William Blackerby

Dr. Jeff Weddle

LS 501-925

6 October 2021

Critical Cataloging: An LIS Hot Topic

As part of their university libraries' commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism, metadata specialists at the University of Washington published a statement on harmful language in catalog records and archival finding aids in August of 2021 (Casey et al., "Words Matter"). UW Libraries' publication of their "Critical Cataloging and Archival Description" statement takes place in the context of the ongoing, broader national conversation about equity, diversity, and inclusion prompted by systemic police violence and killings of unarmed Black people and brought to a head by the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in May of 2020. The statement is one manifestation of UW Libraries' commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion and represents a commitment to transparency in the library's resource description process. UW Libraries are, of course, not the first to make such a statement; in fact, their statement references similar work undertaken in recent years at other academic libraries including those at Drexel University, Duke University, the University of Iowa, MIT, and Temple University. At issue in these statements is the use of racist, sexist, and otherwise harmful terms in standardized, controlled vocabularies such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) used to describe library resources. The work of critically examining and remediating the language used in classification and cataloging is known as critical cataloging, one element of the broader field of critical librarianship.

Myriad examples of harmful language used in subject headings and classifications can be drawn from the library catalog, but one recent, concrete example is the Library of Congress Subject Heading "Illegal aliens." In 2014, students at Dartmouth College "petitioned the Library of Congress (LC) to change the catalog subject heading 'illegal aliens' to 'undocumented immigrants'" (Ford, "Conscientious Cataloging"). In 2016, after the ALA passed a resolution urging the Library of Congress to comply with this petition, LC's Policy and Standards Division cancelled the heading "Illegal aliens," deciding to replace it with the two headings "Noncitizens" and "Unauthorized immigration" ("Library of Congress to Cancel the Subject Heading 'Illegal Aliens'"). However, in June of 2016, because of political pressure from the Republican-led Congress, LC kept the cancelled heading, which is still in place today (Ford).

In accordance with the ALA core value of diversity, librarians have confronted the issue head on in their own institutions by, where possible, replacing the "Illegal aliens" subject heading with "Undocumented immigrants" and where not possible, placing the two terms side by side. According to Sol López, a librarian who implemented these changes at two academic libraries, changes such as these made at the local level communicate inclusion to "library users who may have undocumented status" (Ford). At the Lawrence Public Library in Kansas, Kate Ray and Emily McDonald made similar changes after viewing a documentary film titled *Change the Subject* about Dartmouth students' efforts to change the LCSH. Ray and McDonald completely removed the "Illegal alien" subject heading from their library's catalog due to their acute awareness of the harm that such language can cause library patrons. As Ray says, patrons "think it's our decision to use [harmful language], and that that term is a judgment on them by the people who work at the library" (Ford). Ray and McDonald's sense of "responsibility to make [their] library as welcoming to as many people as possible" is a clear reflection of the ALA

core value of access, which states that "information resources…should be readily, equally, and equitably accessible to all library users" (Ford; "Core Values of Librarianship").

In July of 2016, the same year the Library of Congress announced its decision to cancel the "Illegal alien" subject heading and then effectively reversed its decision by not implementing it, LC approved a proposal to add the subject heading "Asexuality" (Watson 547-548). Watson's article "'There was Sex but no Sexuality*:' Critical Cataloging and the Classification of Asexuality in LCSH" is a valuable contribution to the literature for a host of reasons, including its review of literature on critical cataloging and in-depth recounting of the process by which "Asexuality" was made an official Library of Congress Subject Heading. Of greater interest, though, is the personal story of Paige Crowl's own experience as an MLIS student searching for information about asexuality.

Crowl's search of her university catalog for "asexuality" resulted in references to "biological works on asexual reproduction and psychological works on disorders of sexual desire" (qtd. in Watson 550). Perhaps a librarian could have aided, but Crowl was "too embarrassed to ask a librarian for help, unsure [she] could even explain the information need [she] had to [her]self" (qtd. in Watson 550). Crowl's story is a clear example of the harm that can be caused by the decisions that create library cataloging and classification systems and the importance of working to ensure that such systems avoid harmful language. Even if a friendly, empathetic librarian with expert search skills is available to help, library patrons may not be aware of this fact, or may be too scared to ask for help, meaning that the catalog is often the first and sometimes the only interface patrons have to the library's resources. If patrons have a harmful or offensive experience interacting with the catalog, the librarians responsible for

stewarding that catalog have, unintentionally or not, violated their core professional value of access.

The publication of UW Libraries' statement on "Critical Cataloging and Archival Description" is just one more recent point on the long and continuing timeline of the critical study of how information is organized, categorized, classified, and cataloged in LIS scholarship. In a tweet on October 1, 2021, Violet Fox, a leader in the critical cataloging movement, reminded her followers about Frances Yocom, a white librarian who "wrote about the lack of subject headings for materials about African-Americans in 1940" (@violetbfox). Fox's tweet quoted another by librarian Harvey Long about Annette Phinazee, a Black librarian whose "1961 Columbia University dissertation was a critical examination of LoC and its cataloging practices" (@harvlong). Along with Yocom, Watson mentions Black librarian Dorothy Porter who, in building the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center for black history and culture at Howard University, "instead of using the Dewey system," which severely limited how works by Black authors could be classified, "classified works by genre and author to highlight the foundational role of black people in all subject areas" (Watson 551; Nunes, "Remembering the Howard University Librarian Who Decolonized the Way Books Were Catalogued"). Watson also notes that "widespread scholarly discussion" of the "Western and white-centric nature of cataloging" began "to develop after the publication of Sanford 'Sandy' Berman's 1971 book *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*" (Watson 551).

