA*, *AERI*) and publication (e.g. *American Archivist*; *JCLIS*; *Sustainable Futures*); data and materials will be made available through a public website.

Budget Summary: The estimated budget for this project is \$359,894. This includes \$92,142 for 3 years of PI summer support; \$89,398 for 3 years of GRA support (including tuition and fringe benefits); \$15,000 for travel for data collection and research dissemination; \$13,250 for other research support (including software, hardware, transcription services, and start-up kits); \$12,000 for advisory board stipends; \$3750 for participant incentives; \$5750 for 50 start-up kits (includes \$100 in seed funding, postage, and printing costs), and negotiated 45.5% in indirect costs.

Project Personnel: The PI for the proposed project is Dr. Tonia Sutherland, Assistant Professor at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Dr. Sutherland, whose research focuses on archival and digital studies, holds an MLIS and PhD from the University of Pittsburgh. She is the Director of the Initiative for the Study of Underrepresented Cultures and Ethnicities (SOURCE) Hawai'i. Her recent work on archival redescription, conducted with MLISc students in the SOURCE Hawai'i Research Lab, is scheduled for January publication. Dr. Sutherland will work with a GRA enrolled in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Communication and Information Sciences Interdisciplinary PhD program to complete the project goals.