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Classification from the margins : three alternative classification systems, 1930-1975

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Good afternoon everyone. Thank you to the Cataloging and Classification Research Interest group for having me today to talk about classification from the margins, where I'll give an overview of three alternative classification systems that were created in North America between 1930-1975.

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My name is Sasha Frizzell. I'm the Catalog / Metadata management librarian at Binghamton University, which you can see in the photo here on the left.
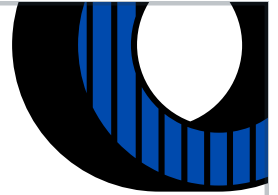
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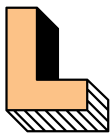
For my presentation today, I'll start with an incredibly brief history of reparative cataloging efforts and I'll highlight some of the reasons that librarians who catalog collections by, for, and about marginalized communities find that current systems are inadequate.

I'll then talk about three librarians, the alternative classification systems they created, and how and why they needed to deviate from existing schema in order to better represent the resources in their collections.

This list is not exhaustive -- this type of alternative classification work has done by many other librarians but today we're going to focus on Dorothy Porter Wesley, Alfred Kaiming Chui, and Brian Deer.

Background

Classification systems are biased

Librarians, as they are known to do, found solutions

By now most librarians recognize that classification systems like Library of Congress or Dewey Classification have inherent biases. They are built to represent a white, male, Christian, Eurocentric worldview and people who exist outside of those parameters are given space in the margins of the classification systems, if they're afforded space in the system at all.

Most current scholarship about bias in classification traces the first reparative efforts to the important work of leaders like Sanford Berman or the American Library Association's Social Responsibility Roundtable, the "radical" librarians of the 1970s who championed for more inclusive subject headings and classification.

But for this presentation, I wanted to go back a bit further. Before this push towards critical cataloging in the 1970s, there were librarians from marginalized communities who found themselves classifying collections that couldn't be adequately represented by Dewey / LCC and these librarians had to work outside of those systems.

Photograph source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Dorothy Burnett Porter Wesley

Librarian, curator, archivist, and bibliographer

Moorland Foundation, Howard University, 1930-1973

Dorothy Burnett Porter Wesley is one of these innovative librarians.

In 1930, she was appointed as the curator of "The Moorland Foundation", now known as the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, at Howard University. Under her curatorship, the Moorland Foundation built collections of books, music, and ephemera that highlighted the Black experience across the globe.

This focus on works by and about Black people made the collection at Howard difficult to classify with the prominent system at the time, Dewey Decimal Classification. Wesley explained her frustration with Dewey in an oral history in the early 90's:

> In the Dewey Decimal System they had number 326 -- that meant slavery -- and they had one other number [...] that meant colonization.
>
> Every book, whether it was a book of poems by James Weldon Johnson, who everybody knew was a Black poet, went under 325. And that was stupid to me.
>
> **Why not take the whole Dewey Decimal System and put a book by James Weldon Johnson, the poet, under the number for poetry? You see? So that's what I did.**

Source: Madison, A. J., & Wesley, D. P., 1995, p. 25

Solution

Restructure classification

Subject first, author second hierarchy

- **Art**
- **Anthropology**
- **Communications**
- **Demography**
- **Economics**
- **Education**
- **Geography**
- **History**
- **Health**
- **International relations**

- **Linguistics**
- **Literature**
- **Medicine**
- **Music**
- **Political Science**
- **Sociology**
- **Sports**
- **Religion**

With Wesley's system, instead of placing all of the works by and about Black and African American people inside a small two number range, patrons would find resources based on their subject. We see the outline of her classification on the right of this slide.

But following this subject first logic, Wesley could have continued to use the Dewey system with a modified cataloging process. She could have chosen to simply ignore the dewey ranges that called for items to be classed based on author attributes and instead cataloged with a focus on the subject.

But, if you're familiar with Dewey, you'll notice that her subject hierarchy, which is shown here on the right, is different from what we're used to seeing in Dewey. A 2018 article entitled "Cataloging Black Knowledge" by Zita Cristina Nunes notes that these re-envisioned subject categories align more closely with the intellectual priorities of the Harlem Renaissance.

By making this ideological shift from Dewey, Wesley also uses the classification system to amplify a new set of intellectual priorities, one that differed from the Eurocentric priorities set forward by Dewey.

Wesley's method of subject-first classification also tackles head-on the unnecessary segregation of resources that we still battle with 100 years later.

Alfred Kaiming Chiu (裘開明)

Librarian and bibliographer

Harvard-Yenching Insitute, Harvard University

Photograph source: Columbia University Chinese Students & Scholars Association, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Alfred Kaiming Chui addressed a similar problem in the 1940's. Dr. Chui was an incredibly influential librarian who made massive contributions to bibliography, cataloging, and classification of Chinese and Japanese resources both in China and the United States.

