

# This Is the Work

## A Short History of the Long Tradition of Inclusive Cataloging—Critiques and Action

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I am willing to bet that when the first Library of Congress printed cards became available in 1901, recipients started complaining about the subject headings.

—*Bella Hass Weinberg*<sup>1</sup>

**RADICAL CATALOGING, CRITICAL CATALOGING, INCLUSIVE DESCRIPTION,** reparative description, ethical metadata, conscious editing, metadata justice: these are just some of the terms used in libraries and archives to address prejudice and marginalization in description and classification. The proliferation of names for this type of work reflects both the length of time over which it has taken place and the wide range of methods by which it has been attempted.

The recent interest in social justice-related initiatives in the United States, spurred by the racial reckoning after the George Floyd uprisings in mid-2020, has put renewed attention on the need for efforts to ameliorate the hegemonic viewpoint of libraries. As is common with social movements with the potential to make the majority uncomfortable, there has been significant pushback to efforts to implement social justice within libraries. But even among those who are sympathetic or agreeable to these efforts, there is the impulse to think this work is a short-lived fad. This is apparent in inclusive cataloging work as well. After an initial swell of interest in this work beginning in late 2020 (as evidenced by the proliferation of webinars, workshops, and the creation of library statements on description and bias in cataloging), cataloging and metadata librarians are now at an inflection point, where we can choose to treat this work as a fad or a one-time task to check off our to-do list, or we can choose to reinvest ourselves in the necessity of continuing this work.

The creators and maintainers of library metadata must endeavor to find sustainable ways to make our cataloging and classification systems more equitable in the long term. One way of doing this is by placing our current efforts in historical context in order to gain a clearer perspective on the need to see this work as iterative and ongoing. This chapter highlights some of the earliest work of critiquing classification prejudice in the United States, as well as discusses more recent scholarship, to spotlight work that has been underappreciated in the profession and expand the understanding that this work is not a recent invention or a transient phase. The chapter is not intended to be an exhaustive recounting of this work; instead, this review is meant as just a sample of the history and development of efforts to make cataloging more accurate, useful, just, and principled.

## CRITIQUES ABOUT SPECIFIC TOPICS

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### Critiques from African American Perspectives

Some of the earliest critiques of the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), the Library of Congress Classification (LCC), and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) originated from librarians at Black colleges and universities. An early example is the work done by Howard University librarians Lula V. Allen, Edith Brown, Lula E. Conner, and Rosa C. Hershaw, who recognized the Eurocentric standards created by the Library of Congress (LC) and used by most academic libraries in the United States were insufficient to appropriately organize and describe works by and about African Americans.<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Porter Wesley created eighteen categories for works about African Americans, rejecting the use of 325 as the DDC class to which other libraries relegated works by and about African Americans.<sup>3</sup>

White librarian Frances Lydia Yocom started her career by writing her 1940 master's thesis, *A List of Subject Headings for Books by and About the Negro*. The thesis compiled a list of subject headings to be used at the historically Black Fisk University in addition to the standard LCSH. At Fisk University, the 1936 purchase of a collection with 3,000 books about African Americans "brought to a head the problem which had long been existent in the library, that of adequate subject headings for the cataloging of books by and about the Negro."<sup>4</sup>

Annette Lewis Phinazee, the first Black woman to earn a library science PhD from Columbia University, described the problems with the white-centric LCC in her 1961 doctoral thesis, *The Library of Congress Classification in the United States: A Survey of Opinions and Practices with Attention to Problems of Structure and Application*.<sup>5</sup> Phinazee also coordinated a conference addressing subject headings relating to African Americans; the proceedings of that event were published in 1967 as *Materials by and about American Negroes: Papers Presented at an Institute Sponsored by the Atlanta University School of Library Service, with the Cooperation of the Trevor Arnett Library, October 21–23, 1965*.

Doris Hargrett Clack, a longtime cataloger and cataloging instructor at Florida State University, titled her 1973 PhD dissertation *An Investigation into the Adequacy of Library of Congress Subject Headings for Resources for Black Studies*.<sup>6</sup> Her findings revealed “the subject analysis provided for black resources is sorely inadequate. Less than half of such materials can be effectively retrieved through the Library of Congress subject headings as it is presently designed and used.” She also wrote the 1975 book *Black Literature Resources: Analysis and Organization*, which includes a list of relevant LCSH, providing an overview of the topic for catalogers and researchers.

More recently, Dorothy Ann Washington, librarian at Purdue University’s Black Cultural Center, reviewed the status of LCSH in her 1994 essay “Are the Standards Adequate for Organizing African American Studies Resources?”<sup>7</sup> The essay describes the work of the staff at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture adding headings and editing assigned headings in order to make their resources accessible. Washington worked to address issues within LCSH with the foundation of the SACO African American Funnel in 2000, creating opportunities for collaboration on improving subject access. More than two decades later, the African American Funnel members continue working with the Library of Congress to address missing and outdated terminology.

