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A Weapon and a Tool: Decolonizing Description and Embracing Redescription as Liberatory Archival Praxis

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Abstract

This article uses Indigenous decolonizing methodologies and Critical Race Theory (CRT) as methodological and theoretical frameworks to address colonial and racialized concerns about archival description; to argue against notions of diversity and inclusion in archival descriptive practices; and to make recommendations for decolonizing description and embracing redescription as liberatory archival praxis. First, we argue that extant descriptive practices do not diversify archives. Rather, we find that descriptive work that isolates and scatters aims to erase the identifiable existence of unique Indigenous voices. Next, we argue that while on one hand, the mass digitization of slavery-era records holds both the promise of new historical knowledge and of genealogical reconstruction for descendants of enslaved peoples, on the other hand, this trend belies a growing tendency to reinscribe racist ideologies and codify damaging ideas about how we organize and create new knowledge through harmful descriptive practices. Finally, working specifically against the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion, we challenge the ways archives claim diverse representation by uncritically describing records rooted in generational trauma, hatred, and genocide, and advocate for developing and employing decolonizing and redescriptive practices to support an archival praxis rooted in justice and liberation, rather than more palatable (and less effective) notions of "diversity and inclusion".

Keywords: archival redescription; decolonizing methodologies; diversity and inclusion; liberatory archives; refusal and sovereignty

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Introduction

Archival description is a tool that assists in the process of discovery. Description, in its most effective form, works to increase access to archival materials by revealing the structure and content of archival collections while also highlighting materials within collections that may be of particular interest to researchers. In *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS), The Society of American Archivists (SAA) foregrounds the idea that "the nature of archival materials, their distribution across many institutions, and the physical requirements of archival repositories necessitate the creation of … descriptive surrogates, which can then be consulted in lieu of directly browsing through quantities of original documents" (2013, p. xxi). In this way, description simplifies and streamlines discovery; and for this reason, descriptive tools such as finding aids[1] which result from professional descriptive practices, are often a researcher's first encounter with a repository's collections and other archival materials. Archivist Richard Pearce-Moses defines description as the "process of creating a finding aid or other access tools that

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allow individuals to browse a surrogate of the collection to facilitate access and that improve security by creating a record of the collection and by minimizing the amount of handling of the original materials." (Pearce-Moses, 2005). In this vein, descriptive practices, like any other tool, can be weaponized as a means through which power structures, both colonial and decolonial, are reaffirmed and reinforced.

When archives seek to diversify their collections in efforts towards inclusivity, there are often harmful side effects, raising questions about whether diversity (and inclusion) is a goal towards which archives should be working. Archival descriptive practice is, for example, often fraught with violence and othering. Best practices for archival description have long been codified and standardized through classification systems such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and, more recently, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS). Marisa Duarte and Miranda Belarde-Lewis (2015) describe descriptive standardization as a violent process that inherently valorizes some perspectives while simultaneously silencing others. This violence further encourages a binary of universality versus diversity in which diversity becomes defined by universality—or what it is not—and in which efforts to diversify are easily claimed to have been accomplished. Using the Hawai'i State Archives' M-93 Queen Lili'uokalani Manuscript Collection (M-93) and the archives of Atlantic slavery as case studies, this paper argues that to truly reimagine archival spaces as liberatory is to embrace those most marginalized by archives; to move beyond the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion; to decolonize archival praxis; and to work actively against systems of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Using Indigenous epistemologies and Critical Race Theory (CRT) as methodological frames, we assert that this work can be accomplished in part by decolonizing extant descriptive practices and embracing redescription as a liberatory archival praxis.

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

To address colonial and racialized concerns about archival description; to argue against notions of diversity and inclusion in archival descriptive practices; and to make recommendations for decolonizing description and embracing redescription as liberatory archival praxis, we use Indigenous decolonizing methodologies and CRT as methodological and theoretical frameworks. To exemplify these frameworks, we have chosen to focus on two case studies. First, we problematize the Hawai'i State Archives' M-93 Queen Lili'uokalani Manuscript Collection, for which current descriptive practices fail to uphold mutual archival obligations crucial to Native Hawaiian kinship—including recognizing language as a carrier of culture, communication, and protective properties; here, we argue that descriptive tools for M-93 should be constructed in 'Ōlelo Hawai'i [the Hawaiian language] to better strengthen Native Hawaiian kinship connections. Our second case study builds on the first, shifting our lens slightly from a single finding aid and the kinship networks often hidden as a result of colonial archival practices, to the collective harm that is done when these kinds of colonial and other damaging descriptive practices are reproduced in digital environments. Focusing on the archives of Atlantic slavery and the need to embrace redescription practices, the second case study reflects a different set of cultural practices and traditions that nonetheless draw on similar concerns about archival description. Taken together, these two cases demonstrate that Indigenous and Black communities may not best be represented through unexamined models of diversity and inclusion, particularly in current archival description practices.

