

Practicing Care: A Look at the Application of Care Ethics to Metadata Creation and Remediation

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Abstract

The process of creating and stewarding descriptive metadata is often approached with a focus on standardization. However, utilizing an approach grounded in care ethics to construct a relationship between the metadata creator and the people who are the creators and subjects of the archival materials can provide better descriptive metadata. The improvement is focused on allowing digital archives to give people appearing in the archive the respect and attention they deserve, as well as providing important historical information to users. This paper details a concept-in-practice discussion of the employment of an approach grounded in care ethics on the remediation of a collection with harmful legacy descriptive metadata.

Keywords: archival metadata, archival ethics, metadata remediation, metadata ethics

Introduction

It's our oft discussed professional responsibility to interrogate our approaches to metadata creation and stewardship and their impact, but we commonly address efforts to improve with solutions aimed at standardization. It is not the intention of this paper to consider the ethics of what images and what types of content should be shared and/or made available in publicly accessible digital collections, nor is it the intention to discuss a "one size fits all" approach for tackling difficult issues of description in digital archives. Rather, I intend to argue that there is no "one size fits all" approach at all, but instead provide a "food for thought" example from my own recent work with the Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann photographs from the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) at Syracuse University Libraries. I'll anchor the work in feminist care ethics and discuss the practical and ethical considerations that went into the way the problems were considered and addressed in this specific collection in order to begin investigating how a caring approach to metadata can be at odds with standardization and what benefits it can bring. A historical context of the collection will be given first to introduce the ethical considerations, then a brief introduction to care ethics, followed by a summary of the project and discussion of the work undertaken.

"Freak" photography, introduction

"Freak" photography saw the catalyst for its rise in the collision of P.T. Barnum's purchasing of the American Museum in New York City in 1841 and the development of the collodion photographic process in the 1850s, which enabled the creation of many prints from a single exposure, rapidly followed by improvement in the photographic process in the 1860s with the production of cabinet cards. The United States was booming with immigration and industry, and subsequently suffering an enormous demand for entertainment. Not only were "freak shows" at dime museums, sideshows, and circuses and carnivals popular attractions, but the cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards sold at the venues and by photographers and performers' agents were popular souvenirs.

The majority of the photographs in our collection were taken in studios, particularly Charles Eisenmann's studio in New York City's Bowery neighborhood. These photographs center people with unusual bodies who performed as "freaks," cast largely into two types of performance that Robert Bogdan (1988) describes as the aggrandized mode and the exotic mode. In short, "in the exotic mode showmen presented the exhibit so as to appeal to people's interest in the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic," (p. 105) while "with the aggrandized mode the presentation emphasized how, with the exception of the particular physical, mental, or behavioral condition, the freak was an upstanding, high-status person with talents of a conventional and socially prestigious nature" (p. 108). This concept of presentation is present in all of the studio photographs, summarized neatly by Rachel Adams' (2001) argument that "freak is not an inherent quality but an identity realized through gesture, costume, and staging" (p. 6), a perspective with which Bogdan and many other scholars agree. "Freak" photography's focus on people with unusual bodies and its methods of crafting a role had a profound influence on the development of medical photography and the social understandings of diverse bodies and medicalization in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe and the United States.

Centering ethics of care

Care ethics, growing out of feminist ethics, focuses on caring relationships as central to the human experience and, thus, to morality. It also develops ideas of context and sympathy as central to the process of moral decision-making and action. Virginia Held (2006) argues "that care is both a practice and a value": a practice because it "shows us how to respond to needs and why we should" and a value because "caring relations ought to be cultivated, between persons in their personal lives and between members of caring societies" (p. 42). Stephanie Collins (2015), in her survey of the basic tenets of care ethics common among scholars, describes specifically that these caring relationships and their "responsibilities derive directly from relationships between particular people, rather than from abstract rules and principles" (p. 4).

Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor (2016) provide an anchoring for care ethics in archival work, arguing that "a feminist ethics of care approach places the archivist in a web of relationships with each of the concerned parties and posits that the archivist has an affective responsibility to responsibly empathize with each of the stakeholders" (p. 41). They also elaborate that "the archivist has an affective responsibility to those about whom records are created, often unwittingly and unwillingly" (p. 36) They argue that "these affective responsibilities should be marked by radical empathy," (p. 25) a concept shared by many writing on care ethics, using a variety of names for the concept which may be understood as an active effort to understand and sympathize with the lived experiences of another. Nel Noddings (1984) describes this concept as "the fundamental aspect of caring from the inside," a "displacement of interest from my own reality to the reality of the other" (p. 14) which enables the construction of a caring relationship.

