

Derogatory Language in Natural History Collection Databases

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Abstract

Natural history collection databases contain billions of records containing a wealth of information about the earth's biodiversity, climate, medicinal knowledge, cultural knowledge, and genetic resources. This information is generally transcribed verbatim from specimen labels which often contain historical language, some of which is unacceptable by modern social and ethical standards. As efforts to decolonize and practice ethical stewardship take priority for many museums, it is important that digital collections are not overlooked in their potential to disseminate harmful ideologies through uncontextualized derogatory language. Responses gathered from a survey sent to collections and digitization staff from natural history collections predominantly in the United States were used to identify the motivations, challenges, and methods of treating derogatory language currently employed in collection databases. In addition to disclaimers on collections websites, square brackets and bracketed tags allow for the contextualization of historical language and transparency. Equally as important is the collaboration among museum staff, descendent communities, and groups represented in the collections. Through the thoughtful implementation of derogatory language protocols and institutional empathy, museums can acknowledge their problematic pasts and create physical and digital spaces that are welcoming, accessible, and safe for generations to come.

Keywords: ethical stewardship, decolonization, accessibility

Author's Statement

I acknowledge the Massachusetts People and their ancestral lands, upon which this work was completed.

This capstone paper is built upon my admiration for natural history collections and my desire to see them thrive in the twenty-first century. For the past three years, I have worked to make herbarium specimens digitally accessible on various digitization projects at the Harvard University Herbaria. Through this work, I began to understand how the lack of conspicuous curation of digital collections can perpetuate harmful ideologies, particularly when it comes to the verbatim transcription of offensive historical language found on specimen labels.

It is no secret that natural history specimens, as marvelous as they are, carry the weight of centuries of systematic exploitation and exclusion. Confronting the truths of the past must be accompanied by practices that reflect institutional change. By writing this capstone paper, I hope to answer why these changes are important and inspire museum professionals to create protocols that are conscientious of the language used in their databases. Natural history museums have the opportunity to expand their digital reach and welcome database use by groups often negatively represented in historical collections – and I believe universal access and institutional empathy is the way forward for our museums.

This capstone would not have been possible without the inspiring discourse shared among my peers and professors in the Museum Studies program at the Harvard Extension School. Thank you to my colleagues at Harvard University Herbaria who share the desire to make our digital collections truly accessible, and to the friends and family who encouraged me along the way.

Disclaimer: This paper contains derogatory language that is used to illustrate specific cases collections staff and users may encounter.

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Introduction

The accessibility of natural history museum collections through the rise of digital content has reached unprecedented levels following the closures of physical spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic (“COVID-19”). Meanwhile, social unrest and calls for racial justice in the United States following the murder of George Floyd brought issues of diversity and inclusion to the forefront of all institutions (Dafoe and Goldstein). For an industry that has historically supported curiosity and education through the observation of physical objects, fostering a digital presence that is equally as engaging and inclusive poses a challenge. Natural history museums have had decades to refine the protocols, policies, and ethical standards that govern their physical spaces and collections, but the rapid evolution of digital technologies means it is more difficult to do the same with digital content (Nelson & Ellis 3). As a result, the lack of curatorial treatment performed on most digital collection databases poses threats to true accessibility.

Because their colonial history runs wide and deep, efforts to decolonize museums require completely rewriting the traditional museum experience. Museums are beginning to restructure their internal policies and expand their boards to reflect more diversity. Externally, they are creating innovative programming and redesigning their spaces to be more accommodating to diverse audiences (Huff). Collections are being reviewed for looted artifacts, unethically-acquired and held human remains, and mistreated sacred objects.

Digital collections present unique challenges to resolving issues of exclusion and accessibility that do not have universal solutions. One of these challenges is the treatment of derogatory language found in label descriptions. Language is one of the most fluid expressions of the human experience, and meanings change depending on their temporal and spatial contexts

(“The Fluidity of Language”). Standardizing the treatment of offensive language in databases is no easy task, and it is impossible to come up with solutions that are applicable across the board. However, natural history collections can use the concept of ethical stewardship as a guide to decolonize their digital collections and increase accessibility by considering historical context as ethical standards evolve.

Scientific racism and the origins of natural history collections

The origins of natural history collections can be attributed to the desires of the scientifically curious and wealthy to examine the natural world, beginning during the Renaissance and evolving into the trophy rooms popularized during the twentieth century (Alexander and Alexander 54-56). Today, natural history collections are important repositories that safeguard type specimens from which species are described, document the state of the natural world across space and time, and provide material from which scientific inquiries can be answered (“Why Collections Matter”).

Evidence of racism, prejudice, erasure, and exclusion exists visibly, and sometimes blatantly, in natural history collections. Placing Native American dioramas and artifacts on display alongside taxidermy indigenous mammals reinforces harmful colonial notions that Native Americans are somehow more part of the landscape than they are human (LaVaque-Manty 71-72). Studies of cranial measurements across human races by nineteenth-century anthropologists Franz Joseph Gall and Samuel George Morton were used by contemporaries to justify white supremacy and the enslavement and displacement of nonwhite peoples by majority-white nations (Edwards-Grossi 52; Menand 110; Renschler and Monge 34). Morton’s experiments inspired racism in the scientific practices and teachings of other scientists, including

Louis Agassiz (Iqbal). Agassiz happens to be the founder of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. Native and nonwhite artisans remain unknown in collection databases and museum wall texts, their names notably absent despite the value placed on the works created by their hands. As museum professionals, it is important to analyze collections empathetically so that sources of harm can be identified and addressed, be it as simple as updating a name or as invested as restituting cultural artifacts. Digital collections should not be overlooked in their potential to cause harm, especially when they are often the only way to access the majority of specimens in a collection.

While natural history museums are advertised as telling comprehensive, objective stories about the natural world and the human experience within it, the reality is that one narrative has been told above all others since their foundation: a Euro-centric, white, colonial narrative. This is not an inclusive way to disseminate knowledge. In a time when science centers are struggling to welcome new visitors compared to other cultural institutions (Dilenschneider 2022), it is key that they change the way they curate their collections - both physical and digital - to offer multiple perspectives and reduce the harm they might perpetuate.

Decolonization

Decolonization is a contemporary effort among museums to recognize and recontextualize the inherent white-centered, colonial narratives conveyed through their collections and exhibitions by “expand[ing] the perspectives they portray beyond those of the dominant cultural group” (Hatzipanagos). The public, whom museums are pledged to serve, are demanding greater transparency and moral responsibility from all institutions in the United

States. Natural history museums are no exception. They must acknowledge the unpleasant truths of their pasts if they wish to harbor the trust of current and potential audiences.

Traditionally, the museum has been thought to be a neutral space with an unbiased authoritative voice. However, the rise of efforts to decolonize museums has been accompanied by the notion that museums are not neutral (Autry and Murawski). A series of interviews with individuals of low-income, minority ethnic groups revealed that these groups perceive science museums as exclusionary and void of content that accurately reflects their experiences, opting instead to display mainstream narratives of the white experience (Dawson 781). To break down this barrier of entry, some museums have begun to offer multiple perspectives by collaborating with underrepresented stakeholder groups. The San Diego Museum of Us (formerly the Museum of Man) has replaced the role of curator with exhibit developers that hail from diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise so that the content of their exhibits is interpreted from numerous perspectives (Parzen). By presenting multiple narratives, the Museum of Us has steered away from having a single authoritative voice and increased the likelihood of connecting with diverse audiences. Natural history museums have a responsibility to recognize their problematic and ethically-convoluted pasts if they wish to continue serving a public that demands transparency and action. While certain aspects of these pasts involve intangible racist doctrines and ideologies, other aspects, like language, are legible reminders of how social and ethical norms have changed over time.

Ethical Stewardship

The concept of ethical stewardship is defined by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology as “a set of values and practices that promote historical reflection while

directing museums to become agents of a more equitable and inclusive future” (“Ethical Stewardship”). For natural history museums, establishing ethical standards requires an understanding of the historical context of their collection, and how that context differs from what audiences experience today. Filling the gaps between the historical and contemporary experience is, some might argue, the role of the museum, and to do so ethically is the challenge. Ethical stewardship embraces this challenge and makes it a moral priority to which museums must commit now and in the future. It invites museums to remain receptive to changes in societal morals and to perpetually evolve their practices.

Ethical standards of collections care

There has been a shift to include previously-excluded stakeholder groups in collecting and curatorial practices. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), enacted in 1990, requires institutions that receive Federal funding in the United States to identify all human remains and funerary objects in their possession and work with Native American communities towards the objects’ better care or restitution (“H.R.5237”). It encourages museums to establish ongoing relationships with the Indigenous communities from which portions of their collection were taken so that these groups can have agency over their cultural legacy. NAGPRA cannot undo the violence done against Native Americans, but it is an example of how practicing ethical stewardship can make museum collections more inclusive of previously excluded and exploited communities. It is one of many actions museums must take to dismantle the problematic histories on which they were built.

