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# Radical Cataloging: From Words to Action

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## Abstract

Radical cataloging seeks to give a voice to people and concepts that are difficult to access through library subject searches. This article will explore four areas of radical cataloging: cataloging rules and the inequities and hierarchical problems inherent in classification itself, the use of cataloging to further a cause, the challenges of language in subject headings; and cataloging efforts around unconventional collections, such as zines.

Keywords: cataloging; subject headings; zines; non-traditional libraries; radical cataloging; radical reference; special collections

## Part I. Radical Cataloging: An Overview

The so-called “rules” of librarianship as set forth by organizations like the American Library Association and the Library of Congress are often not universally applicable to libraries and information centers. Many information professionals have made a point of raising their voices in critique of the practices and methodologies that others in the field may utilize daily. This disconnect has forged a space for what is now commonly referred to as “radical librarianship.” Much of the criticism of the status quo originated in technical services departments through the work of self-proclaimed “radical catalogers.” The term “radical cataloging” originates from RADCAT, a listserv created in 2002 by K. R. Roberto. The list was established as a

response to a discussion on the AUTOCAT listserv, a general list devoted to issues of cataloging and classification, that political topics were not appropriate for that forum (Roberto & Berman, 2008).

The term “radical” in mathematics refers to the root of a number. Likewise, the meaning of “radical” in progressive terminology, though often lost, refers to addressing the root–systemic, or structural–issues behind social problems. Radical cataloging, in this way, is not necessarily an attempt to do away with or subvert cataloging altogether, but is rather intended to address the root issues that can make access to information problematic.

### Cataloging Rules

In her essay for the 2008 book *Radical Cataloging*, Emily Drabinski discusses “structural problems” or issues of classification itself. The two main problems that she identifies are:

- “Hierarchies of sameness”: A phrase coined by Hope A. Olson of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Hierarchies privilege the “first term” or a single aspect of something, informed by structures of cultural and social power. What makes something, or someone, primarily about one thing rather than another?
- Permanency: Once something is cataloged, it usually stays where it is, even if terms change. For areas of knowledge with terms that are constantly in flux (e.g., transgender topics), cataloging can’t keep up, and it is burdensome to constantly adapt.

In response, Drabinski proposes three solutions, in addition to the most common response of adapting language (as discussed below in the “Subject Headings” section):

- Local classification: User-centered cataloging for particular communities (e.g., art terms agreed upon by a group artists), or folksonomies in which users themselves create and add cataloging terms to items.
- Technological innovation: Improvement of free-text searches and better algorithms may eliminate some classification needs and get rid of some of these problems in the process.
- Teaching the radical catalog: Many librarians are charged with the task of teaching “information literacy.” Rather than transmitting information one-way, from instructor to student, librarians can use Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a model: empower students to think critically about

cataloging by having them engage firsthand with its problems, and thus contribute to the learning experience instead of simply absorbing it from the top down.

### Cataloging to Further a Cause

The Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the American Library Association (ALA) in 1996 established the Hunger, Homelessness & Poverty Task Force (HHPTF). Its goal was to help promote and implement ALA's Policy 61, *Library Services for the Poor*, intended both to make libraries more accessible to low-income individuals as well as to further discussion and action toward ending poverty on a societal level (HHPTF, 2009).

That same year, notorious radical cataloger Sanford Berman sent a resolution to the Library of Congress pressuring it to change many of its subject headings related to poverty, hunger, homelessness, and social policy. The resolution emphasized the importance of library catalogs in information access: "Library of Congress subject headings can importantly affect access to vital library resources on hunger, homelessness, and poverty, as well as shaping library users' attitudes toward those topics." As such, the resolution encouraged the Library of Congress to make changes to reflect more common and respectful terminology in discussing poverty, such as replacing "Public Welfare" with "Welfare" and "Poor" with "Poor People," and adding terms like "Corporate Power," "Homeless Families," and "Hunger Activists" (SRRT of the ALA, 2006). In this way, radical cataloging became part of a multi-pronged approach by the HHPTF to address poverty within American libraries and as a political issue, which has included conferences, resources, surveys, and promotion of the topic in mainstream ALA committees and publications (HHPTF, 2009).

