

Toward Ethical and Inclusive Descriptive Practices

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes the context which galvanized our Collection Management unit at UCLA Library Special Collections to collectively craft a descriptive practices statement within a study group focused on an anti-oppressive approach to discovery and access. This paper discusses the planning and design of the study group, our direct engagement at meetings, collaborative iteration, and liberatory pedagogical strategies that enabled the statement's publication, and its impact within our department, library, and beyond. This work speaks to radical descriptive change and provides a potential path for the development of ethical and inclusive descriptive practices at other institutions.

Author-Generated Keywords: Ethics, Values, Description, Special Collections, Discovery, Bias, Archival

INTRODUCTION

In October 2021, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Library Special Collections (LSC) published a statement on our website describing our past, current, and future approaches to archival and bibliographic description, asserting LSC's belief that, "ethical description requires that we be transparent about our decision-making; that we engage in critical and iterative reflection; and that we commit to continual learning and growth." (For a copy of our statement, see Appendix A.) The statement goes on to outline our commitment to remediating harmful description by creating and implementing an anti-oppressive approach to discovery and access built on the following principles:

- Be clear about what we know, how we know it, and what we don't know
- Embrace baseline description as a tool to improve the discoverability of all our materials
- Demonstrate an understanding that description is a continuous and necessarily iterative endeavor

The impetus for publicly making this statement grew out of factors both internal and external to LSC. Internally, there were a number of projects in recent years within LSC that centered on engagement with our catalog records and finding aids. These included the introduction of a peer review process for finding aids and an archival data remediation project. Both projects raised critical questions about our description practices and goals, and each resulted in a number of changes to our overall workflow. Not only did these projects inculcate the importance of examining our descriptive practices with an analytical eye, but they also revealed how varied LSC's approach to description and discovery has been over the years. In light of this, we felt that it was necessary to explain the inconsistencies between our legacy and contemporary practices in order to set expectations among LSC stakeholders about the range of description they will encounter in our collections.

At the same time, there were external upheavals within our country's social-political-cultural-economic landscape that made the need to address our current and past approaches to description a priority. The uprising in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the violence of the COVID-19 pandemic ultimately catalyzed the process of publicly addressing how our descriptive practices have evolved over time.

LSC Archivist Kelly Besser and LSC Digital Archivist Shira Peltzman, convened a peer-led Descriptive Practices Study Group that would enable a collaborative approach to developing a public-facing statement about our descriptive practices, past, present, and future. The study group was participatory by design, with each session employing a series of hands-on activities built around LSC's records and collections. These activities were used as the basis for a drafting process that enabled the statement's iterative creation as the study group progressed. Since its creation, LSC's descriptive practices statement has inspired LSC to set and pursue additional goals related to description, and has also impacted how our department assesses potential digitization projects.

This case study will explain the impetus, context, and background for this statement; provide an account of the highly collaborative process through which it was developed; and chronicle its impact at UCLA Library both within and beyond LSC. Our work was galvanized by the proliferation of recent statements on potentially harmful language in cataloging and archival description that have been published by libraries, archives, and museums nationally. We were especially moved by the ethics and honesty within the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library's commitment to their patrons and their Statement on Cataloging.¹ We were heartened by the words of our colleagues in the West Adams district of Los Angeles, working to make sure there is "room for everyone," while one of the nation's largest real estate firms gentrifies the neighborhood and displaces Black and Latino families – an act of violence supported by both the Los Angeles Police Department and the city attorney.² With this account we hope to provide those seeking to create reparative archival and bibliographic records with the resources and inspiration to convene study groups to interrogate past and current approaches to description at their respective institutions.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE WITHIN LSC

Discovery of our archival and bibliographic holdings has been a major focus of our work over the past several years. This priority was driven by LSC's then-Director, Athena Jackson, who assumed leadership of our department in 2019 following a five-year directorship vacancy. Jackson's vision for our department centered on ethical principles which guided the creation of several newly formed standing committees within the department. The Digitization and Grant Readiness committee (DGR) was charged with developing and deploying a rubric for assessing LSC collections for digitization or grant readiness in order to take a proactive approach to digital access and funding opportunities. Jackson's goal was to be more purposeful about digitizing LSC materials, and to build considerations related to ethical stewardship into the decision-making process. The realization of this goal necessitated that LSC reckon with what ethical description meant to us, and what this would look like in practice.

The need for work in this area was compounded by several ongoing projects in recent years that have focused on harmonizing different aspects of our description protocols and outputs. The first of these projects was the introduction of a peer review process for all new finding aids and catalog records we authored. This project sought to streamline our descriptive practices by making this a shared task. The second of these

¹ Clark Library - UCLA, "A Commitment to Our Patrons," <https://clarklibrary.ucla.edu/clark-statement/>.; Clark Library - UCLA, "William Andrews Clark Memorial Library Statement on Cataloging," <https://clarklibrary.ucla.edu/research/statementoncataloging/>.

² Peter Waldman, "An Entire Neighborhood Is Being Flipped by a Los Angeles Developer." *Bloomberg*, April 27, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-04-27/gentrification-battle-comes-to-los-angeles-neighborhood>.

was an archival data remediation project that sought to create baseline catalog and resource records for all archival collections with at least one descriptive record, while updating and standardizing our archival metadata to set the stage for retrospective accessioning.

In each case, these projects have required us to closely examine the descriptive choices we have made and grapple with how our approaches to this task have shifted and evolved. Additionally, both of these projects surfaced instances of harmful description, which were exacerbated by white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal, and heteronormative processing priorities and a heavy emphasis on efficient processing strategies that prioritized throughput. They also made evident how much variation exists within our records as a result of inconsistent descriptive standards in place at LSC over time. Ultimately these projects provided a foundation for our descriptive practices statement by priming us to think more critically about our approaches to description, and by setting a precedent for interrogating the implications of our choices. Above all, these projects underscored the urgency to speak openly and honestly about the necessity to implement descriptive practices informed by professional ethics and respect for our users, donors, creators, and those represented within our collections.

