

Historical Metadata Debt: Confronting Colonial and Racist Legacies Through a Post-Custodial Metadata Praxis

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Abstract: How can the creation, management, and use of metadata developed as part of post-custodial archival projects and partnerships between United States based institutions and Latin American organizations improve current archival description praxis? By recognizing that many historically colonized and oppressed communities in Latin America seek to redefine and address longstanding racism, homophobia, cultural hegemony, and classism both locally and abroad, this article argues that this work cannot rest solely on the shoulders of those most impacted by colonialism and White supremacy. Through a critical archival studies lens, the author situates traditional metadata practices while also juxtaposing them against those used in a post-custodial paradigm. In addition, anti-colonial and anti-racist frameworks interrogate the cultural, power, and racial dynamics within the partnerships. Concrete examples from the author's work in Colombia and Brazil provide the backdrop for a critical reflection on the unique methodologies used throughout various post-custodial projects. In order to truly unsettle institutional archives, archivists and others in positions of power must relinquish authority and complete control through the work of description in an effort to make space for those most oftentimes excluded or ignored.

Introduction

In response to the call from the United Nations for human rights-based approaches to data to “ensure respect, protection, and fulfilment of human rights” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016, p. 2), this essay asks: how can post-custodial archival models facilitate efforts at self-determination? In particular, how can the creation, management, and use of metadata developed as part of post-custodial archival projects and partnerships between United States-based institutions and Latin American organizations and groups improve current archival description praxis? Concrete examples from my work provide the backdrop for a critical reflection on the unique methods used throughout various post-custodial projects. Hailed as a drastic deviation from traditional archival practice, post-custodialism focuses on creators maintaining control of their archival records with archivists providing guidance and support. In order to truly unsettle institutional archives, both archivists and users must relinquish authority and complete control in an effort to make space for creators and subjects. These creator- and subject-centered processes pave the way towards richer, culturally sensitive, and ethics-centered metadata.

The research methodology of critical reflection defined by Christine Morley (2008) as “the process of identifying the ways in which we might unwittingly affirm discourses that work against us, and the people we are working with” (p. 266) sets the stage for me as the author and practitioner to examine my biases and implicit assumptions. Alongside critical reflection as a data collecting method, I employ three theoretical

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frameworks as a means of understanding why and how the metadata practices outlined facilitate autonomy, agency, self-determination, and self-identification. These frameworks include critical archival studies, anti-colonial discourse, and anti-racist action. By employing a critical archival studies lens, this essay introduces traditional metadata practices while also juxtaposing them against those used in a post-custodial paradigm. The anti-colonial and anti-racist frameworks interrogate the cultural, racial, and power dynamics within the partnerships between my United States institution and our Latin American partners.

This interrogation paves the way towards an action-based approach towards archival work. By examining myself and my work, I challenge “fixed and restrictive ways of thinking” (Morley, 2016, p. 266) about archival practice and instead propose new pathways towards change in the field. The examples of metadata investigation, consultation, processing, and continuation serve as tangible deliberations on how these frameworks have been and can be incorporated in archival metadata work. All four practices emphasize the need for community-centered and -driven metadata archival praxis rather than established authority-driven principles and approaches that currently demand objectivity, neutrality, and unquestioned power dynamics. In addition, for those archival and memory workers looking to shift priorities from the things within an archive to the people involved, these suggested practices introduce a radical shift in archival work.

Positionality of Author

I dedicate this section to situate my positionality in relation to the work I do as a Latin American Metadata Librarian, an increasingly common practice in critical archival literature. A positionality statement is crucial when using critical reflection, as my writing seeks to deconstruct my previous metadata work in an effort to “reconstruct my practitioner narrative around [my] own agency” (Morley, 2016, p. 266). Despite cultural and ancestral connection to the region known as Latin America, at the moment of writing this article I do not view myself as Latin American. Instead, I define myself as a daughter of Honduran parents, a native of New Orleans, a product of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, and a member of the Central American diaspora in the United States.

I view my contributions to the field as support driven, community centered, and dependent on many privileges including my United States nationality, residency in the Global North, and employment at a large, well-funded American public institution. There exists a long history of the American academic gaze on Latin America with organizations like the American Historical Association establishing journals on the subject as early as 1916 or the United States’ Title VI of the National Defense Education Act (Delpar, 2008). This article strives to avoid common malpractices and assumptions that originate from a longstanding U.S. imperialist and hegemonic approach to work and study across the Americas. Through an emphasis on critical reflections of previous mistakes and shortcomings of my work, I strive to pave the way for a more anti-racist and anti-colonial metadata praxis. These words and perspectives are possible due to my privileges of cultural safety, economic comfort, and access to resources.

Introducing the Partners

While this article focuses on my firsthand experience, this article lacks the perspective of the partners involved, due to a detrimental lack of structural and financial support for partners to publish academic writings regarding their own work. For a more grounded and thorough perspectives of the work of these Latin American partners, the reader should seek out information on the vital work of the partners even beyond the post-custodial projects mentioned. The following is a very brief introduction to the work of the *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* (PCN), the partners in Colombia, and the *Equipe de Articulação e Assessoria às Comunidades Negras* (EAACONE), our partners in Brazil. Both partners began their post-custodial projects in 2019 and continue the work to this day.