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Decolonizing Methodologies

In her essay "Imperialism, History, Writing and Theory," Maori scholar and professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith critiques western tools—imperialism, history, writing, and theory—that are commonly used in research on Indigenous worlds (Smith, 1999). Smith (1999) argues that colonizers utilize these tools to further the colonization of Indigenous peoples through practices of dehumanizing, othering, excluding, and misrepresenting. However, Smith (1999) also argues that Indigenous peoples can re-appropriate problematic colonial tools and utilize them to support decolonizing efforts. Here, we argue that these tools, when centered in Indigenous worldviews and epistemologies, can contribute to decolonization in the form of contested and alternative histories, proper representation, and discourse that radically critiques imperial notions of language, legitimacy, and power. The concept of decolonizing description is characterized in these pages by the efforts of Indigenous peoples to challenge and deconstruct problematic archival standards and institutions in order to implement new, decolonial standards and institutions that are steeped in Indigenous knowledge organization systems, and that work towards reconciliation and/or reaffirming Indigenous sovereignty.

Critical Race Theory

CRT is a broad theoretical framework that stems from a synthesis of scholarly work challenging dominant contemporary understandings of race and the law. CRT allows for a deeper understanding of how race and racism are threaded through professional practices and therefore also through the products and results of those professional practices. In his 2006 article, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started," Anthony W. Dunbar invokes narrative as a mode of applying CRT to archival discourse. Dunbar (2006) argues that failing to question dominant, traditional, hegemonic, or "master" narratives is one of the principal ways that archival discourse continues to perpetrate and perpetuate harm. Dunbar further suggests that the construction of counternarratives is a powerful means of remediating that harm (Dunbar, 2006). Counternarrative (i.e. reading and writing *against*) and the construction of more faithful representations are powerful tools for resistance, social justice, and liberation. This paper uses CRT as a framework to make a case for counternarrative as essential to redescriptive practices; we argue that redescription, at its heart, is about reading and writing *against* extant description and about counternarrating harmful description in order to move toward a more liberatory and justice-oriented archival praxis.

Decolonizing Description

The extant literature on decolonizing description stems from the efforts of Indigenous peoples to challenge and deconstruct problematic archival standards and institutions in favor of implementing new standards and institutions that align more closely with Indigenous knowledge organization systems. For example, Kelly Webster and Ann Doyle (2008) describe existing descriptive practices as barriers that either confine Indigenous peoples into a single, confining area of classification schedules or diasporize Indigenous topics across a wide Western knowledge-based taxonomy. Indigenous scholars working on decolonizing description specialize in building knowledge organization systems outside traditional colonial structures. The constant imaginings and re-imaginings of archival structures in this body of research speaks to a need within the field to re-evaluate and challenge the existing, problematic structures that impede the goals of Indigenous peoples. For example, scholars have challenged the controlled vocabularies, standardization, enforced binaries, and other problematic aspects of archival description, all of

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which are exemplified in the archival finding aid.

An ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi Finding Aid

Kānaka Maoli[2] [Native Hawaiians] have always looked to their ancestors (in all their infinite forms) as potent sources of mana[3] [supernatural or divine power] to ground Kānaka Maoli in times of confusion and powerlessness. Tracing all beings to the same source, Hawaiian creation stories[4] honor and acknowledge Hawaiians' kinship with the universe and all that it encompasses. Within and across these connections, there is a braided cord—an ʻaha—tying all Hawaiians together. Hawaiian Studies Professor Kekuewa Kikiloi looks to the ʻaha as a visual metaphor and defines it as a genealogical confirmation braided between the past and present (2012). When we understand that the ʻaha is not an event but is instead a structure,[5] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of the "cultural bomb" comes to mind because constant, colonial explosions of misrepresentations persist today to contribute to the annihilation of Indigenous peoples' beliefs in our names, our languages, our lands, our unity, and ourselves (1986). Land Desecration. Houselessness. Language Suppression. Boom. Boom. Boom. Like asteroids, Kānaka Maoli spin recklessly and violently through a Western culturized universe that we can't see—let alone navigate.

For example, the Hawaiʻi State Archives' M-93 Queen Liliʻuokalani Manuscript Collection (M-93) has grounded Kānaka Maoli in the chaos of the cultural bomb and allowed us to reactivate and engage within our ʻaha network. However, current descriptive practices fail to uphold the mutual obligations crucial to Hawaiian kinship. Because language is a carrier of culture and communication and possesses protective properties, descriptive tools for M-93 need to be constructed in ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi [Hawaiian language] in order to strengthen the ʻaha-connection between the collection and Kānaka Maoli, to facilitate collective growth and the successful transmission of knowledge across the Hawaiian community, and to protect against external forces that threaten the ʻaha network.[6]

M-93: The Queen Liliʻuokalani Manuscript Collection

Comprising 9 linear feet of correspondence, diaries, account books, song books, and other papers pertaining to Queen Liliʻuokalani—the last reigning monarch of the Kingdom of Hawaiʻi, M-93 exists in three subgroups, the third of which contains documents that Judge Albert F. Judd seized from Liliʻuokalani's desk following her arrest by the Republic of Hawaiʻi on January 16, 1895. As a Graduate Research Assistant at the Hawaiʻi State Archives this author has been tasked with constructing and reconstructing item-level descriptions for M-93 materials in English and, for the first time, in ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi. This article affirms the need for such an endeavor through the framework of the ʻaha. As a result of the ongoing efforts of Kānaka Maoli to reclaim our mother tongue amid the illegal occupation of the Hawaiian lands by the U.S., Article 15 of the Constitution of the State of Hawaiʻi recognized ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi as an official state language in 1978 (Hawai'i Legislative Resource Bureau), and the state lifted the 1896 ban of the use of the Hawaiian language in all schools in 1986 (Act 57, s. 30, 1896 Laws of the Republic of Hawaiʻi). A finding aid constructed solely in ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi continues a rich and active legacy of Kānaka Maoli asserting our rights as a people to speak.