Ethical standards of collecting practices and benefit sharing

To avoid the exploitation that must retroactively be addressed by policies like NAGPRA, ethical standards have also been established for collecting practices. Unlike their predecessors, modern-day botanical and zoological collectors must possess the proper permits to collect in different parts of the world. The Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization (ABS) to the Convention on Biological Diversity is an international agreement that aims to ensure the sharing of benefits of genetic research to the countries from which the samples are removed (“About the Nagoya Protocol”). However, the Nagoya Protocol sparks concerns about limiting the sharing of information and making collaborative research more difficult (Watanabe 480). In practice, issues have arisen due to absences of clarity in the protocol itself. Among other things, what constitutes traditional knowledge is not well defined, and some participating provider countries that were supposed to create national focal points have failed to do so, making it impossible for user countries to establish a point of contact with them (Philippidis). Instead of opening the doors to international genetic resource and benefit sharing, the Nagoya Protocol creates expectations that must be legally complied with but are very complicated to maintain. As museums begin to work on advancing the ethical stewardship of their digital collections, they should aim high but develop policies that are feasible and truly beneficial to all stakeholders.

Ethical standards of digital collections

There is no widespread standard for the ethical treatment of language in collection databases, which arguably hinders their potential to benefit portions of the population by making them unwelcoming and inaccessible to them. A lack of standardization also makes it difficult for

individual collections to implement and adhere to a derogatory language protocol. Making digital collections more accessible through initiatives that recontextualize them in a more ethical way might contribute to their increased value to the broader public and inspire future collectors to contribute to their growth.

Digitizing Natural History Collections

Natural history collections provide invaluable resources to supplement studies in biodiversity, ecology, systematics, history, and, most importantly today, climate change. In order to be useful to comparative studies that require temporal data, such as climate change research, natural history collections must continue to grow (Miller et al. 674). The acquisition of specimens representative of modern environmental conditions are necessary to build comprehensive collections, but recent trends show that a multitude of constraints – lack of space, staff, funding, and changing ethical considerations – have sharply stunted growth in the past fifty years (Rohwer et al. 2, 3). Digitizing collections is an initiative that began in the late twentieth century and has grown to become increasingly important in the sharing of biodiversity data across the globe. Today, digitization projects are most severely limited by funding, time, and staff (Vollmar et al. 96), which results in collections that are only partially digitized or lack records with detailed data capture.

The typical digitization process involves five “task clusters”: pre-digitization curation and staging, specimen image capture, image processing, electronic data capture (transcription), and georeferencing locality information (Nelson et al. 23). The information that is typically transcribed and presented on digital databases includes but is not limited to collector/creator information, collection/creation date, collection number, barcode, specimen or object type,

material, acquisition date, place of origin, culture of origin, provenance, locality description, specimen or object description, and any other identifying data that is relevant to the specimen being cataloged. Specimen images are associated with the record when available. The digitization of collections is based on the verbatim capture of label data but traditionally allows little room for institutional voice to come through despite digital records being the only way to access a collection remotely. While they do not serve the same function as virtual exhibits and galleries, collection databases could benefit from an increased level of curation, especially as museums commit to carry out the ethical stewardship of every aspect of their collections.

Interaction with derogatory language could occur at any point of the digitization process, but it is during transcription that digitization staff and volunteers physically type out the relevant label information. Due to a lack of resources, namely time and staff, collections might find it difficult to establish protocols expanding beyond the general digitization protocols (see Case Study). Emphasizing ethics in the digitization process is complicated and requires heavy involvement, but it is part of the commitment to move forward from the colonial history of museums. Because of these limiting factors, derogatory language is an ethical concern that has generally been left unaddressed.

Derogatory language and accessibility in the collection database

Embedded in the fabric of natural history collections is the unpleasant reality of exploitation, whether in the form of the nonconsensual removal of specimens and objects from their places of origin or in the deliberate exclusion of indigenous narratives – both symptoms of colonialism. It is not uncommon for natural history collections labels to contain offensive language reflective of the racist ideologies harbored by collectors and institutions in the past. In

some cases, geographic place names or common names for plants can be explicitly derogatory and racist (see fig. 1); in others, racism is present in the lack of information attributed to native collectors and artisans (see fig. 2).

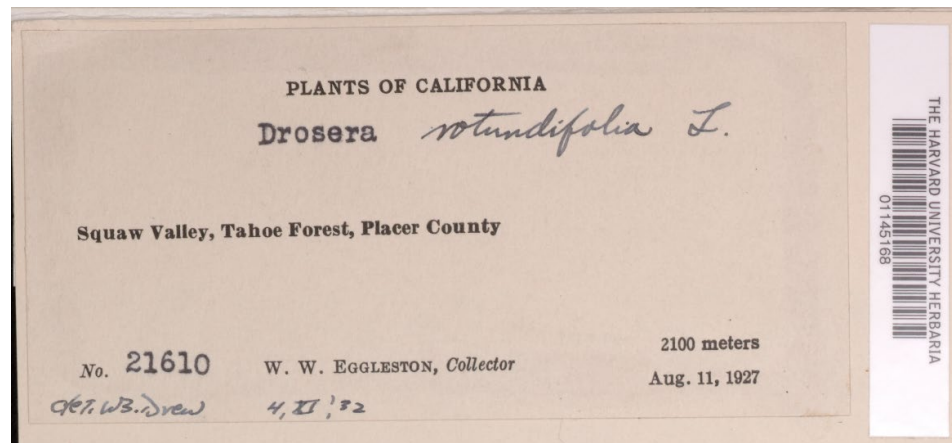


Figure 1. A herbarium label containing the offensive slur “squaw.” Squaw Valley has been officially renamed to Palisades Tahoe. Specimen collected by Willard W. Eggleston in 1927. Photo from “Index of Botanical Specimens,” *Harvard University Herbaria & Libraries*, https://kiki.huh.harvard.edu/databases/specimen_search.php?barcode=01145168.

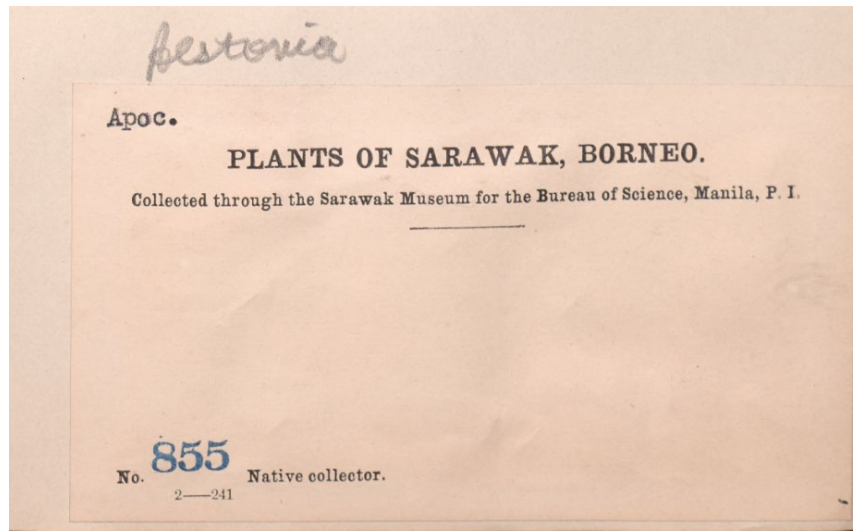


Figure 2. A herbarium specimen collected by an unnamed native collector in Sarawak. Pressed specimen collected by an unnamed Sarawakian collector. Photo from “Index of Botanical Specimens,” *Harvard University Herbaria & Libraries*, 2022, https://kiki.huh.harvard.edu/databases/specimen_search.php?barcode=02182326.

Where derogatory language occurs

Derogatory language and evidence of racism is typically found in four places in natural history collections: geographic place names, binomial nomenclature and common names, object and cultural descriptions, and through the erasure of native collectors (see fig. 6 in Case Study). Geographic place names in the United States are riddled with slurs and offensive language. Although the N-word was officially removed from place names in 1963 (Asmelash), the term continues to appear on natural history specimens collected prior to then, and even afterwards. Even localities with less shocking names, like Crazy Woman Creek in Wyoming, reveal prejudice when their contextual origin is known. Over six hundred localities in the United States had their names officially changed this year to remove the term “squaw” (“Interior”).

The common names of plant and animal species often use racial terms as descriptors in an offensive way, such as “Wandering Jew”, the common name for *Tradescantia zebrina*, and “Redneck Palm”, the common name for *Dypsis leptocheilos*. While not as common on labels, common names occur so casually in the botanical world that contextualizing them could greatly improve the experiences of minority groups and people of color in the field.

The descriptions of objects and ethnic groups on specimen labels often contain language that harbors racist stereotypes and perceptions. Historical collectors would describe people of color using slurs (“Bushmen” in reference to Indigenous people from southern Africa), stereotypical descriptions, or outdated, racist, and other-ing terms instead of using proper names. Cultural artifacts and traditional practices and rituals were also given offensive names or nicknames. The “Iron Butcher,” a machine used to gut salmon, was alternatively called the “Iron Chink” in reference to the Chinese immigrants working in Alaskan canneries (Wilma). One variant name for a Native American basket weaving technique is the “Lazy Squaw Stitch” (Rosenthal). Descriptions can reveal the author’s biases, which are perpetuated into online databases when data is captured verbatim.