Throughout Latin America, Afro-descendent communities hold a long history of migration oftentimes coerced across the region. Colombia, with one of the largest populations of Afro-descendant peoples in Latin America, serves as home to countless Afro-Colombians, a large number of whom live in coastal regions or rural areas, and more recently in urban spaces as a result of ongoing displacement. Our partners at PCN primarily serve these communities in a variety of ways, from mobilization against racist policies or land dispossession to cultural rejuvenation programming for both young and old audiences (Proceso de Comunidades Negras, n.d.). Currently, the organization functions as a network of branches and other groups, each working on issues impacting the life and wellbeing of Afro-Colombians throughout the country. During my appointment as Latin American Metadata Librarian, my institution worked with the PCN branch Palenque el Kongal with their offices and collections situated in the seaport city of Buenaventura in the region known as the Valle de Cauca (Carbajal, 2018).

On the opposite end of South America, our partners EAACONE in Brazil work in more specific areas commonly referred to as Quilombos. Similar to PCN, the EAACONE team works on issues of land dispossession, discrimination, and overt racism towards Afro-Brazilians (Shore, 2019). As a smaller organization, EAACONE's work focuses on the communities living in the area of Vale do Ribeira, a primarily rural region south of São Paulo. Alongside EAACONE, the organization Instituto Socioambiental (ISA) assisted with organizational support given that EAACONE needed a more robust structure in order to accept the financial support provided through our project (Instituto Socioambiental, n.d.). The majority of the EAACONE team members work in the city of Eldorado with a large portion of their collection materials documenting the history of EAACONE's work with Quilombolas and their communities in the northern regions of Brazil.

Critical Archival Studies as Foundation

As its theoretical foundation, this article uses a critical archival studies framing as the starting point for understanding how the archival field views its present and future entanglement with digital records, users, and considerations around both. This framework, first introduced by Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand (2017), outlines three core tenets: (1) explain what is unjust with the current state of archival research and practice, (2) posit practical goals for how such research and practice can and should change, and/or (3) provide the norms for such critique. In this way, critical archival studies, like critical theory, is emancipatory in nature, with the ultimate goal of transforming archival practice and society writ large (Caswell, Punzalan, & Sangwand, 2017, p. 2).

For the last two decades, a growing number of archival scholars have grappled with critical questions on the impact of archival practice and theory on society. Through this archival scholarship, archivists and archives-adjacent scholars have confronted issues around ownership, acquisitions, power dynamics, racism, erasure, dispossession, and other similar topics. From Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook's 2002 seminal special issue to the foundational issue by Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand (2017), the field of archival study and theory continues to grow, evaluate, engage, and expand our understanding of archives, archivists, and the archival field at large. This essay continues in this tradition of confronting the field's difficult past and using the present as a means of learning, in hopes that the future can become a better place not just for archivists, but for the users, subjects, and communities that depend on our memory work.

Metadata serves as an ideal example of what happens when previous efforts neglect to understand, conduct, and evaluate their current work in relation to historical settings and contemporary discourse. In conjunction with other efforts at grappling with "understanding and coming to terms with past wrongs or permitting continued silences" (Caswell, Punzalan, & Sangwand, 2017, p. 1), this article utilizes a critical archival studies framework to contextualize the desired future direction of metadata and description work. Unfortunately, the practice of metadata creation has been tackled without much forethought, concern, or vision for its liberatory or restorative potential, likely a result of metadata serving solely as a management

tool for the growing amount of data. For digital archives, metadata areas of practice and research mainly focus on the technical aspect of digitization efforts, with metadata as an afterthought. This disregard for the ethical implications of description mirrors the history of bibliographic cataloging practices where derogatory terminology, outdated verbiage, and outright disrespectful information was created by catalogers and freely shared with the public.

Ultimately, the strategies outlined in this article hope to contribute to the field of Critical Archival Studies. Given that the role of metadata in archival practices remains relatively new, this is the perfect opportunity to combine theoretical frameworks to practice-based methods. Without a paradigm shift in this growing subfield of archival studies, noncritical digital archival efforts will continue to contribute to what Carbajal and Caswell (in press) term as an institution's historical debt. Similar to technical debt, historical debt refers to the additional, costly, and haphazard work of redoing or undoing work as a result of a previous person or people's decision to pursue a cheaper, quicker, or incorrect solution or approach (Carbajal & Caswell, 2021).

Anti-Colonialism in Colonial Spaces

This article argues that many ethical considerations can best be addressed through an overt stand against the colonial gaze inherent when working from a privileged, Global North standpoint. Given the multinational context of my work setting, there existed a need for a critical lens on the power relations and dynamics that naturally occur between colonial institutions and historically colonized communities. Anti-colonial discourse on the ways imperialism and colonialism impact those most gendered, racialized, and sexualized as framed by writers such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Smith is crucial to understanding how cultural heritage institutions and individuals can play a role in disrupting the extractive, controlling, and exploitive tendencies of colonialism. Such is the case with my large public university and cultural heritage institution, which has for 100 years facilitated United States settler-state goals by "producing, adjudicating, organizing, maintaining, and promoting the discourses that are then viewed as the primary texts of history" (Dirks, 2002, p. 59).