### **Critiques from Indigenous Perspectives**

Many readers will be familiar with the Brian Deer Classification, first developed in 1974 for the National Indian Brotherhood’s research collection and adapted or revised for local use by various libraries, including what is now the X̱wi7̱wa Library at the University of British Columbia. While it’s true that far more developments of this type have taken place in Canada, there have been notable efforts in the United States.

One of the earliest critiques of the categorization and description of resources about Indigenous peoples was Thomas Yen-Ran Yeh's 1971 article "The Treatment of the American Indian in the Library of Congress E-F Schedule." Yeh detailed how LCC relegated Indigenous peoples to premodern history and disregarded their contemporary existence, and Yeh proposed moving some classes and creating new ones to address this segregation and marginalization.<sup>8</sup> The same issue of *Library Resources & Technical Services* also included a response from Eugene T. Frosio of the Library of Congress, acknowledging some of Yeh's points but mainly making arguments as to why his suggestions would not be taken up.

At the Rasmuson Library at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, staff found LCC's PM classification schedule for the "Hyperborean languages of America and the kindred languages of Asia" was inappropriate for their collection of Alaska Native language materials, with problems including the illogical results of alphabetical arrangement (rather than by linguistic relationships), misleading and incorrect terminology, and the inclusion of nonexistent languages. Beginning in 1971, they developed the "Matthews-Krauss Revision for the Classification of Alaska Native Languages" and adopted it for local use. This was followed by a new revision in 1979, "Guidelines for the Application of the Classification for Alaskan and Other Arctic Native Languages: Lincoln Revision," both of which are detailed in Tamara Lincoln's 1987 article "Ethno-Linguistic Misrepresentations of the Alaskan Native Languages as Mirrored in the Library of Congress System of Cataloging and Classification."<sup>9</sup>

Founded in 1972, the National Indian Law Library developed and used an internal list of subject headings, which were included in their published catalog beginning with the 1973/1974 issue. Later, this list was expanded and developed into the *Thesaurus for Describing Materials Related to Federal Indian Law and Tribal Law*, a publication designed "to be used in conjunction with the Library of Congress Subject Headings and other authority files of subject headings."<sup>10</sup>

Many other Indigenous classification and subject heading systems have been developed in the twenty-first century, including the Mashantucket Pequot *Thesaurus of American Indian Terminology* and the *National Native American Thesaurus*. Two indispensable resources describing some of these developments are *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly's* 2015 special issue on Indigenous knowledge organization and Ann Doyle's 2013 doctoral

dissertation, *Naming, Claiming, and (Re)Creating: Indigenous Knowledge Organization at the Cultural Interface*.<sup>11</sup>

### Critiques about Gender and Sexuality

Following the sexual revolution of the United States in the 1960s, the 1970s were a time for significant exploration of gender and sexuality in cataloging standards. A. C. Foskett, head of the South Australian Institute of Technology library school, wrote one of the earliest discussions of gender bias in cataloging in 1971 with the publication of his article “Misogynists All: A Study in Critical Classification.”<sup>12</sup> In an abstract note that would set the stage for many critiques in future decades, Foskett explained, “No solution is proposed, but it is important that librarians be aware of the problems.”

The 1972 book *Revolting Librarians* included a chapter titled “Sex and the Single Cataloger” describing the placement of homosexuality in DDC and LCC as intricately tied with crime and disease. That was the same year that homosexuality was reclassified in LCC and was no longer labeled with the phrase “sexual deviation.”<sup>13</sup>

Elizabeth Dickinson of Hennepin County Library’s Technical Services Division addressed the problem of sexist subject headings in her article “A Word Game” in 1974.<sup>14</sup> Dickinson also chaired the ALA Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship beginning with its establishment in 1976, which would go on to address subject headings through ALA’s Subject Analysis Committee.

The conservatism of LCSH and slowness to change led to the establishment of several alternative vocabularies for the use of libraries and archives. Joan K. Marshall, a cataloger at Brooklyn College Library, compiled *On Equal Terms: A Thesaurus for Nonsexist Indexing and Cataloging*.<sup>15</sup> The principles underlying the thesaurus were created by the ad hoc committee established in 1976; the annotations for some terms contrast the headings used in the thesaurus with the authorized headings in LCSH.