The issue of unnamed native collectors reflects the deliberate erasure of people of color and traditional knowledge from natural history collections. Prominent scientists often worked closely with local guides when traveling in other countries but failed to adequately record their contributions on specimen labels. Specimens collected in Sarawak sometimes have no data besides “Native collector” (see fig. 2), and some collections made in India are attributed to “Dr. Prain’s collector” instead of providing a name. While not explicitly derogatory, these unnamed

collectors indicate a broader issue of mis- and underrepresentation of people of color in natural history collections.

Defining derogatory

For the purposes of this study, the term “derogatory” will be defined according to Cervone et al. as “any disparaging statement referring to a social category as a whole or to its members” (81). This broad definition covers the scope of terms that might be found in a natural history collection. However, the subjectivity of language and interpretation means that some instances of derogatory language might be difficult to identify. To help this, the Plant Nomenclature & Taxonomy (PNT) and Council on Botanical and Horticultural Libraries (CBHL) performed a joint study on the historical contexts of offensive terms used in common plant names. This study defined “offensive” terminology as “words or language with an identifiable history of aggression or mal-intent towards a particular group of people or peoples” (“Cultural Context Resource Document” 8). Clarifying what is meant by derogatory and offensive language is important for identifying what needs to be contextualized in digital natural history collections. It is important to note that the emphasis on an “identifiable history of aggression” in the definition for offensive language refers to the research carried out in the PNT/CBHL study to determine if certain terms were assigned to common plant names within a harmful context. This information is synthesized in the Cultural Context Resource Document—a useful tool for institutions to use since, realistically, most will not have the resources or knowledge to track down the implications of certain terms that are more ambiguous in their offensive nature (see Appendix C). For the purposes of this paper, the term “derogatory” will

refer to the broader definition laid out by Cervone et al. in reference to language that has the capacity to harm, undermine, or erase.

Perpetuating racist narratives and limiting accessibility

The verbatim transcription of label information immortalizes words of the past, which, without context, can reflect poorly on institutions today and deter individuals from wanting to use their databases (Wright 334). This places limits on who databases actually serve and also perpetuates racism, which cannot be the case if collections are meant to be beneficial for all. Public-facing databases should display accurate information but be sensitive to the ideologies expressed by the language used in historical specimens.

Historical language, especially derogatory language, is likely to limit the discoverability of collections results for inexperienced users (Chilcott 368). Most users would not expect to search for a racial slur to get the search results they need, but records do exist that are only identifiable by a derogatory term. For instance, a user that searches the phrase “Native American” in the Penn Museum collection database will not find historical Native American cultural artifacts until the sixth page of search results. Instead, they will find three pages of twenty and twenty-first century film footage related to Native American culture and two subsequent pages of cultural items of Spanish, Hawaiian, and Americana origin. However, searching the derogatory term “squaw” retrieves twenty-seven records of cultural artifacts of Native American origin without having to sift through multiple pages of film footage and unrelated objects. Of course, a more refined search would result in more refined search results, but an inexperienced user might get discouraged by the lack of relevant material retrieved by the first search and exit the database before finding the answers they seek. This scenario can be

avoided by assigning certain terms the appropriate context to increase searchability and help users understand how to navigate the historical language in collections. Chilcott describes the possibility of using community-created thesauri on archival databases to help users find relevant terms that will aid their search (369).

While derogatory language can hinder a user's ability to find relevant records, it has the largest impact on the individuals that work in the collections. Curatorial and digitization staff work with derogatory language on a daily basis. In fact, many institutions that have begun to implement a derogatory language protocol in their collection database are doing so because of internal concern and feedback (see Question 5 in Case Study). Many museum professionals begin as interns or volunteers with little previous experience to prepare them for encountering historic language, and university collections often employ students as part-time workers to aid in digitization projects. Being without a protocol for transcribing derogatory language can create a work environment that perpetuates the exclusion of people of color in the museum workforce by making individuals feel dehumanized, misrepresented, and pressured to physically type out slurs.

Part of the process of decolonizing collections involves changing the institutional workspace to welcome individuals of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Historically, demographics in the museum industry skew white, and positions of leadership skew white male (Charr). The high qualifications and meager wages of entry-level museum positions make it almost impossible for anyone without strong financial support to break into the museum industry (Strong). If finances are not an issue, the lack of internal action to provide context to evidence of historical violence in collections may deter professionals from staying in the industry. Interacting with derogatory language on a daily basis is difficult, especially for those directly impacted by it,

and it should not be the standard to ignore it on the basis that it is historical or academic. If museums truly want to increase the diversity of their employees, they must make their spaces safe, open to discussion, and receptive to change. Derogatory language in a collection has its value in understanding changes in social ethics across time, but museums should implement internal policies that contextualize it so that collections workspaces are safe and accessible.

Providing context

Contextualizing derogatory language in the database is as important to dismantling racist ideologies in natural history collections as it is to the accessibility and searchability of collections. Public archives have begun using disclaimers, bracketed tags, and community-created thesauri in an effort to contextualize culturally sensitive content and redistribute the benefits of these archives back to those mentioned within them (Wright 343; Chilcott 365; Briscoe et al. 11-13). Natural history collections that have implemented similar protocols must work retroactively to provide the appropriate context to records containing offensive language that have already been published – a task restricted by funding and time (Anonymous Interviewee 1; see Fig.). However, taking on the task of providing context to a digital database is crucial in demonstrating museums' efforts to be more welcoming and inclusive following widespread promises to decolonize.

A critical step to contextualize historical language involves assigning the authority to determine what is considered offensive. The same term may have a negative connotation for one group, but not for another, and the meaning behind certain terms will change over time. The Cultural Context Resource Document listed in Appendix C provides historical context for a number of potentially offensive terms often used in common names and is a valuable resource

for creating a derogatory language protocol. Labels may include terms that are offensive in English, but not in the context of the language in which they are written by the collector (i.e. *negro* in Spanish versus English). An individual unfamiliar with the Spanish language may not know that the use of the term *negro*, which means “black,” is not necessarily offensive. While there is no single solution for the multitude of cases that arise, natural history collections can use this problem as an opportunity to listen to the groups represented in their collections. Through their work with stakeholder communities, staff at the Field Museum in Chicago were informed that “B’laan” or “Bilaan,” two common misspellings of the name “Blaan” in reference to the Blaan people from Mindanao, are derogatory (KafyeBlaan; Anonymous Survey Respondent). Instead of continuing to silence and overlook under- and mis-represented groups, natural history collections can invite these groups into conversation to learn how historical language impacts them directly. Collaborations will vary depending on a museum’s location and the scope of their collections, but in many cases, living descendants of individuals represented in the museum might be willing to share their testimonies. Natural history collections must be prepared to foster the relationships they initiate and continue their assessment of the language in their database as times and language change.

Case Study: A Derogatory Language Treatment Survey

In order to understand if and how natural history collections are treating derogatory language in their databases, a survey was created and distributed to collections managers, curators, collections stewards, directors of bioinformatics, digitization leads, and other museum staff involved in implementing digitization policies at their institutions.

In total, sixteen survey responses were successfully completed representing eight herbaria, five anthropological collections (one anthropological collection was represented by two different survey respondents), one natural history museum, and one cultural history museum. In one case, a Zoom interview was conducted with a respondent in addition to their survey submission. In another case, a Zoom interview was conducted in lieu of a written survey response. To avoid redundancy, identical responses from the two individuals representing the same anthropology museum were counted as a singular response, but differing responses were counted separately.

The majority of institutions represented in the survey are in the United States; however, one international submission was made from a museum in New Zealand. This response demonstrated the pervasiveness of derogatory language in institutions across the globe and regional differences in language and interpretation. For the purpose of maintaining the anonymity of survey respondents, responses will be synthesized and summarized for each survey question, beginning with Question 4.

Response Summary

Question 4: In what form does derogatory language usually appear in the collection (place names description, taxonomic/common names, collector names/name erasure)?

The most common source in which derogatory language occurred across the institutions surveyed was in place names and locality information (11 responses), followed by vernacular/common names (9), object descriptions (5), collector names/erasure (5), ethnic group descriptions (3), titles of artworks (2), medical terminology (1), methodological terminology (1), and 'not sure' (1) (see fig. 3).

