

# Critical Cataloguing and Contradiction Analysis: Using Mao Zedong’s Dialectical Materialism to Address Classificatory Antagonisms

**Ryan Burley**

*Curtin University*

**ABSTRACT:** This article pioneers the application of Marxist theory in the field of critical cataloguing. I take the recent Library of Congress ‘Illegal aliens’ controversy as a case study to demonstrate how dialectical materialism—specifically Mao Zedong’s contradiction analysis—can serve as a useful approach for addressing ruptures in classificatory language. I identify three advantages to using contradiction analysis in critical cataloguing research. First, by giving equal attention to all aspects of a phenomenon, contradiction analysis accounts for the inherently biased nature of library classification systems. Second, by insisting that all phenomena are in motion from one state towards another, contradiction analysis accommodates the fluid and contextual nature of language. Third, contradiction analysis is not limited to a single discipline—it can be effectively applied alongside a range of other approaches, such as feminist theory, queer theory, and critical race theory. My analysis reveals how dialectical materialism can be applied both retrospectively and in future critiques of classificatory antagonisms. I also call for an extension of the challenge to the language of undocumented migration beyond the realm of library classification and into the field of legal discourse.

**Keywords:** dialectical materialism, Marxist theory, Mao Zedong, contradiction analysis, Library of Congress



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## Introduction

Critical cataloguing (CritCat) scholarship has shown that library classification systems are sites of struggle between dominant and subordinate discourses (Adler 2017; Fox 2015; Smiraglia 2015; Vaughan 2018). As language and culture shifts over time, the relationship between these dominant and subordinate aspects of a classification can become antagonistic. This antagonism manifests as a biased classification—what Emily Drabinski (2013) calls a “rupture” in classificatory language. Such classifications often result in the further marginalisation of already vulnerable people and groups. The mission of CritCat is to locate these ruptures and advocate for change. CritCat researchers employ methods such as domain analysis (Hjørland 2002) and subject ontogeny (Tennis 2012) to reveal the layers of meaning behind library classifications. They also engage with marginalised groups to bring subordinate narratives to the fore so that library classifications can be better aligned with the ethical standards of librarianship and with the broader principles of social justice (Watson 2020).

A range of paradigms are mobilised in CritCat scholarship including feminist theory, queer theory, and critical race theory (CRT). Olson (1998) adopts feminist spatial analyses to demonstrate how dominant narratives are privileged in library classification systems, while narratives that go against the mainstream are marginalised or “ghettoised.” In her 2007 study, Olson examines the traditional Aristotelian logic that underlies western knowledge organisation, alongside feminist critiques of this logic that highlight its tendency towards the construction of hierarchical, linear systems. From a queer theory perspective, Campbell (2000) illuminates the tensions affecting the suitability of subject access systems for gay and lesbian communities, where the ideological biases of both system designers and users inevitably influence the kinds of categories employed. Campbell’s analysis emphasises the instability and fluidity of categories, and the need for system designers to accommodate the changing nature of language. Focusing on the Dewey Decimal Classification, Furner (2007) mobilises critical race theory to analyse so-called “colour-blind” approaches to organising knowledge around race and ethnicity. Furner reveals that attempts to achieve neutrality in library classification perpetuate the dominant discourse of white supremacy. Instead of advocating for neutrality, Furner argues that moving towards racial justice in library classifications requires system designers to adopt explicitly anti-racist approaches.

What these analyses have in common is a concern that library users who encounter biased classifications and subject headings may accept these as neutral descriptions of the world devoid of any ideological slant, resulting in the reproduction of dominant narratives that further marginalise already vulnerable people within our communities. As Drabinski argues, when library workers fail to critically engage with the content of controlled vocabularies, “biased ideological stories continue to be ‘told’ by the organisational systems” (Drabinski 2013, 97). The effect of this is the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about race, gender, class and other socially constructed identities. This problem is compounded when members of vulnerable groups themselves encounter classifications that further marginalise and oppress them. Jodie Boyd (2022) argues that catalogue terms can either reinforce a library user’s sense of self as a welcome member of a community or ostracise the library user as an unwelcome Other. When exposed to official language like library classifications, marginalised people are likely to internalise what is said about them by dominant, mainstream culture to the extent that they come to believe that all

