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Using Metadata To Mitigate The Risks Of Digitizing Archival Photographs Of Violence And Oppression

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USING METADATA TO MITIGATE THE RISKS OF DIGITIZING ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION

Archival photographs are used for a wide variety of purposes including teaching, research, and artistic reference. The digitization of archival photographs and their dissemination through online digital collections portals has made discovering and using archival photographs easier than ever. The nuanced histories and meanings of such images, however, are often lost in digitization and description, which tend to reduce physical objects to their visual content. The power dynamics that produced an archival photograph collection may not be immediately apparent. Images that appear unproblematic may have been produced or used for morally reprehensible purposes, information that may be omitted from the metadata describing them in digital collections portals. The digitization of archival images that result from acts of violence or depict victims of violence allows these images to be decontextualized and appropriated in ways that do not respect the consent of those depicted. Archival photographs depicting violent or otherwise sensitive content or resulting from violent/sensitive histories need additional care to be distributed ethically in an online environment to prevent misuse of the images and violating the consent of the subjects or stakeholders of the images. There is currently a lack of consensus on which images need that additional care and what that care consists of. More work needs to be done to address these questions. Descriptive metadata, particularly the contextualizing essay (written for the purpose of contextualizing a collection), can be part of the approach.[1]

The metadata used to describe digitized archival images often inaccurately frames an image with a complex origin as a work of art with a single artist and obscures the violent or traumatic origins of an image. The descriptive metadata about a digitized archival photograph can be used to reconstruct its context and protect the image from misuse. The metadata describing digitized archival photographs can incorporate the words or experiences of the subjects of the photographs or members of the communities impacted by the violence or other histories depicted. Descriptive metadata, particularly the contextualizing essay, can help users of a collection understand it in context and see the biases and intentions of its creators. Such metadata is a valuable tool for ethically disseminating digitized archival photographs of violence or trauma online, particularly when developed with the donors, subjects, or other stakeholders of a collection.

Literature Review: Photographs of Violence

Photographs of violence and atrocity are widely disseminated, particularly now when such images are typically discovered online. The potential uses and dangers of such images have long been a popular topic of discussion. Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* is the quintessential work on atrocity photographs. Sontag criticizes the popularly held belief that atrocity photographs, particularly war photographs, elicit the same response in all viewers, a belief which sustains the use of atrocity images for both educational and propagandistic purposes. Sontag is also concerned with the value of war photos as evidence and whether their evidentiary value is lessened when it is discovered that these images have been staged. Sontag goes on to discuss the ways atrocity and

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[1] Farley and Willey, "Wisconsin School for Girls Inmate Record Books," 460. Farley and Willey use the term *contextual essays* to describe the essays written by stakeholders in the Image Archive on the Eugenics Movement and in the digitized Wisconsin School for Girls Inmate Record Books. The phrase *contextualizing essays* is used here to denote essays written for the purpose of contextualizing a collection.

war photographs perpetuate an imperialist gaze and power dynamic. As Sontag notes, "Generally, the grievously injured bodies shown in published photographs are from Asia or Africa. This journalistic custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic—that is, colonized—human beings."[2] It is considered acceptable to publish—and cite or teach—images showing othered or exoticized people as the victims of violence, but not images of those who might resemble the presumed white, educated, upper- or middle-class viewer.

Photos of violence tend to perpetuate the oppressive power dynamics that produced them. John Berger discussed the use of war photographs in the essay "Photographs of Agony." Berger points out that newspapers often publish shocking photographs of violence and its aftermath or victims even while justifying or reporting positively on the same violence.[3] While this essay was written in 1976, this ideologically inconsistent treatment of photographs of victims of violence continues. A contemporary example is the *New York Times* publishing photographs of the Palestinian children killed in Gaza in 2021, after decades of ignoring and/or publishing justifications of Israeli violence in Gaza, including the 526 children killed there in 2014.[4] Berger criticizes the use of violent photographs to capture the viewers' attention without providing them with any avenue to change their behavior in reaction to it.[5] Violent images shock and upset the viewer, or provide the thrill of morbid interest, but do not call the viewer to action or give them any way of responding to the events depicted.

The power dynamics in violent images identified by Sontag and Berger are accentuated in a digital environment. Tonia Sutherland provides a discussion of the digital dissemination of images of violent deaths in "Making a Killing: On Race, Ritual, and (Re)Membering in Digital Culture" using the lenses of critical race theory and performance studies, and archival concepts of evidence, to analyze the distribution and appropriation of digital records depicting the deaths of Black Americans. Sutherland centers the discussion on the Black men, women, and children whose murders by police officers and armed civilians have been recorded on cellphone cameras, discussing the ways in which these images and videos take on lives of their own outside of the lived experiences of the individuals they depict, being appropriated and commodified in digital spaces.[6] Sutherland links the consumption of this digital media to Black American "ritual practices of (re)membering and bearing witness to violent acts as modes of resistance and mourning," as well as the American white supremacist traditions of circulating images and souvenirs of lynchings.[7] "Making a Killing" raises a question that is particularly relevant in discussing the digitization of images of violence: when images of death and the dead find new viewers and uses online, where is the line between memorialization and commodification?[8] This analysis of the appropriation of born-digital violent images also applies to discussion of digitized archival images, which exist in the digital environment often without their finding aids or other contextualizing material.

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[2] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 72.
[3] Berger, "Photographs of Agony," 42.
[4] El-Naggar, Rasgon, and Boshnaq, "They Were Only Children"; North and Weiss, "'NYT' Puts Faces of 60+ Slain Palestinian Children on Front Page, at Last."
[5] Berger, "Photographs of Agony," 44.
[6] Sutherland, "Making a Killing," 32, 35–36.
[7] Sutherland, "Making a Killing," 33–34.
[8] Sutherland, "Making a Killing," 37.

