Teaching the Radical Catalog

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During a recent information literacy session for a group of first-year students enrolled in an African-American women's history course at Sarah Lawrence College, I discussed the changing Library of Congress (LC) subject headings for this field: NEGRO WOMEN; BLACK WOMEN; AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN; etc. A student raised her hand and asked whether students specifically interested in the history of White women needed to search the catalog using the term WHITE. My colleague, a reference and instruction librarian with five years of experience, answered yes. While we might wish that LC acknowledged White as a racial category and marker for domination, it does not. LC is rooted in historical structures of White supremacy; as such, the catalog presumes White to be the normative term. The librarian got it wrong.

We must get it right. Currently at stake is, first off, the problem of giving students wrong information. A class busily searching for works about WHITE WOMEN will come up empty, when a search for WOMEN would serve them quite well. A second stake, less obvious but more insidious, is the risk that by teaching a catalog uncritically, we hide and extend the universalizing, hegemonic tendencies of our classifications into our teaching.

This chapter takes up the moment where critical classification theory intersects with critical pedagogy. Considering critical interruptions of classification as a social and political project, I argue that classification schemes are socially produced and embedded structures; they are products of human labor that carry traces of all the intentional and unintentional racism, sexism, and classism of the workers who create them. Political efforts to change terminology or localize classification schemes are inevitably limited by the nature of classification itself. We cannot do a classification scheme objectively; it is the nature of subject analysis to be subjective. Teaching, done critically and done well, offers a potential way out of this dilemma. This will require a challenge to our standards-based information literacy discourse, and a turn toward radical pedagogical theory.

Classification in the Library

Classification is at the heart of the work of a library. A library is arguably nothing more - or less - than a set of materials classified according to some set of standard prin

ciples. All classifications, including those in libraries, function according to a set of three ideals described by Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star in their critical study of classification: they apply a system of classificatory principles to a given set of objects; an object can reside in one and only one category; and all objects are accounted for in the classification.' In libraries, the classification can include National Library of Medicine, Dewey Decimal, Library of Congress, SuDocs, and others, or some local scheme; the objects classified are varied concretizations of knowledge, including books, films, journals and journal articles, and audiovisual materials.

Classifications consist of two separate parts. First, the classification includes a system of categories that allow for the arrangement of knowledge objects by subject to allow for browsing. The Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) consists of ten decimal divisions *(100s, 200s,* etc.), each containing ten narrower divisions *(110s, 120s,* etc.). The Library of Congress classification (LC) has *21* general subject divisions, further divided by narrower intellectual divisions.

A second aspect of cataloging is a controlled vocabulary. A controlled vocabulary is a thesaurus of terms applied to knowledge objects by cataloging librarians and used by library patrons to access materials in Online Public Access Catalogs (OPACs). The hierarchical classification and the controlled vocabulary together contain all knowledge objects in a given system. Every object in a library will be placed in a subject division and assigned controlled terms; nothing lies outside of the system. Library classifications in the ideal are ambitious, totalizing projects: they seek to contain not only the present sum of human knowledge, but also to encompass any new knowledge generated in the future.

Thesaurus Problems

Scholars and activists have pointed out two central problems with library classifications. A brief discussion of the work of Sanford Berman and Hope Olson lays bare the central issues with library classifications as we know and use them.

In 1969, Sanford Berman published a letter in *Library Journal* calling attention to the chauvinistic headings in the Library of Congress subject heading list.' He went on to publish a broad attack on LC headings in 1971's *Prejudices and Antipathies.*[3] His work took issue with what he called "the realm of headings that deal with people and cultures," arguing that "the LC list can only `satisfy' parochial, jingoistic Europeans and North Americans, white-hued, at least nominally Christian (and preferably Protestant) in faith, comfortably situated in the middle- and higher-income brackets, largely domiciled in suburbia, fundamentally loyal to the Established Order, and heavily imbued with the transcendent, incomparable glory of Western civilization."[4] Berman's writings, as well as his activist work as a cataloger with the Hennepin County Library, has inspired a generation of radical librarians to work for change in cataloging systems.

The language used in the classifications is also a reflection of broader social structures. The thesaurus acts as a meta-text, a symbolic representation of values, power relations, and cultural identities in a given place and time. For example, LC lacks a controlled term for conflicts related to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Users seeking

information about Israeli incursions into Palestinian territories will find works classed under a general heading for ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICTS. This denies the specificity of Israeli attacks on Palestinians. Further, ISRAELI-ARAB CONFLICT is listed as a cross-reference for ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICTS, suggesting that in LC, Arabs are the originators of regional disputes.