the negative, pejorative things that are said about them are true (Freire 1996). For example, Barbara Gittings recalls encountering harmful language while researching homosexuality at a time when the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) still categorised homosexuals and lesbians under ‘sexual perversion.’ “I was so anxious to get to the materials on homosexuality,” Gittings writes, “I didn’t even mind looking in categories like ‘perversion’ and ‘abnormal.’ *And I half believed them anyway*” (quoted in Adler 2015, 478 – emphasis added). Thus, when library classifications reflect dominant discourses, we can observe that they have the potential to reproduce harmful stereotypes about marginalised groups and legitimise their oppression.

One approach that has not been utilised in the CritCat field is Marxist theory. The Marxist paradigm has a great deal to offer when it comes to analysing not just matters of political economy but for undertaking intersectional critiques of a range of social phenomena. In this paper, I propose dialectical materialism—specifically Mao Zedong’s contradiction analysis—as a theoretical framework for performing CritCat investigations. Through his “Sinicisation” of western Marxist dialectics, Mao shows how the antagonism between contradictory aspects of a phenomenon creates the potential for a subordinate aspect to assume the dominant position, thus bringing about change (Tian 2019). I argue that contradiction analysis serves as a useful approach for addressing ruptures in classificatory language. I identify three advantages to using contradiction analysis in CritCat research. First, by giving equal attention to all aspects of a phenomenon, contradiction analysis accounts for the inherently biased nature of library classification systems. Second, by insisting that all phenomena are in perpetual motion, contradiction analysis accommodates the fluid and contextual nature of language. Finally, contradiction analysis is not limited to a single discipline—it can be effectively applied alongside feminist, queer, CRT and other approaches.

The focus of this paper is a recent controversy regarding the LCSH classification of migrant populations, particularly those within the United States. Since the publication of the scheme’s first edition in the early twentieth century, the term “Aliens” has been used in the LCSH to refer to people who are not citizens of the country in which they currently reside. In 1980, the heading “Aliens, illegal” first appeared and was subsequently adjusted to “Illegal aliens” in 1993 (Lo 2019). In 2016, a grass-roots movement to discontinue the use of the term ‘Illegal aliens’ in the LCSH and replace it with more sensitive language received a reactionary backlash from conservative lawmakers and media. This backlash was exacerbated by the Trump-era political climate in which the situation took place. The controversy demonstrates how biased, misrepresentative language in library classifications can cause harm to vulnerable people. It also shows how library classifications are inherently ideological in that they shape and are shaped by the cultural and political circumstances of the society that creates them. I begin this paper by giving an overview of Mao’s distinct approach to Marxist dialectics, accompanied by analysis of Mao’s ideas by Chinese scholars. I then turn to focus on the Library of Congress Subject Headings ‘Illegal aliens’ controversy to demonstrate the utility of contradiction analysis in CritCat scholarship. My purpose is not to break any new ground regarding the classification of migrant populations in the US; rather, I use the controversy as a case study to demonstrate how contradiction analysis can be applied when undertaking analyses of biased, unjust library classifications.

## Mao's Contradiction Analysis

First published in 1937 and then refined over the course of Mao's career, the essay *On Contradiction* addresses ideological rifts within the Communist Party of China (CPC), particularly dogmatism in Marxist theory and practice. 'Contradiction analysis' (矛盾分析法 – *maodun fenxifa*) is the standard term in the People's Republic of China for the approach to dialectical materialism that Mao puts forward in this essay. In this section, I present an overview of Mao's contradiction analysis, culminating in his unique treatment of antagonism as a catalyst for change.

