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Critical Cataloging: Researching American Art History on Its Own Terms

Tracy Stuber and Jennifer Way

We are acutely aware of the current United States administration's actions to remove funding from GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums) organizations as well as its withdrawal or threats to rescind support from institutions of higher education. These cuts impact programs that rely on GLAM resources and train the next generation of GLAM professionals.

Also threatened at this moment is the vital role of cataloging within the GLAM sector and academic programs focused on American art and art history. Cataloging provides the foundational infrastructure for research, teaching, and learning. It enables discovery, supports sustained inquiry, and reflects the current state of knowledge in the field—along with the values embedded in what is collected, preserved, and made accessible to scholars and the broader public. Critical cataloging is an approach within library and information science that identifies and examines traditional cataloging practices and standards that perpetuate bias, marginalization, and systemic inequalities. It also actively works to make catalogs more inclusive, equitable, and representative of diverse perspectives, especially those of historically underrepresented or marginalized communities.

This essential work is imperiled. Critical cataloging, in particular, plays a reparative role: it enhances the discoverability and representation of artifacts, texts, and artworks in ways that align with scholarly and pedagogical movements and steer this effort toward greater inclusion and accessibility. As funding and staffing for projects and institutions become increasingly precarious, the continued support and advancement of this work is both more important than ever and more vulnerable.

In spring 2023, Digital Dialogues published a series of informal short pieces reflecting on the development of digital catalogues raisonnés. This issue takes a similar approach to critical cataloging, another example of information management that, like the catalogue raisonné, is indispensable to art history but often overlooked in visions of what the field is and does.

For this issue, Digital Dialogues explores the facets of critical cataloging—the who, when, where, and how—as it pertains to American art history. Colleagues in diverse positions across GLAM share insights from critical cataloging efforts at their institutions and reflect on who is doing critical cataloging and in what roles and institutional contexts they can

proceed. What does this work actually entail in a contemporary digital context? What promotes it, and what hampers it? When and how does it intersect with the art-historical research process?

When we initiated this section of the journal in fall 2024, we did not foresee the extent to which these insights would become snapshots of a clearly distinct moment in American history. In recent months, executive orders dismantling the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and DEI programs across GLAM institutions and impacting higher education have radically attacked the cultural, political, and financial conditions necessary for critical cataloging to take place. Together, these contributions reveal the complexity and necessity of this work for this moment and for the future of research and the representation of the field's resources.

Fig. 1. People working in Card Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C, c. 1900–1920. Photographic print. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, https://www.loc.gov/item/97513719

Critical cataloging is also referred to as reparative cataloging, inclusive description, or ethical metadata, among other terms. It is neither new nor wholly digital. In their short yet potent history of critical cataloging, Violet B. Fox and Tina Gross highlight the originating critiques of commonly used cataloging systems—such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), the Library of Congress Classification (LCC), and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC)—by Black librarians, such as Dorothy Porter Wesley, Annette Lewis Phinazee, Doris Hargrett Clack, and Dorothy Ann Washington.[1] In the 1970s, Thomas Yen-Ran Yeh, Sanford Berman, and others advanced feminist, antiracist, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ critiques of these systems, which continued to develop in the decades following.

In her contribution to this issue, arts and humanities librarian Stefanie Hilles examines how the LCC system used to organize library shelves creates hierarchical distinctions of value about what counts as art and who counts as an artist. At a time when many institutions are moving book storage off-site and closing stacks to public access, this system may seem like an artifact of the past.[2] But Hilles argues that analog cataloging continues to matter as both an artifact of past practice and a continued influence on present library users.

Students seeking inspiration in the stacks or limiting their online search to the content of Miami University's art and architecture library may not encounter books classed and stored in the university's numerous brick-and-mortar libraries. Furthermore, the "virtual shelves" on many online library catalogs merely revive LCC classifications in digital form, similar to how many digital collection catalogs created by mass digitization efforts transformed the form but not the content of existing cataloging data. Nor did they greatly expand on what a user could do with digital catalog information in comparison to the analog world.

