Critical Librarianship in a Global Context*

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Abstract

Critical librarianship involves the study of structures that undergird the selection, acquisition, description, circulation, and preservation of information. These library structures are embedded in other systems, including capitalism, colonialism, and other circuits of power. Critical librarianship that acknowledges global contexts must include a critique of the dynamics of American empire.

Keywords: Cataloging and classification; Knowledge organization; Critical librarianship; Colonialism; Imperialism

Critical librarianship involves the study of structures that undergird the selection, acquisition, description, circulation, and preservation of information (Drabinski, 2019). We ask how the systems we use to complete these core library functions came to be and how they enable—and don't—access to some forms of knowledge and not others. We interrogate their origins, the ways they work in the present, and how we might change them to facilitate equity and justice for readers, writers, and researchers from all socioeconomic and cultural locations. These library structures are embedded in other systems, including capitalism, colonialism, and other circuits of power. Critical librarianship that acknowledges global contexts must interrogate these structures as well. If we want to critique library structures and functions, we must also critique the dynamics that have produced them as they are.

Critical work in library and information studies explores libraries as institutions shaped by logics of racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression. Libraries are critiqued for trying to be everything to everyone regardless of the impact on library workers, or for perpetuating inequalities through collection development and outreach strategies that center dominant white, male, western perspectives in the United States and elsewhere. Too often, solutions are located at the scale of the library: library directors should resist an expansion of their mission, for example, or collection development librarians should select from alternative presses and underground publishers. Such interventions are important but should also account for the larger social forces that put librarians in these kinds of binds. Why are libraries the only place in many cities where a person can use a bathroom, get a drink of water, sit down without buying anything? Critical librarianship should engage these broader questions too. And while there are surely issues internal to librarianship—a commitment to intellectual freedom above material harm to communities, for example, or a professional managerial workforce that serves state and capital rather than the needs of communities—these larger forces determine much about the problems and opportunities facing library workers. Libraries are not a space of total freedom. Critical librarianship needs to account for systems and structures that produce us as we are.

We can see these kinds of dynamics at work in a brief sketch of the history of libraries in the Philippines as shaped by the United States' involvement in the nation. This sketch touches on colonial violence and national resistance, the perils of war, and legislative processes in the United States and in the Philippines that shape the ways librarians in both countries participate in the field. These

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forces shape the terrain of possibility for all of us, libraries included.

In 1901, the United States took control of the Philippines at the end of the Spanish-American War, quickly and violently quashing a nascent independence movement that had initially sided with the Americans against Spain, a colonial power in the archipelago for nearly 400 years. In the wake of this war and the 200,000 Filipino lives it cost, the United States moved swiftly to erect colonial structures of all kinds. These institutions included schools and hospitals built in the American image and a state military and police apparatus that continues to be mobilized by the state. Among these institutions we find the library.

The initial circulating collection was built from a Congressionally directed gift of books gathered by Georgie Greenleaf, the wife of a U.S. Army doctor who arrived in the archipelago following the Battle of Manila ("Philippines," n.d.). While her husband worked to establish more than 600 military outposts in a country that was fighting against this occupation ("Brigadier General Charles R. Greenleaf," 1911), she built a leisure reading collection as a tribute to fallen American servicemen. In 1901, the U.S. Congress passed a law establishing the first circulating library in the Philippines for American readers. Four years later, that body decided that Filipinos would be allowed to use the collection too (Hatch, 1972). Accompanying this initial deposit of books was a push to train Filipino librarians to build and maintain libraries according to U.S. standards. In 1918, Gabriel Bernardo and three other *pensionados* left the islands for library school in frigid Madison, Wisconsin. When they returned, Bernardo took the position of University Librarian at the University of the Philippines, Diliman (Verzosa, 1963). In 1923, he and five others founded the Philippine Library Association, the oldest professional library organization in Asia (Philippine Librarians Association, Inc., n.d.). In 1945, Filipino libraries were one of many social infrastructures laid waste by the war. In the decades that followed, libraries were rebuilt, and library schools in the country trained professional librarians across the public, school, academic, and special library sectors. In 1990, the Philippines established national licensing standards that institutionalized the profession at the highest levels of the state (Santos, 1993).

