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Sorrow, Fury, Helplessness, and Cynicism: An Account of the Library of Congress Subject Heading "Illegal aliens"

by Jill Baron and Tina Gross

Sometimes, the library community responds to a problem with courage, unity, and clarity of purpose. For example, the violations to patron privacy instituted by Section 215 of the USA Patriot Act in 2001 were met with sustained, outspoken opposition. The American Library Association (ALA) not only passed multiple resolutions and issued press releases, but backed them up with persistent member education and mobilization, and joined with other groups to sue the Justice Department. Many local libraries engaged in tacit civil disobedience by posting signs that said "The FBI has not been here. Watch very closely for the removal of this sign." This advocacy did not go unnoticed. Librarians were heralded in the media as champions for intellectual freedom and the patron's right to privacy.

In other circumstances, the will to advocate for library users (especially in the face of government policy that is causing harm) is less concerted, and even absent. When one looks at what issues inspire unity in the library community, around which there is a near consensus, and what issues mobilize only a segment of that community, it seems that there is a perception that issues of censorship and privacy are core, inviolable, impartial values of the profession, while opposing racism, nativism, and xenophobia in the interest of truly serving all users are seen as subjective, and therefore secondary, concerns. The willingness to rally to protect intellectual freedom might not be motivated by whiteness directly, but rather by a perception of "neutrality" in which whiteness is heavily implicated. To this point we refer to Todd Honma: "All too often the library is viewed as an egalitarian institution providing universal access to information for the general public. However, such idealized visions of a mythic benevolence tend to conveniently gloss over the library's susceptibility in reproducing and perpetuating racist social structures found throughout the rest of society."¹

As two of the librarians involved in the initial and ongoing effort to push for the "Illegal aliens" subject heading change, we puzzle over what the lack of a clear resolution and the long impasse reveals the profession's (in)ability to uphold the core values and code of ethics framed by the

¹ Todd Honma, "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005): 2.

American Library Association.² Indeed, what we see is a “glossing over” of culpability, and a sense that nothing can be done in this political environment. Yet if a patron encounters racist and nativist language among the standard subject descriptors, how are we, as a profession, providing “accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests”? How are we ensuring the “highest level of service” to our users with immigrant backgrounds, especially? By allowing that subject heading to persist, how can we see ourselves as perpetrating anything but a hostile environment?

In this chapter, we will provide an account of the efforts to change the “Illegal aliens” subject heading, from its origins in a research consultation, to its current unresolved status within the Library of Congress. We also seek, through this chapter, to examine our own roles in this story. As two white librarians, how do we work - and fail - within a troubled system? We are inspired by Brown, Ferretti, Leung, and Méndez-Brady’s work, that suggests that [white] librarians not only do racial justice work, but that they “stop for a moment now” and critically reflect on whiteness and the barriers to access that it causes:

“In our attempt to further an honest dialogue about the barriers we face as women of color, we ask our readers to stop for a moment now; reflect, have an internal dialogue about the ways in which they may unintentionally perpetuate whiteness and vocational awe, and encourage problematic norms that continue to marginalize us.”³

There is an uncomfortable contradiction between considering the impact of whiteness and vocational awe in a book chapter (which is very different from having “an internal dialogue”) and trying to refrain from centering ourselves. Yet given our involvement in this subject heading change, we feel it’s incumbent upon us to reflect on the ways that whiteness has pervaded this issue in the profession as a whole, and in our own roles. As such, inspired by Brown et al’s example, we wish to tell this story in a way that integrates both personal reflection and third-person narration, in order to be real with the reader about where we are coming from.⁴ Our desire is to focus on the story of one small fragment of the fight for racial justice in the library, without losing sight of the following problem: that white librarians - which includes us - by and large do not do enough to address issues of racism and racial inequality in the library, because white librarians do not experience them.

² American Library Association, “ALA Policy Manual, B.1 Core Values, Ethics, and Core Competencies (Old Number 40),” accessed August 10, 2019, <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/policymanual/updatedpolicymanual/section2/40corevalues>.

³ Jennifer Brown, Jennifer A. Ferretti, Sofia Leung, and Marisa Méndez-Brady, “We Here: Speaking Our Truth,” *Library Trends* 67, no. 1 (2018): 166.

⁴ Brown et. al set forth an intentionality concerning their writing tone and style that “attempt(s) to resist the white-centered norms of scholarly writing styles that demand a distanced perspective.” 164.