ONGOING DESCRIPTION REMEDIATION AND BASELINE DISCOVERY

For some time, LSC has used a peer review system to ensure quality archival description.³ This system, originally implemented shortly after migrating our collections data from Archivists' Toolkit to ArchivesSpace, was designed to account for varying standards adopted over the years. Under this model, each new finding aid and catalog record is reviewed by four different archivists, and revised based on feedback prior to publication. This enables dialogues to develop between archivists over the course of the review process. Significant areas of concern are brought to meetings so that all archivists have the opportunity to weigh in on the issue before a resolution is agreed upon. This workflow not only improves the quality and consistency of our archival description, it also creates space for staff to participate in conversations about issues related to ethical description and helps cultivate a more collective approach to this work.

An additional description remediation project is an ambitious ongoing retrospective accessioning project designed to create standardized and accurate minimal description for our considerable backlog of unaccessioned archival and bibliographic materials.⁴ Embarking on the retrospective accessioning project first required us to assess and remediate our collections data to ensure that every collection was accounted for in our collection management system. The archival data remediation project was a 2020 initiative to create minimal records for over 530 collections that had published

³ This project was led by former LSC Collections Data Archivist, Maggie Hughes.

⁴ This project was led by LSC Accessioning Archivist Jasmine Larkin. At the time of writing, UCLA Library Special Collections' backlog is approximately 11,404.5 linear feet.

catalog records and/or finding aids, but for which no ArchivesSpace resource record existed.⁵ This project was foundational for our descriptive practices statement.

Although this was necessary work, translating legacy description into new resource records proved unexpectedly challenging. Over the years LSC has described collections at varying levels based on a multitude of factors; our practices have evolved over time; and our guidelines have changed in accordance with national metadata and description standards. Our legacy description has yet to be comprehensively surveyed, remediated, and brought into alignment with our current practices. As a result, the description in our finding aids and catalog records is not harmonized, and in some instances contains harmful and/or outdated language. Compounding these disparities is that historically, creating description in LSC has been a highly individualized process, and there has not traditionally been an emphasis on aligning distinct approaches to description across LSC.

The process of reckoning with our legacy description raised fundamental questions about what it means to describe our materials and where our responsibilities lie with respect to description created by booksellers, dealers, creators, and community members. Our study group discussions grappled with ethical cataloging and archival description as challenges to the structure of classification and the assumption of neutrality. We agreed that Eurocentric libraries and archives have never been neutral or objective,⁶ that our decisions are political, and that respect and care for our communities and our collections was a stewardship model which supported our steps toward the creation of a more equitable bibliographic and archival description. We discussed our feelings concerning our legacy description, the impact of white supremacy on our past collecting priorities, and how critical cataloging and reparative archival work requires a commitment of thoughtfulness, labor, resources, and time. We also considered how we may prioritize time and space for this work within the confines of a capitalist academic library culture that all too often values product over process. Ultimately this project underscored the need to have rigorous conversations in order to develop a statement that would clearly explain our past, present, and future approaches to description.

DESCRIPTIVE PRACTICES STUDY GROUP

2020 brought new urgency to the imperative to publicly address our descriptive practices. The COVID-19 pandemic, marked by violence against America's most marginalized communities and the retelling of racist narratives by our nation's leaders, coupled with nationwide protests against police brutality and racism, led to a progressive sea change within our professional discourse and practice that compelled a response by the UCLA Library. A week following the murder of George Floyd, our University Librarian, Virginia Steel, published an open letter addressed to the UCLA

⁵ This project was led by LSC Accessioning Archivist Jasmine Larkin.

⁶ Nathan Sentance, "Your Neutral Is Not Our Neutral" *Archival Decolonist* [-o-], January 18, 2018, <https://archivaldecolonist.com/2018/01/18/your-neutral-is-not-our-neutral/>.

Library Community to affirm that we are not neutral, that we stand on the side of justice, and that Black Lives Matter everywhere.⁷

In January 2021 – just as the planning for our Descriptive Practices Study Group was getting underway – UCLA Library responded with a new set of Strategic Directions that are built upon the following organizational values: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI); Inspired Excellence; Accountability; Community-Centered Solutions; and Sustainability.⁸ In conversation with these values, UCLA Library Special Collections created a Vision rooted in inclusivity for all who enter our physical and online spaces, the creation of “ethical description” practices, and “respectful interactions with communities whose histories can be found in our holdings.”⁹

With LSC’s Vision and UCLA Library’s Strategic Directions in mind, we began translating our goal to draft a public-facing statement while engaging in our department’s inaugural conversations about our legacy archival and bibliographic description to inspire and inform our practice.

We determined that the most effective way to collaboratively draft this statement would be through an iterative writing process within the context of a study group focused on readings, discussion, and hands-on activities. This liberatory pedagogical approach was a natural choice because there was already a precedent within LSC for using study groups to interrogate key aspects of our work.¹⁰

PLANNING AND DESIGN

The first step in launching the study group was to create a project charter describing the challenge or opportunity and outlining the goals, objectives, and assumptions associated with the project. We found that, especially for a study group that was oriented around a specific objective, having a document that clearly defined the scope was helpful for setting expectations both internally within LSC and externally within UCLA Library for those who did not participate.

Our charter framed this project as both a challenge as well as an opportunity to examine issues like discoverability and description through the lens of ethical

⁷ UCLA Library, “A Message from University Librarian Virginia Steel - June 2, 2020,” <https://www.library.ucla.edu/news/message-university-librarian-virginia-steel-june-2-2020#:~:text=A%20Message%20from%20University%20Librarian%20Virginia%20Steel%20%2D%20June%20%2C%202020,-By%20Library%20Staff&text=Today%20I%20write%20to%20affirm,Black%20lives%20DO%20matter.>

⁸ UCLA Library, “Strategic Directions 2021,” <https://www.library.ucla.edu/about/administration-organization/strategic-directions-2021>

⁹ UCLA Library, “LSC Vision and Goals.”

¹⁰ Previous study groups have focused on issues including born-digital processing (led by former LSC Processing Archivist Angel Diaz and former LSC Principal Museum Scientist Jessica Tai), efficient processing (led by former LSC Processing Archivist Melissa Haley and LSC Archivist Kelly Besser), and appraisal (led by LSC Accessioning Archivist Jasmine Larkin, LSC Archivist Kelly Besser, and LSC Librarians/Archivists for Los Angeles Communities and Cultures Dalena Hunter and Lizeth Ramirez).

stewardship. A series of past individual projects resulted in incremental changes to how we approached description, but we had yet to consider and articulate our overarching strategy and goals in this area, and what these changes meant in relation.