The potential of archival materials, including photographs to trigger or traumatize users of a collection or workers in an archive has been recognized. Nicola Laurent and Kirsten Wright discuss and present a solution to this potential in "A Trauma-Informed Approach to Managing Archives: A New Online Course." This article discusses a new course on trauma-informed archival practice to be offered by the Australian Society of Archivists in 2020.[9] Laurent and Wright state that

> Recognising, and responding to the challenging material that is in records, and ensuring people—archivists and other staff, users, donors, and volunteers—are supported to provide access to these items in a sensitive and respectful way, is of increasing concern within the archival profession.[10]

In proposing the use of descriptive metadata and the contextualizing essay, the present article takes up the exhortation made in this quote to respect the trauma of stakeholders including users and donors in providing access to a challenging collection. This article gives an overview of the literature of trauma-informed archival practice.[11] The trauma most relevant to the case studies discussed below, however, is that of subjects of a photograph collection who may or may not be the donors. This group goes unnamed in Laurent and Wright's article. The recommendations made below however are compatible with trauma-informed archival practice as described in Laurent and Wright, particularly the suggestion to utilize the five principles of trauma-informed practice in "cataloguing, finding aids and archival description, and providing access to records and records release processes."[12]

The academic use of photographs of violence or atrocity, which evoke feelings of disgust, shock, sadness, or morbid interest in the viewer, has always been divisive. It has been debated whether the strong reactions elicited by violent images make them useful in academic and educational settings or render them too provocative to be worthwhile tools. In "Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography," Susan A. Crane considers why, given their violent origins and potential to upset viewers, photographs of Nazi crimes continue to be used as educational tools. In the case of Holocaust atrocity photographs, many of the arguments for using them hinge on the emotional response they elicit from the viewer, whether it is shock, interest, pity, or identification with the subject.[13] The subjects of these photographs were not able to consent to their representation, nor to the current uses of these images.[14] Is such an emotionally manipulative use of atrocity images ethical with respect to the individuals they depict?

The essential qualities of atrocity images identified by Crane and Sontag, their violent origins and the inability of their subjects (who are typically victims of state and/or institutionalized violence) to consent, are shared by many digitized photographs in digital collections websites today. Archivists can sometimes take for granted the idea that providing digital access to archival

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[9] Laurent and Wright, "A Trauma-Informed Approach," 80–87.
[10] Laurent and Wright, "A Trauma-Informed Approach," 80.
[11] Laurent and Wright, "A Trauma-Informed Approach," 81–82.
[12] Laurent and Wright, "A Trauma-Informed Approach," 83.
[13] Crane, "Choosing Not to Look," 311.
[14] Crane, "Choosing Not to Look," 315.

collections is a positive and necessary action. The first core value listed in the Society of American Archivists Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics is" Use and Access," and the document frames providing access to materials as the core function of archivists.[15] Digitization is often promoted as a method of expanding and democratizing access to archival materials. Atrocity photos and other images resulting from violence problematize this imperative to provide access to all records.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pressures to digitize materials in collections, since it forced many archives to close or radically limit in-person services, leading to increased use of digitized materials, making the conversation about ethical digitization even more important.[16]

Risks of Digitization

Digitizing archival records in a museum, library, or archive environment comes with ethical risks. Two of the primary dangers of digitizing archival records are violating the privacy of those depicted in the records or those who created them and creating unrestricted access to materials that may be considered offensive to the public. Paul Dalgleish's "The Thorniest Area: Making Collections Accessible Online While Respecting Individual and Community Sensitivities" succinctly expresses these two dangers in the context of the archival imperative to provide access. The most obvious consideration for an archive providing access to a record digitally or in-person is whether they can legally allow access to the record.[17] If there are no legal issues to the archive providing digital access to a record, a new set of issues crop up. Donors who had been comfortable with allowing researchers to use their materials in-person may not be comfortable with their materials being made widely available online.[18] Additionally, shocking, violent, or provocative materials which would previously have had a small, in-person audience are now able to reach a much larger audience and have a greater potential to offend.[19] Dalgleish also discusses the challenges of creating metadata for digitized archival materials—descriptors which might have been acceptable in a card catalog or database entry accessible only to visiting researchers may not be acceptable online, where the audience is larger and lacks the mediating presence of an archivist.[20] Simply replicating legacy metadata such as text from a finding aid perpetuates the biases of the archivists who originally described the material. The labor and specialized knowledge needed to create metadata for digitized archival materials with privacy or ethical concerns must be considered when a collection is selected for digitization. The potential benefits of digitizing a collection must justify both the labor and fair compensation thereof to the archivist and outweigh the risks of making the collection accessible digitally.

Digitizing sensitive archival materials increases the risk of their being appropriated or taken out of context. Suzannah Biernoff discusses one instance of such misuse in "Medical Archives and Digital Culture." The 2007 video game *BioShock* used World War I medical illustrations and photographs as identifiable references for the game's villains. Certain images in the game are

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[15] SAA Council, "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics."

[16] Sye, "Use of Digital Archives during the COVID-19 Pandemic."

[17] Dalgleish, "The Thorniest Area," 69–70.

[18] Dalgleish, "The Thorniest Area," 72.

[19] Dalgleish, "The Thorniest Area," 74–75.

[20] Dalgleish, "The Thorniest Area," 75.

recognizably based off photographs of named individuals with severe facial injuries. The illustrations and photographs used by the game creators are in the public domain and are freely accessible online.[21] Biernoff discusses the critical eye with which they approach teaching with this same set of images: "I worry how my students will respond: with pity? With disgust? Fascination? Should I name the patient, or protect his anonymity? Would he, or his relatives, want the photograph to be shown in a non-medical context?"[22] Placing these images online for anyone to use skips past these considerations, allowing the images to be appropriated in ways their subjects could not have consented to. The right to privacy of the individuals represented in archival materials may be at odds with the archival imperative to provide access.

The digital publication of *On Our Backs*, a lesbian pornography publication that ran from 1984 to 2004, exemplifies the danger of violating the privacy of individuals depicted in an archival collection.[23] In the early 2010s, Reveal Digital digitized *On Our Backs* and published it online. The individuals photographed in *On Our Backs* did not consent to having their images put online, and one individual had not consented to having photographs of them printed in the magazine to begin with. The publication often included the full names of those photographed, and these names were included in the metadata for the digital editions of *On Our Backs*. Tara Robertson interviewed several individuals who had been in issues of *On Our Backs* about its digitization in "Not All Information Wants to be Free: The Case Study of *On Our Backs*." One respondent said, "[w]hen I heard all the issues of the magazine are being digitized, my heart sank. I meant this work to be for my community and now I am being objectified in a way that I have no control over. People can cut up my body and make it a collage."[24] This quote, and the digitization of *On Our Backs* as a whole, reflects the two potential issues of digitization raised by Dalgleish: the violation of creator or subject's privacy, and putting potentially offensive, in this case pornographic, materials online without the intermediary of an archivist or access restrictions. It also raises the issue of appropriation discussed by Biernoff. An additional concern was that Reveal Digital did not provide an avenue for viewers, or those depicted in the collection, to issue requests to take down the material. Ultimately, parts of the *On Our Backs* collection were taken down because minors were able to access the pornographic content of the collection, and, secondarily, due to the concerns about contributor privacy.[25] In the conclusion of the article, Robertson provides some guidelines for ethical digitization including learning from other digitization projects, posting clear contact information, using appropriate technology, and working with the relevant communities.[26] Ethical considerations for the metadata describing digitized archival materials also need to be considered.

