27

Disability in the Library and Librarianship

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Libraries and librarianship have a complex relation to disability and disabled people. On the one hand, modern professional librarianship is a nineteenth-century invention that developed alongside eugenic ideologies and charitable institutions. On the other, the profession has always had an explicit commitment to a principle of access and an ethic of care. In short, librarianship is linked to some of the very formations against which disability rights movements and disability studies developed (eugenics, charity), and it is also connected to some of the very principles that have emerged as central to recent waves of disability justice activism and critical disability studies (access, care). In recent decades, library and information science (LIS, the disciplinary field of library knowledge) has been explicitly influenced by disability studies and by the activism of disabled library patrons and workers. Those committed to librarianship and disability justice, working in both academic research libraries and public libraries, argue that the field of librarianship has a radical potential to remake knowledge systems, to advocate for collective access, and to cultivate spaces in which participation is not conditional on abled performance or capitalist productivity. At the same time, the field has to recognize its foundations in charity service models (Schlesselman-Tarango 2016) and eugenic logics (Adler, Huber, and Nix 2017), frameworks that have historically constrained the production and management of disability (Snyder and Mitchell 2006).

In recent years, critical librarianship informed by disability activism and theory has reckoned with the ways in which these frameworks still structure disability's presence within libraries and librarianship—in subject headings determined by medical models, in separate libraries for "specialized populations" with disabilities, and in a focus on patrons' but not workers' barriers to access. At the same time, recent scholarship and critical practice, led by disabled and other marginalized library workers, has been working to realize the promise at the intersection of library values and disability justice principles, to question and reframe the historical position of disability in the library.

Call Numbers, Classification, Description

In between the call numbers HV1551 and HV3024, books that treat the subject "people with disabilities" are located. These numbers come from the Library of

Congress Classification, a system for organizing publications according to subject, developed at the turn of the twentieth century and used by most academic libraries in the United States (Library of Congress, 2014). (The Dewey Decimal Classification, in turn, is used by most public libraries in the United States and is the most widely used system in the world; OCLC Online Computer Library Center 2003.) In many libraries, the classification system is not just a string of numbers attached to each book; it is the spatial logic that determines where and how each book is shelved. If you go looking for disability in the library, the shelves labeled HV1551 to HV3024 are one place you will find it.

Since the first publication of the Library of Congress Classification (1901–1911) and the Library of Congress Subject Headings (1909–1914), multiple waves of critique and correction have addressed the system's inadequate specificity and relationship among terms, the "currency or bias of the headings," and structural problems (Fischer 2005, 103; Berman 1971; Adler 2017; Roberto 2008). The bias of headings, in particular, has become a flash point around minoritized subjects, and for entire fields of study that critique the knowledge systems preserved in the catalog. Specific terms (such as "Illegal alien"), as well as larger hierarchies and juxtapositions (queer theory under "Homosexuality," next to "Sexual deviations"), have been contested and in some cases changed (American Libraries Magazine 2021). However, such controversies or changes generally leave untouched the consolidated power in the *unmarked* terms and categories: *citizen*, *white*, *male*, *heterosexual*, and so on. Furthermore, the slow and uneven process of updating subject terms, from the 1970s to the present, means that even today many subject terms do not reflect language used by communities to define themselves (Olson 2000), are not aligned with field-defining keywords (Howard and Knowlton 2018; Koford 2014), and can enact violence or retraumatize researchers at specific intersections (Loyer 2018; Brilmyer 2020).

With respect to disability in particular, critiques have shown that library classification systems are themselves part of the modern project to "classify and pathologize human differences" (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 4–5) and use "medical and sociological frameworks" to reproduce normative assumptions about "people with disabilities as diseased and/or dependent" (Adler, Huber, and Nix 2017, 118). Critiques show that classification systems fail to represent the distinctions that matter to scholars in the critical interdisciplinary field of disability studies (Koford 2014). And they argue that archival description largely fails to expose the political-relational assemblages that produced archival materials about disabled subjects, including materials like "arrest records, asylum documentation, . . . legislation" (Brilmyer 2018, 107).

