METADATA THAT EXCLUDES
A Case Study of the Rock Springs Massacre in Digital Collections

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Abstract – This poster presents the preliminary findings of a project that analyzes archival materials about the 1885 Rock Springs Massacre to understand archival silences around the experiences of Chinese people in the United States. We observed that metadata contributes to the exclusion of Chinese people through absent categories, overly narrow subject descriptions, and an emphasis on foreignness and otherness. Future work will identify points of intervention in digital preservation to address these issues.

Conference Topics – Digital Accessibility, Inclusion, and Diversity.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Trouillot [1] argues that silences enter history at four crucial moments: fact creation, fact assembly (the making of archives), fact retrieval, and retrospective significance. The Rock Springs Massacre occurred in Wyoming in 1885, involving racial violence as white miners attacked Chinese individuals, resulting in the death of 28 Chinese people and displacing hundreds more [2]. The archival silences surrounding this massacre start from fact creation, through witness intimidation and the absence of criminal indictments. The continued lack of evidence and curated collections functions as an “archival amnesty” [3] that enables the United States to evade collective responsibility.

We are library and information scholars working to understand how digital infrastructures can reinforce archival silences. Metadata, an essential element of digital collection infrastructure, shapes the narratives about resources. Giving resources names [4], assigning subject descriptors and designing knowledge organization systems [5] and transcribing historical names into metadata [6] have all been critiqued for their impact on marginalized groups. Studies on reparative and inclusive description have recently gained prominence in archival description and cataloging [7] – [11]. For example, metadata recommendations from the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia’s Anti-Racist Description Working Group equip professionals to create “ethical, respectful, and accurate description of records created by and about Black people” [11].

As a part of a larger project, we are assessing and reflecting on archival materials about the Rock Springs Massacre collected by four mainstream archival repositories: the Library of Congress, the American Heritage Center (AHC) at the University of Wyoming, the Wyoming State Archives, and the National Archives and Records Administration. We wrote structured reflections for each item about its repository context and metadata, affective responses of ourselves and our imagined audience,
and our own motivations and assumptions. Through this process, we examined existing metadata records and contemplated potential interventions within the current descriptive infrastructure. We report initial findings from the critical reflections that focus on metadata and its role in reinforcing archival silences.

II. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS: METADATA AS EXCLUSION

A. Absent Categories

The issue of uneven representation in navigation categories and topical collections is evident in the Library of Congress’s digital collection page. While there is a category for “African American History,” there is no equivalent category for Asian American History or other ethnic/racial groups and immigration history. While there is an Asian Division within the “World Cultures & History” topical category, those collections focus on cultural material created in Asia. The observations align with arguments around the invisibility of Asian Americans in archival collections, curricula, and knowledge organization systems.

B. Overly Narrow Subject Descriptions

In examining items from the AHC, we observed subject descriptions that primarily focused on the labor dispute aspect of the Rock Springs Massacre. These descriptions highlighted terms such as “Coal Mines and mining,” “Chinatowns—United States,” and “Immigrants—Wyoming.” While these subject headings are not inaccurate, they emphasize a specific narrative surrounding the massacre, centered on industrialization and labor. Alternative subject headings such as “Racism” or “Xenophobia” could provide different perspectives. Future descriptive metadata should incorporate elements embracing counternarratives regarding racism of the massacre, such as narratives about the xenophobia experienced by survivors or victims and presenting a broader perspective from Chinese Americans.

In the Wyoming History Day virtual collection, newspaper clippings from the 1920s mention Chinese men who died in the Rock Springs Massacre. One of these, titled “Lao Chung Dead” includes the metadata Citation “Subject File: Chinese, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming” and a descriptive note of “The article states that Lao Chung was shot in the back during the 1885 riot and ‘carried the bullet to his grave.’. Another clipping tells the story of a man who “hid in a bake oven for three days” during the massacre. We suggest adding subject headings such as “Survivors” or “Survival Narratives”.

C. Othering and Emphasis on Foreignness

Our examination of digital repositories revealed examples of metadata that emphasized the foreignness and otherness of the Rock Springs Massacre victims. This emphasis, coupled with the focus on labor relations, creates an “archival amnesty” surrounding the event and aligns with arguments around the “perpetual foreigner” status of Asian people in the United States. Five items in the Wyoming History Day virtual collection are categorized under “Photo File: Wyoming-Rock Springs-Foreign Population, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming”, including an engraving from Harper’s Weekly, two photographs of the Chinese community’s escape route during the massacre, and two pictures of Chinese men returning to China in 1925 and 1926, respectively. Categorizing these items in a “Foreign Population” photo file reflects and reinforces the notion that foreignness is the core theme that ties them together. Especially for the first three items directly related to the massacre, emphasizing the foreignness of the victims in the metadata not only contributes to othering them—it also lacks sensitivity and empathy.

III. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

These initial findings show how metadata structures and terms contribute to the ongoing exclusion of Asian people in the United States through absent categories, overly narrow subject descriptions, and an emphasis on foreignness and otherness. Metadata is not neutral—it shapes our ability to find and understand materials. As we continue this work, we are exploring representation and archival practices around historical materials that foreground radical empathy, decolonization, and community. Future work will continue this dialogue between critical examination of digital collections and digital preservation workflows. We aim to identify points of intervention in digital preservation, such as reviewing metadata at ingest, transfer and access and developing processes for community participation around metadata.

1 https://www.loc.gov/collections/
REFERENCES


