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The *Sears List of Subject Headings*: Social and Cultural Dimensions in Historical, Theoretical, and Design Contexts

Abstract

The *Sears List of Subject Headings* was first published in 1923 to provide guidance to subject catalogers in small libraries in the United States. *The Sears List*, now in its 22nd edition, is still widely used for subject cataloging in small- and medium-sized libraries and in children's and school libraries, but the *Sears List* is not nearly as widely studied as the more comprehensive Library of Congress Subject Headings. This paper aims to expand the critical discussion of the *Sears List* and to contextualize the *List* in contemporary cultural and social dimensions by reviewing its history, theory, and design. The paper looks specifically at how Black people and culture, Indigenous peoples and cultures, and LGBTQ+ people and cultures are represented in the *Sears List* throughout its history and how warrant, design, and theory inform this representation.

Introduction and History

The *Sears List*, a streamlined alternative to the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), was created in the image of and in service to small library collections in the United States in the 1920s. This period was marked by a rapid expansion of public libraries, funded largely by Carnegie grants. In fact, cross-referencing shows that seven of the nine "well cataloged" small libraries that Minnie Earl Sears used as the basis for the first edition of the *Sears List* received Carnegie funding (Miller, 1943). Sears aimed to provide a simplified cataloging reference for the many "library workers [with] a limited knowledge of the principles and practice of cataloging" who were hired during this expansion (Sears, 1923). In the first edition of the *List*, Sears minimized subdivisions and technical terms, and limited authorized headings to those likely to be needed for small library collections of the era.

These small library collections and this era in United States history, while marked by major cultural shifts, were characterized by a dominant Christian- and Euro-centric culture. This is evident in the first edition of the *Sears List*, which reflected the literature and culture of the era. For example, the first edition contains dozens of authorized headings related to Christianity and Christian culture, but minimal coverage of other religions, which are represented with single authorized terms: *Mohammedanism* (Islam), *Buddha and Buddhism*, *Hinduism*, and *Jews—Religion* (other aspects of Jewish life and culture are also represented). Similarly, non-European cultures are hardly represented, while English, German, and French history and culture are represented with multiple subdivisions and phrase headings.

Recent editions of the *Sears List* have intentionally moved towards inclusivity in both language and representation (Wilson, 2018). These changes were implemented to reflect diverse literary-, cultural-, and user warrant. This paper explores the history and the subject ontogeny of the *Sears List*, analyzing specifically the representation of historically marginalized groups: Black people and culture, Indigenous peoples and cultures, and LGBTQ+ people and cultures. The changes to the subject headings related to these groups, when viewed in context with the evolving design and theory of the *Sears List* and evolving warrants driven by U.S. history, show the *List* to be continuously adaptive in language and cultural understanding, increasingly specific and inclusive, and steadily more complex and expressive.

Theory and Design

Like all subject heading lists, the *Sears List* is heavily influenced by the foundational theory of Charles Ammi Cutter's *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog* (Cutter, 1876). In *Rules*, Cutter introduces three principles of subject cataloging that focus on “the convenience of the public”: 1) uniform and unique headings, 2) specific and direct entry, and 3) common usage and current terminology. The *Sears List* both builds on and is at odds with these principles, and this tension informs how the *Sears List* situates itself in social and cultural contexts and how the *List* has evolved. In addition to working within and around these three principles, the *Sears List*, like other subject heading lists, added thesaural relationships to its design to support bibliographic objectives like navigation and to provide useful context for subject headings. The following subsections discuss how these designs have been implemented (or not implemented) through the history of the *Sears List*.

Uniform and Unique Headings

The principle of uniform and unique headings ensures that each concept has only one subject heading and each subject heading has only one concept. This principle is fundamental to controlled vocabularies' support of precision and recall, and the *Sears List* has implemented this principle consistently since the first edition. To ensure unique headings, the *List* uses disambiguation techniques such as parenthetical qualifiers like *Composition (Art)*, *Composition (Music)*, and *Composition (Rhetoric)*. To ensure uniform headings, the *List* has consistently used entry terms and references throughout its history to help catalogers arrive at preferred terms. The first edition used "See" and "Refer from" references while recent editions have evolved to use thesaural notation: USE and UF. The exception to the *List's* consistent implementation of uniform and unique headings stems from the design choice to allow individual catalogers to add more specific subject headings as needed. While the *List* provides instructions for added headings, catalogers might make different decisions in these additions, which could become an issue for catalog interoperability.