In keeping with western Marxist dialectical materialism, Mao (2007) explains that contradiction is present in the development of all processes and phenomena, and that things are in a constant state of motion from one state towards another. Rates of development vary, and while phenomena may have the outward appearance of being at rest, contradictory internal processes are constantly occurring that push phenomena towards change. The insistence on motion and development is in direct opposition to what Mao calls the "metaphysical or vulgar evolutionist" worldview, which "sees things as isolated, static, and one-sided" (Zedong 2007, 68). The dialectical materialist outlook, on the other hand, sees things as interconnected, in constant motion, and composed of a plurality of forces acting with and against each other. This is the paradigmatic shift accomplished by Marx in his subversion of Hegelian dialectics. Marx's materialist transformation of Hegelian dialectics gave a practical purpose to an otherwise idealist method, with the capacity to be applied to real historical processes (Nanshi 2011). In breaking away from the idealism of Hegel and contemporary western philosophy generally, Marx's materialist dialectics insists that the ideal proceeds from the concrete; or, in other words, the spiritual, cultural, and political aspects of human existence stem from material conditions.

The basic ideas of dialectical materialism apply as much to the world of human social relations as they do to the physical universe. Indeed, a key aspect of Marx's approach to dialectics is to dismantle the barrier between nature and human society that had been erected by the western philosophical canon and bourgeois ideology (Ollman 2003). This understanding of the continuity between the social and the physical is also present in Mao's thought. Chenshan Tian (2019) argues that *tongbian* (通变 – change through continuity) is a crucial aspect of Mao's "Sinicisation" of western dialectical materialism. *Tongbian* is a concept derived from classical Chinese philosophy, in particular *The Book of Changes*, which formed the bedrock of Mao's early education. In *tongbian*, there is no separation between humanity and nature (Tian 2019). This insistence on the unity between humanity and nature—as opposed to the bourgeois doctrine of individualism that sees humanity as separate from and superior to nature—makes dialectical materialism an effective tool for examining social phenomena, since human social relations are treated as an intrinsic part of objective reality.

Dialectical materialism also emphasises the interconnectedness of all things. The unity and struggle of opposites, and the idea of change occurring due to the movement of internal processes, does not preclude the relationships between phenomena as they act upon each other. As Mao explains,

the world outlook of materialist dialectics holds that in order to understand the

development of a thing we should study it internally *and in its relations with other things*; in other words, the development of things should be seen as their internal and necessary self-movement, while each thing in its movement is interrelated with and interacts on the things around it (Zedong 2007, 69 – emphasis added).

Mao's point here is that, while we should pay close attention to the movement of contradictions within a given phenomenon, we must also consider the broader context in which these processes take place. Every process influences, and is influenced by, the processes surrounding it. Again, we see evidence of *tongbian* in Mao's thought. One of the significant aspects of *tongbian* is that "the manifold and diverse relationships of things (or events) to any other things (or events) are a matter of interconnectedness" (Tian 2019, 17). Focusing on the differences between western dialectics and Mao's own approach, Xu Quanxing (2015) reveals the tendency in western dialectics to focus on the internal struggle between opposites, while traditional Chinese dialectics puts emphasis "on the interdependence, mutual supplementation and mutual transformation of opposites" (Quanxing 2015, 58). This broader view is present in Mao's dialectical materialism. Through his Sinicisation of Marxist dialectics, then, Mao insists that all phenomena are composed of contradictory internal processes, that the development of these processes has the potential to facilitate change, and that phenomena are interrelated and act upon each other.

A key component of Mao's contradiction analysis is the notion that each contradiction is composed of a principal aspect and one or more secondary aspects. Before elaborating on this, it is necessary to focus on how English translation tends to distort Mao's precise meaning here. Tian explains how, in the English translation of *On Contradiction*, "such expressions as "leading and decisive role," "secondary and subordinate position," "is determined," and "dominant position," etc., tend to lead people to the old issue of which determines which" and can lead to "problems of causal reductionism and simple determinism" (2019, 27). However, Chinese scholars insist that this is a symptom of western thinking that fails to consider Mao's meaning within the context of Chinese thought. The primary difference between Chinese and Western modes of thinking is that Western thought takes the "concept" as its basic unit, while the basic unit of Chinese thought is the "image" (Nanshi 2011). The Chinese "imagistic" mode of thinking places things together horizontally and looks for changes and differences, while the western "conceptual" mode of thinking sees things in isolation and attempts to pierce through them. The result of this mode of thinking is that,

in Chinese dialectics, what we call contradiction is not expressed as opposition between "the one" and "the many," *noumenon* and phenomenon, or reason and perception, i.e., opposition between two things at two different levels, but as opposition between two tendencies and positions at the same level" (Nanshi 2011, 88).