Language as a Carrier of Culture

Encompassing the social norms, values, memory, and identity of a people, culture possesses two

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main levels: base and aesthetic. Language unites the two levels and facilitates the successful articulation, development, and transmission of culture. Hawaiian language Professor Larry Kimura (1983) defines base culture as consisting of the "daily lifestyle, values, and personality of a people" while the aesthetic culture consists of "ceremonies, philosophy, and literature"—all of which reinforce and legitimize values inherent in the base level (p. 181). For the majority of Kānaka Maoli living under illegal U.S. occupation, America and its assimilatory institutions have forced an American-English aesthetic culture upon the ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi base culture, which has, in turn, weakened the Hawaiian base and aesthetic cultures and left Kānaka Maoli vulnerable to the destructive forces of the cultural bomb. Because language is a carrier of culture, descriptive tools for M-93 should be constructed in ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi in order to perpetuate a Hawaiian base culture and cultivate a Hawaiian aesthetic culture, which will reaffirm and strengthen the ʻaha network. Furthermore, the ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi finding aid should be constructed as an independent document that is not an extension of, supplement for, or reflection of an American-English counterpart. This is necessary to ensure that we are not merely dressing up the problematic descriptions of a disconnected Anglo-American culture under the false guise of diversity.

Free from the colonial confines of an English counterpart, an ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi finding aid would perpetuate the collective memory—an aspect of base culture—shared between Kānaka Maoli and the collection through its use of vocabulary reflective of Kānaka experiences and perspectives. For example, when referring to annexation, the proposed finding aid utilizes the term "hoʻohuli kūʻokoʻa," which describes an overturning (hoʻohuli) of independence and freedom [kūʻokoʻa] and evokes feelings of resistance and loss. "Annexation" carries connotations and memories that are disconnected from the Hawaiian base culture and that speak from an Anglo-American culture of colonization and domination. Its root word "annex" describes the action of adding to "something larger or more important" (Dictionary.com, LLC, n.d.), which seeks to justify annexation as not only necessary but also beneficial for the involved parties. This had not been the case for Kānaka, who staunchly resisted annexation as demonstrated by the more than 21,000 signatures compiled by the anti-annexation "Kūʻē petitions" of 1897 (Silva, 2004), and who continue to suffer as a result of it as demonstrated by our rising levels of poverty (Pignataro, 2018), incarceration (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2014), and suicide (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2018). M-93 upholds and perpetuates the Hawaiian heritage of resistance within its wide scope of petitions, letters to foreign powers, statements of protest, national songs, and newspaper articles. For example, Box 6-Folder 61-Item #512 contains a petition (in ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi) that Joseph Nāwahī presented on behalf of the group Hui Aloha ʻĀina o Ko Hawaiʻi Pae ʻĀina on 1896-05-16 and that seeks to restore Liliʻuokalani following her dethronement and imprisonment. When remembering the annexation, the term "hoʻohuli kūʻokoʻa" properly echoes the voices of the collection and Kānaka Maoli, which are voices of Indigenous resistance against American forces. There are no American-English words that could adequately encapsulate or speak to such distinctly Hawaiian experiences.

On top of perpetuating base culture, an ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi finding aid would also cultivate a Hawaiian aesthetic culture in its preservation of the kaona[7] of the collection's large number of ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi songs, poems, writings, and other artistic expressions—the symbolisms and layered meanings of which become lost in translation (Kuwada, 2018). The American-English finding aid fails to encapsulate the distinctly Hawaiian nuances of M-93's materials because the American-English language carries its own Anglo-American culture and is not equipped to hold within itself the Hawaiian universe. For instance, M-93 possesses documents and manuscripts that detail the moʻokūʻauhau[8] for an extensive number of prominent Kingdom-Era figures. Box 6-Folder 67-Item

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589 contains the moʻokūʻauhau of Liliʻuokalani and her siblings and traces them back to the gods Papa (Earth Mother) and Wākea (Sky Father). The current American-English finding aid describes these materials as "genealogy," which is not a sufficient enough term to encapsulate everything moʻokūʻauhau represents. The "moʻo" aspect of "moʻokūʻauhau" evokes the resiliency of a lizard's tail, the life-giving and death-dealing nature of Hawaiian water deities, and the relationality that exists between a grandchild and grandparent or one land division tucked within another (Pukui & Elbert, 1986f). It also alludes to related concepts like moʻolelo, which encompasses narratives, histories, literature, and their embedded lessons and ancestral knowledge (Pukui & Elbert, 1986g). The "ʻauhau" aspect of "moʻokūʻauhau" calls to mind the Hawaiian customs of paying tribute to the community and its leaders and evokes the respect, humility, and reciprocity involved in those processes (ʻPukui & Elbert, 1986c). ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi descriptors more accurately describe the character and potentiality of records than American-English descriptors, and they not only retain the kaona of the materials but also provide Kānaka with the language and symbolism to cultivate it. In this vein, the base culture represents our existing ʻaha network, and the aesthetic culture is not only our engagement with but also our expansion of the network.

