1-22-2017

Examining the Subject Heading "Illegal aliens"

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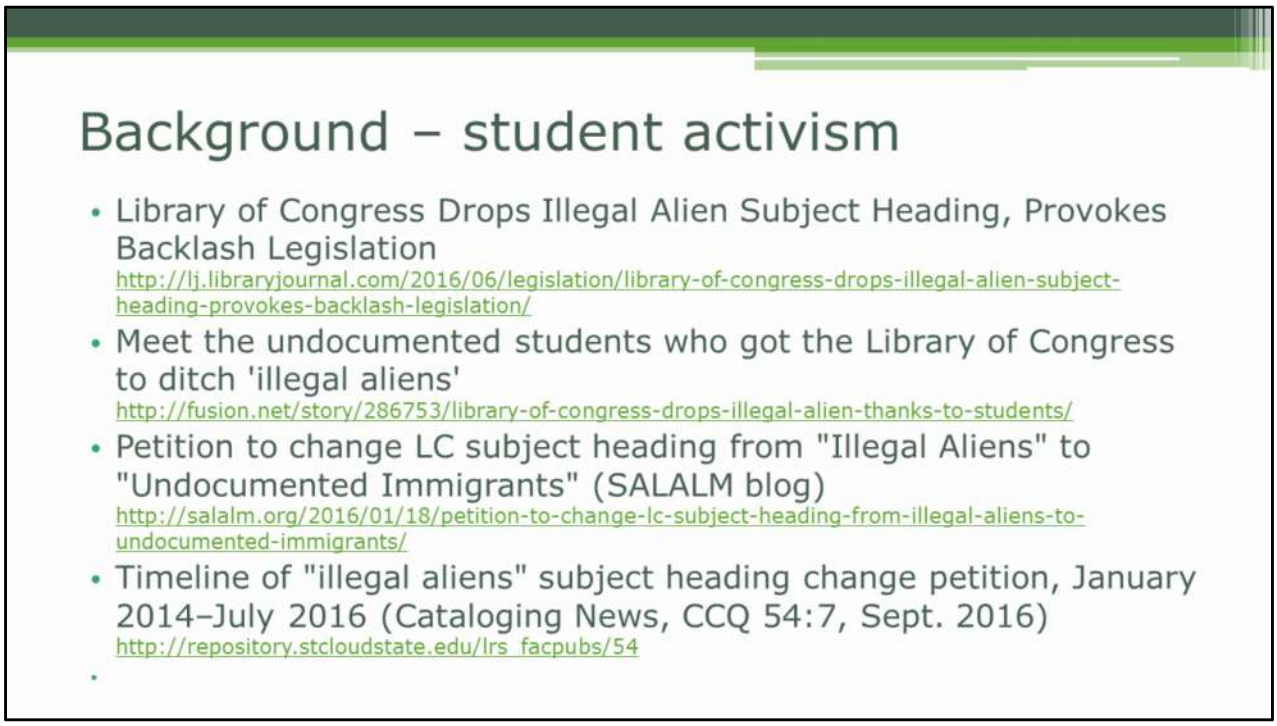
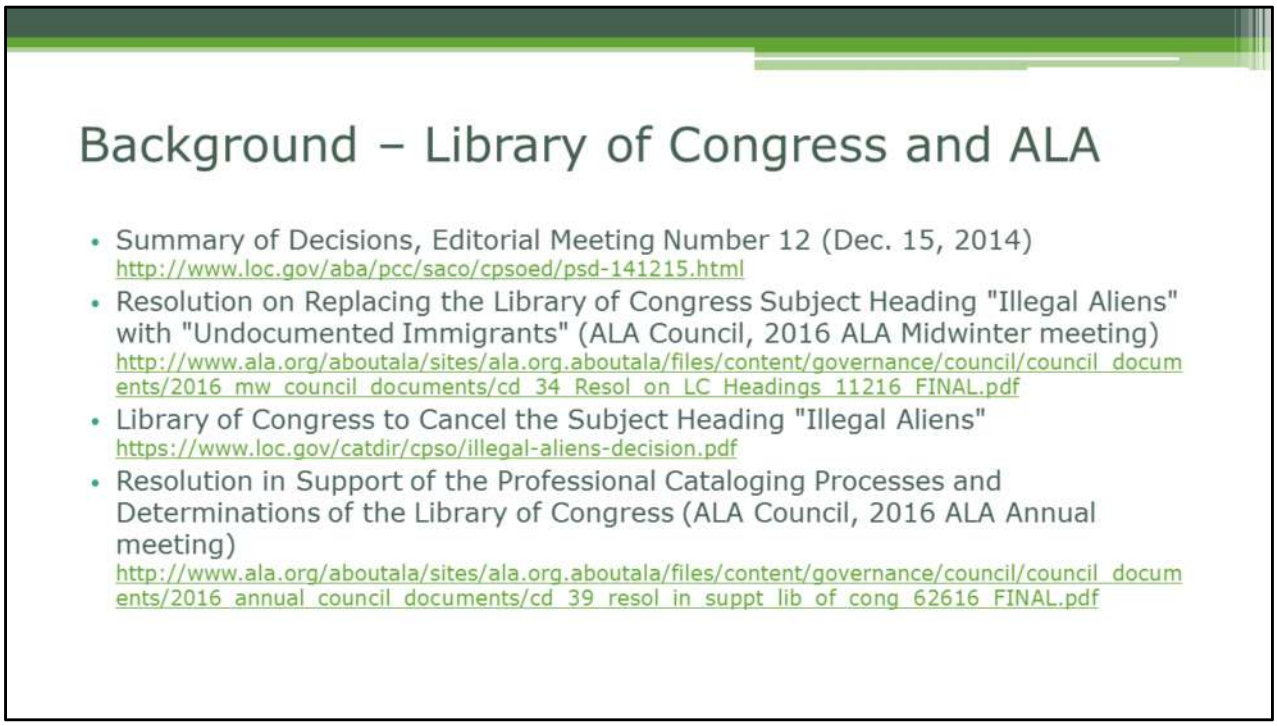
CaMMS Forum
ALA Midwinter 2017

