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# Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction

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Emily Drabinski

## ABSTRACT

Critiques of hegemonic library classification structures and controlled vocabularies have a rich history in information studies. This project has pointed out the trouble with classification and cataloging decisions that are framed as objective and neutral but are always ideological and worked to correct bias in library structures. Viewing knowledge organization systems from a queer perspective, however, challenges the idea that classification and subject language can ever be finally corrected. Engaging queer theory and library classification and cataloging together requires new ways of thinking about how to be ethically and politically engaged on behalf of marginal knowledge formations and identities who quite reasonably expect to be able to locate themselves in the library. Queer theory invites a shift in responsibility from catalogers, positioned to offer functional solutions, to public services librarians, who can teach patrons to dialogically engage the catalog as a complex and biased text, just as critical catalogers do.

Libraries are spaces where language really matters. Most of what we hold on our shelves and in our electronic databases are collections of words: books, journal articles, pamphlets, and ephemeral material, such as zines. Libraries are also spaces of control, and not just controls about noise and food and when books are due. The materials themselves are linguistically controlled, corralled in classification structures that fix items in place, and they are described using controlled vocabularies that reduce and universalize language, remarkably resistant to change. In terms of organization and access, libraries are sites constructed by the disciplinary power of language. Librarians of all kinds—conducting research in library and information studies (LIS) programs, working in technical services, serving at the reference desk, and teaching in the information literacy classroom—work within and against these linguistic structures: we build and extend them, and we teach users how to navigate them.

Critiques of these disciplinary library structures of classification and controlled vocabularies have a rich history in information studies, one that can be roughly dated to the late 1960s and early 1970s (Gilyard 1999). Sanford Berman, a US librarian working at the University of Zambia, found that his Zambian users had a very different relation to the term “Kafirs”

than US users did: while “Kafirs” is simply descriptive in the US context to US catalogers, it was virulently racist in Zambia (Gilyard 1999, 3). The idea that language has meaning only in context, an idea articulated abstractly in fields like philosophy, comparative literature, and anthropology, was made very materially evident: subject headings, often cast by catalogers as a kind of pure, objective language, are not; where and when and by whom subject headings are used makes all the difference in terms of meaning.

Berman’s insight—one shared by other catalogers, including A. J. Foskett, Steve Wolf, and Joan Marshall—was one that changed the cataloging landscape in the United States for good. Mobilized by petitions to the Library of Congress, missives in library journals and newsletters, and organized responses within ALA—the first program of ALA’s Task Force on Gay Liberation was called *Sex and the Single Cataloger*, a session about the trouble with headings for gay and lesbian materials (Gough 1998, 121)—librarians since the 1970s have made it their business to critically read subject headings for bias, arguing, often successfully, for changing subject headings to ameliorate bias and altering classification structures to “fix” the ideological stories told by the classification scheme. Simultaneously, LIS faculty, including Hope Olson, Ellen Greenblatt, and others, have made critical engagement with classification and subject language central to their work.

In both their activism and their scholarship, librarians have convincingly made the case that Library of Congress Classification (LCC) and Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) fail to accurately and respectfully organize library materials about social groups and identities that lack social and political power. Librarians have worked to correct incorrect classification decisions and have argued for the expansion and correction of subject headings. The critical cataloging movement has addressed the problem of bias in these structures primarily as a functional problem: materials are cataloged incorrectly, and they can be cataloged correctly with the correct pressure from activist catalogers. This project has meaningfully pointed out the trouble with classification and cataloging decisions that are framed as objective and neutral, calling attention to the fundamentally political project of sorting materials into categories and then giving those categories names.

While this work has been productive, its emphasis on correctness locates the problem of knowledge organization systems too narrowly as the domain of catalogers themselves. As a user services librarian in an academic library, my work with students has made clear the limits of this approach. Even when subject headings are updated to reflect current usage—for example, the inclusion of *Lesbian* as a heading in 1976 concurrent with the rise in lesbian visibility—they do not account for all the other words users might use to describe themselves. From the perspective of user services, the problem of inaccessible knowledge organization is one that can be productively addressed at the moment of mediated research: where librarians assist users in dialogic engagement with library access structures. An exploration of this dialogic engagement can productively shift the discussion of what to do

about LCC and LCSH from the cataloger's desk to the reference desk and the library classroom.

