Critiquing the Machine:
The Critical Cataloging Database[1]

by B. M. Watson

> *Libraries are [...] desiring machines that seek to collect everything for everyone for all time, making knowledge universally accessible through cataloging and classification schemes from which nothing escapes... Knowledge organization structures are also about power, the power to produce both order and excess... our catalogs and classification structures are themselves technologies of power, facilitating some ways of knowing and not others, representing certain ideological ways of seeing the world, and, crucially, not others.* (Drabinski 2019, 49–51).

INTRODUCTION

Critical Cataloguing (CritCat) is a descriptor for a variety of critical approaches to the cataloguing, classification, and creation of metadata for resources[2] in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums, and Special Collections (GLAMS) and in other information systems. Critical cataloguing places an emphasis on "radical empathy" (Caswell and Cifor 2016; Fox and Swickard 2019, 19) and "outreach work" (Fox and Gross 2019; Buccicone and Leaman 2021), and recognizes the importance of "information maintenance as a practice of care" (The Information Maintainers et al. 2019). While library catalogers typically operate from a position of literary or bibliographic warrant (i.e. cataloging a book that they are holding in their hand), I argue (Watson 2020) that critical catalogers operate from a position of *catalogic* warrant, reading the terms and hierarchies of cataloging and classification systems with a critical eye, reflecting on the potential benefit or harm of each term on marginalized users, groups, or the GLAMS community as a whole. By reading and examining knowledge organization systems from a social-justice-oriented perspective, catalogic warrant reflects on the potential harm or benefit of each term on users and the library community as a whole. Critical catalogers may also understand the catalog in a "holistic manner" (Olson 1997, 52), seeing systems like the Library of Congress or Dewey Decimal Classification as living documents that can be revised and improved.

While CritCat is a novel term, it refers to practices deeply rooted in the history of technical work in cultural heritage institutions, librarianship, archivy, and museology—whether those practices are called alternative, radical, reformative, or critical. There is nearly a century (1933 to the present day) of GLAMS and Library and Information Science (LIS) literature aimed at addressing harms and misrepresentations caused by knowledge organization systems to marginalized and minoritized individuals, communities, and their resources. The database described in this article originated from my professional concerns, activism, and the preparatory work undertaken as a Ph.D. student at the University of British Columbia iSchool, where I study on equitable cataloging in GLAMS. It represents my attempt to organize and understand this literature and the history of ethical, equitable and justice-oriented metadata work. It also explicitly aims to support this work, offering a freely available resource for the catalog-critical or critical-curious. In the remainder of this article, I will discuss the developm ental methodology for and explain the structure of the Critical Cataloging Database (CCDB).

Finally, as this material deals with literature produced by and on marginalized communities, it is important to note the limitations of my analysis before I characterize these literatures. These

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characterizations are reflective of and influenced by my own intersections and experiences in marginalized sexuality, gender, and disability identities. My history as a disabled, white, queer and nonbinary settler hailing from N'dakina in Aln8ba8dwaw8gan (colonially: New Hampshire), now living in Xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh and səlilwətaɬ gives me insight into some aspects of this literature, but by the same tokens, it may limit and influence the way I understand and speak about other aspects of gender, race and or indigeneity.

METHODS

To understand and contextualize contemporary conversations, I undertook a comprehensive review of literature about ethical, equitable, and critical cataloging from 1933 to the present day. The resulting (open access) publication (Watson 2021c, some of which is reproduced here) 1) synthesizes the broader history of these discussions, 2) examines its facets and subdomains, and 3) provides a foundation for the realignment of knowledge organization (KO) work towards social justice. As a result, I will limit myself in this article to discussing the methods, purpose, and structure of the CCDB.

I began by conducting keyword and boolean searches in Google Scholar similar or identical to ones used by Hope A. Olson and Rose Schlegl in their highly influential articles (Olson and Schlegl 1999; 2001). The authors of that analysis collected the extant literature on "subject access for marginalized groups and to marginalized topics" in order to begin "addressing systemic subject access problems" (Olson and Schlegl 2001, 236). Their resulting (now unavailable) ProCite database identified 93 "works documenting biases of gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, ethnicity, nationality, language and religion" in Knowledge Organization Systems (KOS). I then validated my results by repeating the same queries in several LIS-specific databases and comparing the results.