Towards an Ethics of Care of Digitization

In the past several years, archivists and information professionals have called for the development of an ethics of care for the digitization of archival documents in response to the risks discussed above. Peterson Brink, Mary Ellen Ducey, and Elizabeth Lorang discuss the need for a digitization ethics of care in "The Case of the *Awgwan*: Considering Ethics of Digitization and Access for

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[21] Biernoff, "Medical Archives and Digital Culture," 180.
[22] Biernoff, "Medical Archives and Digital Culture," 183.
[23] Robertson, "Not All Information Wants to Be Free," 225.
[24] Robertson, "Not All Information Wants to Be Free," 226–27.
[25] Robertson, "Not All Information Wants to Be Free," 229–30.
[26] Robertson, "Not All Information Wants to Be Free," 233–37.

Archives." This group of University of Nebraska-Lincoln archivists discusses the digitization of the *Awgwan*, the University of Nebraska humor magazine that ran from 1913 to 1946. The *Awgwan* contains numerous examples of racist caricatures and racist and misogynistic humor, leading the archivists to hesitate to digitize it.[27] The archivists acknowledge that

> [t]here perhaps appears a tension in our reluctance [to digitize the collection], a tension between values of access and the role of archives—to provide access to the historical record without regard to content—and our desire to create some barriers to the circulation of the *Awgwan*'s pernicious messages, particularly those messages shorn of context.[28]

The challenge in the case of the *Awgwan* is to maintain some control over the circulation and use of an archival record without going against the key archival principle of access. The authors end by debating whether the benefits of digitization outweigh the risks given the limited digitization resources available. While it may seem sacrilegious to suggest that an archival collection should not be digitized, the ambiguous conclusion of this article highlights the importance of recognizing archival labor in deciding which collections should be digitized. Archivists do not have the time or resources to digitize all collections held by their institutions, and difficult collections such as the *Awgwan* are necessarily more time- and labor-intensive to digitize responsibly. Archivists must carefully consider the value of digitizing each collection, particularly if it can be accessed in-person or digitized by request.

Temi Odumosu discusses the need for clearer understandings of the ethics of digitizing and reproducing images of slavery and colonization in "The Crying Child: On Colonial Archives, Digitization, and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons." Odumosu centers one photograph of a crying Black child taken around 1910 by the Danish photographer Axel Oveson in St. Croix.[29] This is an image rooted in the violence of colonization, which threatens to be reproduced and even amplified by digitization. This image's metadata was created by the Danish government, and it remains a part of the Danish National Archives, which has the power to decide how this image is disseminated, described, and used.[30] Odumosu raises a key issue to the discussion of digitization metadata for images with violent and colonial histories:

> We have yet to delineate a sacred environment for the images that articulate (in part) the experiences of slavery and colonization, that we have not yet decided what material is off-limits. I say "off-limits" with trepidation because I do not mean to suggest cultural ghettoization but, rather, to insist on care where there has historically been none.[31]

It is apparent to archivists, educators, and researchers that certain images need additional consideration, but there is no consensus on how to determine which images need this care or what steps are involved in it. This lack of guidance leads to grotesque uses of archival images, such as digital collections websites selling clothing and other goods decorated with images of ships that

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[27] Brink, Ducey, and Lorang, "The Case of the *Awgwan*," 10.
[28] Brink, Ducey, and Lorang, "The Case of the *Awgwan*," 18.
[29] Odumosu, "The Crying Child," S291.
[30] Odumosu, "The Crying Child," S294.
[31] Odumosu, "The Crying Child," S297.

transported enslaved people.[32] Odumosu's proposal that metadata can be used to address these concerns will be discussed and expanded upon below.

Critiques of Archival Metadata

Metadata is not neutral. The potential of metadata to contain the biases of a record's creator or of the archivists and librarians who described it has been a subject of controversy in library and information science for fifty years. Sanford Berman's 1971 book *Prejudices and Antipathies* problematized many of the racist and otherwise bigoted subject headings included in Library of Congress Subject Headings. Many of these have since been changed, but problematic subject headings remain.[33] For instance, the Library of Congress Subject Headings for Indigenous American peoples often differ from the names preferred by members of the groups being described.[34] Archival metadata has also been subject to criticism for perpetuating the biases of its creators. A working group of the association Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia, the Anti-Racist Description Working Group, published a guide to antiracist archival description. This guide consists of recommendations for creating archival description including guidance on voice and style, considering an audience beyond the typical (i.e., white, educated, middle or upper middle class) archival researcher.[35] Many of the recommendations described in this guide to antiracist archival description can be utilized in creating metadata for potentially problematic digitized archival records, with the caveat that the guide is more oriented toward the creation of finding aids than digital collections metadata. Guidelines that are relevant here include "Audit[ing] past harmful description practices and implement[ing] taxonomic reparations when appropriate," devoting time and staff to remediating racist language in metadata and going beyond a mere processing note to contextualize racist creator-sourced description.[36] Many of these steps can be adopted in writing descriptions for digitized archival photographs.