There has been successful activism to change subject headings related to disability, but changes have come shockingly late. "Monsters" became "Abnormalities" in the National Library of Medicine Subject Headings in 2009 (Adler, Huber, and Nix 2017, 127). "Mental retardation" became "Intellectual disability"

in the Dewey Decimal Classification in 2020 (Fox 2020). Perhaps too late, these changes are also too little, since the hierarchical arrangement of classification systems continues to reflect the eugenic logic that informed their original development. For example, while "Defective" has been replaced with "People with disabilities," the term is still under "Special classes" of "Protection, assistance and relief," which is under "Social pathology / Social and public welfare / Criminology" (Library of Congress, n.d.). In short, the entire subject is still locked within its original eugenic framing as a problem for science and the state, even as specific terms evolve (Adler, Huber, and Nix 2017). Similarly, while some sections have been removed—for example, "HQ1036–1043 Marriage of degenerates and defectives"—they persist as silences and gaps. The current outline jumps from "HQ1001–1006 The state and marriage" directly to "HQ1051–1057 The church and marriage," leaving the sections in between unnamed but also unchanged (Adler, Huber, and Nix 2017; Library of Congress, n.d.). And where racialized terms have disappeared from spaces beside disability—for example, from the subsections of Dewey 379.1, "Education of Special Classes," that originally included "Blind; Deaf and Dumb; Feeble-minded; Freedmen. Negro; Indians; Orientals; Criminals. Reform Schools; Special Nationalities; and Co-education of Races"—their modern and seemingly race-neutral replacements—"Students with physical disabilities; Students with mental disabilities; Delinquent and problem students . . ." (quoted in Adler, Huber, and Nix 2017, 130)—only bury deeper the interlocking logics of racism and ableism.

Critical approaches to cataloging (represented in library literature and also in online spaces including #CritCat on Twitter and the Cataloging Lab website) (Fox 2018) are interested in these projects of correction, and also in the politics of correction itself. Some recognize correction's limits, encouraging instead a critical pedagogy that teaches the biased logics of knowledge organization systems, while also preparing researchers to use them (Adler 2017; Drabinski 2013; Loyer 2018). Beyond correction, some catalogers and archivists are supplementing existing disability classifications and descriptions with critical and community-generated keywords. For example, Sara White (2012) encourages archivists to draw on a disability theory of complex embodiment when appraising and describing materials about subjects with disabilities; Gracen Brilmyer advises an approach to archival description that would make more explicit the "complexity, power, and politicization" of that description, thereby "addressing—not redressing—contestable terms" (2018, 107, 95); and Meghan Rinn offers an approach that uses parts of the archival finding aid (a descriptive guide for a collection) to add relevant biographical information about disabled subjects in "sensitive writing that uses language preferred by the community" (2018, 14). And beyond libraries and archives, in the online social spheres that archive the present, disabled activists and other marginalized technology users are tagging work with hashtags of their own creation (Brock 2020). Hashtags such as #DisabilityTooWhite, started

in 2016 by activist and social worker Vilissa Thompson, work to "acknowledge gaps" in mainstream retellings of disability rights history and to reorganize disability knowledge around new key terms (Thompson 2019, 3).

Specialized Services, Separate Collections, Universal Access

Modern professional library organizations name accessibility for individuals with disabilities as a core value. Both the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and the American Library Association claim a commitment to equitable information access "without regard to . . . disability" and "regardless of technology, format, or methods of delivery" (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions 2019; American Library Association 2022). While these specific value statements were formalized at the turn of the twenty-first century (Johan Lor 2006; Jacobs and Berg 2011), professional library organizations have a much longer history of meeting the access needs of patrons with disabilities, often through specialized services and separate collections. There is, however, a tension between, on the one hand, attempts to situate disability access as integral to the profession and, on the other, the historical realities of achieving disability access by handling it separately (realities reinforced by, for example, specialized professional knowledge and practice, copyright law and its provisions for disability access, and the material properties of specific media formats). This tension between universal access and separate access (a familiar dialectic of accessible design and individual accommodations) persists into the present. Libraries may still redirect patrons with disabilities away from primary spaces, services, and collections to other, separate ones. And at the same time, there is ongoing work to embed accessibility in all library practice, such as movements to make new publications "born accessible," to design all services and spaces with disability in mind, and to recognize that workers as well as patrons have access needs.