Berman did not take issue with the fundamentals of library classifications. The goal of library classifications - to bring human knowledge together under a single unifying, universalizing structure and language -was central to Berman's point. Berman wrote in his 1971 Introduction, "Knowledge and scholarship are, after all, universal. And a subjectscheme *should,* ideally, manage to encompass all the facets of what has been printed and subsequently collected in libraries to the satisfaction of the worldwide reading community."' Thus, Berman's political claim was in some ways a limited one: The primary problem with Library of Congress classification is a lack of correct language. Structural critiques of classifications, however, suggest that Berman's pragmatist, yet reformist, stance is fundamentally limited.

Structural Problems

A second aspect of critical intervention has to do with the structural limitations of library classifications. Hope Olson outlines two central challenges to the structure of classifications. First, the classifications are hierarchical, and prescribe a universalizing structure of "first terms" that masquerade as neutral when they are, in fact, culturally informed and reflective of social power. For example, Olson discusses the status of WOMEN as a narrower term in relation to FEMALE. "In the case of `Women,' the broader term `Females' puts this heading into a biological context that divides all species by sex. Narrower terms are lower in the hierarchy. In the case of `Women,' `Abused women,' 'Abusive women,' `Aged women,' and so on are lower in the hierarchy..." . In order to provide a context for the knowledge objects in a library, classifications seek to define hierarchies, not only in broader and narrower terms, but also through the use of related and "see also" references that create a web enfolding everything in the knowledge universe into a single, hierarchical net.

Hierarchies centralize power in the "first term," be it in a dictator in a fascist government, the father in a patriarchal family, or the quarterback in a football team. Less visible is the way that hierarchies privilege only a single aspect of a given object. For example, a man who is a football quarterback may also be a father, a brother, and stamp collector, but for the purpose of the hierarchy that embeds him on the football field, he is only a quarterback. The other relevant parts of his person -his ability to stay in the pocket, scramble, throw the long ball, and so on -are derivative of his "first term," his quarterback-ness. The other parts of his person - his presidency of a local philatelist society, perhaps - become irrelevant. Hope Olson calls this the hierarchy of samenesses. "[W]e divide first by one facet, then by another and another and so on in a prescribed citation order. The result is a hierarchical arrangement that gathers effectively by the first facet following the idea that we gather what is the same and separate what is different. "[7]

Imagine a book about our quarterback that also discussed his struggles with racism in the NFL. A cataloger might assign QUARTERBACKING (FOOTBALL), because it is about football, rather than RACISM-UNITED STATES about racism in America. The book would then be visible to sports researchers, and less so to researchers studying racism in America. The range of options is enormous; a cataloger might also choose RACISM IN SPORTS,

AFRICAN-AMERICAN ATHLETES-SOCIAL CONDITIONS, DISCRIMINATION IN SPORTS, and so on. In library classifications, the work of choosing the "first cut" for a given book is by catalogers. This is a very human and very subjective process: What is this book in my hand primarily about? Is it about football, or is it about racism? And which among this set of relevant headings should be assigned? This decision has material effects for browsers, who may or may not find or a book depending the classification. The hierarchy in classifications is not simply that of privileging a single term over others, but also the privileging of certain kinds of sameness and difference.

A final structural problem with classifications is their permanency. Even the most flexible classification requires that a knowledge object be placed into a given category "for good." Once a book is placed in a category, even a new category, it usually stays there. Catalogers do revise headings, but the vagaries of cataloging under capitalism generally reward the production of new records. What happens, then, to emerging knowledges that are necessarily in motion? I am thinking here, for example, of materials that address the lives and experiences of transgender and gender-variant people. This identity group is in a state of acute formation - new language is used daily by transgender and gender-variant people to describe their experience, and new identities are constantly coming into being and passing into some other identity. LC figuratively arrests this becoming by placing a book into a classification category based on a vocabulary that may be supplanted by the text itself. For example, books about gender variance fall under the headings TRANSSEXUALS or TRANSSEXUALITY, though many in those communities identify "transgendered" as the appropriate umbrella term. Surely people can continue to change regardless of LC subject headings; however, the headings do fix certain identities and not others in place and time.