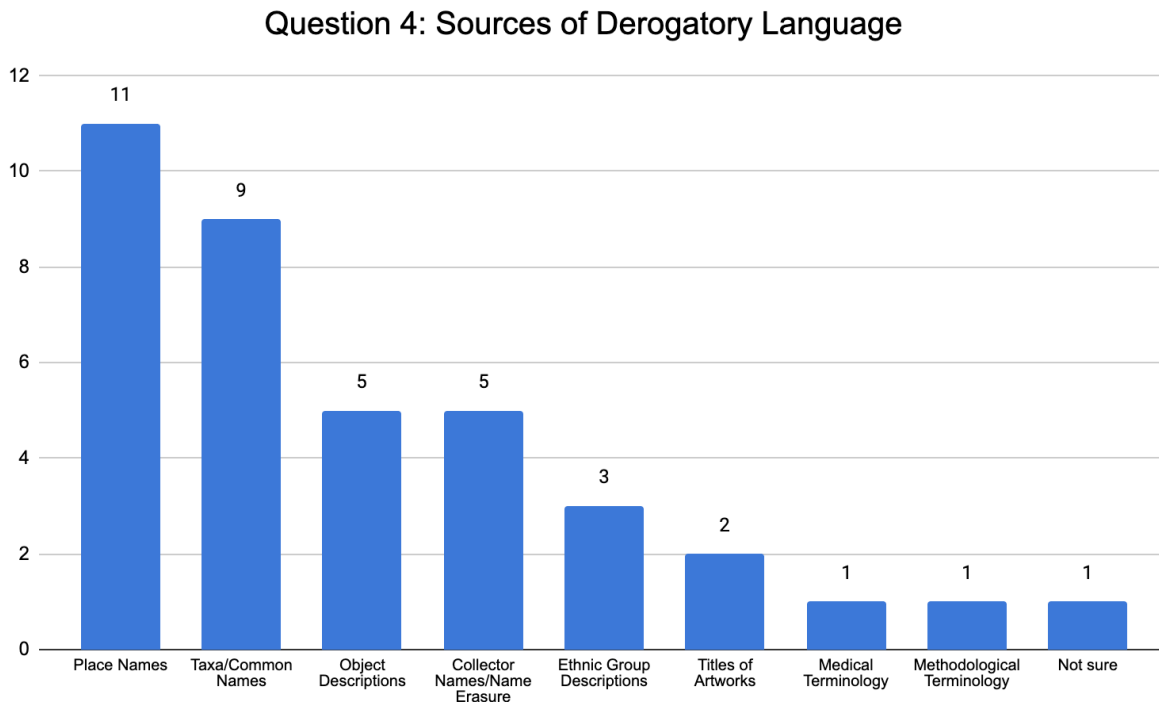


Figure 3. Responses to survey question 4. Common sources of derogatory language in natural history collections as noted by survey respondents, with place names being the most commonly noted form. Less common responses, such as medical and methodological terminology, can be unique to certain collections and artifacts.

As demonstrated above, place names and taxonomic/common names contain the most instances of using derogatory and offensive language. Depending on the scope of the collections and the type of institution, derogatory language can also be found in medical terminology and methodological terminology. Anthropology collections may see derogatory language in object descriptions, ethnic group descriptions and titles of artworks, while zoological collections and herbaria might not.

Question 5. Have you received feedback or concerns from database users about derogatory language in the collection database?

Six (6) of sixteen respondents answered yes, although most feedback came from faculty, staff, or students interacting with the collections; stakeholder communities; and occasionally visiting researchers. None of the respondents cited feedback directly from off-site digital database users, although one noted that might be the result of having limited access to comments after sending data off to online data aggregators. In one case, off-site users did raise concerns when the institution announced it would be addressing derogatory language in the database with fears that doing so might limit their ability to use the collections in historical research. Nine (9) survey respondents answered no to Question 5, but most indicated an awareness of the problem amongst staff that led to a proactive approach to handling the digitization of derogatory language.

Question 6. Does your museum have a written protocol to address derogatory language in the database?

Seven (7) respondents answered that a written derogatory language protocol had been created. Four (4) did not have written protocols, and four (4) were in the process of discussing the issue and creating a written protocol (see fig. 4).

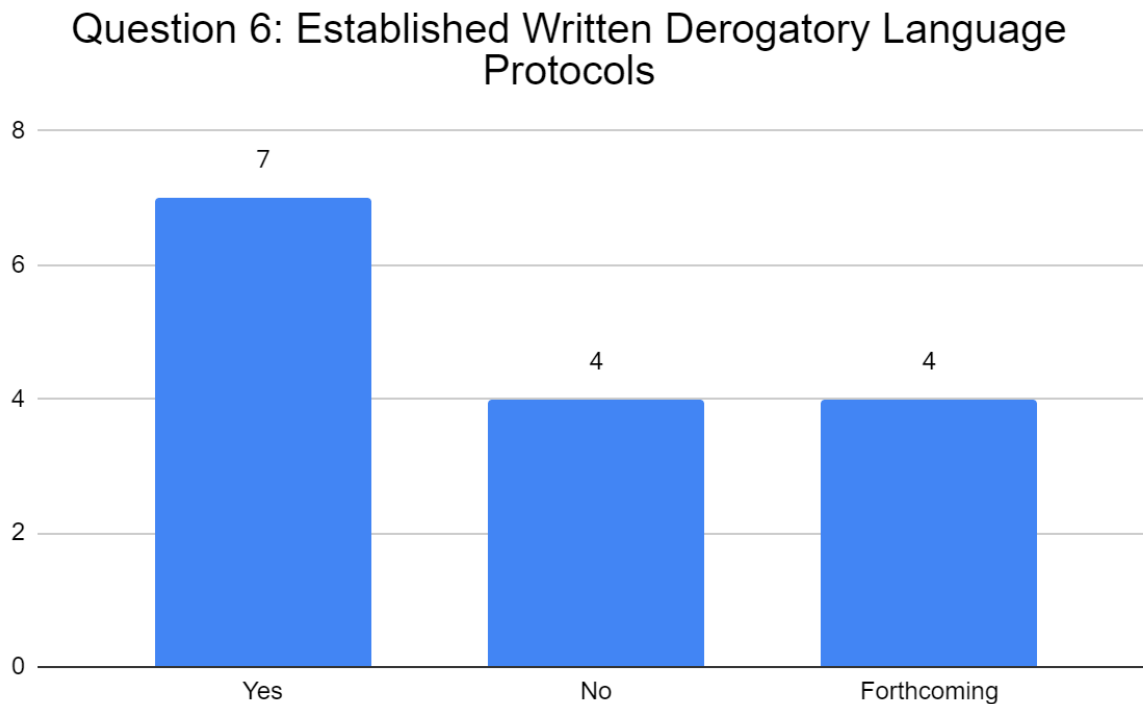


Figure 4. Responses to survey question 6. Most survey respondents had created a written derogatory language protocol, while some were in the process of doing so.

Most “Yes” responses indicated that the protocol was continually being updated or in need of revision. The “Forthcoming” responses indicated that discussions were underway to develop a protocol. In one of these cases, the current focus was on identification and data cleanup rather than writing a formal protocol to be shared with the public.

Question 7. What methods have you developed to address derogatory language in the database (disclaimers, bracketed tags, etc.)?

The most common method of addressing derogatory language amongst survey respondents was to use a disclaimer. Nine (9) survey respondents indicated that a disclaimer

exists somewhere on the museum or database search page. Two (2) respondents used bracketed tags to contextualize derogatory language on individual records, and two (2) respondents had redacted or replaced derogatory language completely from specimen records. Two (2) respondents had created task forces whose role it was to develop and enforce the derogatory language protocols, and three (3) respondents indicated having no current methods of addressing derogatory language (see fig. 5).

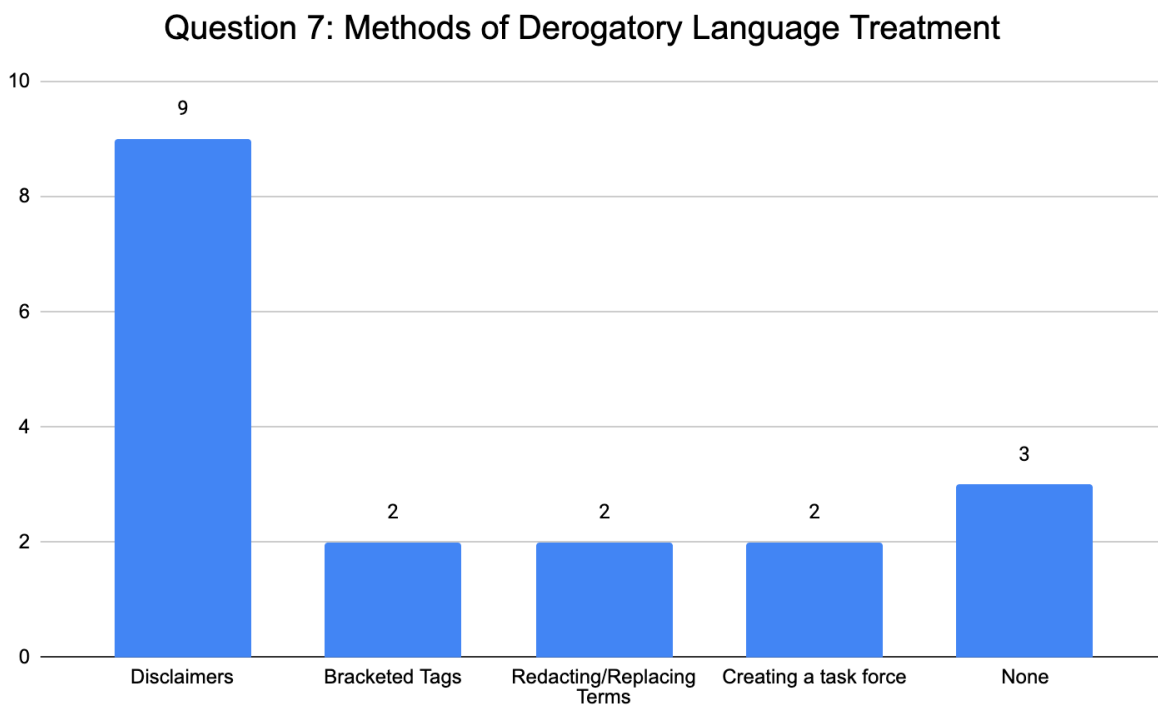


Figure 5. Responses to survey question 7. Respondents indicated that disclaimers were the most common method of treating derogatory language, followed by bracketed tags, redacting or replacing terms, and creating a task force.