As Fox and Gross point out, and as the contributions to this section demonstrate, critical cataloging gained significantly in visibility and momentum in 2020. Among the multiple factors driving this development, two stand out. During the pandemic, digital catalogs became a required rather than optional part of art-historical research and the everyday jobs of staff at museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions who were then working from home. Separated from on-site, object-oriented duties, many of these same staff members faced shakeups in their typical work tasks. With doors closed to the public and the acceptance of new collection items paused, some seized the rare opportunity to devote attention to reflecting on cataloging practices. This situation points to time as a crucial factor for this work that so often is assumed to take place and even written into job descriptions but whose constitutive tasks are rarely intentionally scheduled.

What also motivated this work was the murder of George Floyd and the rapid development of the Black Lives Matter movement. These events sparked conversations about racial power imbalances across American higher education and GLAM as they intersected with the scholarship of archival silences and decolonizing knowledge to motivate critical cataloging and highlight the whiteness of art history across its professional modalities. Yet, change is slow for constructing a more inclusive information system and workforce. In 2023, for example, librarianship remained approximately 86 to 88 percent white.[3]

A key interest of this Digital Dialogues section is how critical cataloging brings an understanding of description as interpretation to the fore. In an article titled "The Discovery of Absences," Martien de Vletter (Associate Director of Collection of the Canadian Centre for Architecture) articulates a significant shift in the relationship between art-historical researchers and information professionals: "The work of interpretation is traditionally the domain of the researcher, [while] the technical practice of cataloguing or describing . . . is traditionally the domain of the cataloguer or archivist. [Yet] today the work of interpretation is done alongside the work of cataloguing." In her contribution to this section, de Vletter reminds us that the primary sources on which we may scaffold research and teaching projects come to us through existing knowledge systems. Additionally, de Vletter highlights the interpretive nature of making the Centre's archival materials more discoverable, meaning more available and findable, for a greater diversity of users. In helping researchers find material, in turn, the labor of librarianship facilitates art history research that is both more inclusive and expansive in the service of academic arguments, curatorial endeavors, and casual browsing. This is important for a field whose content and practitioners transcend national political borders.

Whereas physical catalogs often rely on the information professional—whether librarian, archivist, or collections manager—as an intermediary, digital catalogs put users into more

direct contact with the terms of cataloging itself, not all of which were designed with end users in mind. Finding aids—a common cataloging genre used by archives—originated as tools for archivists to use internally.[4] Consequently, so-called legacy cataloging information, including descriptions and terms applied in earlier historical moments, are out of step with contemporary norms. Additionally, they remain the source of significant portions of digital metadata in current digital repositories.[5] Critical cataloging makes it possible to find materials on their own terms, by which we mean terms used and valued by artists to describe themselves, the objects they create, and the stories they tell, and by specialists and sometimes community members who are sensitive to the material's nuances of identity and history. At the same time, information professionals need to balance nuance and specificity with how users search. In this issue, Christina Ayson-Plank and Rihoko Ueno (Smithsonian Archives of American Art) describe how archivists, reference specialists, and other information professionals in their institution's Subject Terms Working Group (STWG) sought this balance, for example, by electing to describe collections "with both the panethnic (Asian American) and an ethnic-specific term (Japanese American, Chinese American, and so forth)." This decision recognizes diversity while keeping in mind the larger categories with which users might begin their research.

Critical cataloging does not matter only at the beginning of the research process. It also shapes how scholarly output circulates, especially online. In her contribution, Rose Paquet (cofounder and codirector of The Incluseum) recounts the iterative process of critically cataloging blog posts on The Incluseum, an on- and offline initiative dedicated to making museums of all types more inclusive. Consulting with students enrolled in a Masters of Library and Information Science degree program, Paquet and her colleagues designed and redesigned a controlled vocabulary—an approved list of tags and categories—for posts that would reflect the organization's mission. This process, Paquet writes, involved "a move from power-over to power-with modes of relating: inclusive practices center relationships and social justice to increase representation and access to museum resources and facilitate institutional change." Users of the site do not only read about inclusion; they also experience it in the ways they navigate site content.

