Metadata & Discovery Group

Cataloguing the Empire

Classification as colonial project

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the colonial history of classification systems and their role in controlling people and knowledge. The legacy of these colonial practices is evident in modern library classification systems, including the Dewey Decimal Classification system and Library of Congress Subject Headings. Through these explorations, I hope to illuminate the history and ongoing struggle for equitable and inclusive cataloging in libraries.

KEYWORDS classification; decolonisation; coloniality; Dewey Decimal Classification; Library of Congress Subject Headings

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Introduction

> The existence of colonization relies on not only ongoing occupation of land but also occupation of regimes of knowledge erected to maintain and legitimate such occupation. (Roopika Risam, 2018)

From the Enlightenment onwards, classification systems have contributed to colonial epistemic control. This process included the introduction of racial categories and the assignment of superiority or inferiority based on these distinctions (Crilly, 2019, p. 9). For example, Carolus Linnaeus, a Swedish scientist known for his work in binomial nomenclature, created a descriptive classification of skin tones by continent (yellow in Asia, black in Africa, red in America, and white in Europe), reinforcing the idea of racial hierarchies (Crilly, 2019, p. 9). Historically,

> Classification of the global population by skin color was not undertaken by blacks, yellows, reds, and browns. Nor were they consulted. The process of classification was initiated and sustained by white men of letters and scientists who were the gatekeepers of Western and modern knowledge…it is whites who constitute the only knowing subject who can determine classification. (Mignolo, 2011, p. 45)

Decolonial scholars Quijano and Mignolo both emphasised classification – of people and of knowledge – as a means of colonial control. Quijano argued that colonialism

was not just about territorial domination but also about establishing a global racial hierarchy that classified people based on race and labour (Quijano, 2024, p. 95). This classification system served to justify exploitation and oppression, positioning Europeans as superior and others as inferior or subhuman (Quijano, 2024, pp. 85-87). Mignolo built on Quijano's ideas by emphasising the epistemic dimension of colonialism. He argues that colonialism imposed Western knowledge systems as universal and marginalised other ways of knowing and being (Mignolo, 2011, p. 80). This epistemic classification not only justified colonial rule but also continues to shape how knowledge is produced and valued around the world (Mignolo, 2011, p. 205). Both scholars highlighted how classification, whether of people into racial categories or of knowledge into hierarchies of value, serves as a mechanism of control and domination.

This essay explores the colonial history of classification systems and their role in controlling people and knowledge. The legacy of these colonial practices is evident in modern library classification systems, including the Dewey Decimal Classification system and Library of Congress Subject Headings. Through these explorations, I hope to illuminate the history and ongoing struggle for equitable and inclusive cataloguing in libraries.

Historical Review

Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End (1998) by John Willinsky examines how education has been used both to perpetuate and to challenge imperial power structures. He notes that modern education and knowledge are dependent on the discoveries of the colonial project – however, this does not justify or erase five centuries of exploitation and domination (Willinsky, 1998, p. 53). Significantly, he describes how classification and categorisation have been instrumental in shaping Western knowledge systems and global power dynamics. Willinsky argues that the act of categorising knowledge, peoples, and cultures has historically been a tool of colonial control and that the 'themes of discovery, conquest, possession, and dominion are about ways of knowing the world, of bringing it to order, of surveying, mapping, and classifying it in an endless theorizing of identity and difference' (Willinsky , 1998, p. 85). He argues that it is important to explore recurring patterns connecting colonisation and knowledge that shape our understanding of the world today. Addressing this historical association is not a call for outright rejection of the knowledge amassed through imperialism; however, it is valuable from an educational perspective to investigate this knowledge while also considering what has been overlooked or overwritten in the construction of the modern world (Willinsky, 1998, p. 52).

The British developed an 'empire of information'. In India, British initiatives like the census gave the distinctions among India's many castes and tribes unprecedented focus, alongside an emphasis on religious differences between Hindus and Muslims (Willinsky, 1998, p. 43). In this way, British colonisers classified and controlled their

subjects, emphasising their differences to make solidarity difficult. The British also established a scholarly tradition in managing India. Colonial administrators found themselves increasingly involved in disciplines such as philology and geography, which ultimately contributed to their governance of the Indian subcontinent:

> Knowledge operated as a force, with *mastery of the subject* the operative educational metaphor and faith… It was all part of the British Empire's development of what we would call a global information system, with extended data feeds, lines of credit, and international postings. (Willinsky, 1998, p. 44)

The empire consistently linked power and knowledge to reinforce the legitimacy of categories like colony and empire. Through both scholarship and governance, India was consistently portrayed as a decaying society, with the empire positioned as the solution to this perceived deficiency to justify its rule. Colonial administrators stationed in India actively participated in an imperial pursuit of knowledge (Willinsky, 1998, p. 44). This is what Edward Said referred to as 'power using knowledge to advance itself' (Said, 1995, p. 4).

Colonisers classified the colonised, sorting not just knowledge itself but the people who created it as well. This movement was exemplified by the British Museum, 'the cataloging hub of the English dominions' in the 19th century (Willinsky, 1998, p. 34). Classification, cataloguing, and the sorting of knowledge were tools of the colonial project – even before the birth of modern libraries. In the 19th century, European museums started providing guides to sailors on how to collect and preserve specimens (Willinsky, 1998, p. 63). These amateurs were eager to 'discover' new specimens and classify them, often replacing Indigenous names and categories. It was as though this extensive cataloguing of nature could serve as a foundation upon which to build a new episteme.

