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Antiracism in the catalog

An analysis of records

As people seek to learn more about race, bookstores have begun selling out of books on antiracism.¹ These titles are, of course, also available in libraries, but can be difficult to locate in the catalog. Patrons will be able to *find* them through known title searches, but the catalog should go beyond this.

The first user task in the “Library Reference Model” is to *find*, defined as “to bring together information about one or more resources of interest by searching on any relevant criteria.”² Ideally, a patron should be able to search terms such as *racism* or *antiracism* in the library’s catalog and find a comprehensive list of titles on the topic or start with a known title and find other, related works. However, catalog records often fall short due to lack of appropriate keywords or subject headings. When a patron is ready to move beyond recommended reading lists and discover new books, will the library catalog aid in discovery?

To study the effectiveness of cataloging for works on antiracism, this article examines the catalog records for a core list of 21 books. Records are analyzed for their use of keywords and subject headings, examining the efficacy and accuracy of terms selected or, in some cases, terms not selected. It closes with advice to catalogers in describing materials on antiracism to increase discoverability.

Core list and catalog records

Books on antiracism, racism, and race were compiled from the bestseller lists of both Amazon and Barnes and Noble for June 2, 2020. Two recommended reading lists were also examined, one from BuzzFeed and one from antiracist scholar Ibram X. Kendi.³ All titles that appeared on at least two lists were included, as well as the top five bestselling titles from both Amazon and Barnes and Noble. This generated a list of 21 titles:

1. *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander
2. *White Rage* by Carol Anderson
3. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou
4. *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin
5. *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
6. *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo
7. *Biased* by Jennifer L. Eberhardt
8. *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi
9. *Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi
10. *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lourde

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11. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
12. *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng
13. *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold and Suzanne Kaufman
14. *Stamped*, adapted by Jason Reynolds from *Stamped from the Beginning*
15. *Fatal Invention* by Dorothy Roberts
16. *The Color of Law* by Richard Rothstein
17. *Me and White Supremacy* by Layla F. Saad
18. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas
19. *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson
20. *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson, illustrated by Rafael López
21. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X and Alex Haley

Each title was searched in OCLC Connexion. Records from the Library of Congress or Program for Cooperative Cataloging were selected due to their high quality and frequent use by libraries. Six of the titles (*Sister Outsider*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Bluest Eye*, *The Fire Next Time*, and *White Rage*) have been issued in multiple editions. In these cases, the catalog record with the most complete information was selected.

Analysis

Every record included basic bibliographic information (title, author, publication details, physical description, and ISBN). All 21 records also included a summary in the MARC 21 field 520 and subject headings recorded in the MARC 21 field 650.

In total, the catalog records examined included 24 summary fields, with three records containing two. Seven summaries quoted the book cover or dust jacket, seven quoted the publisher's description, and seven were free text supplied by the cataloger. An additional

three MARC 520 fields did not include an attribution but appeared to be quoting from either a cover or publisher's description.

Summaries were examined for their terminology pertaining to race. The most used term was *race*, which appeared in ten records. Other frequently used terms included *racism/racist/racists* (seven records), *antiracism/antiracist/antiracists* (five records), and *African Americans/Black/ implicit bias/white people* (four records each).

Works of fiction were least likely to include terms about race in the summary. Works for children especially implied race by mentioning "looking different" or "celebrating diversity." The summary for *The Hate U Give*, a young adult novel about the aftermath of the murder of an African American teenager by a police officer, makes no mention of race. Summaries for nonfiction were more likely to explicitly name racism or antiracism. However, records with cataloger-provided summaries were least likely to include these terms.

The cataloger-provided summary for *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, for example, states only: "Written by Alex Haley from conversations with the Negro leader over a period of two years before his death," which does little to help a researcher find this work via keyword search and contains the dated term *Negro*, which was removed from the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) in 1975. By contrast, the description of this book in Amazon notes that the book discusses Malcolm X's views on the "inherent racism" of our society, providing crucial information missing from the library's record.

Although catalogers may add free-text terms in the summary field, terms pertaining to race, racism, and antiracism were almost universally pulled from publishers' descriptions and jacket text. Only two of the seven free-text summaries

included these terms. This is a missed opportunity. Unless these crucial keywords appear somewhere in the record, these books would likely be missed in a keyword search. However, the terms did sometimes appear in subject headings.

In total, 55 subject headings were used in these records.⁴ Many of these did not pertain to race or racism (e.g., *girls, family secrets, poetry*). After narrowing to terms related to race, racism, antiracism, or prejudice, 25 remained. Of these, the two most common were *African Americans* and *racism*, each appearing in nine records. The next most used terms were *Whites* (four records), *race, race discrimination*, and *race relations* (three records each). Other terms appeared in two or fewer records.

