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Mrs. His Name: Reparative Description as a Tool for Cultural Sensitivity and Discoverability

Elspeth A. Olson

ABSTRACT

Reparative description, a term coined by La'el Hughes-Watkins to describe the role of revising archival metadata in social justice, becomes a tool of both practical discoverability and cultural sensitivity toward the past when applied to the issue of married women's names in legacy metadata in finding aids. The Mrs. His Name Project at the University of Nevada, Reno, represents a case study in balancing the practical with the ethical in identifying married women formerly identified solely by their husband's names in finding aids. The project further suggests methodology which may be applied to other reparative description projects in archives, and shows how changing cultural norms make finding aids living documents in need of regular adjustments.

Introduction

In Western culture, the tradition of a married woman taking her husband's surname derives from a number of patriarchal customs in European history reaching far back into antiquity. Women in ancient Greece and Rome were subject to the authority of men for their entire lives, for example, and such practices remained in place with the rise of Christianity in Europe. Tradition transformed into legal standards in the Middle Ages with doctrines like coverture, as defined by English Common Law. Coverture subsumed a married woman's legal existence under that of her husband, making him solely responsible for all decisions without need for her consent or knowledge. Though many cultures, Western and otherwise, include patriarchal traditions of protection and guardianship of their female members, the imposition of standardized naming conventions on colonized peoples by European bureaucratic and religious authorities creates an issue for cultural sensitivity in metadata. Moreover, calling a person by the wrong name cuts across ethnic, religious, and racial identity groups. When an individual is only identified by the personal name of another person, their identity is obscured at best and obliterated at worst. Researchers also face much greater challenges in finding them in the records. Referring to women only by the names of their husbands continues the practice of male identities serving as the sole valued representative of both spouses.

Not long after COVID-19 lockdowns began in the early spring of 2020, the University of Nevada, Reno, Department of Special Collections and University Archives Director identified a new metadata project that fit the parameters and limitations of remote work while still continuing the department's commitment to improving practices: to search our manuscript and university archives collections for women identified by their husband's names, and attempt to identify them in our finding aids by their own given names. The concept of reparative description stands as one pillar of the Department's ongoing work to bring our collections into alignment with the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, and is firmly supported by the University Libraries administration.¹ The Director identified this project as a priority due to the egregiousness of the problem, the relative ease of addressing most instances, and the probable impact of the project. Because of the ease of working on this project remotely, the pandemic moved it up the priority list, though its presence on the priority list had already been of some duration.² Dubbed the "Mrs. His Name" Project, our project was inspired by a similar endeavor at Columbia University, and was grounded in "feminist ideologies that place value in lived experience."^{3,4} The project began in May 2020 and concluded in June 2021. This case study explores how we sought to balance what the women may have called themselves in their lifetimes with how current researchers might go looking for them. Retaining both the original metadata and our created, updated information provides multiple points of access and creates more ways of finding the individual, while respecting the cultural differences of the past.

The Society of American Archivists' "Dictionary of Archives Terminology" includes both adjective and noun definitions for "reparative description," the gist being the goal of remediating "practices or data that exclude, silence, harm, or

1. For the full text of the Protocols, visit <https://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/>. For the Department's work in the area, see <https://library.unr.edu/locations-and-spaces/special-collections/projects-and-initiatives/protocols-alignment-project-x340086>.
2. I would like to acknowledge my position as a white, cisgender woman. While commitment to the Jewish social justice concept of tikkun olam, "repairing the world," informs my overarching interest in reparative description, my background as a historian and amateur genealogist played a significant practical role in approaching this specific project. The collections in the Department's care, and thus the collections impacted by this project, largely represent the experiences of white people in Northern Nevada, the Great Basin, and the Eastern Sierra Nevada, though not exclusively. This project focused entirely on the women's names and did not explore other aspects of their identities such as race, religion, or country of origin, unless directly relevant to the process of identifying them.
3. Celeste Brewer, "Eleanor Roosevelt Speaks for Herself: Identifying 1,257 Married Women by their Full Names," News from Columbia's Rare Book & Manuscript Library, September 9, 2020, <https://blogs.cul.columbia.edu/rbml/2020/09/09/eleanor-roosevelt-speaks-for-herself-identifying-1257-married-women-by-their-full-names/>.
4. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives." *Archivaria* 81 (2016): 25, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/687705>.

mischaracterize marginalized people.”⁵ This article proposes that such efforts at reparative description, however small the project or seemingly minor the initial impact, play a fundamental part in the role of archives as curators of the historical record. By approaching the endeavor with an eye to social justice, discoverability, access, and the multifaceted nature of archival description, archives can continue striving toward a more inclusive, equitable, and diverse representation of the populations they document.⁶ As Lae’l Hughes-Watkins writes, such projects “may seem to be an exercise in futility but in actuality [are] an ethical imperative for all within traditional archival spaces.”⁷

