
Critical Cataloging

Addressing Bias in Description and Finding Solutions

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ABSTRACT In this paper, the author discusses her experience incorporating critical cataloging in her cataloging practice and provides examples and considerations for prioritizing diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in cataloging and metadata work. The author provides examples pertaining to pattern headings in religion to emphasize inherent biases in library cataloging and classification systems, and the need for reflection as well as an individual and collective commitment to action to dismantle biases in systems, standards, and tools used in cataloging and metadata work. Strategies and resources to consider when cataloging collections highlighting diversity, equity, and inclusion are included at the end.

INTRODUCTION AND POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

This paper describes the use of critical cataloging principles in cataloging and metadata work in libraries, archives, museums, and cultural heritage organizations. As an arts cataloger, the author is not a regular Atla Annual conference attendee and is, therefore, bringing her outsider's perspective here to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion as they may relate to theological librarianship. The author has encountered subject headings related to Christianity while cataloging music and art collection items depicting early modern Europe (late 15th century to late 18th century). The Western art music canon and European art history have significant overlap with Christianity and related topics, and the author has consulted related cataloging resources and subject heading instruction sheets when performing subject analysis for arts resources related to Christianity. The author will present examples relevant to Library and Information Science (LIS) workers in theological librarianship to help recog-

nize ways in which bias is inescapable within library collections as well as systems and standards used in cataloging and metadata work.

The author works primarily with Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and classification (LCC). Library of Congress (LC) systems are standards used in cataloging and metadata work. However, they tend to reflect mainstream views in librarianship and in the greater society. Library and Information Science (LIS) scholar Hope Olson defines the mainstream as “White, ethnically European, bourgeois, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied, and male (WEB-CHAM)” (Olson 2001, 4). Any critique of LC in this paper is simply a critical assessment of language used in systems and standards and not criticism of those affiliated with the institution.

The author’s critical cataloging work is informed by her lived experiences as a woman of color in the United States and how she navigates professional spaces with marginalized identities. When working with collections representing intersectionality, a term founded by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, the author approaches her work with cultural humility: by reading and listening to voices from specific marginalized and underrepresented groups and communities.

CRITICAL CATALOGING

Terms such as critical cataloging, ethical cataloging, radical cataloging, conscious editing, inclusive description, reparative description, and more recently, antiracist description are often used interchangeably within the context of diversity, equity, and inclusion in cataloging and metadata work in libraries, archives, museums, and cultural heritage organizations. This paper emphasizes the practice of critical cataloging, which is an offshoot of critical librarianship. According to Karen Nicholson and Maura Seale, critical librarianship is “a growing body of LIS scholarship that draws on critical theory, progressive movements within librarianship, an online ‘community’ that occasionally organizes in-person meetings, and an informal Twitter discussion space active since 2014 and identified by the #critlib hashtag” (Nicholson and Seale, 2018, 1). Critical cataloging is the practical application of critical librarianship in a functional area such as cataloging and metadata work, and focuses on critiquing knowledge organization systems and dismantling oppressive structures and hierarchies used in cataloging and classification.

Critical cataloging is a growing area of interest among catalogers and metadata LIS workers. Interested individuals engage with each other in social media platforms using the #critcat hashtag. In recent years, LIS workers outside of cataloging and metadata have also taken an interest in critical cataloging topics. While the topic has become more popular in recent years, it is not a new concept within the history of social justice work in librarianship. Library workers such as Frances Lydia Yocom, Dorothy B. Porter, Doris Hargrett Clack, Dorothy Ann Washington, Sanford Berman, Brian Deer, to name a few, had advocated for subject heading and classification changes long before critical cataloging was established as a movement in librarianship.

IDENTIFYING BIAS

To understand inherent biases in standards, structures, and systems used for library cataloging and classification, the author wishes to offer some questions for reflection. The purpose of these questions is to help the reader understand why critiquing systems and standards is necessary for identifying bias as part of cataloging and metadata work. In libraries, archives, museums, and cultural heritage organizations: Who has been doing description work historically, and who continues to engage in description work? Who has been involved in creating and contributing to controlled vocabularies and cataloging standards and systems, and who continues to engage in that work? Where is the intellectual labor coming from, and where is the work being done? Who has the resources to contribute to the systems used in resource description? Whose expertise is being consulted, and for which communities? Under whose leadership is description work being done? The author invites readers to reflect on past processes to understand the present state of cataloging and classifications systems and standards. Reflection is necessary for envisioning how to dismantle inherent biases in these systems and standards.