Specific and Direct Entry

The principle of specific and direct entry requires the cataloger to use the most specific heading available and requires a dictionary (or alphabetical) ordering of terms so that they can be found directly and without traversing a hierarchy. The *Sears List* fully supports direct entry, having used an alphabetical design since the first edition. The *List's*

support for specific entry, however, is more complex. A central design principle of the *Sears List*, starting from the first edition, is to avoid unnecessarily specific headings and subdivisions for small- and medium-sized library collections and to recommend that catalogers can add more specific subject headings as needed. This design principle keeps the *Sears List* more concise and arguably easier to use than LCSH and offers catalogers with local knowledge to establish their own headings with greater cultural awareness and cataloging utility, but in many ways runs counter to the principle of specific entry because specific authorized headings are not available in print in the *List*.

Navigating this tension between simplicity and specificity has been one of the central stories of the evolution of the *Sears List*. Over time, specific entry has largely emerged victorious. While still significantly shorter and simpler than LCSH, the 22nd and most recent edition of the *Sears List* contains more than 12,000 authorized headings, many of which are detailed technical terms that were added in this edition (Satija, 2018). Furthermore, the *List* has encouraged more specific entry by embracing phrase headings and encouraging subdivisions, which had been considered too complex for library workers early in the history of the *Sears List*. Joseph Miller, editor of the 15th to 20th editions of the *List* describes the motivation behind part of this evolution:

We no longer want to limit the number of subdivisions. In fact, that's a good example of the change in thinking. The early editions were very prescriptive. They were trying to tell people how to catalog and they had a confined idea about the kind of library they were addressing. Maybe they were correct. But now the *Sears List* can be used for any kind of library (Marcus, 2011).

This quote reveals a significant motivation for greater specificity: more diverse libraries and collections. While the early editions of the *Sears List* were made specifically for a certain type of small- and medium-sized library and collection, more recent editions have needed to adapt to serve a wide variety of school libraries, prison libraries, and more. Diverse libraries mean diverse collections, which require more specific subject headings and have yielded a design that supports specificity through subdivisions and precoordinated headings. Does this shift in design undermine the initial goals of the *Sears List*? That is an open question, but one could argue that the *Sears List* still holds a place next to LCSH as the shorter and simpler subject heading list that catalogers can adapt as their collections warrant.

Common Usage and Current Terminology

The principle of common usage and current terminology is tightly coupled with warrant and requires that an indexing language to use terminology consistent with the terminology used by literature and users. From the first edition, the *Sears List* has built on this principle by choosing headings that were widely used by small- and medium-sized libraries and by avoiding inverted headings and unnecessarily technical terms. By the 5th edition, the *List* had completely removed inverted headings.

The *List* also regularly updates its authorized headings to replace or remove outdated and prejudicial terms and to add emergent terms and concepts once they solidify. Past headings are typically maintained as entry terms and marked as "former headings" to ease the transition to new terminology. Longtime *Sears List* editor Joseph Miller describes the cautious approach of updating, adding, and removing subject headings:

Language changes and we try to be conservative about it because subject headings by their nature are conservative. You follow what's done in the world. We are not trying to promote anything, we have no agenda, it is just that when the language that is used for things in the world changes we want to be as responsive to that as possible. (Marcus, 2011)

The source for these terminological updates has widened from seven libraries in the first edition of the *List* to a diverse array of voices and cultures in recent editions. This shift has produced more inclusive and culturally sensitive language and greater representation for historically marginalized groups and cultures. The *Sears List*, while it maintains a goal of coordination with LCSH when feasible, has moved more rapidly toward inclusive language than LCSH because its size and role in cataloging grant the *List* "the liberty to go forward faster" (Marcus, 2011).

Thesaural Features and Relationships

Early editions of the *Sears List* lacked thesaural relationships, aiming for simplicity, and provided only "See" and "Refer from" references. However, the *List*, along with other subject heading lists, adopted thesaural features, including broader terms (BT), narrower terms (NT), and related terms (RT). Recent editions of the *List* use these relationships extensively to connect related subject headings and to support the bibliographic objective of navigation.

These hierarchical and associative relationships also help catalogers find the most specific subject heading for a concept and communicate rich semantic meaning. In this way, the *List* function almost as a thesaurus that informs our social and cultural understanding of subject headings by placing them in relationship to each other. However, these relationships, especially hierarchical relationships, can cause harm when communicating social concepts like gender and race (Olson, 2001). Still, the simple structure of the early editions of the *List*, even with updated vocabulary to reflect contemporary warrant, would be inadequate to represent the complex and diverse concepts and relationships in contemporary library collections without the thesaural features employed in more recent editions of the *List*.

