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Who?

I am a Librarian at the University of Kansas Libraries (http://lib.ku.edu) where I currently serve as co-director of KU’s Institute for Digital Research in the Humanities (http://idrh.ku.edu). I have administrative, production and outreach responsibilities in support of a variety of digital initiatives and publishing services. Prior to joining KU Libraries’ digital initiatives program in 2005 I worked at the Scholarly Publishing Office at the University Library, University of Michigan (now Michigan Publishing: http://www.publishing.umich.edu/) where I helped develop electronic journals and digital scholarly projects.

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Decolonizing Libraries (extended abstract)

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http://brianrosenblum.net/2015/02/01/decolonizing_libraries/
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[During the Fall 2014 term I participated in the Hall Center for the Humanities Faculty Colloquium on the theme of Decolonizing Knowledge. This was a fantastic interdisciplinary program that, for me, was a chance to become more familiar with a wide range of writing and ideas, within librarianship and beyond, about notions of decolonization, inclusion, neutrality, and the production of knowledge. I would like to thank colloquium co-directors Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Glenn Adams for organizing it (and inviting me to participate), along with all the other colloquium participants. A publication from the colloquium should be available soon.

Below is the extended abstract (for a paper in development) that I contributed to the colloquium. This was largely a chance for me to begin to review some of the literature and dip into the work of several librarians who have been deeply engaged in these issues for far longer than me. Particularly inspiring in the library world were the work of nina de jesus, Chris Bourg, Barbara Fister and Trevor Muñoz. Among my next steps: continue to organize and read through an extensive and growing reading list, which I will also share here once I get it in shape.]

This paper will explore the notion of decolonizing libraries by looking at how libraries are complicit in supporting constructions of knowledge that perpetuate existing power structures, and how at the same time they may have the potential to serve as sites of resistance and change. Libraries are revered in the public imagination as symbols of democracy, access to knowledge, and an educated citizenry (De Botton 2012; Maxwell 2006; Smith 2014). But libraries (along with other cultural institutions such as archives and museums, collectively referred to as LAMs) are embedded in larger social-historical contexts, inherit their values from those larger structures, and are constrained by them, so much so that, as nina de jesus argues, “they come to embody institutional oppression, rather than resist it” (de jesus 2014). In addition, because they are built upon professional and
organizational values of service and technical efficiency, libraries provide “affordances for ignorance” through technologies that can “magically” facilitate information discovery for the user but that can obscure the modes of production—and the material, economic, and political forces that control them—behind the shiny and smooth curtain of the search interface. Digital technologies promise new models of unprecedented access and sharing but these too may inherit or reproduce the same biases, inequalities and power structures.

Libraries, however, also hold a potential for resistance and change that can be realized through individual activism; through deliberate attention to core practices and issues such as collection development, public programming, discovery and access, long-term preservation; and through critical engagement and action within the larger context of research and teaching.

This paper will describe several areas that can serve as openings or entry points to thinking about the project of decolonizing libraries. These entry points, briefly touched upon and noted by the numbers in the sections below, can serve as starting points for further exploration and discussion.

I. A Wolf in LAMs clothing: libraries, archives and museums as producers of colonizing knowledge

Part one of the paper will review some of the literature exploring the colonial and hegemonic aspects of library practices, including (1) how our conception of modern libraries, archives, museums arose out of and reflect the values of the Enlightenment, particularly its colonial legacy. In fact LAMs were at the heart of the colonial enterprise. At home they were the privileged repositories for the artifacts collected and knowledge generated by the colonial powers; in the colonial context they were used as a civilizing influence — a tool to promote literacy, religion, morals, and self-improvement (Bivens-Tatum 2012; Dudley 2013; Edwards 2005). This legacy is evident in (2) cataloging and classification schemes, which reveal racist, sexist and Euro-centric origins and which mask other ways of viewing the world and the voices of the colonized or powerless. Cataloging is a method of knowledge control, and in the pre-digital age, subject terms were a primary mechanism by which library users discovered material.
Much work to raise awareness of the problematic nature of library subject terms and of classification schemes in general has been undertaken by Sanford Berman, Hope Olson and other activist librarians. (Berman 1971; Olson 2002; Drabinsky 2008; Knowlton 2009). In the digital age, metadata, search and indexing technologies have provided a way around some of the limitations of subject headings, but they have inherited their own set of prejudices and antipathies, sometimes right down to how the code is created, and are often more effective at obscuring them from users behind the “magic” of the search interface (McPherson 2012; Presner 2014; Underwood 2014; Bourg 2015).

The profession of librarianship itself has been critiqued for its (3) political naiveté and failure to confront important social questions. This failure is attributed to the profession’s middle-class aspirations and values, and its preoccupation with a managerial outlook that promotes links with the corporate world and prioritizes service delivery and technical efficiency at the expense of class and social theory, which is largely absent from the LIS curriculum (Pawley 1998). Librarians’ much-embraced concept of (4) information literacy (promoted through instruction and reference programs) may also reinforce hegemonic structures of power. For example, the contemporary models of information literacy have been critiqued for their reliance on market terminology, and for framing information literacy as a set of discrete, individual, marketable skill sets and measurable outcomes. Such approaches reinforce existing models of expertise and authority, condition users to view information as belonging to private, gated and often subscription-based collections, and continue to serve as an affordance of ignorance, obscuring the power relations that determine what kind of knowledge gets created, how we find it, and who gets access. Not incidental to these issues, libraries are notably non-diverse workplaces: 88% of credentialed librarians are white, and there are only 185 (0.1%) credentialed Native American librarians (Beatty 2014; Bourg 2014a; Bourg 2014b; Searle 2013).

