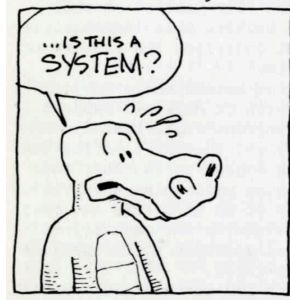


Radical Classification and Outsider Archives

Is this a SYSTEM?: Radical Classification and Outsider Archives

Noa Ryan

Pratt Institute School of Information



Abstract

This paper addresses practice-based challenges to the epistemic imperialism inherent in systems of classification and knowledge organization that emerged from the intellectual and political perspectives of the western European Enlightenment. Because its ideas would form the basis of a globally imperial modernity, the knowledge organization systems attendant to the Western rationalist project have become as hegemonically endemic as its other structuring frameworks (for example, the neoliberalism of the late end of the last century and beginning of this one). This paper investigates “challengers” to such a system coming from within and without the institutional bounds of libraries and archives as a profession, from radical catalogers creating alternative classification systems to “outsider archivists” organizing knowledge independently, idiosyncratically, and sometimes extraordinarily.

Keywords

Alternative classification, Indigenous classification, libraries, epistemology, informal archives

Radical Classification and Outsider Archives

The organization of knowledge is deeply enmeshed with and embedded in the organization of political, economic, social, and in fact spiritual life. Because its ideas form the basis of globally imperial modernity, the knowledge organization systems attendant to the Western rationalist project have become as hegemonically endemic as its other structuring frameworks of economic and political life. In this paper, I investigate three “challengers” to such a system coming from within and without the institutional bounds of libraries and archives as a profession. First, I will discuss two radical catalogers whose work in library classification has made Indigenous epistemes more accessible and materially manifest in Canada and abroad. In the second section of this essay, I will profile an “outsider archivist” whose life and work became more fiercely independent of institutions over the years, leaving an extraordinary legacy.

Part 1: Radical classification – Brian Deer and Gene Joseph

Native and First Nations people of North America have been among the most brutally and systematically impacted by the epistemic violence of colonialism. Schools, churches, and government institutions of all kinds have been among the weapons of this particular violence, which settlers and our governments have ruthlessly deployed to attack traditional Indigenous knowledge systems, lifeways, and languages. In Canada as in the United States, government-funded networks of so-called residential schools imposed a systematic program of violent abuse and cultural deprivation onto generations of young Indigenous people, aiming to “eliminate all aspects of Indigenous culture” (Hanson, Gamez & Manuel, 2020). Rising out of this history, it might be unsurprising that two of the most influential librarians in the field of

radical and alternative knowledge classification systems are First Nations practitioners. Brian Deer was born in 1945 in Brooklyn to Tonieratokhen parents from Kahnawake, where he later grew up. According to Jean Weihs in her 2019 memorial profile of Deer in *Technicalities*:

He had used libraries extensively during his life and had become aware that the system for organizing a library's collection did not take into consideration the culture of the First Nations' people, so he enrolled in McGill University's Faculty of Library Science and added a MLS degree to his academic accomplishments... Upon his graduation from McGill the National Indian Brotherhood gave him a contract to catalogue their collection. He worked at the Brotherhood from 1974 to 1976 and it was during this time he developed his classification system. (Weihs, 2019)

Deer's system utilizes similar practical or technical syntax to prevailing settler classification systems (for example, lists or schedules of subject area topics with codes for call numbers, etc.) and departs from their mold at the intellectual level. He designed and elaborated a network of subject areas to reflect the depth and breadth of materials housed with the National Indian Brotherhood and support the information-seeking needs of the collection's users. Later, successive waves of librarians would encounter his system and continue to build on it, including Gene Joseph. Joseph, credited with being the first Indigenous (Wet'suwet'en) librarian from British Columbia, began working at the Union of British Columbia Indian chiefs and adapted the Brian Deer Classification Scheme to further reflect local dynamics. In addition to being an activist, she went on to become the founding librarian of X̱wi7̱x̱wa Library, which uses an extended and adapted BDCS as well as the subject headings authority of over 11,000 entries that she created. The First Nations House of Learning Subject Headings are currently only in use at X̱wi7̱x̱wa Library, where they are integrated with the broader UBC Library catalog, but Joseph

and her colleagues' work has been documented frequently in professional journals and literature as part of a growing effort to indigenize knowledge organization and libraries worldwide. In that vein:

In 1991, Joseph helped establish the BC Library Association First Nations Interest Group, a professional network that holds a scholarship endowment created in her name to support Aboriginal graduate students pursuing library sciences... At the time of the first award, Joseph was one of the few First Nations librarians in Canada. Now 16 Aboriginal Gene Joseph Scholars are working as information professionals. (Vancouver Island University, 2018)

Part 2: Outsider archives – Marion Stokes

Marion Stokes, the creator of what may hopefully become the largest and most openly accessible archive of broadcast television, bridged the gap over the course of her life between institutional and outsider archival practice. Stokes was a librarian and political activist turned television producer who recorded 71,000 video cassettes worth of broadcast television in her home over a span of 30+ years between the late 1970s and the early 2010s. Her life and work were the subject of a documentary film by director Matt Wolf in 2019, and her massive collection was deeded to the Internet Archive after her death in December of 2012, where it is slowly being digitized with the eventual goal of being made available to the public. Currently, 181 tapes of the 71,000 are available to view on the Internet Archive site (Internet Archive, 2023).