This tension is played out, for example, in the long-twentieth-century history of professional librarianship, wherein the needs of segregated populations or separate collections lead to the emergence of professional specialization—which can address those needs but can also reinforce segregation and separation. For example, librarians within the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions formed the Subcommittee on Hospital Libraries in 1931 to coordinate library services for hospitalized individuals (Panella 2009). In its first decades, the group became a site of emergent knowledge on assistive technologies (including microfilm, which allowed for increased text size and reading without holding a book) and accessibility policy (including copyright and customs exemptions for the reproduction and international exchange of accessible formats for use by disabled readers) (Panella 2009, 262). In the later twentieth century, it began both to expand into other sites of institutionalization (e.g.,

prisons) and to develop specialized guidance for all libraries (e.g., its Standards for Hospital Libraries, published as part of the 1973 Standards for Public Libraries) (Panella 2009).

Over time, what began as the subcommittee has gone through name changes, divisions, and mergers with adjacent specialist subgroups. Its current iteration is the IFLA Section on Library Services to People with Special Needs, and it focuses on library and information services to "people with . . . disabilities[,] . . . people experiencing homelessness, displaced populations, people in prisons, . . . people in hospitals and nursing homes" (Bolt 2021). In the development of this professional group (and its US equivalents in the American Library Association Interest Groups and Sections), there is an arc toward equitable, *integrated* library access for marginalized groups—in its creation of standards and guides for the profession—and also evidence of the repeated effects of the "institutional archipelago" (Chapman, Carey, and Ben-Moshe 2014). That is, institutionalization and its effects segregate people, creating barriers to access for specific populations. These barriers or "access problems" are often then treated as if they reside in the people themselves (Kumbier and Starkey 2016). And these access problems are addressed by emergent library specializations and then, only after some delay, incorporated into general professional practice.

In library collections, separation has come about through different processes. Print publications have historically been made accessible (to patrons with specific disabilities that prevent the use of print, often called "print disabilities") through processes of conversion that produced entire separate collections of alternate-format works: in Braille, recorded sound, and specialized digital formats. The development and distribution of those collections became regulated by copyright provisions that, while enabling access, also restrict it to specific users whose disabilities prevent the use of print. Today, the largest libraries of accessible-format publications in the United States are the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (n.d.; several hundred thousand popular books, magazines, and music scores in Braille, audio, and digital formats), BookShare (n.d.; over one million academic and educational titles in a range of digital formats), and HathiTrust (n.d.; seventeen million digitized scans of historical, academic, and government publications), according to the current estimates on their websites. Yet in accordance with copyright law, these services are only available to users who meet specific disability eligibility criteria. That is, users must be blind, or have a "visual impairment or perceptual or reading disability" that prevents reading "printed works to substantially the same degree as a person without an impairment or disability," or be "otherwise unable, through physical disability, to hold or manipulate a book or to focus or move the eyes to the extent that would be normally acceptable for reading" (United States Copyright Office 2018). In fact, this language is meant to apply to individuals with "*any* disability (including learning disabilities and mobility impairments) that affect the ability

to read text in a standard format" (Butler, Adler, and Cox 2019). And additional disability legislation (the Americans with Disabilities Act) and copyright provisions (Section 107, or the Fair Use provision) allow the creation of accessible copies of works for individual disabled users, including users with disabilities not necessarily defined here and works not already in these libraries. Yet in practice, this eligibility requirement maintains a medicalized system of "proving disability" for those who do qualify (Samuels 2014, chap. 6), and it can result in patrons getting separated out or redirected—from their public library to the National Library Service, or from their academic library to campus disability services.