Post-custodialism, while challenging some of these aforementioned settler goals, does not by default incorporate anti-colonial ideas or principles. Post-custodialism more closely aligns with postcolonial thought, as a substantial portion of post-custodial archival literature looks at the impact or aftermath of colonialism and imperialism on people, their communities, and their history. Using post-custodialism as an alternative archival acquisition approach, the dominant institution aims to relinquish some of the gains of acquiring physically cultural heritage materials. Hannah Alpert-Abrams, David Bliss, and Itza Carbajal (2019) note how "the post-custodial model further serves by helping to correct for the long history of colonialist collecting practices in transnational librarianship" (p. 3). T-Kay Sangwand (2018) notes that in order to undo the harms of colonization, archivists must "center these [colonized] communities in the reclaiming of their humanity and retelling of their own stories as a powerful form of resistance" (p. 3).

But in the case of the highlighted projects, post-custodialism originates and remains situated within colonial spaces that continue to uphold unbalanced distribution of resources, power, and influence. Sangwand (2018), for example, highlights how, despite the aim of post-custodialism as a form of disruption, "large US educational institutions have historically received and currently still receive disproportionate social, political and economic benefits in these global south partnerships while simultaneously contributing to or benefiting from the ongoing exploitation of marginalized groups" (p. 3). Metadata work, due to traditional structures of placing authority on highly trained and well-funded institutions, easily falls prey to colonial or savior-like decisions. Even if an institution engages in post-custodial practices, the "challenge is to participate in creating this shared historical memory without replicating or enabling the neoliberal structures of transnational inequality" (Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, & Carbajal, 2019, p. 9). In proposing an anti-colonial approach, all participants must recognize that as long as a colonial power structure plays a role in

a project, participants must actively challenge biases and uncontested assertions over people, their land, their identities, and stories.

Anti-Racism as Action

This essay utilizes two approaches to discussing anti-racist metadata work. I begin with what Bergis Jules (2016) calls a failure of care referring to a quote by Theaster Gates where he asks, “Who feels responsible for the failure of care around the legacies of great black people around the world?” This question and Jules’ framing of it as a responsibility to act then led me to recognize the importance of anti-racism as an action. The archival field cannot only remain at the most basic level of acknowledging past harms, but archivists must also commit to unlearning harmful practices and improving them for the future. Stacie Williams and Jarrett Drake (2017) warn against this by saying, “without an intentionally radical praxis upon which to base our professional actions, archivists ‘maintain the existing social order...[by] perpetuat[ing] those values through collection development policies that favor privileged groups” (p. 3-4).

Recent archival literature especially in regard to metadata redescription work, race, and ethnicity have become an important entry point into the damage archival historical debt has inflicted on archival subjects, users, and the field. From increased use of critical race theory in the literature to extensive studies on the legacy of Indigenous, Black, Asian, and Arabic (mis)representation in cultural heritage collections, metadata work continues to reckon with uncontested bias and inappropriate norms. A portion of existing archival literature regarding metadata looks at legacy metadata, meaning that which was created previously oftentimes by predecessors to the current archivist in charge of description work (Wood, Carbone, Cifor, Gilliland, & Punzalan, 2014; Drake, 2016; Tai, 2018). Others focus their attention on establishing recommendations for best practices for either new collecting project or efforts at redescription (Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Working Group, 2019). But few engage in metadata creation methods that are both anti-colonial and anti-racist by design and practice. There are exceptions of course, including the project known as Mukurtu, an open-source content management system that “allows Indigenous communities to define privacy settings and levels of access to and circulation of their digital heritage materials according to local cultural protocols” (Christen, 2011; Montenegro 2019).

Without an anti-racist approach, my work likely would have created and expanded on an already increasing number of problematic metadata records directly contributing to my institution’s historical debt. In the case of creating, defining, and maintaining metadata for our post-custodial digital collections and our users, historical debt is both an inherited problem and a potential pitfall. To this day, my institution as well as others continue to struggle with balancing the issues created by predecessors as well as avoiding making current or future issues. As both technical and historical debt root from the concept of financial debt, there exists an understanding that, as with all debt, it must eventually be paid. The question now rests on how to avoid placing this debt solely on the shoulders on marginalized and historically oppressed archival practitioners, especially if the debt was accumulated by privileged predecessors.

Areas of Work

While this essay does not speak in length about post-custodialism as an archival practice, it should be noted that the metadata work conducted existed within a post-custodial setting. Post-custodial practices at my institution have varied in scope, scale, and vision throughout the years (Kelleher, Sangwand, Wood, & Kamuronsi, 2010; Norsworthy & Sangwand, 2013; Kelleher, 2017; Sangwand, 2018; Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, & Carbajal, 2019). Of these projects and partnerships, some remain active, others existed only during initial implementation, and some have undergone changes in scope.

In the case of PCN and EAACONE, I saw an opportunity to confront my own inaction towards preserving the legacy of Black people. In all my discussions and critical reflections on preserving and highlighting Latin

American and U.S. Latinx history, why had I not felt a specific obligation to support the stories of Black and Afro-descendant communities and people? As the Latin American Metadata Librarian, I designed, implemented, assessed, and shared best metadata practices for both legacy and emerging post-custodial projects in order to better develop metadata tools and expectations that met their needs. Of the various approaches and methods used in this metadata work, this essay looks at the following four areas through anti-racist action and anti-colonial thought: investigation, consultation, processing, and continuation.