Language as a Carrier of Communication

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) describes three main elements of language as communication: speech, written words, and relations with others. As a carrier of communication, an ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi finding aid facilitates collective growth through its documentary form and its impact on the Hawaiian community—both of which ensure the successful transmission of Hawaiian culture. In its written form and with its dynamic language, the ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi finding aid serves as an articulation and documentation of the collection's expanding "semantic genealogy" (Ketelaar, 2001) and ʻaha network for current and future generations of Kānaka not only to grow and develop but also to grow and develop from. According to Eric Ketelaar's (2001) concept of semantic genealogy, re-contextualization—a constant throughout an item's lifetime—transforms the value, purpose, and character of the record. By applying re-contextualization from a Hawaiian point of views to M-93, Kānaka Maoli activate the collection and facilitate its growth. For example, numerous M-93 descriptions utilize the term "aloha ʻāina," literally translating to "love of the land" (Pukui & Elbert, 1986a, p. 21). The term carries a heavy history because it calls to mind past anti-annexation efforts such as the *Hui Aloha ʻĀina* political party, the party's newspaper *Ke Aloha Aina*, and James Kaulia's 1897 speech in which he declares, "e kue loa aku i ka hoohui ia o Hawaii me Amerika a hiki i ke aloha aina hope loa"—meaning "we should forever resist and oppose the annexation of Hawaiʻi by America until the very last aloha ʻāina" (Kaulia, 1897). Historical context expands the literal meaning of aloha ʻāina to encompass not only a love for the land but also love for one's nation and people. We've witnessed this semantic expansion in how we've adapted the term to refer to Hawaiian patriots and to fuel Kānaka Maoli movements like the protests against the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope at Mauna Kea and the annual marches for Hawaiian sovereignty and independence in Waikīkī [9]. When utilizing an ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi finding aid, we activate a whole moʻokūʻauhau of interpretations, learn from such a heritage, and build on it with our own research and knowledge.

While its written form successfully serves as a carrier of communication, the proposed finding aid's service in its "relations with others"—specifically the Kānaka Maoli community—is far more profound and wide-reaching in that it normalizes the use of ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi, provides the language with, and efficiency for, productive research, and helps activate greater agency among Kānaka. Ideally, every collection in Hawaiʻi would possess an ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi finding aid, so that Kānaka

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can more easily access and navigate archival contents while reactivating and expanding our ʻaha-networks and lifting our need to rely solely on American-English tools. This also normalizes the use of ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi, an official state language that Kānaka have fought to push into courts (Lincoln, 2018) and schools (Wong, 2019). Normalizing the language normalizes the worldviews and culture it carries. The traditional metaphor of mālama ʻāina is one example of a Hawaiian worldview. The metaphor describes the relationship between Kānaka and ʻāina[10] as one in which the land, taro, and chiefs are expected "to feed, clothe, and shelter their younger brothers and sisters, the Hawaiian people" and the Hawaiian people, in turn, are expected to reciprocate those actions (Kameʻeleihiwa, 2012).

ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi embeds this dynamic into its classification of ʻāina as part of the "o" possessive class—a class reserved for an inherent type of belonging similar to how a Kānaka belongs to his/her/their body or his/her/their parents. During the transmission process, the ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi finding aid and its described materials uphold mālama ʻāina and communicate the metaphor to the researcher, who carries it into his/her work. The produced work further pushes the metaphor into the community, where Kānaka can learn from the research and use it to exercise their agency across the economic, educational, political, and socio-cultural sectors of society. As demonstrated by the efforts of Kānaka (Friedlander et al., 2002) and institutions like the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, n.d.), Kamehameha Schools (Kamehameha Schools, n.d.), and even factions within the Department of Education (State of Hawaiʻi, 2017-2020), mālama ʻāina-informed research could alter existing stewardship practices, education structures, and legislation, which could expand our land rights, improve our ability to control our resources, reduce rates of poverty and houselessness, and more.

Research informed by Hawaiian language and worldview fuel Kānaka Maoli agency. We have witnessed this in the movements and protests spurred by groundbreaking archival research—like that of Political Science Professor Noenoe Silva. Silva's research into the Kūʻē Petitions at the U.S. National Archives has shifted the ways we regard and remember Hawaiian heritage of resistance against colonial forces and has contributed to movements resisting the U.S.'s prolonged occupation of Hawaiʻi at the state, national, and international levels (Silva, 2004). The research born from our kinship with M-93 is a braid within the vast, forever-expanding ʻaha network and is, therefore, not created in a vacuum. With ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi as its conduit, produced knowledge continuously cycles between the collection, researcher, and community.