Drafting a public-facing statement acknowledging how our description practices have evolved over time would allow us to address important issues like how we approach harmful or offensive language in description, bias and standpoint in description, and the levels of interrogation and consideration that we give to various special collections materials that we describe. Our established objectives were to:

- Deepen our critical engagement with description embedded within ethical stewardship
- Publish a collectively drafted public-facing statement communicating our approach to discovery that will 1) Provide increased transparency about our description practices – legacy, current, and future, and 2) Improve discoverability by giving users more clarity about what they can expect to see

Once the project charter was approved, our next step was to design a syllabus. (For a copy of our syllabus, see Appendix B.) Our starting point for this task was to brainstorm a list of resources, articles, and existing descriptive practices statements. It was important to us to include readings that discussed conceptual and analytical frameworks like intersectionality and critical race theory, as well as readings that engaged queer and feminist theories.

Initially the sheer variety of practical, critical, and theoretical approaches seemed overwhelming. However, certain themes began to emerge, and we saw an opportunity to focus each of the four study group sessions on a distinct topic. Organizing the study group thematically provided a pedagogical structure from which we began to outline the remaining parameters. Ultimately we decided to convene as a unit remotely via Zoom four times between April and June, 2021. Each meeting was 90 minutes long as follows:

- Week One: Bias, Standpoint, and Positionality
- Week Two: Legacy and Harmful Description Practices
- Week Three: Inclusive and Ethical Description Practices
- Week Four: Ethical Description Practices and Levels of Description

DIRECT ENGAGEMENT

The study group was limited to members of LSC's Collection Management unit, but was scoped to include former LSC Manuscripts Library Assistant Eric Olsen, as well as former Center for Primary Research and Training (CFPRT) scholars Grace Muñoz and Jackie Herrera,

who were working on a contemporaneous audit of our archival and bibliographic descriptive practices.¹¹

We asked participants to complete a series of required readings ahead of each meeting that would then be used as the basis for a series of activities and group discussions. For example, for Week One, which focused on bias, standpoint, and positionality, we paired Jessica Tai's "Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description" and Erin Leach's "Power, Corruption & Lies: Bias and Neutrality in Metadata Creation" with a collaborative brainstorming activity that asked each participant to individually reflect on the elements that constitute and inform their standpoint.¹² The prompt was:

"Standpoint theories engage with the idea that all knowledges are produced from a power position and are a result of lived experiences. Taking Jessica Tai's and Erin Leach's positionality statements as inspiration and jumping off points, use [Jamboard's] sticky note feature to record your standpoint, considering how your positionalities may be brought to bear on your approach to description."

The activity that followed the standpoint exercise built off that prompt by leading participants to examine various descriptions of a single collection in order to interrogate how those descriptions might reveal or obscure the standpoint of archivists and stakeholders.

In designing these prompts, we did not want these to be based around a hypothetical corpus of material. It was important to us to ground each activity within our collecting principles by working with LSC's Los Angeles-based collections and their corresponding catalog records and finding aids. We examined the finding aid, catalog record, and our Digital Library metadata associated with digitized material from the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee records.¹³ We chose these legacy records for our description analysis because we acquired this collection in 1945 and the materials speak to an anti-racist social justice struggle and victory for Mexican American young men in Los Angeles.

¹¹ UCLA Library, "Center for Primary Research and Training (CFPRT)," <https://www.library.ucla.edu/location/library-special-collections/destination/center-primary-research-training-cfprt>.

¹² Jessica Tai, "Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (March 2022): 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i2.120>; Erin Leach, "Power, Corruption, and Lies: Bias and Neutrality in Metadata Creation," NISO webinar, last modified July 2019, 28:29, <https://www.niso.org/niso-io/2019/07/bias-and-neutrality-metadata-creation>.

¹³ "Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee records," UCLA Library Special Collections, <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf3b69n8z8/>.

COLLABORATIVE ITERATION

Each activity built toward a brainstorming exercise designed to generate collaborative notes and aid the public statement's formation. The study group conveners later used Jamboard, a digital interactive whiteboard that is part of the Google Workspace, to organize these notes into broader concepts and trends. The Jamboard was divided into various sections (called 'frames') devoted to topics such as past practices study group members wanted to change or stop and current practices we wanted to keep doing. The final frame was by far the most robust. It was devoted to chronicling description practices that we wanted to embrace but were not currently pursuing. This frame included 38 actionable suggestions for future projects or goals that we aspired to incorporate into our practice going forward. They included suggestions to version our finding aids and catalog records to cite contributors and their changes; create policies and develop training for working with creators on description; embrace the use of community-based thesauri for subject headings and, in tandem with this, to explain the retention of harmful subject headings within a note field.

Not only did this iterative note taking process help us to establish the content of our statement as the study group progressed, it also allowed us to develop a slate of aspirations for our descriptive practices that could then be translated into an actionable set of projects and goals. In this way, our statement served a dual purpose both externally as a framework to inform our stakeholders and internally to guide and prioritize our work. For example, the notes from the discussion that followed the aforementioned activities about bias, positionality, and standpoint made it clear that there was a desire for more transparency about who was involved in creating the description as well as the circumstances surrounding its creation. This sentiment was echoed in subsequent conversations throughout the study group, and we noted this as a practice that we wanted to prioritize going forward. This would ultimately be reflected in the portion of LSC's statement that speaks to our goal to "Cite all contributors, dates, endowments, funding sources, and other information used to process materials to increase transparency and acknowledge our own positionalities in relation to the materials that we describe."¹⁴

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

After the four themed sessions took place, we held a fifth and final 90 minute meeting designed to workshop the format and content of the statement. Our goal for this meeting was to decide as a group how we wanted our statement to be organized and structured, what components it should include, and crucially, how we wanted to introduce this statement to the public. To facilitate this work we asked all participants to review the Jamboard where we had grouped the notes from each meeting into broader

¹⁴ UCLA Library, "Toward Ethical and Inclusive Descriptive Practices in UCLA Library Special Collections,"

<https://www.library.ucla.edu/location/library-special-collections/discover-collections/toward-ethical-inclusive-descriptive-practices-ucla-library-special-collections>.

concepts and trends prior to the meeting. We also asked them to answer the following prompts:

- This public-facing statement will address how description practices in LSC have evolved over time. Beyond describing our past and present approaches to description, what other elements should it include?
- What should we call this statement?