Investigation

Prior to the start of each project, the first stage of preparing for metadata work focuses on investigating and familiarizing myself with our partners, their historical context, their collections, and the goals of each project. For other digitization projects, the investigation phase might only include research into equipment or different metadata schemas for the data-gathering phase. This reactive practice of emphasizing the technical aspects of a project, oftentimes at the expense of the societal ones, paves the way for the undervaluing of partners' needs and situations. Investigation plays a crucial role in project development as it establishes the extent of future work as well as functions as a trust building mechanism. Without proper understanding of each partner's situation, history, and politics, project advice would be baseless or at minimum insensitive. During my time as the Metadata Librarian, our institution oversaw roughly four active partnerships each requiring a degree of familiarity with the context of our partners and their collections. This information in the case of PCN and EAACONE ranged from the history of enslavement of Africans in present day Brazil and Colombia as well as the subsequent histories of those that escaped enslavement or who eventually gained freedom through emancipation. Not only did these stories differ greatly, but so did the languages, terminology, and settings of each.

In my case, I consider the historic and political context of our partners as equally important as the type of material we plan to digitize or the machine to be used. This approach matters due to the fact that post-custodial practices prioritize the needs of partners with "partners decid[ing] how to describe their collections and create the collections' metadata" (Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, & Carbajal, 2019, p. 16). Initially, I admittedly viewed the goal of investigation as a way of better understanding the technical and structural makeup of the collection materials. During this period of investigation, I found countless stories I had never heard of or had heard differently. Despite my historical training in Latin American history during college and my culturally rooted upbringing, I lacked extensive or even a basic understanding of Afro-descendent cultures and histories in Latin America. While realizing this immense gap in my knowledge, I approached our doctoral student liaisons and our partners in hopes of seeking their guidance on how I could improve my knowledge of the communities I would be working with.

Shortly after, I visited our partners in Colombia for the first time to conduct a scoping trip where I would assess the proposed collections for digitization, meet core team members, and review existing workspaces and other environmental conditions. Prior to arriving, I dedicated my time to reading the works of writers working in the areas that I sought to learn about (Dest, 2020; Paschel, 2018; Shore 2019). During this scoping trip, I spent my time with multiple members of PCN and in various parts of Colombia. The scoping trip in particular served as the perfect opportunity to apply or question the insights I gained through my readings. It took a while after returning from Colombia to realize that my lack of care and responsibility towards these stories mirrored in many ways the attitude some White or Anglo Americans feel towards the stories of people of color in the United States. Fortunately, given the structure of our project timeframe, I still had about six months to finalize my investigations and the metadata aspects of our partner's digitization project. The insight gained through this phase allowed me to return to questions of current and future use as well as well potential hurdles that I might come across as partners began to collect metadata.

Consultation

The investigation stage also set the stage for working with my partners as a consultant on metadata practices that best addressed their projects and collections. Very early on in my new position, I recognized the potential of offering my skills, labor, and expertise to our stakeholders, but in a radically different way than had been done before. Instead of replicating the common White colonizer savior complex of holding my expertise above that of our stakeholders, I view consultation as a method of serving and supporting the work of our partners through deep listening and open dialogue. In other digitization projects, there may exist little time or dedicated labor to meet with project partners or lack of interest in presenting plans only to revise them after receiving partner feedback. When considering the perception of authority, project members might value the final say of the members with more authority even if they do not agree with the entirety of the project plan. But in order to design tools and a project plan that best met our partner's needs, realities, and expectations, I wanted and needed community and user input even if it contradicted my training in traditional practice or required extra time commitments. This method of consultation functions as a way for both parties to better define and achieve the vision and goals of a project. For example, for both PCN and EAACONE, I initially envisioned the use of certain terms situated within controlled vocabularies for fields such as "subject" or "category of record type." While the use of controlled vocabularies remains crucial to the usability and effective management of metadata records, the controlled placed on these vocabularies should not come before the needs and expectations of partners.

By offering metadata consultations, I aimed to amplify the knowledge held by our partners by viewing my knowledge around information knowledge management, metadata creation, standards, and organization, project coordination, and subject expertise as the starting point, not the end. For some like our partners at EAACONE, that meant discussions around considerations for descriptive or administrative metadata that could be incorporated into other existing data collecting projects. For example, given EAACONE's relationship with another Brazil based organization, I initially envisioned a deep commitment to geographic data collecting given that ISA had a robust focus on this type of data. While EAACONE likely held geographic data as invaluable to their work on land reclamation, ultimately attention was placed more on people's names likely due to the pressing nature of remembering their histories through people first and foremost. For others like PCN, it involved conversations and planning for workshops and instruction sessions on the impact, value, and structure of metadata regarding topics like race and gender. In one instance, I incorporated a discussion during a technical training on how visual records like photographs provide fruitful opportunities to challenge gender norms especially in regard to identifying and documenting a person's perceived sexual identity or gender in the metadata record. While I perceived a need to highlight this area of work, I understood that my perceptions around gender and also race remained limited and potentially harmful. Ultimately, this part of the training served as a suggestion that may or may not have contributed to the overall project vision or workplan. As I rely heavily on understanding the context of our partner's work and goals, I depend on their expertise to guide my decisions around issues such as what metadata to collect, what supplemental resources to identify, as well as what potential uses exists for the metadata beyond just access to the asset.

