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Unachieved Inclusiveness in Cataloging, but Action Means all

This book, *Inclusive Cataloging: Histories, Context, and Reparative Approaches*, serves as a group portrait (Waston 110) of actors who have devoted themselves to implementing the concepts of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility into cataloging. Through long-term first-hand cataloging practical experience from three editors as well as other contributors, this book vividly illustrates the concept of “inclusive cataloging” and aims to provoke a call to action among massive library professionals. While the evidence presented is strong and the intentions noble, there is room for improvement in the selection of examples and the development of its arguments to achieve greater inclusivity, coherence, and depth. This essay aims to provide a critical examination of these aspects.

This book consists of two distinct parts: “History and Theory” and “Case Studies.” Each part presents the evolution and practical applications of inclusive cataloging.

The first part, “History and Theory”, from Amber Billey, one editor’s perspective, offers a historical and theoretical framework by intertwining citations of original cataloging history with the Enlightenment Era, and introducing pioneers who have shaped this field.

Chapter 1 examines the historical and social background of library cataloging and addresses its “injustice issue” born by nature. It points out how the original classification as a

European-centered narrative repetitively narrows down and even distorts the “world” people see (Belantara and Drabinski 4). Such a large time span can be the best proof of colonial lasting and tremendous impact.

What’s also worthy of attention is the subtitles of this chapter, vividly presenting how the authors organize this chapter an elegant and progressive layer by layer. The series of subtitles with rhythm and a sense of cohesion — “The Worlds Words Create”, “Information Tools Are for Use”, “Information Tools as Worlding” and “Community-building as Worlding” — underscore a more dynamic and proactive way of understanding words, tools, and systems, rather than depicting them as something submissive. It reveals Amanda Belantara and Emily Drabinski’s ambition to unfold the reciprocal relationship between knowledge organization systems, or from a more foundational level, words and people. This opinion aligns closely with the discourse theory (Foucault 32), which posits that discourse is a system of representation that produces knowledge and meaning, reflecting and reproducing power relations within society. Foucault argued that discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak, thereby influencing societal norms and perceptions. Adopting this perspective lays a solid foundation for understanding contemporary challenges as well as eliciting the necessity of “inclusive cataloging”.

Chapters 2 to 4 outline key criticisms of original cataloging from African American, Indigenous, and Gender/Sexuality perspectives and then smoothly transition to pioneers of “inclusive cataloging”. The authors effectively highlight the early contributors like Dorothy Porter Wesley, who represented the Black community and whose work has laid the groundwork for modern cataloging practices. These stories provide detailed context and tables helping audiences clearly figure out the improvements in the classification system. They serve as

reminders of the progress made and the challenges overcome, motivating current practitioners to continue pushing boundaries.

Chapters 5 to 9, while labeled as part of the “History and Theory” section, are largely devoted to detailed case studies that delve into the challenges faced by marginalized groups, including unauthorized immigrants, individuals with disabilities, and members of sexual minority communities. These chapters aim to illustrate the systemic barriers that exist in achieving inclusive cataloging practices. For example, the authors highlight the slow pace of implementing equitable cataloging. A notable case is related to the Library of Congress (LC)’s decision in 2016 to retain the term “Illegal” when referring to unauthorized immigrants. It sparked outrage among library professionals (Baron et al. 53). But what reirrigated library workers' practical counterattack was when the American Library Association praised LC’s update in 2021. After that, organizations released statements and many libraries made local changes in cataloging to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with LC’s decision. The prolonged timeline from the initial controversy to the local resolution unfolds the extremely huge obstacles within the library system and the continuous nature of achieving inclusivity.

Then, part 2, “Case Studies”, focuses more on practical applications and technical details of “inclusive cataloging”. 19 cases explore real-world implementations of inclusive cataloging in greater depth, providing actionable insights through demonstrations of technical details, reusable patterns, and participants’ reflections. This section functions almost as a handbook, offering practical guidance for those looking to implement inclusive cataloging in their institutions.

The book, except for Chapters 1 through 4, is comprised of case studies. The editors and authors meticulously curated these examples to vividly embody and reinforce the central theme

of inclusivity. Each case was chosen not only for its relevance but also for its ability to highlight diverse perspectives and experiences, thereby enriching the reader's understanding of what true inclusivity entails.

These cases demonstrate diversity both in the groups being classified and in the various forms of unequal cataloging. Examples of marginalized groups include unauthorized immigrants, Black, Indigenous, Asian, people with disabilities, and sexual minority communities. The inequities in cataloging practices can be categorized into three main forms: first, direct stigmatization or even neglect of cataloging due to discrimination, such as Wesley noticed that books about the black community were under the categories meant “slavery” and “colonization” in the early 1990s (Frizzell 30); second, cultural arrogance leading to the blind application of cataloging practices rooted in one’s own cultural norms without sufficient exploration of others; and third, the misuse of terms that carry discriminatory connotations, which is supported by Chapter 10 Words Matter and Chapter 11 Coming to Terms.