We workshoped an outline in real time, discussing various possibilities before settling on a structure that we felt made sense. We decided that splitting into small groups of 2-3 people each responsible for drafting a section would enable the statement's collective creation. Once these groups were established, we used the remaining time to allow each group to meet briefly and figure out how they wanted to organize their work.

Each group spent the weeks that followed summarizing and synthesizing all of our previous work in their assigned sections. Once each piece of the statement was complete, the conveners embarked on an editorial review. Over several weeks we knit these pieces together into a single, cogent statement that reflected the overall format and structure that the group had identified. We sought to ground the statement in practice by including as many specifics as possible so that it could be actionably applied within our department, and serve as a point of reference for any member of LSC that could be used to help guide and assess description related to digital projects.

The resulting draft was then sent out for review prior to a feedback meeting focused on discussing the draft. We asked them to come prepared to discuss 1) whether the statement accurately represented us and our work, 2) whether they saw anything that was missing and/or unnecessary, and 3) whether there were any changes or improvements that they could recommend. After incorporating this feedback, we sent the final draft to LSC management for their review and approval.¹⁵ We presented our statement to our LSC colleagues at an all-staff meeting on October 29, 2021 and moments later, published it to our website as a standalone page.

We chose to create a new static page for the full statement rather than adding a shorter version to a preexisting page because we wanted the statement to be as visible as possible, and we felt that sandwiching the statement in between other information would take away from its clarity and impact. Another benefit of this strategy was the ability to create a 'purl' (permalink) for this page that would allow us to link to the static page directly from outside resources like our LibGuides and finding aids.

Throughout the publication process, we worked with LSC's Computer Resource and Visual Communications Specialist, Caroline Cubé, to increase the statement's overall visibility, readability, and impact. Caroline administers LSC's website and she helped us

¹⁵ This included LSC Director Jennifer Osorio; Jasmine Jones, former Head of Collection Management; Jet Jacobs, Head of Public Services, Outreach, and Community Engagement; and Heather Briston, former Head of Curators and Collections.

select an appropriate location for this page within the current structure of our Drupal website Content Management System (CMS) that would make the most sense within our website hierarchy.

Caroline also has a background in writing for the web. As a result of her knowledge in this area, she suggested to us that because most people don't read text-heavy pages, a more effective strategy would be to include an abstract or summary statement of the page content. We worked with Caroline to draft some text for this purpose. Caroline created a stylized Drupal block containing this summary language, which links directly to our statement, to ensure that the statement would be visible to everyone who visits our website. She placed the block on our LSC homepage. Using a LibGuide reusable box, Caroline placed the content at the top of all LSC's LibGuides as well. The summary text reads:

LSC is committed to remediating harmful description by creating and implementing an anti-oppressive approach to discovery and access. We aim to:

- Be clear about what we know, how we know it, and what we don't know
- Embrace baseline description as a tool to improve the discoverability of all our materials
- Demonstrate an understanding that description is a continuous and necessarily iterative endeavor

Read more about our past and current approaches to description: [Toward Ethical and Inclusive Descriptive Practices in UCLA Library Special Collections](#).

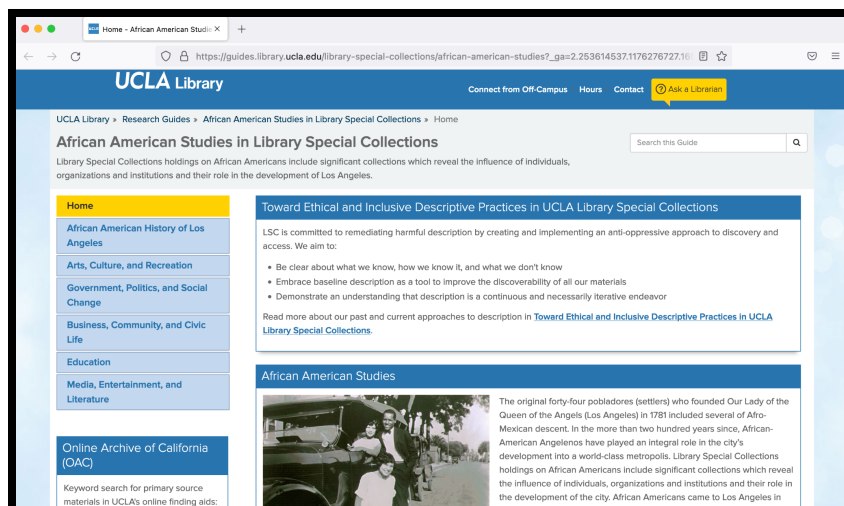


Image 1. *We added a reusable box containing a short summary of our statement at the top of all of LSC's LibGuide homepages to increase its overall visibility.*

IMPACT

Since its publication, our statement, "Toward Ethical and Inclusive Descriptive Practices in UCLA Library Special Collections," has guided work throughout the department and beyond. Within LSC, we have used the statement as a source of inspiration to set a suite of goals around different aspects of ethical and inclusive description that grew out of the study group and statement drafting process. The first of these is a project to design and implement a user feedback mechanism that will allow users to anonymously submit suggestions and feedback about harmful, inaccurate, or otherwise problematic description in our finding aids and catalog records.¹⁶ The second goal is to develop guidelines and procedures for our redescription process. The third goal entails developing a set of guiding principles that provides a framework for creating ethical and inclusive bibliographic and archival description in LSC. While the statement supports our broader unit goals, there are a multitude of possible projects that were ultimately out of scope for our study group's deliverables. Our hope is that we may develop these with our library leadership's continued support for our shared values.

Additionally, the statement has had a broad impact on LSC's ability to communicate with stakeholders both internal and external to the UCLA Library. We have incorporated a description of the statement into the standard language for reference queries that we receive regarding description remediation. We have also discussed this statement with donors by providing them with a set of clear expectations about what they can expect to happen to the material they donate. For example, recently the statement has served as a particularly helpful point of reference during a series of conversations with UCLA Library's Development and Communications departments. Through these discussions we have been able to cultivate a better shared understanding of the differences between LSC's current and past approaches to description.