* * * * *

“‘Why do you have to make it about race?’ We have to make it about race because whiteness dominates this profession: it’s the way it’s always been. It’s easy to ignore racism if you’re a member of the dominant race.”⁵

Jill: To me, the story of the effort behind the “Illegal aliens” subject heading change begins with an encounter. A difficult encounter, that was the source of what came next. Melissa, a first-year student, met with me for help with research in the winter of 2014. Melissa was doing an independent study on undocumented youth organizing. I had previously met Melissa during an instruction session I had given to her first-year writing class. She had stayed after the class ended to ask me a question, and this led to her contacting me some days later. I was impressed that she sought me out for a one-on-one appointment, and was interested in her topic, although I did not know a lot about this social movement.

During her visit, we sat together at my desk. I typed some variation on the terms “undocumented students” into the search box of the library catalog. As we looked at the catalog record for a book, I pointed out the subject headings assigned to it, to show how Melissa might use the headings to find similar sources. This was usually a moment I relished during any research consultation. It awarded me the opportunity as a librarian to draw back the curtain on the undergirding of library organization: a self-congratulatory, vocational ooh-ing and ahh-ing moment as much as a way of effectively teaching a functional tool. With Melissa, however, my pointing out the subject heading did not produce the desired result. While I continued to show sources cataloged with “Illegal aliens,” Melissa remained silent. When I turned to face her, to ask if everything was alright, she asked, “why are you using those words? The I-word?” It took me a moment to recognize that she was talking about the wording of the subject heading. Her question - and my delayed response - stuck with me for a long time.

What I had failed to do, when pointing out the subject heading, was to notice. I did not consider what the words “Illegal aliens” convey, or what they might mean to Melissa. In that moment, it did not matter to me very much what the words were; the subject heading was a link in the research chain that I was following to more and potentially better sources on the topic. I knew that the Library of Congress Subject Headings were plagued by outdated, inadequate, or even inaccurate language. But on a personal level, the words did not affect me, did not relate to my personal, lived, experience, and so I did not even pause to consider the harm they might inflict

⁵ Brown, Ferretti, Leung, and Méndez-Brady, “We Here: Speaking our Truth,” 172.

on others. Rather than pause, note, and reflect on the insidious power of those words, I accepted them as-is, as good enough, as simply a means to an end in my consumerist approach to research.

Melissa could have walked away from this uncomfortable interaction and never said anything, disillusioned with the library. Instead, rooted in an ethic of activism, she rallied her peers to demand a change in the terms the library used to describe materials about undocumented immigrants. By listening to Melissa, and taking her concerns seriously, I reoriented my professional practice.

* * * * *

Melissa Padilla, a first-year student at Dartmouth College, took note of the “Illegal aliens” subject heading during a research consultation with librarian Jill Baron in the winter of 2014. After this meeting, Padilla relayed her frustrations to her peers in the newly-founded student group focusing on immigrant rights, the Coalition for Immigration Reform, Equality and DREAMers (CoFIREd), led by fellow first-year student Óscar Rubén Cornejo Cásares and Eduardo Nájera, a senior. From this moment forward, a series of actions, spurred by Dartmouth students and later sustained by librarians across the United States, forced the Library of Congress to examine this choice of language and produce alternative nomenclature. While this was not the first time that someone had taken notice of this particular instance of offensive language in LCSH,⁶ Dartmouth was the first library to submit a subject heading change proposal to the Library of Congress, through its participation in the Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO).

Members of CoFIREd shared in Padilla’s dismay, and agreed that something needed to be done to correct the use of this language in their college library. Incidentally, one of CoFIREd’s initial goals as an organization was to carry out local programming inspired by the national “Drop the I-Word” campaign, which urges news organizations and others to use the word “undocumented” instead of “illegal.” “Drop the I-Word” provided organizations and communities with a toolkit, and CoFIREd was busy that winter term planning some of the recommended activities. Yet Padilla’s encounter with the Library of Congress subject heading “Illegal aliens” offered an unexpected and concrete action for CoFIREd to take locally.

⁶ The subject heading “Aliens, Illegal” was first established by LC in 1980 and changed to “Illegal aliens” in 1993. The alternative subject heading “Undocumented workers” was established by Hennepin County Library in early 1981.