Question 8. What are your/your museum's motivations behind addressing derogatory language in natural history collection databases?

The most common motivation for addressing derogatory language could be classified as promoting inclusivity (6 respondents). These respondents felt that derogatory language could be a barrier for individuals of affected groups to access the collections as both external users and internal staff members and collaborators. With two (2) responses each, other motivations included avoiding the reproduction of bias, addressing racism and inequality, and improving searchability. Two (2) respondents emphasized addressing derogatory language as a way to prevent the erasure of Indigenous knowledge and promote collaboration. One (1) respondent referenced upholding the institutional mission to disseminate scientific and vernacular names as a form of scientific communication, with language being central to that task. Lastly, one (1) respondent indicated that the main sources of derogatory language, common names, were not transcribed, and thus had not yet needed to be altered or addressed (see fig. 6).

Question 8: Motivations for Addressing Derogatory Language

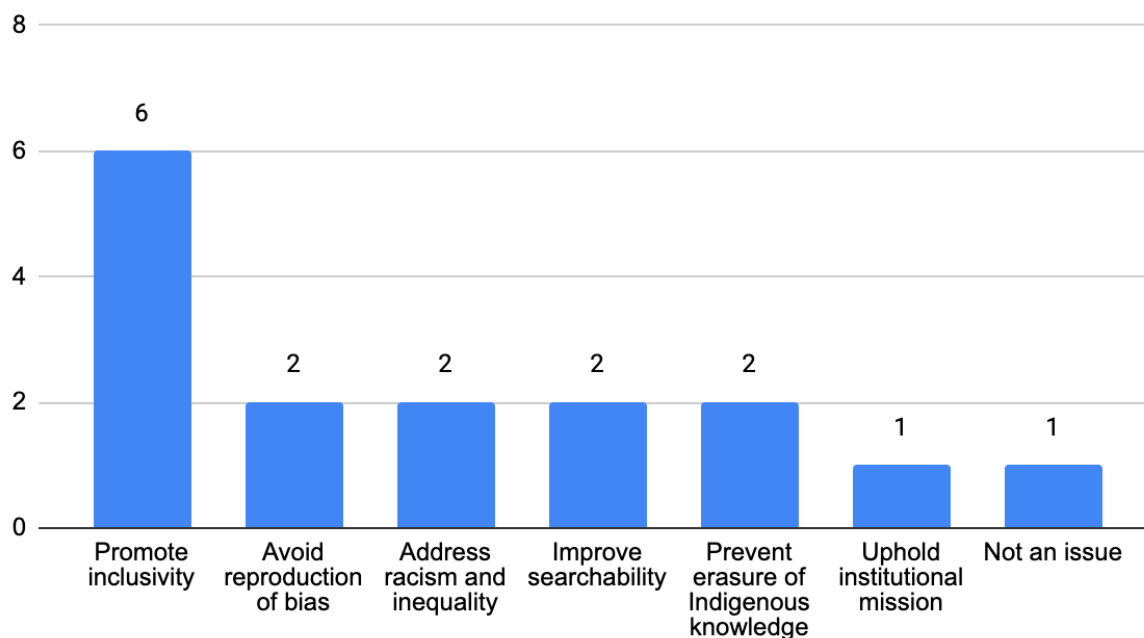


Figure 6. Responses to survey question 8. The most common motivation for addressing derogatory language was to promote inclusivity.

Question 9. What challenges, concerns, or limitations have you faced when determining how to treat derogatory language in the collection and digital database?

With five (5) respondents citing these issues, the greatest challenges facing the implementation of a derogatory language protocol were disagreements among staff; the individuality of each case preventing a one-size-fits-all approach; and limitations in labor, time, and funding. Difficulty in identifying harmful terminology and their historical context was cited by three (3) respondents as a concern, which coincided with the three (3) responses referencing the scope of collections and limitations in linguistic and historical expertise among natural

history museum staff. Two (2) respondents faced database limitations, such as the inability to successfully query derogatory terms and the lack of control over disclaimers in data aggregator portals. In addition, two (2) respondents emphasized the responsibility to transcribe data verbatim, including derogatory historical terms (see fig. 7).

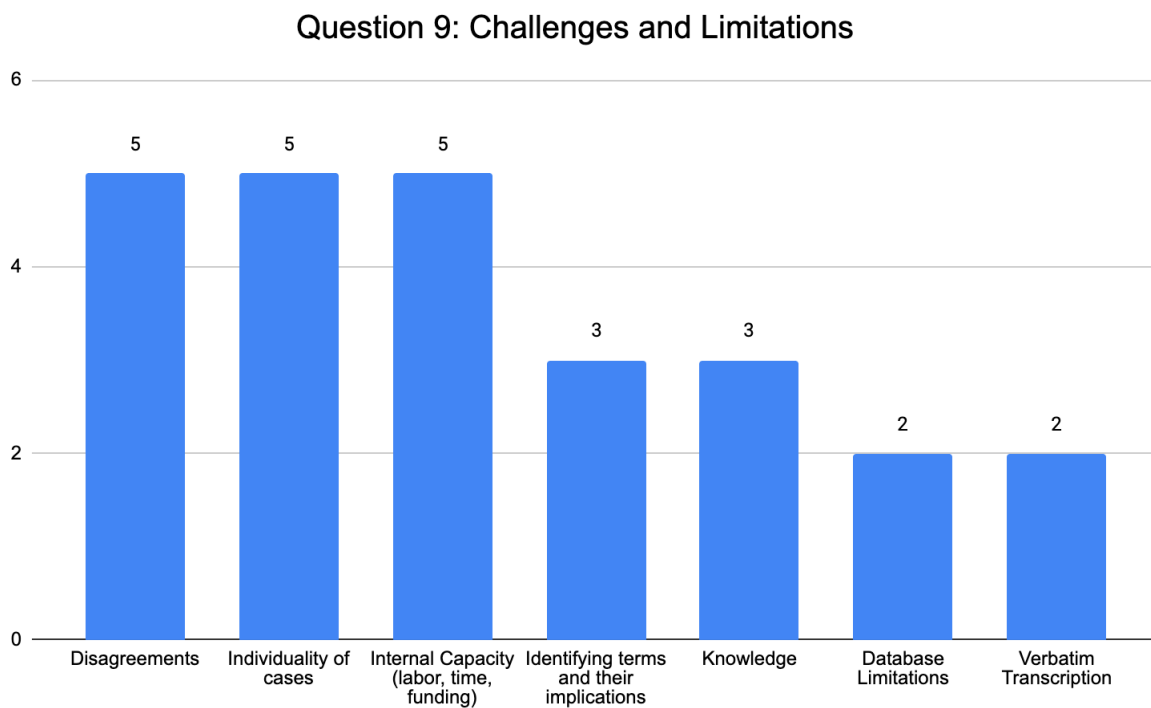


Figure 7. Responses to survey question 9. The greatest challenges influencing the creation of a derogatory language protocol are disagreements, the individuality of cases, and limited internal capacity.

Question 10. Lastly, what resources have been helpful in understanding how to address derogatory language in the database?

Respondents indicated that discussions amongst their peers and other museum professionals were the most useful tools to learn more about the issue of derogatory language in databases and the methods currently being formed to address it. Several respondents mentioned having discussions with peers while attending conferences, including events hosted by the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collection. Others found articles and publications on derogatory language, decolonization, and geographic place names useful. Other respondents used the websites and collection databases of other museums as examples for how to word and where to place disclaimers on their own sites. A select list of these and other resources is provided in Appendix C.

Recommendations

Historical labels and descriptions are important. They provide insight to the social attitudes and personal opinions of their writer and the society in which that writer lived. Despite the discomfort they may cause, offensive and derogatory language on specimen labels should never be erased. While it may seem best to assume a policy that sees the removal of derogatory language in its entirety, it does not benefit a collection or its users to willfully hide evidence of racism and violence. Rather, what is important is to provide the proper context so that users of a database can access all of its material safely with an understanding that harmful language may appear, but is considered unacceptable by the museum's ethical standards. Following archivist Alicia Chilcott's suggestions to contextualize records in the United Kingdom's National Archives, a workforce of collections managers and curatorial staff recently proposed ways in

which natural history collection databases can address derogatory language (Briscoe et al.). Briscoe et al. suggest four methods to reduce the harm perpetrated by derogatory language: disclaimers and warning statements, transcription guidelines, internal policies, and guidelines for new collections (11). Some collection databases have already implemented these methods in ways that are visible in their database and will be cited in the following examples. Certain aspects of these examples will not be applicable to every collection due to differences across database systems; however, they can be adapted to suit the needs and limitations of a database on a case-by-case basis. A list of resources, references and examples of disclaimers in addition to those mentioned in this section is provided in Appendix C.

Disclaimers

Providing disclaimers that warn database users of the presence of derogatory and offensive language is a practice recommended by Briscoe et al. that has been adopted by numerous institutions already. Additionally, it was the most common treatment method mentioned by survey respondents. Certain museums, like the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, present the disclaimer as a pop-up window that users must acknowledge in order to proceed to the search page:

Important Note about Historical Language at the Peabody: Collections records may contain language, reflecting past collecting practices and methods of analysis, that is no longer acceptable. The Peabody Museum is committed to addressing the problem of offensive and discriminatory language present in its database. Our museum staff are continually updating these records, adding to and improving content. We welcome your

feedback and any questions or concerns you may want to share. Please email us with your comments. (“Welcome”)

Other databases contain the disclaimer as text on the search page or among the search results.