Language as Protection

Moreover, descriptive tools for M-93 should be constructed in ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi because language possesses protective properties. It staves off foreign cultures that want to dominate the collection and Kānaka, alleviates the need to rely on harmful and problematic coping mechanisms, and shields us from the ongoing annihilation of the cultural bomb. While the ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi finding aid does not completely quell the bomb, it is one way to unite a collection and people who have been forced into spaces that threaten not only our union but also our very existence.

Embracing Redescription

The first substantive articulation of foundational ideas around description in Archival Studies—as a profession oriented in European traditions—can be traced to the 1898 *Dutch Manual* penned by Muller et al. (modern archivists utilize the 1940's translation). The *Manual*, almost entirely

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devoted to arrangement and description, solidified for archivists that descriptive practices were at the core of their professional work. Today, for most archivists and archival institutions, description remains at the core of both professional practice and theoretical discourse. Over time, research on description in the archival literature has attended to the development of descriptive standards as well as the challenges and opportunities presented by new technologies. However, the research questions being posed around both description theory and practice have remained largely the same: they have mainly focused on the nature of description, the purpose of description, units of descriptive measure, standardization, and notions of control.

The field of Archival Studies has undergone several recent shifts: centering 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, to developing practices with an eye toward harm-reduction such as community-centered archival description and archival redescription. In 2019, for example, Alicia Chilcott, writing for *Archival Science* suggests moving towards protocols for describing racially offensive language in UK public archives while Sam Frederick, writing for *iJournal* that same year, urges 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 4 Black Lives (A4BL) Philadelphia's work around community-centered description and a piece by archivist Courtney Dean (2019) on redescribing Japanese American collections at UCLA in which Dean reports on a pilot project to survey archival holdings documenting the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. Dean's 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" (Dean, 2019, p. 6) Alongside more popular venues such as social media, which in 2019 saw an uptick in hashtags such as #racistrecords, this turn toward rethinking description and toward 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.

How wide-ranging is this theoretical shift and what are the factors that have influenced these changes in archival practice? From the black- and brownface scandals that have recently caught archives off-guard—yearbook photos of Virginia Governor Ralph Northam in blackface and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in brownface, to name just two of several examples—to now-digitized slavery-era archives that tend to mirror descriptive practices as they already exist, adopting and reproducing 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 damaging ideas about how we organize and create new knowledge as one drawback of mass digitization. The access afforded the public by digitization practices has arguably rendered archival description too visible to not take the calls to remediate harm seriously through redescription practices.

Just as Indigenous voices are lost in efforts to diversify the archival record, the increasing number of digital archives, databases, and other digitization projects focused on the Atlantic slavery era are transforming how scholars in the humanities and social sciences study and understand the

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history of human enslavement (Agostinho, 2019; Johnson, 2018). Scholars such as Simone Browne (2015) and Jessica Marie Johnson (2018) have suggested that archives are deeply implicated in colonial histories of quantification; histories that endure through the accounting and marking of Black people's bodies. Johnson (2018) argues, for example, that archival descriptive practices frequently reinscribe the biometric measures used to describe enslaved people by carrying the racial nomenclature of the time period (such as mulatto and octaroon) into the present and work to "encode skin color, hair texture, height, weight, age, and gender in new digital forms, replicating the surveilling actions of slave owners and slave traders" (pp. 59-60) and warns that if left unaddressed, the violence of these archival processes—namely description—will "reproduce themselves in digital architecture" (pp. 58-59).

These concerns are not unfounded: frequently, digital archives mirror descriptive practices as they already exist, rather than taking up the goal of redescription. In now-digitized slavery-era archives, the end result has been that archivists have uncritically adopted and reproduced both structures of knowledge organization and descriptive practices used by slave traders, slaveholders, and colonial officers. Early research on redescription suggests that in addition to local repository practices, digitization and aggregation endeavors are worthy of deeper inquiry. The following section outlines the need for redescription practices, discusses existing redescription efforts, identifies how and why these practices are being engaged, and addresses the ways that digitization does (and does not) act as an impetus for redescription.

A Brief Survey of Existing Redescription Practices

There are several repositories that have begun to embrace redescription as archival best practice. An informal survey of practicing archivists in late 2019 revealed several redescription projects that have been undertaken over the past 15 or so years. As early as the mid-2000s, staff at the Clements Library at the University of Michigan conducted a redescription project that focused on gender. More recently, the Claremont Colleges (California, U.S.), as part of a Collections as Data grant from the Mellon Foundation have begun to collaborate with community partners to attach appropriate indigenous place names to roughly 13,000 digital files of mixed archival materials, including journals, ledgers, correspondence, field notes, and maps documenting the history of water use in Southern California in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[11] The University of Montana is reported to have done some redescription work on their Native American collections as has The Center for Native American and Indigenous Research at The American Philosophical Society.[12] Princeton University's Special Collections division has done important work contextualizing and offering interventions to problematic terminology in their finding aids (drawing from A4BL), and working to ensure that predominantly Spanish-language collections have predominantly Spanish-language finding aids. Archivists at the University of California, Riverside have experimented with using computational scripts to audit existing descriptive practices while archivists at the University of Texas Austin have argued for redescription noting that titling files accurately but failing to provide contextual description is dangerous and that assumptions of neutrality create biases in favor of historical racism.[13] Finally, work done by the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University, new redescription work being undertaken by the Brooklyn Historical Society (New York, U.S.), and a small pilot project at the University of Houston (Texas, U.S.). Libraries focused on metadata redescription for slavery-era records represent some of the work currently being done on developing best practices for and implementing instances of archival redescription.

