

Queering the Library: Naming the Subject Is an Act of Power

Margaret Breidenbaugh



"We didn't know at the time that we were questioning our gender. We just knew that this felt right. There wasn't all this terminology, all this labeling—you know what I mean?"

Major

In her 1998 oral history interview, a Black transgender woman known as "Major" recounted her experience of 1950s "queen" culture in Chicago. The word "transgender" was not in common use until the 1970s, but Major's testimony demonstrates that queer people have long known that we do not conform to societal norms. (*A note on positionality: I say "we" because I identify as queer; I am a White, cisgender, pansexual, polyromantic person.*)

Major's testimony demonstrates a broader set of issues in the queer community: what do we call ourselves, what should others call us, and who decides which, if any, terms are authoritative? How do we as a society respond to changes in what terminology is acceptable? Many people are surprised to learn that the information profession also has a contentious history when it comes to what to call queer people.

Queer in the Library

Imagine you could travel back in time to look for resources about queer people in library catalogs. Until the late 1970s, if you wanted to find information about homosexuality, you would have to have used the search term "Sexual perversion." Prior to mid-2016, any library catalog searches for "asexuality" would only have led you to resources about asexual reproduction in plants. Queer or not, the central problem remains that no person wants to be pathologized as perverse or classified as non-human.

Why do we need appropriate library catalog terminology, and who comes up with it? The formal terms that librarians use to describe resources (e.g., books, films) are called subject headings, which collectively make up controlled vocabularies. The most widely used such vocabulary is LCSH, short for Library of Congress Subject Headings. First published in 1909, LCSH governs how users find information in library catalogs the world over, and no wonder: subject searches optimize the research phase by collocating all materials on a given subject. For example, a subject search for "structural engineering" retrieves electronic records for every item in a given catalog *about* structural engineering, even if the book is *titled* something seemingly unrelated like "A Bridge to Nowhere." But for all of its benefits, LCSH is a product of bias, rooted in time and place, rife with outdated, exclusionary terms. People are not bridges, and the fight for accurate and respectful representation of queer people in the library catalog is far from over.

Critical Cataloging Then and Now

The so-called critical cataloging movement emerged in the 1970s in direct response to problematic terminology in LCSH. Sanford Berman's *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Headings Concerning People* (1971), was foundational to this movement:

[The Library of Congress] list can only 'satisfy' parochial, jingoistic Europeans and North Americans, white-hued, at least nominally Christian (and preferably Protestant) in faith, comfortably situated in the middle- and higher-income brackets, largely domiciled in suburbia, fundamentally loyal to the Established Order, and heavily imbued with the transcendent, incomparable glory of Western civilization.

While Berman advocated for changes to formal knowledge organization systems like LCSH, calling out the biases and power belonging to catalogers in dominant cultures. Others took additional steps and created alternative systems such as the *Homosaurus* ("an international LGBTQ+ linked data vocabulary") to de-center cis- and heteronormativity in cataloging. Both approaches have value, and librarians working in alternative and formal systems should collaborate to improve queer representation in subject headings. In 2022, we created a community to do just that.

Collaborative Activism: The Gender and Sexuality SACO Funnel

In June 2022, during a virtual cataloging meeting, I heard Michelle Cronquist (she/her), Special Collections Cataloger at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Staci Ross (she/her), Cataloging/Metadata Librarian at the University of Pittsburgh, talk about co-chairing a group called the *African American SACO Funnel*. SACO stands for the *Subject Authority Cooperative Program*, a Library of Congress initiative that encourages catalogers to "funnel" their expertise into suggesting changes to LCSH. You do not have to pay anything to become a funnel, and any number of libraries may combine their resources, time, and energies into completely autonomous projects. As I listened to Cronquist and Ross talk about their successful petition to the Library of Congress to change "Blacks" to "Black people," I wondered if other historically marginalized groups had their own funnels. Maya Espersen (she/they), Cataloging Coordinator at Aurora (Colorado) Public Library, shared in this curiosity, noting in the meeting chat that there was not a queer funnel. I jumped into action.

Within two weeks, I had organized a virtual meeting of thirty-six attendees, and I began consulting with Cronquist, Violet Fox of the *Cataloging Lab*, *Homosaurus* Editorial Board Member B. M. Watson, and others about their work. Today our mailing list has grown to include some sixty librarians across Canada and the United States. Collectively we are the Gender and Sexuality SACO Funnel, and our co-chairs are myself, Espersen, and Adam

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funnel proposals) and a proposal to change the dehumanizing heading "Gays" to the more humanizing "Gay people" (a massive undertaking affecting hundreds of subject headings).

Conclusion

Library subject headings are here for the foreseeable future, but it must reflect humanizing language that challenges the pathologizing of queer communities. Controlled vocabulary, while allowing users to identify multiple resources for one subject, reflects a monolithic, cis- and hetero-normative point of view. As long as LCSH dominates library catalogs, librarians interested in queer representation must collaborate across formal and alternative knowledge organization systems to advocate for corrections, deletions, and additions, keeping in mind that today's correction might be tomorrow's pejorative. The work is never finished, and we keep fighting.

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