The metadata used to describe archival photographs tends to reduce them to their visual content, as discussed by Joan M. Schwartz in "Coming to Terms with Photographs: Descriptive Standards, Linguistic 'Othering,' and the Margins of Archivy." Schwartz points out the ways archivists fail to adequately describe photographs and the ramifications this failure has for historians. In archival metadata standards, photographs are often considered to be "special media," a term that reflects the way the field marginalizes photographs and holds textual media as the norm.[37] In certain metadata schemas, including Rules for Archival Description, photography falls under "Graphic Materials" and is categorized as primarily a visual medium.[38] In a United States context, the Library of Congress Thesaurus for Graphic Materials includes photography under the term *graphic*.[39] This marginalization of photography emphasizes the visual content of an object over its history and context, framing photographs as visual objects devoid of custodial history, unlike textual objects. Archivists are limited by the weakness of their tools, which identify photography primarily as an artistic medium, to create metadata that adequately describes and contextualizes

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[32] Odumosu, "The Crying Child," S297.
[33] Knowlton, "Three Decades Since *Prejudices and Antipathies*," 125–26.
[34] Dieckman, Teal, and Wintermute, "What's in a Name," 3.
[35] Antracoli et al., "Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia," 3–6.
[36] Antracoli et al., "Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia," 7–8.
[37] Schwartz, "Coming to Terms with Photographs," 147–48.
[38] Schwartz, "Coming to Terms with Photographs," 149–50.
[39] Schwartz, "Coming to Terms with Photographs," 152.

photographs. More work must be done to develop a metadata schema to describe archival photographs more accurately in the digital environment.

One factor that contributes to the weaknesses of archival metadata in a digital environment is that museums, libraries, and archives each have different approaches to creating metadata, though these approaches borrow from each other. One difference is in the controlled vocabularies that these three environments use. Museums in the United States tend to use the Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus and Union List of Artist Names to normalize data for artist names, formats, and genres. United States libraries tend to use Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). Archives often use LCSH as well, although there are valid criticisms to be made about the weaknesses of LCSH in describing formats such as photographs.[40] In terms of the elements used to describe a record or collection, many of the issues with the object-level metadata discussed above derive from inappropriate terminology in the metadata fields. Descriptive metadata can inaccurately or incompletely portray the digitized archival photograph collection it describes, but it can also provide an opportunity to complicate and contextualize the collection.

Contextualizing Digital Archival Objects through Metadata

Digital collections platforms prioritize the visuality of a photograph rather than the object's creation and history. Archives can restore the histories of the objects they hold through metadata. In a case study of a collection of photographs from the 1860s of paintings by Giotto, Costanza Caraffa notes how the digitization of this collection reduced the images to their visual content and robbed them of their histories. The catalogers who created metadata about this collection omitted the name of the original 1860s photographer, making the images impossible to discover in the database by searching for the creator's name. Caraffa discusses the importance of an image's digital metadata building off the wealth of preexisting data about the image:

> Photographic archives are open, dynamic, and complex systems formed by organisms of different kinds which have a reciprocal action among each other and with their surrounding environment—not only photographs but also inventory books, card mounts, card catalogues and even digitalized and electronic records that interact within the archive's habitat.[41]

All too often the image is expected to speak for itself without these contextualizing materials. Archival photographs come from larger series and collections and can only be understood with an awareness of their archival context. This context must be preserved in a digital environment. Not every collection comes to its repository bearing such contextual information as card catalogs, but if such materials exist, they should be digitized with the record, provided they do not violate any ethical or legal guidelines such as HIPPA.[42]

Photographs and photographic archives, much like archives in general, are often viewed as neutral documents of historical events or practices. Photo archives themselves, however, have been used as tools of oppression, and social control. The digital metadata describing such photo archives

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[40] Gilliland, "Setting the Stage."
[41] Caraffa, "Photographs as Documents/Photographs as Objects," 149.
[42] Natasha R. Margulis, email to the author, June 28, 2023.

often belies their troubling histories. One early example of the photo archive is the system devised by Alphonse Bertillon in the 1880s. Bertillon was a police official in Paris who devised a system of criminal identification. Bertillon's system utilized photographic portraits, anthropometric information, and written notes. Each individual identified as a criminal by this system had their information recorded on one card, which was filed in a card catalog based on a complex anthropometric order.[43] This system was developed in parallel with the racist pseudoscience of eugenics, which emerged from the pseudosciences of phrenology and physiognomy, which heavily utilized photography.

The Bertillon photographs were in service to a system built around the structure of the card catalog.[44] Digitized images of Bertillonage center the visual impact of the photograph, an issue compounded by the metadata used to describe these objects.

Artwork Details

Overview	**Title:** Grégoire. Alphonse. 27 ans, né à La Montagne (Loire-Inférieure). Mécanicien. Anarchiste. 2/7/94.
Signatures, Inscriptions, and Markings	**Artist:** Alphonse Bertillon (French, 1853–1914)
Provenance	**Date:** 1894
	Medium: Albumen silver print from glass negative
	Dimensions: 10.5 x 7 x 0.5 cm (4 1/8 x 2 3/4 x 3/16 in.) each
	Classification: Photographs
	Credit Line: Gilman Collection, Museum Purchase, 2005
	Accession Number: 2005.100.375.189

Learn more about this artwork

Figure 1. Basic metadata describing Bertillon photograph in Met Digital Collections.[45]

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[43] Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 18.
[44] Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 16.
[45] Bertillon, "Grégoire. Alphonse." Screenshot by the author July 12, 2023.

Figure 2. Description of Bertillonage in Met Bertillon photograph record and image of back of card.[46]

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art Digital Collections webpages for the museum's collection of Bertillon photographs, the images are not gathered and contextualized within the card catalog but displayed as individual thumbnails with individual metadata records, like any other work of art in the Met's collection. The descriptions of each card on the Met website include a brief description of Bertillonage (figure 2) followed by an Object Details section (figure 1) including the Title, Artist, Date, Medium (Photographs), Dimensions, Classification, Credit Line, and Accession Number of each individual card.[47] The images included on the object pages do include a shot of the back of the card with the physiognomic information of the subject (figure 2). While to the Met's credit the essay (figure 2) does educate the viewer on Bertillonage, the card is ultimately classed as an individual photograph (not part of a larger collection), and the object is ultimately viewed as an individual work of art created by an artist, given as Alphonse Bertillon (figure 1). All examples of Bertillonage in the Met collection list Bertillon as the artist. It is possible though uncertain that Bertillon himself took this photograph. Bertillonage had been officially presented the year prior to the creation of this card, in 1893.[48] In any case, artist is not likely to have been the word Bertillon as photographer would have chosen. The Met acknowledges in the accompanying essay that Bertillonage was an anthropometric system utilizing photography (figure 2). Yet the object is still described as having an "artist" and is classified under "photographs" (figure 1). This framing silences the object's history as part of a state-supported surveillance archiving project. This is an issue of metadata—both the description, which fails to contextualize

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[46] Bertillon, "Grégoire. Alphonse." Screenshot by the author July 31, 2023.
[47] Bertillon, "Grégoire. Alphonse."
[48] Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 25.