Literature Review

A number of institutions have tackled and continue to confront the metadata challenge of women identified by their husband’s names in archival materials; archivists at Columbia, Yale and the American Museum of Natural History have written informative blog posts about their own efforts.^{8, 9, 10} Much of the scholarly literature on the subject of reparative description appears to focus on pressing and sometimes contentious issues surrounding metadata referring to ethnic, racial, and LGBTQ+ groups. Compared to those, the restoration of women’s names can seem, if not trivial, then at least not particularly urgent. The urgency only *seems* less pressing. When considering the importance of both accurate representation and researcher support, women’s names carry just as much weight as any other category of metadata repair. An examination of the literature on reparative description and searching similar key terms, two dominant themes emerge: social justice in the archives and high-level analyses of the nature and standards surrounding archival description,

5. “Reparative description,” Dictionary of Archives Terminology, Society of American Archivists, accessed July 2023, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/reparative-description.html>.
6. Other examples of reparative description projects include Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources (https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/ardr_202010.pdf) created by Archives for Black Lives (<https://archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com/>).
7. Lae’l Hughes-Watkins, “Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018, article 6): 4, <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol5/iss1/6>.
8. Brewer, “Eleanor Roosevelt Speaks for Herself.”
9. Alison Clemens, Jennifer Coggins, Michelle Peralta, and Jessica Tai, “Say My Name, Say My Name: Addressing Missing Name Information for Women in Yale Special Collections,” Descriptive Notes, March 28, 2022, <https://saadescription.wordpress.com/2022/03/28/addressing-missing-name-information-for-women-in-yale-special-collections/>.
10. Melissa Silvestri, “Survey Collections and Ethics in Scope & Contents,” Vertebrate Paleontology Archives, May 28, 2021, <https://vparchives.wordpress.com/2021/05/28/survey-collections-and-ethics-in-scope-contents/>.

both underlaid with the desire to improve discoverability of and access to archival materials.

Social Justice

The relationship between the archives and social justice movements has prompted persistent threads of discussion within the profession for decades. Many scholars point to Howard Zinn's speech to the Society of American Archivists in 1970 as an important initial point of coalescence. In the context of the ongoing Vietnam War and the United States' activist movements about the war's atrocities, Zinn challenged archives and archivists to make a point of collecting materials showing governmental lies and hypocrisies. More importantly, he challenged archivists to make those resources readily available to users. He spoke about the inherently political nature of scholarship, saying, "the archivist, in subtle ways, tends to perpetuate the political and economic status quo simply by going about his ordinary business. His supposed neutrality is, in other words, a fake."¹¹ Archival records overwhelmingly privilege the rich, important, and powerful people in society, Zinn pointed out, ignoring "the poor, the obscure, the radicals, [and] the outcasts."¹²

In a similar line of thought as Howard Zinn, Michelle Caswell wrote on the subject of representation in community archives in 2014, stating clearly that "silences in history are compounded by archival omissions."¹³ Archivists face the challenges posed by gaps and silences in archives every day, and reparative description projects narrow some of those gaps, bringing long-silent voices back into the conversation. It is fair, on a broad scale, to say that archives curate the historical record.¹⁴ We select what to retain and what to discard or withdraw, and what we are able to obtain for our collections largely relies upon the generosity of those who wish to give us materials, or funding, which again leads us back to the problem of who is represented in archival materials. Reparative description allows us to re-analyze our collections to see what representation has always been there, but has been hidden, mischaracterized, or described in ways that are harmful. As Caswell wrote, "If archives are to be true and meaningful reflections of the diversity of society instead of distorted funhouse mirrors that magnify privilege, then they must dispense with antiquated notions of whose history counts."¹⁵

11. Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *Archival Issues* 2, no. 2 (1977): 20, accessed July 2023, <https://www.howardzinn.org/collection/secrecy-archives-public-interest/>.
12. Zinn, "Secrecy," 23.
13. Michelle Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation," *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.26>.
14. Ricardo L. Punzalan and Michelle Caswell, "Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 86, no. 1 (January 2016): 26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26561647>.
15. Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History," 36.