The history of separate collections and specialized services for individuals with disabilities, as well as the professional focus on *print disabilities* traditionally defined, continues to shape, as a recent review article puts it, "how we talk about disability" in LIS (Gibson, Bowen, and Hanson 2021). The review, of peer-reviewed articles on disability in LIS from 1978 to 2018, finds an overreliance on external authority about disability, a focus on blindness and low vision, a tendency to use "single-axis definitions of disability" that ignore relevant intersections, and (after 1999) a focus on technology and digital access. Much of the research in this area, as surveyed by Amelia Gibson, Kristen Bowen, and Dana Hanson (2021), and previously by Heather Hill (2013), asks whether patrons with a (often specific) disability can access a particular service or collection, investigating the question through user surveys that ask disabled users about their experience or through accessibility testing procedures in which often nondisabled experts test a service against standards. This work is necessary—patrons with disabilities remain underserved, and barriers remain to both services and collections—but it has also occluded other questions, circled the same problems without exploring others, and failed to transform into more radical approaches to access. As such, it is symptomatic of what David James Hudson calls a profession-wide "imperative to be practical" that prevents much LIS literature from approaching critical theory or radical practice, leaving larger ableist and racist structures in place (2017, 207).

In response to historical legacies and professional imperatives that too often collapse *libraries and disability* into *library collection access for patrons with print disabilities*, various movements are working to expand the professional discourse of accessibility to include, for example, open and accessible publications for all, library services that center rather than segregate access needs, and an attention to library workers (not just patrons) with disabilities. In scholarly publishing, there is a movement away from separate collections of specialized formats, toward born-digital, born-accessible—and often open-access—publications, driven by scholars and consumers with disabilities as well as library and publishing organizations (Rosen 2018). The library profession's commitment to equitable information access for all library users, without barriers created by cost or format, is supported by a publishing model that is both accessible and open access—that is,

digital publications that adhere to accessibility standards (and are therefore usable by readers with a range of technologies, disabilities, or access needs) and that are freely available online. Libraries, both as advocates and as publishers (many university presses are administratively part of academic libraries), have advanced this movement by making their own publications more accessible, by developing guidebooks for the production of accessible publications (Library Publishing Coalition Ethical Framework Task Force 2018; Seaman, Ober, and Kasdorf 2019), and by pressuring the vendors who sell access to scholarship via ebook and journal platforms to make those platforms and content more accessible (Pionke and Schroeder 2020). While libraries work to address access barriers created within the academic publishing ecosystem, disabled scholars have advanced this advocacy from their roles as authors, readers, and editors. For example, the Society for Disability Studies (2016) statement on publishing accessible books called for accessible publishing practices from academic presses, the "Disability Studies Reader 6 Collective Statement" (Clare et al. 2021) demanded ethical and consentful editorial practice in the creation of scholarly anthologies, and Cynthia Wu (this volume) has developed editorial practices that respect "crip time" by factoring in flexible deadlines for disabled writers and editors who "might need more time to accomplish something or to arrive somewhere" due to ableist barriers, unpredictable illness, or managing care (Kafer 2013, 26; Samuels 2017).

In the design of library services and spaces, there have long been efforts to broadly incorporate accessible practice and design. *Universal design*—the approach of designing spaces, services, and information to be readily accessible for a range of bodies, needs, and backgrounds—is a key term that has migrated from product design and pedagogy into LIS literature and is the subject of book-length studies on library service development (Spina 2021), online library instruction (Lund 2020), and the architecture of academic library spaces (Staines 2012), as well as hundreds of articles. Of course, the meaning of *universal design* may vary—from specific disability-centered designs, to "mere ergonomics," or to almost "any form of user-centered design"—and often leaves out the "politicized claims of disability rights advocates" in order to appeal to the mainstream desires of "normate" consumers (Hamraie 2017 211), or to the neoliberal demands of only the most privileged disabled consumer subjects (Puar 2017). At the same time, universal or accessible design approaches can be used strategically to center the needs of disabled and marginalized users and advance an intersectional political agenda that remakes spaces and services (Rosen 2017).