The Harvard University Herbaria (HUH) disclaimer reads:

Disclaimer: Collection records at the Harvard University Herbaria (HUH) may contain language that reflects historical place or taxon names in an original form that is no longer acceptable or appropriate in an inclusive environment. Because HUH preserves data in their original form to retain authenticity and facilitate research, we have chosen to facilitate conversations and are committed to address the problem of racial, derogatory and demeaning language that may be found in our database. Insensitive or offensive language is not condoned by the HUH. (“Index”)

The Peabody disclaimer acknowledges the historical practices that resulted in the presence of derogatory language in its collection and encourages users to reach out with any concerns they may have. The HUH disclaimer specifies the places where derogatory language might be found, illustrates the importance of keeping the language verbatim, and makes it clear that HUH does not condone the language and has made a commitment to the ethical stewardship of its collections. Its location at the bottom of the “Index of Botanical Specimens” search page is more obscure than a pop-up window used by the Peabody, but both disclaimers explain the historic origins of derogatory language and the institution’s position against it. Users accessing these databases are made aware that there are internal practices being implemented to make the digital collections more accessible. Disclaimers allow institutions to make blanket statements about

their collections while they work on providing context to individual records that contain derogatory language through the addition of bracketed tags or updated terms.

Square brackets and bracketed tags

Using square brackets to include information not taken verbatim from a specimen label can contextualize offensive language in a collection database more pointedly than disclaimers. HUH has a short statement beneath the derogatory language disclaimer informing users about the purpose of brackets: “Data shown in square brackets [] are annotations made by the cataloger and do not necessarily reflect data present on the specimen labels” (“Index”). This distinguishes the voice of the institution from the voice of the historical collector, which is important to do as institutions increase the level of curation in their collection databases.

Developing a standardized list of bracketed tags is useful so that database entries containing derogatory language can be more easily queried should they ever need to be updated. For example, if there is a place name or object description that contains offensive language that has not been officially updated, a tag can be placed at the end of the locality string so that users are aware that the term is derogatory, historical, and unrepresentative of the institution’s ethical standards. HUH uses the tag “[Verbatim transcription of historical term]” to this effect (see fig. 8).

Classification	<u>Asteraceae: Erigeron</u>
Harvard University Herbaria Barcode(s)	02206051
Collector	<u>B. E. Nelson</u>
Collector number	12550
Country	United States of America
State	Wyoming
Geography	North America: North America (CA, US, MX) (Region): United States of America: Wyoming: Park County
Locality	T55N R104W S7; Northern Absarokas; "Battleship Mountain", ca 2.5 air mi NW of Dead Indian Pass[Verbatim transcription of historical term], ca 24.3 air mi NW of Cody
Date Collected	1985-07-18
Verbatim Elevation	6400 - 6600 ft
Habitat	Cracks and thin soil at and near the edge of the first rim
Project	US and Canada - Mass Digitization

Figure 8. A database record containing the contextual tag [Verbatim transcription of historical term]. Pressed specimen collected by Burrell Ernest Nelson, 1985. Photo from “Index of Botanical Specimens.” *Harvard University Herbaria & Libraries*, 2022, https://kiki.huh.harvard.edu/databases/specimen_search.php?mode=details&id=1521974.

Briscoe et al. emphasize the importance of transcribing the label information verbatim in order to retain historical accuracy and suggest adding the updated place name in brackets following the offensive term (13-14). While the retention of historical locality information is important, the reality of transcribing slurs raises concern regarding the comfort level of digitization staff and volunteers. The survey responses demonstrate that most concerns about derogatory language came from internal staff and those involved in the process of digitizing the collection. Some individuals might find it difficult to transcribe the language, even with an established derogatory language protocol that incorporates adding bracketed information for context. In these instances, it is important to allow for an option that does not force individuals that digitize to type out the derogatory term (Anonymous Interviewee 2). A standardized bracketed tag such as “[See historical term on label]” or “[Historical term temporarily redacted]” can be queried later on so that a staff member who is willing to type out the offensive language can update the record

information. This way, individual comfort levels are respected and historical accuracy is ultimately maintained.

Certain derogatory terms have been officially removed from place names by the United States Geological Survey, including the N-word and, more recently, the term “squaw” (“Interior Department”). For place names with an official new name, the updated place name can be transcribed in brackets followed by a tag that explains the historical offensive term has officially been replaced, but can still be seen on the specimen image. HUH uses the tag “[Historical name replaced with modern name because of derogatory language. See label for historic term.]” (see fig. 9).

Classification	Ericaceae: Orthilia
Harvard University Herbaria Barcode(s)	01719896
Collector	A. E. Porsild & R. T. Porsild
Collector number	3000
Country	Canada
State	Northwest Territories
Geography	North America: North America (CA, US, MX) (Region): Canada: Northwest Territories
Locality	[Husky] Lake Basin: North shore of second Lake. [Historic name replaced with modern name because of derogatory language. See label for historic term.]
Georeference	69°N, 132°30'W
Date Collected	1927-08-18
Habitat	in dry tundra
Container	Flora of Northwest Territories
Frequency	abundant
Project	US and Canada - Mass Digitization

Figure 9. A database record containing the contextual tag [Historical name replaced with modern name because of derogatory language. See label for historic term.]. Pressed specimen collected by Alf Erling Porsild and Robert Thorbjörn Porsild, 1927. Photo from “Index of Botanical Specimens.” *Harvard University Herbaria & Libraries*, 2022, https://kiki.huh.harvard.edu/databases/specimen_search.php?barcode=1719896.

In general, operational transparency augments trust between visitors and a museum and is a core standard established by the American Alliance of Museums (“Public Trust”). Bracketed tags indicate where and why the derogatory language appears. They can also provide insight to the internal practices that collections have implemented to address derogatory language, shedding light on curatorial processes to database users.

Common Names

Common names, while not always included on specimen labels, can contain derogatory terms. Their transcription to the collection database is dependent on the scope of the digitization project – some projects may not consider them important enough to capture, and many labels do not contain this information. However, common names are used widely by both professional and amateur botanists, and context should be provided when they appear in an offensive form. Many species have multiple common names. This gives museums the option to use synonymized common names in square brackets in the appropriate text field. If necessary, all of the common names can be listed out, and those using derogatory terms can be accompanied by a bracketed disclaimer that explains this name is not preferred and contains derogatory language. Since most digitizers will not be familiar with the historical contexts of many of these terms, the Cultural Context Resource Document in Appendix C provides a comprehensive evaluation of terms that is useful for this purpose.

Unnamed Collectors

Tags and disclaimers can be used to provide context for unnamed collectors. In instances where the information provided on a label does not include any identifiable information for a

local collector (i.e. “Native collector”; see fig. 2), context can be provided to explain that historically, scientists traveling to other countries employed local workers to collect with and for them. In a virtual exhibit created about the history of botany in Sarawak for the Beccari Centenary by the Friends of the Sarawak Museum, the important role unnamed local botanists played in scientific discovery is acknowledged with a statement that reads:

We also acknowledge the numerous Sarawakians who made huge contributions to botanical collections during the Brooke and Colonial periods, but whose names were never recorded. This herbarium label is one of many recording the work of an unnamed ‘native collector’. (*Plant People*)

In general, the wording used in contextualizing elements should not discourage database users from researching the collectors themselves to find more information about them and should avoid claims that these names were never recorded anywhere, or that every case of an unnamed collector is the result of prejudice on the part of the scientist. While these situations do occur, names may have been left unwritten for a variety of reasons, and museum staff in the present day cannot make general assumptions for every case. That said, name erasure without context does little to inform researchers and database users of the massive gaps in written history that contain the experiences and contributions of people of color. The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, while not a natural history museum, respectfully attributed artworks to unnamed Native American artists in an ongoing exhibition by using the phrase “name once known” on gallery labels (*On This Ground*). This choice in language expresses the complexities of historic indigenous erasure in museum collections without making assumptions as to why the names are no longer known. Natural history collection databases should aim to capture both the verbatim

language used to describe a native collector and provide a tag or disclaimer that explains the historical significance of name erasure in the sciences.

If museum staff are able to identify an unnamed collector based on additional research, that information should be reflected in the specimen record along with a bracketed note explaining that the name was not recorded on the label but found through research. If the database records have fields where reference data can be listed, these should be included so that the source of the information is retrievable. While it might not be necessary to have the reference information published to the database, it is useful to keep as an internal resource so that it can be traced and provided to researchers upon request.

Other Cases

In some cases, self-labeling using derogatory terms can be a demonstration of agency and power. Social psychologist Adam D. Galinsky defines the term reappropriation as “taking possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce another group’s lesser status” (2020). Minority groups can reclaim slurs in ways that diminish their negative connotation and maintain the group’s self-esteem, increasing their felt and perceived power (2021, 2028). In collections, some artworks and objects are given titles that include derogatory language that should not be hidden or altered in the public-facing database. Diné (Navajo) artist Betty J. Lee titled a painting featuring a man and woman *Brave and Squaw* (see fig. 10).