Queer theory has informed more recent foundational literature addressing bias in cataloging. This literature includes 2014’s “What’s Gender Got to Do with It? A Critique of RDA 9.7” by Amber Billey, Emily Drabinski, and K. R. Roberto, arguing against the binary structure placed on recording gender in authority records, and the 2017 book *Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge* by Melissa Adler, highlighting the infamous Delta Collection at

the Library of Congress and contending library classification functions as a method to construct and discipline gender and sexuality in our society.<sup>16</sup>

## **EFFORTS TO COORDINATE CRITICISM AND TO TAKE COLLABORATIVE ACTION**

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### **Meta-Analyses of Cataloging Ethics Scholarship**

A series of three articles with the title “Critical Views of LCSH” provides valuable insight into the trends in critiques of LCSH from 1945 to 1999. The bibliometric analysis provided by the first article, by Kirtland and Cochrane, confirms the significant increase of LCSH-critical literature in the 1970s; and in their articles, Shubert and Fischer demonstrate a greater number of critiques in the 1980s, with a “surge of interest” from 1987 to 1993 and a “slight decline” in the critical literature of the later 1990s.<sup>17</sup> The sections of these articles that discuss prejudicial bias in LCSH reveal the most frequently addressed ethical-related topics in LIS scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century: gender bias, Christian-centric vocabulary, and the lack of multicultural headings.

Olson and Schlegl performed a similar review of LCSH-critical literature in their 1999 article “Bias in Subject Access Standards: A Content Analysis of the Critical Literature.” They analyzed both the type of critiques and the subject of critiques, and they illuminated interesting trends, such as the fact that 27 percent of the articles they reviewed related to bias against women in LCSH.<sup>18</sup> Olson and Schlegl also created a relational database within ProCite, a reference management software. The database gathered together ninety-three articles, chapters, and books; unfortunately, the database is no longer available.

There have been other recent reviews of cataloging ethics critiques covering specific topics, but further analysis of critical views of LCSH in general and cataloging bias critiques, especially since 1999, would be a welcome addition to the literature to provide a view of trends over time.

### **The Radical and Critical Cataloging Movements**

Two significant movements have taken place in library and information science since the late 1960s with the common goal of addressing bias in cataloging and classification. Radical cataloging takes its cues from the wider

movement of radical librarianship, a progressively oriented effort that flourished in the 1960s. The radical cataloging movement was kickstarted by the vociferous efforts of Sandy Berman, beginning with his 1971 book *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*. Many in the profession have written about and have sung the praises of Berman, so we will mostly refrain from discussing his work in this chapter and instead focus on lesser-known efforts.

The 2008 book *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front* provides a helpful snapshot of issues addressed in radical cataloging. The book's editor, K. R. Roberto, describes behaviors and traits of the radical cataloger, including “knowing when and how to make cataloging decisions that may be in conflict with traditional cataloging standards,” “appreciating traditional cataloging models while examining ways to integrate new and useful ideas into this framework,” and “feeling passionate about cataloging and its benefits.”<sup>19</sup>

The related but distinct critical cataloging movement flourished after the 2014 development of “critlib” (a subset of critical librarianship). While similar in many ways, critical cataloging might best be considered a subset of radical cataloging. While B. M. Watson describes critical cataloging as sharing in common a “revisionist (rather than an abolitionist) ethos,” some would argue that a significant difference between the two can be seen in the amount of value they find in cataloging's traditional structures, with critical catalogers much more likely to criticize the foundational aspects of the DDC, LCC, and LCSH and to encourage the adoption of alternatives to those systems.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the overarching criticisms of cataloging systems that have spoken critically about the Library of Congress controlling our standards in its entirety have informed critical cataloging. Essential texts in this area include Hope A. Olson's 2001 article “The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs” and the subsequent book of the same title, which critiques the presumption of universality in cataloging standards; and Emily Drabinski's article “Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction,” which argues that catalogers' work to address bias in cataloging standards is insufficient and should be joined with efforts from public-facing librarians to critically engage users with the terminology and structures of queer theory.<sup>21</sup> Looking back, we also see a willingness to denounce LCSH as a whole in Joan K. Marshall's chapter “LC Labeling: An Indictment” in the book *Revolting Librarians*. Marshall writes the insensitivity displayed by LC toward minority groups

“is a result of the philosophy that underlies the Library of Congress’s subject heading practice,” a philosophy wherein LC identifies the user as the “majority reader” who is white, Christian, male, and straight.<sup>22</sup>

### Cataloging Ethics Codes

In a 2000 column in *The U\*N\*A\*B\*A\*S\*H\*E\*D Librarian* newsletter, Sandy Berman suggested “issues of cataloging adequacy and reform can’t be meaningfully addressed in a vacuum.” With that, he proposed a five-sentence “credo” describing the mission of catalogers as serving their colleagues and users, “not to please bosses” or “mindlessly adhere to rules and protocols.”<sup>23</sup> A few years later, Sheila A. Bair wrote the article “Toward a Code of Ethics for Cataloging,” arguing for the establishment of a shared set of principles around metadata. Bair suggested catalogers occupy a unique position among librarians because of the unique skills and knowledge they implement in their work, as well as the power they wield in access and naming.<sup>24</sup>