Inclusive cataloging practices are underpinned by the concept of “inclusivity,” which is reflected not only in the diverse perspectives of the actors involved but also in the wide range of focal points their actions address. Whether it’s a solo librarian from the Utah State Hospital’s library or librarian organizations, and whether the practices focus on cataloging patterns, the adoption of new technologies in the State University of New York System (Turner et al. 251), staff structures in Clemson University (Serrao et al. 225), or even the proposal of new workflows in the Washington Research Library, all efforts align with and respond to the theme of inclusivity.

Although the practices mentioned in the book are undoubtedly inspiring and provide valuable insights into innovative approaches within library science, I still have two significant concerns that need to be addressed: Lack of Global Representation and Structure

One significant concern lies in the potential Western-centrism bias evident in the selection of recent cases. Despite efforts to achieve balance, disparities persist. For instance, inclusive practices in Eastern library resources are exemplified by Dr. Alfred Kaiming Chui's work with Chinese and Japanese collections (Frizzell 31) and the case study on Southeast Asian resources in Chapter 17. However, these examples are outnumbered by the five chapters dedicated to inclusive cataloging practices concerning LGBTQ+ communities (Chapters 7, 9, 12, 16, and 20). From my point of view, it seems like using one kind of centrism to get rid of another kind of centrism. Addressing this imbalance is critical for ensuring that the book presents a genuinely global perspective. After all, overcoming Eurocentrism does not inherently ensure overall inclusivity; true diversity necessitates a wider array of voices and experiences. Another example is that the critique topics authors selected are American Africa, Indigenous people, and Sexuality, which is the result of a typically American narrative.

Ensuring broader inclusivity is essential for strengthening the book's relevance and impact. Including a wider range of global perspectives, especially from underrepresented regions, would make the content more representative and applicable to diverse audiences. This could involve soliciting contributions from librarians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, among other regions.

When it comes to the book's structure, one notable issue is its reliance on a series of isolated case studies, which results in a fragmented narrative. While each example provides

valuable insights, the lack of connections between them prevents the cases from forming a cohesive argument. By failing to analyze the similarities and differences between cases, the book risks becoming a simple collection of examples rather than a comprehensive exploration.

Another issue is there are no clear standards about why some of the case studies are placed in the “History and Theory” section, while most of them are placed in the second part. This way, it would be an issue in the overall structure. There is no clear basis for distinguishing the first part from the second part. For instance, some case studies that seem theoretically grounded are found in the second part, whereas others with historical significance are scattered throughout both sections. This inconsistency disrupts the logical flow and makes it difficult for readers to anticipate where they will find relevant information.

To address fragmentation and enhance depth, the editors could consider organizing the book around thematic threads that connect different cases. For example, grouping case studies based on common themes such as user engagement, technological innovation, or policy implementation can create a more structured and coherent narrative. Organizing content thematically ensures that related ideas are presented together, creating a more logical flow and reducing fragmentation. It also allows for a more in-depth analysis of each topic, providing readers with comprehensive insights into various aspects of library practice. What’s more, it enables readers to trace the development of ideas across multiple case studies.

Additionally, including reflective essays that synthesize findings and draw overarching conclusions would add value to the reader’s experience.

Adding comparative analysis would also allow readers to identify common challenges, effective strategies, and potential risks across various contexts. This approach would not only

enhance the book's coherence but also provide readers with broader insights that can be applied beyond individual scenarios.

In general, to better develop an inclusive and holistic view, the editors should incorporate higher-level sentences that draw connections and highlight contrasts between cases. This would not only deepen readers' understanding but also foster a more nuanced exploration of underlying principles. For instance, discussing how certain practices align with or diverge from established theories can provide valuable insights.

While "History and Theory" and "Case Studies" each serve important roles in presenting the evolution and practical applications of inclusive cataloging, the book could be significantly improved in several areas. Ensuring broader global representation, incorporating comparative analysis, and fostering coherence and depth would strengthen the book's relevance and impact. By addressing these areas, the editors can create a more comprehensive and impactful resource that truly captures the essence of inclusive cataloging and its importance in today's diverse world.

In general, this book exemplifies the courageous spirit and practical experience of librarians as they challenge and reform traditional classification systems. Although the concept of "inclusivity," straightforward in theory, proves challenging to implement due to the limitations of individual perspectives and narratives, no improvement would happen if people don't start with their own actions. This tension is poignantly captured in the authors' own reflections: "Politics aside, we, the authors of this chapter, found ourselves in an awkward position. We were proud of our achievements and the progress made. Yet, we also aspired to achieve maximum impact and see the positive change reflected in all library catalogs" (Baron et al. 63). The

previous and ongoing efforts recorded by this book can stimulate librarians' motivation or even non-professionals' interest in this field.

Works Cited

Billey, Amber, et al. Inclusive Cataloging. ALA Editions, 4 Sept. 2024.

Foucault, Michael. The Archaeology of Knowledge. London, Routledge, 1972.