Consultation sessions functioned as opportunities for partners to help explain or better define their decisions in order for me to process their data accordingly when transferred over to my institution. Currently, my default approach to metadata consultation is two-fold: group consultation and individual feedback sessions with designated metadata technicians. The group consultations normally include project team members and, if applicable, a project lead. During this time, technicians will bring up questions that arose during the metadata creation process or issues with decisions made prior to the start of the project. The individual consultations or feedback sessions with the designated metadata technician will occur once a project begins and the team members have been able to create a portion of the metadata for review. These sessions are helpful when dealing with sensitive topics such as the use of terms that might be considered derogatory or outdated, but that technicians may view as quotidian. For example, for our PCN project team,

Metadata Details	
Title:	Carta da Comissão Pró Índio de São Paulo enviando cópia do Plano Decenal 1990-1999
UUID:	016c2b35-1ea5-4701-af03-a8edbd18e687
Date - creation:	1990-06-28
Description:	Carta da Comissão Pró Índio de São Paulo enviando cópia de Pkano Decenal da Eletrobrás
Digital identifier:	eaacone_c1990-01_p02_0037
Country of origin:	Brazil
Physical repository:	Equipe de Articulação e Assessorias às Comunidades Negras do Vale do Ribeira (EAACONE)
Partner Collection:	Quilombos do Vale do Ribeira SP/PR
Extent:	1 Página
Notes:	Nome da caixa ou nome da pasta: Documentos 1990
Type of resource:	Text
Contributors:	(Contributor) Leinad Santos (Contributor) Lúcia Andrade
Categories:	Letters
Subjects:	Eletrobrás Plano Decenal Hydroelectric Tijuco Alto Quilombos Indigenous Communities Gás Natural Amazon

Figure 1: Screenshot of Metadata Record for Carta de Comissão Pro-Índio

particular has deep roots in the work of PCN. On the contrary, the EAACONE project team very clearly understood which terms their Afro-Brazilian communities preferred. Unlike the agreed upon term of Quilombola, referring to a person living in Quilombo settlements originally established by escaped slaves in Brazil, the use of other terms such as “Indio” oftentimes used to refer to an Indigenous person appeared less straightforward. After a mid-project consultation with the EAACONE team, the team decided to use the term “indígena” in the subject field rather than the historic yet questionable term of “indio.” This juxtaposition can be witnessed in Figure 1 showing the original title of the record “Carta da Comissão Pró Índio de São Paulo enviando cópia do Plano Decenal 1990-1999” in the title field with the preferred term “indígenas” in the subject field alongside “povos” translated in English to “indigenous communities.”

Given that my metadata post-custodial approach centers the directions and wishes of our partners and their subject expertise, creating metadata using this method can result in several hurdles, dead-ends, and conflicting results or decisions. By insisting on an anti-colonial framework, the use of my time even if repetitive or slow allows me to refocus our attention on what best meets our partner’s needs even at an institution’s expense. This brings the mind what Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson (2019) call slow archives, meaning from the temporal sense the slowing down of work in order to focus differently, listen carefully, and act ethically (p. 90). Through clear communication with a supportive leadership and attention to the overall vision of the work, my position on the matter was typically respected. By emphasizing the long-term gains both physical and relational, I could argue for the slowing down of work while also ensuring that this would not be seen as lack of work. This may at first appear counterintuitive from the institutional standpoint, but in order to fully embrace anti-colonial tactics, settler temporalities must be disrupted and transcended. This most easily begins by challenging notions of busyness or overwork.

Processing

Metadata work in archival systems and spaces remains fairly limited in scope and trained labor, most staff working exclusively on metadata management work on processing existing metadata files and records. In this case, processing metadata means the various acts of reviewing, preparing, transforming, and enhancing the data created. Alongside processing, there is also the expectation of adhering to best practices or field standards in order to systematize, standardize, and improve the quality of the metadata. Unfortunately, for much of the metadata work done in cultural heritage institutions, the emphasis remains on the technical aspect of the data. The overemphasis on whether metadata will display correctly or function as intended oftentimes overshadows issues such as how users may react to the metadata displayed or whether users can even access it in the language of their choice.

Reactions to metadata represent a critical component of anti-racist and anti-colonial metadata work. When considering the complexities around race in Latin America and the oftentimes subtle disinterest in bringing up these conversations, processing metadata with partners from a variety of backgrounds provides an excellent opportunity to incorporate anti-racist strategies. In addition, when thinking about the context of providing access to these collections for a U.S. based audience, users can fall prey to stereotypical portrayals of Latin America as a result of the colonial gaze. For example, for both partners in Brazil and Colombia, issues around race, identity, and decisions on how to express and communicate their realities played a central role in how items were described. But as some Latin American scholars such Paschel (2018) note, Black histories in Latin America remain understudied, misrepresented, or ignored. PCN as an early voice on these crucial matters provided a wealth of information on topics of self-identification as seen through the digitized report on the concept of cultural identity for Black communities.