The records in the collection are unique in a way, in that they were partly created by the archivist, Stokes, as well as her assistant and members of her family. Her collection policy was as laser focused as it was indiscriminate – she taped 24/7, as long as the news was on, and did

focus primarily on news from the major broadcast news providers which proliferated during the time of her practice – CNN came on the airwaves in her first few years of taping. Tapes were changed regularly and completed tapes deposited in boxes for storage. The present collection is housed in the Internet Archive’s cold storage facility in Richmond, California. In terms of description, according to Matt Wolf, the creator of *Recorder*, the documentary about Stokes’ life and collection, “Marion wrote on the spine of all of her tapes the date, the network, the time period she was recording, and sometimes other information that we called meta-data.” In the same interview with Samuel Argyle in *The Outline*, Wolf goes on to describe the workflow that his production team devised in collaboration with the archivist Trevor von Stein at the Internet Archive to quickly index the hundreds of thousands of hours of footage for the documentary’s editors using Stokes’ own original description and the crowdsourced interpretive work of volunteers (Argyle, 2019).

Wolf’s film itself becomes the first official use of Stokes’ collection as archival material. *Recorder* engages with its subject matter on a number of registers, reveling at moments of timeliness or significance (take, for example, the four-channel supercut of the four major broadcast news channels cutting one by one from their regularly scheduled programming on one early September morning in 2001), and sometimes simply the sheer nostalgic pleasure of almost incidental artifacts like infomercials which now provide valuable insight into cultural and economic history. At its heart, though, the film is about Marion Stokes as much as or more than an exploration of her miraculous archive. When I first saw the film in 2019, I remember hoping for more archival activation and less biopic and being disappointed. After watching the film again, I thought of Wolf’s approach as a different way to activate an archive, especially one that was created with a singular vision by someone who was operating outside of an institutional

framework, at a kind of margin. By making visible the life force, personality, and labor that went into the creation of Stokes' rich archival resource, as well as the degree of pathos necessarily involved in undertaking and maintaining a labor so monumental, Wolf drummed up a significant amount of support for the project among a much broader set of communities than the archivists and researchers who would have otherwise heard of the project. As multiple threads on Reddit over the past 4 years can attest, people want to access the collection and are eager for more information on its digitization timeline.

In both of these sections I have attempted to address the work of practitioners modeling knowledge organization systems outside of and/or against the dominant modes of collecting, cataloging and classifying. In my approach, I've hoped to foreground the people as much as the systems they developed, as this centering of life and labor in the conversation about knowledge is its own form of epistemic intervention. To continue to forge a robust network of knowledge workers and makers, it is important to understand all of our systems as created by and for the ultimate aims of people and communities rather than vague and impersonal infrastructures imposed on us from above long ago. As the success of Wolf's film in drumming up support, or the ripple effect of Gene Joseph's scholarship fund suggest, interpersonal care and recognition are what ultimately animate our libraries and archives, bringing them to life in relation to others.

Sources

- Ann M. Doyle, Kimberley Lawson, & Sarah Dupont. (2015). Indigenization of Knowledge Organization at the Xwi7xwa Library. *圖書資訊學刊*, 13(2).
[https://doi.org/10.6182/jlis.2015.13\(2\).107](https://doi.org/10.6182/jlis.2015.13(2).107)
- Argyle, S. (n.d.). *The woman who recorded 70,000 VHS tapes of... News*. The Outline. Retrieved December 12, 2023, from
<https://theoutline.com/post/7370/recorder-documentary-marion-stokes-interview-matt-wolf>
- Bosum, A., & Dunne, A. (2017). Implementing the Brian Deer Classification Scheme for Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute. *Collection Management*, 42(3–4), 280–293.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01462679.2017.1340858>
- Cherry, A., & Mukunda, K. (2015). A Case Study in Indigenous Classification: Revisiting and Reviving the Brian Deer Scheme. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 53(5–6), 548–567.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2015.1008717>
- Hanson, E., Gamez, D., & Manuel, A. (2020, September). *The Residential School System*. Indigenous Foundations.
<https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/residential-school-system-2020/>
- Humble intellectual leaves unique legacy. (n.d.). Retrieved December 12, 2023, from
<https://easterndoor.com/2019/02/07/humble-intellectual-leaves-unique-legacy/>
- Library, X. (n.d.). *Research Guides: Indigenous Librarianship : Brian Deer Classification System*. Retrieved December 12, 2023, from <https://guides.library.ubc.ca/Indiglibrarianship/briandeer>
- Macdonald, R. (2019, May 24). 71,716 video tapes in 12,094 days | Internet Archive Blogs. *Internet Archive Blogs*. <https://blog.archive.org/2019/05/24/71716-video-tapes-in-12094-days/>
- Swanson, R. (2015). Adapting the Brian Deer Classification System for Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 53(5–6), 568–579.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2015.1009669>

The Incredible Story Of Marion Stokes, Who Single-Handedly Taped 35 Ye. (n.d.). Retrieved

December 12, 2023, from

<https://www.fastcompany.com/3022022/the-incredible-story-of-marion-stokes-who-single-handedly-taped-35-years-of-tv-news>

VIU Honours First Nations Advocate with Honorary Degree | News | Vancouver Island University |

Canada. (n.d.). Retrieved December 12, 2023, from

<https://news.viu.ca/viu-honours-first-nations-advocate-honorary-degree>