A Critique of the Finding Aid for UCLA's Japanese American Research Project

(Yuji Ichioka) Collection of Material about Japanese in the United States

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For this assignment, I examined the [Online Archive of California (OAC) finding aid for the Japanese American Research Project (Yuji Ichioka) collection of material about Japanese in the United States](), held in the Special Collections of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). While I found the collection-level finding aid largely met both the "required" and "optimum" requirements of the current version (2022.0.0.1) of *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS), as well as including some appropriate "added value" elements, I also found some inconsistencies and omissions there, and even more at the series, subseries, and lower levels—some of which, however, are mitigated by the fact that several series and even many subseries are described as separate collections in OAC and in the UCLA catalog. While these issues illustrate the difficulty of keeping archival metadata current, with regard both to the systems and procedures of their custodial institutions, and to changing archival standards, they were relatively minor, and did not detract from the overall usability or utility of the finding aid. (The interface of the OAC website, however, is long overdue for an overhaul.)

Overview of the Finding Aid

The finding aid for the Japanese American Research Project collection (JARPC) uses multilevel description, with the bulk of the description at the collection level. The material is arranged in eighteen series, of which four are cataloged in OAC as separate collections with their own, separate finding aids—although only two of these appear to be treated as separate collections in UCLA's own catalog. Of the series included within the main finding aid, about half have at least minimal description, such as extent, and in some cases a scope and contents note and/or a link to other relevant collections; the rest seem more or less abstract, introduced only to

make what would otherwise be a large number of top-level series more tractable (the "Personal Papers" series, for instance, includes more than 90 sub-series relating to particular families, as well as "Anonymous Manuscripts", "Miscellaneous Personal Papers", and "Passports and Passage Permits"). Some subseries are described; other materials are described at the box, folder, or item level, or as sub-subseries (which may comprise multiple boxes, or only multiple folders within a single box). Many of the subseries under "Personal Papers" seem also to be cataloged in OAC and/or in the UCLA catalog as separate collections, with their own extensive finding aids.

DACS Conformance: Elements for Minimal Description

DACS specifies eleven elements as minimally required for a single-level description: Reference Code (2.1), Name and Location of Repository (2.2), Title (2.3), Date (2.4), Extent (2.5), Name of Creators (2.6), Scope and Content (3.1), Conditions Governing Access (4.1), Languages and Scripts (4.5), and Rights Statements for Description (8.2). For the top level of a multi-level description, DACS adds (without a corresponding numbered section) identification of the whole-part relationship to the next subsequent level. The JARPC includes all of these, except for Rights Statements for Description (8.2). That said, according to the DACS Changelog, this element was added only in 2021, which not only seems sufficient to explain its absence from this finding aid, but also suggests that the concept is a relatively new one; even the OAC's general Terms of Use page does not seem to consider the intellectual property status of archival description, only of the archival materials described.

Worth noting, however, is that while DACS (2.1) specifies that the local identifier portion of a reference code should serve as "a means of gaining access" to the collection, it is not clear how those elements of the JARPC finding aid that appear to be reference codes could be used to do so. The "Collection Number" or "Identifier/Call Number", LSC.2010.00, produces no results

when input as a search term to UCLA's instance of the University of California's consortial Primo VE discovery system (UC Library Search); the "UCLA Catalog Record ID", 4233210, appears to predate the implementation of the consortial system and is no longer valid, although inputting it as a search term does produce the JARPC as the second search result. Nonetheless, a UCLA special collections librarian would undoubtedly have no difficulty making the connection, and the main problem this poses to the user is that the "UCLA Catalog Record ID" link in the finding aid, which presumably at one point linked directly to the catalog record display page for the collection, now is redirected, without context, to the front page of the discovery system.[1]

Apart from this issue, the content of the required elements seems adequate. The creator is given as the Japanese American Research Project—the collector or accumulator of the records, rather than their creator; but the creators of the records are generally given at the series or subseries level (if often in a scope and contents note rather than as a separate creator element). The scope and contents element focuses on quantity by documentary form, with some geographical information, and no dates apart from noting that some records pertain to surveys of Japanese immigrants conducted during the 1960s. The date range for the collection, 1893-1973, is formatted correctly and is noted as inclusive (which according to DACS 2.4, it should be), but the type of date—whether it pertains to, e.g., creation, or record-keeping activity, or the period documented—is not stated.

DACS Conformance: Elements for Optimum Description

For optimum single-level description, DACS adds two elements, Administrative/ Biographical History (2.7) and (without a corresponding numbered section) access points, and specifies that the Scope and Contents (3.1) element should include "a full description", rather than "a short abstract" (DACS, Chapter 1). While it is hard to judge whether the Scope and

Contents section of the JARPC finding aid meets that standard, the finding aid does include both additional elements. The "History" section is brief, however, summarizing only the history of the Japanese American Research Project; while most researchers seeking out this collection intentionally are likely already familiar with the history of Japanese immigration to the United States, with the incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, and so on, the finding aid's general utility would be improved by including that historical context. The list of access points, comprising six topical subjects and nine documentary forms, is somewhat more comprehensive, but is notably lacking in personal names—an issue somewhat mitigated by the general transition from subject access to keyword search in discovery systems, but one that might become more of an issue in a linked data environment, and might make it more difficult to incorporate information from external archival authority records.