Queer theory provides a useful theoretical frame for rethinking the stable, fixed categories and systems of naming that characterize library knowledge organization schemes and strategies for helping users navigate them. Queer theory is distinct from lesbian and gay studies, and this distinction, while necessarily drawn in broad strokes, is helpful for understanding the potential limits of a corrective approach to classification and cataloging. Lesbian and gay studies grew out of the recognition that those identities were largely absent from the historical record. The goal was recuperative, and scholars like John Boswell (1980) and Lillian Faderman (1991) sought to locate lesbians and gays in history, where they had previously been missing. Queer theory, however, argued that this recuperative approach was dangerous. It froze identities in time and universalized them, erasing the real differences that accompany same-sex sexuality on the scales of time and place. Scholars like David Halperin (1990) and Eve Sedgwick (1990) explored how gay and lesbian identities were and are constituted in the first place. Rather than taking these identities as stable and fixed, queer theory sees these identities as shifting and contextual. Where lesbian and gay studies takes gender and sexual identities as its object of study, queer theory is interested in how those identities come discursively and socially into being and the kind of work they do in the world. Lesbian and gay studies is concerned with what homosexuality is. Queer theory is concerned with what homosexuality does.

This analytic approach locates the trouble with library classification and cataloging systems in the project of fixity itself: as we attempt to contain entire fields of knowledge or ways of being in accordance with universalizing systems and structures, we invariably cannot account for knowledges or ways of being that are excess to and discursively produced by those systems. From a queer perspective, critiques of LCC and LCSH that seek to correct them concede the terms of the knowledge organization project: that a universalizing system of organization and naming is possible and desirable.

Viewing classification and cataloging from a queer perspective—one that challenges the idea that classification and subject language can ever be corrected once and for all, outside of the context in which those decisions take on meaning—requires new ways of thinking about how to be ethically and politically engaged on behalf of marginal knowledge formations and identities who quite reasonably expect to be able to locate themselves in the library. A critical cataloging movement that locates the problem of cataloging in particular categories or subject headings invites very clear and functional solutions: librarians can lobby the Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) for changes that “fix” the problem. A queer approach to classification and cataloging suggests no such easy solution. In defining the problem of classification and cataloging queerly, the solutions themselves must be queer: built to highlight and exploit the ruptures in our

classification structures and subject vocabularies, inviting resistance to rather than extension of the coherent library systems that a critical cataloging movement for correctness upholds. This shift in approach emphasizes the pedagogical possibilities of our access structures, shifting attention away from “fixing” the placement of materials in organizational systems and modifying and elaborating subject language and toward an effort that engages users in a critical reading of the catalog itself. While this might initially seem only an intellectual exercise in theorizing, the effects of such a shift in theory can be translated easily to the daily practice of helping users navigate complex information access structures. Public services librarians already engage in dialogue with users about classification and cataloging. When these interactions are informed by a queer analytic, such work shifts from one of correcting the user’s engagement with fundamentally and inextricably biased retrieval systems to one of teaching the user to engage the catalog as a complex and biased text, just as the critical catalogers do. This strategy suggests the possibility of a queer library politics that, rather than attempt to resolve the paradox of queer classification and cataloging, embraces and extends the user’s engagement with it.

### **What’s Wrong with Library Knowledge Structures?**

This queer analytic represents an intervention in the extensive discourse of critiques of LCC and LCSH dating from the 1970s, with work by Berman ([1971] 1993), Marshall (1972), and Foskett (1977), persisting into the present. Berman maintains “score cards” documenting changes to LCSH (Berman 2010); RADCAT, a listserv for radical catalogers maintained by K. R. Roberto, remains a popular listserv for politically motivated catalogers;<sup>1</sup> and Jenna Freedman, a zine librarian, periodically blogs about changes to LCSH.<sup>2</sup> Both practitioners and theorists have argued that library knowledge organization systems of all kinds fail to accurately and respectfully organize library materials about social groups and identities that lack social and political power. Works about religion in the Dewey Decimal System are overwhelmingly Christian (Berman [1971] 1993, 70); works about heterosexuality are barely named as such in LCSH (Christensen 2008, 233–34). As a result of these failures, biased ideological stories continue to be “told” by the organizational systems. As users interact with these structures to browse and retrieve materials, they inevitably learn negative stereotypes about race, gender, class, and other social identities. For example, they “learn” that ethnocentric myths are true, like that Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are minor religions compared to Christian monotheism. Similarly, they “learn” that heterosexuality is normative, that gay and lesbian sexuality is the only sexual identity that ought to be examined, and that queer sexuality is inherently deviant.

1. *Radical Cataloging*, listserv archives. <http://www.listserv.uga.edu/archives/radcat.html>.

2. Jenna Freedman writes on the blog *Lower East Side Librarian*. <http://lowereastsidelibrarian.info/taxonomy/term/139>.

