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Is critical art librarianship actually a thing?

If I'm being honest I still feel as though I am a bit of an imposter in the world of art librarianship. I often feel as though I have a very conservative, corporate and conformist approach to librarianship within the art library environments, in which I work. I also often feel naïve when it comes to discussing and affirming 'what makes art librarianship different?' Acknowledging such naivety, I will also openly admit that until last year I had not heard of 'critical librarianship' as a concept, let alone 'critical (art) librarianship', which is how I was introduced to it at a day-long conference held by colleagues from the University of the Arts London in 2018 at Chelsea College of Arts [1].

But that day was a bit of a 'game changer' for me. I was incredibly impressed and inspired by what I saw and heard that day, and it really got me thinking about critical librarianship as a notion. Whilst I had not encountered 'critical librarianship' as a library genre or movement before, the content that I experienced at the conference was not all new to me. Indeed, several colleagues and former colleagues were presenting on initiatives that I was well aware of (such as the mission and provision of the Women's Art Library, housed in the Special Collections and Archives at my own institution). To hear from so many art library practitioners speaking about their work through a 'critical librarianship' lens was really powerful and made me feel proud to be part of an environment and wider library community that was so passionate about making a difference and righting social wrongs through their library practice.

I have often extolled the virtues of librarianship and am happy to profess how we are a 'helpful', 'supportive' profession and that our missions and aims are those of order, enablement and support. More recently my involvement in art librarianship has opened up my thinking and indeed my approach to librarianship to include and encourage creativity and increased innovation in how the above is delivered and how libraries support arts education. However, having now been introduced to critical librarianship, my head was spinning with the concept that not only can art libraries order, help and support, but they can also have an impact on equality, diversity and social justice. Wow!

I was very pleased to be asked to write this viewpoint on the theme of critical art librarianship, largely because I am in no way at all an authority on the subject, and fulfilling such briefs means that I have to become more knowledgeable on the topic. So I set about looking into critical librarianship, its origins, its practices, its implications and its impact. In doing so I have now discovered some definitions of critical librarianship, which seem like a good place to start in answering my question about how critical 'art' librarianship manifests itself. Kelly McElroy suggests that critical librarianship asks us to "look at the socio-political world both inside and outside of our libraries" and says that she has seen the 'critical' element interpreted and defined in several different and competing ways: self-reflective critical theorist framework; 'critical' meaning criticising; 'critical' meaning decisive, pivotal or urgent [2]. Therefore my first attempt to find a clear definition have resulted in slight confusion, but I discovered that at least there is plenty of scholarship around critical librarianship.

In his comprehensive overview of critical librarianship as an academic practice, Ian Beilin quotes Toni Samek defining critical librarianship as "an international movement of library and information workers that considers the human condition and human rights above other professional concerns." [3] This is indeed a very noble and bold position and this stance is validated further through Gregory and Higgins, when they argue that "librarians, when applying a critical perspective in their work, consider the historical, cultural, social, economic, and political forces that interact with information in order to critique, disrupt and interrogate these forces" [4]. A couple more definitions and explanations appear in Kenny Garcia's Blog post 'Keeping up with critical librarianship' where he

claims that “critical librarianship seeks to be transformative, empowering, and a direct challenge to power and privilege.” [5]

At this stage I think I comprehend ‘critical librarianship’ as questioning and potentially transformative, and I certainly consider the pursuit of it as a practice very worthwhile. It makes sense, as a ‘helpful’ profession that we would want to extend this help to include elements of social justice, but what does critical librarianship in practice actually look like? In his Blog, Garcia synthesises several examples of critical librarianship outcomes that he had recently discovered and conveys this through suggesting that “academic librarians are: challenging regressive conceptions of gender identity in cataloguing; excavating queer of colour AIDS activist and trans archives; researching the misrepresentations of women, girls, people of culture in commercial search engines; documenting micro-aggressions in librarianship; and developing a diversity standards toolkit for academic libraries and librarians.” [6] This all sounds very formidable and demonstrates some very valuable outcomes and impacts from the practice of librarianship, and at least now I’m a little further on in answering my question.

All the above definition and indeed Garcia’s examples of outcomes are associated with academia and academic librarianship, but other sectors, including public libraries, school libraries, special libraries and archives services are also engaged in similar ‘critical’ approaches and practices. The ‘critical (art) librarianship’ conference that I mentioned in the first paragraph provided me with an ‘epiphany moment’ in that it was then that I really discovered critical librarianship, and, as the title of the conference suggests, it was very much grounded in an arts library context. Yet, my subsequent investigation yields mainly ‘academic’ examples of critical librarianship practice, which left me questioning whether there was anything specific or unique about critical librarianship in art libraries.