January 22, 2017

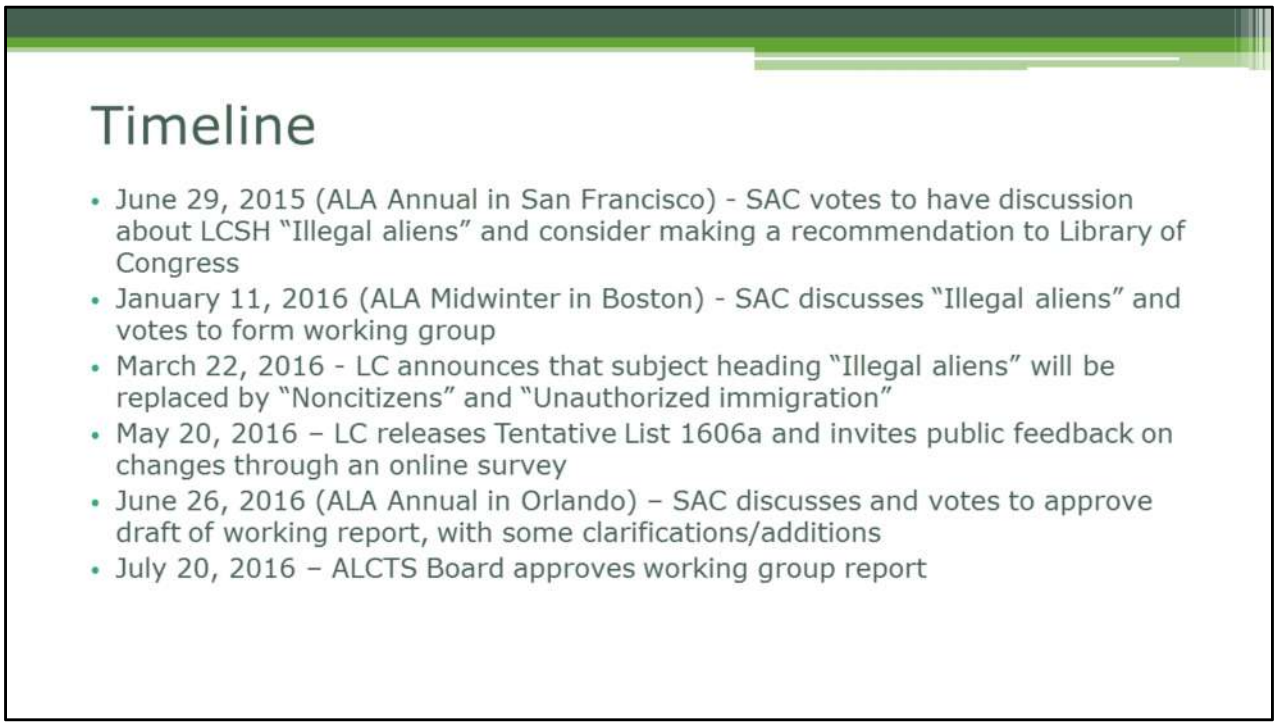
-"Illegal aliens" LCSH saga is a long story, won't cover it all today (will not discuss, for example, the question of interference by Congress)—just some of the cataloging issues
-My own observations; not representing SAC or the Working Group
-Might get a little political, polemical—seems called for in today's circumstances
-Will not repeat or summarize what's in the Working Group's report—please read it!



some resources that provide background on the student activism at Dartmouth College that started the whole thing

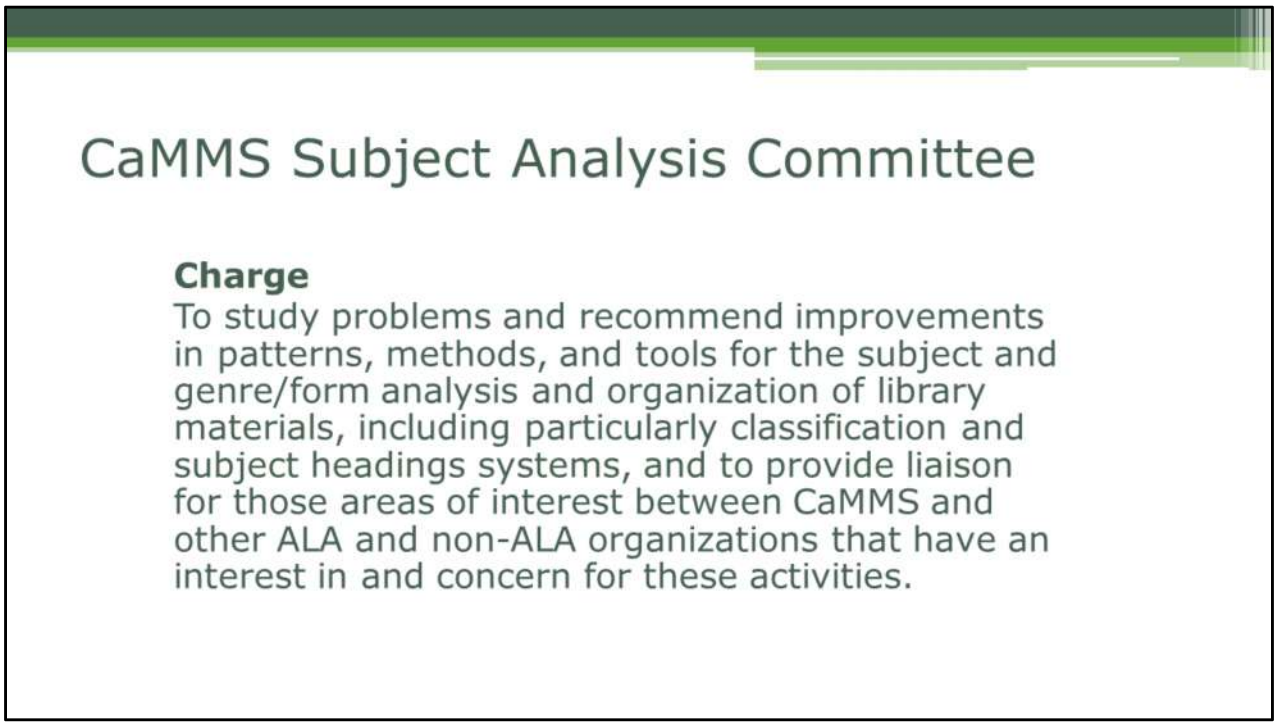


some resources that provide background on events in ALA and at LC



Timeline of the discussion about "Illegal aliens" LCSH in the CaMMS Subject Analysis Committee.

For broader timeline, see link on slide 2 for "Timeline of 'illegal aliens' subject heading change petition" in CCQ's Cataloging News column.



The Subject Analysis Committee (SAC) was a logical place to discuss the "Illegal aliens" LCSH.

SAC Working Group's charge

"review the term 'illegal aliens' and draft a report to SAC with a recommendation to change the heading, keep the heading, or establish a relationship with another heading"

-Charge was broad, open
-Studying and writing a report about a single subject heading not exactly a well-worn path—process was chaotic, often scattered

Members of SAC Working Group

Elvia Arroyo - Princeton University - elvia.arroyo@gmail.com
Jill Baron – Dartmouth College - Jill.E.Baron@dartmouth.edu
Paromita Biswas - Western Carolina University- paromitabiswas7@gmail.com
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Cate Kellett – Yale Law School - cate.kellett@yale.edu
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Report from the SAC Working Group on the LCSH "Illegal aliens"