Critical work around library classification and cataloging locates bias at both the structural and descriptive level: decisions about classification and classificatory language have both been sites of their critiques. Critics of biased classification argue that the placement of materials in the classification can reflect prejudice about certain identities. In some cases, they are concerned about the ideology that underlies the decision to place materials at one point in the classification instead of another. For example, locating materials about transsexuality at RC560.G45, the point in the classification schedule for *Sexual and psychosexual conditions*, suggests that transsexuality is a psychological disorder that can be remedied with treatment, rather than just another way of existing in a gendered world, or a political position, or a religious or philosophical experience (Drabinski 2009, 17). When materials about transsexuality are located elsewhere, for example, in HQ77, the emphasis on the social aspects of this identity are emphasized in ways that contradict what some users might feel are the biological or psychological causes of transsexual identity. The variable classification of two different editions of the autobiography of Christine Jorgensen provides an example of this problem. The Library of Congress assigned the 1967 edition of *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* the class number RC560.C4 J6. The 2000 reissue from Cleis Press was assigned the number HQ77.8 J67. In both cases, the ideological bias of the classifier is revealed by the classification decision.

Additionally, critics argue that the placement of materials in relation to one another indicates bias, or a failure to represent materials about social identities correctly. Roberto has argued that the placement of materials about transsexuality adjacent to materials about gay and lesbian sexuality creates a false understanding that gender and sexuality are congruent (2011). Steve Wolf captured the outrage of 1970s queer catalogers in his 1972 contribution to *Revolted Librarians*, an essay that called LC to task both for its homophobic classification of materials related to homosexuality, ordered under the heading *Sexual deviance* until 1972, writing: "Our dearly beloved Library of Congress until this year classed what straights call 'homosexuality' in the HQ '70's under the general heading 'Sexual deviations.' This was unbiased? Objective?? Non-judgmental?? After agitation by the cataloging sect of SRRT's Task Force on Gay Liberation, LC pulled 'Homosexuality' from the shadow of 'Sexual deviations' into the clear descriptive light of 'Sexual life'" (Wolf 1972, 39). For Wolf, categorical decisions like this one carry a weight far beyond the simple location of materials on library shelves. Their location tells an ideological story, that "homosexuality"—in quotes to suggest that the subject language is also wrong—is deviant, a behavior to be legislated, medicated, and policed. The classification decision marks LGBTQ materials as always already deviant. In all of these cases, dominant classification structures represent materials about gender and sexuality in ways that are inaccurate at best and discriminatory at worst.

Critiques of classification like these are less common than those that address bias in cataloging, or the selection and assigning of subject heading language. Subject headings are

the controlled terms that bring the classification structure to the public: they are the terms users see when they navigate our catalog and the terms our users click on to collate materials in our collections. Hope Olson and Rose Schlegl suggest that the comparative richness of subject heading critiques is directly related to their public aspect: “Subject headings are far more commonly examined than classification. This might be because the omissions and racist, sexist, xenophobic, etc., biases in subject headings are presented to us directly on the screens of our online catalogues” (2001, 66). Where subject language is central to access, classification decisions are often thought to provide “simply a shelf address,” leading librarians and catalogers to “disregard the influences of context on how a work is perceived” (Olson and Schlegl 2001, 66). In simplified terms, while classification decisions might tell a story to the browser, subject-heading choices tell a story to the searcher.

Berman, the most prominent critic of subject headings, first articulated his argument in the late 1960s as a cataloger at the University of Zambia. While cataloging materials using LCSH, Berman’s Zambian users informed him that using the subject heading *Kafirs* to catalog materials in the Zambian context was to use a virulent racist epithet (Gilyard 1999, 3). Useful in the US context and racist in Zambia, the problem of “Kafirs” revealed for Berman the problem with using a universal language emanating from the hegemonic white, male, Christian culture at the Library of Congress. Thus launched Berman’s lifetime struggle to revise subject headings in order to ameliorate bias. His 1971 volume *Prejudices and Antipathies*, widely available in a 1993 reprint, argued famously that LCSH “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” ([1971] 1993, 15). All other viewpoints and contexts that lay outside those dominant boundaries could not be represented by the existing LC list.

Berman’s work was joined by catalogers like Marshall (1972), Wolf (1972), and Foskett (1977) in the 1970s and 1980s, and it was extended by Wayne Dynes and Greenblatt in their contributions to the 1990 anthology *Gay and Lesbian Library Service* (Dynes 1990; Greenblatt 1990), and then into the present by Roberto (2011) and Freedman.<sup>3</sup> Marshall (1977) argued that mainstream cataloging language was patriarchal, and she developed a thesaurus for cataloging feminist collections. In her ground-breaking piece in *Gay and Lesbian Library Service*, Greenblatt (1990) pointed to the problem of outdated subject headings for LGBT materials. Her historiographical work was updated in the second version of that title, *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users* (Greenblatt 2011), a book whose expanded acronym tells us something about the rapid changes in language around identity. Freedman writes a blog about

3. Freedman, at the blog *Lower East Side Librarian*.

the lack of subject headings for her institution's women of color zine collection; the poverty of relevant LCSH headings makes cataloging those zines nearly impossible.