Thus, when Mao speaks of principal and secondary aspects, it is important to see these as existing in a horizontal relationship, rather than the hierarchical, deterministic configuration that characterises western thought.

With this in mind, we can return our attention to the importance of the principal and secondary aspects of a contradiction in Mao's contradiction analysis. The principal aspect of a contradiction

is that which forms a phenomenon's outward appearance or, in other words, is the most apparent attribute of a phenomenon. Secondary aspects exist alongside the principal aspect, but the effect they have on the overall shape of the phenomenon is less pronounced. Mao deviates from western Marxist thought with his rejection of the three (or four) laws of dialectics. The effect of this is that, in Mao's reading of dialectical materialism, there is a continuity of contradictory aspects (Tian 2019), as opposed to the separation between aspects that is characteristic of western dialectics. Another point where Mao deviates from western dialectics is by insisting that, under certain conditions, the secondary aspect(s) of a phenomenon can become dominant and bring about change. Again, this approach to dialectics is influenced by traditional Chinese thought. As Quanxing explains, "Mao combined the theory of identity in materialist dialectics with the traditional idea that "Things that oppose each other also complement each other," developing the idea that opposites oppose, depend upon and change into each other under certain conditions" (2015, 59). What are these conditions under which the secondary aspects of a contradiction can assume the dominant position? For Mao, the answer is under conditions of antagonism.

Antagonism between contradictory aspects is the linchpin of Mao's contradiction analysis, as it is the process and resolution of an antagonism that facilitates change. As indicated above, contradiction is inherent in all physical and social phenomena. For the most part, contradictory aspects exist in a non-antagonistic state. However, antagonism arises when the secondary aspect gains momentum and begins to challenge the status of the dominant aspect. Mao also puts this process in terms of old versus new:

In each thing there is contradiction between its new and its old aspects, and this gives rise to a series of struggles with many twists and turns. As a result of these struggles, the new aspect changes from being minor to being major and rises to predominance, while the old aspect changes from being major to minor and gradually dies out. And the moment the new aspect gains dominance over the old, the old thing changes qualitatively into a new thing (Zedong 2007, 89).

Mao's primary focus here is revolution, with the new socialist dictatorship of the proletariat displacing the old capitalist dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Given the universality of contradiction, however, we can observe this process taking place in other social phenomena. The second part of this paper will focus on a recent controversy in library cataloguing to show how the antagonism between contradictory aspects of a subject heading acts as a catalyst for change.

## **Contradiction Analysis and Critical Cataloguing**

In this section, I examine the development of the antagonism between dominant and subordinate discourses in the Library of Congress 'Illegal aliens' subject heading controversy. I demonstrate how Mao's contradiction analysis can be applied to the CritCat process and show how the struggle between dominant and subordinate aspects of a contradiction gives impetus to change, reaction, and an eventual resolution of the antagonism. In keeping with the basic principles of Mao's dialectics the analysis will show that, although a resolution to the antagonism has been achieved, the contradiction remains. My application of contradiction analysis demonstrates how CritCat scholars can use Marxist theory to accommodate the ever-changing nature of language

and culture, as well as the inherently ideological character of library classification.