Another clear illustration of classifying scholarship with an imperialist bent is the Encyclopédie, often considered emblematic of the Enlightenment. Published in stages throughout the second half of the 18th century and edited by Diderot, it appears to simultaneously recognise and classify the converging forces of imperialism and scholarship that aimed to dominate the world (Willinsky, 1998, p. 73). Barthes goes so far as to call it a 'huge ledger of ownership… to fragment the world, to divide it into finite objects subject to man' (p. 27). He continues to contend that 'we cannot separate without finally naming and classifying, and at that moment property is born' (Barthes, 1980, p. 27). In this way, the Western world established an 'intellectual mercantilism,' extracting facts and artefacts globally to support its theories and empower its classifying ability to observe, categorise, and rationalise the world (Willinsky, 1998, pp. 51-52). Willinsky critiques how Western classification systems have imposed hierarchical structures that privilege certain forms of knowledge over others, often marginalising Indigenous, non-Western, and non-dominant perspectives.

Discussion

Legacy in Current Systems

> Librarianship has been complicit, if not responsible, for perpetuating colonial approaches to knowledge by replacing traditional knowledge with Western knowledge, especially in physical libraries established under colonial regimes, by failing to maintain the authority of the indigenous people who produced the knowledge, or by stealing or appropriating the knowledge without appropriate compensation. Sandy and Bossaller, 2017, p. 132

The main classification systems used in libraries around the world today emerged in the late 19th century with the creation of the Dewey Decimal Classification system in 1876 and the US Library of Congress Classification system in 1897. These systems are not neutral; they reflect Western-centric perspectives and biases. Drabinski (2013) states, 'As users interact with these structures to search, browse, and retrieve materials, they inevitably learn negative stereotypes about race, gender, class, and other social identities' (p. 97). Doyle (2006) argues that the 'information industry [i.e. librarians and other information professionals] not only acts as a gatekeeper to knowledge, it also controls the interpretation of knowledge' through cataloguing and classification systems (p. 4). The Dewey Decimal Classification system, created by Melvil Dewey in the late 19th century, is widely used for organising library materials. It is hierarchical and rigid, placing books into fixed categories based on a numeric code, which may not reflect the complexity or multidisciplinary nature of modern knowledge. This rigidity can make it difficult to accommodate new or interdisciplinary fields of study – for example, computer science, which did not exist in the 19th century, falls into the number for 'information' but with many additional decimals for clarification. The system's logic reflects the cultural and social biases of its time. For example, the 200s category is for Religions, but all numbers until the 290s are exclusively for Christianity, with other religions combined with mythology. Before reforms by Howard University librarian Dorothy Porter, Black writers were classified in either 325 (colonisation) or 326 (slavery), regardless of their subject matter (Nunes, 2018). Dewey himself held racist, misogynist, and anti-Semitic views, which influenced the system's classification (Joseph, 2021). Jimenez et al. (2022) note the 'particularly unfortunate legacy' of the most common library classification systems, including 'antiquated, often racist, androcentric assumptions about the ordering of the world.' These systems not only complicate navigating library resources but also cause epistemic harm. Library classification systems are historically rooted in coloniality.

Intervention

According to White (2018), librarians around the world 'need to feel empowered to go beyond the Euro-American models of library cataloging work... Structures need to be in place to allow libraries and catalogers to vary the way they apply the necessary guidelines.' White (2018) argues that the issue extends beyond the cataloguing tools

themselves to the structures within which those tools, guidelines, and rules are embedded. Libraries could improve access to their resources by allowing cataloguers more flexibility. While systems like subject headings and classification numbers are necessary foundations, White (2018) contends that deviation is crucial for expanding access beyond current limitations. The author questions whether librarians prioritise these rules over user needs, often waiting for approval from larger institutions before implementing potentially beneficial changes locally. Two intervention approaches are reparative cataloguing and inclusive cataloguing. Inclusive cataloguing involves ongoing efforts to use inclusive language and represent diverse perspectives, while reparative cataloguing often involves specific projects or initiatives to revise and update existing records. Both approaches are essential for creating fair, accurate, and respectful library catalogues.

Indigenous librarians are also working towards creating their own controlled vocabularies. For example, the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal Libraries have created a new classification system called Maawn Doobiigeng (Gather Together). The tribal libraries originally used the Dewey Decimal Classification system (DDC), the Library of Congress Classification system (LCC), and Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), which 'employ colonialist logic to classify and describe items relating to Indigenous people' (Saginaw Chippewa, 2024). This new system organises resources by the seven original clans and their responsibilities (Saginaw Chippewa, 2024). The system collects information in a way that is accessible and meaningful to the community, resonating with their cultural background and knowledge frameworks.

Conclusion

Through historical legacies, systemic biases, and ingrained practices, libraries can perpetuate colonialism and enact epistemic violence. Librarianship has, intentionally or not, upheld colonial methods of knowledge dissemination (Sandy and Bossaller, 2017, p. 132). This has involved replacing Indigenous knowledge with Western perspectives, especially evident in physical libraries established during colonial periods (Sandy and Bossaller, 2017, p. 132). To dismantle colonial structures and diversify collection development and instruction, libraries should aim to democratise knowledge, moving beyond Western-centric perspectives to include insights from the global majority (Clarke, 2021, p. 136). This involves questioning the nature of knowledge itself and addressing the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge systems. By determining what qualifies as knowledge – through the collections libraries prioritise, institutional structures, and classification systems – libraries significantly influence perceptions of knowledge (Leung and López-McKnight, 2021, p. 320). The knowledge housed within libraries and archival collections is predominantly generated by white authors, reinforcing white dominance; consequently, libraries validate prejudiced, racially charged content as legitimate knowledge. This historical trend must be challenged.

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