The issue of cultural competency ought not to be ignored when dealing with reparative description projects in archives. At what point does the past become a different culture? Obviously, this question hangs upon what particular aspect of the past one chooses to explore. In the case of what a married woman called herself, one must consider the history of feminism and the laws regarding a married woman's rights. As recently as 2015, the Emily Post Institute, a reliable source on the subject of etiquette, stated that it is still acceptable if a woman chooses to be known as Mrs. Husband's Name, but it is equally suitable to be known by her own name, or her given name and husband's surname.¹⁶ The point here is choice, and that we can no longer make assumptions about the structure of a married person's name. In the past fifty years or so, many forms of addressing a married woman have become increasingly culturally satisfactory. Before that, it was a sign of respect to refer to a married woman by her husband's name as an indication of status. It stems from laws of *couverture*, in which a woman became part of her husband's legal entity when entering upon marriage.

Cultural competency, often presented with a focus on ethnic, racial, or religious issues, can also be applied to past iterations of gender norms. We can look at historical conventions around women's rights and identities within marriage, and apply our "knowledge (cognitive), skills (behavioral), and attitudes (affective)" to value the identities claimed by people in the past.¹⁷ Whether those people would have chosen to identify differently if they lived in the present day can rarely be guessed and is usually an irrelevant thought exercise for metadata purposes, so we have to balance our current cultural practices with respect for "the language people use to describe themselves" in historical documents.¹⁸ Ellen Engseth, in an article about cultural competency as an equity, diversity, and inclusion framework for archives, explains that "awareness of... systemic inequity [fits] squarely in the KSAs." The KSAs, as Engseth describes them, are knowledge, skills, and attitudes,

alternatively articulated as mindset, skillset, and heartset or the head, hand, and heart components. Knowledge includes cultural self-awareness, as well as knowledge of others' cultures, languages, histories, and lived realities. Essential skills are listening, observing, reflecting, empathizing, and communicating. Attitudes, increasingly recognized as core to cultural

16. Lizzie Post and Dan Post Senning, "Mrs. [Husband's Name Goes Here]," *Awesome Etiquette*, episode 26, May 18, 2015, accessed July 2023, <https://emilypost.com/podcast/episode-36-mrs.-husbands-name-goes-here>.
17. Ellen Engseth, "Cultural Competency: A Framework for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the Archival Profession in the United States," *The American Archivist* 81, no. 2 (2018): 462, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-81.2.460>.
18. Sharon Mzota, "Reparative Description," Society of American Archivists webinar, June 8, 2022, https://www.pathlms.com/saa/events/873/video_presentations/235195#.

competency, are those of curiosity, humility, open-mindedness, respect, and tolerance for not knowing (ambiguity).¹⁹

Engseth argues for “restorative archival description” as a method of demonstrating critical attention paid to stakeholders, users, and also professional predecessors. The phrase itself also suggests the return of something that was originally present but has been lost, while reparative description implies the fixing of something broken. Both approaches have merit, and may be usefully applied in improving the equity and inclusion found within archival collections and metadata.

In 2018, Lae’l Hughes-Watkins coined the phrase “reparative description” and issued a call for “social justice through archival repair,” because “social justice in archives is a worthwhile goal and...shapers of the historical record have a professional obligation not only to work toward a more equitable future but also toward a moral one.”^{20, 21} The question of reparative description is one of both professional practice and professional ethics. Instead of considering the effort to be one of completely erasing past errors, harmful practices, and intentional or unintentional censorship, Hughes-Watkins states that “reparative archival work does not pretend to ignore the imperialist, racist, homophobic, sexist, ableist, and other discriminatory traditions of mainstream archives, but instead acknowledges these failures and engages in conscious actions.”²² *Mea culpa*, we must say on behalf of our predecessors, and take responsibility for rectifying and updating the work of previous generations of archivists who were presumably acting by the professional standards of their time, right or wrong. This point leads us to the second theme in scholarly discussions of reparative description: the professional standards and practices regarding archival metadata.

Archival Description

Like many others, Engseth highlights the fact that archival description exists in a life cycle that requires consistent work. Finding aids and their associated notes are living documents, and the work to make them functional, efficient, and culturally competent never truly ends. Thanks to the professional emphasis placed on retaining the context of the materials as much as possible, related to *respect des fonds*, archives tend to transcribe original folder labels, donation information, and so on into the finding aid as they find them. These run the risk of retaining harmful or outdated terminology, inefficient points of access for researchers, and even inaccurate information. Therefore, we balance the original metadata which came with the

19. Engseth, “Cultural Competency,” 462.

20. Hughes-Watkins, “Moving Toward a Reparative Archive,” 5.

21. *Ibid.*, 2.