Social and Cultural Dimensions

The history, theory, and design of the *Sears List* that were examined in previous sections inform and are informed by social and cultural dimensions. These relationships are reified in the subject headings and subject ontology of the *Sears List*. The following subsections consider the evolution of subject headings for three groups of historically marginalized peoples and cultures: Blacks, Indigenous peoples, and the LGBTQ+ community, and examine how the historical changes to the design of the *Sears List* have manifested in changes to headings through the *List's* history and whether these changes have been beneficial, harmful, or neutral.

From Negroes to Blacks and African Americans

The *Sears List* was first published during an era of codified segregation in the United States—and in U.S. libraries, especially in the Jim Crow South (Knott, 2016). Early editions of the *List* reflected this period in history, both in the vocabulary and in the paucity of authorized headings dedicated to Black people and culture. The first edition of the *List*, as shown in Figure 1, authorized the heading *Negroes*, provided the entry

term *Colored people* to ensure uniformity, listed three subdivisions for *Negroes*: *Education*, *Politics and suffrage*, and *Social life and customs*, and authorized one related phrase heading: *Negro songs*.

Figure 1. A scanned image from the first edition of the *Sears List* shows the subject heading *Negroes*, its subdivisions, and a related phrase heading, *Negro songs*. Early editions of the *Sears List* included minimal coverage of Black people and culture and used what is now considered dated and pejorative language; however, the listing of three authorized subdivisions does not indicate a lack of coverage on its own, as the first edition of the *List* was designed to avoid subdivisions. Available at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015036864968&view=1up&seq=136>.

Negro songs
 Refer from Plantation songs
Negro suffrage. See Negroes—Politics and
 suffrage
Negroes
 Refer from Colored people
Education
 . **Politics and suffrage**
 Refer from Negro suffrage; Ne-
 groes—Suffrage
Social life and customs
Suffrage. See Negroes—Politics and
 suffrage

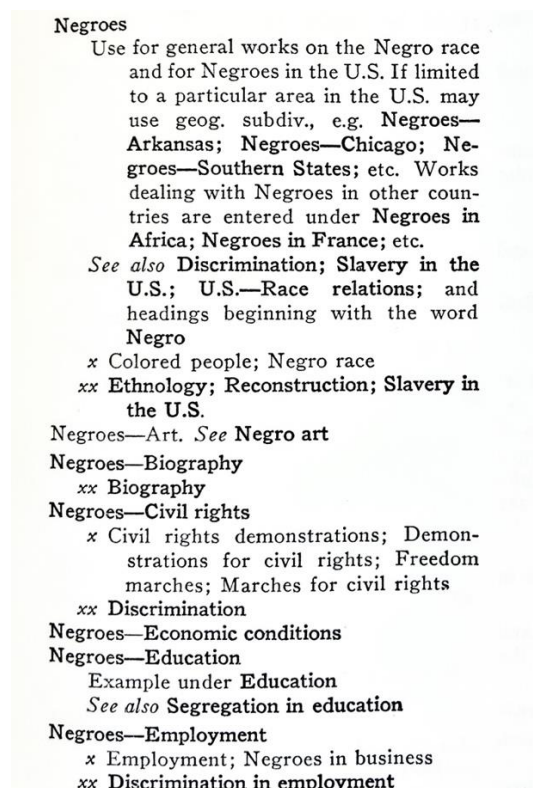
The ninth edition (Westby, 1965), which was published the year after the Civil Rights Act and is shown in Figure 2, maintains the authorized heading *Negroes* but represents a significant update, with extensive scope notes for subdividing geographically, more than 30 listed subdivisions and closely related phrase headings, and fuller coverage of Black history and culture. For example, the ninth edition authorizes subject headings to represent Black people as athletes, musicians, authors, and poets, signaling increased representation of Black people and culture in both library collections and the United States in general.

The changes to the *Negroes* subject heading by the ninth edition demonstrate changes both to the design of the *List* in general and to literary and cultural warrant related to the specific subject. In the design of the *List*, we see a shift towards specificity through more extensive use of subdivisions like *Negroes—Civil Rights* and more specific headings like *Segregation in education*. We can also note the adoption of thesaural relationships, which provide useful connections to *Reconstruction* and *Slavery in the U.S.* These connections were not only absent in early editions of the list but could not even be expressed through the "See" and "Refer from" relationships used in the first edition.