This points to problems with both LCSH and with catalogers' application of it. LCSH has long been criticized, and, although improvements have been made, many problems remain. For instance, *The New Jim Crow* would logically include a subject heading for the *Jim Crow laws*. It cannot, because no such heading exists. *Jim Crow laws* redirects to *African Americans—Legal status, laws, etc.* When this subject heading was proposed in 2019, the Library of Congress deemed that the heading would be “a disservice to the user,” as it would separate this particular set of laws from similar laws.⁵

The subject heading for *Whites* includes a scope note that the heading is to be used for works of a sociological nature “especially in countries where they are a minority.” The United States, which is 73% white, does not fit this scope, which may explain the term's infrequent use in these records. Other terms have similarly fine shades of distinction.

Racism may be applied to “works on racism as an attitude as well as works on both attitude and overt discriminatory behavior,” but works “limited to overt discriminatory behavior” should be entered as *race discrimination*. This

distinction is not likely to help users, especially since they do not see these scope notes.

Further problems occur when catalogers apply these terms. Although these titles were identified from antiracism reading lists, the subject heading *anti-racism* appeared in only two records (*How to Be an Antiracist* and *Me and White Supremacy*). The scope note states that the heading may be used for “works on beliefs, actions, movements, and policies adopted or developed to oppose racism,” which could apply to most works on this list. Some records omit any subject terms about racism.

Sister Outsider, a collection of writings by Audre Lorde, uses several subject headings, including *poetry, feminism, lesbianism*, and *African American women*, but omits headings about the prejudice she addresses in these writings.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X and *The Fire Next Time*, likewise, include headings only for Black Muslims and African Americans, focusing on race but omitting headings about racism or prejudice. *The Bluest Eye*, a novel describing an African American girl mocked for her skin color, uses the headings *African Americans* and *Girls* but no headings for racism or discrimination.

Every title on this list addresses racism in some form, but the subject headings *racism* or *race discrimination* appear in ten records. Eleven do not include these headings, preferring, in some cases, to just use *African Americans* or to imply racism with subdivisions (e.g., *African Americans—Segregation—History*). These narrower terms are important, but omitting the broader terms will make discovery more difficult for users performing keyword searches.

Conclusion

The catalog records for these titles always provided enough information for known title searching, but often lacked

terminology to assist the user task of *finding* resources beyond that. If a researcher conducted a keyword search on racism, they would miss eight titles on this list, including *The New Jim Crow*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and *The Color of Law*, because the term *racism* does not appear in those catalog records.

Antiracism reading lists are a starting point, but they cannot be the only means for researchers to identify works on antiracism. With judicious cataloging, the library's catalog can be a valuable addition. There are a few steps catalogers can take to aid users in finding these resources:

- *Describe the book as it describes itself.* If an author or publisher state that a book is about racism, then catalogers should describe it accordingly. It is notable that summaries provided by the publisher often include terms pertaining to race, whereas cataloger-provided summaries omit this information. Wherever possible, pull terminology from the work itself, such as by quoting the jacket description or transcribing the table of contents. This will ensure that keywords that the author deemed important appear in the catalog record.

- *Consistently apply subject headings.* Always adding the subject heading for *racism* when a work is about racism will ensure that the word appears in the record, which will help with keyword searches, while allowing users to collocate works on this topic. Establish best practices within your cataloging department and make sure that catalogers apply these terms when needed.

- *Become comfortable with discomfort.* Racism is painful. It's human to try to distance ourselves, but for catalogers, this can lead to minimizing racism in the catalog, which comes at the expense of our users. When the jacket description notes that the book addresses "themes of race and identity," there is no reason

to omit this. It is crucial to unflinchingly examine these difficult works and describe them in an accurate, honest way.

Through cataloging, libraries contribute to the work of antiracism by connecting readers with resources. Catalogers must describe these books in terms that will benefit researchers by using the tools available. In addition, user studies would be valuable here. If we learn which terms will be most useful to users, we can make sure they're included. Although this is time-consuming, it will make the catalog stronger.

Notes

1. Heather Schwedel, "There's Been a Run on Anti-Racist Books," *Slate*, June 1, 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2020/06/antiracist-books-sold-out-amazon-george-floyd-protests.html>.

2. Pat Riva, Patrick Le Bœuf, and Maja Žumer, "IFLA Library Reference Model: A Conceptual Model for Bibliographic Information," International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, August 2017, amended December 2017, https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/cataloguing/frbr-lrm/ifla-lrm-august-2017_rev201712.pdf.

3. Arianna Rebolini, "An Essential Reading Guide for Fighting Racism," BuzzFeed News, May 29, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ariannarebolini/george-floyd-amy-cooper-antiracist-books-reading-resources>; Ibram X. Kendi, "An Anti-racist Reading List," *New York Times*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/books/review/antiracist-reading-list-ibram-x-kendi.html>.

4. LCSH are often subdivided, such as Discrimination in housing—Government policy—United States—History—20th century. For this analysis, only the first subject term (in this case, *Discrimination in housing*) was examined.

5. "Summary of Decisions, Editorial Meeting Number 1911," Library of Congress, accessed June 26, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/cpsod/psd-191118.html>. ↯