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Digitization and Redescription

The archives of Atlantic slavery were created by colonizers and slaveholders. Rather than being faithful representations of the colonized and enslaved, they are a deeply complex, fraught, and often problematic set of sources that speak to how archives hold, produce, and reproduce agency, privilege, and power. The mass digitization and datafication of slavery-era archives has arguably contributed to a distancing of the lived experiences of enslaved people from slavery's historical imaginary. Performance studies scholar Harvey Young has argued that societal ideas of the "Black body" (where the "Black body" is an imagined—and inescapable—myth of Blackness upon which narratives are projected and around which mythologies are formed), are too often projected across the actual bodies of Black people, rendering Black people frequent targets of abuse (Young, 2010). Because of the significant temporal gap between the violence of the past and the visual experience of the present, when slavery-era records are digitized en masse, records appear and circulate in different contexts. This decontextualization removes the immediacy of trauma, giving records that document that trauma new afterlives, often independent of their historical context.

Given the nature of slavery-era archives, and the long-acknowledged problematics of the history of systems of archival production, it is important to pose a set of critical questions about these archives, the history they represent, and our affective relationship to the memories they evoke. For example, how do descendants of the enslaved pin their discursive location in history and, how are the formerly enslaved continuing constitutive figures in our consciousness? How does resurfacing the material conditions of Atlantic slavery in digital spaces fashion Black and African American individual and collective identities and ideologies? What mythos surround the period of chattel slavery in the U.S., and what is the relationship between the symbolic resurrection of enslaved people via records created about—but not by—them and the truth of their personhood, which includes, but of course is not limited to, the facts of their lives?

The increasing number of digital archives, databases, and other digitization projects focused on the slavery era are transforming how scholars in the humanities and social sciences study the history of human enslavement (Agostinho, 2019; Johnson, 2018). As archival scholar Laura Millar writes in her 2007 article,

> We are often cautioned not to look at the documentary residue of one culture through the intellectual lens of another. While the study of past cultures demands that we step outside our own temporal reality, perhaps it is also true that when one … system intersects with another, in the past or the present, we must consider the effects of that intersection on the social relationships and the communications processes of both cultures. (p. 330)

While digitization offers broad access to important information about enslaved people, including rare records about birth, life, and death; social and cultural customs and norms; disease and illness; and so much more, the uncritical reproduction of violent and harmful descriptive practices must be critiqued through a CRT lens. Interrogating descriptive practices as extensions of whiteness, one might ask: "What does it mean for someone who thinks about Black people as 'the Other' to describe and narrate the experiences of chattel slavery?;" "How do these descriptive practices, yanked from a violent past, interfere with Black life and normalize Black death in the present?;" and "What narratives and counter-narratives emerge from these descriptive practices and how might these narratives contribute to our understandings of Black

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life in the present?" A critical race analysis of extant descriptive practices around slavery-era records necessarily raises questions about whiteness, about power, about violence and harm, about inclusion and exclusion, and eventually, about how more quantitative approaches and a turn to datafication (more generally as a result of digitization) may transform how we understand the era of chattel slavery in the U.S. As digitization leads to the construction of more slavery studies databases (the "North American Slave Narratives" database, for example) which require users to search holdings according to local descriptive practices, researchers have found themselves searching for terms that have long been considered outdated, offensive, violent, and harmful.

This leads to what Saidiya Hartman (2008) calls a "second order of violence" whereby the people already harmed by descriptive archival practices are again harmed, while also becoming a new form of datafied and quantifiable raw material from which new values can be extracted. Along with Johnson (2018), Simone Browne (2015), and Jacqueline Wernimont (2019) have also argued that data is deeply embedded in colonial histories of quantification that have a defining moment in the accounting and marking of enslaved bodies. Johnson further argues that if left unaddressed, the violence of these archival processes can "reproduce themselves in digital architecture" (Johnson, 2018, p. 58). Too frequently, digital archives mirror the organization of information as it already exists, rather than taking up the goal of reorganization or redescription. In now-digitized slavery-era archives, this means archivists have uncritically adopted and reproduced both structures of knowledge organization and descriptive practices used by slave traders, slaveholders, and colonial officers.

While Nikole Hannah-Jones's (2019) impressive *New York Times Magazine* undertaking, "The 1619 Project," aims to "reframe the country's history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are," not all projects have such noble goals. In the final case I want to discuss today, two images long stored away in an institutional attic are also now subject to new digital afterlives. Two daguerreotypes, commissioned by Louis Agassiz, a Swiss-born zoologist and Harvard professor (who is sometimes called the father of American natural science) and taken in 1850 by J.T. Zealy, in a studio in Columbia, South Carolina, have come to national attention in the U.S.[14] because of their digital afterlives. The daguerreotypes feature images of an enslaved man and woman, Renty and Delia, who were among seven enslaved people who appeared in 15 images made using the daguerreotype process, which, for those unfamiliar with the form, is an early type of photography imprinted on silvered copper plates. The images are haunting, and experiencing them feels voyeuristic, as Renty and Delia stare at the camera with detached expressions.