Ten years later, Elizabeth Shoemaker restarted the conversation with the publication of her article “No One Can Whistle a Symphony: Seeking a Catalogers’ Code of Ethics.”<sup>25</sup> Soon after, members of the cataloging community from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom collaborated to research and distill the core values of the profession into a framework catalogers could consult. Published in 2021, the “Cataloguing Code of Ethics” has been adopted by multiple library associations and translated into Arabic, French, Greek, and Welsh. The six members of the Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee have admirably worked to create a document with many chances for input, as well as continuing the conversation after the publication of the code with virtual meetings about how the code can be used by practitioners.

### Work through ALA and PCC to Revise Standards

The Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) is an international cooperative effort to improve the quality of cataloging and classification standards. The Subject Authority Cooperative (SACO) program, one of the component programs of PCC, began around 1993 as a path for catalogers to contribute proposals for new or revised LCSH. This is one way catalogers can propose changes to biased subject headings, though in practice, the SACO program tends to be accessible mostly to academic librarians within larger institutions. The recent establishment of new SACO funnels, providing more opportunities

for catalogers from smaller institutions, is a welcome development in getting more input into the development of LC vocabularies.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to contributions from SACO members, significant project work has taken place within ALA to improve and update terminology within LCSH. Highlighting a few of these efforts emphasizes this work has been consistent and ongoing:

- The ALA Resources and Technical Services Division’s Subject Analysis Ad Hoc Committee on Racism and Sexism was prompted by complaints from the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table’s Task Force on Women.<sup>27</sup> The committee spent four years in the 1970s producing reports and recommendations including specific changes in the DDC, LCC, and LCSH, as well as establishing procedures for investigating sexism and racism in subject representation.<sup>28</sup>
- The ALA Subject Analysis Committee’s (SAC) Ad-Hoc Subcommittee on Concepts Denoted by the Term “Primitive” was created in 1981 to study LCSH which included the word “primitive.”<sup>29</sup> The subcommittee report recommended use of the term “primitive” be reduced and offered specific suggestions for replacements; some, but not all, of these suggestions were implemented by the Library of Congress at the time.
- The SAC Task Force on Library of Congress Subject Heading Revisions Relating to the Poor People’s Policy reviewed a group of thirty-three proposed topical headings relevant to poor people. In 2000, the task force recommended that fifteen new headings be created and specific cross-references be added to existing headings.<sup>30</sup>

The authors of this chapter are well acquainted with the power and limitations of reports created and published by ALA members, with each one of us having chaired a SAC working group relating to the “illegal aliens” subject headings (the SAC Working Group on the LCSH “Illegal aliens” and the SAC Working Group on Alternatives to LCSH “Illegal aliens”). While this work is only advisory in nature, the value of coming together to analyze and make recommendations is a powerful tool for catalogers, who often feel at a significant remove from the decisions made by LC, the Dewey Editorial Policy Committee, and other organizations in control of our standards. The recent momentum toward more cataloger involvement in LC decision-making, as described in the 2023 “Report of the SAC Working Group on External Review of Library of Congress

Vocabularies,” is an exciting one for its promise of better structures and more active involvement from catalogers.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

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As cataloging and metadata librarians who have been deeply invested in this work throughout our professional careers, the authors of this chapter take heart in knowing library workers have worked toward recognizing bias and prejudice in subject headings for almost a century. Rather than being discouraged by the Sisyphean task of improving our standards, we are resolute in knowing that the iterative nature of this work will always be an integral aspect of it.

The authors want to emphasize that a significant proportion of critical cataloging work has been done by African American librarians such as Dorothy Porter Wesley, Annette Lewis Phinazee, Doris Hargrett Clack, and Dorothy Ann Washington. We encourage cataloging and metadata librarians to celebrate this fact and acknowledge our indebtedness to their important efforts, as well as the work of those who have studied and written about Black librarians throughout history to highlight their accomplishments.

Additional research on critiques of LCSH, especially before 1945 and after 2000, would illuminate the consistent throughline of recognizing the limitations of one standardized vocabulary to organize materials and the regular attempts by the profession to create alternative vocabularies, whether to be used in addition to LCSH or as an alternative. We hope the recognition that the need for alternatives to LCSH has been long established in our profession might provide additional impetus to support and fund the creation and maintenance of alternative vocabularies. We encourage metadata librarians to recognize that this work of improving the standards and structures we use is not secondary or optional. This is the work.

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