Library classifications are necessary. Indeed, we can hardly begin to make sense of knowledge without them. Classifications order objects in material space-they place books in an order on shelves -and grant intellectual access to collections by collating books according to some logic. And yet they are problematic. Library classifications use the hegemonic language of the powerful: they reflect, produce, and reproduce hierarchies; *they* order sameness and difference and prevent the full representation of minority literatures; they arrest the linguistic transformation in emerging fields of knowledge and identity production. These are large problems, and solutions have tended toward two approaches: attacking the language problem, and attacking the structural problem.

Sandy Berman is perhaps our most famous cataloging activist. Since 1971, his work on transforming subject headings both at the local level (in Hennepin County) and at the Library of Congress has yielded positive linguistic change (LC 's elimination of the

obviously racist heading YELLOW PERIL in 1989, for example), and has called attention to the hegemonic nature of classification. Yet his work sustains and upholds the value of LC. As Berman struggles to change the thesaurus, he leaves the structural problems untouched. This failure is important. Berman's approach suggests there is some "right" language that could be universally understood and applied. The politics of language are rarely so tidy, and language is virtually always contested. For example, in her interview with Library Juice's Rory Litwin, Barbara Tillett, LC's chief of the Library of Congress Cataloging Policy and Support Office, recalls: "Before we made the change from `Gypsies' to 'Romanies,' staff members from CPSO attended a seminar on the topic at the Holocaust Museum and consulted closely with a renowned expert and advocate in this field. After we changed the heading to `Romanies' [in 2004], we received complaints from several individuals and a few organizations that opposed our discontinuing usage of the term Gypsies. [11]8

Imagine other instances where the politics of a particular identity term are so contentious that it's difficult to imagine settling on a "right" word. Think of the reclamations of identity terms like "n*****," "queer," "fat, and "crip" for use by some members of those identity groups. Should LC reflect these self-identifications? Berman's struggle for "right language" does not account for the ways in which language is inherently political and contextual.

What about these structural problems? If classifications are necessary, how can we resist the structural aspects that we don't like: the hierarchical ordering of samenesses, their lack of flexibility? Some librarians, including Olson, have focused on the generation of local classifications. Rather than pouring energy into improving a single, universalized classification like LC, Olson and other librarians focused on creating user-centered classifications for particular collections. Examples include the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus,* which uses a faceted classification scheme to classify art objects for art researchers, and the use of folksonomies in digital environments, both discussed elsewhere in this volume.

A second approach to these structural limitations might be to apply technologies to reduce our reliance on structured classifications. A combination of free-text searching and strong relevance algorithms might allow users to retrieve relevant search results without the need for an underlying classification. Anyone who has waded through thousands of JSTOR results in search of a relevant document can tell you we're not there yet. Olson discusses her project of mapping a local thesaurus onto DDC as a second technological solution, combining a localized feminist thesaurus with a standard organizational structure to highlight sexism in DDC and make feminist research easier.

Challenging and changing thesauri, developing local solutions, and utilizing new technologies all have potential use in our radical toolbox. However, none of these solutions will work everywhere all of the time, and none account for the persistent and growing reliance on standardized schemes like DDC and LC. Those of us who practice with LC need a fourth strategy for undoing the perils of the classification.

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Neither changing the language nor changing the structure can eliminate the fundamental limitations of classification systems. Classifications are inherently static - at least

at any given moment in time - and inherently universalizing - at least in relation to a given field of knowledge objects. If these characteristics are indeed fundamental, we might incorporate radical pedagogies into our work as teachers to transform users' relationships to these systems.

Public services librarians increasingly think of ourselves as teachers. This turn in our professional identity is noted by James Elmborg, who cites the shift away from individual reference transactions and toward group instruction as empirical evidence of an increased professional focus on "information literacy" as an object of professional elaboration.[10] Further evidence of our profession's emphasis on teaching can be seen in the emphasis of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) on the development and implementation of standards of information literacy. The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education ("the Standards") map a closed universe of library skills and abilities that constitute the information-literate student. They create a hierarchy of information literacy skills, naming them with scientific precision. The Standards constitute the text from which librarians draw the content of our lessons. They form our primary pedagogical text; as such, they both demonstrate the limitations of our current pedagogical thinking, and indicate potential points of radical intervention.

In 1970, Paulo Freire published his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Among his many arguments for "education as a practice of freedom,"[11] Freire offered a definition of the pedagogy of the ruling classes. He called this "banking education," which he described as follows: "The banking concept (with its tendency to dichotomize everything) distinguishes two stages in the action of the educator. During the first, he cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons in his study or his laboratory; during the second, he expounds to his students about that object. The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor do the students practice any act of cognition, since the object towards which that act should be directed is the property of the teacher rather than a medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students."In banking education, then, the student serves as a passive receptacle for the knowledge of the teacher. Critical thought is not encouraged; memorization and regurgitation is rewarded.