22. *Ibid.*, 4.

materials in the first place, with metadata we create ourselves, such as the biographical, provenance, and scope notes. Elizabeth Yakel describes archival representation as “both the processes of arrangement and description, and is viewed as a fluid, evolving, and socially constructed practice.”²³ Arrangement and description are tools for both the users and the archivists, and so, archives workers must learn to expect to amend finding aids as necessary. “The meaning will change over time as records are put to different uses,” Yakel writes, and we must revisit old descriptions to ensure the ongoing revision of representational processes.²⁴

Archivists may consider approaching reparative description as a largely user-centered task. Balancing original metadata with created metadata expands the access points by ensuring multiple ways of finding an individual, organization, or concept.²⁵ Furthermore, acknowledging the previous harmful descriptions, as suggested by Hughes-Watkins, educates the users. They can see what changes have been made, they learn why original metadata with potentially harmful descriptions remain in the finding aid, and they know we are aware of damage done by our professional predecessors. A Society of American Archivists webcast described the inclusion of both supplied and created metadata as a method of achieving balance between historical accuracy and mitigating current or future harm.²⁶ In the context of the Mrs. His Name Project, retaining old access points is useful. The women identified can now be found via multiple versions of their names, increasing the likelihood that users will find productive information in their research efforts.

Treshani Perera relates reparative description closely to critical cataloging practices.²⁷ As indicated above, the Society of American Archivists Dictionary of Archives Terminology includes both noun and adjective definitions for reparative description. Perera links the concept to ethical and inclusive description, as well as ethical cataloging, while the SAA Dictionary suggests “archival silence” and “reparative archive” as related terms. All of these phrases bring important nuances to the challenges of revising legacy metadata as faced by all archives, all the time. Inclusive description practices, according to Perera, are vital to “dismantling oppressive structures and hierarchies used in cataloging and classification.”²⁸

23. Elizabeth Yakel, “Archival Representation,” *Archival Science* 3, no. 1 (March 2003): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02438926>.

24. *Ibid.*, 4.

25. Stephanie M. Luke, Sarah Pezzoni, and Whitney Russell, “Towards a More Equitable, Diverse, and Inclusive Representation in Metadata and Digitization: A Case Study,” *Serials Librarian* 82, no. 1-4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0361526X.2022.2040241>.

26. Mzota, “Reparative Description.”

27. Treshani Perera, “Description Specialists and Inclusive Description Work and/or Initiatives—An Exploratory Study,” *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 60, no. 5 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2022.2093301>.

28. *Ibid.*, 357.

Similarly referring to classification practices, Ciaran B. Trace states that “the archivist is mandated to use the information gleaned in this process to overcome the distance in time and space between the records as used and the records as archives.”²⁹ Trace discusses the work of Terry Cook regarding the representation of historical context in finding aids and acknowledges that much of the processes that developed to create finding aids draw from the inclination of bureaucracy to impose order. “The modern archival profession emerged in tandem with the modern nation-state, allying archivists to the interests of government, administration, and the working of large bureaucracies...with operating rules that were both stable and exhaustive.”³⁰ The professional tradition of functioning within this bureaucratic framework means that “much of the profound complexity of the world in which records are created and used (the creator’s world) and the worlds in which the records are subsequently curated (the archivist’s world) and reused (the researcher’s world) remain obscured in the process of classification and arrangement.”³¹ The unending task of revising metadata with an eye to reparative, inclusive, and ethical description practices helps to restore some of that complexity.

Method

The initial stages of the Mrs. His Name Project at the University of Nevada, Reno involved identifying the records in need of revision and the categories of data and notes to track research and modifications to the records in question. The University of Nevada, Reno holds two ArchivesSpace repositories, separating University Archives collections from non-university-produced manuscript collections, known as Special Collections. A simple keyword search for “Mrs.” in each repository pulled up hundreds of results, collectively, but in this project our focus was on Archival Objects, Resources, and Persons. Assessment, Event, and Accession records were outside the scope of this project, and were not included. With these filters in place, the two repositories produced a list of 356 records that needed attention. To track the project and share it with colleagues, the cloud platform Airtable was used to remotely engage with two Excel-style worksheets: one for resolved searches and one for unresolved. In the resolved sheet, there were fields for collection number, name (original), name (new), overall changes (notes/description work and/or name change), notes regarding the changes, a checkbox indicating whether or not the search involved an agent record, agent record (original), agent record (modified), source/citation, changed by, and date changed. Only a few agent records were changed during the project, and most of the modifications went in collection, series, and folder records. The unresolved sheet had fewer fields: collection number, name,

29. Ciaran B. Trace, “Maintaining Records in Context: A Historical Exploration of the Theory and Practice of Archival Classification and Arrangement,” *The American Archivist* 83, no. 1 (2020): 93, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-83.1.91>.