Tamara Lanier, who through deep genealogical research has identified the people in these images as family ancestors, has filed a lawsuit for their return, marking the first time the descendant of an enslaved person in the U.S. might be granted return of property rights (Per Benjamin Crump, Ms. Lanier's attorney, as cited in Hartocollis, 2019). Held by Harvard University, however, the daguerreotypes are highly contested records. After a long period during which they were believed to have been "lost," Harvard has since used the daguerreotypes, the worn and wary faces of Renty and Delia, on book covers, on event banners, and other forms of advertising and merchandise. Ta-Nahesi Coates, well-known for his article on the case for reparations to African Americans, has said of the image of Renty: "That photograph is like a hostage photograph. This is an enslaved black man with no choice being forced to participate in white supremacist propaganda — that's what that photograph was taken for" (Coates, 2019).

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Closely associated with the daguerreotypes are the slave inventories that have also been published online in the time since the case came to national attention. Used in part to verify Lanier's ancestral claims to the daguerreotypes, these inventories are replete with all the problems previously noted about knowledge organization and descriptive practices. While datafication and quantification might be lesser concerns in this case, commodification is a considerable worry as Renty and Delia have moved to digital platforms, where death and trauma are continuously re-inscribed and re-experienced, visually and perhaps, eternally.

Scholars such as Safiya Umoja Noble (2014) have written on the political economy of the death of Black people. Sutherland has similarly argued that there are political, social, and economic gains to be made by re-inscribing historical reminders of the conditions of Black people's deaths (Sutherland, 2017). These descriptive records serve as a means of power and control, a powerful reminder that Black Americans must be ever-vigilant, hyper-aware, and ever in fear for their lives. On one hand, the mass digitization of slavery-era records holds both the promise of new historical knowledge and of genealogical reconstruction for descendants of enslaved peoples; on the other hand, this trend belies a growing tendency to reinscribe racist ideologies, codify damaging ideas about how we organize and create new knowledge, codify harmful descriptive practices, and uncritically circulate records rooted in generational trauma, hatred, and genocide.

Against Diversity and Inclusion: Decolonizing Description and Engaging Redescription as Liberatory Archival Praxes

Against Diversity: Decolonizing Description as Liberatory Archival Praxis

Reaching toward diversity (a broad term often characterized as much by what is excluded as by what is included) is an imperfect attempt, at best, to represent a range of beliefs and perspectives. Too often, notions such as "diversity of thought" or "whiteness as diversity" supersede the inclusion of those in the margins in favor of furthering existing colonial ideas and practices. Like an 'aha braid, this paper ties together several of those colonial ideas and practices—the disconnected language of the existing M-93 finding aid, the violence of digitizing Atlantic slavery-era records without revisions or context, the commodification of the daguerreotypes of Renty and Delia, and more—in order to expose the shallowness and ineffectiveness of these feigned attempts at diversity and inclusion.

If not to diversify and include, what then are the real intentions of these initiatives? Perhaps they serve as prime examples of "false generosity," a concept Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) expounds on in his publication *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. (p. 44)

Diversity initiatives are only meaningful to the extent that unjust systems are maintained and enforced, which ultimately evades and neglects issues of oppression and dehumanization. True generosity is born from liberation that overthrows injustice and eradicates conditions where

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charity is seen as viable. Most importantly, true generosity and real change are born from the efforts not of the oppressor—who will not willingly relinquish or share his power—but of the oppressed. In his 1963 publication *The Wretched of the Earth*, French West Indian psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon argues that colonialism is "not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence" (p. 61). This "greater violence" is not and could never be found in superficial diversity policies that employ new gate-keeping mechanisms, exploit and re-traumatize oppressed peoples, and ignore calls for structural change. It comes from marginalized peoples and liberatory practices (such as those discussed in this paper) that move towards deconstructing and dismantling systems of harm, racism, and oppression.

Against Inclusion: Embracing Redescription as Liberatory Archival Praxis

Inclusion, as an extension of what are known as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, is frequently aimed at remedying gaps and vagaries, such as those which have been permitted to occur over time as a result of archival appraisal, or the assignation of sociocultural value to archival materials. Indeed, it is difficult to be represented (or misrepresented, as the case may be) in the archival corpus—and therefore the historical narrative—if the records that document your lives and the lives of others like you are not included. Inclusion, however, is a double-edged sword. One must always ask, *what does it mean to be included? Is being included in this instance going to ease or exaggerate burden? Will it alleviate or perpetuate harm? Is this a space in which I am welcome?*

As previously discussed, too often archivists recreate harmful descriptive (and other professional) practices, simply via uncritical transfer from analog to digital formats. *Is digital inclusion, in this case, alleviating or perpetuating harm? Is this digital space, with its analog violences, a space in which I am welcome? In which I want to be included?* What is perhaps most compelling is that notions of archival permanence—a feature, not a bug—often burden Black and Indigenous peoples' daily lived experiences. Oftentimes a result of pallid and hurried attempts at inclusion, these efforts, frequently taken up as a response to a specific social or political moment are damaging specifically because there is no right to refusal, no archival sovereignty. In these instances, inclusion is often thoughtless and even more often, violent or damaging. How ordinary (and extraordinary) Black and Indigenous people lived, how they died, how they are remembered, how their digital remains are constituted, and what happens to those remains is forever intimately linked to systemic and structural practices of anti-Black, anti-Indigenous (and often state-sponsored) violence, and that violence that is too frequently reinscribed and reified in—and also justified by—the archival record.

