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2016 CLAPS conference presentation
Tucson, AZ

Institutionalizing Critical Librarianship

Although critical approaches to librarianship and library pedagogy have been around for some time, those approaches have seemed to become more mainstream within the past 5 to 10 years. One example of this trend is the emergence of conferences like this one, CAPAL in 2015, and the Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies Colloquium, which specifically focus on critical librarianship. Critical librarianship has also begun to appear at more mainstream conferences like ALA and ACRL, both as separate unconferences that are co-located, and as presentations at those conferences. In June 2015, ACRL distributed a “Keeping Up with Critical Librarianship” and has also begun publishing books that either implicitly or explicitly take a critical approach to librarianship. Last year, ACRL officially endorsed critical, humanistic methodologies in its flagship journal, *College and Research Libraries*. Critical librarianship is now possessed of a canon, as described by Eamon Tewell in his article “A Decade of Critical Information Literacy:.” Finally, the *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*, produced and backed by ACRL, explicitly incorporates critical approaches to both information literacy and librarianship.

These developments point to how critical librarianship is becoming embedded within institutions that have a significant role in articulating what librarianship is, what library pedagogy is, what library scholarship is. That is, it is becoming institutionalized. This is not a bad thing; it is beneficial in some ways and limiting in others. In order to think through those benefits and limits, I will now turn to Rod Ferguson's book, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, which analyzes the institutionalization of minority interdisciplines such as

ethnic studies and women's studies in the wake of the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Ferguson understands the institution as a framework for interpretation. The process of institutionalizing is a process of translation in which that which is institutionalized becomes legible within and legible to that framework. Because this is a process of translation and a sort of reification, there are aspects that are left out and foreclosed on. The relationship of the minority interdisciplines to traditional disciplines parallels the relationship of critical librarianship to the discipline of library science; in some ways, critical librarianship seeks to bring the interventions of the minority interdisciplines to library science. What, then, happens when critical librarianship is institutionalized?

Ferguson's argument is complex, but I will do my best to summarize it. He argues that within the postwar United States, difference becomes crucial to global capitalism and the state due to the political needs of both to absorb rather than reject heterogeneity. Within academe, minority interdisciplines rejected the dominance of the West by articulating minority culture and difference, and so produced, affirmed, and introduced into history minority groups and subjects. Once minority culture and difference became objects of study, they became subject to power and so could be absorbed and deployed by state and capital. Ferguson relies on Foucault's understanding of power, so power flows throughout these operations, and must be understood as impersonal and productive.

Academe, state, and capital acted to maintain their own power and to manage the "insurgent possibilities" (4) of minority social movements, taking on a position of "adaptive hegemony" (6). Minority interdisciplines became part of academe, but with that institutionalization, legitimacy and recognition became their end goals. Power began to move through them, and minority difference was neutralized and individualized. Ferguson describes this absorption, incorporation, and negotiation of difference within the logic of the university as the will to institutionality.

The will to institutionality is appealing because it produces and affirms minority culture and difference as stable, legible, consistent, reliable, permanent, and above all, as truth. This sort of legitimacy makes it possible to leverage minority culture and difference in the service of institutional change, but it also makes possible their commodification and incorporation into neoliberalism/global capitalism. To Ferguson, the minority interdisciplines in their current form are sites of contradiction, that both agree with and contest institutionalization, that channel power but also critique. He calls for the critical analysis of institutional modes and power, including their productive and affirmative techniques. These practices help us “negotiate with and struggle against the steady closure of critical universes brokered in a time of affirmation” (226).

The institutionalization of critical librarianship, then, is productive; it leads to recognition, legitimacy, and can help enact institutional change. But it also forecloses other possibilities and manages into nonexistence opposition it cannot absorb. In the rest of my presentation, I want to consider some ways in which critical librarianship may create new channels for capital.

Critical librarianship applies the interventions of the minority interdisciplines to librarianship. These include a rejection of the universalism of the West, an emphasis on context, history, and power relations, and the modern subject as constituted by difference. Like the minority interdisciplines, as critical librarianship becomes institutionalized, it becomes subject to hegemonic liberalism, which reduces systemic and structural differences to individual difference, which can then be commodified. That is, as African American studies emerges as a discipline within academe, blackness becomes something that can be marketed to and sold. In librarianship, it is not group identities that are commodified, but the individual who is different from other individuals, individual difference itself. Karen has already discussed badging, which commodifies individual learning. I

would also suggest that interest in learning analytics, which track individuals' data and thus their "learning," also represents the commodification of individual difference. Learning analytics has yet to receive much buy-in from libraries, but libraries are interested in and often invest in systems that speak to individual difference by offering more targeted or personalized search results, platforms, and resources. This includes web-scale discovery systems, patron-driven acquisitions, and the personalization of search (Showers, 2015). I do not think these tools are bad or wrong or not useful, but we do need to engage in analyses of how the institutionalization of critical librarianship might play into new paths for capital. For Ferguson, this sort of analysis is a crucial "strategy of intervention."

As I mentioned earlier, I see the *Framework* as a key example of the institutionalization of critical librarianship. Created by ACRL, it is explicitly designed to be implemented on an institutional level. Although the Standards have not been formally sunsetted and many institutions undoubtedly continue to use both, a mini-industry around implementing the *Framework* has arisen. Numerous books, articles, webinars, workshops, presentations, and panels have emerged to help librarians use the Framework. Some of this training is informal, but much of it has to be paid for, including training provided by ACRL. Again, it is noticeable that as critical information literacy took on an institutional form, new areas of commodification emerged.

Finally – and I haven't really seen this yet – I wonder how institutionalized visions of critical librarianship and critical information literacy will respond to the ongoing commodification of both information literacy and critical thinking. In her recent article in *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, Amanda Folk mentions that "the AAC&U found that 76 percent of employers surveyed valued IL as a learning outcome for postsecondary students" in a 2011 survey. At the same time, there are

connections being drawn between critical thinking and employability. This line of reasoning often appears in defenses of liberal arts education, but there are also studies and surveys of employers that make this connection, and apparently so does the U.S. Department of Education in its Employability Skills Framework (<http://cte.ed.gov/employabilityskills/index.php/framework/thinking>). As the *Framework* is implemented and critical information literacy becomes more institutionalized, will it become commodified in similar ways?

Critical librarianship, like the minority interdisciplines, can be seen as a site of contradiction; it is within the university but not necessarily of it. Ferguson ends with a reclamation of the “little things” and “minor details” that lead to “a will to institutionality that honors the feeling that 'this world is not enough'” (232). As critical librarianship becomes more embedded within professional organizations and universities, we must keep sight of the contradictions of institutionalization and hold on to the ability to imagine those other worlds.