These critics of LCC and LCSH share one core belief: classification schedules and subject headings promulgated by the Library of Congress are often wrong and should be corrected. The problem is not that cataloging happens, but that it happens incorrectly. Critical catalogers are positioned as outsiders to the cataloging process, resisting biased controlled vocabularies and fixing LCSH for the rest of us. Missing from these arguments is a reckoning with the problem of cataloging itself. Just as Library of Congress classification and cataloging decisions can be critiqued, so can the revisions suggested by critical catalogers be subject to debate. For example, in her 1972 essay for the book *Revolt of Librarians*, Marshall argued against the Library of Congress's decision to add the subject heading *Mammies*, saying, "Could any of us, without mumbling embarrassed and probably useless apologies, even if we dared, tell a young, militant, Black woman who wanted material on this subject to look under MAMMIES! Why not SLAVERY IN THE U.S.—OPPRESSION OF WOMEN, OR NEGRO WOMEN—OPPRESSION?" (1972, 48). For Marshall thirty years ago, the heading *Negro women* is an improvement over the term *Mammies*; in 2012, such a term would be targeted by activist catalogers for removal.

This example points to the challenge posed by a politics of knowledge organization that seeks to "fix"—both as correction and in place—classification and cataloging decisions in library structures. Such corrections are always contingent and never final, shifting in response to discursive and political and social change. Just as *Negro women* could make political sense in 1972 but not in 2012, the corrections suggested by Berman, Freedman, and Roberto today are just as subject to the contingent vagaries of history and standpoint. Such work often fails to acknowledge such contingency: Berman writes of LCC and LCSH that "there can be no quarrel about . . . its value as a global standardizing agent, a means for achieving some uniformity in an area that would otherwise be chaotic. . . . Knowledge and scholarship are, after all, universal" ([1971] 1993, 15). His conclusion, shared by a generation of catalogers who have seen their role as corrective agents, reiterates an approach to classification and cataloging that elides contingency as a factor in determining what classification and cataloging decisions are imagined to be correct in any given context. Taking into account such contingency requires theorizing the trouble with classification and cataloging in library knowledge systems as at the root rather than along the branches.

Queer theory offers a useful analytic for developing such a critique. Queer theory has its roots in disruption of, rather than assimilation to, norms of identity. Politically, queer emerged as part of a political movement of gender and sexual minorities in the 1960s. Distinct from mainstream lesbian and gay movements, groups like Queer Nation resisted assimilationist strategies that sought rights on the basis of stable and unchanging identities. Queer theory also found roots in a postmodernism that challenged the idea that truth could



be final. For queer theory, knowledge—both of the self and about the world—is understood to be discursively produced, socially powerful, and always already undergoing revision. Queer theory resists the idea that stable identities like lesbian or gay exist outside of time. Rather, these identities exist only temporarily in social and political contexts that both produce and require them. Queer theory sees claims to universal and unchanging identities as both unattainable and undesirable, particularly in the sense that they elide the social power of uncontested claims to truth. In the library context, queer theories can refocus attention away from the project of producing “correct” knowledge organization systems, pointing toward a project of dialogic pedagogical interventions that push all users to consider how the organization of, and access to, knowledge is politically and socially produced.

### Queer Critique of Classification and Cataloging

When queer theoretical claims about the instability of identity categories come into contact with the knowledge organization project, the trouble with correction becomes quite clear. Grant Campbell (2000) and Patrick Keilty (2009) have taken up the issue from historical and literary perspectives on queerness, while Emily Drabinski has explored the queer challenge to library classification and cataloging in explicitly spatial terms (2009). The entire project of library classification and cataloging is at odds with queer ideas about historicity, contingency, and the impossibility of a fixed system of linguistic signs that would contain identities that are always already relational and contingent. A queer perspective on classification structures sees categories as discursively produced and historically contingent rather than as essential or articulable once and for all. A queer approach to language resists the idea that naming is ever outside of power or resistance. In both cases, the project of a critical library classification becomes less about correction and more about locating the ruptures in the structure, developing what Olson has called “techniques for making the limits of our existing information systems permeable” (2001a, 20).