Pacquet's shift in language—from "power-over" to "power-with" modes of relating—reflects a broader movement from domination to relationality. References to relationality, relationships, and social justice align critical cataloging with care work—specifically with an understanding of care as labor "that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible."[6] Feminist ethics of care scholarship emphasize that care is not only emotional or moral labor but also practical labor, requiring time, resources, knowledge, and skill. It also raises important questions, such as: Whose social relations are revealed or obscured by care? Who benefits from the visibility or invisibility of that care? These questions have relevance for the work that critical catalogers do, and they equally matter for understanding the institutional permissions and support that typically are necessary for the work to happen.

Institutional change is centered in the roundtable discussion among Sophia Meyers, Rosalie Hooper, and Bree Midavaine—members of the Bias Remediation for Interpretation and Data (BRID) initiative at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA). Their reflections underscore that as care work, critical cataloging requires attention to the social and institutional conditions in which such practices are developed, supported, or hindered. These conditions include the availability of time and resources as well as the willingness

and capacity of staff to collaborate across job descriptions and share expertise. For example, the PMA contributors stress the collective effort needed to initiate and sustain critical cataloging and its influence across various stages of the exhibition lifecycle—from object research to wall labels and publications.

Concerning collective effort, a supporting practice that emerges is centering cross-disciplinary groups for critical cataloging intra-institution, such as the STWG at the Archives of American Art and BRID at the PMA. Furthermore, critical cataloging also emerges as a networked interinstitutional practice—one that thrives through institutional collaboration and professional networks where staff share practices, concepts, and mutual support. This approach fosters awareness of how similar work unfolded during COVID across the broader GLAM environment. It also reflects a willingness to share knowledge across what are often siloed domains, reinforcing GLAM as a loosely connected but mutually influential ecosystem where institutions model and learn from each other.

Critical cataloging must remain forward-looking in its commitment to fostering inclusion, particularly in how materials relevant to historians and students of American art are represented both in front-end access points and in deeper cataloging structures. As a response to systemic biases embedded in traditional classification practices, critical cataloging provides a crucial practical and methodological framework for reimagining how to process cultural-heritage materials, especially through the use of AI. Scholars have demonstrated that AI systems often reproduce and amplify biases related to race, gender, and other identity categories present in training data. While these concerns are not the primary focus of this section, the increasing interest among GLAM institutions in employing AI for large-scale cataloging only heightens the urgency of critically informed approaches.[7]

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Notes

[1] Violet B. Fox and Tina Gross, "This Is the Work: A Short History of the Long Tradition of Inclusive Cataloging—Critiques and Action," in *Inclusive Cataloging: Histories, Context, and Reparative Approaches,* ed. Billey Albina, Rebecca Uhl, and Elizabeth Nelson (American Library Association, 2024), 15–27.

[2] Amy Lucker, "Deal with the Devil: A Participatory Model for Off-Site Storage Selection," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 31, no. 2 (2012): 285–92.

[3] Curtis Kendrick, "Changing the Racial Demographics of Librarians," *Ithaka S+R*, modified April 18, 2023, https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.318717.

[4] Gregory Wiedeman, "The Historical Hazards of Finding Aids," *American Archivist* 82, no. 2 (2019): 381–420, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc-82-02-20.

[5] James Baker, Andrew Salway, and Cynthia Roman, "Detecting and Characterising Transmission from Legacy Collection Catalogues," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2022), https://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/16/2/000615/000615.html.

[6] Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, ed. E. Abel and M. Nelson (SUNY Press, 1990), 36–54. See also Nel Noddings, "Care Ethics and 'Caring' Organization," in *Care Ethics and Political Theory*, ed. Daniel Engster and Maurice Hamington (Oxford University Press, 2015), 72–84; and Jean Keller and Eva Feder Kittay, "Feminist Ethics of Care," in *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, and Alison Stone (Routledge, 2017), 540–55.

[7] Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Polity, 2019); and Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York University Press, 2018).