the object as part of a larger card catalog, and the metadata fields such as "Artist," which categorize the cards as works of art. This inadequacy in metadata elements may come down to the digital collection/content management system used by the Met. Systems such as PastPerfect provide the user cataloging an object with a metadata template or simply Dublin Core elements as seen here. It is likely that this object was not cataloged by an archivist but a cataloger or other museum employee.[49]
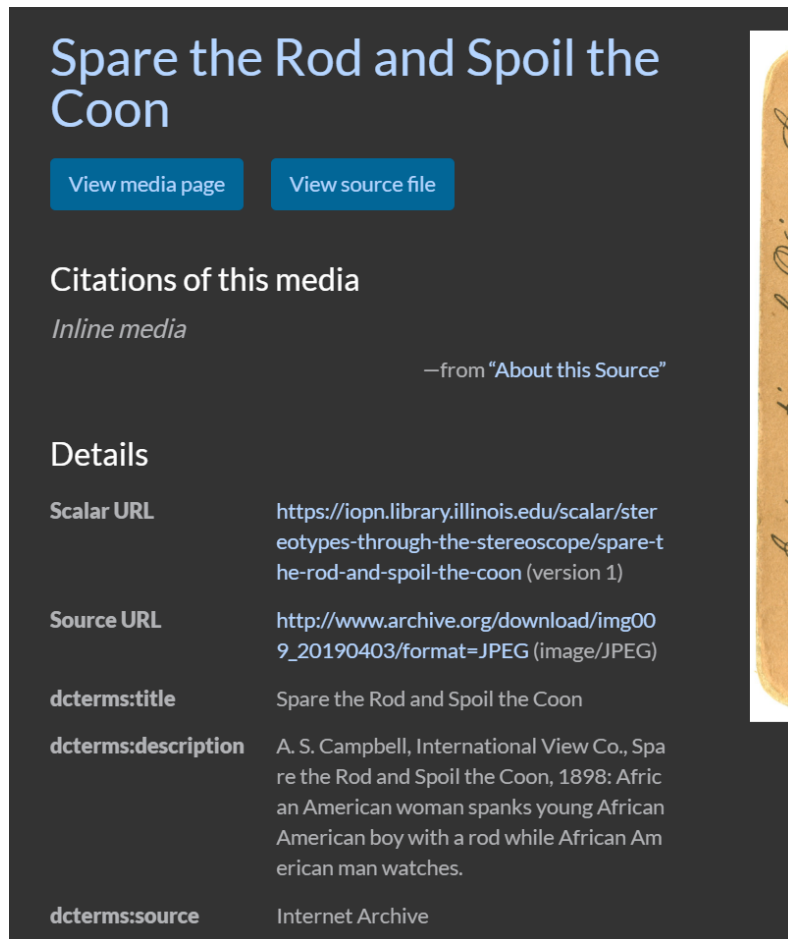
Like the Bertillon photographs, the photographs of enslaved people commissioned by Louis Agassiz in South Carolina in 1850 have also been decontextualized by their framing and the metadata used to describe them. This series of fifteen daguerreotypes of seven enslaved people was intended to support Agassiz's theory of polygenesis, which proposed that Europeans and Africans were separate species with no common ancestry and was intended to provide a scientific basis for white supremacy. "Agassiz's theories of race were controversial even for their time, so he sought to legitimize them by recourse to photography and the photo archive, touring plantations and selecting sitters whose physical characteristics he thought perfectly opposed to the constructed ideal of the white body." [50] The sense of neutrality conveyed by the photographic archive would legitimize his theory by making the hierarchy Agassiz was inventing seem inherent.[51] The Agassiz daguerreotypes have come to be regarded as works of art in the genre of portraiture. The photographs have been exhibited with the nominal photographer of the series, the daguerreotypist Joseph T. Zealy, listed as the artist, glossing over Agassiz's selection of the sitters and his purpose in commissioning the series. The Agassiz daguerreotypes are currently held by Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. The objects are discoverable through the Peabody's digital collections website. The metadata for one object, entitled "Daguerreotype, Renty, profile," includes an object description with a transcription of the label, including the first name of the sitter, "Congo," and the name of the sitter's enslaver. The "Artist" is listed as Joseph T. Zealy. Nowhere is Agassiz's name mentioned, nor his purpose for commissioning the photograph.[52] This is fundamentally an issue of metadata: the fields the Peabody is using to structure the metadata for this object frame it as a work of art by a singular artist. The structure of the metadata is insufficient to fully contextualize, or problematize, this object.

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[49] Natasha R. Margulis, email to the author, June 28, 2023; Gilliland, "Setting the Stage," also discusses how non-archivists/librarians are increasingly creating metadata in environments including museums.

[50] Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science," 40.

[51] Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science," 45–49.

[52] Daguerreotype, Renty, profile.

Figure 3. Item-level Metadata record for Stereograph in the University of Illinois Library Digital Edition[53]

