Pronouns in Institutional Repository Metadata
Emma Boisitz

Land Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge that as an employee in and a resident of New York City, the land I live and work on was stolen from the stewardship of the Lenape, Canarsie, and Wappinger tribes. If you are interested in learning more about Indigenous land reclamation, you can visit landback.org. Until April 2022, an exhibition of Lenape history and artifacts curated by The Lenape Center is being held at the Greenpoint Library. The title of the exhibit, Lenapehoking, refers to the Lenape land which those of us in NYC currently live and/or work on and which was never ceded.

When considering the attention and respect that must be given to people's pronouns and gender expression, it is also important to note that the gender binary is largely a Western construct that was forced upon Indigenous communities by European colonizers.

Pronouns and Gender Identity

It is increasingly common to see "she/her" in the signature of an email or "he/they" in parentheses after a name in a Zoom window. Our pronouns are part of the way we interact with the world. The way someone expresses themselves in their appearance or dress does not necessarily correlate with their gender identity or the pronouns that they use. Pronouns carry gendered implications, such as assuming someone is a man if he uses "he/him" pronouns or assuming someone is a man based on the way they present themselves and then using "he/him" pronouns. Gender is not broken up into two different binaries, but rather should be approached as a spectrum. Different cultures also perceive gender and utilize pronouns in different ways. This discussion today is admittedly US-centric.

Using the correct pronouns is a way to show respect for someone else, affirm their identity, and understand them better. It is respectful of everyone around you, not just for trans and non-binary people. The pronouns someone uses do not necessarily tell you anything about their gender identity. Commonly used pronouns are she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs, ze/zir/zirs or a mix. Mistakes can be made, and, in those circumstances, it is best to apologize, ask if you are unsure of someone's correct pronouns, and move forward using their correct pronouns. If you are unsure of someone's pronouns and unable to ask them, using 'they' is a polite option.

For these reasons, it is essential to utilize pronouns correctly in metadata. To willfully ignore someone's pronouns is to erase their identity and deny them their established sense of self and personhood. Especially in an archival and repository setting, such willful actions would be a deliberate erasure of a person's, culture's, and institution's history.

The Project

Title: Cardozo Photo Archives

Description: Several library assistants, including myself, worked through a backlog of various photos from a variety of departments, such as the library and Communications. A spreadsheet

was created to catalog each individual photo and help users more quickly find what they are looking for. Metadata included the name of the event, date of the event, a description of the event, names of people in the photo, and a short description of the photo itself. This may be a sentence such as "Dean Melanie Leslie laughs from her seat at the brunch table" or "A student smiles for their ID picture".

Best Practices

Safety: Maintaining the safety of everyone is of the utmost importance. Especially for trans, nonbinary, genderqueer, and other LGBTQ+ people, there can be danger in being outed. You may know an individual prefers to use they/them pronouns, but if they ask you to use she/her pronouns in public, those are the pronouns that should be used and recorded. Always use your best judgement.

Research & Sources: Keeping in mind the safety of individuals, the source of someone's pronouns is important. Private social media accounts of any type should never be used unless you have direct permission from the individual in question. Public social media accounts may have pronouns listed in the bio. These may generally be considered a safe source to use if the person's name is directly linked to the account (e.g. written in the bio, included in the username, etc). Email signatures from a work email may also be considered a safe source. When in doubt, the best thing to do is reach out and ask.

Usage & Implementation: Usage of pronouns should be part of the initial conversation in any new repository project that may involve metadata with pronoun usage. For ongoing projects, it is never too late to introduce this conversation and incorporate it into existing workflows. If someone uses multiple pronouns, you may wish to ask them their preference. Often, if a combination is listed, such as "they/she", the first pronoun is the preferred option. Once someone's pronouns have been found and recorded, maintain a working list to refer to for all team members.

Uncertainty: Often, there may be no way of finding out or identifying an individual's name or their pronouns. Our project involved photos of students who could not individually be identified. In these cases, using 'they' prevents any gendered assumptions and should be considered best practice. If the individual can be identified, but not reached for clarification, 'they' should also be used. You can also use their name and no pronouns.

Resources

Homosaurus: Homosaurus is a linked data vocabulary of terms related to LGBTQ+ subjects. This includes a variety of pronouns, including neo-pronouns. It is designed to be used in conjunction with subject headings and to help "enhance the discoverability of...LGBTQ+ resources". In institutional repositories, it can be useful as the basis for a controlled vocabulary not only for subject headings, but also for pronouns. Currently, it is updated around twice a year.

MyPronouns: MyPronouns.org offers an introduction to the usage of and how to handle various aspects of pronouns, including asking someone for their pronouns or handling mistakes. There is also a section on utilizing gender inclusive language with many examples. Resources for further learning and research are also included.

Guidelines for Inclusive and Conscientious Description: This guide was created by archivists at Harvard's Center for the History of Medicine. It is a useful framework for approaching inclusive description as well as providing specific style guidelines that can be utilized outside of a history of medicine context. Their references and works cited offer resources for further edification.