Moreover, the statement has had an impact on parallel work that LSC's DGR committee is undertaking to develop a prioritization rubric for assessing digitization project proposals. The rubric contains nine criteria that are used to evaluate project proposals, including copyright; ethics/sensitivity; privacy/confidentiality; resource intensity; historical significance; instructional value; relevance to current collecting priorities; metadata; and preservation needs. Staff who are proposing a digitization project are asked to complete a series of assessments about the materials that address

¹⁶ UCLA Library, "Report Potentially Offensive Content and Description in Library Special Collections,"

<https://www.library.ucla.edu/location/library-special-collections/discover-collections/toward-ethical-inclusive-descriptive-practices-ucla-library-special-collections/report-potentially-offensive-content-description-library-special-collections>.

each of these criteria. The assessment process has offered an opportunity to translate our statement into practice by building in multiple questions that ask proposers to evaluate how the materials have been treated and described.

A key aspect of the metadata criteria entails evaluating the existing description through an ethical and inclusive lens in order to surface any language that should be updated. For example, the DGR has recently determined that going forward it will be the proposer's responsibility to have assessed the content of the material against LSC's recently published Content Advisory Policy.¹⁷ If either the proposer or the DGR determines that finding aid or catalog description need to be updated to reflect our ethical description practices, the proposer will have to work with archivists and catalogers to redescribe the material and update and republish the finding aid and catalog records. These steps would need to be considered and documented in the metadata assessment, and the increased resource intensity that these steps would entail would factor into the DGR's decision about whether or not to approve the digitization proposal. If the project were approved, digitized materials would not be posted to UCLA's digital library until the description has been remediated.

This is an especially important consideration given that the standard workflow for digitizing most LSC material calls for top-level descriptive metadata only. For archival material, this would mean the digital object would have top-level metadata – primarily a physical description and a scope and content note – that has been repurposed from the description in the finding aid.¹⁸

The statement has also impacted broader work throughout the UCLA Library. In January 2022, UCLA Library's Anti-Racism Ethical Description Subteam invited us to share our process for the design and execution of our study group. They have since launched a study group composed of colleagues from across the UCLA Library that was inspired by our work. Additionally, we hope that the statement will catalyze and guide future discussions between LSC and the Digital Library Program concerning the presentation and content of metadata about LSC's digitized collections in UCLA Library's digital asset management system.

CONCLUSION

The Descriptive Practices Study Group was convened to collectively draft a public-facing statement about the evolution of our descriptive practices over the years. Publishing a statement that addressed this was imperative for LSC. This was due to recent work that exposed issues related to our legacy description, and to a growing awareness within the profession that failure to address harm compounds the harm already caused.

¹⁷ UCLA Library, "Content Advisory Policy," <https://www.library.ucla.edu/location/library-special-collections/discover-collections/content-advisory-policy#:~:text=Our%20collections%20may%20include%20images,%2C%20or%20sexist%20propaganda%2C%20etc.>

¹⁸ UCLA Library, "Cashin Scrapbook."

Developing this statement was envisioned as a fundamentally collective exercise, and we determined that a study group would be the most effective format to facilitate this work. Within this study group we engaged in a collective reimagining of our descriptive practices grounded in records of our city's histories, communities, and cultures. We did this by selecting thematically significant readings, designing hands-on activities based on our collections, and cultivating brainstorming sessions to encapsulate themes as they emerged from the group's discussion.

For example, during our first meeting, we discussed our positionalities and how these identities inform our implicit biases which ultimately impact our descriptive choices. We talked about the possibility of creating individual positionality statements and linking out to these from the records we create. Not only would this work support our commitment to transparency, but it would also identify and humanize our labor while underscoring, yet again, that we are not neutral. We believe this future positionality project and its focus on self-description and accountability will provide context for who we are and the choices we make to facilitate the discovery of our materials. Using these themes as a jumping off point, we collectively agreed upon the format, structure, and content of the statement, and then worked in small groups to draft the statement as a team.

Since its publication in October 2021, LSC's descriptive practices statement has served as a guidepost and source of inspiration for additional work centered around ethical and inclusive description. It has also impacted how LSC assesses potential digitization projects, and has served as a useful tool for education and outreach with external stakeholders.

This work engaged hard conversations concerning our legacy descriptive practices as we struggled to remain positive while holding space for anger within the damage of our historical description. Together, we examined our legacy descriptive practices within a framework of cultural humility, which involved our collective rejection of archival neutrality, acknowledgement of our implicit biases, and ultimately, the creation of transparent documentation of our descriptive practices for our users.¹⁹

In addition to leveraging "joy and anger in all archival endeavors," UCLA Associate Professor of Information Studies Michelle Caswell reminds us that, "The first and most crucial aspect of liberatory memory work is mobilizing records to repair past harms through the redistribution of resources."²⁰ The descriptive practices statement we drafted represents our attempt to realize this goal. Even if our reach exceeds our grasp, the bedrock of our statement is grounded in work for radical

¹⁹ Tai, "Cultural Humility," 3.

²⁰ Michelle Caswell, "Feeling Liberatory Memory Work: On the Archival Uses of Joy and Anger," *Archivaria* (June 2021): 153, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/03f9p14w>; Caswell, "Feeling Liberatory Memory Work," 159.

descriptive change within our field.²¹ We hope that by recounting our creative process we can inspire others to begin this work to develop ethical and inclusive descriptive practices at their institutions.

²¹ Toni Morrison, “Nobel Lecture,” delivered December 7, 1993 at the Swedish Academy, Stockholm, SE. Audio. 33:00, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>.

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APPENDIX A:

Text of the final statement, “Toward Ethical and Inclusive Descriptive Practices in UCLA Library Special Collections”

SUMMARY

LSC is committed to remediating harmful description by creating and implementing an anti-oppressive approach to discovery and access. We aim to:

- Be clear about what we know, how we know it, and what we don't know
- Embrace baseline description as a tool to improve the discoverability of all our materials
- Demonstrate an understanding that description is a continuous and necessarily iterative endeavor

To report potentially offensive description in Library Special Collections materials, please fill out this [form](#).

