Empowering our users, educating ourselves: Getting started with critical cataloging

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Presenters

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Land acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the land we are gathered on has long served as the site of meeting and exchange amongst a number of Indigenous peoples, specifically the Keyauwee and Saura. We also want to acknowledge the long history and lasting legacies of slavery on these lands.

Welcome!

We’re here to talk about learning to implement critical cataloging practices in our department.

But first, some background about critical theory, critical librarianship, and critical cataloging!
Key concepts
What are we talking about?

- Critical theory
- Oppression
- Privilege
- White supremacy
- Critical librarianship
Critical theory is a social theory that examines the constraints of society and culture, assuming that by explaining and understanding them we promote rationality, freedom, individuality and community.

(Cluley, 2011)
Critical theory switches the question of truth into a question of power. It tries to unmask the power relationships that lie behind our ideas of what is true.

(Cluley, 2011)
Critical theory

- We — individuals, cultures, institutions — are a product of our own histories.
- Understanding who, where, and how we are now requires that we think critically about we got here.
- How do our current systems of power reflect and reinforce the oppression we can see in our histories?
Who experiences oppression?

- Non-white people
- Ethnic minorities
- Women
- LGBTQIA+ people
- Immigrants
- People with disabilities
- Many religious groups
- People experiencing houselessness
- People in fat bodies
- Neurodivergent people
Everyday oppression

- Design of spaces & things
- Locations of public goods & services
- Taxing menstrual hygiene products
- Medical research
- Criminalizing houselessness, mental illness & addiction
- City design & infrastructure
Privilege

- *Privilege* refers to the experience of not being oppressed
- Life may be hard, but not because systems are stacked against people like you
- Multiple types of privilege
  - White privilege
  - Thin privilege
  - Straight privilege, cis privilege
  - (And so on...)
White supremacy & racism

- Question reflexive defensiveness
- Embeddedness of racial bias and oppression in our institutions and culture
- Goes beyond the explicit, overt racism of white supremacists
- Often insidious and hidden — thus the need for critical analysis
I refer instead to a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.

(Frances Lee Ansley, quoted in Leung & López-McKnight, 2021, p. 6)
Critical librarianship
Principles of crit lib

Critical librarianship (Drabinski, 2019):

- Interrogates the work of power in structures and systems
- Acknowledges the social, economic, and political context of library policies and processes
- Surfaces hidden labor
- Articulates the infrastructures that enable some lines of inquiry and not others
- Knows that the world could be different
A critical eye on libraries & archives

- Physical & digital accessibility
- Collection development
- Sensitive cultural materials
- Organization & description

- Public policies
  - Overdue fines
  - Rules & consequences
- Types, timing, & accessibility of programming
Critical failure

- Hunters Point Library (Queens, NY)
- Technically ADA-compliant

"Hunters Point Library" by shinya is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0
Crit lib in action

- Abolishing overdue fines
- Contracting with truly accessible digital vendors
- Crafting equitable collection development and user policies
- Employee policies and workplace culture
- Critical evaluation of information organization and description
Critical cataloging
Critical cataloging defined

- Offshoot of critical librarianship
- Critiques of cataloging systems dating back to 1940s (Watson, 2020; Fischer, 2005)
- Work of Sanford Berman as origin point of modern critical cataloging
  - Prejudices and antipathies: a tract on the LC subject heads concerning people (1971 & 1993)
...an approach to the work of cataloging and metadata creation with a sense of criticality and willingness to question already established library systems and processes. This is often accompanied by a social justice lens or approach to analysis.
Scholarly discourse & key works

- Literature from the past era focused more on remediation & correction.
- Current literature trending beyond to focus on other aspects for critical analysis.

- **Radical cataloging: Essays at the front** (2008)
  - K.R. Roberto (Ed.)
- **Drabinski** (2013)
  - Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction
- **Watson** (2020)
  - “There was Sex but no Sexuality*”: Critical Cataloging and the Classification of Asexuality in LCSH

*Sexuality*
Importance to librarianship

- Improved access to resources and discovery
- Mitigating harm to both users and staff
- Critically examining the value of neutrality and promoting inclusion
Access & discovery

- Improved discovery of resources
- Ensuring relevant language for searching
- Accurate & respectful name authority data
Mitigating harm

- Library users and staff might encounter harmful language
- Work to reduce and mitigate needed to increase inclusivity
- LCSH examples
  - LBGTQIA+ terms (Colbert, 2017)
  - “Illegal Aliens” LCSH
Values, neutrality, & inclusion

- Neutrality as a professional value
- Challenge supporting idea of institutional neutrality
- Neutrality in cataloging practice works against harm mitigation
- Critical cataloging to help promote inclusion as a value
Getting started with critical cataloging at UNCG
Technical Services at UNCG

- Department created in 2016 by merging Acquisitions and Cataloging
- 17 FTE, including faculty, staff, and temporary positions
- We’re not experts on critical librarianship or critical cataloging, but we’re actively working on learning
How does Tech Services support EDI efforts?

