

The African American Subject Funnel Project

Definitions, History, and Processes

In 2021, Jean L. Cooper, the principal cataloger at the University of Virginia, sat down to catalog the book *Slavery at Sea* by Sowande' M. Mustakeem.¹ Published in 2009, the text examines the history of the Middle Passage—the forced voyage of enslaved Africans from West and Central Africa to the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century until the abolition of slavery—and the suffering experienced during the journey.² In preparing to describe the book, Cooper began to search for the best Library of Congress (LC) subject terms to assign—including the book's central subject, the Middle Passage, and the broader concept of the transatlantic slave trade. She soon discovered, however, that these concepts did not exist in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). *How could there be no official subject heading for the Middle Passage?* she wondered.³

Cooper's experience reflects the frustrations of librarians and library staff across the profession who have long lamented inaccurate terms and omissions within LCSH. But while librarians across the field have identified these problems, Cooper's experience differed from most of her colleagues in one important way. As a longtime member of the African American Subject Funnel Project, she knew a pathway to officially add these terms. By enlisting the help of her Funnel colleagues, Cooper created new heading proposals and submitted them to the LC. In March 2022, LC officially added "Middle Passage" and "Transatlantic slave trade" to LCSH.

This article describes the process of adding new and updating existing LCSH subject headings through the lens of the African American Subject Funnel Project. It argues that by understanding the process through which subject headings are added and changed, librarians and library staff can contribute to a more inclusive catalog that better facilitates research on African American life and culture.⁴

The African American Subject Funnel Project Defined

The African American Subject Funnel Project is a group of librarians who work to improve LC subject headings related to African American history and culture. Working collectively, they propose new and updated terms to LC for inclusion in the Subject Authorities database. These standardized subjects, which are used widely by libraries, provide catalogers with a fixed and consistent way of describing various concepts. In turn, they also provide a pathway for users to discover research materials about similar topics. According to one recent work on controlled vocabularies, they are "a foundational concept in library science" and "provide valuable access points to library resources during search and discovery for patrons."⁵

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Since 2019, the African American Subject Funnel Project has submitted more than seventy proposals to LCSH and other LC controlled vocabularies, such as Genre/Form Terms, Demographic Group Terms, and Children's Subject Headings. Some proposals—including the change from “Slaves” to “Enslaved persons”—have required extensive research and work over several months. Other proposed terms, including “Anti-lynching movements” and “African American barbershops,” have been comparatively straightforward but have nonetheless allowed for resources to be described more accurately and with greater specificity.

History

In a 1994 ERIC report titled, *Are the Standards Adequate for Organizing African American Studies Resources?*, Dorothy Ann Washington pointed out the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the available LCSH for addressing the descriptive needs of African American studies collections.⁶ Washington, who was then the head of cataloging at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, cited other issues such as lack of relevancy and specificity and the need for subject headings that recognized African American identity within the content. She suggested the authorization of ethnic qualifiers and recommended that LC revise and expand the applications for cross-references and explanatory notes for African American studies publications. For example, the Schomburg required the cataloging of many items dealing with free Black people, but LC only offered the descriptor “Afro Americans.” The term “freedmen” was allowed as a heading but needed “Afro-American” as an ethnic qualifier or an explanatory note about its relationship to the Black American experience.

Four years later, LC's Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) reached out to historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) for assistance with properly identifying African American resources. Subsequently, two LC librarians, Gracie Gilliam and Cornelia Goode, contacted Washington on behalf of the PCC and suggested that she lead the initiative to establish the new funnel. Washington had changed jobs and was serving as the head of the Purdue University Black Cultural Center. Along with Anthony Franks, a cooperative cataloger for LC, Washington presented the idea to the ACRL African American Studies Librarians Section (AFAS) at the 1999 ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans.⁷

AFAS held workshops on subject heading cataloging at its meetings during 2000–2001. At ALA's Midwinter Meeting in 2001, members voted to establish a funnel with the following objectives: a) to create new subject headings relevant to the African American experience, culture, and history; b) to suggest revisions to subject headings; and c) to provide advisement from subject experts, catalogers, archivists, and others who worked with the discipline for improving access to content. After AFAS transitioned to the African American Studies Librarians Interest Group (AASLIG), the African American Subject Funnel Project continued as a working committee that proposes significant changes to LC's application of terms for the African American experience in the United States.

In 2017, Gemmicka Piper (Indiana University Indianapolis) revitalized the Funnel after a period of inactivity. Through the efforts of other past chairs, including Deborah Tomaras (Marist College) and Staci Ross (formerly of the University of Pittsburgh), and the current chairs, Erica Bruchko (Emory University) and Michelle Cronquist (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), the group has grown to include some 30 active members.