While these changes represent a significant increase in the representation of Black people and culture in the *List*, the subject heading itself—*Negroes*—was not updated until the 11th edition in 1977 when it was replaced with *Blacks*. The heading was further updated in the 16th edition in 1997 when *African Americans* was introduced (along with the entry term *Afro-Americans*) as a narrower term to be used for Blacks living in the United States. This new subject heading, *African Americans*, arrived richly represented, with 39 subdivided and phrase headings. The *Principles of the Sears List* from the 19th

edition of the *List* describes how common usage served as warrant for these updates: "Contemporary usage gradually should replace antiquated words or phrases. The heading *Blacks*, for example, replaced *Negroes* as common usage changed. In time the heading *African Americans* was added to the Sears List for greater specificity, as the use of that term stabilized" (Miller, 2007). The heading *African Americans* and its relationship to *Blacks* is explained in scope notes but, importantly, the relationship is clear and navigable because the *Sears List* adopted thesaural relationships and notation.

Figure 2. A photograph from the author's copy of the ninth edition of the *Sears List* shows the subject heading *Negroes*, its scope notes, and some of its subdivisions. While this edition still uses what is now considered a dated and pejorative term, it supports more specific entry for cataloging works about Black people and culture.



In addition to expanding its representation of Black people and culture and updating terminology based on common usage, the *Sears List*, through more specific headings, has been able to represent intersectionality in more recent editions. For example, the 16th edition of the List introduced the headings *Black women* and *African American women*. While catalogers could apply two separate headings, such as *Blacks* and *Women*, explicitly listing the intersectionality together in one heading increases representation and likely improves precision over a post-coordinate approach. Finally, while the LCSH is largely in sync with the *Sears List* on *Black* and *African American* headings, its use of

inverted headings—*Women, Black* in this case—feels like a less natural or intuitive representation of this example of intersectionality.

From Indians of North America to Indigenous Peoples and Native Americans

Unlike Black people and culture, Indigenous peoples and cultures were more extensively represented in early editions of the *Sears List*, at least Indigenous peoples who are native to the United States and Canada. In the first edition, shown in Figure 3, the authorized heading *Indians of North America* featured three entry terms, 22 listed subdivisions, numerous closely related phrase headings, and (unusual for the first edition) a verbose scope note describing how to add specific tribes and linguistic families as needed. This level of detail and specificity, while still less than provided for subject headings about Euro-centric cultures, suggests that U.S. small library collections in the 1920's held many works about Native Americans and that the *Sears List* was committed to representing these works.

Figure 3. A scanned image from the first edition of the *Sears List* shows the subject heading *Indians of North America*, a scope note, entry terms, and some of its subdivisions. Early editions of the *Sears List* included relatively extensive coverage of Native American peoples and cultures, including instructions for adding subject headings for specific tribes and linguistic families. Available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015036864968&view=1up&seq=105>.

Indians of North America
 (Names of the linguistic families and tribes are not included in this list but may be used as needed, e.g. Athapascan Indians, Cherokee Indians)
 Refer from American aborigines; American Indians; North American Indians
Amusements. See Indians of North America—Games; Indians of North America—Social life and customs
Anecdotes
Antiquities
Captivities
Customs. See Indians of North America—Social life and customs
Dances
Education
 Refer from Indians of North America—Schools
Fiction
Folklore. See Folklore, Indian

While early editions of the *Sears List* represented Native Americans with a robust subject heading, it was not until the eighth edition in 1959 that a broader collective term for Indigenous peoples was made available: *Native races*. This subject heading, while signaling a possible increased awareness of Indigenous peoples in other countries, did not have a defined NT-BT relationship with *Indians of North America*

and focused on "race problems" and government relations with colonial powers, not representation of historically marginalized Indigenous peoples. The 11th edition in 1977 updated the heading to *Native peoples* based on literary warrant and established a BT-NT relationship with *Indians of North America*. The 19th edition updated the *Native peoples* heading once more to *Indigenous peoples*, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. An image from the 19th edition of the *Sears List* shows the subject heading *Indigenous peoples*, including a scope note, entry terms, and thesaural relationships. The scope notes provide details about the differences between *Ethnology*, which has existed as a subject heading since the first edition of the *Sears List*, and *Indigenous peoples*.

Indigenous peoples (May subdiv. geog.)

305.8

Use for materials on indigenous groups within a colonial area or modern state where the group does not control the government. General materials on people bound together by common ancestry and culture are entered under **Ethnic groups**. Materials on the various ethnic groups or native peoples in a particular region or country are entered under **Ethnology** subdivided geographically.