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[53] Peterson and Hamrick, "About This Source," "Stereotypes through the Stereoscope," https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/scalar/stereotypes-through-the-stereoscope/about-this-source?path=introduction. Screenshot by the author June 28, 2021.
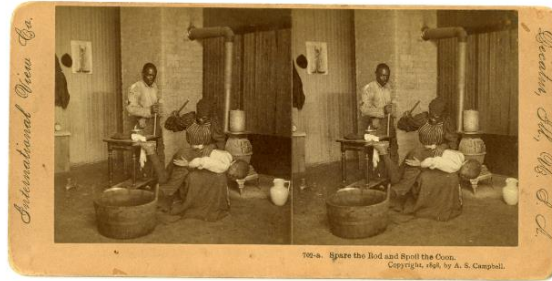
In an example with the object more effectively contextualized by an essay, A digitized archival photograph collection from the University of Illinois Library introduces a powerful tool in archival metadata: the contextualizing essay. A digital edition entitled "Stereotypes through the Stereoscope: Racism and Sexism in Stereographs" by Derek Peterson and Patrick Hamrick presents seven digitized stereoscope views from the late 19th and early 20th centuries and contextualizes them as reflecting the racist and sexist stereotypes of their day. The digital surrogates are presented on their own page, available for download, with Dublin Core metadata including title, description, source, and identifier (figure 3).[54] This basic metadata is not critical or explanatory of the stereotypes at play in the images. It must be noted here that this is a collection of digitized images, not physical objects like the Bertillon photographs in the Met. The metadata for one stereoscope in the collection entitled "Spare the Rod and Spoil the Coon" includes the creator of the stereoscope in the description field, "A. S. Campbell, International View Co." (figure 3). This allows the creator to be framed as part of a company not an independent artist creating an artistic photograph. Such a framing might not be possible in every setting, such as a museum's content management system. The International View Co. and its products are further contextualized in an essay entitled "About this Source." Following the page with the digital images and metadata is this essay about the history and uses of stereoscopes and how they relied on anti-Black racism and sexism to appeal to their viewers. The essay analyzes the stereotypes at play in each of the stereoscopes in the collection. Each photograph in the collection is specifically described and contextualized in the essay (figure 4).[55] The essay concludes by summing up the role such stereoscopes played in American popular culture: "These stereographs demonstrate the interrelated nature of class, gender, and race in the white American imagination. Classism set the backdrop of the racist and sexual images that many members of the American public unquestioningly consumed. Stereographs both mirrored Americans' beliefs in a specific racial and gender order, and further naturalized those beliefs well into the twentieth century."[56] Peterson and Hamrick fully contextualize and problematize this racist collection in the contextualizing essay, while also providing full access to the items in the collection, including the ability to download and cite the images. This digital edition demonstrates that digital collections metadata can extend beyond the basic Dublin Core descriptive metadata. The essay following the digital representations is metadata in the purest sense—that is, data about the data in question. Contextualizing essays like this one can be an effective way to encourage more critical readings of problematic digitized materials without limiting access to those materials. The navigation within this digital edition supports the contextualization of its challenging images. Within the "About This Source" essay, clicking an image redirects the user to that image's object-level metadata. The object level metadata itself links to the contextualizing essay (figure 3). This means a user of the digital edition can learn more about an individual stereoscope from the essay on their context or learn the context of a stereoscope from its item page. It would not be possible to describe every digitized archival photograph in a digital collection portal to this level. But it is an impressive approach to take on a selected challenging collection given staff resources and expertise.

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[54] Peterson and Hamrick, "The Source," "Stereotypes through the Stereoscope," https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/scalar/stereotypes-through-the-stereoscope/online-edition.
[55] Peterson and Hamrick, "About This Source," "Stereotypes through the Stereoscope." Screenshot by the author, June 28, 2021.
[56] Peterson and Hamrick, "About This Source," "Stereotypes through the Stereoscope."

In one of our images, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," we see an African-American woman bathing a young African-American boy who is presumably her son, while an older man (perhaps the father) looks on, holding an oversized scrub brush. The depiction of the home draws upon racialized classist images, in which the walls remain bare, the furniture sparse, piping exposed, and a large wooden bucket and pitcher as the

A. S. Campbell, International View Co., Spare the Rod and Spoil the Coon, 1898: African American woman spanks young African American boy with a rod while African American man watches.
Source: Internet Archive

primary instruments of bathing. The content of the image, by focusing on the bathing process, reifies the upper-middle class' belief in a correlation between poverty, blackness, and slovenliness.

The next image, "Spare the Rod and Spoil the C**n," depicts the same presumed family: a mother spanks her son with a rod while the father watches. The popular saying, "spare the rod, spoil the child," suggests that violent punishment teaches children discipline, and that withholding the "rod" leads to a coddled child. The racial epithet here is particularly revealing; the term "c**n" insinuates centuries of slavery, subjugation, and the persistence of a racial hierarchy well into Reconstruction. Yet, taken as a whole, the image and its title suggests even more than a racial hierarchy: it speaks to the larger belief that African Americans must be disciplined, often violently, to "know" their place within the white-dominated power structure.

Figure 4. Contextualizing Essay about Stereograph in University of Illinois Library Digital Edition[57]

An exemplary digital archival collection that includes photography and is well contextualized and problematized through metadata is Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory's Image Archive on the Eugenics Movement. Martin L. Levitt details the motivations for and process of creating this digital archive in a book chapter entitled "Ethical Issues in Constructing a Eugenics Web Site." The Image Archive on the Eugenics Movement disseminates the documents and photographs created by the Eugenics Records Office at Cold Spring Harbor in the early 20th century. The website was created by the Dolan DNA Learning Center in 2000 to educate high school and college students about eugenics during a time of renewed conversation about eugenics in popular culture as a result of the Human Genome Project.[58] From the start of the project there were serious concerns about the material in this highly charged collection being misused, and about violating the privacy of individuals represented in the collection. The Cold Spring Harbor eugenicists interviewed and created pedigrees for people to prove their racist, classist, and ableist pseudoscientific theories. As such, the materials in the collection include medical information and are highly defamatory. To address these issues, the Dolan DNA Learning Center created an Editorial Review Panel containing "historians of science, scientists, educators, legal scholars, representatives of the handicapped community, and ethicists." This panel created ethics guidelines for the project and wrote the metadata for objects in the collection: image captions and

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57 Peterson and Hamrick, "About This Source," "Stereotypes through the Stereoscope." Screenshot by the author, July 31, 2023.
58 Levitt, "Ethical Issues in Constructing a Eugenics Web Site," 115.

contextualizing essays.[59] What makes the Image Archive on the Eugenics Movement a critically presented yet accessible digital archive of difficult archival material is this approach to metadata creation.

The About page of the eugenics website includes a statement noting that what is presented as scientific and factual in the collection has since been discredited and that the language and images in the collection may be offensive. This statement effectively contextualizes the material in the collection for viewers unfamiliar with eugenics. Users also agree to a use agreement stipulating that the materials are only to be used for educational and scholarly purposes.[60] The Editorial Review Panel also invited scholars to write nine additional essays on the historical context and specific components and effects of eugenics. The images included in the collection can be discovered through these essays or by searching by subject category, each of which has a short contextualizing essay.[61] The Dolan DNA Learning Center team took further steps to protect the individuals documented in the collection, such as redacting family names. The contextualizing essays and image captions in the Image Archive on the Eugenics Movement play an important role in contextualizing this collection. This metadata places the collection in its historical context and problematizes the content of the collection for viewers who may be unfamiliar with it. It was written by subject experts and key stakeholders in discussions of genomics and eugenics. While such an approach may not be possible in all archival digitization settings, it sets a positive example for the digitization of collections with ethical concerns.