Read more about our past and current approaches to description below.

At UCLA Library Special Collections (LSC), we are guided by professional values and codes of ethics in support of ethical and inclusive approaches to descriptive practices. These do not act as prescriptive standards; rather, they provide a framework for intentionality and care in decision-making. The ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians, in particular, recognizes that “descriptive standards are products of the social world in which they were created. Therefore, standards are not neutral...”^[1] Consequently, we believe that ethical description requires that we be transparent about our decision-making; that we engage in critical and iterative reflection; and that we commit to continual learning and growth. We strive to respect everyone who creates, uses, and is represented in our collections by adhering to principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion^[2] when we create our finding aids, catalog records, and other descriptive metadata. By doing so, we hope to ensure that when we create and remediate description, the result will be inclusive, humanizing, and anti-oppressive.

OUR PAST APPROACHES TO DESCRIPTION

There are many factors that impact how special collections material is described. First and foremost, description is the product of individuals who approach this task with their own inherent biases. While LSC is comprised of people from different intersectional identities, UCLA Library is a predominantly white organization, and this is undeniably reflected in the work that has been done at LSC.

Historically, description was not framed as a political act, but rather as a tool for discovery by means of the deployment of ‘neutral’ terminology written from an unbiased perspective. This so-called neutrality, a political act in and of itself, amounts to tacit complicity. Our past approaches to description aligned with this framework, which resulted in some existing description of our materials containing language that may be offensive or cause harm. For example, LSC staff did not critically engage with potentially offensive practices, such as repurposing problematic bookseller description or employing outdated standardized subject headings and authorized terms.

Our decisions about what to include and how to structure the description we create are guided by national and international cataloging and description conventions that enable standardized searching across the entire University of California library system and beyond. Our reliance on these standards means, in some instances, we have employed certain terminology that is outdated and harmful. The resulting description is further influenced by the contextual, technical, and standards-based limitations of the various discovery platforms that we utilize to make our material accessible. We support efforts underway to update these terms at the national level.

Additionally, it takes a lot of time and labor to create archival and bibliographic description, and, unfortunately, Library Special Collections has limited collection management staff resources to do this work. Alongside these factors, descriptive practices in LSC have also been heavily influenced by the need to prioritize externally funded projects and those which we acquired with donor-imposed deadlines or based on other donor-related priorities while our backlog increased. This resulted in productivity expectations that prioritized throughput, which were driven by professional imperatives for efficient processing.[3] This emphasis meant that we focused on publishing more finding aids with minimal description, often re-purposed from donors, booksellers, or the creators of the material whenever possible.

OUR APPROACHES TO DESCRIPTION

More recently, scholarship in the field of information studies has recognized the harm that an unexamined practice brings about. Specifically, the temporal framework of slow archives is about “focusing differently, listening carefully, and acting ethically.”[4] A descriptive practice that does not actively seek to remediate holdings with racist or otherwise harmful content is a disservice to our communities. We acknowledge that we are not neutral[5] and neither is the description that we create. LSC is working to remediate the harm we have caused by critically examining our existing records and implementing new descriptive practices that aim to be inclusive and respectful.

We are committed to remediating harmful description by creating and implementing an anti-oppressive approach to discovery and access. To sustain this approach, we will

center people in all of our metadata practices and adapt our strategies for doing so over time.

As LSC reviews, revises, and creates new description for the materials we steward, we strive to implement ethical and inclusive descriptive practices in the following ways:

Be clear about what we know, how we know it, and what we don't know

- Cite all contributors, dates, endowments, funding sources, and other information used to process materials to increase transparency and acknowledge our own positionalities in relation to the materials that we describe.
- Include a standardized Processing Information Note in all finding aids and catalog records that provides a clear record of the interventions we undertook to make the materials discoverable and accessible.
- Provide information about the reasons and circumstances, where possible, under which material was acquired by including Source of Acquisition and Provenance Notes in finding aids and catalog records.
- Take time to research and consult with subject-area specialists and community members prior to describing material and document and credit their intellectual contributions.

Embrace baseline description as a tool to improve the discoverability of all our materials

- Communicate our capacity to receive and care for the materials we steward to all stakeholders, both internal and external.
- Surface the names of individuals documented in community collections by adding relevant subject headings and authority terms to ensure that description adequately represents the historical record.
- Implement an initiative to elevate discovery and access to LSC materials, which facilitates baseline discovery, reappraisal, prioritization, and access activities.
- Engage in ongoing systematic metadata remediation to improve the quality and consistency of our finding aids and catalog records by updating language to align with current standards and best practices as they evolve.
- Document instances of harmful language provided by donors, booksellers, UCLA library staff, and creators within a Processing Information Note in the finding aid and catalog record, and queue the material for redescription.

Demonstrate an understanding that description is a continuous and necessarily iterative endeavor

- Improve the overall quality and consistency of finding aids and catalog records via a peer review process that incorporates multiple perspectives.
- Create a mechanism for users to provide feedback about harmful or inaccurate description so that the material can be queued for redescription.
- Develop a process for identifying collections from historically underrepresented and marginalized communities to prioritize and queue these for additional description.
- Implement a practice of using community-based thesauri for subject headings, and explain the retention of any harmful subject headings within a Notes field.
- Develop policies and guidelines that are rooted in and directly support the commitments outlined in the Statement of Inclusion and Equity in Special Collections, Archives, and Distinctive Collections in the University of California Libraries.[6]
- Collaborate with community members and stakeholders on an ongoing basis, and participate in community-driven efforts to describe the materials we steward ethically and respectfully.