Library classification structures like LCC consist of categories that appear—to the cataloger and to the user—to be objective and unbiased. Indeed, mainstream cataloging literature removes the biased mind of the human cataloger from the system altogether, insisting that categories are derived from the literature itself: the cataloger responds to literary warrant, building citation order and naming systems out of the literature of a specific discipline (Olson 2001b, 118). Similarly, both mainstream and critical catalogers contend that subject cataloging language is (in the case of the central authority at the Library of Congress) or should be (according to Berman, Foskett, Greenblatt, and others) objective and unbiased, based on David Haykin’s first principle of subject description: “the heading, in wording and structure, should be *that which the reader will seek in the catalog*” (1951, 7, emphasis added). The demand that classification and cataloging should be unified and representative systems, responsive to

text and user, is conceptually shared by mainstream and alternative catalogers. The political disagreement only has to do with who ought to determine what those systems should be. As Campbell has put it, the work of Berman and others depends on a faith that bias in library classification and cataloging systems “can be alleviated by being more enlightened, and responding more quickly to the suggestions of enlightened people” (2000, 129).

Queer theory invites a divergent interpretation, focusing on the ways these unified systems are produced—within LC and via resistance to LC—and what effect those categorizations and naming conventions have on access to materials. For queer theory, systems of categorization and naming are inextricable from the historical contingencies of their own production; there can be no “correct” categorical or linguistic structures, only those that discursively emerge and circulate in a particular context. For example, efforts to fix gay sexuality under the category of *Sexual life* rather than *Sexual deviance* do not secure truth, but simply reveal the process through which these categories and knowledge about them are produced. The categorical change does not reveal the emergence of an eternal, unchanging truth about gay sexuality, but describes a discursive arc through the history of the knowledge organization structure itself.

A queer analysis intervenes in this shared discourse and offers a way to reconsider such systems as always already biased, remedied not by correctness once and for all but engaged as a site of productive resistance. For queer theory, knowledge organization structures are productive, not merely representative. They do not smoothly represent reality, but discursively produce it, constituting the field of potential identities users can either claim as true and authentic representations of themselves or resist as not quite correct. From this perspective, for example, subject headings that represent the language of the normalized cataloger—who always gets such language wrong—are as important to the production of queer identities as subject headings that, generated by queer-identified people, would purport to be correct. Indeed, as Keilty has suggested, the normalized and stabilized language of controlled library vocabularies are in fact required for the production of other identities. He writes: “Queer necessarily relies on normalized and stabilized boundaries to exist, not only because queer itself is a category with limits—it is whatever normal sex and desire is not, that which does not belong, as normality changes over time—but also because queer transgresses those boundaries. Queer’s non-normativity relies on norms as a precondition, and is therefore defined in relation to its opposite” (Keilty 2009, 242). “Incorrect” subject headings, or subject headings that reflect a normative view of minority identities and knowledges, are both unavoidable and necessary for the emergence of “correct” subject headings, which are always produced in resistance to normative vocabularies. If queerness is seen as contingent and contextual, any subject heading entered into the controlled vocabulary is inaugurated into the norm, and therefore is just as subject to critique and revision as the headings that they correct and replace. No matter which name is fixed—whether *Homosexuality* or *Gay men* or *Lesbians*—other identities will emerge at the boundaries of what can be contained by this language.

Central to queer claims about structures of identity is this idea that such structures are always already in motion, contingent, and subject to change. From the standpoint of a queer analytic, then, classification and controlled vocabularies are always sites of struggle, both necessary in order to come into being (I need the word “lesbian” in order to articulate myself as different from the norm, just as I need the subject heading *Lesbian* to locate books about myself in the OPAC) and subject to intense debate and resistance (and yet I am not entirely a lesbian, in fact I am something even more different than that; *Lesbian* should be replaced by *Dyke* because that is the vernacular I use to describe myself). This is the heart of the very queer struggle to come into being through a language that is always already exceeded by the subject who claims it: “The individual subject can’t quite either be or not be in the collective category, can’t coincide with it or easily escape it” (Riley 2000, 85). It is not a problem of finally determining the correct word that will describe myself; any such decision simply inaugurates the play of resistance all over again. In this sense, library classification and cataloging productively provide a field of context against which I can describe myself both in terms of identity and resistance.

Ideas about the contingency of knowledge and language can be rooted in the work of Michel Foucault, a foundational queer theorist who argues that knowledge, rather than being a thing that exists abstractly to be grasped and represented, is in fact produced by discourses and anchored in time. We do not discover knowledge: we create knowledge through discourse. Truth claims, including the claim that an individual is insane (*Madness and Civilization*), sexually deviant (*History of Sexuality: Volume 1*), or a criminal (*Discipline and Punish*) are simply reflections of the work of politics and language. What is relevant in our efforts to understand these categorizations is not the content of individual categories of knowledge or identity—what a person does or says that makes her insane—but the mechanisms and workings of power through which those categories are constructed and then used to produce material social effects. As Foucault writes in his preface to *Madness and Civilization*, “madness and non-madness, reason and non-reason are inextricably involved: inseparable at the moment when they do not yet exist, and existing for each other, in relation to each other, in the exchange which separates them” (1988, x). Each category of identity relies on the other for its stability, and each is the product of the circulation of the two through a discursive field. Foucault’s genealogical method demonstrates the ways that categories—of identity and of knowledge—are inextricable from the time and place that produced them and the discursive process by which they come into being and begin to bear the weight of social and political meaning.