The CritCat process typically begins with the identification of an antagonism in classificatory language. With the LCSH ‘Illegal aliens’ case, the antagonism between the dominant and subordinate discourses contained within the subject heading (that is, the primary and secondary aspects of the contradiction) was first highlighted in 2014 by Dartmouth College student Melissa Padilla (Baron and Gross 2021). Of course, this not to say that the antagonism first arose at this moment in time. In fact, the antagonism between dominant and subordinate narratives in a classification term manifest every time the term is encountered on the library catalogue. The extent to which each manifestation of the antagonism becomes a catalyst for change, however, depends on the individual library user's capacity to challenge the dominant narrative. For example, in her study of the historical treatment of subject headings relating to homosexuality, Adler (2015) reveals how many LGBTQIA+ library users who encountered biased catalogue terms in the past felt powerless to challenge them. In such cases the antagonism is resolved by the dominant discourse maintaining its position as the primary aspect of the contradiction. With the LCSH ‘Illegal aliens’ case, however, Padilla, along with the CoFIRED immigrant student advocacy group, were able to challenge the Library of Congress and advocate for more socially just terminology.

Padilla’s activism revealed the antagonism between the legalistic aspect of the LC’s subject heading ‘Illegal aliens’ and the growing resistance to this terminology in broader society. CritCat scholars have shown the power attributed to medical and legal discourses in the politics of classification, and how adherence to these discourses regularly obstructs the empathetic and socially just representation of vulnerable, marginalised people (Bowker and Star 2000; Fox 2015). In their petition to the Library of Congress, Padilla, the members of CoFIRED, and allies within the Dartmouth College library team cited news reports, academic papers and the nationwide “Drop the I-Word” (DTIW) campaign as evidence that “undocumented immigrants” was rapidly becoming the preferred terminology throughout the US (Baron and Gross 2021). Starting in 2010, the DTIW campaign targeted media outlets in the United States imploring them to refrain from using the word “illegal” when referring to immigrants and asylum seekers. Insisting on the use of the term “illegal” when referring to these groups “supports suspicion and distrust and fuels the assumption that immigrants are responsible for serious crimes” (Thomas 2020, 277). In response to the campaign, several large media outlets pledged to discontinue use of the word, with the Associated Press removing the term from its style guide in 2013 (*Drop the I-Word* 2017).

Despite the reasoning of Padilla’s petition, the LC rejected the proposal on the grounds that “Illegal aliens is an inherently legal heading, and as such the preference is to use the legal terminology” (Library of Congress 2014). The LC cited Title 8 of the U.S. Code, which deals with “Aliens and nationality,” and the ninth edition of *Black’s Law Dictionary* to justify its decision. *Black’s Law Dictionary* defines “Alien” as follows:

A person who resides within the borders of a country but is not a citizen or subject of that country; a person not owing allegiance to a particular nation. In the United States, an alien is a person who was born outside the jurisdiction of the United States, who is subject to some foreign government, and who has not been

naturalized under U.S. law (Garner 2009, 84).

This definition is adequate within legal discourse. However, the language used becomes antagonistic when we consider that the LCSH is used throughout the world in public and university libraries that serve a broad spectrum of users for whom legalistic discourse is not necessarily a priority. In common parlance, it is more likely for the term “alien” to be used in reference to the idea of extraterrestrials, especially within the context of science fiction. This implies a specifically *nonhuman* aspect and is often associated with invasion or some kind of violent threat (Cunningham-Parmeter 2011; Thomas 2020). This connotation serves the interests of reactionary groups that characterise immigrants and asylum seekers as a threat to the (white) citizenry, along with the mobilisation of deliberately hostile terms like “swarm,” “invasion,” and “flood” (Cunningham-Parmeter 2011; McGuire 2019). Fox (2015) shows how legal discourse, which is reflected in library classification systems, is leveraged to justify the mistreatment of people with non-cisheteronormative sex and gender identities. In similar fashion, the characterisation of immigrants and asylum seekers as “aliens” is a tactic of dehumanisation that legitimises the mistreatment of these already vulnerable people. What we are faced with in the LSCH ‘Illegal aliens’ controversy, then, is the antagonism between legal discourse as the dominant aspect and the discourse of social and racial justice as the subordinate aspect of the contradiction. In this initial action of the ‘Illegal aliens’ case, legal discourse maintains its dominant position in a reaction against advocates of subordinate narratives.