WORKS CITED

1. **ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians**
2. **UCLA Library Strategic Directions 2021**
3. **Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries (Version 3.2)**
4. **Christen, Kimberly and Jane Anderson. "Toward Slow Archives." *Archival Science*, 19, (2019): 87-116.**
5. **A Message from University Librarian Virginia Steele - June 2, 2020**
6. **Statement of Inclusion and Equity in Special Collections, Archives, and Distinctive Collections in the University of California Libraries**

RESOURCES

Bias, Standpoint, and Positionality

- **Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description** by Jessica Tai
- **Power, Corruption & Lies: Bias and Neutrality in Metadata Creation** by Erin Leach
- **Three Decades Since Prejudices and Antipathies: A Study of Changes in the Library of Congress Subject Headings** by Steven A. Knowlton
- **Kimberlé Crenshaw: What is Intersectionality?** by National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS)
- **Archival Amnesty** by Tonia Sutherland

Legacy Harmful Description Practices

- **Ethical Cataloging and Racism in Special Collections** by Elizabeth Hobart
- **Stanford Special Collections and University Archives Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Cataloging and Archival Description**
- **Insensitive and Discriminatory Content in Wake Forest’s Howler Yearbooks and Other Records**
- **Guide to Using Special Collections at Yale University: Statement on Harmful Language in Archival Description**
- Temple University Libraries Special Collections Research Center **SCRC Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description and Cataloging**
- **Authority Work as Outreach** by Tina Gross and Violet B. Fox
- **Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction** by Emily Drabinski

Inclusive and Ethical Description Practices

- **Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources** by Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia’s Anti-Racist Description Working Group
- **Teaching the Radical Catalog** by Emily Drabinski
- **Redescription as Restorative Justice** by Tonia Sutherland
- **Moving Toward a Reparative Archive** by Lae'I Hughes-Watkins
- **Archives Have the Power to Boost Marginalized Voices** by Dominique Luster
- **“Writing about Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help”** by P. Gabrielle Foreman, et al.

Ethical Description Practices and Levels of Description

- 'Description' section of the **Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Library System**
- **DCRM(B): Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (Books)**
- **DACS Guiding Principles**
- **Cataloging Code of Ethics**
- **ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians**
- **The Cataloging Lab**
- **Critical Cataloging: Identifying and Dismantling Bias in Description (ARSC Webinar, 1/14/21) Readings and Resources** (compiled by Treshani Perera)

APPENDIX B: Description Practices Study Group Syllabus

Conveners: Kelly Besser and Shira Peltzman

Goal

The Description Practices Study Group is being convened to support CM's 2020/2021 unit goal to interrogate our description practices through discussion and reading groups and collectively draft a public-facing statement about how description practices have evolved over time.

Objectives

At the end of the description practices study group participants will:

- Demonstrate a deeper understanding of key description concepts and their relationship to our users
- Recognize how this work can impact and advance LSC's vision for prioritizing inclusivity and ethical stewardship
- Examine historical description practices with an EDI lens
- Understand models for restorative justice through redescription as well as inclusive, collaborative, and community-based description models
- Contribute expertise to LSC description practices, and understand the deeper interrogation practices inherent to special collections materials

Outcomes

- Deepen CM's critical engagement with description embedded within ethical stewardship
- Publish a collectively drafted public-facing statement communicating our approach to discovery that will (1) provide increased transparency about our description practices – legacy, current, and future, and (2) improve discoverability by giving users more clarity about what they can expect to see.

Week One: Bias, Standpoint, and Positionality

April 7, 2021 @ 2:30pm | [zoom link]

Wayfinding

- [LSC CM Community Agreement for Meetings and Collaborations](#)
- [Jamboard \(Week One\)](#) for group brainstorming and individual reflection
- [Google doc](#) for breakout group activity

Required Readings

- [Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description](#) by Jessica Tai
- [Power, Corruption & Lies: Bias and Neutrality in Metadata Creation](#) by Erin Leach
- [Three Decades Since Prejudices and Antipathies: A Study of Changes in the Library of Congress Subject Headings](#) by Steven A. Knowlton, p. 123-128

Suggested Resources

- [Kimberlé Crenshaw: What is Intersectionality?](#) by National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS)
- [Archival Amnesty](#) by Tonia Sutherland

UCLA LSC Collections/Records

- ***Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee Records***
 - [Finding aid](#)

Activities

- Introduction and community agreement
- Positionality/standpoint exercise (group activity and individual reflection via Jamboard)
- Discussion of readings (group discussion)
- Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee description review (collective modeling exercise, breakout groups, and share-back)
- Description Practices statement brainstorming activity (group and individual reflection/brainstorming via Jamboard)

Week Two: Legacy and Harmful Description Practices

April 27, 2021 @ 2pm | [zoom link]

Wayfinding

- [Jamboard \(Week Two\)](#) for group brainstorming and individual reflection

Required Readings

- [Ethical Cataloging and Racism in Special Collections](#) by Elizabeth Hobart
- ***Read a minimum of 5*** of the following description practices statements:
 - [Princeton University Library Statement on Language in Archival Description](#)
 - University of Nebraska Omaha [Statement on Harmful Material](#)
 - [Insensitive and Discriminatory Content in Wake Forest's Howler Yearbooks and Other Records](#)
 - [Guide to Using Special Collections at Yale University: Statement on Harmful Language in Archival Description](#)
 - [Digitized Archival and Special Collections: Potentially Offensive Materials](#)

- [Drexel University Statement on Harmful Language](#)
- [Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Cataloging and Archival Description](#)
- Temple University Libraries Special Collections Research Center [SCRC Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description and Cataloging](#)
- Emory University Rose Library [Harmful Language in Finding Aids](#)

Suggested Resources

- [Authority Work as Outreach](#) by Tina Gross and Violet B. Fox
- [Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction](#) by Emily Drabinski

UCLA LSC Collections/Records

- *Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education records*
 - [Finding aid](#)
- *Collection of Underground, Alternative and Extremist Literature*
 - [Catalog record](#)
 - [Finding aid](#)

Activities

- Discussion of readings/Collection of Underground, Alternative and Extremist Literature description remediation activity (breakout groups)
- Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education records - Teacher Integration Unit (T.I.U.) ethnicity case files activity (breakout groups)
- Description Practices Statements review and discussion (group discussion and collective reflection/brainstorming via Jamboard)

Week Three: Inclusive and Ethical Description Practices

May 19, 2021 @ 10:30am | [zoom link]

Wayfinding

- [Jamboard \(Week Three\)](#) for group brainstorming and individual reflection
- [Google doc](#) for critical cataloging breakout group activity

Required Readings

- [Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources](#) by Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's Anti-Racist Description Working Group
- [Teaching the Radical Catalog](#) by Emily Drabinski

Suggested Resources

- [Redescription as Restorative Justice](#) by Tonia Sutherland
- [Moving Toward a Reparative Archive](#) by Lae'I Hughes-Watkins

- [Archives Have the Power to Boost Marginalized Voices](#) by Dominique Luster (TedX talk on YouTube)
- [“Writing about Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help”](#) by P. Gabrielle Foreman, et al.