Similar issues are also at play in discussions about (5) collection development, particularly in the debate between purchase on demand and curated models of collection building. While the strategy of purchasing what will satisfy the immediate needs of current researchers may seem rational in a time of tight
budgets, it also raises concerns about the integrity of collections in the future. Will we be generating significant gaps in our collections, or creating new archival silences by ignoring the material that is currently not in immediate demand? These issues force us to ask ourselves what our professional role is and what communities are we serving (Bourg 2014; Fister 2010).

II. Open Access, publishing and digital humanities: library practice in the digital age

The second part of the paper will explore several specific forward-looking issues or trends relevant to library practice in the digital age. These issues may offer some paths toward decolonization but also present have limitations and constraints of their own.

Open access (6) is a powerful and much-needed intervention that can help increase access to scholarship and break apart librarianship’s close and often exploitative relationship with for-profit commercial publishers and vendors. Yet the main goal of OA is not decolonization, and a one-size-fits-all approach to OA may in some respects work against efforts to decolonize scholarly communication. OA focuses largely on issues of access, reuse rights, metrics and research impact, but does little to address, for example, the technical and logistical problems of getting educational materials to communities lacking adequate Internet access (an issue tackled by initiatives such as WiderNet, or the development of publishing infrastructures that can support the production and management of scholarly research in the developing world. Such infrastructures would allow research communities to attain control of their own research output and encourage greater internal and region-to-region research communication, rather than increasing dependency on the infrastructures—and interests—of the global north and supporting a largely north-to-south research flow. Efforts to make cultural materials “open” can also be at odds with the interests of indigenous or marginalized groups, opening up their heritage for appropriation and profit by those with access to the means of knowledge production. Traditional Knowledge (TK) licenses are one attempt to address some of the
inadequacies of Creative Commons licenses in this regard (Christen 2012; Greenberg 2014; Mann 2012).

Another significant development is (7) the emergence of massive digital collections like Hathi Trust, Jstor, Internet Archive, Google Books, Europeana and DPLA, and their increasingly central role in information discovery and as providers of research data. What economic and institutional forces are driving these initiatives, and how well do these kinds of collections enable or limit alternative voices or ways of knowing? For example, in HathiTrust, according to one study, less than 5% of the content is in the Spanish language (Weiss 2014). The issue of “archival silences” comes to the fore in looking at the state of (8) digital recovery projects. Many individual recovery projects originating in the early days of the web have fallen by the wayside due to lack of institutional support and other reasons, resulting in a canon of digital literature far less diverse than envisioned in the early days of the Web (Earhart 2012; Carter 2006). Efforts at studying historical literature by black authors raise questions about how our default digital textual research methods may not only hinder the study of literary history from a racial perspective, but also serve to make invisible many black authors and the unique qualities of their writing, often intended for a localized audience in place and time. But there are also some interesting initiatives that point to ways digital methods might work to uncover and fill in existing gaps. For example, Invisible Australians rearranges the bureaucratically organized collections of the National Archives to reveal the individuals controlled—and extensively documented—under the racist White Australia Policy, and the “Collective Biographies of Women” project provides new digital tools and metadata structures for studying the lives of historical women.

Issues of infrastructure, material production, and political-economic control (9) provide another lens for looking at issues of decolonization. Our seemingly “virtual” information infrastructure is dependent upon real power plants, data centers, a network of satellites orbiting the planet and cables on the ocean floor, and generates landfills of toxic e-waste shipped out of site and out of mind, but with real environmental and human consequences (Mattern 2014, 2016; Munoz 2014). What implications does this have for how we think about and practice
information sharing and distribution? What does it mean to decolonize knowledge in an age in which the infrastructure for the production and distribution of information is controlled by a network of little understood corporate and governmental entities? How does our use of free and convenient tools both facilitate new networks of communication, yet feed into the corporate power structures that provide those tools?

Finally, other tools and methods of the digital humanities (10) offer paths to decolonizing knowledge and scholarly practice. Often libraries’ engagement with digital humanities mirrors the approach to information literacy, viewing digital humanities in terms of skill building, job preparation, and marketability. In part libraries are pushed to couch initiatives in these terms in order to justify their value and provide measurable outcomes. But digital humanities also offers opportunities to critically engage with questions of scholarly and pedagogical method, new models of publishing, digital media formats, and other alternative or emerging scholarly practices (Baer 2013). There are many active digital humanities communities engaged with precisely such issues, including #pocodh, which looks at digital humanities through the lens of postcolonial theory and practice, and Global Outlook::Digital Humanities, which promotes communication and collaboration among researchers and students in high, middle and low income economies. The emergence of peer-to-peer and other alternative networks of curating and sharing, the rise of “critical making” and related methodologies point to decentralized, non-textual modes of knowledge production. “Minimal computing” looks at how computing can be done under significant constraints of hardware, software, bandwidth or other factors, through the use of open, sustainable, interoperable, low-cost practices.

These areas all represent opportunities for critical engagement on the part of libraries. Situated at the nexus of a range of communities, systems and issues central to scholarly communication, libraries can promote change through education, advocacy and engagement, working to make more visible the larger systems of knowledge production and access, and encouraging critical thinking about how those systems affect what we can access and discover.
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