The second phase of the LCSH “Illegal aliens” controversy once again illustrates the antagonism between dominant and subordinate aspects of the classification. Following the LC’s initial rejection of the proposed changes, Padilla and colleagues sought assistance from Sanford Berman and formulated a resolution with the American Library Association. As a result of this pressure, the Library of Congress agreed to adopt “Noncitizens” and “Unauthorized immigration” as replacement headings in early 2016. While the petitioners felt that these terms were still not ideal, they were nonetheless accepted as an improvement on the overtly pejorative ‘Illegal aliens’ terminology (Baron and Gross, 2021). However, the LC’s decision to abandon the use of ‘Illegal aliens’ as a subject heading was soon the target of a reactionary backlash by elements of the right-wing US media, as well as unprecedented intervention by Republican lawmakers who again appealed to legal discourse in their opposition to the LC’s proposed changes. Conservative elements in US Congress—bolstered by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States—threatened to interfere with the LC’s funding, which eventually led the LC to reverse its decision and retain ‘Illegal aliens’ in its subject headings. Again, we see the reassertion of the dominant aspect of the contradiction, although in this instance the dominance of legal discourse is reasserted through an escalation to the level of coercion, or what Slavoj Žižek (2008) calls objective violence—a concept that has also been explored in relation to CritCat scholarship (Adler and Tennis 2013; Tennis 2013). The LC issued a survey in late 2016 to gather feedback on the proposed changes and then withheld the results of this survey for the remainder of Donald Trump’s time in office, effectively adopting a “wait and see” approach (Baron and Gross 2021). Thus, we see that the antagonism between dominant and subordinate aspects of a contradiction does not occur within a vacuum. While Padilla and her colleagues drew inspiration from activist movements throughout the US to plead their case, advocates of the dominant legal discourse took advantage of the wave of anti-immigrant sentiments that washed through the US with the rise of Donald Trump.



Since contradiction analysis emphasises the interconnectedness of social phenomena, focusing on the broader political context is necessary to gain a full understanding of the LCSH ‘Illegal aliens’ controversy. Thus, it is informative to consider the scenario within the context of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, which “targeted Latinos via racist and xenophobic rhetoric from its inception” (Canizales and Vallejo 2021, 151). This racist rhetoric continued throughout the Trump regime. At a White House media conference in May 2018 Trump insisted that “You wouldn’t believe how bad these people [i.e., Latino immigrants] are. These aren’t people, these are animals, and we’re taking them out of the country at a level and at a rate that’s never happened before” (quoted in Canizales and Vallejo, 2021, 155). This animalistic rhetoric is designed to dehumanise an enemy so that it is easier to perpetrate violence against them. If the person committing violence sees their victim not simply as a ‘bad’ human but as *less than* human, then not only does violence become easier to commit but this violence becomes justifiable. Trump’s racist rhetoric had a demonstrable impact on real life violence experienced by Latinos in the United States. US counties that hosted a Trump rally in 2016 saw a 226 percent increase in hate crimes, while in 2018 there was a 21 percent increase in hate crimes across the nation that specifically targeted Latinos (Canizales and Vallejo 2021). When we consider the conservative reaction against the LC’s decision to change its subject headings related to ‘Illegal aliens’ within the context of this orchestrated political campaign, we have a clear example of how related social phenomena apply pressure to the antagonism between aspects of a contradiction. Given the Trump regime’s desire to dehumanise Latinos and undocumented migrants, the LC could not be seen to favour a subordinate narrative characterised by social and racial justice. Thus, it was imperative that conservative lawmakers reassert the legal narrative to bolster the administration’s anti-immigrant stance.