The programme for the day-long conference was impressive and full of real life critical librarianship examples from art librarians: hacking the library through critical appraisal of the Dewey Decimal Classification system; feminist Wikipedia edit-a-thon; empowering marginalised voices in zine collections; liberating the curriculum; critical approaches to using special collections. Emily Drabinski delivered a splendid and inspirational keynote presentation entitled “What do we mean by critical librarianship” in which she presented her thoughts and included several practices of critical librarianship including: questioning what we collect and how we catalogue and classify it; looking at social and political contexts outside the library; having true conviction that things could be different [7]. All the presentations I experienced on the day were high quality, excellent presentations and revealed to me so much about critical librarianship in practice. Many of them were delivered by both current and former colleagues and I felt very proud that they were all demonstrating such high impact, but I was still left questioning whether I was hearing about critical art librarianship or just critical librarianship in art libraries. To add to my confusion around this I struggled to find any mention in recent publications designed to help us identify the role of the modern art librarian. The ARLIS/NA Core Competencies Report [8] and the recently published Handbook of Art and Design Librarianship [9] both provide reflections, advice and guidance on the knowledge, skills and abilities required by a modern art librarian. However, whilst both publications are, comprehensive, useful and very well informed they describe general, universal art librarian aptitudes and reveal very little around requirements for critical skills.

To try to get to the bottom of my query I started to look ‘more critically’ at some of the critical librarianship examples in my immediate art library environment and the work of some of my colleagues: establishing and engaging in a critical librarianship reading group; exposing racist classification schemes and subsequently making changes to the Library Search system to give

prominence to non-Western publications [10]; blogging about the Dewey Decimal Classification system and exposing it as oppressive, offensive and colonial 11]; student engagement in collection development, in order to enable diversity of collections [12]; and a wealth of methods of engagement in curriculum liberation and decolonisation initiatives [13]. This is an admirable and impressive set of critical librarianship outputs, but I was still unclear (perhaps even unconvinced) as to whether these were indeed anything more than standard critical librarianship practices. Or was there something significant about the arts environments in which thee practices and interventions were taking place?

To help me in this line of thought, I started to consider some of the amazing and inspirational special collections that I have been close to in my recent years whilst working as an art librarian: The Women's Art Library (WAL) and Women of Colour Index (WOCI) at Goldsmiths; the Zine collection at London College of Communication; the African-Caribbean, Asian and African Art in Britain Archive at Chelsea College of Arts. Then I reflected on how I had heard my colleagues speak so passionately and enthusiastically about these collections, and how they reach out to so many people who can relate to the narrative and the history of the collection. I recollected how my colleagues spoke about how the marginalised voices in a particular zine collection were the genuine voices of a lived experience and how dominant theories and ideologies are not present in such collections. I learnt how one of the underpinning principles of the Women's Art Library is to ensure a breadth of exposure to women's art to future researchers [14], and how the WAL slide collection is intended as a "site of resistance in terms of feminist and other discourses that consider the nature of knowledge, culture and power." [15]

Collections aside, I also discovered (and perhaps realised at the same time) that critical art librarians are engaged in all kinds of liberation through their library work, from enabling access to accurate information through events such as Art + Feminism's Wikipedia edit-a-thons [16] to teaching critical information literacy through a variety of creative outlets such as object based learning, which by its nature inherently challenges dominant views of what constitutes information and knowledge [17]

This got me thinking that there might be something about the art library environment that enables and encourages a greater, or different, level of critical librarianship. Something about the types of collections that we develop, or something about the types of users that art libraries attract? Do we have more marginalised voices in and around our libraries? Does art and therefore art library collections expose social injustice to a greater extent than other types of library collections (e.g. STEM collections, Law collections, etc.). Are the arts regarded as marginalised within the realms of academia, and therefore are art libraries more representative of marginalised voices? I suspect that the answer is 'yes' to some or all of these questions.

In an attempt to triangulate all of these musings I turned my attention to arts education and pedagogy more generally. I have often heard art described as 'the practice of freedom', which more than suggests elements of liberation through art and through being an artist. Indeed much has been written about how artists work and practice in society and how individuals and communities identify through their art. These concepts form a key part of 21st century arts education, which, where developed with inclusivity at its heart, include elements of critical disability studies, critical race theory, individualism and socialisation theories, etc. all of which are discussed in Kate Hudson's edited collection about inclusive arts education [18]

And then it dawned on me…, all the above examples of critical library practice are within an arts education environment, and are examples of dedicated, passionate, ideological, (art) librarians, motivated by social injustice who are deliberately and intentionally using their library craft and

'know how' to affect this. My colleague. Marilyn Clarke recently wrote about how at our institution, our librarians are fully taking ownership of the skills and influences they have and rising to the challenge of continually 'chipping away' at the historical legacy structures of the academy [19]. Like so many others, they are choosing to collect and make visible marginalised voices through their special collections and archives. They are choosing to expose flawed classification systems and do something about them. They are choosing to engage with critical librarianship theory and critical theory more generally through their subject specialisms. They are choosing to expose inequalities and micro-aggressions in arts education. They are choosing to ensure that those marginalised within the arts world have a stronger and louder voice in the curriculum and in the scholarly collections that support the curriculum. They are choosing to engage in the critique of the status quo in their arts institutions and their art libraries. They are critical art librarians!

So I think the answer is 'Yes'. Critical art librarianship is an actual thing! A thing for the greater good, which should be supported and encouraged, and long may it continue.

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