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Cruising the Library

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Melissa Adler’s Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge engages and critiques the systems of organization in the library classification system using a critical lexicon that intentionally disrupts expectations. Adler sets the tone from the very beginning with the use of the term “cruising” in the title: “The notion of cruising embraces promiscuous and perverse readings. The shelves are the streets, and when browsing or cruising the library, the classification roughly serves as a map to guide our desires” (xii). Adler encourages “perverse readings,” by which she means readings that do not fit within the power structure of the library. However, she is careful to note that perverse texts bring potential risks because they still must exist within the library’s power system: “To be perverse is to be vulnerable because being illegible and outside the law is to be at risk of being coerced into a category with a name and its rules or to suffer the painful consequences of failing or renouncing the law” (5). Adler details the complicated and often incongruous ways that texts and readers must submit to existing power structures within the Library of Congress classification system and within libraries themselves. As she walks us through various categories of texts and classifications, Adler reminds us that readers enter libraries to find pleasure in books and wittingly or unwittingly submit to the laws of classification and “terms of use” of the system of power. She describes the experience for many as “simultaneously thrilling, intimidating, and fearsome” when “[submitting] to the library’s disciplinary techniques”; but she notes that “[t]he threats of punishment and shame are real. And the shelves, with their separation of subjects from one another and the placement of sexualized and racialized subjects in the margins, reflect one’s alienation” (177).

As previously discussed, Adler first calls for “perverse readings” and for cruising the library in the book’s introduction. Her first chapter discusses the naming of subjects in
the library, and it pays particular attention to the medicalizing of subject headings and the pathologizing of disciplines and sexualities. Her primary example is the subject heading “paraphilias,” a psychiatric term that had replaced “sexual deviation” in most catalog entries without human review; such a change erases materials for library users outside of the medical sciences and misrepresents historical concepts of perversion and deviation (28-30). Chapter two uses the Library of Congress’s infamous Delta Collection as an example of protecting texts for the public while also restricting texts from the public. This collection exemplifies the library’s role as a servant to government officials (67). Chapter three does a close reading of the library shelves and the physical act of cruising library spaces, and Adler uses specific examples at the University of Kentucky’s William T. Young Library to demonstrate how shelving influences user interaction with library books (108-10). Chapter four examines libraries as tools for nation-building: places that organize and create “sub-categories” to mask racial, sexual, and gender difference. In considering the possibility of a universal collection, Adler also suggests that the idea of a universal classification system is rooted in fantasy and would actually further contribute to institutionalized racism and heteronormativity (140). Chapter five engages libraries in digital spaces as part of a neoliberal apparatus; she calls for the categories to “keep moving” and “always be open to possibilities for unmasking and remaking - not to keep adding to existing structures but to undo them and start again” (163). Finally, Adler’s epilogue considers the “masochistic user,” as referenced previously in this review.

Adler’s text has a strong argument because it considers the history of the library in the United States. The analysis on the Library of Congress’s catalog and its international influence during the Cold War is especially telling as the book recognizes the work to enhance democracies in opposition to communism and to spread American culture in order to win against the Soviet Union (139). Such a reading sets up a strong connection to the library’s continued use by Congress today by senators on the issue of immigration (11). However, our one critique for the text deals with the contemporary library, particularly in relation to the Internet and online search terms. While Adler does acknowledge that the Internet is “another battleground for claim to territory and authority” concerning classification, she then moves away from digital spaces and accepts them “with great reserve” (170). Since this text seeks to engage with past and present concerns for library classification, a stronger analysis on digital influences, particularly in relation to the Internet search engines that are competing with library classifications, would have been a welcomed addition.

Adler has written on all manner of topics connected with Library Information Systems, most notably the intersections of Disability, Race, Gender, and Queerness with the library classification systems. She is currently an Assistant Professor teaching Research Methods & Statistics in the Master of Library and Information Science program at University of Western Ontario. We look forward to her next project which continues a line of inquiry into the organization of knowledge, examining the creators of systems from the Enlightenment era to the present, and is tentatively called “Organizing Knowledge to Save the World.” As a feminist critique of the library’s systems, it looks to be an important next step in her research and a worthwhile follow-up to Cruising the Library.
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