UCLA LSC Collections/Records

- **Collection of books illustrated by E.W. Kemble**
 - [Catalog record](#)
 - [Finding aid](#)
 - [HathiTrust MARC record](#)
- **Slave trade today: American exploitation of illegal aliens / Sasha G. Lewis.**
 - [Catalog record](#)

Activities

- Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources reading discussion and description remediation exercise (group discussion)
- Critical cataloging activity (breakout groups)
- Teaching the Radical Catalog reading discussion / [The Cataloging Lab](#) subject headings remediation exercise (group exercise)

Week Four: Ethical Description Practices and Levels of Description

May 19, 2021 @ 10:30am | [zoom link]

Wayfinding

- [Jamboard \(Week Four\)](#) for group brainstorming and individual reflection
- [Google doc](#) for Levels of Description breakout activity

Required Readings

- 'Description' section of the [Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Library System](#) (p. 44-47)
- [DCRM\(B\): Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials \(Books\)](#) Read the following sections:
 - III.1 Functional objectives of DCRM (p. 14-15)
 - X. Precataloguing decisions (p. 21-27),
 - Appendix B. Collection-Level Records (p. 153-165)
 - Appendix C. Core-Level Records (p. 167-172)
 - Appendix D. Minimal-Level Records (p. 173-174)
- **Read a minimum of 2** of the following codes of ethics/statement of principles:
 - [DACS Guiding Principles](#)
 - [ICA Code of Ethics](#)
 - [Cataloging Code of Ethics](#)
 - [ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians](#)

Suggested Resources

- [A Progressive's Style Guide](#) - Sum of Us Progressive Style Guide
- [Critical Cataloging: Identifying and Dismantling Bias in Description \(ARSC Webinar, 1/14/21\) Readings and Resources \(compiled by Treshani Perera\)](#)
- [Problem LCSH](#) - Crowdsourced LC subject headings

UCLA LSC Collections/Records

- **Collection of Cuban slavery documents**
 - [Finding aid](#)
 - [Catalog record](#)
- **Collection of personal narratives, manuscripts and ephemera about the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic**
 - [Finding aid](#)
 - [Catalog record](#)
- **Dr. Dorsey W. Lewis daybook**
 - [Finding aid](#)
 - [Catalog record](#)

Activities

- Code of ethics/statement of principles discussion (group discussion)
- Levels of Description activity and discussion (breakout groups, group discussion, and group activity)
- Moderated group discussion and collaborative brainstorming

Final Working Meeting

June 29, 2021 @ 1pm | [zoom link]

Wayfinding

- [Reflections and Notes \(Weeks 1-4\) Jamboard](#)

Required Pre-Work

- Read through the [Reflections and Notes \(Weeks 1-4\) Jamboard](#); if there is anything we discussed that you don't see adequately represented in the existing sticky notes, please add it to the board.
- Please respond to the following prompts on frames 7 and 8:
 - This public-facing statement will address how description practices in LSC have evolved over time. Beyond describing our past and present approaches to description, what other elements should it include?
 - What should we call this statement?

Activities

- Collective brainstorming discussion about what elements our statement should include
- Collective brainstorming discussion about what statement should be called
- Collective draft outline for statement
- Break out activity for small groups to make a workplan for section drafting

Additional Resources

- [AMIA Cataloging and Metadata Committee DEI Controlled Vocabulary Resource List](#), created by May Haduong, Rebecca Fraimow, and Chloe McLaren
- [LCSH to Local Headings Map](#), created by Chicago History Museum
- [Anti-racism and Inclusion Initiatives Progress](#), created by ArchivesSpace
- The Getty Research Institute [Anti-Racist Statement](#) (specific to description)

Study Group Timeline and Checklist

JANUARY 2021

- Kick-off – conveners establish regular meeting schedule and logistics; DUE 1/9

FEBRUARY 2021

- Calendar meetings – confirm availability of Collection Management team and calendar meeting dates and times to proceed CM meetings by one week; DUE 2/2
- Review existing literature on description practices – gather and compare existing statements from peer institutions, review resources, scan salient journal articles, ethics statements, etc.; DUE 2/9

MARCH 2021

- Create syllabus – create a study group syllabus that includes planned activities, discussion topics, and required/suggested readings for each session; DUE 3/22
- Submit syllabus to Head of Collection Management for review and approval – Head of Collection Management will review proposed syllabus and request any changes within one week; DUE 3/24
- Finalize syllabus and send to study group participants; DUE 3/29

APRIL 2021

- Convene Week One: Bias, Standpoint, & Positionality study group; DUE 4/7
- Convene Week Two: Legacy & Harmful Description Practices study group; DUE 4/27

MAY 2021

- Convene Week Three: Inclusive and Ethical Description Practices study group; DUE 5/19

JUNE 2021

- Convene Four: Ethical Description Practices and Levels of Description study group; DUE 3/6
- Host a final 90 minute-long working meeting to workshop the format of the statement – we will use this time to decide on what components the statement should include. We will then split into small groups, each of which will be responsible for drafting a section of this

statement. Each group will summarize, synthesize, and combine all of our previous work in their assigned section into a cogent statement that aims to describe LSC's approach to description, and explain both current and historic description practices. Groups will meet as necessary to draft their portion; DUE 6/29

JULY 2021

- Groups hand in section drafts to conveners for editorial review; DUE 7/23

AUGUST 2021

- Editorial review by conveners; DUE 8/23
- Send statement to CM for review prior to CM meeting, where we will formally approve it; DUE 8/24

SEPTEMBER

- Present statement for approval by team at Collection Management meeting – agree on statement language and determine location for publication of statement on LSC website; DUE 9/21
- Finalize statement and send to all LSC Unit Heads and Interim Director for review and approval; DUE 9/24

OCTOBER 2021

- Unit Heads and Interim Director submit comments/approval to conveners; DUE 10/15
- Send statement to UCLA Library Communications; DUE 10/29
- Present on statement to all LSC staff at monthly staff meeting; DUE 10/9
- Publish statement on LSC website; DUE 10/29