Just as universal design approaches shift from separate, "disability-specific" services toward an integrated, "disability-informed" approach, *trauma-informed* approaches in libraries shift from special treatment for trauma survivors, toward practices that reduce risk and foster resilience across individuals and groups with varying trauma histories (Carello and Butler 2015, 265). While trauma-informed approaches have arrived in librarianship and related fields by several avenues

(Gohr and Nova 2020; Mauldin, this volume), one is through direct partnerships between librarians and social workers (Zettervall and Nienow 2019; Tolley 2020). Certainly, both professions have common origins in an assimilationist discourse of moral uplift in which mostly white women tend to those marked as other to the healthy, national body (Schlesselman-Tarango 2016; Ettarh 2018). And both professions have been shown to at times police (or call the police on) those they serve, traumatizing or endangering marginalized, especially disabled and/or Black, individuals (Robinson 2019; Roberts 2021). But library workers and their social work partners have also shown a commitment to social justice and community support—by empowering patrons with both information and connections to social services, by reducing unwanted patron interactions with the state and the police, and by training their own staff to de-escalate and use other informal techniques (Balzer 2020).

Finally, there is the push to recognize disability among library workers, not just library patrons, and to document the experiences of such workers (Brown and Sheidlower 2019). Autoethnographies, personal narratives, and scholarship from the perspective of library workers with disabilities emphasize that we are here, and highlight discriminatory working conditions that assume an able-bodied, flexible worker while viewing "disability as a problem in need of a solution" (Moeller 2019, 466). Discrimination and barriers facing librarians with disabilities are well documented (Oud 2019; Roulstone and Williams 2014), as are the professional discourses that can prevent critical action toward more sustaining and sustainable working conditions (Ettarh 2018). Recent counternarratives by library workers who claim disability function to "elevate . . . hidden voices" (Dube and Wade 2021, 316) and to critique the current practices of librarianship and think toward more liberatory ones (Lawrence 2013; Brilmyer 2018; Schomburg and Highby 2020; Dube and Wade 2021). Beyond the professional literature—which overrepresents white perspectives and underanalyzes race, just as in disability studies (Bowen, Kuo, and Mills, this volume)—this work happens in online spaces, events, and storytelling. For example, on Twitter, recurring #CripLib (n.d.) chats unpack topics at the intersection of disability and libraries; in an interview, Cyrée Jarelle Johnson (Brooklyn Public Library's inaugural poet-in-residence) speaks on ableism and racism in literary spaces (Bowen 2020); and online, the We Here (n.d.) platform provides a "safe and supportive community for Black and Indigenous folks, and People of Color (BIPOC) in library and information science professions and educational programs" to confront systemic social issues in the profession.

Disability Justice in the Library

In librarianship, a profession fundamentally concerned with questions of access, disability issues have long been part of the conversation. Only more recently have critical disability studies methods and the political demands of disability justice

begun to influence libraries and librarianship. Disability studies as method "[employs] disability studies as a lens to analyze the intersecting systems of ableism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalist violence, particularly as they assign value or lack thereof to certain bodyminds" (Schalk and Kim 2020, 37–38). Disability justice is a twenty-first-century wave of disability activism that demands intersectional analysis, coalitional activism, and collective access, "led by disabled people of color, and disabled queer and gender non-conforming people" (Sins Invalid 2019, 21). Several examples of recent library scholarship and critical conversations—some of which explicitly address disability and some of which do not—resonate with the methods of disability studies and the politics of disability justice. This work can, in turn, form the foundation for future library practice committed to collective liberation. As Gibson, Bowen, and Hanson (2021) point out, we can imagine building toward future "co-liberatory information work" that would center the expertise of disabled individuals of color and ground information systems in disability justice, toward library cultures "built on care webs . . . and institutional responsibility," knowledge systems based in "wholeness . . . rather than clinical cure or rehabilitation," and decision making driven by disabled community needs in a neoliberal present.