Databases consulted included: Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA); Library Literature & Information Science Retrospective: 1905-1983 (LLISR); Library & Information Science Source (LISS); and Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA). In reviewing the results, I found that LISA provided the most relevant results; Google Scholar the greatest quantity; LISTA the highest quality; and LLISR provided only sporadic hits. Finally, I consulted several reading lists and bibliographies that focused on ethical, equitable, or critical cataloging (CritLib.org 2020; University of Cambridge Library 2019; Cook 2020; Snow 2020; Park n.d.), along with the citation lists of previously-conducted reviews (Kazuye Kimura 2018; Williams 1997; Skinner 2014; Gardner 2021; Starr Paiste 2003; Fagan 2010; Desale and Kumbhar 2013; Speller 2007; Homosaurus Editorial Board 2020; Martin 2021; Diao 2018; Sheetija Kathuria 2011; Dunsire 2018; Satija and Martinez-Avila 2017; Velez and Villa-Nicholas 2017; Hudon 2011; 2010)

In order to properly evaluate the articles, I limited my review and the resulting database to English-language resources. The resulting items (~500) were either collected in full-text digital format, or requested via interlibrary loan. Finally, I reviewed each article to determine their relevancy to critical cataloging, discarding or adding them to an open-source, open access Zotero database, available at CritCat.org (Watson 2021b) and via the main Zotero website (Watson 2021a). This database has also been saved in institutional and international data repositories as an additional safeguard against loss.

The resulting corpus was sorted into the eight categories identified by Rose and Schlegl (i.e. gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, ethnicity, nationality, language, and religion) and then further refined. The refined groupings in the CritCat.org database are: Racialized KO, Indigenous KO, Names,

Gender & Sex KO, Queer KO, Disabled / Crip KO, and an "Others" section, which includes topics such as American immigration, non-English issues, religion, children, and so on. These areas are discussed further below.

In order to keep the database up to date, I use Google Scholar alerts with keywords and boolean operators identical to the original search terms. On a weekly or biweekly basis, I review newly-published articles identified by these alerts, adding likely candidates into the "000 – To Evaluate" folder discussed below. As time permits, I read through each article, and then add them to a relevant section. Irrelevant or out-of-scope literature is discarded. These changes are then uploaded to the publicly accessible Zotero database on a triannual basis. Readers who are interested in participating in article reading, sorting, or organization may do so by contacting me.

THE DATABASE

As the current number of articles (~600) in the CritCat.org database suggests, the literature has expanded sixfold in the two decades since Olson and Schlegl's original ProCite database. It has also taken on a number of new directions and goals, and, in some cases have developed into subdomains of their own, which I have discussed elsewhere (Watson 2021c). The database itself is organized using Johnny Decimal (a computer file sorting system) and is composed of four primary sections: "**000. To Evaluate**," "**100. Context**," "**200. Groups**," and "**300. Broad Critiques. Ethics. Recommendations & Strategies**." The first of these ("**000. To Evaluate**") is entirely functional, serving as the "To Be Read" list.

100. Context

Category	Subcategory	Articles
100. Context	00. Other Bibliographies	6
	01. Historical Context & Reviews	51
	02. Ethical Codes	27
	03. Library Statements	39
	04. Archives	39
	05. Museums	20
	(total)	171

Table 1: Subcategories of "100. Context," and number of articles in each. Note that the number of individual articles will not add up to the categorical total because of crosslisting.

