Tentative Supplement to (the History of) Classification: Librarians of Color and Operationalizing Solutions to Deconstructionist Critique

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Abstract

As interdisciplinarity becomes more ubiquitous within academia, information professionals are grappling with how to renegotiate reductive and oppressive classification structures. Librarians of color, however, have been altering these structures since their implementation to better serve their communities. This paper highlights two examples of such renegotiations, and explores the implications for implementing their methodologies into mainstream library praxis. Dorothy Porter's supplement to the Dewey Decimal System and the Brian Deer Classification system both offer operationalizable solutions to concerns contemporary information science has with cultivating useful and equitable classification systems.

Keywords

Libraries, curation, black librarianship, indigenous librarianship, classification theory

When meditating on the role libraries played in his childhood in South Africa, Simon Gikandi distills a fairly prominent modern perception of the library which has emerged as deconstructionist, post-colonial critical approaches become more ubiquitous. “My faith in the library as the custodian of culture and civilization was premised on what now appeared an unforgivable blindness – the belief that libraries were autonomous, objective fountains of knowledge. Enchanted by books and the buildings that housed them, one could easily forget that libraries were often institutions of power, that they had always been associated with the powerful” (Gikandi, 2015, p. 12). The ways in which modern libraries operate as institutions of power is seen most clearly in the classification infrastructures¹ which were developed and almost universally instituted during the nineteenth century. Twenty-first century information science presents a more nuanced understanding of classification systems, such as the understanding that the world – natural and social – is so complex, multi-layered, and overlapping that universality is impossible, and attempts to construct universal classification systems often reflect oppressive institutional biases (Maciel, 2006, p. 47). Such a perspective evokes some anxiety amongst information professionals about their role in the wake of such realizations, particularly considering the reconfiguration of information due to technological innovation within a global society. However, recent discussions in information science about the overhaul of nineteenth century classification infrastructures are predated by decades of work on the part of librarians and cataloguers of color, who from the onset have had to renegotiate these infrastructures in order to accurately represent and organize knowledge by, for, or about their communities. In looking to past praxis which mainstream information science previously dismissed or ignored, we can find operationalizable solutions to the questions which information professionals are seeking answers for today.

The modern North American public library developed within a specific social and economic context. Late nineteenth century tax subsidies funded circulating subscription as part of an endeavor to provide “useful knowledge” to the public (Wiegand, 2007, p. 536). When the ALA (American Library Association) began in 1876, the stated goal was to curate “the best reading for the greatest number at least cost.” The professionalization of librarianship focused mostly on the second two of these mandates – “greatest number at least cost” – by developing access schema and collection management systems. After Melville Dewey’s School of Library Service opened in 1887, many of his students became cataloguers who helped transition social, circulating libraries into public libraries by instituting his classification system. This endeavor was greatly aided by Andrew Carnegie, who between 1881 and 1917 spent over fifty million dollars building over 2,000 public libraries across Canada and the United States (p. 537). The dissemination of Melville’s students across Carnegie’s libraries allowed for the Dewey classification system to access and organize the institution of public libraries in North America from the onset. In this way, by the First World War public libraries were numerous and standardized, intrinsically tied with the Dewey Decimal system.

¹ Though there are other classification schema which also greatly influenced the way librarians and cataloguers organize knowledge, for the purposes of this paper I focus on the Dewey Decimal system.

Though the Dewey system endeavored towards universality and neutrality, more recent scholarship has shown how it reflects biased ideological mindsets (Beghtol, 1997, p. 92-3). From the Christian-centric organization of religion to a now obsolete understanding of how technology operates in everyday life, critiques of the Dewey decimal classification contain a volume and breadth too impractical to detail here. Despite critique, however, these classification systems have a far-reaching effects. For example, as Lisa Gitelman has demonstrated, the organization of predominate online scholarly resources such as JSTOR were developed with Dewey in mind (2014, p. 75). Additionally, understanding the genesis of these classification schema as the Dewey Decimal system only complicates the way information professionals relate to and use digital infrastructures in libraries today.

The reductive aspects of libraries' classification infrastructures is only exacerbated when interrogating how they have historically categorized racialized authors, topics, and volumes. For example, the presumption of predominantly white, male classification creators that there is no valuable knowledge from people of color is clearly illuminated in the Dewey classifications of "Negro Question:" almost all² aspects of African American life fit under the decimal 325.26, a category under "immigration" (Helton, 2019, p. 103). Moreover, as Duarte and Belarde-Lewis observe, classification systems can disguise topics as well as conflate them: "uncomfortable information can be hidden behind inappropriate subject headings: for example the use of terms like "Aborigines, Australia - Treatment" for works which might more appropriately receive the heading "Genocide" (2015, p. 681). Through such misleading 'descriptive' headings and the homogenization of marginalized communities, classification enables and propagates oppression.