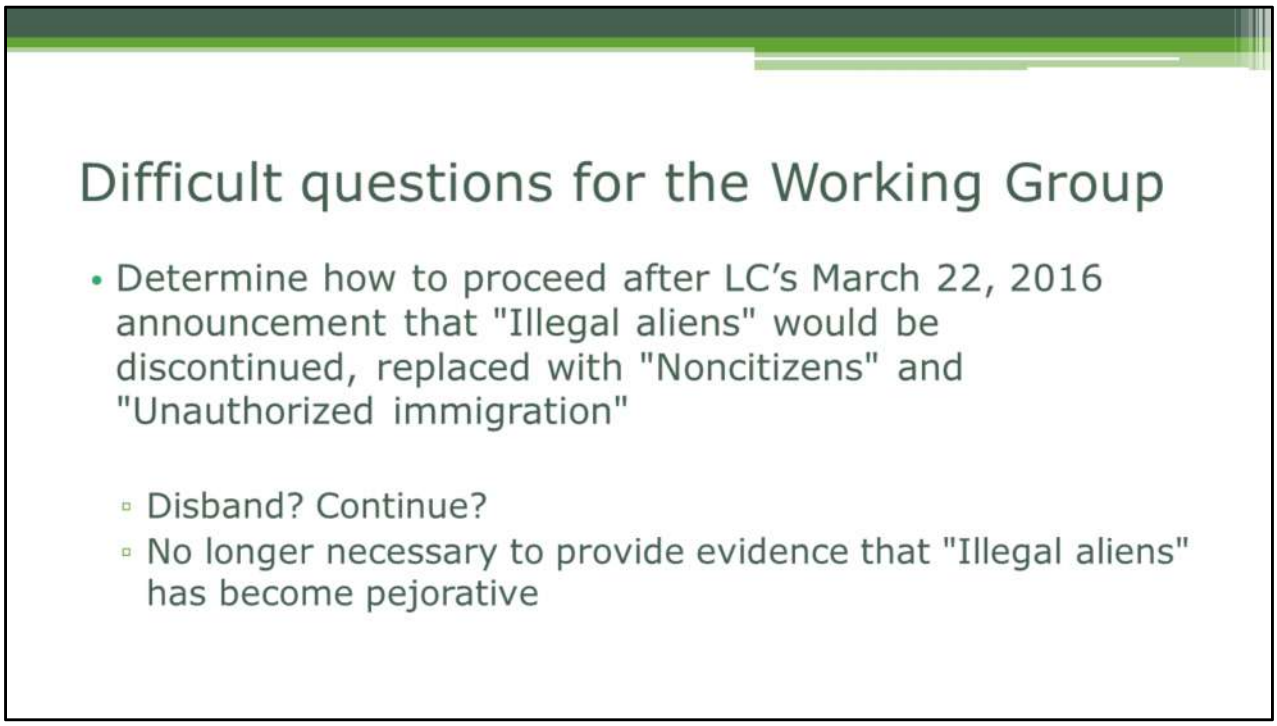
http://connect.ala.org/node/255185

Annual 2016 - Report from the SAC Working Group on the LCSH "Illegal aliens"

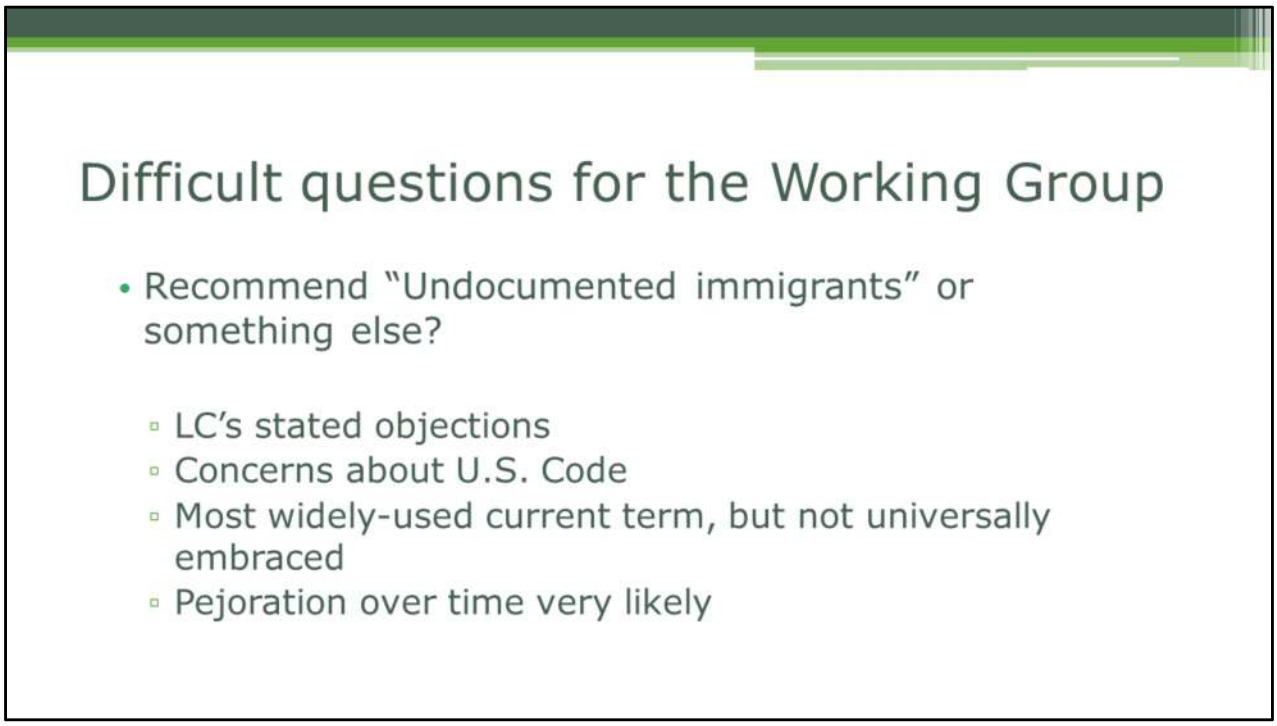
Last modified by Elizabeth Bodian on Sun, 07/17/2016 - 7:20 am
Tags: Reports

Attachment	Size
Report from the SAC Working Group on the LCSH Illegal aliens.docx	31.91 KB
ATT-1-study-spreadsheet.xlsx	52.27 KB
ATT-2-study-methodology.docx	166.6 KB
ATT-3-other-controlled-vocabularies.xlsx	12.3 KB
ATT-4-usage-in-databases.docx	68.83 KB
ATT-5-Dartmouth-EvidenceforLibraryofCongressCase.docx	159.76 KB
ATT-6-recommended-LCSH-changes.docx	17.72 KB
ATT-7-example-records.docx	16.47 KB

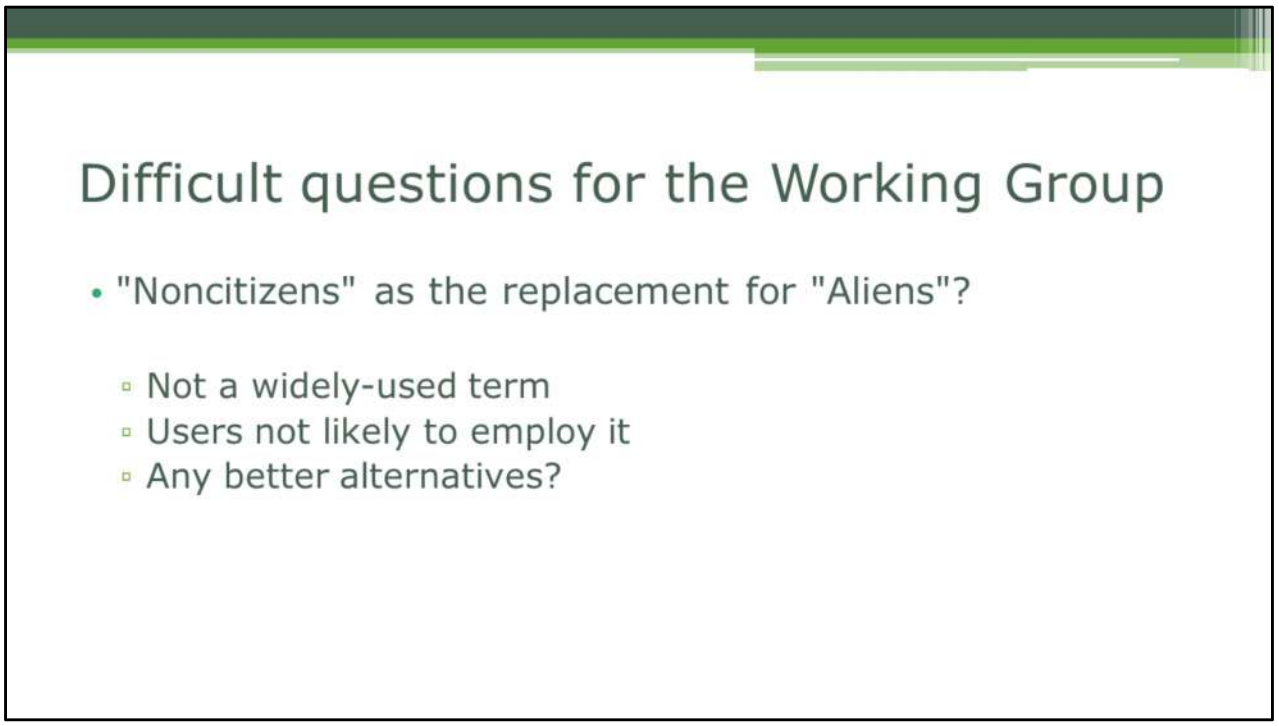
Report and all seven appendices are available on ALA Connect