Articles in "**100. Context**," primarily belong to contextual or supportive subcategories. Contextual subcategories are those which give historical context for critical cataloging, or provide histories of social movements in cataloging and classification (i.e. Tennis 2012; 2013; Adler and Tennis 2013; Olson 2000; Homan 2012; Poole 2017; Velez and Villa-Nicholas 2017; Wenzler 2019; Gardner 2021; Hudon 2010; 2011; Dobreski and Kwaśnik 2017; Martin 2021). Other contextual subcategories include "**02. Ethical Codes,**" a collection of ethical codes or guidelines established by GLAMS professional organization (i.e. Association for Computing Machinery 2018; Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals 2018; Daniels 2018; American Library Association 2019; Canadian Federation of Library Associations 2019; Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee et al. 2019; Char-

tered Institute of Library and Information Professionals 2020; Society of American Archivists 2020) and "**03. Library Statements**," which includes statements on bias in library and archives description and library technical services/metadata department mission statements. Both of these latter sections are largely due to Violet Fox's collection efforts at the Cataloging Lab; the CCDB largely simply provides HTML copies of the webpages in the event they are taken down, changed, or lost. Finally, supportive subcategories "**00. Other Bibliographies**," "**04. Archives**," and "**05. Museums**," are being developed in order to support users of the CCDB. These subsections collate other critical cataloging bibliographies, articles about critical cataloging in archives, and articles about critical cataloging in museums respectively.

200. Groups

Category	Subcategory	Articles
200. Groups	01. Racialized KO	74
	02. Indigenous KO	87
	03. Names, Sex & Gender	45
	04. Queer KO	52
	05. Disabled & Crip KO	36
	10. Other KO (Immigration, Politics, Religion & More)	30
	(total)	298

Table 2: Subcategories of "200. Groups" and number of articles in each. Note that the number of individual articles will not add up to the categorical total because of crosslisting.

Articles in category "**200. Groups**" form the largest section of the CCDB. They are primarily organized along a refinement the eight categories identified by Rose and Schlegl (i.e. gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, ethnicity, nationality, language, and religion). My refinement combines ethnicity into Racialized KO, some articles from age into Disabled KO, and places some remainders into "**10. Other KO (Immigration, Politics, Religion & More).**" The reasoning for the latter decision was my decision to institute a general rule of thumb for the creation of new subcategories, which is circa 30 articles, evidence of ongoing and active publication discussion, generally taking place over 2-3 decades. For example, despite early CritCat focus on poverty in LCSH by Berman (1971; 2005; 2007) and a couple of other articles (Chatman 1996; Hunger and Force 2005) this area has failed to inspire much action or further discussion, so I included it in "**10. Other KO.**" Religion (Broughton and Lomas 2020; Dong-Geun and Ji-Suk 2001; Idrees 2011), children (Beak 2015), and sizeism (Waldorf and Furner 2021) have also been identified as problematic areas within cataloging and classification and are included here for potential subcategory status. Examples of areas that may become their own subcategories includes discussion around immigration resulting the fallout around the LCSH subject headings "Illegal Aliens" and "Illegal Immigration" and their replacement with "Noncitizens" and "Unauthorized immigration" (Library of Congress 2016; Aguilera 2016; Taylor 2016; Broadley and Baron 2019; Lacey 2019; Lo 2019), or how non-English subjects or individuals are poorly served by LCSH (Diao 2015; Correa and Marcano 2009; Diao and Cao 2016; Sheetija Kathuria 2011; Shoki and Oyelude 2006; Randall B. Kemp 2011; Holloway 2018; Cohen 2019).

The CritCat subdomains I consider highly established and lively are "**01. Racialized KO**" i.e., Black and other communities of color; "**02. Indigenous KO,**" including Aboriginal, Native Ameri-

can, American Indian, and other communities; "**03. Names, Sex & Gender**," focusing specifically on women and other marginalized gender identities but overlaps some with the preceding subcategory due to Two Spirit identities as well as the postceding one due to connections between Queer and trans and gender diverse communities); "**04. Queer KO**," which includes minoritized sexual orientations (such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Asexual, Two-Spirit and others), but generally not gender identities (such as women, men, transgender, nonbinary, and others) addressed in the previous section (there are overlaps and crosslistings, as already stated); and "**06. Disabled / Crip KO**," which revolves around Disabled and Crip people and their communities and resources; Crip is a reclaimed term used by some disabled activists similarly to the way the word Queer is.