He was an outspoken advocate for transliterating Chinese and Japanese scripts into the Roman alphabet. In fact, under Dr. Chui's leadership, the Harvard-Yenching library was the first known library to transliterate author names and resource titles on catalog cards.

In 1931, Dr. Chui was appointed as the librarian of Harvard-Yenching Institute at Harvard University. He immediately ran into a two-prong classification problem.

First, existing Western classification schema rely heavily on alphabetical order. This is fairly straightforward across languages that use Roman alphabets, but provides a significant barrier when working outside non-Roman scripts.

Second, using an existing American system like Dewey or LCC didn't leave much space for non-European philosophy, history, and religion. Much like Dorothy Porter Wesley, Dr. Chui recognized that his collection would fall into narrow segments of the classification schedule that didn't provide the subject granularity that was necessary for this type of research collection.

> It was a period of transition during which three trends were dominant. The first was to cling tenaciously to the old sì kù (fourfold) classification of the eighteenth century.
>
> The second, diametrically opposed to it, was to abandon the old system completely and to adopt some Western scheme such as Dewey's.
>
> The third was to divide old and new books into watertight compartments, using the sì kù scheme for the old and some modern system for the new.

■ ■ ■

Source : Wu, Eugene W. (1993), p. 66

Dr. Chui could have decided to use an existing Asian classification method. He was an expert, having published a book on Chinese cataloging in China in 1931. But none of the existing classification systems seemed to be the right fit.

In an interview he explained the landscape of cataloging in China at the time -

-- ultimately, Dr. Chui decided that neither of these three options worked for the collection at Harvard, so he came up with something else.

Solution

Created a four digit classification system based on merging ideas from Dewey & modified sì kù methods

100-999	Chinese Classics
1000-1999	Philosophy and Religion
2000-3999	Historical Sciences
4000-4999	Social Sciences
5000-5999	Language and Literature
6000-6999	Fine and Recreative Arts
7000-7999	Natural Sciences
8000-8999	Agriculture and Technology
9000-9999	Generalia and Bibliography
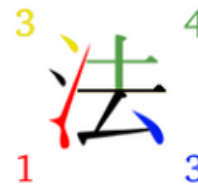
Dr. Chui, instead, opted to create a system that conceptually was based in East Asian classification philosophy.

In 1943, he published "A Classification Scheme for Chinese and Japanese Books", which indexed over 10,000 books and outlined the classification scheme itself in both Chinese and English.

Dr. Chui expanded the siku classification to include nine categories, instead of the traditional four. These nine categories are outlined on the right of the slide.

The actual call number of the item was created by assigning the appropriate four number code for the subject along with a designation for the author or title based in the four-corner method.

On the bottom right of the slide, there is a graphic showing the basic principles of the four-corner method. It is a framework that assigned numbers to specific strokes within a Chinese character. In the graphic, each of these strokes is highlighted in a different color and includes the numerical value assigned to the stroke. The numbers are read at each corner, so the character in this graphic here would be 3431.

With the modification in ideological order and by integrating a method for the inclusion of non-Roman characters, Dr. Chu created a system that not only better collected resources by aboutness, he also created a system that simply made room for the cataloging, classification, and easy indexing of non-Romanized language. In fact, his system was so successful and prolific that it is still actively used in several libraries today, and this sustained use highlights the serious gaps

that still exist in more prominent classification schemas.

Tionerahtoken
Alec Brian Deer

LIBRARIAN, SCHOLAR, AND VIDEO STORE OWNER

National Indian Brotherhood, Ottawa

Lecturer, Concordia University, Montreal

Otiohkwa Video, Kahnawake

Finally, we have Alec Brian Deer, best known as Brian Deer.

Brian Deer was a librarian, scholar, and video store owner. Deer created his classification system while working with the National Indian Brotherhood in Ottawa.

In 2003, three graduate students at the University of British Columbia found, analyzed, and published his classification system on the web. Deer himself didn't know about this project until it was brought to his attention several years later while lecturing at Concordia University. He hadn't known its influence and likely wouldn't have expected its lasting power.

Solution

Build a system that focuses on the needs of Indigenous patrons and decentralizes European worldviews

Created to be reorganized and customized

A - Reference
B - History & Culture, British Columbia
C - History & Culture, North America
D - History & Culture, International
E - Education
F - Economies & Financial Systems
G - Governance
H - Colonizing Government Policy Research
J - Justice System
K - Indian Government
L - Law
M - Rights & Titles
N- Nature & Ecological Knowledge
P - Community Resources
S - Health
V - Religion
W - Arts & Crafts
X - Language
Y- Literature

Brian Deer's classification (also known as BDC) focuses on centralizing Indigenous worldviews and providing the highest possible accessibility for Indigenous library patrons. We can see the basic subject outline here on the right.