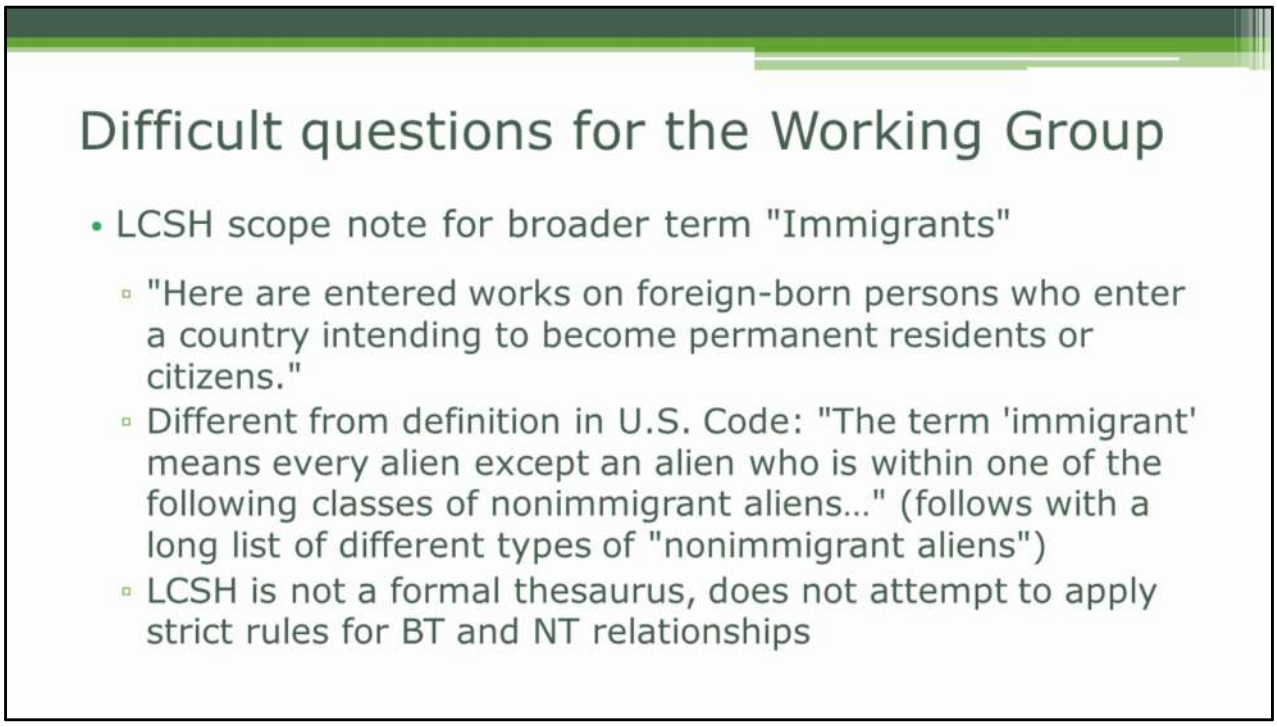
-Working Group was formed before the March 2016 announcement from LC
-Some work had started, but not much
-Still charged by SAC to investigate, write report, make recommendation
-ALA resolution called for "Illegal aliens" to be changed to "Undocumented immigrants"—still important to look at this
-Audience for recommendation not just LC—report could be important for future discussions; should recommend a model that would be possible for libraries to implement locally



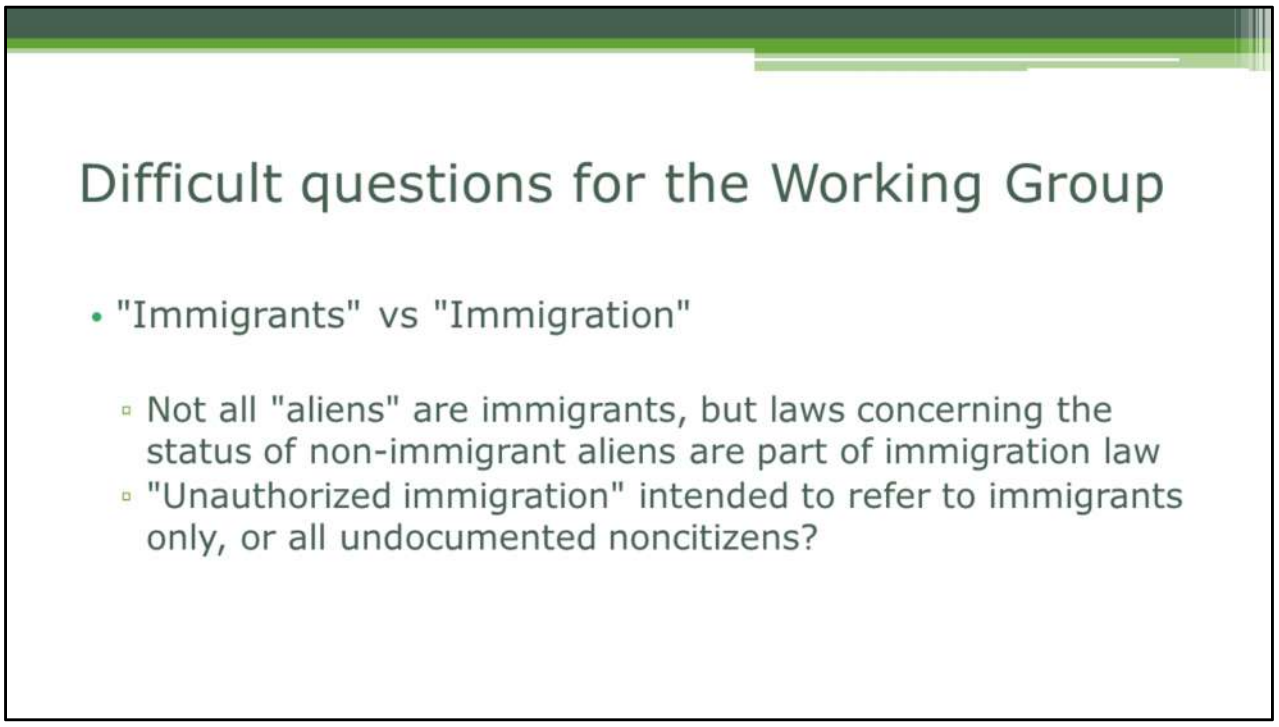
-This case is a good illustration that there is often no "right" choice of terminology, just the *least* problematic *for now*
-Words "undocumented" and "immigrants" both have multiple, complex meanings
-"Illegal aliens" is broader than "Undocumented immigrants," because not all "aliens" are immigrants
-All variant terms identified as possibilities had some problems, and all had detractors
-"Undocumented immigrants" has broad acceptance now, but for how long? (will discuss "pejoration" more later)