With the election of Joe Biden as US President and the subsequent shifts within Congress, the LC finally implemented changes to the ‘Illegal aliens’ subject heading and related headings, replacing the terminology with ‘Illegal immigration’ and ‘Noncitizens’ in 2021. This resolution to the antagonism between dominant and subordinate aspects is far from definitive. Although the removal of the pejorative term ‘aliens’ is a positive step, the retention of the term ‘Illegal’ is a concession to the dominant legal discourse. The new terminology is a compromise that does not do full justice to migrant communities within the US. Also, we should once again consider the broader political context surrounding this issue. Although the Biden regime is not characterised by the openly racist rhetoric of Trump’s presidency, material conditions for undocumented migrants both entering and already within the US have not improved significantly with the change in leadership. The operation of deliberately punitive Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facilities has expanded under Biden’s leadership, despite Biden’s campaign promise to close them (Cho 2021; Yang 2022). These ICE detention facilities have received widespread criticism for the egregious human rights abuses perpetrated against detainees (Becerra et al. 2022; Diaz et al. 2022; Kohlmeyer, 2022). Migrant communities within the US, particularly those incarcerated in detention camps, are therefore still subject to oppression and violence at the hands of the state. People attempting to seek asylum in the US are also treated with extreme hostility at the border. In July 2023, a Texas State Trooper whistleblower revealed that barrels wrapped in razor wire were being deployed in the Rio Grande to deter asylum seekers, that refugees had sustained horrific injuries from these devices, and that troopers had been ordered to push refugees—including children—back into the river

(Oladipo 2023). Thus, we see that that the contradiction remains despite a resolution of the antagonism between its various aspects. Additionally, the unsatisfactory nature of the resolution, as well as the potential for political tides within the US to veer back towards reactionary xenophobia, means that there is always the possibility for the antagonism to resurface.

What this application of contradiction analysis also reveals is that a truly just resolution of the ‘Illegal aliens’ library classification requires a challenge to the existing legal discourse—a task somewhat more monumental than a petition to change a Library of Congress subject heading. The “Illegal aliens” term is used uncritically throughout US legal discourse and carries metaphorical connotations that perpetuate the widespread racial vilification of migrants, particularly those from Mexico (Cunningham-Parmeter 2011). Challenging this problematic language in legal discourse would involve an illumination of the darker side of the basic principles upheld by the United States’ legal system (e.g., nativism, white supremacy, and Manifest Destiny) which would undoubtedly cause an even greater reaction among conservative forces. Scholars such as Cunningham-Parmeter (2011) and Murthy (2013) have shed some light on this aspect of US legal discourse, with some suggestions for alternative terminology. However, what is needed is an organised, unified campaign—such as that mobilised by Padilla and her various colleagues and allies—within the US legal sphere. In the interests of moving toward broader racial justice in the US and elsewhere, activists within both the library and legal professions must unify their efforts and challenge the dominant discourse with clear, anti-racist intent.

## Conclusion

This paper shows that the use of a Marxist theoretical framework need not limit the focus of a study to matters of political economy. Rather, Marxist theory can be mobilised to undertake intersectional critiques of a broad range of social phenomena. Mao’s contradiction analysis sees social phenomena as being composed of dominant and subordinate aspects that exist in a horizontal relationship where the dominant aspect has the greatest influence on the phenomenon’s outward appearance. As language and culture shifts, the relationship between these aspects can become antagonistic, which opens up the possibility for change. The development of an antagonism is contextual and should be understood as an interconnected process that shapes and is shaped by the surrounding political, cultural and economic environment. I have shown how dialectical materialism can inform our understanding of the CritCat process by mapping Mao’s contradiction analysis onto the development of the LCSH “Illegal aliens” controversy. Using this case study, I have demonstrated how subordinate narratives of racial and social justice can challenge a dominant narrative—in this instance legal discourse—to bring about qualitative change. This is not a straightforward process, however, as reactionary forces may attempt to reassert the dominant aspect of a contradiction.

In addition to this retrospective function, contradiction analysis may also be of use to those undertaking challenges to problematic library classifications in the present. It is my hope that this paper might be of use for future CritCat research and advocacy. Mao insists that the advantage of dialectical materialist analysis lies in giving equal weight to both sides of a phenomenon. By using contradiction analysis to consider both the dominant and subordinate aspects of an antagonistic classification, we can better anticipate the reaction of forces that may wish to

maintain the status quo. Such an approach allows for greater manoeuvrability in CritCat activism, which may lead to better, more efficient outcomes.

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