Discussion: Metadata as One Strategy toward Ethical Digitization

The examples above illustrate the pitfalls of the metadata currently used to describe digitized collections of archival photography and how descriptive metadata and accompanying essays can be used to contextualize difficult collections. Many of the issues with the object-level metadata discussed above derive from inappropriate terminology in the metadata fields and inappropriate fields in the schema being used. For instance, the Metropolitan Museum of Art frames each Bertillon card as a work of art by listing Alphonse Bertillon as the "Artist." It is also troubling for the Peabody Museum to describe Joseph T. Zealy as the Artist of a photograph of an enslaved person commissioned by Louis Agassiz. This metadata record is creating a narrative that is not true, that this photograph was a work of art with a sole creator and not part of a project to prove a racist pseudoscientific theory. The metadata frameworks used to describe works of art are not capable of contextualizing an archival photograph with a unique history of creation and unique custodial history. The next section will discuss where the metadata weaknesses originate and how they can be remedied. Archivists should undertake metadata work in conjunction with other measures to ethically digitize and disseminate collections with violent or oppressive histories. Finally, descriptive metadata and contextualizing essays can serve as counternarratives to the power dynamics implicit in archival photograph collections and can give voice to those silenced in the archival narrative.

Metadata work is not the only approach to mitigating the risks of putting difficult archival photograph collections online. Alternative approaches include redacting sensitive material,

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[59] Levitt, "Ethical Issues in Constructing a Eugenics Web Site," 117.
[60] Levitt, "Ethical Issues in Constructing a Eugenics Web Site," 120.
[61] Levitt, "Ethical Issues in Constructing a Eugenics Web Site," 119.

allowing users to easily request that materials be taken down, and creating a tiered system of access to digital collections.[62] Ideally, contextualizing metadata will be part of a broader set of actions to lessen the risk of violating the privacy or consent of the individuals represented in an archival collection. Redaction can be done across an entire collection, or on specific records identified as having privacy or ethical concerns. "Wisconsin School for Girls Inmate Record Books: A Case Study of Redacted Digitization" by Laura Farley and Eric Willey details one example of the redaction of a digitized collection. The Wisconsin School for Girls Archives consist of personal and medical information and newspaper clippings about girls incarcerated at the facility in the late 19th and 20th centuries.[63] The materials in this collection were regulated by laws regarding information about minors and medical information. Beyond these legal restrictions, the materials are also considered sensitive because they contain information about living individuals and that may be upsetting to the families of those described.[64] Fully redacting all identifying information in this collection was not desirable as it would make it impossible to research specific individuals. It was decided to digitize and redact personal information from a sample of the records in the collection and digitize specific records as users requested. This solution was combined with an online use agreement and contextualizing essays to provide ethical access to this difficult collection.[65] Although this example is not a collection of photographs, it demonstrates how intentionally crafted metadata can work with other strategies to ethically disseminate digitized collections.

Another example of a case study on a photograph collection with privacy and access concerns in the digital environment is the J.A. Youngren Papers at Idaho State University Special Collections and Archives discussed in "Identifying Culturally Sensitive American Indian Material in a Non-tribal Institution" by Ellen M. Ryan in *Case Studies in Archival Ethics*. This photographic collection, documenting the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes at Fort Hall in the early 20th century, was determined by archivists to contain culturally sensitive material, some of which was immediately restricted online.[66] Archivists in this case met with leaders of the tribe in question to determine what materials could be made accessible and how. "It is important to know, understand, and even recognize differences in cultures and to seek consultation with others when caring for culturally sensitive material. What may seem appropriate to a non-tribal institution to make public, may not necessarily be the case."[67] Descriptive metadata was not the principal tool used in this case to ethically distribute the Youngren papers collection. The solutions taken in this case in response to the wishes of Fort Hall was the restriction of access to certain images.[68] This case study provides an important corrective to the recommendations for descriptive metadata discussed in this article. If the stakeholders and or subjects of an archival photograph collection do not consent to the collection being accessible (online) their consent should be respected. This is particularly relevant in the case of American Indian material in a non-tribal institution as discussed in Ryan's article. Archivists describing sensitive archival photograph collections for digital access should already be in discussion with such stakeholders and/or photographic subjects for the creation of descriptive

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[62] Dalgleish, "The Thorniest Area," 79–80.
[63] Farley and Willey, "Wisconsin School for Girls Inmate Record Books," 453.
[64] Farley and Willey, "Wisconsin School for Girls Inmate Record Books," 455–57.
[65] Farley and Willey, "Wisconsin School for Girls Inmate Record Books," 463–64.
[66] Ryan, "Identifying Culturally Sensitive American Indian Material in a Non-Tribal Institution," 4.
[67] Ryan, "Identifying Culturally Sensitive American Indian Material in a Non-Tribal Institution," 6.
[68] Ryan, "Identifying Culturally Sensitive American Indian Material in a Non-Tribal Institution," 4.

metadata and contextualizing essays as discussed in the case of the Image Archive on the Eugenics Movement.[69]

The need to work with stakeholder/subject Tribal communities in the context of indigenous archival collections is also emphasized in "Providing Culturally Responsive and Ethical Access to Indigenous Collections," in section 1, "Building Collaboration into the Plan" by Melissa Stoner. Stoner states that relevant indigenous communities should be included in discussions of access to collections with sensitive material from the earliest stages: "Behind the content management systems and metadata, institutions should consult with Tribal communities to consider issues of access, navigating systems of power, and how the institution can best partner with the community—from the very beginning of a project."[70] The consent of communities depicted in or relevant to a collection containing sensitive records, particularly photographs, is a prerequisite of allowing digital (or physical) access to the collection. Descriptive metadata only provides a tool for contextualizing sensitive images for viewers that stakeholders/subjects of a collection consent to being made accessible.