Around that same time, CoFIREd was invited by members of other marginalized groups at Dartmouth to contribute to a collective document called “The Freedom Budget,” a list of suggested reforms to academics, residential and social life. In addition to recommending increased resources and a better support infrastructure for undocumented students, CoFIREd included a demand, in the “Miscellaneous” section of the document, that read ““The library search catalog system shall use undocumented instead of “illegal” in reference to immigrants.” The Freedom Budget was published online and linked to from a front-page article in the college newspaper, *The Dartmouth*.⁷ On the day it was published, librarians at Dartmouth took note of the demand directed toward the library, with both a sense of wonder (how incredible that these students even noticed the subject headings, good for them for speaking up!) if perhaps also with a hint of condescension (don’t these students know we don’t control these headings?)

When CoFIREd’s faculty advisor Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera suggested to Baron that she meet with the students to discuss their concerns, Baron agreed, inviting her colleague Amy Witzel to join her. When they met with the students, the two librarians explained the context for the library’s participation in the Library of Congress’ cataloging and classification systems, and how the language used in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) was largely controlled by the Library of Congress. In other words, while wanting to express solidarity, the two librarians assumed that the conversation would end with a simple explanation of the Dartmouth Library’s lack of culpability in the use of this pejorative language. The students, however, were not convinced by this argument, and insisted that something needed to be done. Baron and Witzel contacted cataloging and metadata librarian John DeSantis and the library’s administration in order to inquire about possible next steps, express the students’ concern, and insist on a response commensurate with the students’ demand.

The associate university librarian for collections at the time, Eliz Kirk, responded with an idea: the Dartmouth Library, through its participation in SACO, would propose to the Library of Congress a new subject heading to replace “Illegal aliens,” but only if the CoFIREd students joined the library in compiling the evidence to back up the proposed new heading. The resulting team consisted of Dartmouth librarians, students, and their faculty advisors. They contributed to a shared document of sources, ranging from news reports to academic papers, that indicated that “Illegal aliens” had been replaced by “Undocumented immigrants” in the mainstream media and academic discourse. DeSantis submitted a proposal to change the subject heading “Illegal aliens” in June 2014 and was confident that colleagues in the Library of Congress would

⁷ Priya Ramaiah, “Students Collaborate in ‘Freedom Budget’ to Demand Change,” *The Dartmouth*, February 24, 2014, <https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2014/02/students-collaborate-in-freedom-budget-to-demand-change>.

approve this change. However, by December, the response from the Library of Congress, indicated otherwise:

This proposal was made to change the wording of the existing heading **Illegal aliens** to *Undocumented immigrants*. **Illegal aliens** is an inherently legal heading, and as such the preference is to use the legal terminology. The U.S. Code, Title 8, Aliens and Nationality, uses the terminology “illegal aliens.” In addition, the 9th edition of *Black's Law Dictionary* includes the headword “illegal alien” with a cross-reference from “undocumented alien.” The *Legislative Indexing Vocabulary* used by the Congressional Research Service follows suit by authorizing the heading “Illegal aliens,” with a reference from “Undocumented aliens.” The meeting also notes that in some legal systems, a person may be an undocumented alien without being in a jurisdiction illegally; general works on undocumented legal aliens are covered by the heading **Aliens**. Finally, **Immigrants** – the proposed broader term for the revised heading – is not an inherently legal heading. Mixing an inherently legal concept with one that is not inherently legal leads to problems with the structure and maintenance of LCSH, and makes assignment of headings difficult.

All of the above argue against revising the heading. A UF *Undocumented aliens* was added to the record in 1993 to provide additional access, and reflects the fact that the common terminology is fluid.

The proposals were not approved.⁸

In early January 2015, DeSantis relayed the news of LC’s decision to the group of students and librarians that had contributed to the subject heading change proposal: “I am sorry to start off the New Year with disappointing news, but I did want to report that our petition to the Library of Congress was not successful.”⁹ In an email response, Oscar Cornejo shared his frustration, and invited the group to meet again in person to discuss the matter further and consider next steps. Whereas Baron, Witzel, and DeSantis viewed the decision as a final blow to the effort, with no opportunity or avenue within SACO for recourse or appeal, the students were determined to continue fighting. Among their ideas was encouraging peer groups in colleges and universities to send in petitions of their own, in collaboration with librarians, to show the extent to which the desire to “Drop the I-Word” in the LCSH was widespread.

⁸ Library of Congress, Policy and Standards Division, “Summary of Decisions, Editorial Meeting Number 12,” December 15, 2014, <http://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/cpsod/psd-141215.html>.

⁹ John DeSantis, e-mail message to Jill Baron et al., January 5, 2015.

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“Collectively, we must kick the habit of racism, cultural dominance, and the upholding of oppressive systems. More poignantly, our challenge, our responsibility, our deep resounding call is to be at the forefront of this overdue evolutionary thrust forward. Why? Because we choose to position ourselves as the standard-bearers of an ethical high ground. And we have the tools and the teachings to do so.