300. Broad Critiques. Ethics. Recommendations & Strategies

Category	Subcategory	Articles
300. Broad Critiques. Ethics. Recommendations & Strategies	01. Broad & Multiple Critiques	39
	02. Equity. Equality. Ethics. Social Justice.	74
	03. Strategies	68
	(total)	166

Table 3: Subcategories of "300. Broad Critiques. Ethics. Recommendations & Strategies" and number of articles in each. Note that the number of individual articles will not add up to the categorical total because of crosslisting.

Finally, category "**300. Broad Critiques. Ethics. Recommendations & Strategies**" contains subsections that grapple with issues arising from the previous two categories. This category is heavily crosslisted with the two preceding it, and, as a result, can be seen in two different ways: 1) as another entryway into articles about groups; or 2) about entirely separate approaches to problem solving. Stated more plainly, as most professional LIS and GLAMS literature presents a problem, analyzes it, and then offers solutions, articles about ethics (Odumosu 2020; Wagner 2019; Martin 2019; Kazmer 2019; Antracoli and Rawdon 2019) may also be about marginalized issues (respectively: race, gender and queer issues, privacy, gender and names, and race and archives) and may also offer specific recommendations (respectively: ethical digital description, unpacking misnaming, omitting details from living name authority records, community consultation and description). Therefore, these articles would be added to multiple subcategories. The general-use subcategories developed in this section are "**01. Broad & Multiple Critiques**," which generally contains articles that offer multiple critiques of GLAMS metadata, usually focused on Library of Congress Classification or Dewey Decimal Classification. "**02. Equity. Equality. Ethics. Social Justice**" contains articles that focus or claim to focus primarily on the philosophical issues of Ethics, Equality, Equity, or Social Justice. Finally, "**03. Strategies**," contains articles or case studies that offer practical solutions/approaches, community-based recommendations on cataloging, classification and description, and other strategies for ameliorating bias.

CONCLUSION

In August of 2020, I wrote an article about CritCat in *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly*, which was, as far as I'm aware, the first article about CritCat in the GLAMS literature broadly. In it, I focused on the effort of several cataloguers to add "Asexuality" and "Asexual people" to the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and argued that "speaking generally, critical catalogers

tend to recognize that that no system is free of bias and tend to inherit a revisionist (rather than an abolitionist) ethos from their RADCAT predecessors" (Watson 2020, 6). After publication, I received critique that this represented RADCAT as an outmoded or historic movement, when, in fact, it is still active.[3] I think that this was (and is) a fair criticism, and the development of the CCDB has demonstrated that RADCAT and CritCat belong to the same long tradition of critical knowledge organization laying at the 'core' of our professional domains.

I opened this article with a quote from Emily Drabinski's article "What is critical about critical librarianship?" where she discusses the "persistent longing for a librarianship that looks and acts in ways that disrupt the status quo, that center a commitment to social justice and social change, that elevate and amplify the voices of a diverse group of librarians, and that grapple directly with the problems of power concentrated in the hands of only a few" (Drabinski 2019, 51). She then outlines five principles of critical librarianship, which I believe apply to CritCat as well:

- Critical librarianship interrogates the work of power in structures and systems
- Critical librarianship acknowledges the social, economic, and political context of library policies and processes
- Critical librarianship surfaces hidden labor
- Critical librarianship articulates the infrastructures that enable some lines of inquiry and not others
- Critical librarianship knows that the world could be different

I also offer five reoccurring recommendations derived from my reading of the CCDB:

1. the use of multiple or alternative vocabularies or classifications, where available[4]
2. the practice of "cultural competency" when considering historic identities, items, or groups or the use of "ethical outreach" when dealing with still-living identities, items, or groups[5]
3. "trickster" practices of "alteration," "subversion," or "extension" of dominant metadata principals or systems, and/or the replacement of dominant classification or cataloging on a local level[6]
4. consultation with described subjects[7]
5. and finally: the realization that changing words and hierarchies alone will not fix the problems or harms caused by description, cataloging, or classification.