Archival collections that derive from power imbalances and acts of violence perpetuate those histories in insidious ways. When one looks at holocaust atrocity photographs, for instance, one literally takes on the perspective of the Nazi who first saw that image in the viewfinder.[71] The perspective of the subject of the photograph is unknowable. When looking at atrocity photographs and other images of violence, there is a need for a counter-narrative that speaks to the experience of the one being pictured, not just the creator of the picture. Saidiya Hartman describes the desire to create counter-narratives to the violence preserved in archives of slavery in "Venus in Two Acts." The format of the archive uncritically replicates the perspectives of the record creator, who may be the captain of a ship transporting enslaved people or a plantation owner. Researchers read the words written by these individuals and learn the stories of the people they enslaved only through them.[72] Hartman feels a powerful temptation to create fictional stories to contradict this power imbalance: "The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed."[73] Hartman describes resisting this temptation in order to avoid crossing the archival boundary of verity and romanticizing the suffering and imagined resistance of those depicted.[74] Hartman proposes a new form of writing based in the archive, *critical fabulation*, which would interweave fiction and fact to imagine the voices and lives of those permanently silenced in the archive.[75] Archival metadata, the contextualizing essay in particular, can enact Hartman's concept of critical fabulation by incorporating stories from outside the collection being described which give insight into the experiences of those depicted. The authors best suited to contextualizing essays engaging in critical fabulation would be those with lived experience of the actions documented in a collection, archivist, or community member. Archivists could work with community members or subjects of a collection to create text for a contextualizing essay. It would also be beneficial to excerpt from

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[69] Levitt, "Ethical Issues in Constructing a Eugenics Web Site," 112–25.
[70] Carpenter et al., "Providing Culturally Responsive and Ethical Access to Indigenous Collections," 4.
[71] Crane, "Choosing Not to Look," 311.
[72] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 5–6.
[73] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 8.
[74] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 9–10.
[75] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11–12.

published works that reflect the experience depicted in a collection. For instance, excerpts of a slave narrative could be selected and used to contextualize a collection related to slavery, like the Zealy photographs. While such a quote would not illuminate the experience of the very individual pictured it would give insight into the lived experience of enslavement. An example of incorporating previously published work into archival metadata follows.

The metadata used to describe digitized archival photographs can serve as a counter-narrative to the implicit stories told by the creators of the photographs. Odumosu raises this idea in the conclusion of "The Crying Child": "metadata as an alternative cataloging space capable of narrating in full an object's life and afterlife, and making that known to users with each right-click and download. So, here is a proposition: What if the digital object could do all the speaking that the original could not do?"[76] Archivists are responsible for mediating the experiences researchers have with their collections. Metadata is one of the tools that supports that endeavor, and it can illuminate stories that may not be immediately visible in an object.

Archivists can use metadata to contextualize, criticize, and counter digitized photographic collections by incorporating the voices and experiences of those silenced in the archive. One example of this approach is in Laura L. Terrance's article "Resisting Colonial Education: Zitkala-Sa and Native Feminist Archival Refusal." Terrance describes a familiar story of "discovering" a journal in a library, this one having been kept by a young woman who attended a residential school in the early 20th century. Terrance chooses not to describe this journal, to state the woman's name or tribe, or use her story or the object in any way. Instead, Terrance uses the words of Zitkála-Šá (Yankton Sioux), who published her experiences in a residential boarding school in "The School Days of an Indian Girl."[77] Terrance uses Zitkála-Šá's narrative instead of the journal because Zitkála-Šá was able to consent to sharing her story by having it published. Terrance uses the book instead of the journal, not in addition to it, because sharing the journal would replicate the colonial power dynamics at play in the residential boarding school system.[78] The *instead* approach used by Terrance may not be possible in the context of digitized archival photographs, for which access is the main priority, but an *in-addition* approach can be taken. Archivists creating metadata for digitized archival materials that derive from histories of violence and oppression can and should incorporate the words of individuals who experienced the violence depicted in the archive and who consented to sharing their stories. This is particularly true for photographic collections, in which the power dynamics between the record creator and the oppressed subjects of the photographs may not be immediately apparent. Personal accounts can be incorporated into contextualizing essays, as in the case of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory's Image Archive on the Eugenics Movement or University of Illinois Library stereoscope collection, or into image captions or descriptive metadata. Using the first-hand experiences of members of the community affected by the violence shown in the collection in image captions, descriptions, or contextualizing essays can mitigate the risks of making these collections digitally accessible.

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[76] Odumosu, "The Crying Child," S299.
[77] Terrance, "Resisting Colonial Education," 621.
[78] Terrance, "Resisting Colonial Education," 624–25.

Conclusion

Future work is needed to reach consensus on how to determine the archival photographs which need special care to be disseminated ethically and what that special care consists of. Metadata is only one part. This work falls under Odumosu's call to "to delineate a sacred environment for the images that articulate (in part) the experiences of slavery and colonization."[79]

The first step to digitally disseminating an archival photograph collection born from or documenting violence, trauma, or atrocity should be consulting the relevant community that was the victim of the trauma. The collection should only be digitized and shared with their consent. When describing the collection, any relevant guidelines for ethical description should be consulted and used, such as the Cultural Stewardship and Cultural Sensitivity Guidelines for indigenous collections discussed in "Providing Culturally Responsive and Ethical Access to Indigenous Collections" by Carpenter et al., or the Anti-Racist Description Working Group guide to antiracist archival description.[80] The metadata approach to ethically providing access to difficult/problematic digitized archival photographs discussed here comprises going beyond the Dublin Core metadata used to describe art and incorporating further descriptive metadata, principally the contextualizing essay. Contextualizing essays can be written by or with stakeholders and can incorporate fictional stories or accounts from outside the collection that represent the experiences of the subject of an archival photograph of trauma or violence. This principle should be adopted alongside other means of providing privacy and respect to donors/subjects such as redaction. This approach is shown in several case studies above such as the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory's Image Archive on the Eugenics Movement and the Wisconsin School for Girls Archives. Ultimately, archivists must work with stakeholders/subjects to determine what to disseminate and how.

Metadata can be a powerful tool for mitigating the risks of digitizing archival photograph collections that have violent or problematic origins. Metadata can push back on the perception of an archival photograph as a work of art and provide context for its creation and use. Metadata in the form of image captions and contextualizing essays can encourage viewers to consider an archival photograph critically and historically. These tools are most effective when created by members of communities affected by the events depicted in a collection, as in the case of the Image Archive on the Eugenics Movement, which included captions and essays written by a panel including historians, ethicists, and advocates for the disabled community. The metadata for digitized collections can also incorporate the words of community members who have consented to share their stories. These measures would allow digitization metadata to serve as a counter-narrative to the stories told implicitly in archival photographs of violence.

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[79] Odumosu, "The Crying Child," S297.

[80] Carpenter et al., "Providing Culturally Responsive and Ethical Access to Indigenous Collections"; Antracoli et al., "Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia."

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