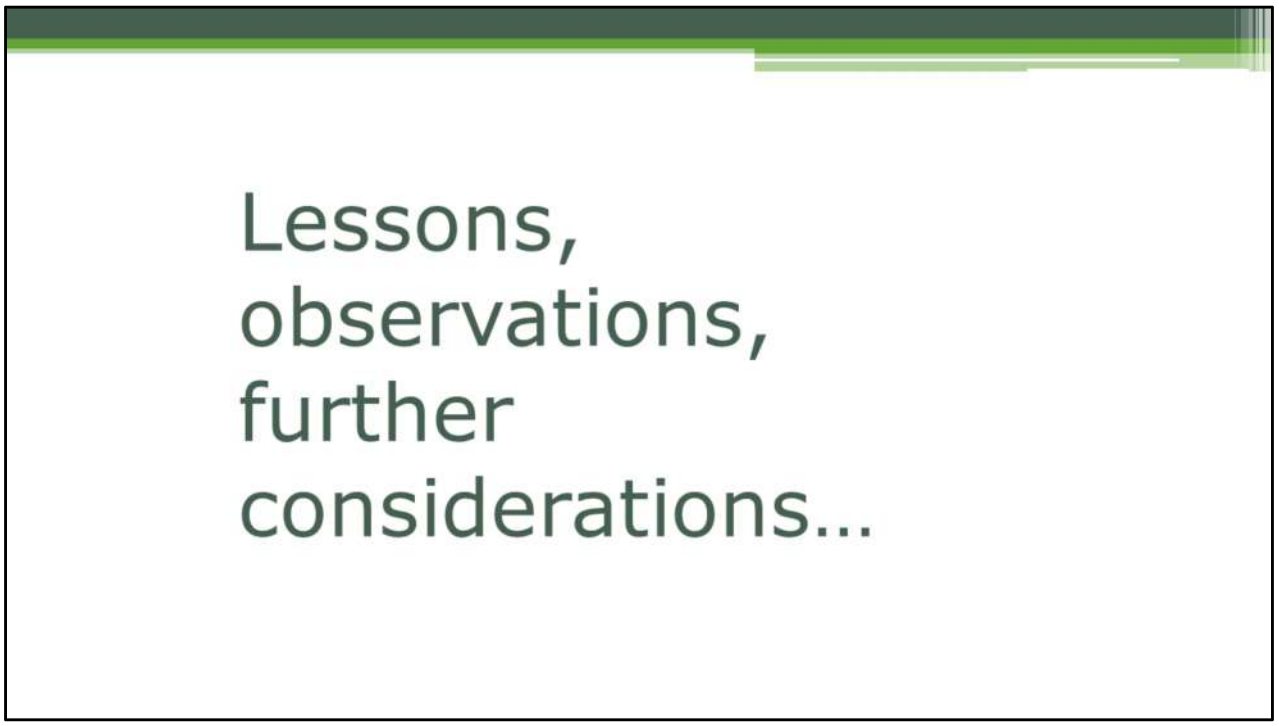
-LC's decision to replace "Aliens" was very welcome, but defining a group of people in the negative (by what they are *not*) is always questionable
-All other options have even more significant problems!
"Foreigners" is loaded with negative connotations
"Foreign nationals" excludes stateless people
Phrases including "Visitors" and "Guests" exclude those residing permanently
-Another example of having to choose the least bad option



-LCSH scope note for the term "Immigrants" defines them by *intention* to immigrate, not the activity itself (technically, someone who entered a country *not* intending to immigrate, but who did ultimately do so, would not meet the scope note's definition)
-Word "immigrants" is not inherently legal, but it does have a legal definition in the U.S. Code
-Working Group debated whether or not making a recommendation on the scope note for "Immigrants" was within its purview; decided not to make a formal recommendation but to include comments in report



Is "immigration" a thing done just by immigrants? One might think so, but it turns out to be a sticky question…



-Before making some observations that flow from the Working Group's discussions, going to zoom out first and look at some broader cataloging issues
-Not anything new, but important to frame the discussion this way

Our inherent contradiction/inescapable conundrum

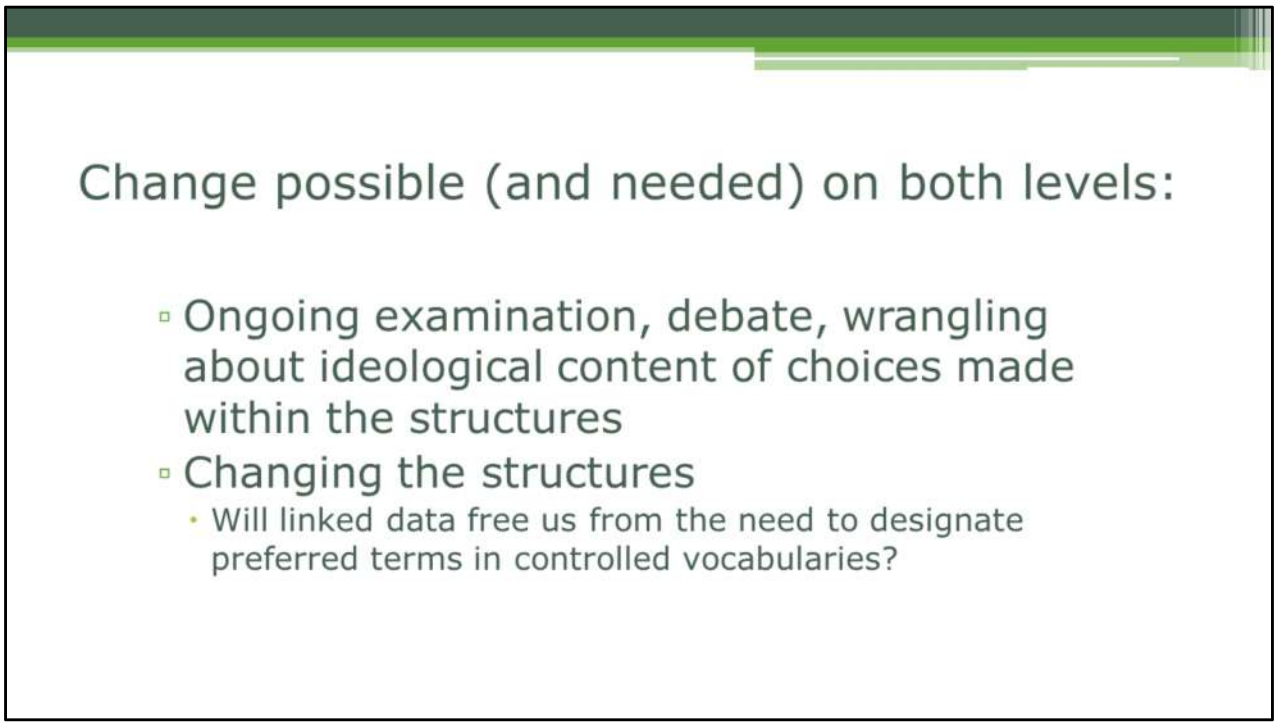
- In order to facilitate access, we need to create artificial structures (such as controlled vocabularies, classification systems, descriptive rules)
- These artificial structures are inherently, intrinsically loaded with ideological and political perspectives
- Always! There is no escaping it and should be no denying it, but rather a commitment to ongoing work to improve them

-The artificial structures we create and apply are necessary to facilitate access, but they also introduce problems
-Desire to be free of these artificial structures (and the problems they bear) and work directly with data is longstanding
-Work of Safiya Noble (and others) shows that data itself (and algorithms to search it directly) are not free of problems of bias, nor of the tendency to center some and marginalize others
-Intervention (including but not limited to the artificial structures of cataloging) is still needed, with intentional choices and constant attention to what the effects are, how they're changing
-Can we ever escape this conundrum? In my view, escape is unlikely—instead, we'll face new forms of it