Within LIS literature, the most well-known introduction of the concept of "disability justice" was in a 2016 *Library Trends* article by Alana Kumbier and Julia Starkey. Kumbier and Starkey argue that "access is not problem solving," critiquing approaches to library accessibility that treat access barriers as merely problems to solve, and that treat patrons as people who either have access or have access problems. Rather, they encourage an intersectional approach to creating access, dismantling ableism, and collaborating across disability—an approach explicitly informed by disability justice writings and the authors' own disability justice activism. Since this publication, new library work has continued to engage with disability justice.

Disability justice argues that understanding ableism requires "tracing its connections to heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism" (Sins Invalid 2019, 18). A good deal of library scholarship has worked to reckon with these interlocking systems—not always with an explicit disability lens, but rather with the critical race, decolonial, and other analytical lenses that are foundational for understanding disability. For example, some recent scholarship has critiqued the expectation that all library workers should embody culturally white (and implicitly able-bodied) social and professional performances to succeed in librarianship (Hathcock 2015; Galvan 2015; Andrews 2020). Others have worked to rearticulate the library's role in colonialist projects and in nationalist projects of assimilation (Honma 2005; de jesus 2014; Schlesselman-Tarango 2016, 2017). And others have critiqued the rhetoric of neutrality that libraries currently use to disavow political responsibility and, consequently, uphold a white supremacist status quo (Hudson 2017; Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferretti 2021).

The question of care is another site where libraries can think with disability justice. Collective care has always been a part of disability justice organizing, and it has received greater attention with the publication of *Care Work* (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018), which has, in turn, influenced writing in disability studies (for example, Kim 2020). Care, for collections and for people, has likewise always been a part of librarianship and cultural heritage professions. And care in these professions has received renewed critical attention, following recent work in science and technology studies (Martin, Myers, and Viseu 2015), workers' insistence that care and maintenance are labor (Mattern 2018), and calls to reckon with the violent colonial foundations of care as performed by cultural institutions (Umolu 2020). There have been critical studies of the ways in which care in libraries is always shaped by raced, gendered embodiment and especially by histories of white saviorism (Ettarh 2018), and there have been offerings of alternatives. Anne Cong-Huyen and Kush Patel (2021) describe mutual support collectives as counterspaces that, by enacting care among marginalized academic workers, enable their survival in the neoliberal university and other hostile environments. Jessie Loyer (2018, 150) imagines library care practices as they could be, transformed not just by feminist critique but by Indigenous frameworks—based in "relational accountability between librarians and students" as students face the trauma of doing research within the violent structures of library classification, archival description, and educational institutions.

For many library workers and librarian scholars, including the specific examples just cited, the library remains a space of possibility—deserving of critique but also open for transformation. Celebrations of the library, as a key site that can sustain democratic possibility through access to information and support the lives of local communities through access to resources, can be problematic and are also based in truth. Certainly, such uncritical praise can be used to falsely position libraries as neutral or postpolitical (Seale 2016; Bourg 2015), and it can forestall critique of librarianship or gloss over the histories that have shaped it (Ettarh 2018). But the library really is an emancipatory space, even as it's also a hegemonic institution (Aptekar 2019). Under the pressures of neoliberalism (Bourg 2014), there is a real danger that libraries may lose the pro-privacy, anti-surveillance, noncommercial, access-oriented qualities that make them different from everywhere else—or that they might just be replaced by Amazon-funded simulacra (Johnson 2018). Maura Seale and Rafia Mirza (2020) argue that, given that libraries have to justify their existence in a context of neoliberal austerity, we can at least do so on our own terms by rejecting neoliberal regimes of value and claiming libraries' *political value*—as sites of care, mutual responsibility, and harm reduction. And if libraries can claim political value, they could also claim the specific political values of disability justice, including collective access, cross-movement solidarity, a recognition of wholeness, and sustainable transformation (Sins Invalid 2019, 22–27). Library spaces are already potential

sites of cross-group solidarities. Public libraries in particular are spaces where individuals come to meet some of their needs, where resources are distributed "outside of capitalist market exchange," and where users make the "space their own through everyday practices" (Aptekar 2019, 1216). The principles of disability justice can steer the political work of and in libraries as the profession continues to reckon with the complex tensions and histories that shape it and its relationship to disability.

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