For inclusion to be anything other than a buzzword for archival praxis, it must also, on principle, embrace rights of refusal as advocated for by Indigenous scholars, many of whom argue that not every story is a story to pass on; that refusal can be generative and strategic; and that refusal can be seen as a deliberate move toward one thing, belief, practice, or community and away from another (Simpson, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2014). For institutionalized ideas around diversity and inclusion to be truly effective, it is not only wordplay that must occur. The kinds of changes that are a necessary challenge to the very foundations of archival theory and practice and compel archivists to embrace decolonizing methodologies; actively engage ideas around refusal (and think through what new commitments might look like, such as justice-oriented archives); and apply fiscal resources towards enacting meaningful change. Decolonizing description and embracing redescription are an excellent place to begin.

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Conclusion

We have used the Hawai'i State Archives' M-93 Queen Lili'uokalani Manuscript Collection (M-93) and the archives of Atlantic slavery as case studies to engage ideas around decolonizing description and to make an explicit call for redescription practices; we have further used these cases to argue against the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion in archival spaces. In the first part of this paper, "Decolonizing Description," we argued that extant descriptive practices do not diversify the archives. Rather, we found that descriptive work, that isolates and scatters, aims to erase the identifiable existence of unique Indigenous voices. We advocate centering the ways Indigenous communities have wielded the weapon of archival description and transformed it into a tool of self-empowerment and healing. In the second half of this paper, we focused on "Embracing Redescription," arguing that while on one hand, the mass digitization of slavery-era records holds both the promise of new historical knowledge and of genealogical reconstruction for descendants of enslaved peoples, on the other hand, this trend belies a growing tendency to reinscribe racist ideologies and codify damaging ideas about how we organize and create new knowledge through harmful descriptive practices. Finally, working specifically against the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion, we have challenged the ways archives claim diverse representation by uncritically describing records rooted in generational trauma, hatred, and genocide and advocate instead for developing and employing decolonization and redescription practices to support an archival praxis rooted in justice and liberation, rather than more palatable (and less effective) notions of "diversity and inclusion."

Endnotes

[1] Here we are referring to archival finding aids
[2] Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert define "kanaka maoli" as a "native Hawaiian" with "kānaka maoli" as its plural form (Pukui & Elbert, 1986d, p. 127).
[3] Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert define "mana" as a "[s]upernatural or divine power" (Pukui & Elbert, 1986e, p. 235).
[4] Some of these creation stories include the Kumulipo, the story of Papa and Wākea, and the story of Kumuhonua.
[5] This follows in the vein of Patrick Wolfe's assertion that invasion is a structure and not an event (Wolfe, 2006).
[6] I use "'Ōlelo Hawai'i" in reference to the Hawaiian language.
[7] Hale Kuamo'o and 'Aha Pūnana Leo define "kaona" as a "[h]idden meaning, as in Hawaiian poetry; concealed reference, as to a person, thing, or place; words with double meanings that might bring good or bad fortune" (Hale Kuamo'o and 'Aha Pūnana Leo, 2003a, p. 130).
[8] Hale Kuamo'o and 'Aha Pūnana Leo define "mo'okū'auhau" as a "genealogical succession, pedigree" (Hale Kuamo'o and 'Aha Pūnana Leo, 2003b, p. 254).
[9] For more information regarding these movements and other political struggles in the Hawaiian community, see Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, N., Hussey, I., & Wright, E. K. (Eds.). (2014). *A nation rising: Hawaiian movements for life, land, and sovereignty*. Duke University Press.
[10] Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert define "'āina" as "[l]and, earth" and "to eat" (Pukui & Elbert, 1986b, p. 11).
[11] Collections as data produced by project activity exhibit high research value, demonstrate the capacity to serve underrepresented communities, represent a diversity of content types, languages, and descriptive practices, and arise from a range of institutional contexts.

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[12] See, for example: https://www.amphilsoc.org/blog/finding-mrs-mahone-and-indigenous-experts-archives and https://www.amphilsoc.org/blog/introducing-new-indigenous-subject-guide.
[13] See for example: https://schd.ws/hosted_files/archives2018/b4/s101_slides.pdf.
[14] See, for example: Hartocollis, A. Who Should Own Photos of Slaves? The Descendants, not Harvard, a Lawsuit Says. New York Times. March 20, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/us/slave-photographs-harvard.html;
Also, see: Schwartz, M. Harvard Profits From Photos Of Slaves, Lawsuit Claims. *National Public Radio*. March 21, 2019. https://www.npr.org/2019/03/21/705382289/harvard-profits-from-photos-ofslaves-lawsuit-claims; and Whalen, E. A Lawsuit at Harvard Pries Open Debates About Science and Reparations. *The Nation*. November 28, 2019.

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