Further, the discursive construction of categories means that categories produce each other: once a social category comes into being, it makes space in a field for the articulation of other categories. Judith Butler describes the ways that categories produce other categories as we lay claim to them, always producing an other, or outside, that is as fundamental to

the identity as the characteristics that inhere in it. A claim to identity always relies on the production of an identity category that simply *is not what I am*. Butler uses the example of claiming lesbian identity to describe how this simultaneous production of self and other works: “To claim that this is what I am is to suggest a provisional totalization of this ‘I.’ But if the I can so determine itself, then that which it excludes in order to make that determination remains constitutive of the determination itself” (Butler 1991, 15). In other words, sexual identity categories—and the names that enter them into linguistic social life—are always reliant on the presence of an outside or an other without which the category cannot exist: in order for the category of lesbian to exist, everything that is not-lesbian must also exist. Categories are not mutually exclusive, but mutually contingent, a way of thinking about boundaries that challenges the assumptions of exclusivity that lie at the foundation of library classification and cataloging practice.

These queer theoretical perspectives on classification and cataloging challenge the idea that a stable, universal, objective knowledge organization system could even exist; there is no such thing if categories and names are always contingent and in motion. Movements to correct classification and cataloging are therefore simply examples of instances of categorical production, doing the same kind of work that LC classification and cataloging decisions do, and just as subject to critique from different contingent positions. The discursive interventions represented by Berman and others perform what Olson calls “the important first step” of revealing through resistance the hegemonic system of ordering and standardized naming in LC (2001a, 21). They do not, however, change or challenge the hegemonic fantasy that lies at the heart of the knowledge organization project in the first place.

In fact, the political focus on correcting classification structure and subject language solidifies the idea that the classification structure is in fact objective and does in fact tell the truth, the core fictions—from a queer perspective—that allow the hegemony of a universalized classification structure to persist. When gay and lesbian materials are classified under *Sexual deviance*, the knowledge organization structure tells one kind of true story: gay men and lesbians are sexually deviant, a dominant ideological truth reflected in, for example, the systematic denial to gay men and lesbians of the social goods acquired by those with normative sexuality through marriage. A user confronting the perhaps initially shocking and upsetting placement of materials here could, with the deployment of technical and human resources, be encouraged to think critically about the classification and cataloging structure; after all, if LC thinks about gay men and lesbians this way, what else does it get terribly, consequentially wrong? Such incorrectness reveals ruptures in the otherwise seamless objectivity that the classification pretends to. Erasing the rupture, smoothing it over through Wolf’s intervention and those that might follow in the contingent future, erases the evidence of dominant ideology and the resistance to it that are essential components of the classification and cataloging project. An emphasis on correctness and revision precludes inter-

ventions that acknowledge and strategically deploy this analysis, an analysis that might productively engage users in their own critical engagement with OPACs and, by extension, other systems of linguistic discipline. In the final section of this article, I turn to a discussion of what these queer interventions might be.

### Queer Interventions

The way a problem is defined has much to do with the solutions offered. When a problem is defined functionally, the proposed solutions will be functional. If bias in library classification and cataloging is merely a problem of failing to get things functionally correct, then the political solution will be to set things so: lobbying the Library of Congress to correct classification schedules and subject headings to reflect the truth. But if library classification and cataloging is seen as a coextensive process of identity representation as well as the production of identities, then such functional solutions begin to make less sense. A queer theoretical approach calls instead for queer solutions: shifts in analytical approach that take seriously the contingency of these apparently stable structures. If contingency is axiomatic for our understanding of library knowledge structures, then our interventions cannot undo or erase that contingency. Instead, they should highlight and make visible the fundamental paradoxes of classification and cataloging from a queer perspective: in order to be accessible to users, materials must be fixed in place and described using controlled vocabulary. However, this fixing is always fundamentally fictive; classification and subject heading decisions are always made in a context that is subject to change. Queer interventions will highlight and make visible the contingency of cataloging decisions.