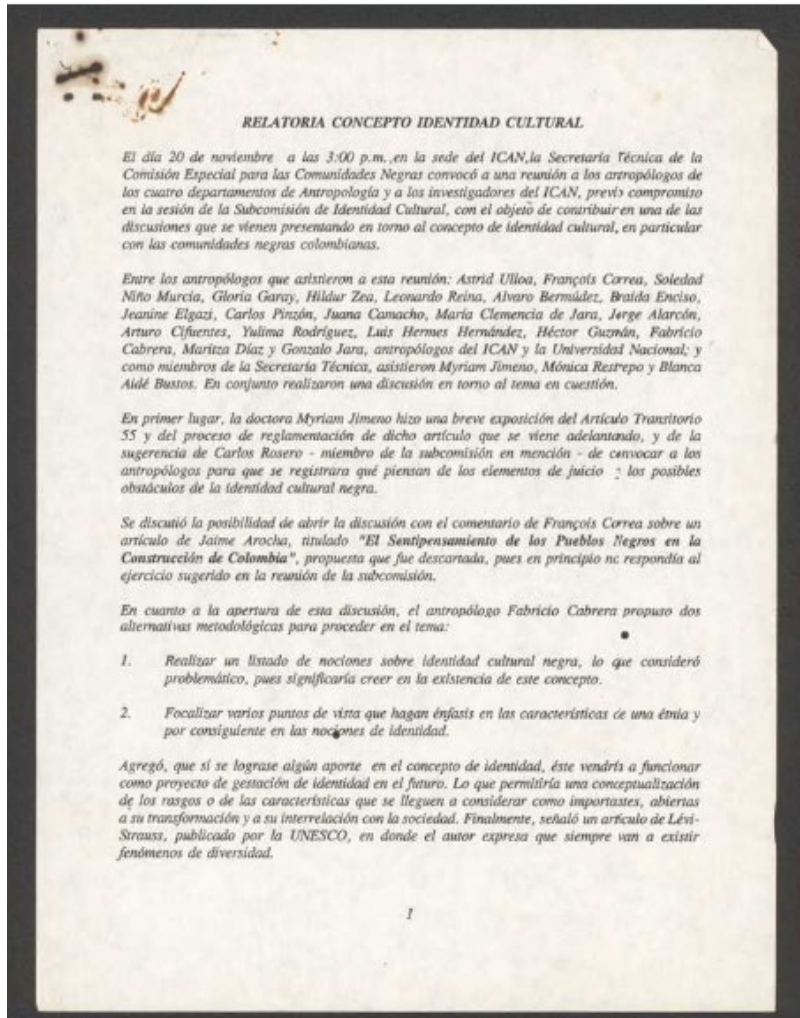


Figure 2: Image of Report on Concepto de Identidad Cultural

terms that varied from previously collected terms or that clashed with terms established in other formal authority standards like the Library of Congress Subject Headings. As both PCN and EAACONE have struggled to counteract harmful depictions of their communities, subjugating them to use terms they otherwise rejected would run against anti-colonial aims. This harm mirrors what Maria Montenegro (2019) notes as how “[d]ata on Indigenous peoples have long been used in ways not supported by them, and there has been a perceptible lack of Native voice in the collecting processes and subsequent data management and documentation policies made by non-tribal entities” (p. 733) As the metadata librarian, I focused both on creating consistency in the metadata that would be placed into our system (prioritizing good management and ease of use) and on deliberate respect for the wishes and viewpoints of our partners.

When considering the diverse perspectives of both PCN and EAACONE, the metadata produced through these two projects provided crucial insights on issues that students, faculty, and scholars at my institution would benefit from. The issue then arose as how our repository system could best communicate these differing histories and interpretations of the Black experience in Latin America without prioritizing or overlooking certain metadata descriptions or terms over others.

One area that most noticeably benefited from anti-racist processing included subject terms, as those were both considered useful and important by partners and by my institution. For our partners, subject terms served as easy entry points into their own work, as well as an opportunity to represent multiple interpretations of their data. For my institution, subject terms could in theory be easily controlled, standardized, and maintained through the use of a controlled vocabulary system in our repository. The issue then arose when partners would introduce