- Diversity audits of collections
- Participation in Reparative Archives Working Group
- Professional development and learning; following developments and changes in the profession
- Active development of skills and practices in specific areas—critical cataloging and metadata remediation
We wanted to learn more about critical cataloging and improve our practices and skills.

So we pursued a project that would give us that hands-on experience.
The Robert C. Hansen Performing Arts Collection

- Dates from the 1700s to the early 2000s (bulk 1800s-2000s)
- Contents: programs, heralds, guidebooks, periodicals, playbooks, sheet music, song books, correspondence, autographs, original costume and scenery designs, posters, photographs, postcards, tradecards, other visual materials, scrapbooks, subject files, and other memorabilia
- Documents the history of the performing arts, mainly theatre, in many countries, mainly the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom
- Some materials have been digitized, but most of this collection is not available online.
Hansen Collection subset: historical sheet music

- Dates from the 1840s-1920s (bulk 1900-1929)
- Sheet music, primarily songs
- Most items include cover art
- Many include advertisements for other musical compositions and/or excerpts of other songs
- Digitized and available online:
  - [https://gateway.uncg.edu/islandora/object/mss%3AMSS0255](https://gateway.uncg.edu/islandora/object/mss%3AMSS0255)
Not pictured: many examples of objectionable images, words, and phrases
Hansen Collection metadata work, 2011

- Author name clean-up in digital collections metadata
- Addition of LCSH to records in digital collection
- Addressing other minor metadata and digital file issues as they were encountered
2011 was a different time!
Sheet music metadata work, 2011

Did:
- Notice problematic aspects of images, terms, etc within collection materials
- Feel uncomfortable with some of the collection contents
- Follow expected workflows and practices
- Finish the project & move on

Didn’t:
- Discuss the problematic aspects
- Consider the possibility of addressing the issues we found
- Question the practices we had in place
- Think about it much once we were done, until...
Hansen Collection metadata work, 2021

- Specifically looking to provide more respectful and accurate metadata
- Considering critical cataloging practices and looking for ways to implement them
- Addressing other minor metadata and digital file issues as they are encountered
- Still in progress!
Why the Hansen collection?

- Many examples of problematic content and/or description = Many opportunities to provide more accurate and respectful language
- Manageable size (~500 items)
- Opportunities to learn from others in the profession who have similar collections
How have we approached this project?

- Reading relevant articles and other literature, attending webinars and conference sessions
- Seeking out examples of similar collections to see how other institutions have handled them
- Talking to personnel at other libraries who are active in this work
- Applying what we’ve learned to our project
- This work—and learning—is still in progress!
What kind of issues have we identified?

- Racism - particularly against Black people
  - Blackface art
  - Blackface minstrelsy
  - Legacy of slavery
  - Other racist language and/or images
- Colonialism
- Exoticism
- Misogyny, sexism
- Orientalism
- Xenophobia
- Disparaging language and/or images targeting racial, ethnic, and other minority groups
Projects spreadsheet example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Art</th>
<th>Other (describe)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Issue grouping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Memphis Blues</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>The cover has a man in blackface; racist lyrics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Merry Widow Waltzes (Die Lustige Witwe Walzer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>instrumental</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Message of the Honeymoon</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Racist/caricatured depictions of Black people on the cover art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Navy of the U.S.A.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ragtime Pipe of Pan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Red Lantern</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Racist art and lyrics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We’ve flagged approximately one-fifth of the collection for remediation and/or further review
Next steps

▸ Address incorrectly/inconsistently applied LCSH

▸ Use identified issues to inform selection of additional terms and/or vocabularies

▸ Consider practices and workflows for future collections and projects
What have we learned?

- Historical context about this collection and its era
- Some objectionable content is clear and dramatic, while other issues are more subtle; there are also gray areas
- Sometimes we have to question our own assumptions about and understandings of the materials we’re working with
- Not all the issues we’ve flagged will necessarily be addressed through metadata remediation
- This work is a process
- We have a lot more to learn!
Thinking about getting involved in critical cataloging work?

- Needed: willingness to learn, willingness to question assumptions and practices while working toward reducing harm and increasing inclusivity
- You don’t have to have a blatantly offensive collection to do this work
- Seek out learning opportunities:
  - [https://go.uncg.edu/critcat-resources](https://go.uncg.edu/critcat-resources)
THANKS!

Any questions?

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- Anna: arcraft@uncg.edu

Slides: https://go.uncg.edu/ncla2021
Resources and works cited: https://go.uncg.edu/critcat-resources
Credits

- Presentation template by SlidesCarnival
- Illustrations by Sergei Tikhonov
- Photographs by Unsplash
Examples of objectionable materials

- Racism - particularly against Black people
  - Blackface art
  - Blackface minstrelsy
  - Legacy of slavery
  - Other racist language and/or images
- Colonialism
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