The politics of correction advanced by Berman and others smoothes out the ruptures in the catalog that lay bare its contingencies, rendering the constructed quality of library classification and cataloging less visible to the user and, therefore, more difficult to apprehend and understand. When a user encounters an obviously biased classification decision or subject heading, the fact that the library knowledge organization structure emerges from an ideological perspective becomes easy to see. If gay and lesbian sexuality is classified as *Sexual deviance*, a user—especially a gay or lesbian user—can very quickly understand that catalogs reflect a particular point of view rather than an objective truth; such a categorization offends, and therefore becomes a site of resistance that can extend beyond the catalog itself. If, after all, such a categorization reflects a truth about the world (and in a time where gay men and lesbians continue to struggle for equal access to public rights like marriage), the library classification scheme can be seen as a productive site of truth-telling about the larger political world.

Contemporary cataloging activists respond to such ruptures of the apparent objectivity of library classification and cataloging with functional solutions: Berman continues to lobby the Library of Congress for changes, documenting his work on his website; Greenblatt

argues that corrected headings are critical to the work of library catalogers, and she advocates for expanded “funnels,” cooperative structures for organizing petitions to SACO for new and revised headings (2011, 222); Freedman posts updates from her own and others’ efforts to fix and LCSH on her blog, *Lower East Side Librarian*. These efforts have met with success, particularly in the area of modifying subject headings. In a 2003 study, Steven Knowlton found that 39 percent of Berman’s suggested LCSH changes in *Prejudices and Antipathies* had been accepted as proposed by the Library of Congress, while an additional 24 percent were altered to take into account his concerns (2005, 127–28). Greenblatt’s suggested changes to sexuality headings in her 1990 contribution to *Gay and Lesbian Library Services* have all been adopted (2011, 219).

While this work represents a critical disruption to the smooth hegemony of LCC and LCSH for librarians and scholars who engage in these activist projects, it erases that disruption in OPACs for users. Such work has the unintended effect of implicitly affirming the possibility that library classification and cataloging could be done correctly, once and for all, and outside of discourse or ideology. As Olson has suggested, this discursive work is “the important first step” in a project that “identif[ies] the limits” of classification systems (2001a, 21), but it cannot be where critical engagement with classification and cataloging ends. Instead, queer interventions can start at the same place—where the ideology of the knowledge organization structure is apparent, and therefore where the contingency of classification and subject description are most obvious—and inaugurate users into the same dialogue with the structure that Berman and others engage. Such work would, as Olson, has suggested, begin to “conceiv[e] ways to create breaches in the limit” (2001a, 21).

Rather than placing a correction at that exposed limit, a queer analysis suggests interventions that highlight that limit and invite the user to grapple with it. Information studies scholars and practitioners have suggested technical approaches to exploit the points where classification and subject headings founder on the shores of difference. Olson has suggested designing search interfaces that make related and broader terms visible to users so that they can understand how materials are linked in the knowledge organization scheme, as well as systems that allow users to enhance subject description through user tagging and mapping local thesauri to universally applied subject headings (2007, 533). In other work, Olson offers additional technological solutions, all of them locally applied, acknowledging the contingency of place: using local language in MARC records, exploiting notations to gather locally important materials, developing alternative local classification and cataloging systems built out of alternative thesauri, and varying citation order in order to vary the hierarchy of samenesses (Olson 2001b, 120–21). These technological approaches reveal points in the classification structure “through which the power may leak out” (Olson 2001a, 22), making apparent the otherwise invisible constructedness of classification and cataloging schemes.

Another compelling strategy lies in exploiting the ground laid by queer theory for understanding classification structure and subject language as discursively produced and inviting users into that discourse in the moment of encounter with our OPACs. This emphasis on the dialogical is apparent in some proposed technical solutions; user tagging, for example, makes material the stake users have in designing subject vocabularies. Discursive engagement is also a hallmark of public services librarianship: librarians meet users at the reference desk or in the library instruction classroom, teaching users how to navigate library knowledge organization structures. A queerly informed teaching librarian has the potential to transform these moments in the library use process into another point where the ruptures of classification and cataloging structures can be productively pulled apart to help users understand the bias of hegemonic schemes. For example, a user seeking information about identities that are not listed in LCSH but related to identities that are named—for example, *genderqueer* versus *transsexuality*, or *aggressive* versus *lesbian*—could be led to the general point in the classification where related materials could be found and engaged in a discussion of why the knowledge they come seeking by name is invisible in the structure. Such a reference interaction would both usefully direct the student to relevant materials and exploit the contextual clues offered by LCSH. Librarians who are themselves engaged with a queer approach to knowledge organization can teach the user how to understand what she sees when she searches the OPAC—and what she does not see—as directly related to the structure of the knowledge organization system she searches against.