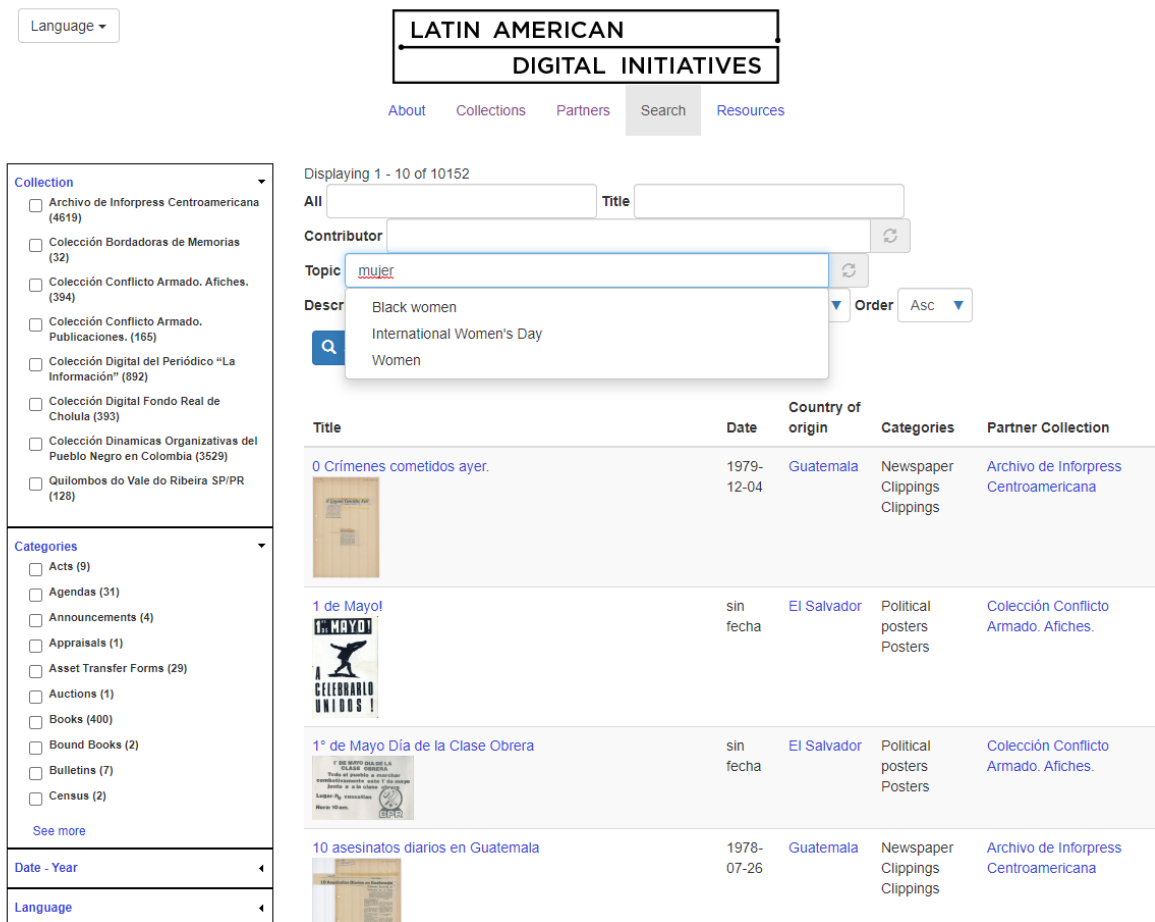


Figure 3: Screenshot of Latin American Digital Initiative Online Repository Advanced Search

Figure 3 demonstrate how a user can use the advanced search feature on the English interface of the repository system to input a term in Spanish causing the system to then offer equivalent terms in English. As the Latin American Digital Initiatives repository is trilingual with interfaces in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, this advanced search method can be used across these languages. This customized repository system allowed for multilingual interfaces as well as the ability to use linked data modeling to search by language while also displaying similar terms across languages.

Continuation

The three aforementioned areas of metadata work provided concrete examples of issues in the field and potential changes. This last phase, called continuation, unfortunately remains speculative. In an ideal project, workflows would include time and mechanisms for continued work with partners to enhance their data while still providing the intellectual and financial assistance typically allotted during a new project. This has been noted as an area of opportunity by Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, and Carbajal (2019), but unfortunately “grant funding directives carry strict deadlines and limited funds, meaning our current projects goals focus more on minimal deliverables than ongoing, robust, or intricate approaches to description” (p. 16). This desire for deeper and ongoing collaborative metadata work calls attention to existing dependencies from partners on their funding institutions. In the case of my institution, constant changes around funding cycles and sources, partner participation, expectations, and scope have led to a plethora of post-custodial projects over the last 20 years but with few remaining active. Both partners and

institutions constantly have to look for new post-custodial projects despite the real need for stable maintenance and enhancement work on existing ones.

Ultimately, one of the more crucial yet underattended aspects of post-custodial work includes the continuation of partnerships. Without this, many unintended consequences of unbalanced power structures remain prevalent and impede systematic redistribution of power. While still developing, the current post-custodial team has recently proposed and implemented new strategies for continued work between our partners and our institution. This would alleviate the issue that Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, and Carbajal (2019) note as having partnerships “pressed by project deadlines or limited by physical, emotional, and mental capacities that lead to mak[ing] difficult decisions abruptly” (p. 16). As previously mentioned, the use of controlled vocabularies has provided both a fruitful avenue for users to access these collections