There is no neutral.”¹⁰

Tina: When I first learned about the Dartmouth students raising the issue and working with librarians to make a proposal to LC, I was amazed. For people who aren't librarians to be not only drawing attention to a problematic subject heading, but to be actively working to change it, was unexpected and inspiring.

As a cataloger, I had long been keenly aware of problems with controlled vocabulary in general, and LCSH in particular. I understood that the practice of designating one term to represent a concept has inherent problems and limitations, even if changes in language and usage are tackled quickly and continuously. For many years, I had offered an instruction session on subject headings that attempted to fuse an explanation of the pitfalls with a demonstration of the essential function--addressing the ambiguity of language (and its abundance of synonyms, homographs, and polysemes) by facilitating searches for actual concepts and not just character strings. Examples that I used to illustrate both the necessity of subject headings and the impossibility of making a flawless, "neutral" choice when designating a term as a subject heading included "Indians of North America," "East Indians," "Older people," and "Sexual minorities." I talked about the progression from "Negroes" to "Afro-Americans" to "African Americans," and from "Cripples" to "Handicapped" to "People with disabilities."

In my own cataloging work, I endeavored to make resources easy to find while trying to avoid doing harm. (Using LCSH often made this a challenge.) However, my efforts to wrangle with problems presented by LCSH had never gone beyond what I did at my own job. I had known about the "Illegal aliens" subject heading for years and thought it was awful. I knew about the "Drop the I-Word" campaign--that's how I first came upon the news about the students and the subject heading. But I had never considered trying to get the Library of Congress to change it.

¹⁰ Angel Kyodo Williams, Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016), xxvi.

It was the Dartmouth students' outspokenness and determination, their insistence that the subject heading simply had to be changed, that snapped me out of my resignation and passivity. They made me feel the urgency that Library of Congress was lacking in simply rejecting the Dartmouth SACO proposal and considering the matter closed. It should be obvious that having a racial slur as the subject heading for a group of people cannot be tolerated.

Having just been appointed to the Subject Analysis Committee gave me a clear direction, and I wonder what I would have done otherwise. Would I still have emailed John DeSantis at Dartmouth and made a connection with folks there I have worked with since? Maybe not. But it turned out that going to SAC wasn't actually the thing that had the biggest effect, or that actually prompted LC to shift from its original position. It seems that was the ALA Council resolution, which perhaps I could have done without being in SAC. (Maybe I couldn't have gotten SAC's support without being a member and having already introduced the issue. But the resolution might have passed anyway, it's hard to say.)

Either way, the crucial factor was a group of library users not only asserting that one of those problems that catalogers all know about and perpetually regret was making them feel unwelcome and hurting them, but demanding that we do something about it. This is one of the ways in which protest matters—it convinces people of the seriousness of a problem, it puts human faces on abstract problems, it draws people into action.

* * * * *

In June of 2015, Tina Gross, cataloging and metadata librarian at St. Cloud State University in central Minnesota, contacted John DeSantis after reading about the CoFIREd students' efforts and the rejected SACO proposal. She had just been appointed to the Subject Analysis Committee (commonly referred to as "SAC"), a subgroup within the American Library Association¹¹ responsible for studying and making recommendations related to subject access, with an emphasis on classification and controlled vocabularies such as LCSH. Since its purview includes giving feedback and suggestions to LIBRARY OF CONGRESS about subject headings, SAC seemed like the body best positioned to urge the Library of Congress to reconsider its decision to keep using "Illegal aliens." Raising the question in the Subject Analysis Committee over the course of several meetings eventually led to the group voting to form a working group to study the issue and submit a report.

¹¹ A committee of the Cataloging and Metadata Management Section (CaMMS), within ALA's Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS) division.

However, getting to that point was a challenge. While that process was still ongoing, Gross began to explore other ways to bring attention to the issue and to confer with other concerned librarians, including Sanford Berman, a retired librarian who has been a leading critic of bias and prejudice in LCSH for decades. The idea that proved to be the most consequential was to propose a resolution to be voted on by the ALA Council, the governing body of ALA, which regularly passes resolutions on matters related to libraries.