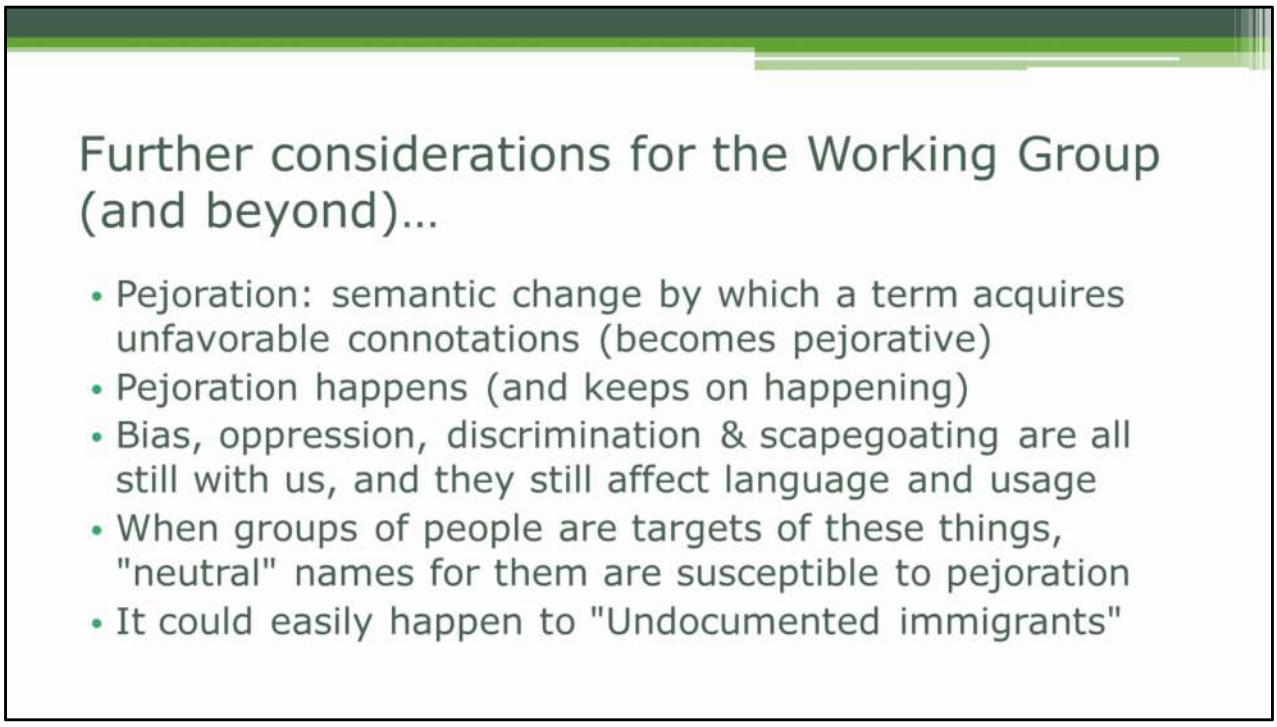
Actually, two levels of inherent contradiction

- Structures of cataloging standards are inevitably ideological and political (for example, need to choose/designate a preferred term)
- Choices made within those structures are inevitably ideological and political (what is chosen/designated as the preferred term, what is a variant term, what is left out entirely)

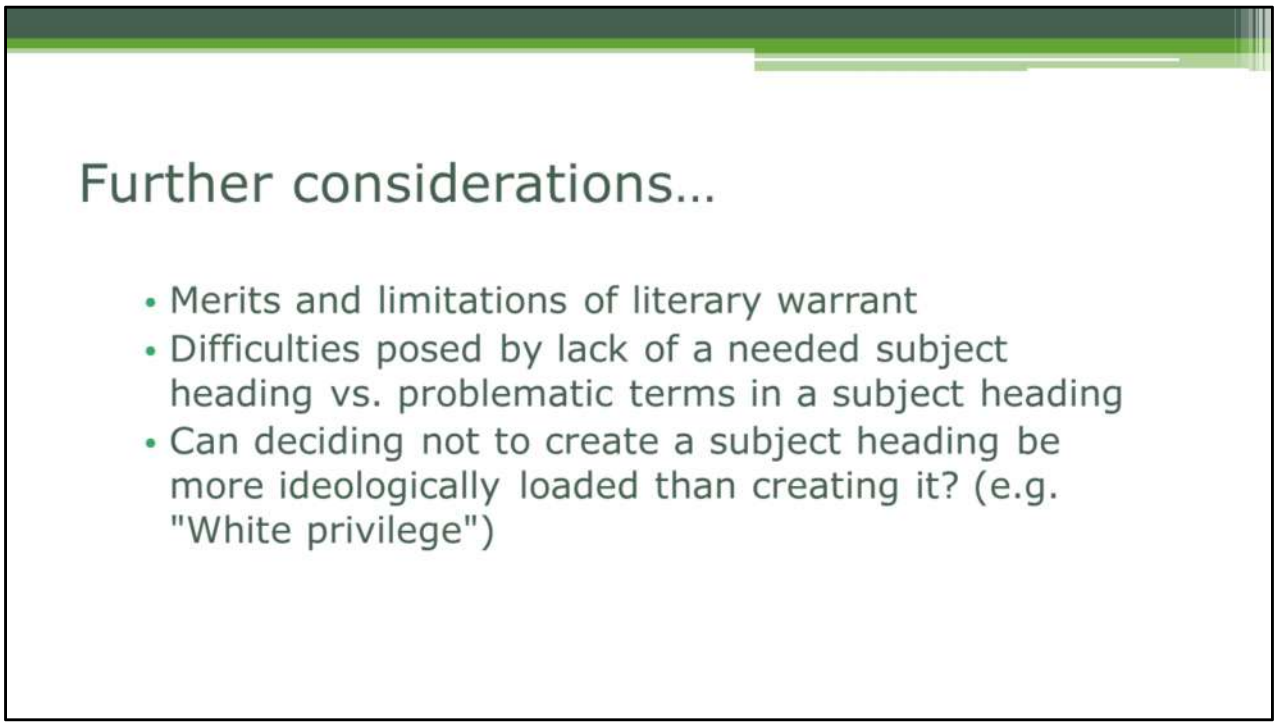
-In cataloging world, awareness of these two levels is varied
-Broadly, there is more awareness of problems with choices made within the structures
-The limitations and contradictions of the structures themselves is most clear in the case of controlled vocabulary—the need to identify the ONE preferred term (in essence, one character string) for a topic is the cause of much wrangling, which makes the inherent conundrum more noticeable



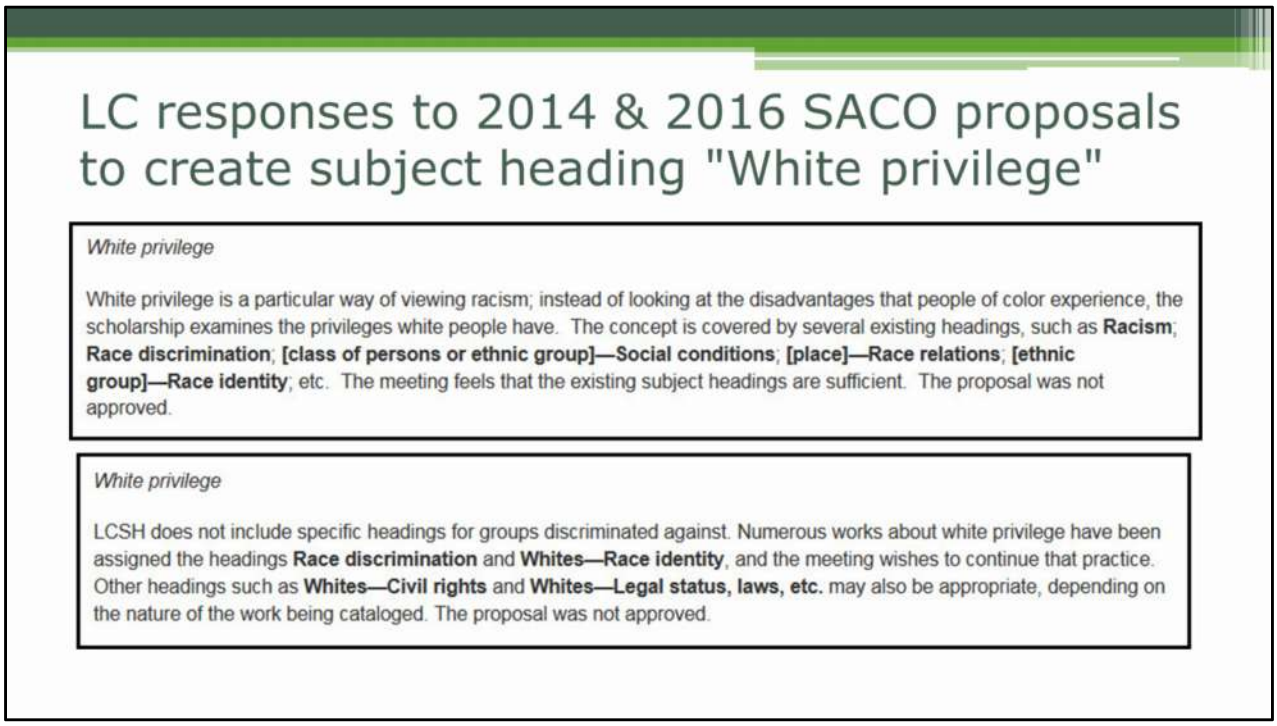
-Problem is not just in which terms are chosen to be subject headings, but in the fact that a preferred term must be chosen
-These choices can never be "neutral" (in practice, "neutral" means reflecting the most prevalent/dominant perspectives) or free of all bias
-Perhaps linked data will free us from the need to designate preferred terms, but libraries will still need to make fraught choices (for example, what terms to display to convey the subject content of search results)
-If those choices can more easily happen on a local level, great! But the choices and associated dilemmas won't all go away
-Seeking solutions to the structural contradictions/limitations/conundrums is essential, but it should never be an excuse to eschew struggles over choices made within the structures
-The two levels should not be counterposed—addressing the structural limitations and the examining choices made within existing structures are both permanent and essential parts of our work