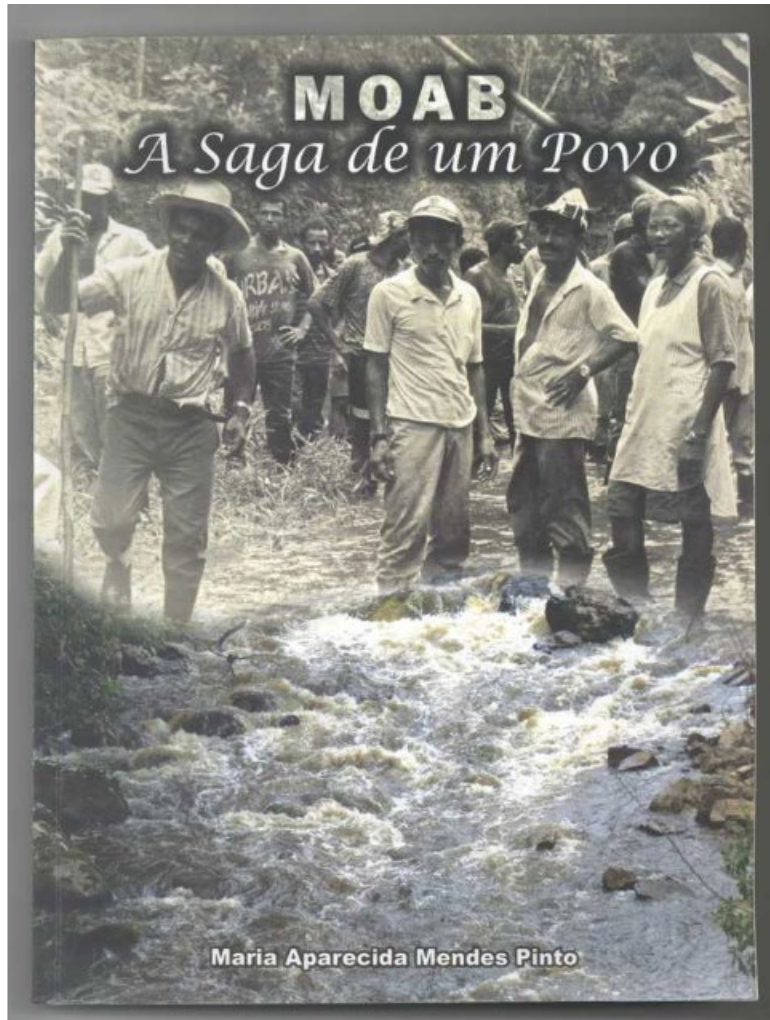


Figure 4: Image of Book titled MOAB - A saga de um Povo
(translated as MOAB – a saga of a people)

through keyword entries, but the clarity, preciseness, or even accuracy of these terms remains to be reviewed. This applies to metadata elements such as subject topics, subject people, and subject geographies as all three metadata fields include data that is incredibly valuable but perhaps not yet complete. EAACONE and PCN both demonstrate, for example, the value in continuing metadata refinement on geographic data considering that both organizations work in communities that historically occupy or claim geographic spaces that government and private institutions dispute. The inclusion of names of people with a legacy of involvement with PCN or EAACONE also deserve adequate attention to both accuracy and issues of privacy as noted in Figure 4, which shows the digitized cover of the book documenting 25 years of MOAB history. As the predecessor to EAACONE, the majority of the early records document the history of MOAB and their work in Brazil.

By maintaining built relationships and refocusing vision to expand or improve existing projects, partners can leave better prepared to continue their archival work alone.

Future Directions

The lessons noted in this article collected through the use of critical reflection look to merge with the call from J.J. Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell (2019) to establish a decolonial archival praxis. Metadata, essentially a compilation of words used to express ideas, feelings, emotions, and values, must consider the

situation and impact certain decisions, practices, and principles have on people. While decolonization has been misrepresented as a metaphorical exercise, this article recognizes that there exists power in decolonizing both physical spaces, such as repatriating land and possessions, and in reclaiming intellectual and mental space (Tuck & Yang, 2012). But in the case of anti-colonial and anti-racist metadata work, decolonizing metadata cannot be used as a move to “alleviate settler guilt and safeguard settler futurities by appropriating and abstracting decolonization to such an extent that the question of structural transformation...is disappeared altogether” (Ghaddar & Caswell, 2019, p. 73).

Instead of focusing exclusively on decolonization which primarily calls for physical restitution, an anti-colonial and anti-racist metadata approach echoes what Kenyan scholar and writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s calls decolonization of the mind through the lens of language. Viewing metadata as contributing to language formation allows for archivists, record creators, and users to frame “language as culture...[as] the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history” (wa Thiong’o, 2019, p. 15). This also mirrors similar calls by Indigenous scholars and communities around the work of Indigenous Data Sovereignty (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). Indigenous communities working on data sovereignty issues relating to the past, present, and future use of data now demand control of that information. While metadata may not initially be viewed as data, a growing interest will likely slowly emerge given metadata’s flexible structure and rich content.

By merging decolonizing efforts with anti-racist and anti-colonial approaches, marginalized and historically oppressed communities can gain true sovereignty over their lives, places, and futures. For example, insights in this article contribute to conversations around issues of data collecting, aggregation, and disaggregation such as “A Human Rights-Based Approach to Data: Leaving No One Behind in the 2030 Development Agenda” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016). These outlined guiding principles of a Human Rights-Based Approach to Data matter greatly to the overall goal of using archival materials to improve the wellbeing of historically colonized and harmed communities across the world. Project partners as data stakeholders can develop, alongside large institutions, communities of practice that improve the quality, relevance, and usability of that data consistently and ethically. The merging of conversations around a decolonial archival praxis focused on metadata with that of anti-colonial and anti-racist approaches to data should be of interest to those eager to ensure respect, protection, and fulfilment of human rights through the creation, collection, and use of cultural heritage materials.

Conclusion

Ultimately this essay strives to align with Caswell and Cifor’s (2016) call to be an archivist who “cares about and for and with subjects” (p. 36). Both anti-racist and anti-colonial action-based framing facilitate an understanding of how metadata work as a method can usher in communal approaches to self-regulation and self-determination. The difficulty with a full implementation of a communal metadata praxis lies in the struggle to maintain an equal distribution of resources, power, and work (Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, & Carbajal, 2019). I will finish with a specific call for those working in or with Latin American and Latinx collections, but the same can apply across different cultural settings. As historically colonized and oppressed communities struggle to redefine and address longstanding racism, homophobia, cultural hegemony, and classism, the need for a reckoning perhaps has already begun. But this work cannot rest solely on the shoulders of those most impacted by colonialism and White supremacy, mainly Black and Indigenous folks. Rather, the work must be distributed and at times unequally redistributed onto the people who benefit the most from these Anti-Black and colonial structures.

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