The SACO Process

Funnels, including the African American Funnel, function as part of the Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO), which is part of the PCC, a membership-maintained group originally developed by the LC.⁸ The SACO program allows member libraries to submit proposals for new and changed subject headings.⁹

The subject proposal process requires substantial planning, research, and understanding of LCSH's structure. The first step in a subject heading proposal is to identify a work that requires a new subject heading in order to be described accurately. Generally, the proposal will also cite reference works that help to define the concept, demonstrate usage in written works, and give any variant terms. These variant terms will be “see from” references that will allow searchers to find the authorized term. The proposal should also include one or more broader terms that will allow the new heading to fit into the hierarchical structure of LCSH.¹⁰

After the cataloger prepares a proposal, they enter it in the Classification Web proposal system.¹¹ On a monthly basis, LC staff compile these proposed headings into a tentative list that is made public so that library staff and others can write to LC with comments.¹² Taking those comments into consideration, LC staff assess the proposal according to their policies as documented in the Subject Headings Manual and make a decision about whether to accept it as is, make changes, or not accept it.¹³ LC also holds public editorial meetings where some proposals are discussed and attendees can share their opinions.¹⁴ If a proposal is not accepted, it appears in the Summary of Decisions, which explains why it was not accepted or requires further revisions, which may be because of specific policies or may be a judgment call on LC's part.¹⁵ LC maintains final control over what will or will not be included in LCSH. If the heading is accepted, it will be added to LCSH and available for use in catalog records.

Preparing Subject Proposals

An example of a new heading that the African American Subject Funnel proposed is one for the Great Migration, which was a surprising omission from LCSH, in 2021. More general headings like “African Americans—Migrations—History—20th century” and “Migration, Internal—United States—History—20th century” were used for works on this topic instead. In the proposal, Funnel members cited a book about the Great Migration that would require this subject heading in order to be fully and accurately described. The group also cited several reference sources that defined the term and gave some idea of the dates when the migration took place. Unlike most other events, the migration did not have a clear beginning and ending, so the final approved subject heading of “Great Migration, ca. 1914–ca. 1970” reflected the approximate dates of the era found in reference sources.



Figure 1: This updated section of the authority record for the “Great Migration, ca. 1914–ca. 1970” is available via the Library of Congress Authorities Database.

The African American Subject Funnel has also worked to update the language of existing LCSH headings that have become out of date or offensive. The Funnel's first project of this sort was to change "Blacks" to "Black people," as well as "Whites" to "White people" for the sake of consistency with other terms describing ethnic groups. This change came about because of a discussion in a Funnel meeting in which African American members discussed feeling offended and not represented by the outdated heading "Blacks." In order to change an existing LCSH term such as this one, the burden is on the proposer to show why the existing term is problematic and an updated term would be better. The LC does not want to change LCSH terms without a good reason, because thousands of libraries that use LCSH will have to update their catalogs, which is known as bibliographic file maintenance. In this case, the Funnel was able to find dictionaries and style guides that consistently recommended "Black people" in place of "Blacks." After we presented this evidence, LC agreed that a change was warranted. However, the change was not as straightforward as just changing two headings; there were many other LCSH terms that needed to be updated as well, such as "Blacks in art" and "Working class whites." In all, well over 100 records were individually updated by Funnel members.¹⁶

Challenges

Trying to improve LCSH to make it more inclusive can be challenging. This was clear in 2024 when the Funnel proposed a subject heading for "White flight," which was needed to accurately describe works describing the exodus of white people from neighborhoods that were becoming racially integrated. In the proposal, the group cited a book about white flight and several reference sources defining the term. However, the Library of Congress rejected the proposal in May 2024 on the grounds that "LCSH does not currently have an established pattern that combines the topic of migration with the social reasoning for that migration. The meeting was concerned that introducing such a pattern, particularly in this case, would contradict the practice in LCSH of preferring neutral, unbiased terminology."¹⁷ This rejection led to a discussion on the SACOLIST listserv where commenters pointed out that this established pattern does in fact exist in terms like "Amenity migration" and even "Great Migration, ca. 1914–ca. 1970."¹⁸ Funnel members were frustrated by this setback. However, trying to improve LCSH is a long-term project that will not happen overnight. A more than 100-year-old controlled vocabulary has many embedded biases that will take many years to undo.

