Black Subject Headings in LCSH
Successes and Challenges of the African American Subject Funnel Project

Michelle Cronquist, Special Collections Cataloger, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Staci Ross, Cataloging/Metadata Librarian, University of Pittsburgh
Overview

- Why LCSH for racial and ethnic groups needs to be improved
- How collaborating in a funnel is an effective way to make changes to LCSH
- What successes and challenges the funnel has experienced
What’s Wrong with LCSH (Library of Congress Subject Headings)?

- Centers whiteness
- Includes outdated terminology
- Omits concepts related to the African American experience
- Hides material about racism
Centering Whiteness

“Marked” vs. “unmarked” headings

- African American art museum curators / Art museum curators
- Asian American actors / Actors

People of color = “Minorities”
Outdated Terminology

- “Illegal aliens” (instead of “Undocumented immigrants”)
- “Blacks” (instead of “Black people”)
- “Slaves” (instead of “Enslaved people”)

Lacking Concepts Related to the Black Experience

- Great Migration
- Blackface
- Black wall streets
- Slave auctions
- Slave markets
Hiding Materials about Racism

- “Racism” used only for general works about racism, not directed against a particular group
  - New headings for Racism against Asians, etc.
- “Racism” vs. “Race discrimination” distinction
Other Challenges

- LCSH is not designed to be updated frequently
- Lack of transparency in the subject approval process
- Few institutions and few catalogers involved in the proposal process
SACO: Making LCSH More Transparent

1994: PCC established to facilitate increased availability of acceptable-quality records

1995: SACO and funnels established for institutions and individuals could directly contribute to LCSH
SACO Funnels: Subject and Regional Expertise

- Groups of libraries or librarians who contribute to LCSH
- Efficient means of contributing for all levels of expertise
- Subject- or location-specific
African American Subject Funnel Project

- AFAS/AASLIG established in 2000
- Focus on terminology reflecting the African American experience
- About 20 active members with diverse expertise
- Members from public and academic libraries of all sizes

African-American Studies Librarians Interest Group

Charge

Provides the resources—ideas, programs, discussion forums and networking opportunities—to support the development of African American Studies librarianship and resources in academic and research libraries.
Barriers to SACO Participation

- SACO participation is mysterious
- Few catalogers contribute
- Not widely known who can submit proposals
- Documentation can be inaccessible and outdated
- Lengthy subject approval/rejection process
Funnel Priorities: Democratizing SACO Participation

- Rely on all members’ expertise
- Strive for transparency and equal access to opportunities
  - Funnel-specific training and documentation
  - Free, widely available tools
  - Collaborative process for generating ideas and tracking proposals
- Assert antiracism
New Terms in LCSH

New terminology on Black and African American experiences:

- Afrofuturist fiction
- Ax Handle Saturday, Jacksonville, Fla., 1960
- Black wall streets
- Sundown towns
Proposed Changes to LCSH

Updated terms empower contemporary users to confidently employ LCSH:

- Blacks/Whites change proposals
- Updated references for Colorism

Colorism  (May Subd Geog)  
Here are entered works on prejudice based on relative skin hue within a racial group. 

- UF Bias, Skin-tone
- Colourism
- Shadeism
- Shadism
- Skin-tone bias
- BT Prejudices
Questions for New and Change Proposals

● Should catalogers add new headings to existing records?
● What impact can headings updates have on local catalogs?
● What counts as “literary warrant” these days?
Challenges

- LC sometimes neutralizes our proposals in the name of objectivity
- LC policies can get in the way of establishing commonly used terminology
Neutralizing: “Blackface” Proposal

Original scope note: “Here are entered works on the use of stereotyped portrayals of black people (linguistic, physical, conceptual or otherwise), usually in a parody, caricature, etc. meant to insult, degrade or denigrate people of African descent”

Final scope note: “Here are entered works on the caricature of black people, generally by non-blacks, through the use of makeup, mannerisms, speech patterns, etc.”

Broader term changed from “Racism in popular culture” to “Impersonation”
Proposal

Existing heading: Blacks--Latin America

Proposed heading: Afro-Latin Americans

LC response: “LCSH does not include composite headings for nationalities in countries other than the United States (see Subject Headings Manual H 1919.5).”
Why this Work is Important

- LCSH is widely used in library catalogs
- Greater impact than implementing local policies
Improving LCSH is possible! We need to commit ourselves to this work.

Don’t assume that because there is no heading, there can’t be one.
Thank you!

More information on the funnel:
https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/aframerfun.html

Michelle Cronquist (cronquim@email.unc.edu)
Staci Ross (str51@pitt.edu)