## Part II. Burying Women's Liberation Under Sepulchral Monuments: Gender Discrimination, Heteronormativity, and the Search for Queer People in the Library of Congress Catalog

In an effort to make information accessible to researchers and library users, controlled vocabularies are utilized to produce standardized access points. In theory this would serve to provide uninhibited access to information. In practice, controlled vocabularies, specifically those of the Library of Congress subject headings (LCSH) can lead to frustration on the end of the information professional, and confusion for researchers and individual library users. The works on the leftward edges of the arguably already leftist field of Library and Information Sciences have achieved great progress in advocating for a more balanced, less biased representation. There is, however, always work to be done and improvements to be made. Terminology and the subjects they represent are fluid,

ever changing, and constantly evolving. It is important that a library user searching for emerging concepts is able to find them, and that persons seeking “non-normative” information does not leave the library frustrated or offended.

The absence of the term “Queer” as a LCSH has plagued those with an interest in subject access for some time. It is addressed head on by multiple writers in K.R. Roberto’s (ed., 2008) *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front*, taking on such topics as queer subject access, visibility of queer people of color, and the term’s historical significance. The essays addressing the queer issue often look back further, noting such past victories as the removal of “Sexual perversion” as a cross reference to “Homosexuality” in 1972. Perhaps, then victory should also be attributed to Roberto’s text with the recent additions of the terms “Transgenderism” and “Transgender People” as LCSHs.

Given the abundance of contemporary texts a *Worldcat* keyword search for “Queer culture” finds, it is troubling to scroll down and view the related subjects of “Gay culture,” “Gays in popular culture,” “Lesbian culture,” and “Homosexuality.” The term “Queer” is very prominently absent, with the exception of the subject heading “Queer theory,” which has led Roberto (2011) to ask, “If there are no queers in LCSH, what does Queer theory study?” Additionally concerning is the results of a keyword search for “Queer people,” a term that would make a welcome addition in the tradition of the similarly worded “Transgender people.” The aforementioned search results in texts from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century about European criminals, the Hollywood fiction novel of the same name, and various children’s literature. Although there is a book about homosexuality from the 1960s and a contemporary text about “gays in literature,” the results would be unsatisfactory for a user seeking to learn about people who identify as Queer. Information on actual queer people would more likely be found under the headings “Gays,” “Lesbians,” or “Sexual minorities,” which is, in reality, not likely to be what the searcher for “Queer people” is seeking.

The historical subject heading language problem led to the construction of many progressive thesauri beginning in the 1960s. Sanford Berman’s introduction to the feminist thesaurus *On Equal Terms: A Thesaurus for Nonsexist Indexing and Cataloging* (1977) still rings true. He defines the “existing subject schema” as being “archaic, male-slanted, imprecise, and incomplete,” a combination that inhibits access to materials that may very well exist in unlikely and hard to find locations on the library shelves. This work, along with the American Library Association’s Social Responsibilities Round Table and the committees within that group, led to the eventual inclusion of terms like “Feminism” and “Sex discrimination,” but also the untimely demise of “Women’s liberation movement.” This work kicked off what is now going on five decades of subject access improvements in the Library of Congress Catalog (Johnson, 2008).

Still, certain commonly used terminology struggles to find its way into the Library of Congress authorities. Tatiana de la Tierra (2008) was correct when she asked,

“Do words that originate in the margins have to work harder to prove themselves worthy of use in encyclopedias and subject headings?” The exclusion of Queer may be a product of the similarly absent “Heteronormativity,” which is only listed as a UF under “Heterosexism.” Yet, Heterosexism’s scope note states that it is “...works on prejudicial attitudes or assumptions held by heterosexuals concerning homosexuals or homosexuality as well as works on the presumption that everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation.” Perhaps from the white-Christian-male-heterosexual-Eurocentric perspective that the LCSH often embodies, this might ring true. However, heteronormativity as noted by Ellen Greenblatt in 2011 could be best described as the concept queer identity is rallying against, and thus the reason the term exists as something other than the totality of what is expressed in terms like gay or lesbian. Queer is unique in that it extends beyond mere “sexual orientation” to cover concepts of both gender and sexuality (Greenblatt, 2011), thus proving what would be Queer’s welcome addition to the LCSH.