With feedback from Berman and others, Gross wrote the following resolution:

Resolution on Replacing the Library of Congress Subject Heading "Illegal Aliens" with "Undocumented Immigrants"

Whereas the terms "illegal" and "alien," when used in reference to people, have undergone pejoration and acquired derogatory connotations, becoming increasingly associated with nativist and racist sentiments;

Whereas the appropriateness of the word "alien" as a legal term is being questioned, with the New York Times Editorial Board calling for it to be retired and the state of California passing SB 432 to remove it from the state's labor code;

Whereas referring to undocumented immigrants as "illegal" is increasingly viewed as dehumanizing, offensive, inflammatory, and even a racial slur;

Whereas a national campaigns such as "Drop the I-Word" and #WordsMatter are urging news media to stop using the word "illegal" to describe immigrants;

Whereas many news organizations have committed to not using the word "illegal" to describe immigrants, including the Associated Press, USA Today, ABC, The Chicago Tribune, and the LA Times;

Whereas college students have petitioned the Library of Congress to retire the subject heading Illegal aliens;

Whereas there is no explicit mandate from Congress that LIBRARY OF CONGRESS must follow the U.S. Code terminology in this matter;

Whereas the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) Thesaurus and MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) both use the term Undocumented immigrants, and both are produced by federal government agencies;

Whereas the ALA Policy B.3 (Diversity) states that "ALA recognizes the critical need for access to library and information resources, services, and technologies by all people, especially those who may experience... discrimination on the basis of appearance, ethnicity, immigrant status...;" and

Whereas the ALA Policy B.1.1 (Core Values of Librarianship) states that all library users should receive "accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests;" now, therefore, be it

Resolved, that the American Library Association, on behalf of its members:

urges the Library of Congress to change the subject heading *Illegal aliens* to *Undocumented immigrants*.

Gross brought copies of the resolution to the ALA 2016 Midwinter meeting in Boston and began sharing it with relevant groups with the intention of garnering support to officially propose it at a future meeting. It became evident that support for such a resolution was already substantial, and so the Social Responsibilities Round Table decided to bring it forward for consideration by ALA council immediately. It passed (nearly unanimously, according to attendees live-Tweeting the meeting)¹² on January 12, 2016.¹³ This resolution meant that the American Library Association's official position was that the LCSH "Illegal aliens" should be changed, even if the resolution had no power to compel the Library of Congress to change the heading or even to respond to the resolution.

As such, it came as a surprise when the Library of Congress announced on March 22, 2016 that it would discontinue "Illegal aliens," replacing it with "Noncitizens" and "Unauthorized immigration." While the decision was widely celebrated, many librarians were concerned that

¹² @silent_d, "CD#34 passes near unanimously. #alamw16 #alacouncil," Twitter, January 12, 2016, 9:08 a.m., https://twitter.com/silent_d/status/686927737353797634.

@laurenpressley, "And CD #34 passed—nearly unanimously! #alacouncil #alamw16," Twitter, January 12, 2016, 9:08 a.m., <https://twitter.com/laurenpressley/status/686927832791052292>.

¹³ ALA Council, "Resolution on Replacing the Library of Congress Subject Heading 'Illegal Aliens' with 'Undocumented Immigrants,'" adopted January 12, 2016, http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council_documents/2016_mw_council_documents/cd_34_Resol_on_LC_Headings_11216_FINAL.pdf.

replacing "Illegal aliens" with a combination of two subject headings would make resources on the subject more difficult to find, especially since both of the new terms were less familiar and were not likely to be employed by library users unless they had received special instructions. In the eyes of many catalogers, the announced change would address the problem of a pejorative term used in a subject heading, but presented an additional problem because the replacement terms would not effectively facilitate access.

The CoFIREd students and the Dartmouth librarians were elated by this news, if perhaps surprised that the Library of Congress had decided to reverse its earlier decision "in response to constituent requests."¹⁴ Cornejo and others felt that the choice of terms "Noncitizens" and "Unauthorized immigration" were not preferred, but they nevertheless accepted them as an improvement over "Illegal aliens." DeSantis wrote a post for the Dartmouth Library blog,¹⁵ and a few days later both the student newspaper *The Dartmouth* and the *Dartmouth News* (the College's communication outlet) produced stories celebrating the change.¹⁶¹⁷ The students and librarians shared the news over social media, and within a week, Fox News Latino, Univisión, NBC, CNN, and many other national news outlets had picked up the story. While many accounts reported the Library of Congress' decision to change the subject heading and remove the term "Illegal aliens" without critique, it was not long before the far-right, conservative media weighed in. On March 31, 2016, the backlash against the subject heading change began in full force, with articles from the *Dartmouth Review* "Library of Congress Succumbs to 'I-Word' Protesters"¹⁸; *WorldNetDaily.com* "A government of laws and not of elitist student bodies"¹⁹; the *Gateway Pundit* "Library of Congress to Eliminate Terms 'Aliens' and 'Illegal Aliens' – It's Too Offensive."²⁰ Before long, Alex Jones' *Info Wars* joined in this chorus with their fervent

¹⁴ Library of Congress, Policy and Standards Division, "Library of Congress to Cancel the Subject Heading 'Illegal Aliens,'" March 22, 2016, <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsol/illegal-aliens-decision.pdf>.