The Project

In 2021, Syracuse University Libraries' Digital Library Program, now the Department of Digital Stewardship (DDS), began migrating our digital archival collections to our newly acquired digital asset manager, Quartex. One of the largest collections chosen for phase one of the migration was the Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann Photographs, which consists of just over 1,400 digitized photographs by Charles Eisenmann, his successor Frank Wendt, and a variety of other photographers of the era, some famous and some lesser known. A detailed provenance of the legacy metadata is unknown; we have no record of what was produced by the vendor who digitized the photographs in 2005 or locally at the Libraries between then and

when I began to remediate it in 2021. The collection was eventually delayed from phase one of the migration due to the amount of work needed to improve the legacy descriptive metadata.

The most pressing problem in the metadata is in the description field itself. Most of the objects had been given a cursory visual description, followed by a transcription of any text on the photograph or card, then details of the photographer's mark. The visual descriptions approached the photographs with a clear focus on removal, describing the people photographed indistinctly as "a man" or "a woman" even when their names were known and included in the transcription. These phrases also often included an adjective representing their physical difference, such as "an albino woman," or language that was common in the time of the photograph, such as "a piebald boy."

This collection was selected for phase one of the migration because it holds such high value for researchers; photos from the collection appear and are discussed in many publications ranging from disability studies to nineteenth century culture. Because of this, however, we can also see harm being perpetuated through scholarship using the digital collection and its metadata (for an example, see Dobreski et al., 2020, which offers a great look at using a faceting methodology to bring forth identity information, yet uses the incredibly harmful language in the objects' created titles to do so). Cognizant of both the benefits and problems inherent in the decision, DDS and SCRC determined that the legacy metadata should stay available until the remediation is complete so that searching is still possible, but a detailed note has been added describing the harm and the remediation project so that users are better prepared to interrogate the metadata.

Caring remediation

Part of the remediation being done on this collection, which should be unsurprising, is to center the people being photographed, as they are quite literally the subject of the photograph itself. This is easily understood as good description because it presents relevant information immediately to the user, but it also provides a starting point for considering care ethics in its specific application to this project. One of the most foundational aspects of care ethics, as discussed above, is that the caring relationships that are central to it are between individual people. As Caswell and Cifor argue, I, as the metadata librarian who is remediating this collection, am entering into a caring relationship with each of the people represented. Despite the fact that they lived a century before me and we can never meet, this relationship is nevertheless established. One of the ways in which I not only actively contribute to the establishment of this relationship but also acknowledge it is to respect the identity of the other person, in this case by centering their name in the description field. Fortunately, this is easily done by simply moving the performers' names to the beginning of the description field.

The description of unusual bodies, however, requires more attention. In line with care ethics, and indeed my own natural impulse of empathy upon which care ethics builds, I must engage in Noddings' "caring from the inside" and Caswell and Cifor's "radical empathy," setting aside my own lived experiences as a person without an unusual body. Person-first language is being employed where it aligns with the current preferences for members of the communities represented. Outdated and sometimes harmful terms are being de-centered, put into a context of how they were used at the time; while eliminating this harm entirely would obviously be preferable, to borrow Joan Tronto's (2003) words, "rejecting the past's *authority* need not be the same as rejecting *accountability* to the past" (p. 129). "Freak" photography influenced the rise of eugenics in the United States and Europe (Adams, 2001, p. 114; Bogdan, 1988, p. 67), contributing to the trend of the medicalization of difference that still affects people with disabilities in our society today. Ignoring these roots would do not only the performers for whom we are responsible in this collection a disservice by erasing an acknowledgement of the social marginalization they faced, but also do ourselves a disservice by not acknowledging our own accountability for that marginalization and its continued existence today.

A caring approach also means, however, that terms preferred by the community in the time of the photos must be respected as well. Today, the word “midget” is a highly pejorative term that by no means should be used to describe someone, yet for little people who were performers, the term had a specific meaning, representing people who did not have unusual proportions but were small in stature; the term specifically distinguished them from other little people who performed as “dwarfs,” and the use of the term “dwarf” for people who performed as “midgets” was considered extremely insulting (Bogdan, 1988, p. 175). Furthermore, the performance of each role was distinct and constructed with different elements. I’m therefore preserving these terms in the descriptions during the remediation but underscoring them (as with other terms) as a performance, with phrasing such as “[person’s name], who performed as a midget,” to highlight the terms’ importance as necessary context. I’m also creating new description that highlights the composition of the photos, discussing how costuming, props, poses, and photographic techniques participate in creating the role that the performer is portraying in the image.