If we turn again to the Standards, we see that current information literacy approaches hew quite closely to the "banking education" that Freire describes. ACRL has developed a cognizable object -"information literacy"-and advocates for a pedagogy that conveys these skills to students, and then assesses their ability to reproduce the outcomes favored under the Standards.

Alternative Strategies

Freire offers an alternative pedagogy, one that focuses, not on the one-way exchange of knowledge from a knowing subject to an ignorant object, but instead on the posing

of problems that are then grappled with by individuals, all of whom are subjects, all of whom both teach and learn. He calls this "problem-posing education."[13] Instead of passively teaching classifications, a critical library instruction program might instead teach students to engage critically with the classifications as text, encouraging critical thought in relation to the tools.

When we teach the catalog - or any other classified retrieval tool - as a reality that must be accommodated by the student, we perpetuate the dominance of story "told" by the classification. Problem-posing education allows us to "unveil" the hegemonic production and reproduction of the problematic language cited by Berman and the troubling staticity of hierarchies of sameness articulated by Olson. In the words of Freire, "whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality."[14] When we come to understand the limits of and power enacted by classifications, we are able to use them for their concrete purposes -finding books on library shelves - and to transform our relationships to them via critical engagement.

Elmborg, working from a background in critical literacy studies, makes precisely this claim. Citing the work of Olson, he says, "For information literacy to have a critical dimension, it must involve both an understanding of how various classification systems work, and also an exploration of how they create and perpetuate such powerful categories for representing `knowable reality and universal truth.'"[15] By embedding the problems of classification in our content and in our method, we empower students and ourselves to work critically with systems that can never be "fixed" by our cataloging divisions.

Intervening in the Library Classroom

What might a critical engagement with classification-as-text look like in a bibliographic instruction classroom? Surely we must continue teaching students how to use the library catalog, database indexes, and other classified information retrieval systems. Students cannot succeed unless they know how to navigate our many and varied classifications, with all their limitations and political difficulties. How might we teach these tools while simultaneously including critical reflections on the tools themselves?

A first step is certainly to learn from the work of critical education theorists. As Elmborg notes, drawing on the critical work of Allan Luke and Cushla Kaptizke, librarianship has tended away from critical approaches to the work of teaching." In addition to Freire, librarians could benefit from relevant thinkers such as Lisa Delpit, whose writing engages cultural and racial conflict in classrooms; Henry Giroux, whose work on public pedagogy lies at the root of radical pedagogy in the United States; and Peter McLaren, whose work focuses on teaching against capitalist and imperialist narratives. This pedagogical shift will require stepping back from the standards-and-assessments approach that so dominates the teaching literature of librarians and a step towards the extensive theoretical work already undertaken by teachers in other fields.

As teachers, we will need to relinquish some control in the classroom. While our

focus has long been on our expertise, we will need to be willing to be learners, along with our students. My colleague, a white woman, was blind to the structures of racism built into the library catalog; she didn't understand the difference, because she didn't conceive it as such. A group of ready learners grappling with the problems of classification might come to understand such a critique together. We will need to remove ourselves from positions of dominance and engage in critical learning with the students who come to our classrooms struggling, like us, to make sense of the library.

Notes

1. Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 10.
2. Sanford Berman, "Chauvinistic Headings," *Library Journal 94* (February 15 1969): 695.
3. Sanford Berman, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1993.)
4. Berman, *Prejudices and Antipathies,* 15.
5. Berman, *Prejudices andAntipathies,* 15.
6. Hope Olson, "The Power to Name: Representations in Library Catalog," *Signs* 26 (Spring 2001): 645.
7. Hope Olson, "Sameness and Difference: A Cultural Foundation of Classification," *Library Resources and Technical Services 45* (July 2001): 119.
8. Litwin, Rory. (2006, 6 August). Interview with Barbara Tillett. *Library Juice.* Available: <http://libraryjuicepress.com/blog/?p=115> (accessed December 15, 2006). 9. Olson, Power to Name, 661.
10. James Elmborg, "Critical Information literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice," *Journal of Academic Librarianship 32* (2006): 192.
11. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1990): 62.
12. Freire, 61.
13. Freire, 62.
14. Freire, 62.
15. Elmborg, 192.
16. Elmborg, 193.