An analysis that takes international contexts seriously might attend to the ways library structures—from the training programs offered in Wisconsin to the donations of American books that shaped collections in 1901 and again in 1946 (Morallos, 1998)—served and continue to serve as an extension of the American empire. Where do U.S. classification and cataloging structures, library school curricula, standards for information literacy and outreach, and more come from? How did they spread around the world, to U.S. colonial holdings and beyond? How do library workers across the planet engage and resist these systems as they serve the needs of local communities? Rather than asking only how library structures reify American ideology for Americans, critical library scholars might ask how these systems are used in other contexts where library workers and patrons access information through distinctly American paradigms. Why do so many Latin American libraries use the Dewey Decimal Classification (Arellano & Garrido, 2009)? Why is everyone, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions included, worried about "fake news" (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2016), a distinctly American phrasing?

These questions may be asked and answered outside of U.S. borders, where grappling with the logics of the American empire is a part of daily life. But I write from and largely for American librarians. For the many librarians in the United States who are not immigrants or refugees, who are not people of color from colonized places, American empire is barely legible. Despite its long history as a U.S. colony, then commonwealth, then independent state scarred by an ongoing U.S. military occupation, many Americans will tell you they never knew the archipelago was a U.S. colonial holding. Many Americans are not aware that Puerto Rico still is, that Hawai'i and Alaska are former colonies incorporated into the U.S. state, that the "sea to shining sea" is itself a vast space of dispossession of American Indians who hold land claims to this day. The implications of this for a U.S. critical librarianship are such that those of us who practice what we call #CritLib often lack a critique of the U.S. border or of what U.S. exports like Library of Congress Classification, WorldCat, and the Cebu scanning centers of the Internet Archive (Hachette, 2020) mean for the formation and circulation of knowledge that originates in the Philippines and elsewhere.

The implications of all this forgetting are that U.S. librarians fight over library structures in ways that are necessarily parochial. We struggle over the use of the phrase "Illegal Aliens" as a subject heading but leave the classification structure intact. We do not eliminate borders, just shift how we describe them. This is not to say that these changes are not important, just that they are not structural and are therefore quite limited in terms of the change they can produce in libraries and beyond. The controlled vocabulary changes, but the fact that U.S. policy produces the migrant flows that it then violently crushes is still nearly impossible to see in the library catalog.

Of course, the problem of classification only presents itself to those who sit outside hegemonic modes of knowledge production and dissemination. If classified order and controlled vocabularies reflect one's own experience of the world, those tools will seem timeless, natural, and neutral to you. For U.S. library workers from dominant social groups, that common sense can't help but be an imperial one. Critical library work from the United States should take the rest of the world seriously. We should address the relationship of our country to the rest of the world, something I am beginning to do in my own work in this essay.

One place to begin this work is in those same classification and cataloging structures that have been the focus on much critical work in U.S. libraries. Class D in the Library of Congress Classification is ripe for such critique. The classification for *World History and History of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Etc.*, Class D demonstrates quite clearly demonstrates the imperial roots and shoots of library organization. There are 21 subclasses in Class D. DA is reserved for works about *Great Britain*, DE the *Greco-Roman World,* DG contains *Italy-Malta*, DH the *Low Countries*, DR the *Balkan Peninsula*, and so on. *Asia*, 30% of the world's land mass and 60% of the world's population, is contained in DS. The degree of specificity in the classification tells us something about what matters to those who classify.

Reading further into DS, the imperial gaze intensifies. *The Philippines* does not stand alone as a country but instead sits underneath the broader grouping, *Southeast Asia*. Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are listed as parts of Indochina and the Dutch are named in the history of Indonesia. The United States as a colonial power is invisible. Vietnam and Indonesia are not represented on their own terms. The history of the Philippines includes neither Spain nor the United States. What matters is *Ethnography*, *History*, and *Local History and Description*. What is relevant is what Americans see when they look at the Philippines, not how Filipinos understand and narrate their own history.

None of what I have written here will be new to librarians working outside of the United States and Europe who daily navigate imperial circuits of knowledge organization, dissemination, and control. But for librarians in the United States, broadening our sense of what counts as critical is crucial. The relentless floods and fires of unchecked climate change and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic should tell all of us that national borders are a political fiction that serves power while leaving the rest of us at the mercy of the plundering classes. No wall or fence or airport restriction can produce equity in knowledge production and dissemination. While tempting, these sorts of borders are not what the moment calls for from us. These are not structures we need to be building right now. Critical librarianship in a global context must instead reckon with the ways that U.S. systems and structures continue to limit what and how we can know things in the rest of the world. The borders and boundaries of our classification and cataloging systems are one place that library workers might begin.

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