As digital infrastructures become more ubiquitous in a library context, the question of what it means to classify knowledge becomes only more complicated. As Maria Maciel observes, "this is a hypertextual era, in which the speed and multiplicity of information explicitly de-authorizes and destabilishes the very idea of classification, demanding a reshaping of knowledge beginning from a more open, dialogical, and even paradoxical perspective" (2006, p. 28.) This has led to anxiety on the part of information professionals about technology overtaking their roles as the custodians of knowledge. Articles about questioning the "future of librarianship" or asking questions of how to reclassify or re-understand the way classification infrastructures can organize knowledge abound. Such consternation is not new: since humanities scholarship became more interdisciplinary, particularly at the end of the twentieth century, the librarians have been calling for "radical changes in classificatory prac-

² The specific labels which Dewey categorized outside of 325.6 are "Vocal music—Negro minstrelsy and plantation songs," "Slavery," "Education of special classes," "Negro troops in the U. S. Civil War," "the 13th and 14th Amendments," "Household personnel," "Race ethnology," "Mental characteristics as influenced by race," and "Suffrage." These topics reflect both a stereotype of Afro-American cultures and African American communities' status as marginal to mainstream (white) American society. For example, "Negro minstrelsy and plantation song" reflects the clownish musician stereotype of African American people popularized during the Jim Crow era, while the term "special classes" separates African American populations from what is 'normal,' effectively validating a polarization between different racialized communities in the United States.

tice” (qt. in Szostak, 2008, p. 326). The foundational classification infrastructure of North American librarianship is faulty, forcing information professionals today to grapple with both how to mitigate the deficiencies of this system and how to work with infrastructures built off of the Dewey Decimal system after the nineteenth century.

The crux is then twofold: library classification systems are ill suited to facilitate information organization in a digital age of interdisciplinary perspectives, and library classification systems propagate inequality. Both of these issues require librarians to shift the way they conceptualize and justify the need for classification infrastructures, and as a result theories about potential avenues for reclassification and the potential for digital tools enable them pervade information science today. However, librarians of color have already been altering standardized classification schema which homogenize and colonize their heritage and cultures. Almost as soon as such categorizations were instituted, the practicalities of librarianship by and for marginalized communities resisted them. Looking to the solutions which librarians of color have found to mitigate the deficiencies within the Dewey system offers productive venues for present-day information professionals. In particular, the practice of localizing classification infrastructure, networking those local infrastructures, and the need for embodied or personal knowledge when classifying knowledge offer productive avenues to renegotiate classification infrastructures. Such a perspective, furthermore, reveals the continued need for thoughtful librarianship, which uses digital tools in creating classification infrastructures but is not replaced by them.

One prominent example is Dorothy Porter, the inaugural curator of Howard University’s Negro Collection. Blackness and black people’s experiences are unsurprisingly given short shrift in the Dewey Decimal system, and Porter developed a “Tentative Supplementary Classification Scheme,” for her collection in order to mitigate the deficiencies in the Dewey Decimal system. This entailed shifting topics to different sections of the library and curating additional subsections for the ongoing publication of works by and about black people. Porter’s reconfiguring of the Dewey classification system to fit her needs as “Negro Librarian” speaks to the history of librarians localizing and personalizing so-called universal classification systems. There are epistemological implications for such (re) cataloging praxis: as Helton observes, “while refusing to collapse works under the “Negro Question,” Porter and her colleagues also reframed that question” (2019, p. 105). Moving black literature, poetry, biography, and other texts to its subject specialization pushed back against the homogenization of blackness seen throughout the Dewey’s system in Carnegie’s libraries.

One can further see the cultivation of localized classification infrastructures in the work of indigenous cataloguers and librarians. The terms “Native American” and “Indian” reflect a colonial history which erases the agency and diversity of indigenous communities, so classification infrastructures which depend on these imprecise terms leads to “categorical misunderstanding” of the realities of indigenous communities, both historically and today (Duarte and Belarde-Lewis, 2015, p. 681). In eschewing Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR) to accurately and honestly reflect the names

of indigenous communities and cultures, indigenous librarians reconfigure the bibliographic world at an institutional level, doing valuable epistemological work to de-colonize the archives which disguise their histories. One example of this is the Brian Deer Classification system: “Deer constructed specific cataloging systems for a number of smaller libraries, never seeking to build a universal system, but rather preserving the specificity of systems for particular Indigenous locales” (p. 693). This system, while in English, prioritizes Indigenous terminologies and names for topics relevant to specific communities. It further offers the tools for specialized indigenous collections to develop classification schema particular to their needs through subject heading curation with a focus on the relationships between people, animals, and indigenous land.