Indigenous peoples—Continued

- UF Aborigines
- Native peoples [*Former heading*]
- Natives
- People
- SA names of individual indigenous peoples e.g. Yoruba (**African people**) [to be added as needed]
- BT **Ethnology**
- NT **Aboriginal Australians**
- Inuit**
- Native Americans**
- Yoruba (African people)**
- Indigenous peoples—America
- USE **Native Americans**

While a collective term for Indigenous peoples was added and regularly updated, the *Sears List*, with the notable exception of *Navajo Indians*, has largely resisted adding the names of specific tribes as authorized headings, instead maintaining its design principle of instructing catalogers to add these headings or geographic subdivisions as needed. This design choice decreases representation of specific tribes and their cultures and leaves room for cataloger error and inconsistency but does allow local experts to choose appropriate terminology for local tribes that centralized *Sears List* committees might be less qualified to choose.

The heading *Indians of North America*, which had a robust presence in the first edition of the *List*, accrued more detail and subdivisions through subsequent editions but the heading itself remained unchanged until the 17th edition when the heading became *Native Americans*. Native Americans was a more commonly used term and, along with the longstanding entry term *American Indians*, arguably more likely to be used by native peoples of North America to describe themselves. This updated heading contrasts with LCSH, which authorizes some headings that include the phrase "Native Americans" but still features *Indians of North America* as a preferred term.

Finally, the *Sears List* has addressed some confusion and ambiguity around the term Indians. *Indians* was used as a broader term for *Indians of North America* but was followed in the alphabetical schedule by the awkward entry *Indians (of India) see East Indians* (Westby, 1965). The most recent editions of the *List* have finally addressed this confusion and the misrepresentation of the people of India, who do not see themselves as East Indians. The heading *Indians* which had been dropped from the *List* was reintroduced to describe the people of India. These updates maintained the principles of unique and uniform headings and better represented the cultures being described.

From No Representation to Lesbians, Gay Men, and LGBTQ+ Representation

The first edition of the *Sears List* authorized no headings to represent members of the LGBTQ+ community. This complete absence persisted until the 10th edition was published in 1972—three years after the Stonewall Riots, which many view as a seminal moment in the gay rights movement in the U.S (Carter, 2004). *Gay men* and *Lesbians* first appeared as headings in the 11th edition in 1977, and the LGBTQ+ community has slowly gained representation with each edition of the *List*.

While someone might argue that this prolonged absence of headings and the slow-moving addition of representation is justified by a lack of literary warrant, the ham to underrepresented groups exists, nonetheless. *Sears List* editor Joseph Miller provides some context:

Headings don't only show language used, but also something about the prominence and profile of groups in the world. There were no headings for gays in the first few editions of *Sears*. Maybe there were no books about gays, or no books that would be collected in a small library. But that would be the thing—what is the thing in the world being described, what is the language currently being used for those people or country or whatever the thing is (Marcus 2011).

The most recent editions of the *Sears List* have made a conscious effort to rectify these shortcomings, supporting cataloging and retrieval of diverse works about the LGBTQ+ community with more specific and representative subject headings. The preface of the 22nd edition describes some of these changes and their warrant:

With same-sex marriage reaching full legal status in all 50 states in 2015, and some terms becoming pejorative, the *Sears* database updated a number of LGBTQIA headings in 2016, including but not limited to: Asexual people, Transgender teenagers, and LGBT people in the military (Wilson, 2018).

The new subject headings and inclusive language represent significant progress but also demonstrate how the cautious approach of the *Sears List* in waiting for overwhelming warrant can allow pejorative headings to linger and historically underrepresented groups to remain underrepresented. As we understand more and more how our knowledge organization systems codify standards and work as infrastructure, systems like the *Sears*

List must establish processes for integrating rapid social and cultural progress quickly. The *Sears List* has adopted more frequent digital releases and might do well to be more aggressive in updating, adding, removing headings, especially those with social and cultural dimensions.

Conclusion

The *Sears List of Subject Headings* has a nearly a one-hundred-year history as a cataloging tool for small- and medium-sized libraries. This paper investigated the history and evolution of the *Sears List* and examined how its design, past and present, interacts with social and cultural dimensions for Black people, Indigenous peoples, and the LGBTQ+ community. This examination considered how the *Sears List* has represented and does represent these historically marginalized groups and found that the increased specificity through the use more headings, subdivisions, and precoordinated phrase headings; the effort to continuously update terminology to match common usages and be more inclusive; and the adoption of thesaural features to represent rich semantic relationships between concepts have largely succeeded in modernizing the *Sears List* and better representing the groups studied in this paper while maintaining the relative simplicity and conciseness of the list. In some cases, however, progress moved too slowly and cautiously, causing harm to underrepresented groups. Going forward, the *Sears List* should continue to adapt in language and cultural understanding, to increase specificity and inclusivity, and to add more complex and expressive headings—and to do so at a pace that supports social equity and underrepresent groups.

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