Conclusion

The pathways to change described above represent one way to improve our systems by working within them. Even as we explore new and promising ways of describing information, LCSH remains the most widely used controlled vocabulary in the world.¹⁹ Libraries continue to rely on LCSH to find materials. This ubiquity is, in part, a major source of librarians' frustration with the system. Librarians who regularly use their libraries' catalogs can't help but feel the vocabulary's inescapable reach and yet feel powerless to make changes to it. We are not, however, beholden to the status quo. Through collective effort and advocacy, we can work to rectify the omissions and inaccurate language present in LCSH. The African American Subject Funnel Project is one clear example of this approach to library description and cataloging practices. From its early years to the present, the group has

improved LCSH “one subject at a time.”²⁰

To participate in the African American Subject Funnel Project, please visit the group’s website at <https://acrl.libguides.com/c.php?g=761433&p=7312552.s>. ❧

Notes

1. This article was developed, in part, from a 2023 ACRL presentation titled, “There’s No Library of Congress Subject Heading for the Middle Passage or the Great Migration? African American Subject Headings and the Remediation of LCSH.” Special thanks to those who attended the panel and offered feedback, as well as to co-presenters Jean Cooper and Deidre Thompson. The authors would also like to thank the following members of the African American Subject Funnel Project who provided comments on this article: Kaylin Blount, Jean Cooper, Edna Foxhall, Staci Ross, Kathy Shields, and Lizzy Walker.

2. Sowande’ M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

3. Interview with Jean L. Cooper, July 12, 2024.

4. The authors recognize that this slow and steady approach to update LC Authorities is just one part of a much larger, distributed effort to make our library systems more equitable.

5. Catherine Smith, “Controlled Vocabularies: Past, Present, and Future” in *Cataloging and Classification*, eds. Gretchen L. Hoffman and Karen Snow (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

6. Dorothy Ann Washington, *Are the Standards Adequate for Organizing African American Studies Resources?* (Washington, DC: Education Resources Documentation Center, 1994), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED413923>.

7. This information was gathered from documents published by the LC in the early 2000s and from the recollections of former Funnel members, and it was collected by former Funnel Coordinator Gemmicka Piper and Glenda Alvin. See also Library of Congress, “AFAS and AASLIG Funnel Project History,” <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/documents/AFAS%20and%20AASLIG%20Funnel%20Project%20History.docx>; Library of Congress, “African American Subject Headings,” <https://www.loc.gov/cds/notices/notafro.html>; Library of Congress, “Subject Headings for Ethnic Groups,” <https://www.loc.gov/aba/cyac/ethnic.html>; Library of Congress, “African American Subject Funnel Project Background Papers,” <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/aframerfun.html>.

8. Library of Congress, “SACO – Subject Authority Cooperative Program,” <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/index.html>; Library of Congress, “Program for Cooperative Cataloging,” <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/>.

9. As stated on the SACO website, “The Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) enables member institutions to submit proposals for additions to Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), Library of Congress Children’s Subject Headings (CYAC), Library of Congress Genre/Form Terms (LCGFT), Library of Congress Demographic Group Terms (LCDGT), Library of Congress Medium of Performance Thesaurus for Music (LCMPT), and Library of Congress Classification (LCC) schedules.” Library of Congress, “SACO.”

10. For definitions of commonly used LCSH terms, see Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science, s.v., “Library of Congress Subject Headings,” <https://odlis.abc-clio>.

com/odlis_1.html#lcshlist.

11. ClassWeb Plus, “Main Menu,” <https://classweb.org/Proposal/>.
12. ClassWeb, “Library of Congress Subject Headings Tentative Monthly Lists,” <https://classweb.org/tentative-subjects/>.
13. Library of Congress, “About the Subject Headings Manual PDF Files,” <https://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeSHM/freeshmabout.html>.
14. Library of Congress, “SACO Calendar,” <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/saco-calendar.html>.
15. Library of Congress, “Summaries of Decisions from Subject Editorial Meetings,” <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/cpsod/cpsodeditorial.html>.
16. For a complete list of subject headings changed, see ClassWeb, “Library of Congress Subject Headings Approved Monthly List,” <https://classweb.org/approved-subjects/2112a.html>.
17. Library of Congress, “Library of Congress Acquisitions and Bibliographic Access Directorate Policy, Training, and Cooperative Programs Division Summary of Decisions,” <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/cpsod/ptcp-2402.pdf>.
18. Library of Congress, “SACOList Archives,” May 29–30, 2024, <https://listserv.loc.gov/cgi-bin/wa?A1=ind2405&L=SACOLIST>.
19. Library of Congress, “Subject and Genre/Form Headings,” <https://www.loc.gov/aba/cataloging/subject/#:-:text=The%20Library%20of%20Congress%20Subject,by%20libraries%20large%20and%20small>.
20. Staci Ross and Michelle Cronquist, “The African American Subject Funnel Project,” in “Decolonizing the Catalog: Anti-Racist Description Practices from Authority Records to Discovery Layers” webinar, ALA Reference and User Services Association, July 7, 2021.