PATTERN HEADINGS FOR RELIGION

The Library of Congress (LC) identifies certain subject headings as representative of a particular category; these are called pattern headings. Pattern headings help catalogers with subject assignment and subject authority work. Construction of pattern headings is

supported by instruction sheets in the Subject Heading Manual, a resource intended to assist with the use of LCSH. Although some instruction sheets are specific to LC's work, knowledge of instruction sheets is essential for LIS workers seeking to understand and apply LCSH correctly.

Instruction sheets for headings related to religion are dominated by examples reflecting denominations, sacred works and texts, and orders specific to Christianity. As seen in the image below (figure 1), examples from Christianity represent three out of four pattern heading recommendations for religion.

SUBJECT FIELD	CATEGORY	PATTERN HEADING(S)
Religion	Religious and monastic orders	Jesuits
	Religions	Buddhism
	Christian denominations	Catholic Church
	Sacred works (including parts)	Bible

FIGURE 1: Pattern headings for Religion. (Source: OCLC. "Pattern Headings for LC Subjects." February 6, 2020. Accessed June 30, 2022. https://help.oclc.org/Metadata_Services/Authority_records/Authorities_Format_and_indexes/Get_started/70Pattern_headings_for_LC_subjects)

Furthermore, there are extensive authorized headings and instruction sheets specific to LCSH *Bible* and related headings. LCSH *Bible* is LC's recommended pattern heading to consult when creating a subject authority record for a sacred text. A search of the term *Bible* in the Library of Congress Linked Data Subject Headings website (id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects) returns 819 authorized headings in the search results. When comparing the representation of authorized headings related to the Bible with authorized headings for sacred text in other religions: there are two authorized headings for the Bhagavadgītā, which is the sacred text in Hinduism, and 133 authorized headings for the Qur'an, which is the sacred text in Islam. The overwhelming number of authorized headings for topics related to Christianity show an inherent bias for Christianity being the norm for religious headings in LCSH. One could also argue that the overrepresentation of headings could be due to Christianity and its denominations, sacred works and texts, rites and rituals, and related topics dominating library collections depicting religions and theol-

ogy, thereby justifying the need for granular and extensive subject terms to accurately describe library collections.

These observations do not intend to critique one's faith. The purpose of this critical analysis is to point out inherent biases in cataloging standards and systems favoring one type of religion as the norm. This is particularly important to consider in the context of communities where Christianity is not the predominant religion. According to the Pew Research Center, Muslims are the fastest-growing religious group in the world (Pew Research Center 2017), but there are no instruction sheets or scope notes for using the LCSH *Qur'an* and related topics. The sole instruction sheet specific to Islam is H1680, providing guidance on when to use *Islamic* vs *Muslim* headings. As it stands, there is little guidance for catalogers looking to establish and revise LCSH related to non-Western religions impacting a global audience.

DISMANTLING BIAS

Resource description and subject analysis continues to be a primarily human-managed workflow. Due to different experiences and backgrounds of LIS workers performing subject cataloging and classification, subjectivity is to be expected as part of library cataloging and classification decisions. While catalogers and metadata LIS workers are guided by instruction sheets and resource description standards (e.g. RDA), ambiguity in guidelines could lead to different interpretations of rules and instructions.

Bias is inescapable when LIS workers are expected to work with cataloging systems and standards with inherent mainstream biases. Bias is further perpetuated when subjectivity is plausible in descriptive cataloging and subject analysis. In knowledge organization systems that rely on humans being able to interpret and apply rules and standards, the most impactful way to disrupt mainstream bias is to involve humans that are more representative of the greater society in all levels of operations related to cataloging and classification. It is by bringing in more diverse perspectives and experiences that the LIS profession can truly begin to address bias in resource description and resolve problematic language in cataloging systems and standards.