Figure 10. A Native artwork featuring a man and woman in traditional dress. Betty J. Lee, *Brave and Squaw*, 1960-1965, paper, watercolor, ink, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C.

Altering the title of this painting in a database because of the presence of two derogatory terms would not only make it difficult to search – it would silence the voice of Native American artist Betty J. Lee. Without commentary from the artist, museum staff today cannot be certain why this title was chosen. Perhaps the terms were used willingly by Betty J. Lee to reappropriate them in defiance to the negative perceptions of Native American people. Perhaps the terms were so

commonplace at the time of the painting's creation in the 1960s that it was the norm, or perhaps the artist was catering to a predominately white audience. Perhaps the painting was named by a different person altogether. Part of the difficulty of establishing a derogatory language protocol stems from how unique each case is and the need to address them individually so as not to mistakenly contribute to the silencing of people of color. In a case such as this, collections staff could decide to include a contextualizing tag or disclaimer that explains how the terms "brave" and "squaw" were used degradingly by non-Native American groups so that users are aware of their historic usage. They should not remove or replace the title.

There are certain cases, however, where altering titles and front-facing terminology in a collection database might be acceptable. During the digitization of photographs from the Marshall Family Collection at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, curatorial staff discovered descriptive language that is no longer acceptable and offensive to the groups portrayed in the photographs, such as the term "Bushman" used to describe individuals in Southwest Africa and their physical attributes, like "Bushman-type hair" (Riley). These descriptions, originally the display titles of the photographs, were deemed inappropriate to leave verbatim as titles in the collection database. Project staff created digitization guidelines that allowed for the verbatim language of image descriptions to be available upon request. Public-facing display titles in the database that contained offensive language were reworded, with the subject's names used whenever possible and physical descriptors of Indigenous individuals replaced with broader terms. For example, the description "A Bushman sleeping beside the fire" was recorded in the Catalog Transcription field in the museum's internal database and made available upon request; the Display Title of the record in the public database reads "Man

sleeping lying on the ground beside a fire” (Riley). These guidelines worked specifically for this collection. Staff should be careful to establish written protocols that provide ethical grounds to cover most cases of derogatory language, but still allow for the flexibility to address each case uniquely when necessary.

Collaboration

An important part of the decolonization process of natural history collections involves collaborating with descendent communities so as to incorporate their knowledge, needs, and desires in the care of their cultural material. NAGPRA requires museums to establish relationships with descendent communities when dealing with human remains and funerary objects, but it is up to the museum and the communities themselves to maintain any other form of collaboration beyond this. One way in which museums might consider amplifying traditional knowledge through their digital collections is by partnering with Indigenous communities through portals such as the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN). The RRN was co-developed by the Musqueam Indian Band, the Stó:lō National/Tribal Council, the U’mista Cultural Society, and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (MOA) as part of the MOA’s “A Partnership of Peoples” renewal project (“About”). It is “an online tool to facilitate reciprocal and collaborative research about cultural heritage from the Northwest Coast of British Columbia” (“About”). Researchers and community members can create projects and hold discussions about certain items where they can ask questions, provide insight, and share their own knowledge and expertise. Museums from across the globe have shared items in their collections, including the American Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford (“About”). This

ongoing method of collaboration is an example of how traditional knowledge can be distributed and amplified through digital natural history collections while maintaining relationships with Indigenous communities. The MOA has also hosted Indigenous Musqueam artists and activists to disseminate their knowledge to the public, in addition to other events like film screenings and cultural holiday celebrations (“Past Events”). Stakeholder involvement is an investment that museums can make as part of their commitment to the ethical stewardship of their collections.

It is equally important for collaboration to occur among museum professionals. As illustrated in the survey responses, peer discussion was paramount in determining how to handle derogatory language in the database. Collections managers and digitization supervisors should make the workplace environment conducive to this type of discussion, and preferably hold regular meetings where open conversation can occur and staff members can voice their concerns. This topic is contentious, and while some individuals may welcome a derogatory language protocol, others might feel it is unnecessary or exceeds the limits of staff, time, and funding. Establishing protocols that are communicated across the museum field and become the standard might help ease some of these concerns, and it can only be accomplished through discussion and deliberation, as well as trial and error. The ethical thing to do is to do something, even if the solution is not perfect (Anonymous Interviewee 2). Museum professionals must be critical of the long-established policies and willing to adapt to the changes in ethical standards that have occurred since the creation of natural history collections if they wish to remain relevant to current and future audiences. That said, the individual concerns of staff members should be respected, heard, and discussed in order to reach solutions that ultimately serve the public, as museums are entrusted to do.

Creating a written protocol

Like most collections policies, it is important to create a written protocol so that practices are standardized within the collection and that these practices align with the museum's mission statement and code of ethics (Kiser 239). The Peabody Museum's efforts to treat derogatory language in its database as a result of its commitment to ethical stewardship directly enforces its mission "to [amplify] global Indigenous, descendant, and diaspora community voices and knowledge to address colonial legacies" and "to foster a more inclusive and collaborative future" ("About the Peabody Museum"). Even if a museum's mission statement does not mention inclusion or retrospective action to dismantle the problematic foundations upon which collections were built, the creation of a derogatory language protocol promotes accessibility, which is in the museum's best interest and a standard goal of digitization (Kiser 239). The public trusts museums to a larger degree than newspapers, and must honor this trust by curating collections and collection databases that are transparent and mindful of the ideologies they perpetuate (Dilenschneider 2019). A written derogatory language protocol should be accessible to collections staff physically and digitally so that practices can be standardized within the museum. As language and ethics continue to evolve and new knowledge is acquired, the protocol should be updated and treated as a living document, being that ethical stewardship is a perpetual endeavor.

Conclusion: Reimagining Digital Collections

Digital content is the first point of access for many visitors, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. The tone set by digital content could invite or deter potential guests from ever entering the museum's doors. Because of this, it is important to make digital content as

welcoming and inclusive as possible – including database records. All of the content a museum publishes reflects what it stands for as an institution and public space, and the internal affairs of the collections and staff should reflect what the institution preaches on social media. While derogatory language cannot be erased or ignored, it is important that internal collections policies reflect the welcoming, inclusive environment museums need to remain relevant to broader audiences in the twenty-first century.

Relevance

Remaining relevant is a source of concern among museums. Changing attitudes towards collections, alternate forms of entertainment, and being a traditionally exclusive environment means that natural history museums are not the first place individuals choose to spend their time (Culture Track). Entertainment factors aside, the exclusion felt by people of color in the museum space is something that needs to change if museums hope to survive. The process of decolonization is a step in the right direction, and “successful” decolonization will rewrite the way natural history museums function as institutions, both internally and externally, because of the deep-rooted systematic oppression on which they were built. The treatment of derogatory language should not be done because it is the current trend in social ethics, but because it is truly the ethical thing to do – a sentiment revealed during an interview with an anonymous collections manager responsible for leading the campaign to address derogatory language at their institution. A superficial, performative commitment to conduct ethical stewardship of collections is likely to result in the failure to engage a more diverse audience.

Accessibility

The curation of collection databases to be more welcoming and accessible is a necessary step in encouraging their use. In certain ways, the database is the most exposure external visitors can get into collections practices, particularly because it receives the least amount of curatorial voice. Because museums are institutions that have a colonial, white-supremacist history, database users might have a difficult time navigating data riddled with oppressive and exploitative language, especially now that the political and social climate has reignited concerns about systematic racism. Being a repository for digital information does not exclude collection databases from the need to be reinvented using empathy. Providing context to evidence of racism and prejudice in databases can help users feel safe and welcome. It also prevents internal staff – those digitizing the collection – from disseminating racist ideologies through the uncontextualized transcription of derogatory terms. Rather, they can be agents of promoting ameliorated searchability and accessibility to natural history collections.

Counterpoints

Concerns may arise over the general practice of capturing label information verbatim to reflect historical accuracy and adjusting digital content with tags contextualizing historical language. Since verbatim transcription is generally the protocol when transcribing natural history specimens, altering derogatory language can come across as deliberately rewriting history. However, the recommendations made here for treating derogatory language in natural history databases serve to *conserve* history. In cases where even the act of transcribing a derogatory slur is uncomfortable for museum staff and an alternate name exists, the alternate name can be placed in brackets and a tag added to guide database users to the specimen image for the original term.

Should there not be an image available for the public to access, it would be recommended to keep the original term and add the updated term so that historical accuracy is maintained.

Whatever the final treatment of a term is, the record should reflect accuracy and transparency so that users do not get the impression that information is being kept from them. Complete censorship of derogatory language can make databases less reliable should a researcher be looking specifically at historical language.

A second concern involves the perceived neutrality of museums and institutional voice. Museum neutrality is an oxymoron: they have never been neutral. While visitors are able to interpret the art and artifacts for themselves, even the manner of presentation can influence the information gleaned from an object. Since their establishment, museums have told the narrative of white men from colonizing countries who championed their collections as evidence of their authority. Counteracting these narratives with the voices of misrepresented groups by involving them in the curatorial process has changed the way these communities engage with the physical museum. Digitally, a lack of institutional voice when derogatory language occurs simply reinforces those ideas as fact. Providing context through tags and disclaimers makes it very clear to database users that the language is not that of the museum or its staff; it is attributed to the author of the label, the collector, and to that person only. Evidence of the institution's voice, especially on databases, aids in the transparency of collections practices and demonstrates ethical stewardship is driving collections policy.