30. Trace, “Maintaining Records in Context,” 93-4.

31. *Ibid.*, 93.

notes, and any relevant links. The notes and links fields in the unresolved sheet primarily indicate possible identification or promising leads, though without sufficient information to confirm the correct individual. Some notes indicate reasons for not finding the person, such as insufficient information, being unable to find someone in census records, or the suspicion that the individual might actually be fictional. Working through the search results in alphabetical order, each was examined in an attempt to confirm identification. If enough information was found to feel assured of the identification, the new information was added to the record wherever the woman was identified by her husband's name. If necessary, biographical and historical notes were revised to reflect the additional information, and agent records edited.

Identifying information came from a wide variety of sources, and often required searching multiple places in order to be confident. Figure 1 indicates the final sources used to confirm identities. As much as possible, details were drawn from the extant online metadata and the archival materials themselves, looking for clues that might help triangulate the correct person. Dates, locations, home addresses, affiliations, and the names of other family members were particularly useful. To be thorough, legacy donation files from the early days of the archives' existence in the 1960s were checked, though the information rarely differed from that in the online finding aid. One of the most prominent research sources used was Ancestry.com, a well-known genealogy research database, which was ultimately responsible for almost a third of the identifications made. Ancestry.com was heavily used due to staff having significant experience in searching and navigating the system before embarking on this reparative description project.³² Ancestry.com provided many census, marriage, and death records that helped locate the women researched. Findagrave.com and the Internet Archive (archive.org) provided obituaries, headstone information, and newspaper articles outside of Nevada. Newspaper Archive (newspaperarchive.com) was used to search Nevada historical newspapers. This was particularly vital since a significant portion of the records in need of adjustment came from the scrapbooks of Gladys Belknap Rowley (collection 84-26), a daily columnist in Reno in the 1930s and 1940s. Being able to comb the columns themselves for hints about the women that could then be used to narrow searches was invaluable.

32. The author used her personal Ancestry.com account of her volition. It was expected that staff would use free or university-funded resources to do the research for this project, however the author found the Ancestry interface easier to navigate due to extensive personal experience with the platform. The University of Nevada, Reno has not offered to pay for the author's personal Ancestry account, nor has it been asked of them to do so.

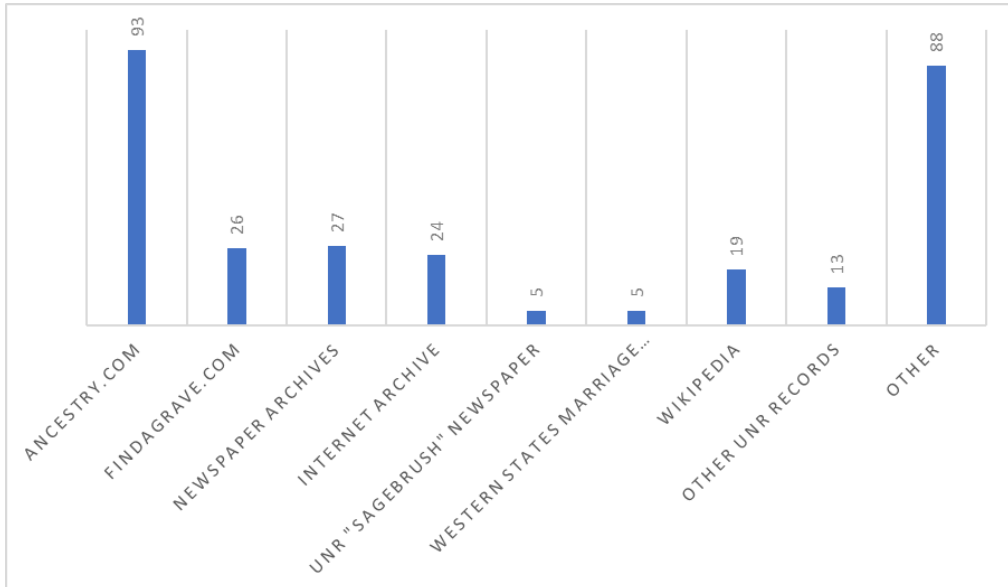


Figure 1. Sources used to confirm identities as part of the Mrs. His Name Project

While a few online resources proved most useful in the search process, there were others that proved vital in a smaller number of cases. University of Nevada, Reno's student newspaper, *The Sagebrush*, assisted with the identification of students, faculty, and other university-affiliated women. The Western States Marriage Record Index, hosted online by Brigham Young University in Utah, helped to locate some women by identifying who they had married. Digitized city directories available online via the San Francisco Public Library were also utilized, as well consulting the University of Michigan Archives and St. Louis Community College with specific questions.