The decisions made and actions taken by the practicing librarians mentioned above to revise the language in LCSH and, when that wasn't possible, make changes within their own spheres of influence reflect current scholarship in the field. These are what Olson would call "local, partial, and dynamic changes" necessary to make the "standards permeable to meet

diverse information needs" (Olson 661). Adler notes that "the way we decide to classify something says a lot about how we want to remember it, but a closer examination also says a great deal about what we're willing to forget or disavow" (Adler 553). To their credit, the librarians who brought about the addition of asexuality to LCSH and who removed the "Illegal aliens" subject heading from their local catalogs showed that they were not willing to disavow the humanity of those who do not benefit from "the discourses that privilege certain norms" (Adler and Harper 57). In fact, they engaged the ethical responsibility they bear thanks to the power they control to organize information (Adler and Harper 58).

Addressing harmful language in library catalogs must take place collaboratively with the communities libraries serve. To that end, UW Libraries have laid out a clear process that is respectful of patron privacy by which patrons can report offensive or harmful language they encounter in the catalog (Casey et al.). Metadata specialists are responsible for mountains of data and are hampered by budget restraints and limited time in the day. In the face of these obstacles, patron participation in the remediation of harmful language in the catalog is a welcome and necessary solution.

While criticism of LCSH dates back decades, it will always be a timely issue. Language is always changing, so metadata specialists will always need to respond to such change by striving to ensure that resource descriptions are up-to-date and devoid of, as far as is possible, harmful terminology. As Olson says, the "'better and quicker and cheaper'" of standardized metadata "is always at a price, and the price is the violent reshaping of objects to fit the preconceptions of the knowing subject" (663). One hopes that the field now recognizes and is willing to constantly reexamine the diversity of knowing subjects and is "getting out of the way enough for communities to determine how they want to best document themselves" (Matienzo

2015). The movement by librarians in institutional settings like academic and public libraries is a promising, though admittedly imperfect, start. Without this work, work that must always be returned to, libraries run the risk of further dehumanizing their patrons and obviating the reason for their existence in the first place.

Works Cited

@harvlong. “Her name was Annette Phinazee. By all accounts, she was the GOAT. Her 1961 Columbia University dissertation was a critical examination of the LoC and its cataloging practices.” *Twitter,* 30 Sept. 2021, 1:04 p.m., https://twitter.com/harvlong/status/1443637915519754243.

@violetbfox. “Reminder that #critcat/radical cataloging history doesn't begin & end with Berman. See also Frances Yocom who wrote about the lack of subject headings for materials about African-Americans in 1940.” *Twitter,* 1 Oct. 2021, 2:09 a.m., https://twitter.com/violetbfox/status/1443835511777472528.

Adler, Melissa. "Afterword: The Strangeness of Subject Cataloging." *Library Trends*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2020, pp. 549-556. *Project MUSE*, http://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2020.0005.

Adler, Melissa and Lindsey M. Harper. “Race and Ethnicity in Classification Systems: Teaching Knowledge Organization from a Social Justice Perspective.” *Library Trends*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2018, pp. 52-73. *Project MUSE,* https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0025.

Casey, Conor M., Erin Grant, Keiko Hill, Kat Lewis, Crystal Rodgers. “Words Matter: Critical Cataloging and Archival Description at the University of Washington Libraries.” *UW Libraries Blog*, https://sites.uw.edu/libstrat/2021/09/07/words-matter-critical-cataloging-and-archival-description-at-the-university-of-washington-libraries/. Accessed 6 October 2021.

“Core Values of Librarianship.” *American Library Association*, 26 July 2006, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues. Accessed 6 October 2021.

Ford, Anne. “Conscientious Cataloging.” *American Libraries,* 1 Sept. 2020, https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2020/09/01/conscientious-cataloging/. Accessed 6 October 2021.

“Library of Congress to Cancel the Subject Heading ‘Illegal Aliens.’” *Library of Congress*, 22 March 2016, https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/illegal-aliens-decision.pdf. Accessed 6 October 2021.

Matienzo, Mark A. "To Hell With Good Intentions: Linked Data, Community, and the Power to Name." *matienzo.org*, 14 Nov. 2015, https://matienzo.org/2016/to-hell-with-good-intentions/. Accessed 6 October 2021.

Nunes, Zita Cristina. “Remembering the Howard University Librarian Who Decolonized the Way Books Were Catalogued.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 26 Nov. 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/remembering-howard-university-librarian-who-decolonized-way-books-were-catalogued-180970890/. Accessed 6 Oct. 2021.

Olson, Hope A. “The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs.” *Sign*s, vol. 26, no. 3, 2001, pp. 639-668.

Watson, Brian M. “‘There was Sex but no Sexuality*:’ Critical Cataloging and the Classification of Asexuality in LCSH.” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 6, 2020, pp. 547-565.