Dorcas Fellows, director of the Dewey classification catalogue in the early 1930s, refused to let Porter publish her “Tentative Supplementary Classification Scheme,” for fear it “would quickly result in destroying all standardization” (Helton, 2019, p. 106). However, classification theory is catching up to this work. Porter’s rejection of essentialism relates to the work of Bruno Latour, who – nearly a century later – argues against the complete deconstruction of pre-existing classifications and instead for a close attention to the “many participants [which] are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence” (2004, p. 246). Similarly, with recent pushes towards interdisciplinarity, there is less of a tendency for “purification” classification, and more of an embrace of the “bewildering variety of matters of concern” which make up “matters of fact” (2004, p. 247). Imposing classifications onto a chaotic world is not necessarily arbitrary or unethical, though classification systems are fated to be localized, incomplete, and biased. Classifications are ephemeral, situated historically, developed from patterns of activity, and informed by preexisting relationships, making classification “a spatial, temporal, or spatiotemporal segmentation of the world” (Bowker and Star, 1999, p. 149). Such a perspective is self-evident when the bias is against you, and your collections are literally segmented from mainstream (white) society. The need for localization is seen particularly in the audiences Porter and Deer sought to serve. The function of being marginalized is such that your experiences are assumed to not be universal, and only relevant to those within your community.

However, just because Porter and Deer served specific marginalized communities did not mean that there were no avenues for knowledge sharing. Porter facilitated a national library for blackness by sharing her classification system with other institutions and relating her knowledge to other librarians of color who were seeking to illuminate the work of black people within their collections. Porter communicated extensively with researchers as well, offering lists of relevant resources. In doing so, she “established conduits between different sites of black textuality” allowing people to recover and reorder the way blackness is conceived in institutional archives (Helton, 2019, p. 112). This network, which exists in American Antiquarian Society among others, demonstrates infrastructures which reclassified through communication, not a singular, universal database. Indigenous cataloguers and librarians have also had to reimagine the way knowledge is shared, considering the “ways the documents and knowledge artifacts about their peoples cohere and interrelate, and forge

partnerships for building systems that reflect, as appropriate, Indigenous epistemologies and local needs” (Duarte and Belarde-Lewis, 2015, p. 679). This is seen in Deer’s catalogue, which while sharing indigenous knowledge primarily for local communities, also translates the correct terminology for outside visitors. In these ways, networks of communication mitigate the potentially restrictive aspects of local classification infrastructures.

An essential aspect of the process of networked classification infrastructures is the embodied and subject knowledge librarians of color had of their communities and collections. For indigenous records, part of this is the language knowledge necessary to accurately collocate people, places, and things. Deer created a system of topics relevant to First Nations communities through a “deep knowledge about First Nations histories, terminologies, and worldviews” (Duarte and Belarde-Lewis, 2015, p. 693). The networks mentioned above are in part developed because of this embodied knowledge and engagement. By knowing the communities they were serving, because they were a part of those communities, Porter and Deer were able to know what was relevant, and the people who needed that information were able to reach out. As Duarte and Belarde-Lewis observe, “one has to experience first-hand that which he or she is cataloging in order to accurately represent it within a greater organizational system” (2015, p. 694-95).

The tension between the need to localize and link information schema is already seen in the efforts, and is productively mitigated within those efforts, of indigenous and black librarians. Out of the need to unpack the reductive and homogenizing boxes imperialist and racist classification infrastructures pigeonholed them in, these librarians offer productive methodologies for the future of classification development. Furthermore, the practices of these librarians demonstrate the need for embodied and subject knowledge when cataloguing for communities, and how technology is not a panacea for thoughtful librarianship. So-called inconsistency between institutional catalogues can also be understood as flexibility: evidence that as institutions continue to dismantle oppressive infrastructures and that there is maneuverability in how information is categorized and presented. The Brian Deer Classification system and Tentative Supplementary Classification Scheme are only two examples of the ways in which librarians of and for marginalized communities have renegotiated established classification infrastructures for their needs. Their work asks us to assess classification infrastructures not only as disciplining mechanisms, but as avenues which can operate to conserve knowledge and “a condition of criticism, revision, and change” (Helton, 2019, p. 101). Continual criticism, revision, and changes enables information professionals to conceive of classification structures as vibrant and important as the information they facilitate, and to continue their work of disseminating that information in as open an equitable ways as possible.

There’s a dangerous tendency for the privileged to appropriate the work of marginalized people and present these solutions as their own. In suggesting that we look to the history of librarianship in the margins, I hope it is clear that I am suggesting the opposite: learn from librarians of color, and give them the credit they deserve. When tracing the history of modern librarianship, it can be easy to culti-

vate a narrative of singular men – Dewey, Carnegie – who laid the foundation, then problematize their actions later on. In doing so, we give less credit to librarians of the past who did work which is useful and viable to the practice of librarianship today. While “the beacons of the library conceal unpleasant foundations,” they also contain the work of librarians who have from the onset resisted reductive classification infrastructures when seeking to share knowledge by and for marginalized communities, and it behooves us to look to their legacy (Gikandi, 2013, p. 14).

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