DACS Conformance: Added Value Elements

The JARPC finding aid includes nine of DACS' sixteen added value elements, and those not included—such as Custodial History (5.1), Appraisal, Destruction, and Scheduling Information (5.3), and Accruals (5.4)—generally seem inapplicable. The system of arrangement (3.2) is specified to the series in the top level of the finding aid, and in more detail at lower levels. Physical access (4.2) notes that the collection is stored off-site and that access requires an advance request. Technical access (4.3) notes the presence of AV materials, including unprocessed AV materials, with more details at lower levels. Additional finding aids (4.6) are linked for those series and subseries that are cataloged as separate collections; related archival materials (6.3) are identified both at UCLA and at other institutions. A processing information section is provided; while this is one of the uses DACS identifies for the Notes (7.1) added-value element, it is interesting—given the increasing interest in using processing notes to make

archival decisions more transparent (see, e.g. A4BLiP, 2020, p. 11)—that there is as yet no top-level DACS element for this purpose. The same section also includes aspects of DACS' Description Control (8.1) added-value element, such as updates made as part of a reparative description project (Dean, 2019), e.g. changing "relocation" to "incarceration". It would be nice to have more information on the collection's accession and custodial history (not least to know who Yuji Ichioka is, and why the collection bears that name).

Usability and utility

On the whole, this is an effective and reasonably comprehensive finding aid, given the size and complexity of the collection it describes. Nielsen (2012) distinguishes between *usability* as the quality or ease-of-use of a user interface, and *utility* as the extent to which an interface design provides necessary functionality to the user. I would argue that the "user interface" of the JARPC finding aid consists both of the interface of the OAC website—a shared feature of all finding aids made accessible by the OAC—and of the structure and arrangement of the finding aid itself, independent of its presentation. Though there are some omissions and inconsistencies when assessing the finding aid against DACS, these problems (with the possible exception of the call number / record ID issues) are minor, and do not especially compromise the finding aid's usability or utility.

As a website, the OAC's interface is functional, but dated, particularly in contrast with more modern interfaces such as that of [Calisphere].[2] The layout is fixed to a 970×848–pixel rectangle, with no provision for use either on mobile devices or on larger screens, compromising both the efficiency and satisfaction components of Nielsen's usability definition. That said, I found the design both learnable and memorable, and made no errors as such—although it seems

a mistake not to have links in the finding aid, such as that to the UCLA record ID, open in a separate window.[3]

Similarly, the organization of the finding aid, if not strictly in line with DACS,[4] was nonetheless familiar and easy to navigate, both within the OAC website and as a PDF created from the finding aid's "Printable HTML" representation; and I believe it would also be learnable and memorable for users less familiar with archival descriptive traditions (a reflection of sensible decisions made by the archival community in developing those traditions, and of UCLA's archivists in following them). I did not attempt to identify or request any specific materials, but the information provided seems sufficiently comprehensive to do so, and it is hard to argue that, for instance, totaling up the number of linear feet of records in the "Personal Papers" series would make the finding aid materially more useful.

Conclusions

The JARPC is a large, complex collection that stretches the boundaries of hierarchical description. The fact that many of its series and subseries are cataloged as separate collections with their own finding aids is interesting, both in the way it raises questions about the collection's history and the custodial decisions made in cataloging and describing it—did some of these sub-collections predate the Japanese American Research Project? If so, how was the decision made to include them in the larger collection? If not, what justified the decision to describe and catalog them separately?—and in the way it seems a kind of precursor to future world of networked (rather than hierarchical) description called for by initiatives such as RiC-CM. At the same time, some of the minor issues that do appear in the JARPC's finding aid, such a call number with unclear context and validity and a broken link back to the holding institution's catalog, also seem to prefigure potential practical issues with that networked world—one in

which not only might the custody of a collection and the responsibility for describing that collection be separated from the responsibility for making that description accessible, but in which the description itself might incorporate content produced by a multitude of institutions for a multitude of purposes.

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Notes

1. Having worked in UC Berkeley Library IT during the transition from separate campus catalogs to the consortial Systemwide ILS and shared Primo VE discovery system, I find it hard to fault my former colleagues at UCLA for not doing better here. I expect updating the catalog links in the OAC is on someone's to-do list, and will eventually make it to the top.

2. In some respects the OAC's digital collections counterpart, and managed by the Publishing, Archives, and Digitization group at the California Digital Library.

3. A sense exacerbated by the time it takes for the University of California's consortial Primo VE to redirect from the obsolete catalog link and load its less than helpful home page.

4. Given that according to Dean (2019) the finding aid was produced with ArchivesSpace, I assume that the structure reflects instead something close to the default for the version of ArchivesSpace used.