-A “bad history” framing of problems with subject heading terminology choices is common—LCSH (like other cataloging standards) has a political and historical origin that remains embedded in it, it reflects the history of government policy and historical attitudes, including many injustices
-True enough, but insufficient—bias and social oppression reflected in controlled vocabulary are not just historical, not only in the past
-Language is an ever-changing moving target, of course we know that—but the changes aren’t just about the passage of time

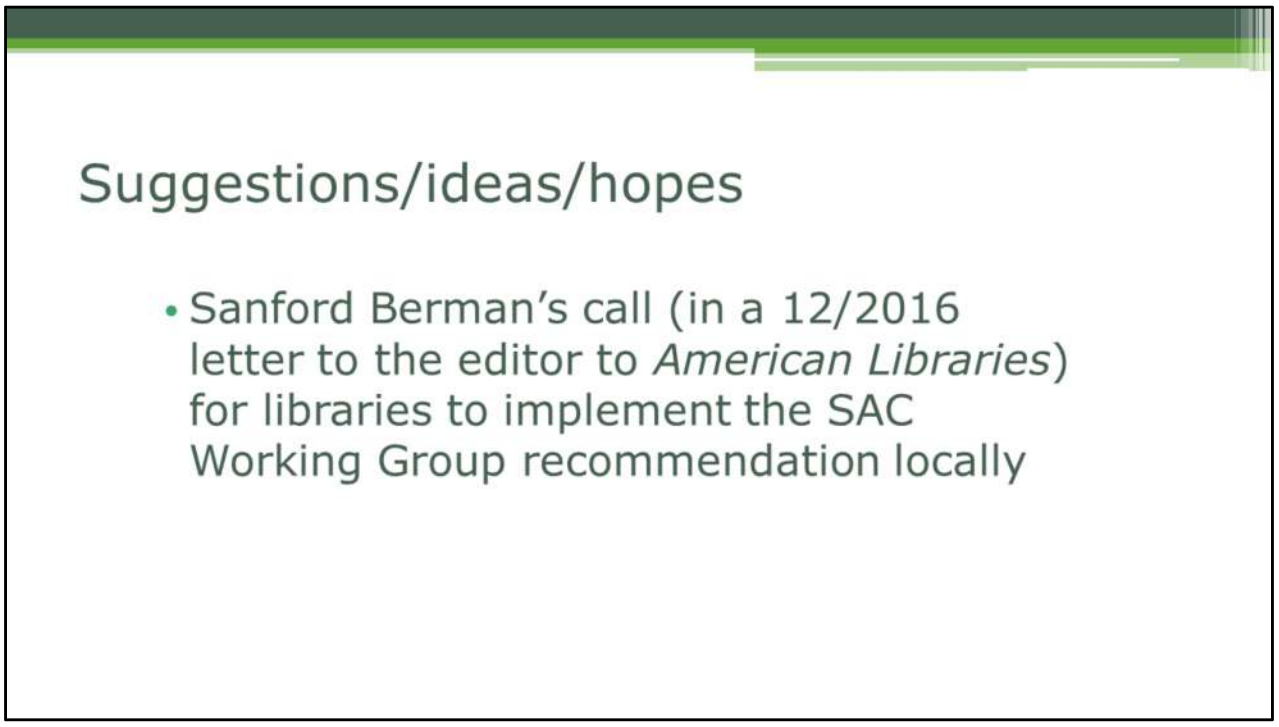


-Another intrinsic contradiction: Looking at literary warrant is crucial, but it also reinforces mainstream/dominant perspectives. Should "literary warrant" be broadened to "usage," beyond a focus on monographs? That could make LCSH more topical, useful, and responsive to many libraries' and users' needs.
-When a needed subject heading is lacking in LCSH, it can be added locally (with some additional challenges, because locally-applied headings usually aren't included in standard authority control practices). When an existing subject heading in LCSH is problematic, adding a local heading doesn't solve the problem, and the decision to delete an offensive subject heading means severing the (automatic) link to possible future revisions of the heading.

