

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
August 24, 2022
Boston, Massachusetts**

**Standards Committee
Recommendation to Approve External Standard:
Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description
Resources
(Prepared by: Kira Dietz, Co-chair)**

BACKGROUND

In June 2022, the Description Section submitted a request to endorse Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources (A4BLiP) as an SAA External Standard. As per the [Procedures for SAA Endorsement of an External Standard](#), the Description Section submitted a proposal as the sponsoring section. The submission is available in the [Standards Committee's shared files](#) as a word doc and pdf, and a pdf has been submitted with this agenda item.

The submission was distributed to the Standards Committee members in advance of our July meeting, was discussed during the meeting, and voted on following the meeting (a voting member was absent). The Standards Committee voted to recommend endorsement of A4BLiP as an external standard.

Relevant links:

Link to A4BLiP website: <https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com/>

Link to the standard in GitHub: <https://github.com/a4blip/A4BLiP/tree/master/Resources>

Link to the standard in pdf:

https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/ardr_202010.pdf

DISCUSSION

From the proposal for endorsement, the “Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources is a descriptive standard that offers metadata recommendations for archival professionals to address racist, particularly anti-Black, archival description, in order to assist archivists who handle collections about, by, and for people of the Black diaspora that are often held at predominantly white institutions.” Referred to as A4BLiP, this set of resource includes recommendations in seven different areas and includes an extensive bibliography of additional tools and sources for archivists engaging in this important work.

This set of resources contains an introduction with a literature review, concrete practices relating to language, advise and tools for “redescription initiatives operating under a reparative

framework,” help for conducting audits, and metadata recommendations that challenge legacy descriptive practices that hide or obscure issues of oppression, identity, and racism. In addition, there is an emphasis on transparency in actions, encouraging accountability by archives and archivists as they revisit past descriptive practices.

The Standards Committee feels that widespread endorsement, particularly by SAA, will encourage knowledge of, and as a result, application of the A4BLiP resources. A4BLiP strongly supports implementation of DEIA and Strategic Plan goals (see below) and will providing a starting point for many institutions that do not have the time or staffing to develop a process for redescription initiatives on the large or small scale. Encouraging use of A4BLiP by endorsement may also aid in archivists and archives finding community and collaborators to engage in this important work.

As noted in the [proposal package](#), A4BLiP is already in use by archives and has been cited in recent archival literature. The package also includes a maintenance plan, with the A4BLiP team working on conjunction with the Description Section and the creation of these resources has been done in compliance with DACS.

During our discussions, the Standards Committee was positive toward the endorsement of A4BLiP. The only question that arose was about the name and whether the inclusion of “Philadelphia” in the title would deter use outside of the northeastern region. However, after some discussion, and considering the use and citation of the resources already, that ultimately did not seem like it would be a concern or reason not to endorse.

As a side note, the Standards Committee hopes this will be the first of more internal and external standards that address the DEIA Work Plan. To encourage this, we are beginning a collaboration with the Diversity Committee on strategies for including DEI directly into the standards proposal, creation, and revision process. A4BLiP going through this process will aid us in that work.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the SAA Council endorse the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources (A4BLiP) as an SAA External Standard.

Support Statement: SAA endorsement of Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources (A4BLiP) as an external standard will promote its use as guidelines for archives, archivists, and other information professionals looking to complete reparative or conscientious description projects.

Impact on Strategic Priorities: Endorsement of Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources (A4BLiP) as an SAA External Standard will support Goal 3 of the 2023-2025 Strategic Plan. Creators of A4BLiP have already taken the initiative to identify a need for guidelines and developed best practices; by endorsing the standard, SAA will help disseminate this information.

In addition, by offering guidance on language, descriptive practices, and legacy work, endorsement of this standard supports specific action items on the Strategic Plan dashboard, including 3.1.D “Develop and provide easy access to existing resources for archivists on antiracism and DEIA topics,” 3.1.E “Support[ing] critical reexaminations of descriptive practices and language used for description, narratives, and exhibits. Promote inclusive language,” 3.1.F “Support[ing] post-custodialism, radical empathy, communication, and ethics in collecting,” and 3.1.H “Address[ing] the shortcomings of archival description and the presence of bias.”

Fiscal Impact: No known fiscal impact.