The California State Archives helped to identify one of the oldest names in a long-shot search that paid off. A 1960s nursing student's paper on mental health treatment in Nevada mentions a "Mrs. Ramshurt" in quotes from 1860s news articles about a woman wandering rural Nevada, seemingly without shelter and suffering from both physical and mental health conditions. Staff had a surname, a date of death, and the suggestion that at some point the State of Nevada sent her to be involuntarily committed at the Stockton Insane Asylum in California, but could not find her in census or death records on Ancestry. The California State Archives holds the Stockton Insane Asylum records, and archivists there located Maria Ramshurt listed among the dead in early 1867, having suffered from "apoplexy."

While many names could be identified through diligent research, a few relied upon sheer luck. Provenance information for some of the earliest collections acquired by the University of Nevada, Reno is inconsistent and frequently lacks the level of

detail modern accession records encompass. Twenty-four records of items donated in the 1960s list a Mrs. Jerry Kane as the donor. Unable to tell if her name was Jerry or if it was her husband's name, locating her took months of combing legacy donation records, newspapers, obituaries, and family trees. Close examination of the physical collection items proved to be the key. In a business ledger from the Diamondfield Mining Company (collection NC24), a newspaper tucked inside was addressed to Jerry Kane. This stroke of luck led to city directories of San Francisco, and finally to Gerald and Sylvia Kane living at the correct address at the correct time.

Between research and luck, staff revised 300 of the 356 records in the collections that turned up in a keyword search for "Mrs." The names appeared in different levels of collections, from folder or item to collection title. Four records had possible or even likely-looking leads on identification, but not enough to feel confident, while 52 proved entirely elusive. A few of those remaining may in fact be fictional characters in audio media, but that was unclear from the available information. Figure 2 shows the high rate of successful alterations to names, with 84% of the names in question located and revised. 1% have strong leads, while 15% remain unidentified. Changes were tracked in three categories: collection or folder name updates, revisions to finding aid notes, and cases in which both needed to be edited (Figure 3). Surprisingly, only 4% overlapped the two needs, while 28% solely involved the names. The remaining 68% comprised changes to a variety of finding aid notes, including biographical, provenance, and scope.