Metadata are wholly a product of our societies, histories, and worldviews and, as such, its benefits and harms belong to us. Phrased slightly differently, a description, classification and cataloging regime centered on white, ethnically European, bourgeoisie, Christian, cisgender, citizen, heterosexual, able-bodied, allosexual, monogamous, men (WEB3CH2A2M)[8] is not desirable, possible, or sustainable. Rather than cycling about in the endless gyre of WEB3CH2A2M-based systems whose center cannot (and should not) hold, knowledge organizers should aim to align themselves closer the principals of social justice. Crystal Vaughn extends this idea, saying that

> ethically speaking, therefore, a librarian's job is not just to preserve and provide access to information, but to also be an instrument for social justice. And this is why the language of cataloguing is so important: it is a librarian's job to work at decolonizing colonial structures so that everyone has equitable access to information (Vaughan 2018, 10)

These are the aims and directions of Critical Cataloging, and they are urgent, present, and necessary ones. As Scott Carlson puts it: "No Metadata, No Future" (Carlson n.d.).

Phrased differently: Our Metadata, Ourselves.[9]

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ENDNOTES

1   This article is dedicated to Emily Drabinski. Without Emily's inspirational scholarship, encouragement of an MLIS student, and her friendship, this article and the work that it discusses would not exist. My title is a riff on Emily's foundational work Queering the Catalog.

2   The use of "resources" here refers to anything that metadata is/are assigned to. Examples include: books, audiovisual materials, archival collections, artifacts, etc. This practice aligns with the work undertaken by the Trans Metadata Collective, a pan-GLAMS effort to develop best practices for trans and gender diverse metadata. The TMDC found that "resource" was the best pan-GLAMS term. See The Trans Metadata Collective, 2022.

3   It is not the only mistake I made in that article, as I've learned from hindsight, the development of the CCDB, and as my colleagues have told or shown me. I am grateful for their time, the lessons taught, and any other mistakes are my own.

4   (Cherry and Mukunda 2015; Swanson 2015; Bosum and Dunne 2017; Michel 1985; Carlyle 1989; Colbert 2017; Lorberfeld and Rinck 2015; Johnson 2007; Schultz and Braddy 2017; Marcondes 2020; Disabled People's Association of Singapore 2015; Coleman 2017; North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities 2019; Homosaurus et al. 2020; Dobreski and Kwaśnik 2017; Dobreski, Qin, and Resnick 2019; 2020)

5   (Moody and O'Dell 2017; Engseth 2018; Tang et al. 2018) (Fox and Gross 2019; Buccicone and Leaman 2021);

6   (Clarke and Schoonmaker 2020; 2019; Angela Kublik et al. 2003; Kwaśnik and Rubin 2003; Gilman 2006; Speller 2007; Bullard 2018; María Montenegro and María Montenegro 2019; Ann Pettingill and Pamela Morgan 1996; Ockerbloom 2013; Sahadath 2013; libraries Australia nd; MAIN (Manitoba Archival Information Network) - LCSH (Library of Congress Subject Headings) Working Group 2017; Bone et al. 2015; Smiraglia 2015)

7   (Lee, Nam, and Nam 2013; Mai 2013; 2010; Lorberfeld and Rinck 2015; Lougheed, Moran, and Callison 2015; Bone and Lougheed 2018; Bone et al. 2015; Marcondes 2020; Chilcott 2019; Antracoli et al. 2019; Antracoli and Rawdon 2019; The Trans Metadata Collective et al. 2022; Tanenbaum, Theresa Jean et al. 2021)

8   Originally WEBCHAM from Hope Olson's naming of the default and assumed universal center of cataloging and classification systems, expanded by Michelle Caswell to include "cis" and "citizen" at the encouragement of Marika Cifor, and here expanded by me to include relationship and romantic orientations. See (Olson 2001, 4; Caswell 2019, 7)

9   (c.f. Our bodies, ourselves Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1973)