Name of submitting group: Description Section

Date submitted: May 2, 2022

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Title of Standard: Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources

Type of Standard: Guidelines

Topic(s):

- Arrangement and Description
- Ethics, Values, and Legal Affairs

Maintaining Organization(s): Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP)

Link(s):

Link to standard in GitHub:

<https://github.com/a4blip/A4BLiP/tree/master/Resources>

Organizational site: <https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com/> (PDF and link to GitHub available from this page:

<https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com/resources/>)

Description of Standard: Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources is a descriptive standard that offers metadata recommendations for archival professionals to address racist, particularly anti-Black, archival description, in order to assist archivists who handle collections about, by, and for people of the Black diaspora that are often held at predominantly white institutions. The recommendations are grouped into seven categories: Voice and Style; Community Collaboration and Expanding Audiences; Auditing Legacy Description and Reparative Processing; Handling Racist Folder Titles and Creator-Sourced Description; Describing Slavery Records; Subjects and Classification; and

Transparency. The Resources also includes an extensive and annotated bibliography of referenced sources, gathering the work of archivists and librarians theorizing and practicing anti-oppressive description.

Effect/Impact of Standard:

The Resources aims to provide an introductory synthesis of professional literature and a set of concrete practices that archivists can implement in order to combat racism, anti-Blackness, and legacies of white supremacy within archival description. One emerging area of practice for which the Resources provides guidance is for redescription initiatives operating under a reparative framework; relevant sections include considerations for conducting description audits, handling racist language in folder titles and other creator-based description, and for documenting archival interventions.

The metadata recommendations also impact descriptive practice by challenging traditions of “neutrality,” euphemistic language that obscures histories of oppression, the valorization of collection creators, and the habit of privileging the interests of scholarly researchers over other audiences who engage with historic records. The recommendations also encourage archivists to use descriptive language preferred by those being described rather than prioritizing authorized vocabularies, in cases where authorized sources are known to be harmful, and promote the participation of archivists in broader efforts to revise subject headings.

The Resources also elaborates on the principle of transparency in description and provides methods for ensuring that description is transparent, responsive, and accountable to the broader communities who create, are represented in, and use records. It also discusses the need for ongoing collaboration with communities to generate description and provides some preliminary considerations for developing ethical and mutually beneficial collaborative models. By presenting participatory description as an iterative process, the Resources highlights the importance of community input throughout the metadata lifecycle.

Use of Standard:

The A4BLiP Anti-Racist Description Working Group facilitated a survey [\[https://github.com/a4blip/A4BLiP/blob/master/ARDRUserSurveyResults2022.pdf\]](https://github.com/a4blip/A4BLiP/blob/master/ARDRUserSurveyResults2022.pdf) in 2021 to determine who was using the guidelines, how they were using them, and which sections were most helpful. Based on the survey results, our guidelines are being used by many in the archival profession to improve and amend their description. Most of our 50 survey respondents came from academic institutions (76%), but government archives, museum archives, public libraries, and historical societies also responded to the survey. Most have used the guidelines to update their local descriptive practices (54%) and many are working on retrospective description projects (42%). Others are using the guidelines in their reading groups (22%) or to create instruction. The sections of the Resources that have been noted as most useful include handling racist folder titles and creator supplied description (90%) and auditing legacy description and reparative work (70%).

The Resources is also cited frequently in recent professional literature and presentations on reparative description, in archival repositories' statements on harmful language and internal inclusive description documentation, and in course syllabi. Some significant citations include Jessica Tai's "Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description," published in the Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies Vol. 3 No. 2 (2021) [<https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/120>]; Harvard Center for the History of Medicine's "Guidelines for Inclusive and Conscientious Description" [<https://wiki.harvard.edu/confluence/display/hmschommanual/Guidelines+for+Inclusive+and+Conscientious+Description>]; and NARA's "The Archivist's Task Force on Racism" Report (2021) [<https://www.archives.gov/files/news/archivists-task-force-on-racism-report.pdf>]. Additional citations can be found on Google Scholar [<https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cites=16466831189211972986>].

Review/Revision Procedures: Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP) will be responsible for maintaining the standard. The A4BLiP Operations Team oversees the entire operations of the organization, and the A4BLiP Anti-Racist Description Working Group oversees the Resources. Every five years, following potential approval as an external standard, the A4BLiP Steering Committee will assess the need for revisions to the Resources; if it is determined that a revision cycle is warranted, they will reconvene the A4BLiP Anti-Racist Description Working Group to undertake the project. The SAA Description Section will assist with maintaining this schedule and with coordinating any potential future revisions with SAA. In keeping with the ethos of the original project, all potential future revision cycles will involve a compensated review cycle by Black archivists. Additional efforts will be made to include broad community feedback and welcome new members to the working group.

Related Standards: This document supplements guidance provided by DACS (Describing Archives: A Content Standard).