¹⁵ John DeSantis, "Library of Congress to Remove the Subject Heading 'Illegal Aliens,'" *Library Muse* blog, March 25, 2016, <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/library/2016/03/25/library-of-congress-to-remove-the-subject-heading-illegal-aliens/>.

¹⁶ Sonia Qin, "Library of Congress to replace term 'illegal aliens,'" *The Dartmouth*, March 28, 2016, <http://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2016/03/library-of-congress-to-replace-term-illegal-aliens/>.

¹⁷ Charlotte E. Albright, "Students Persuade Library of Congress to Drop the I-Word," *Dartmouth News*, March 29, 2016, <https://news.dartmouth.edu/news/2016/03/students-persuade-library-congress-drop-i-word>.

¹⁸ Charles C.W. Jang, "Library of Congress Succumbs to 'I-Word' Protesters," *The Dartmouth Review* (blog), March 31, 2016, <http://www.dartreview.com/library-of-congress-succumbs-to-i-word-protesters/>.

¹⁹ Alan Keyes, "A Government of Laws and Not of Elitist Student Bodies," *WND*, March 31, 2016, <https://www.wnd.com/2016/03/a-government-of-laws-and-not-of-elitist-student-bodies/>

²⁰ Jim Hoft, "Library of Congress to Eliminate Terms 'Aliens' and 'Illegal Aliens' - It's Too Offensive," *The Gateway Pundit*, April 1, 2016, <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2016/03/library-congress-eliminate-terms-aliens-illegal-aliens/>.

brand of anti-immigrant sentiment,²¹ citing comments from the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a conservative advocacy group: “It’s giving in to political correctness [...] ‘Illegal alien’ is a proper legal term.”²²

It was unexpected, and even startling, to see the news of the subject heading change appear in the national media. CoFIRE students received widespread praise for their efforts advocating for change, but also had to endure abusive comments on their Facebook page and in the comments section of media reports. What was truly shocking, however, was the emergence of the issue on Capitol Hill. Later in April 2016, Representative Diane Black, a Republican lawmaker from Tennessee, introduced the HR 4926, or the “Stopping Partisan Policy at the Library of Congress Act.” This one-sentence long bill, with 35 Republican cosponsors, would “direct the Librarian of Congress to retain the headings ‘Aliens’ and ‘Illegal Aliens’ in the Library of Congress Subject Headings.”²³ The Blaze TV, featuring Tomi Lahren, featured Diane Black as a guest to discuss this issue, and Black wrote a piece for Breitbart.com in which she described her bill as “legislation preventing the Library of Congress from capitulating to hyper-political correctness.”²⁴

A few weeks later, a letter signed by Senators Ted Cruz (R-TX), Jeff Sessions (R-AL), and Lamar Alexander (R-TN), and Representative John Culberson (R-TX), directed to Acting Librarian of Congress David S. Mao, urged Mao to “revoke these subject heading cancellations.” They insisted that removing the term “Illegal aliens” would be too burdensome the Library to carry out, and without that term, researchers would struggle to find materials. Then, within a week, a further development occurred which was truly unprecedented in the history of the LCSH: Republican members of the House Appropriations Committee, led by Tom Graves (R-GA), introduced language into the Legislative Branch FY17 spending bill that would limit the Library of Congress’ ability to use language in its subject headings that deviated from that found in the legal code. Democrats on the committee, led by ranking member Debbie Wasserman-Schultz (D-FL), condemned the insertion of this language into the spending bill, and offered an amendment to strike the language, yet the amendment did not pass by a narrow margin 24-25

²¹ Mark Tapson, “Library of Congress Abandons ‘Offensive’ Term ‘Illegal Alien,’” InfoWars, April 5, 2016, <https://www.infowars.com/library-of-congress-abandons-offensive-term-illegal-alien/>.

²² Steve Padilla and Selene Rivera, “Library of Congress to Stop Using Term ‘Illegal Alien,’” Los Angeles Times, April 3, 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-library-congress-alien-20160403-story.html>.