Despite updates to the LCSH over the years, many awkward and outdated terms remain. Gravestones are still “Sepulchral Monuments,” Drag queens are still “Female impersonators,” and offshore oil is still called “Petroleum in submerged lands.” The Library of Congress continues to call non-citizens “Aliens,” yet “Alien abduction” refers to abduction by extraterrestrials, and not kidnapped undocumented immigrants. One can blame the fluidity of language or even the sheer volumes of LCSH, yet there is no shortage of librarians to point out the incongruities and Library of Congress still remains behind the times. Thus, the solution remains to continue the tradition of radical librarianship and its constant ear to the ground of emerging terminology and the people it describes. It is with this persistence that updates to the LCSH have historically occurred, and that will undoubtedly and belatedly lead to the eventual inclusion of the queer terminology so many radical catalogers and library users have been fighting for.

### Part III. Radical Cataloging and the History of Zine Libraries

Radical cataloging has become exercised through the development of non-traditional library and archival collections in both academic and public libraries. Certain disciplines within the humanities and liberal arts have vanguarded the collecting and preserving of printed material and ephemera. Many of these collections have their roots in the explosion of radical and small presses of the American 1950s and 60s. During these decades, socio-political minorities printed political manifestos, newsletters, and pamphlets to strengthen internal bonds and foster representative dialogue with the public. Zines, shortened from the word fanzines, have been aptly described by zine librarian Randy Scott as “a form of communication between like-minded isolates from all over the world” (Chepesiuk, 1997, p. 70). Reluctant library workers collaborated with independent and radical presses after academic communities realized the zine’s significance as a primary source material to

document non-traditional social histories and underground movements (Dodge, 2005).

Because they are self-published, motivated by self-expression, and not for profit, zines are placed on the fringes of more established art communities (Freedman, 2010). These standards mean that zines can only be acquired through non-conventional methods such as independent press fairs, barter, and non-corporate distribution centers called distros (Stoddart and Kiser, 2004). Additionally, their ephemeral nature and inconsistent format make it certain that zines will never be an accepted part of any larger bibliographic format or universal cataloging schema such as Worldcat (Chowdhury and Chowdhury, 2007, p. 12). However this is not a major disadvantage as most zine librarians choose to emphasize local scope based on content and user demographics. Zine librarians even reach outside of academia to develop the most relevant and up to date subject term headings for their users (Stevens, n.d.).

Zine collections become established in academic libraries and special collections after receiving a sizable collection from a grassroots political organization or activist. Examples of such anchor collections are Sarah Dyer's collection at Duke's Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture and Kathleen Hanna's Riot Grrrl Collection at NYU's Fales Special Collection Library. There is also a surge within academic communities to focus on zines and independent publications created by self-identified people of color, where issues such as casual racism, identity, and community are brought to the forefront. Examples of such burgeoning collections are the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University and the Cushing Memorial Archives and Library at Texas A & M University.

Student run zine clubs have flourished in American college and university settings usually through student based efforts. Cafés, infoshops, and women's centers within academic settings have also boosted the zine's visibility with students collaborating on various zine related projects, fairs, and workshops. Zines in special collections are flexible and multifaceted, and both educators and researchers seek out their materials. Brooklyn College English instructor Natalie Nuzzo, introduced her students to the library's zine collection and collected their reactions. One student remarked, "It reminds me of my own scrapbooking hobby. The ritual of collecting words and photos and compiling them together in something tangible far exceeds blogging in my opinion (I know many people of my age would disagree), and it feels like something that's truly of my own creation," comparing the zine's self-expressive qualities to those available in Web 2.0 (Nuzzo, 2012). This student's quote not only alludes to Benedict Anderson's famous definition of imagined communities, but validates the zine as a vehicle for asserting self-expression (Anderson, p. 145).

Zines in academic settings have secured a special niche in libraries and special collections. Originally collected as rare primary sources documenting underground

political movements, librarians are currently curating zine collections to demonstrate methods for self-empowerment to students. Continued collaboration between the underground zine circuit and traditional American libraries will empower future generations with access to these invaluable self-published works.

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