This is not the only version of the classification system that Brian Deer created. Throughout his career he re-worked this classification system based on the needs of the library and their user base. This alone is a massive divergence from the "one-size-fits-all" classification systems like Dewey or LCC -- by allowing for modification and adjustment, there is space to create room for new or un-acknowledged topics that may have been overlooked in other schema.

Another major difference is that BDC centers geography, and not alphabetical order, in its shelf order.

LCC E Schedule

Indians of North America
Tribes and cultures, A-Z -- Continued

99.G67	Gitksan see E99.K55
	Gitxsan see E99.K55
99.G82	Gosiute
99.H15	Gros Ventre (Montana) see E99.A87
99.H2	Guale
99.H23	Hackensack
99.H26	Haida
99.H28	Haisla
	Han
	Hasinai

BDC Classification

BC	HAIDA
BD	TSIMSHIAN
BDA	TSIMSHIAN - COASTAL
BDC	GITXSAN
BDE	NISGA'A
BE	KWAKWAKA'WAKW
BF	NUU-CHAH-NULTH
BG	NUXALK (Bella Coola)
BH	HEILTSUK (Bella Bella)

On the left we have the current LCC E schedule which is used for resources about the History of North America. On the right we have the modified Brian Deer classification currently used by the Wi Wa library in British Columbia.

In the LCC system, resources about specific North American tribes will likely be classed into E99, Indians of North America -- Tribes and cultures A-Z -- and then be subdivided alphabetically by tribe name as we see here.

But, alphabetic order is especially challenging within this part of the LCC schedule because the name used for a tribal affiliation in LC is not necessarily the name the tribe would use for itself.

For example, if a patron was to look for resources on the Nuxalk, they would anticipate finding them at E99.N. However, LC uses the term Bella Coola, so those resources will be at E99.B. By putting resources in alphabetical order, the LC shelf-order highlights when terms are outdated or inappropriate. LC bases the tribal names off of scholarship and literary warrant. This means LC frequently uses the tribal names assigned by colonizers, though I understand this is something they're actively working on remediating.

You'll notice two big differences when looking at the Brian Deer classification on the right. First, the tribal names generally reflect the term most accepted by the people that it represents. The name does not need to be justified by literary warrant and does not need to be the English version of the name.

Secondly, Brian Deer's classification is based on geography.

BDC Classification & Tribal Geography Map

BC	HAIDA
BD	TSIMSHIAN
BDA	TSIMSHIAN - COASTAL
BDC	GIT<u>X</u>SAN
BDE	NISGA'A
BE	KWAKWAKA'WAKW
BF	NUU-CHAH-NULTH
BG	NUXALK (Bella Coola)
BH	HEILTSUK (Bella Bella)

Map source: A Country By Consent. (1993). Northwest Coast Native Territory. Canada History Project

We can see in the classification scheme on the left that the order of the classification is Haida and then Tsimshian. As we can see from the map on the right, the Haida and Tsimshian ancestral lands exist next to one another, so in BDC classification resources about these tribes exist next to one another on the library shelf.

In a very interesting way, BDC leverages the power of the spatial relationships between resources on the shelf. By focusing on geography when creating a shelf order, there is respect for the physicality of both the people the resources represent and the way the library shelf could be a microcosm that reflects those spatial relationships. This shelf order is a reflection of the connectedness of the history and the people in a way that we do not capture by organizing in alphabetical order.

This system also will withstand any changes in recognized tribal name. If LC decided to make the shift from Bella Coola to Nuxalk in order to recognize the people's preferred name, each of those resources would need to be reclassified and reorganized, requiring significant physical labor. With BDC, there is more flexibility to honor the changes in names requested by the people in the communities that we are naming.

Takeaways

- One-size rarely fits all
- Center patron experience
- Amplify voices from their own communities

Each of these systems was built for a specific type of collection and a specific patron need. While we can't simply apply them to our collections to fix our existing classification problems, there were a few common threads with each of these systems I feel that we can learn from and apply those takeaways to our classification work today.

First and foremost, one size rarely fits all. Classification systems will always carry some level of bias and create frameworks of marginalization. Recognizing that there is a problem is a very small step in working to mitigate the problem.

It's important that we continue to center the patron experience when classifying materials. We want folks to be able to find resources that they didn't even know existed when they browse the stacks. Taking a real look at shelf-listing while we catalog can help us to improve that unknown resource discovery.

In order to center patron experience, we also need to continue to work to amplify the voices and contributions to the profession from folks in marginalized communities. If we only receive input from one type of person when making classification decisions, we may miss clear and inherent flaws and biases that we're creating and reinforcing with our work.

The classification systems we learned about today each highlighted problems that still very much exist in prominent classification systems: segregation, marginalization, and overarching Eurocentric worldviews. Reflecting on the work of Dorothy Porter Wesley, Alfred Kaiming Chu, Brian Deer, and the numerous other librarians who have done this alternative classification work

will help us to build stronger and more inclusive classification systems moving foward.

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Thank you!

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