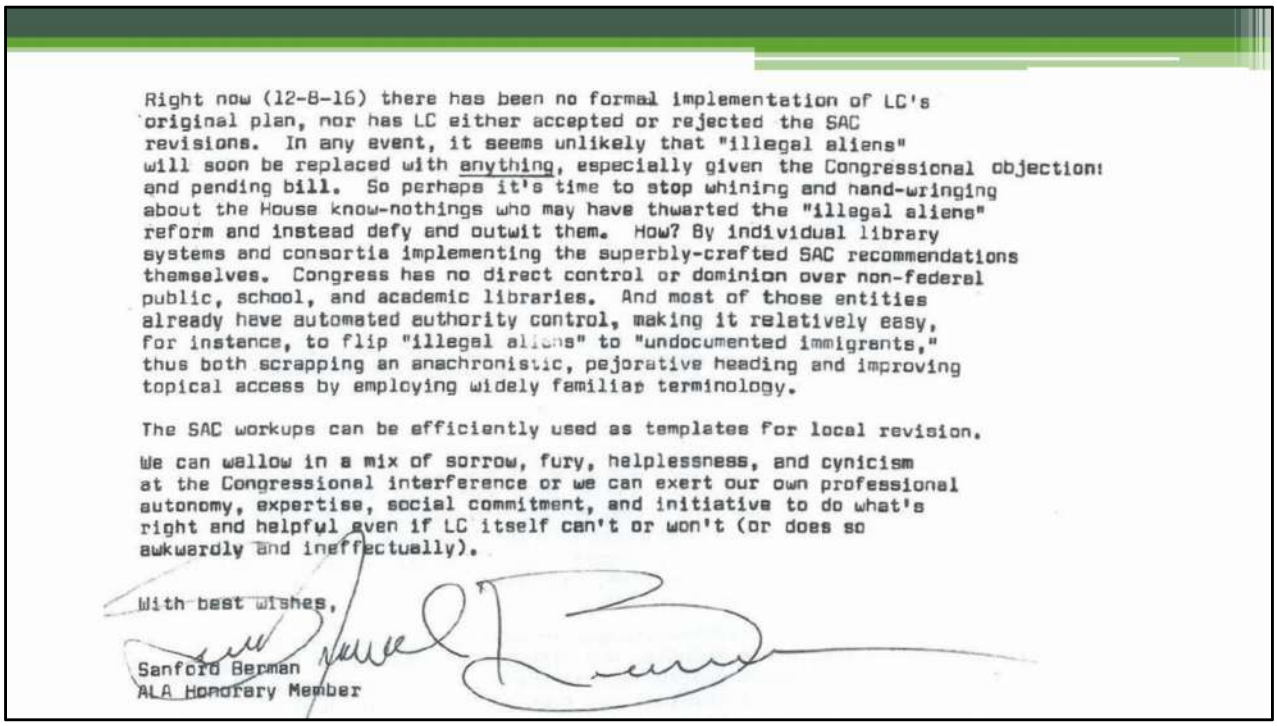


While debate about white privilege takes many forms (and clearly, disputes about whether it exists at all are widespread), a central dispute is whether it exists as a thing distinct from racism. An important part of these arguments is that white privilege is not just "a particular way of viewing racism" that "examines the privileges that white people have," but that a key component is the obliviousness and indifference to racism that white people can maintain. By not creating the subject heading, LC is effectively taking a side in these debates. Indeed, the arguments made in denying the proposals echo ones made by those who deny the existence of white privilege.

I've been thinking about these questions a lot, and I'm becoming convinced that in some cases, choosing not to create a subject heading ends up being more pointedly ideological than creating it would be. To use white privilege as an illustration, if the subject heading had been created, that could be seen as merely recognizing that authors write about and searchers seek resources on white privilege as distinct from (and not simply the inverse of) racism. Declining to create the heading goes beyond failing to recognize this distinction, in effect, because it suggests that authors and searchers who make it are wrong. (According to the logic of the refusal to create the heading, they might think otherwise, but what they're *really* discussing is race discrimination and white identity.)



-Sandy Berman recently wrote a letter to the editor to *American Libraries*, calling for libraries the SAC Working Group on their own
-Has not appeared in *American Libraries* yet, but keep an eye out for it
-If you follow me on Twitter, you've seen this already: https://twitter.com/aboutness/status/808729007852257280



Right now (12-8-16) there has been no formal implementation of LC's original plan, nor has LC either accepted or rejected the SAC revisions. In any event, it seems unlikely that "illegal aliens" will soon be replaced with anything, especially given the Congressional objection and pending bill. So perhaps it's time to stop whining and hand-wringing about the House know-nothings who may have thwarted the "illegal aliens" reform and instead defy and outwit them. How? By individual library systems and consortia implementing the superbly-crafted SAC recommendations themselves. Congress has no direct control or dominion over non-federal public, school, and academic libraries. And most of those entities already have automated authority control, making it relatively easy, for instance, to flip "illegal aliens" to "undocumented immigrants," thus both scrapping an anachronistic, pejorative heading and improving topical access by employing widely familiar terminology.

The SAC workups can be efficiently used as templates for local revision.

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's right and helpful even if LC itself can't or won't (or does so awkwardly and ineffectually).

With best wishes,

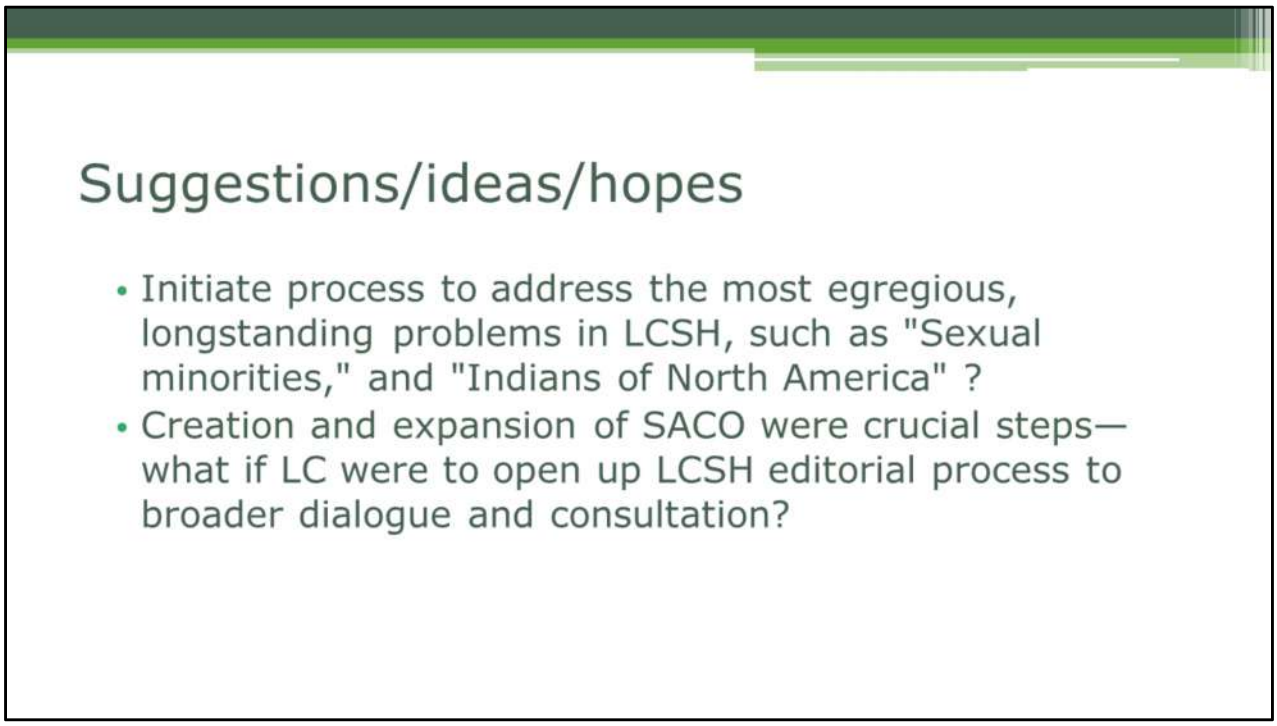
Sanford Berman
ALA Honorary Member

-The Working Group's recommendation was written with this possibility in mind
-Given my role in all this, it would be totally hypocritical for me not to do this in my library!
-But I can't do it on my own, my library is in a big consortium with a shared authority file
-I'm going to ask the consortium to consider it, but I don't expect it to be easy (Hello to any colleagues in PALS who are here today! Please work with me on this.)
-Shared authority files make deviation from national standards increasingly difficult, especially in cloud-based systems where it may be impossible to make local alterations to authority records
-Another reason we can't shrug off addressing problems in our "universal" controlled vocabulary structures

Suggestions/ideas/hopes

- Can the campaign around the LCSH "Illegal aliens" serve as a model?

-I realize that this might almost read as a punchline. The continuous drama, the threatened interference from Congress, the drawn-out suspense—obviously this shouldn't serve as a model!
-But seriously, what might be of value or more broadly applicable?



-There other areas of acute concern in LCSH that merit a comparable level of study, and there are people in the library community with a considerable level of expertise who might be willing to undertake it. Working groups under the aegis of SAC making recommendations to LC could be one possibility. The intensity and level of interest in the "Illegal aliens" saga suggests (to me, anyway) that tackling the most widely recognized issues must not be put off any longer.

-The LCSH editorial process could be improved (and its decisions probably subject to less criticism) if it were opened up to more library community involvement—not just making subject heading proposals through SACO and providing feedback on tentative lists, but also participating in the decision-making process.

Thank you!

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Cat picture!