



Boston Athenæum Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Cataloging Description

Collection materials described and depicted in the Boston Athenæum's online catalog Athena and its Digital Collections are historical in nature, artifacts of the time and place in which they were produced. As such, they may contain offensive racial, gender, sexual, or religious language and imagery. In making these materials accessible catalogers must make choices about language and tone when describing them, while also acknowledging their own implicit biases.

The Boston Athenæum recognizes that many of our materials are created by and/or represent marginalized groups of people. We believe it is our responsibility to describe people and organizations accurately and respectfully, and to do so in a way that is not harmful or offensive. Our work is informed by professional codes of ethics and values centered on social responsibility. Additionally, when describing rare books, prints and photographs, manuscript collections, and their digital surrogates, we follow an evolving set of best practices to address the use of harmful or offensive language. These guidelines include:

- Actively considering the benefits of reusing legacy description and the effect it may have on users encountering that description.
 - In cataloging, it is a common practice to reuse catalog records created by other libraries. When describing materials, we also sometimes transcribe or quote language provided by creators, former owners, and others in order to provide important context for the materials, or to make collections more readily available for research.
- Supporting efforts to modify existing subject headings and to develop alternative controlled vocabularies to include more appropriate or community-oriented language.
 - Subject headings are terms designed to help users find materials based on subject matter. The Boston Athenæum follows the standard practice of using Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) for better findability in our library catalog. Using a standardized set of subject headings facilitates the uniform access and retrieval of items in libraries across the world. LCSH is the world's most widely used subject vocabulary. It is influenced by the policies and language used by the United States Congress. When LCSH terms are updated, those changes will be reflected in our online catalog.
- Privileging individuals' self-identification in regards to race, ethnicity, name, gender, and sexual orientation.

- We research how communities describe themselves and their own histories, connect with other institutions that have engaged with similar materials, and/or appeal directly to the people or organizations who created or are described by the materials. Additionally, we avoid evaluative words like "preeminent" and "renowned" that might obscure context or reinforce existing power structures.

How to address description concerns in our catalog:

If you encounter offensive text that is not in the original material, but in a finding aid, catalog record, or other description created by catalogers, please contact us at reference@bostonathenaeum.org to bring this to our attention. We will assess all concerns. In all cases, we will share information about the resolution process with the person who raised the concern.

Our statement was adapted from:

[University of Nebraska Omaha](#) Statement on Harmful Material
[Tufts University](#) DCA Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description
[Library and Archives of Canada](#) Historic Language Advisory
[Temple University Libraries](#) SRSC Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description and Cataloging

Our work is guided by the following codes and professional literature:

Codes of Ethics and Values:

[ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians](#)
[Core Values of the Society of American Archivists](#)
[ALA Core Values of Librarianship](#)
[RBMS Cataloguing Code of Ethics](#)

Literature:

Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Working Group. "[Anti-Racist Description Resources](#)." October 2019.

Hobart, Elizabeth. "[Ethical Cataloging and Racism in Special Collections](#)." In *Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation*. Sacramento, California : Library Juice Press, 2020.

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