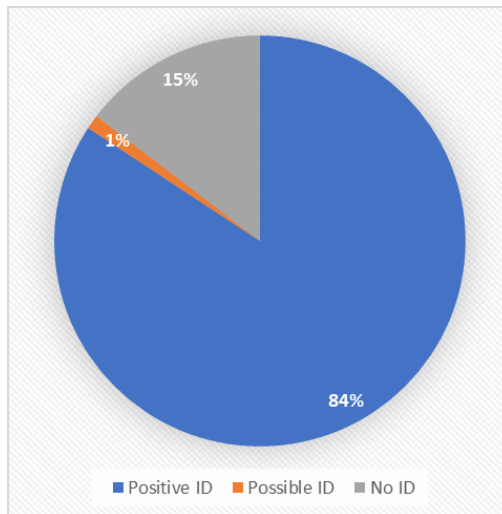


Figure 2. Alteration based on identification status

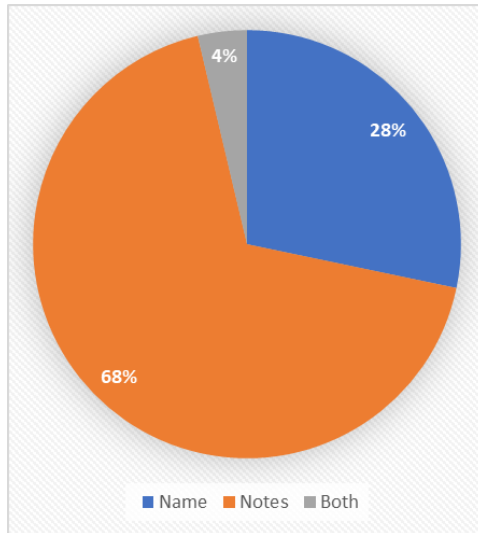


Figure 3. Names and Notes metadata alterations

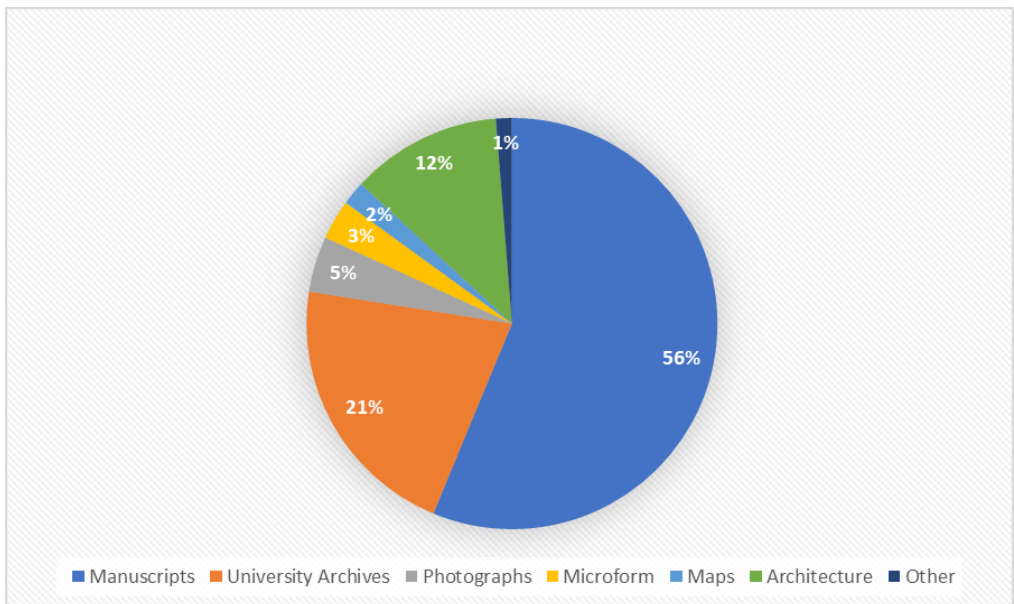


Figure 4. University of Nevada, Reno Special Collections and University Archives collections examined

The collections and items examined in this project came from nearly every category of resource held by Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Nevada, Reno. University Archives, materials produced specifically by and for the university, made up 21% of the records, while manuscripts, which are materially the same but not produced by the university, made up the largest set at 56% percent. Twelve percent were architectural drawings, while 5% or less were found in photograph collections, microformats including microfilm and microfiche, maps, and other formats such as audiovisual materials (Figure 4). A few specific collections accounted for large sections of the results, but more than two hundred collections were represented in total.

Discussion

A reparative description project intending to restore married women's names to them in archival records is, by nature, in pursuit of a practical goal—discoverability—and idealistic ones—feminist archival ethics. It needs to balance what the women may have called themselves in their own time and how current researchers might go looking for them. How a married woman might have chosen to be addressed, given the opportunity to select the format with which she felt most comfortable, we generally cannot know. In this project, the aim was to find the most complete version of the woman's name as possible, sometimes including maiden names and even middle names. The original metadata was retained in the finding aid, as historically some women were indeed content or even proud to be known by their husband's name. At minimum, a sentence stating that "Mrs. John Doe was Mrs. Jane Doe" was added if no other information could be found. At times, the biographical notes were enhanced based on evidence found to confirm the individual's identity. The desired balance incorporated the practice of saving original metadata to provide context to the collection with the ethical standpoint of viewing archives-produced metadata as a living document. Having both original and updated metadata provides multiple points of access and creates more ways of finding an individual, as well as respecting the different cultural naming practices of the past. In 2016, Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor argued for a massive professional shift when addressing social justice issues in the archives, moving from a model "based on individual rights to a model based on a feminist ethics of care. From the approach of a feminist ethics of care, archivists are seen as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility."³³ They advocate radical empathy and consideration for the many levels of archival relationships between creators, curators, users, and communities.

"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there," wrote novelist L.P. Hartley in 1953.³⁴ When it comes to reparative description, there are many layers

33. Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights," 24.

34. L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York: Stein and Day, 1967), 1.

to that statement. If we consider finding aids as living documents, each era of edits and updates adds to the complexity of the historical context of the document itself. How a married woman of the past might have named herself then and how she might name herself now is certainly part of that nuanced complexity. Another factor is the challenge of legacy collections, added to the archives by professional predecessors with different documentation standards than we now require, or sometimes entirely without surviving documentation. Perhaps older provenance information has vanished with time; perhaps it never existed for those collections. At the University of Nevada, Reno, examples of both appear to exist in earliest acquisitions, some of which were transferred by other university departments when the University Archives first opened as a separate library department in the 1960s. Addressing “the past as a foreign country” require a great deal of the cultural competency practices described by Engseth: “Cultural competency is one framework available to all archivists to advance equity and inclusion within the profession.”³⁵ Balancing respect for how a woman might have identified herself in the 1960s or earlier with how a researcher or student in the 2020s might go looking for them means not replacing one name with the other, but including both. Cultural competency in reparative description also requires an understanding of how prior generations of archivists and past archival standards might affect the collections in question, giving the archivist conducting the repair a sensitive insight into how best to go about the work.