Defining the problem of biased classification and cataloging as queer and analytic shifts the burden of engaging and struggling with that bias from catalogers to reference and instruction librarians working with patrons at the desk or in the classroom. Indeed, since the advent of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, teaching students to critically engage information sources is a critical part of the contemporary work of public services librarians: “The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system” (ACRL 2004). A queer approach to instruction would shift from simply teaching the user to navigate LCC and LCSH to a focus on dialogue with patrons that will help them tell the troubles of those schemes. Users can be invited into the discursive work of both using and resisting standard schemes, developing a capacity for critical reflection about subject language and classification structure. *Why don’t I see myself in the subject vocabulary, and what does this tell me about the other ways I feel invisible?* This critical reflection—central to the work of Berman, Greenblatt, Foskett, Freedman, and others—can be encouraged in the work of our students as they are invited into dialogue, and not merely compliance, with the disciplining systems of the library. As Keilty has suggested, “correcting the hazards of classifying queer phenomena occurs not only when the structures of categorization are made permeable, but also when

scholars, practitioners, and activists form a critical engagement congruent with queer's intrinsic resistance to classification" (2009, 244). The work of correction therefore gives way to the work of building and expanding such engagement.

It is easier to imagine points of entry into critically teaching classification and controlled vocabularies if offensive subject divisions and subject language remain uncorrected. This is, after all, what inaugurated Berman's own political project: the shocking rupture of the apparent objectivity of the library classification structure occasioned by seeing "Kafir" in a Zambian context. The project of systematically removing evidence of bias from library structures makes that shock rarer for students to encounter and more difficult to demonstrate across the reference desk or in the classroom. A queer approach to the problem of library classification and cataloging demands that these reflections of ideology be left as remnants in the structure and that librarians be prepared to teach students how to read what they discover in the text that is the knowledge organization system itself.

Turning library access structures into pedagogical tools allows librarians to teach knowledge production as a contested project, one in which they themselves can engage. In her work on using Wikipedia in the library instruction classroom, Heidi L. M. Jacobs calls this "teaching the conflicts" (2010, 186), asking students to read Wikipedia not for the truth value of its explanations but for evidence of struggle over the right to tell the truth evidenced in the website's Talk pages. In the context of library cataloging, students might be asked to examine headings related to women in LCSH side-by-side with Marshall's *On Equal Terms* and to reflect on the assumptions that underlie each term. Greenblatt's historical study of LGBTIQ headings might be productively read next to Wolf's incendiary—and male-focused—activist texts from the early 1970s, and both could be read next to the current LCC and LCSH schedules for materials related to gay and lesbian sexuality. Classification structures and controlled vocabularies are thus introduced as contested and in flux rather than stable and objective, inviting users to engage with them critically on their own behalf. This approach asks users to begin to understand how structures and linguistic forms make certain ways of knowing and being articulable and therefore possible, a very queer goal indeed.

## Conclusion

The problems of bias in library classification structures and subject language are, from a queer perspective, problems endemic to the knowledge organization project itself. If social categories and names are understood as embedded in contingencies of space, time, and discourse, then bias is inextricable from the process of classification and cataloging. When an item is placed in a particular category or given a particular name, those decisions always reflect a particular ideology or approach to understanding the material itself. This fundamental insight challenges the traditional approach of activist librarians who see as paramount the task of correcting classification and cataloging schemes until they become unbiased and universally



accessible structures. Such a project contains an inherent tension: correction can mask the inescapable contested ideological work performed by catalogers who must make these decisions every day.

Approaching the problem of library classification and cataloging from a queer perspective demands that we leave intact the traces of historicity and ideology that mar the classification and cataloging project. Such traces can reveal the limit of the universal knowledge organization project, inviting technical interventions that highlight the constructed nature of classification structures and controlled vocabularies. These traces also represent moments when the burden of undoing the hegemony of library classification and cataloging shifts from the back office to the reference desk and classroom, where public service librarians can intervene and emphasize the discursivity of classification and cataloging by engaging in critical reflection with users about what they do and do not see in the library catalog.

Queer theory challenges us to interrogate the processes and power relations that produce certain ways of knowing and being as correct and others as wrong, deviant, and less worthy of life. When brought into conversation with the literature of critical library classification and cataloging practice, queer theory informs new strategies for teaching the library catalog from a queer perspective. Beyond this narrow intervention, however, such an engagement offers other disciplines material ways to think and teach about discourses of power. Structures of power are often abstract and difficult to perceive or explain to students as real. For example, considered against the background of a dominant fantasy of equal opportunity, explaining the ways that choices and life chances are produced by mechanisms that precede the subject can be difficult. A queer reading of LCC and LCSH offers a concrete way of understanding the way these mechanisms work in time. The ideology that consigns gay and lesbian sexuality to the subject classification for *Sexual deviance*, or classifies sexuality of all kinds as *Social problems*, has ramifications beyond the library catalog for people who claim those identities. The text of the library classification and cataloging structure enables us to apprehend these ideologies directly off the page.

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