Final Remarks and Future Considerations

Like all museums, natural history collections are entrusted to serve the public. As the world grows more diverse and more connected, museums must expand their reach and make

their collections accessible to all. In the wake of a violent past, museums must evolve and uphold their ethical standards. While there has been a focus on addressing racist language because of the social unrest of 2020, collections staff should also consider addressing offensive language in its ableist, homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic forms. Natural history collections risk fading into obscurity should they fail to adopt physical and digital curatorial practices that allow them to serve a diverse public in accessible, safe, and meaningful ways. By creating a derogatory language protocol and committing to practice ethical stewardship, natural history collections can reduce the harm they have the potential to cause while transparently demonstrating their willingness to foster welcoming spaces of exploration for all.

Appendix A

Survey Methods

A survey was created using the Qualtrics survey software and distributed to natural history collections and herbaria in two ways: by emailing the survey link to collections managers and staff leading digitization projects directly, and by posting the survey link to the Museum Collections Management Facebook group. The purpose of the survey was to see where collections are in the process of addressing and treating derogatory language in their digital collection databases and to understand the challenges of doing so. While the respondents' names and institutions were submitted with the survey, that information will remain anonymous in order to protect individual identities while discussing their opinions and experiences.

Survey Questions

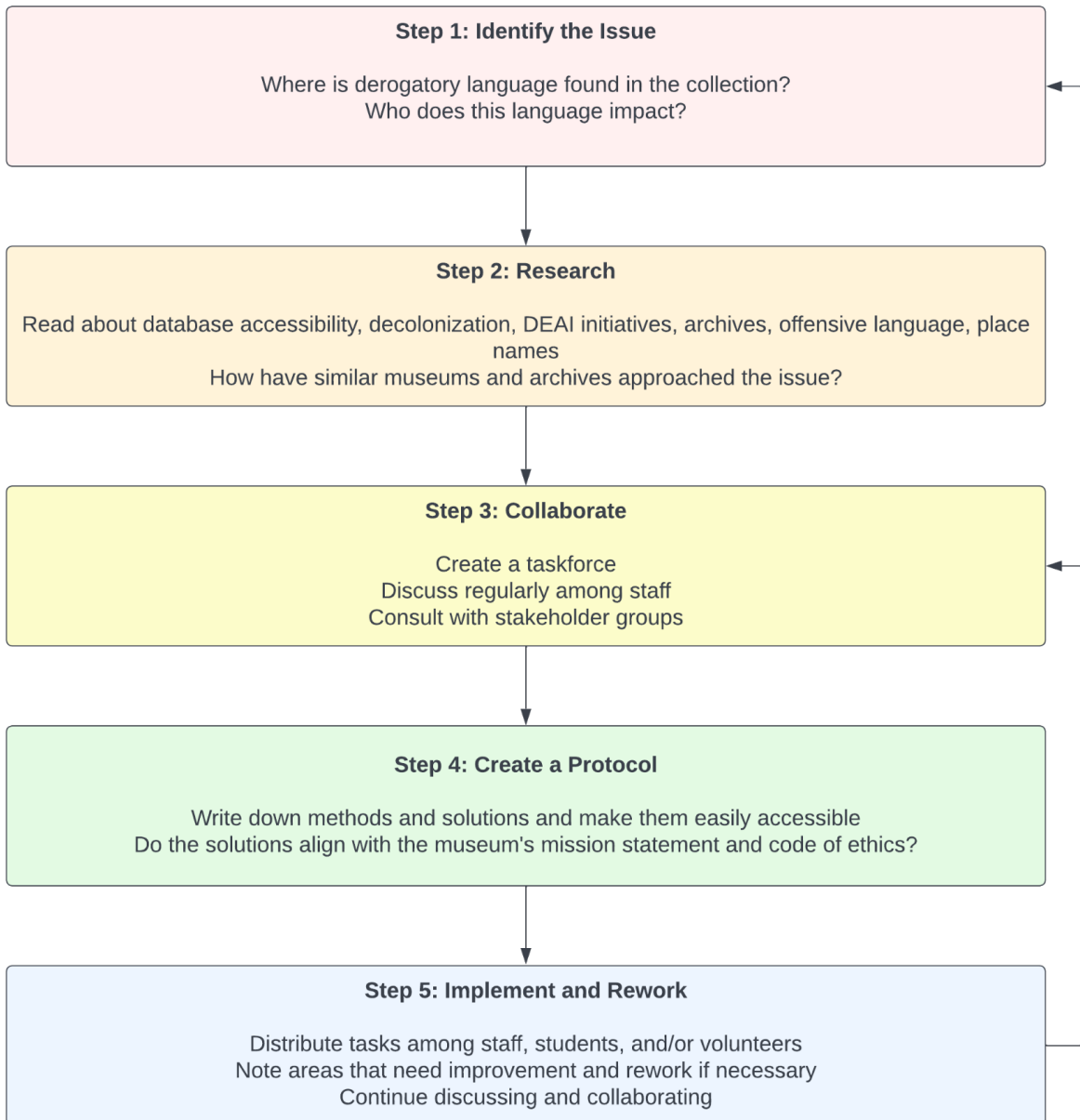
1. What is your name?
2. What museum/collection do you work with?
3. What is your role in the museum/collection?
4. In what form does derogatory language usually appear in the collection (place names description, taxonomic/common names, collector names/name erasure)?
5. Have you received feedback or concerns from database users about derogatory language in the collection database?
6. Does your museum have a written protocol to address derogatory language in the database?
7. What methods have you developed to address derogatory language in the database (disclaimers, bracketed tags, etc.)?

8. What are your/your museum's motivations behind addressing derogatory language in natural history collection databases?
9. What challenges, concerns, or limitations have you faced when determining how to treat derogatory language in the collection and digital database?
10. Lastly, what resources have been helpful in understanding how to address derogatory language in the database?

Appendix B

One of the challenges of creating a derogatory language protocol is its novelty for many museum staff. In order to ease the process, a two-page worksheet was created to provide a step-by-step guide staff can use to aid in the creation of a protocol. The first page of this worksheet is a broad overview of the steps involved in the process, found in the Derogatory Language Treatment Framework Overview graphic on the next page. The second page of this worksheet goes over each step in greater detail, including some guiding questions staff can use to assess their progress. Since derogatory language and museum ethics are ever-evolving, the process is meant to be cyclical, with staff returning to the Identification, Research and Collaboration steps (Steps 1-3) as needed.

Derogatory Language Treatment Framework Overview



Framework for Creating a Derogatory Language Protocol in Natural History Collection Databases

This framework is designed to streamline the process of implementing a derogatory language protocol. Each step contains questions to guide conversations and provide a structure for brainstorming possible solutions.

Step One: Identify the Issue

What is the scope of the collection?

- What regions, cultural groups, and time periods are represented?

Where does derogatory language occur?

- The most common fields include geographic place names, binomial nomenclature and common names, anthropologic descriptions, and unnamed collectors

Who does the language impact?

- Did an individual or group voice concern over the issue?
- Have staff or visitors been affected?
- Does the language limit database searchability for users?

Step Two: Research

Read literature about decolonization, DEAI initiatives, public archives, offensive language, place names

- See Resources in Appendix C

How have similar museums approached the issue?

- Consider implementing methods already tested by other collections, such as adding a disclaimer to the database webpage and using square brackets to add context to individual records or create tags that can be queried in the database

Step Three: Collaborate

Discuss regularly among staff

- Open, periodical discussions are a productive way to identify concerns and brainstorm ideas

Create a task force

- Assigning a group of dedicated curatorial staff to be in charge of creating a protocol will keep the initiative from losing steam

Reach out to descendent communities and impacted groups

- Are there any partnerships or ongoing relationships with any of these groups?
- Is there any traditional knowledge that is not recorded on labels (names, stories, etc.) that could fill in some of the gaps in the collection?

Consult experts

- Historians and onomasticians can determine the contexts behind offensive terms, removing this burden from digitization and curatorial staff members

Step Four: Create a Protocol

Create a written protocol that addresses the issues identified in the database

- Do the solutions align with the museum's mission statement and code of ethics?
- Is the protocol accessible to all individuals involved in the digitization process?
- Is the protocol able to be amended as needed?

Step Five: Implement and Rework

Distribute tasks among staff, students, and/or volunteers - whoever is responsible for digitization of the collection

Note areas that need improvement and rework if necessary

- Are the involved personnel comfortable with the solutions?
- Are disclaimers clearly visible on the website?
- Are bracketed tags able to be queried?

Continue researching, discussing and collaborating

- This is an ongoing process. Treat the protocol as a living document that can be updated as new issues are discovered

Appendix C

The treatment of derogatory terms in databases requires ample research to guide discussions before protocols can be created. Listed here are a selection of articles, scientific papers, and examples of museum webpages compiled from the author’s own research and from the responses to Question 10 of the survey conducted as part of the Case Study. This list is meant as a starting point for further study and is by no means representative of all the nuances involved in the process of decolonizing museums, amplifying under- and mis-represented voices, identifying derogatory terms and contexts, and curating museum databases for a more accessible future.

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