Aside from Sylvia Kane, discussed above, two collections accounted for a large number of the records altered. One, the Harry Reid Senatorial Papers (collection 90-89), which includes many mentions of Senator Reid’s wife, Landra Gould. It seems appropriate that the collection requiring the most research was created by a woman. The other relates to Gladys Belknap Rowley who wrote a daily newspaper column in Reno in the 1930s and 1940s with a chatty, anecdotal tone about the people she met and the events she attended around the region. Rowley was herself a transplant to Reno, having moved to the area in the early 1930s for the “Reno Cure,” the euphemism for a quickie divorce, and then settled and raised her two sons while writing her daily column. Twelve scrapbooks (collection 84-26) contain a copy of every column Rowley wrote, plus professional correspondence, souvenirs, and related newspaper clippings. Most of the columns are about women and their doings around town, from their gardens and poetry to their war work. Newspaper standards of the time, particularly in such a small city as Reno, allowed for printing identifying information about the subjects of articles, such as club affiliations, family members’ names, and even residential addresses, far more than is commonly seen now. This provided sufficient identifying information about the women covered in the columns which could be tracked through other documentary sources, especially ancestry.com and findagrave.com. In the process, staff got a granular look at a remarkable collection that likely would have otherwise not been given much thought; it has since become a favorite with class visits to the archives. The reparative description project to restore married women’s names is therefore already bearing fruit.

35. Engseth, “Cultural Competency,” 476.

The Mrs. His Name Project at the University of Nevada, Reno suggests effective ways to develop and further streamline similar reparative description projects in the future. Use of a project management and tracking system such as Airtable is advisable due to its specific abilities to filter, tag, and otherwise customize data, though a spreadsheet program like Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets will suffice. The University of Nevada, Reno's Department of Special Collections and University Archives and the University of Nevada's University Libraries are engaged in reparative work on an *ad hoc* project basis due to limited resources of staff and time rather than any lack of support from administration. Processing and cataloging style guides are living documents that include instructions and practice improvements, including the use of endonyms and considerations of patriarchal influences when writing biographical notes. The University Libraries have also adopted a feedback process for problematic descriptions of Indigenous materials as part of the efforts to align with the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials. The Department of Special Collections and University Archives adopted a harmful content warning that appears on all finding aids, and the University Libraries formed a cross-departmental working group in early 2023 to develop a harmful content statement for metadata and description in all collections held by University Libraries. Staff, specifically this article's author, moved to a different role within the Department since completing the Mrs. His Name Project and no longer has a direct hand in processing, but continues to engage with the work as it affects archival outreach and instruction.

Reparative description can take many forms and address many past metadata injustices. By focusing on one aspect at a time, such as married women's names, archivists and metadata specialists ensure greater consistency in formatting and language. Methodical progress through single aspect revising will inevitably lead to identifying other elements that need attention, keywords to search, and collections to flag for special attention. Trying to encompass all of the needs at once will lead to mistakes and inconsistencies, and the requisite to start all over from the beginning each time a new variable is added. Each project should have the flexibility to encompass unexpected aspects as needed, but ought still to have boundaries. Beyond those boundaries are separate projects, rather than expansion of the existing one. Furthermore, reparative description and the research that supports each individual metadata change are time-consuming endeavors. Thoroughness must be balanced against efficiency by allowing adequate time while still placing limitations on how far to pursue each thread. This is particularly true of projects identifying individuals or organizations, such as the Mrs. His Name Project.

Conclusion

The Mrs. His Name Project began with internal, informal conversations regarding current-day frustrations about how married women are addressed, and the assumptions that are still made about taking husbands' names. It evolved into serious discussions about reparative description, discoverability and access, cultural competencies regarding the past, and the role of feminist ethics in the archives. Many

information science scholars reinforce the fact that “archives are living artifacts of human creation and continual re-creation through the actions of archivists and users.”³⁶ To best serve our communities—past, present, and future—we need to make sure there are as many points of access to records as we can feasibly manage. How a researcher in 1960 looked for an individual person by name may be different than how one does so today, aside from the technological changes of the intervening decades. The user-centered approach of reparative description in pursuit of greater inclusivity not only improves the archives’ relationship with current users, but it also builds momentum for the future growth of collections and users alike. Potential donors from underrepresented communities see our efforts to improve description to be more inclusive, yes, but also more accurate and nuanced. This may in turn help us to prove to those communities that we are safe, respectful places for their historical records to reside. By paying attention to and openly rectifying mistakes and oversights made by our predecessors, we prove that we are trustworthy.

Archival descriptions are never finally completed. They are living documents that require ongoing revision and refinement to ensure their continued usefulness. It is a professional duty at both the practical and ethical level to continue this unending effort.

36. Scott Cline, *Archival Virtue: Relationship, Obligation, and the Just Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2021), 78.

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