Another difficulty being addressed in the remediation is the use of our Topics—Name(s) field. In our application profile, the Topics—Name(s) field is used with both VIAF and local headings, employing local headings in the format of VIAF when there are no available authority records to be found. Our front-end on Quartex allows the default search of all metadata fields when a user performs a regular or advanced search, but, as with other platforms, only the fields that are set up with controlled vocabularies can operate as filters. This is also complicated by the fact that we do not have the capability to manage authority in Quartex. This creates difficulties in the cases where a person is only remembered in the historical record by a stage name, or whose authoritative name in VIAF or LCNAF is a stage name. William Henry Johnson, for instance, performed for many years as the character “Zip.” The only contributors to the VIAF file for Johnson are LCNAF and Wikidata, both of which have “Zip” as the authoritative form; LCNAF includes “William Henry Johnson” as a variant.

Johnson himself is unfortunately a perfect example of our concerns here. According to work by scholars, Johnson may have been rented or entirely sold into the ownership of P.T. Barnum (see particularly Cook, 1996). He’s believed to have had microcephaly and was billed at the time of his career as a “pinhead,” a term that was also used for other performers with microcephaly. While many people with microcephaly have intellectual disabilities, there is no historical evidence to suggest whether or not Johnson did; despite the general assumptions by scholars that because Johnson seems to have had microcephaly, he must have had intellectual disabilities, this is simply not necessarily the case. While we must consider the possibility that Johnson could not have fully consented to become a performer, we must also consider that he could have. This is further complicated by the fact that consenting to be a performer without other available options is not really consent at all (see Gerber, 1996 for in depth discussion of this concern), but there is also insufficient evidence to fully understand this condition of Johnson’s circumstances as well. For these reasons, I rejected the authority form of “Zip” in favor of using Johnson’s real name. Although it is possible for contributors to make edits to Wikidata records, it is not possible in situations such as this to force a change of the LCNAF and/or VIAF record on a small timescale; therefore, the ability to make local decisions to reject the standardized approach of following only approved authority forms can be a powerful agent of change in our intellectual climate and encourage more widescale changes in the way authority files approach how terms are structured.

By informing our approach to naming with an ethic of care, we see that we cannot treat all people with stage names as we would, say, Madonna, who’s known largely by a stage name of her own choosing. For Johnson, we don’t know if he chose to play the character of Zip, or under what conditions he may have taken on the role. Though he’s more commonly known as Zip, identifying him as such, especially under a general approach to addressing stage names, conflates performance with identity. Johnson’s situation is also different from that of other performers such as the “Circassian beauties,” most of whom were white American women posing as fictionalized Circassian characters. As a Black man with an unusual body, Johnson was cast into Bogdan’s exotic mode, dressed in furs and posed in photographs performing a role with both human and

animal elements. The Circassian performers, however, were cast into a blend of the exotic and aggrandized modes, fashioning their hair into Afro styles and wearing Eastern European clothes to emphasize their fictional non-American origins. These women often performed under exoticized names, and in most cases we don't know their real names, though we do know that at the very least most of them were American. Several of them, including Zuluma Agra and Zoe Meleke, are found in multiple photographs in our collection and those of other institutions and thus would benefit from appearing in the Topic—Name(s) filter. Because we don't have an alternative name to use and because the names used for these performers are not dehumanizing, I included them in the Name(s) controlled vocabulary. For other dehumanizing names where a performer's real name is not known, I included the name, contextualized, in the description for full text searching, but not in the controlled vocabulary.

Looking Forward

Additional work on the collection has involved a discussion among the members of the digital library team and SCRC, leading to a decision to change the name of the digital collection to the Sideshow Performers Collection. Because less than half of the digitized photographs are by Eisenmann and Wendt (though Eisenmann is by far the most represented photographer in the collection) and the focus of the collection is on the performers, we determined that this was beneficial both for the people represented and our users.

Further work that is ongoing at the time of writing is a review of the newly remediated metadata by SCRC staff, evaluating my approach and its outcomes to identify areas for further improvement or revision. I am also producing new subject headings from the Faceted Application of Subject Terminology (FAST) vocabulary to expand the current subject headings beyond a merely medicalized view of the people and performances they describe (for a criticism of the legacy subject headings, see Rinn, 2018), which will also be reviewed when complete. There are also documentation needs that we must address, describing guidelines for the evaluation of legacy metadata and the creation of new metadata, which will allow us to benchmark ourselves. Future work should also include building community partnerships to support the creation and remediation processes.

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