²³ U.S. Congress, House, Stopping Partisan Policy at the Library of Congress Act, HR 4926, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., introduced in House April 13, 2016, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/4926>.

²⁴ Diane Black, “Library of Congress Immigration Name Game: Political Correctness at Its Worst,” Breitbart, April 21, 2016, <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2016/04/21/library-of-congress-immigration-name-game-political-correctness-at-its-worst/>.

vote.²⁵ The House passed the spending bill, despite the motion to recommit put forth by Joaquin Castro (D-TX) and Wasserman-Schultz. The end result of this particular Congressional interference was the following provision in the House version of the spending bill: "To the extent practicable, the Committee instructs the Library to maintain certain subject headings that reflect terminology used in title 8, United States Code."²⁶ The specific reference to Title 8, rather than the entire U.S. Code, is telling. Less than a week before the addition of this provision, on May 20, 2016, Obama signed a bill into law removing the terms "negro" and "oriental" from another part of the U.S. Code.²⁷ ("Negro" was discontinued as a Library of Congress subject heading in 1975.)²⁸

The bill introduced by Diane Black did not pass, and the provision added to the House spending bill to "maintain certain subject headings" was not present in the final FY2017 Omnibus Bill. Amid all the pressure, however, the Library of Congress announced on May 20, 2016 that rather than go ahead with the change as previously announced, it would solicit public feedback via a survey (through July 20) and study the issue further.

In order to have its research and recommendations included in this process, the SAC Working Group on the Library of Congress subject heading "Illegal aliens" submitted its report in July 2016.²⁹ Since the Library of Congress had already agreed that "the phrase illegal aliens has become pejorative" in its March 22 announcement, the working group did not focus on establishing this, but instead addressed what alternative subject heading(s) should replace it. The report concurred, with some reservations, with the Library of Congress decision to change the subject heading "Aliens" to "Noncitizens," but recommended that "Illegal aliens" be replaced with "Undocumented immigrants" where appropriate. (In cases where the subject heading "Illegal aliens" has been assigned to works about non-immigrants, it recommended that more specific terms be assigned.)

After a deadline extension, the Library of Congress' survey closed on September 20, 2016. Librarians from the Policy and Standards Division within the Library of Congress submitted a

²⁵ Ida A. Brudnick, "Legislative Branch: FY2017 Appropriations," *Congressional Research Service*, June 13, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44515.pdf>.

²⁶ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, Legislative Branch Appropriations Bill, 2017: Report (to Accompany H.R. 5325), 114th Cong., 2d sess., 2016, H. Rep. 114-594, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/114th-congress/house-report/594/1>.

²⁷ Madison Park, "U.S. government to stop using these words to refer to minorities," *CNN*, May 22, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/22/politics/obama-federal-law-minorities-references/index.html>.

²⁸ New York Times Editorial Board, "A Fight Over 'Aliens,'" *New York Times*, June 20, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/20/opinion/a-fight-over-aliens.html>.

²⁹ Subject Analysis Committee Working Group on the LCSH "Illegal aliens," "Report from the SAC Working Group on the LCSH 'Illegal aliens,'" July 13, 2016, <https://alair.ala.org/handle/11213/9261>.

recommendation to the Library of Congress management by the summer of 2017.³⁰ As of this writing, this recommendation has not been shared with the public. Two years have passed and the Library of Congress has made no further announcements about what will happen with the subject heading "Illegal aliens," and it remains in use.

Ever since, libraries have been contemplating whether to wait for the Library of Congress to carry out the change or to attempt to implement changes in their local catalogs. As Sanford Berman wrote in an unpublished letter to *American Libraries* urging libraries to do the latter, "We can wallow in a mix of sorrow, fury, helplessness, and cynicism at the Congressional interference or we can exert our own professional autonomy, expertise, social commitment, and initiative to do what is right and helpful even if Library of Congress itself can't or won't (or does so awkwardly and ineffectually)."³¹

Several libraries have either replaced the Library of Congress subject heading with a local subject heading or a heading from another controlled vocabulary, or left the Library of Congress subject heading in their catalog but added an additional heading so that users can search and access resources on the subject without having to perform a search for "Illegal aliens." The first libraries to implement a local approach include Dayton Memorial Library at Regis University, CU Boulder Libraries, Bard College Libraries, Williamsburg Regional Library, and Yale University Library.