Dismantling biases in cataloging systems, standards, and tools can only be accomplished with systemic change. Systemic change is a collective responsibility. Everyone in and engaging with libraries,

archives, museums, and cultural heritage organizations will benefit from disrupting existing systems and practices in cataloging and metadata work and by a reimagining of cataloging and classification that decenters the mainstream in LIS and the greater society. Identifying and dismantling bias should matter to not only catalogers and metadata LIS workers, but also anyone in the LIS profession invested in making our institutions, collections, and the profession more diverse, inclusive, and equitable.

To get to collective responsibility, LIS workers must make an individual commitment to be responsible for their own education on how to dismantle both internal (or implicit) biases and systemic biases. Dismantling biases in professional practice, standards, and systems requires time and effort towards ongoing self-education. Acknowledging one's privileges is also necessary for dismantling and disrupting oppressive structures and systems—everyone has a certain amount of privilege. LIS workers with positional power and authority, especially those in formal leadership roles, should evaluate and re-evaluate how description work is done, who is doing the work, who is getting recognition for work in hierarchical LIS workplaces, whose voices and perspectives are overrepresented, and whose voices and perspectives are missing and therefore need to be included with intentionality.

CRITICAL CATALOGING IN ACTION

This section provides various steps and strategies for prioritizing diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in cataloging and metadata work. The framework below centers the lives and experiences of those from historically underrepresented and marginalized groups and communities in libraries and the greater society.

In several instances, especially when subjects and other access points contain problematic language, LIS workers can practice critical cataloging by incorporating inclusive keywords in a summary statement (MARC 520) or contents note (MARC 505). A general note (MARC 500) providing context to problematic language may be appropriate, too. LIS workers with complete control over local discovery systems and cataloging policy decisions are encouraged to consider local subject terms prioritizing equitable access to collections. If you are solely dependent on MARC records in a cooperative cataloging system such as OCLC WorldCat, local workflows prioritizing

diversity, equity, and inclusion may be necessary for making an immediate impact on your local user community.

When faced with racist or pejorative terms in transcribed data such as a title, a subtitle, or contents note, LIS workers can consider including a content warning note in the catalog record itself. A general note (MARC 500) could provide context explaining why there is offensive language in the catalog record. LIS workers can also use content warning notes to alert users of potentially offensive language in the text of the item. It is important that these content warning notes are publicly visible in catalogs and other description platforms. The catalog record should be treated as a living document and not a historical research document. Racist, offensive, and outdated language in general notes should be removed as quickly as possible. A collection audit using a list of subject terms or classification ranges may point to catalog records with potentially harmful language to be addressed systematically either locally or through professional groups, such as subject authority funnel programs.

LIS workers representing dominant cultures in libraries (or the mainstream) who are looking to partner with underrepresented communities for critical cataloging work should approach partnerships with cultural humility. Work should be done collaboratively with members from the underrepresented group taking the lead on how their experiences should be documented and described. If you are considering bringing in community voices into a project—for example, to change offensive terms, or expanding a set of terms for a particular underrepresented group—you should consider how that labor—especially emotional labor—can be recognized and compensated. If your institutional policies do not allow for compensation as part of partnerships, work to change restrictive policies before you begin collaborations. The long-term and sustainable solution is to increase diversity in the profession and hire LIS workers from underrepresented and marginalized groups into permanent positions. Inclusive hiring practices allow institutions to recruit, retain, and compensate LIS workers with professional expertise and diverse lived experiences, while also giving them agency to describe their own communities.

Appendix A includes reading and resources for inclusive description of Indigenous collections and LGBTQIA+ collections as well as guidelines for highlighting diversity, equity, and inclusion in general library and archives collections. LIS workers interested in creating

new inclusive subject headings and making changes to problematic subject headings can get involved via the Cataloging Lab (cataloginglab.org). The platform, managed by librarian Violet Fox, offers various resources related to critical cataloging as well.

CONCLUSION

Critical cataloging provides a framework for diverse, inclusive, and equitable practices in cataloging and metadata work. Acknowledging and dismantling biases in cataloging standards, systems, and structures are essential for impactful efforts in resource description and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in libraries, archives, museums, and cultural heritage organizations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author expresses her sincere thanks to Jamie Lin, Denise McFarlin, and Atla leadership for the invitation and support to present virtually during the Atla Annual 2022 conference.

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APPENDIX A*Readings, Resources, and Guidelines for DEI in Cataloging and Metadata Work (Not an exhaustive list)*

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