Since sharing the Report from the SAC Working Group on the Library of Congress subject heading "Illegal aliens" with the Library of Congress, the Subject Analysis Committee has requested an update on the status of the heading and the Library of Congress' response to the report's recommendations. Thus far, the Library of Congress has not made an official response but has indicated informally that they are continuing to discuss the matter internally and with members of Congress.

At the ALA 2019 Annual Conference in June of 2019, rather than continue to wait for a response from the Library of Congress, the Subject Analysis Committee voted to form a new working group to explore and compile methods that individual libraries or consortia could use to change the heading in their own catalogs. One reason that so few libraries have tried to remove the Library of Congress subject heading "Illegal aliens" from their catalogs locally is that automated

³⁰ Minutes of the ALCTS Subject Analysis Committee 2017 Annual Meeting, Sunday, June 25, 2017, accessed August 10, 2019, <https://connect.ala.org/alcts/viewdocument/annual-2017-minutes-final?CommunityKey=5ebcb3ff-bc70-41c3-97fd-8af46d791542&tab=librarydocuments> (login credentials for ALA Connect required to access).

³¹ Sanford Berman and Tina Gross, "Expand, Humanize, Simplify: An Interview with Sandy Berman," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 55, no. 6 (2017): 352.

subject heading maintenance functionality in library catalog systems varies widely and can be extremely complex. Many libraries do not control their online catalog's authority data or are parts of consortia that share both an online catalog and authority file. In order to help libraries overcome these obstacles, the new SAC working group will gather information on the methods needed to carry out such changes in each major integrated library system, and collect step-by-step procedures that libraries have used and make them widely available.

For an ALA committee to encourage libraries to go ahead with such changes independent of the Library of Congress, and to help them to do so, is significant. However, it is still imperative that the Library of Congress subject heading be changed, because many libraries simply do not have the staff or resources to do it on their own. Until the subject heading “Illegal aliens” is officially replaced by the Library of Congress, library users across the country will continue to be subjected to it.

* * * * *

Tina: It's not as if the battle with passivity and resignation is over—there has been a two-year lull while we accept, and even perpetuate, the excuse that the Library of Congress cannot act because doing so would be risky in the current political climate. It's the same political climate in which the dehumanization and scapegoating of undocumented immigrants keeps intensifying. Belligerent insistence on calling people "illegal" is part of the racist, white supremacist agenda that is being advanced, and it is horrifying to realize that the library community is (unwittingly?) complicit in this and continues to contribute in a small way to producing the climate that makes the abuses that are occurring possible. We as a profession have to do better.

Thankfully, while passivity and resignation are communicable—they spread, they pull more and more people in—the example of the Dartmouth students shows that boldness, resolve, and taking action are too.

Jill: After the Library of Congress announced the subject heading change in March 2016, I started posting news articles about it on Facebook. I was proud of our work, and I wanted to communicate the impact of this subject heading. As the backlash grew, it became clear that the subject heading was now a flashpoint in the larger nationwide immigration debate.

The media attention inspired me to interview the students, librarians, and faculty members involved in the effort. After Donald Trump was elected, and the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) came under threat, I needed to do more with this material. I approached Óscar and Melissa about making a short film about the subject heading change story. They did not

need much convincing. I also approached Sawyer Bradley, a colleague of mine in the college's media production unit. He was familiar with the story and quite nuanced in his read of its larger significance. All together, we made a film, Change the Subject. What we originally planned to be a 15-minute piece eventually transformed into a feature-length, 55-minute documentary, that foregrounds Óscar and Melissa's perspectives.

The film was produced collaboratively by me, Sawyer, Óscar, and Melissa, with significant participation from Estéfani Marin, Eduardo Nájera, Tina Gross, John DeSantis, Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera, Claudia (Anguiano) Evans-Zepeda, and Representatives Debbie Wasserman-Schultz and Joaquín Castro. And it could not have happened otherwise. Working together on the film was consistent with our community approach to changing the subject heading. No one person could reliably depict the series of events, much less Óscar and Melissa's perspectives, without everyone's collaboration, and all of the conversation, disagreement, and open-hearted exchange that came with it.

That meeting with Melissa – and everything that came next, helped me to understand what was meaningful – and urgent – about library work. The film was not a redemption piece, but a means of making visible a moment in time in which a community of individuals came together to fight an expression of racism, nativism, and xenophobia in the library. For this community, this was not a secondary concern, but central to what it means for us to serve and provide access to all users regardless of immigration status. Like Sandy Berman says, we may wallow in a mix of sorrow, fury, helplessness, and cynicism, or we can do something to assert what's right. I hope that as a community, we will.

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