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The bookshelf's 'magic circle': An ethnographic study of classificatory encounters in library spaces

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses classificatory encounters in a unique library with integrated academic and public book collections. Employing Walter Benjamin's image of the organised bookshelf as a 'magic circle' of independently relating items, I follow the choreography of classification in library spaces: from the formality of the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) through which books are organised, to their resulting social life on the shelves, to the way they are subsequently engaged with by users. Through ethnographic analysis of interactions with the surprising juxtapositions found on the library's bookshelves, I provide insights into the power of classification, both for socially organising knowledge and for inviting intellectually and emotionally significant encounters of subtle reclassification. I argue that while formal classification schemes may seem to fix knowledge categories, the 'magic circles' created through such schemes on the shelves suggest a more vital, vibrant and invitational dynamic. Further, I highlight the centrality of library books as material cultural objects to the potency of these classificatory encounters for those involved in them. Combining insights from prominent lines of research in cultural sociology – regarding classification and materiality – the article shows how classification *matters*.

1. Introduction

1.1. Ordering bookshelves

Libraries and their bookshelves have distinctive features that make them ideal for thinking about classificatory systems and classificatory encounters. Libraries are ambivalent spaces, home to overflowing, hard to define, and even contradictory functions. Libraries facilitate learning and leisure (Hayes & Morris, 2005), shelter and exclusion (Santamaria, 2020), order and chaos (Benjamin, 1999). Although the cliché of libraries being 'book storehouses' implies otherwise, libraries and their bookshelves have never been organised solely around efficient, utilitarian storage. Instead, libraries are organised by systematised classification infrastructures which follow principles of relationality, retrievability, and universality and reflect the social mores of the times in which they were first developed. As the material consequences of classified objects, library bookshelves produce and project boundaries, edges, canons, fields, genres. In the same way as British artist Rachel Whiteread's famous plaster casts of bookshelves (Whiteread, 1997) created solid blocks, rather than a whole series of individuated books, library bookshelves encircle collections and imply completeness. The boundaries, limits and delineations of these collections are often described and displayed on signs at the end of the shelf, on the library

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floorplan and in its catalogue.

This suggestion of completeness and order doesn't meet reality: while shelves and library stocks are materially finite, the knowledge and expression they contain are not; the collections could be infinitely bigger, could contain completely different books, could be organised in myriad other ways. The classification schemes that orientate collections on shelves shape this performance, giving the illusion that any subject can be attained and contained in one rightful place, with one set of rightful neighbours. The schemes by which physical and digital libraries are organised are socially constructed, normative and 'express social values and embody beliefs' (Zhao, 2005, p. 184). While library classification systems are often barely visible to the user, they have a material effect on how interactions with knowledge take place.

The shelves' solidity is made up by their accumulated objects: books. Books attract, are pulled down, thumbed through, borrowed or discarded, reshelved correctly, or lost to a classmark they do not belong to. The shelf is made and (re)made through the book's mobility, and the changing relationships its composition of accumulated relationships creates. As books pool together on shelves and desks, a silent relationality between them emerges. Foucault (1977, p. 32) speaks of a 'fantasia' emerging at the creases, the interstices, 'from book to book'. In his essay 'Unpacking my library', Walter Benjamin (1999, p. 62) describes the moment where books are placed besides one another according to some classificatory logic as the creation of a 'magic circle'. The 'magic' emerges between and among previously separate books when they are placed, deliberately, together on a shelf. While he says that this is a point at which the collection's 'chaos has been given an order', we can equally see it as a moment where order (the classification scheme) creates further moments of chaotic relationships. With books beside one another, their contact points become an additional source of reflection. Sedgwick (2003, p. 8) rumination on the preposition 'beside' is useful for considering how formal classification can create lively collections, since 'beside' comprises 'a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping'.

Recent years have seen a radical reduction in the number of open stacks in both public and university libraries in the UK. A need to create space for ever growing numbers of students is responsible for this in university libraries, while in the case of public libraries it has become commonplace for the institutions to house increasingly diverse council services alongside library services (SCONUL, 2016). While off-site storage facilities and digital resources satisfy many, both options are qualitatively different from their solid, tactile predecessors, and enable different classificatory encounters. The endurance of physical, open stack, library bookshelves therefore ought to provoke questions of what they do, of what encounters they afford, and of what ways they – and the infrastructures that shape them – matter.

1.2. Implications on classification as material and structure of argument

As simultaneously disciplinary and unruly institutions, libraries and library practices offer singular insights into the dance between differently mobile forms of classification. The article draws on ethnographic research at an unusual library in central England called The Hive, a library unique in combining university and public services, stock and staff. This approach to what is called a 'joint-use library' (McNicol, 2008) was taken by a partnership between the University of Worcester and Worcester's local authority in order to create a library service greater than the sum of its parts. Through binding its fate together with the ambitious growth of the university, the beleaguered public library service went some way to being safeguarded.² Something I had not anticipated when I began my research on the Hive was the impact the integration of the two library's collections had on the aesthetics and functions of its bookshelves. As a result of having an unusually diverse public (both academic and public), creating an unusually diverse book collection, all catered for by a single classification scheme (DDC), the integrated bookshelves displayed surprising, incongruent, and gently challenging combinations. Despite all passing through one formal classification scheme, the outcome of the library's classified collections immediately produced new 'magic circles' (Benjamin, 1999) on the shelves, embodying vitality, playfulness, invitation and refusal. These could, in turn, be interacted with through subtly classificatory practices³ of recognition, assimilation, and play, by library users. The Hive presents an exaggerated but not distorted version of all libraries and demonstrates how formal classification schemes can produce lively collections that elicit meaningful, material practices of reclassification.

Through paying close ethnographic attention to the Hive, this article analyses the emotionally and intellectually significant interactions that are invited by classified bookshelves. In attending neither solely to the 'top down' nor solely to the 'ground up' of classification but rather to the points at which formal schemes are encountered and made sense of by users, several insights into classification are made. The article demonstrates that formal classification systems do not themselves produce static collections. The books ordered through them are always-already in a process of reclassification, always being shaped through and by their relationships with their neighbours, and always embodying the 'tension between the poles of disorder and order' that Benjamin's 'magic circle' spoke of (Benjamin, 1999, p. 62). Secondly, I argue that these classified shelves invite library users themselves to perform – intentionally or otherwise – further subtle classificatory work. This subtle classificatory work – of reflecting on the titles and how they do or

² In Great Britain, public libraries have suffered drastic cuts to funding over the last fifteen years, with one fifth (almost 800) closed between 2009 and 2019 (Flood, 2019). Academic libraries have not suffered this same fate, but have experienced a parallel identity crisis. The idea commonly expressed that 'it's all online now' stands in friction with the fact that ever-expanding numbers of university students need – and lack – physical spaces of belonging.

³ I characterise these interactions as subtly classificatory in the sense that they involve interaction with the consequences of formal classification, the 'sorting' of objects in various ways, and the making of associations with and between objects. These practices may not constitute an organised or systematised alternative schema of classification, but are instead examples of what Beer (2012, p. 146) calls 'everyday forms of classification'.

do not belong – can provoke varied intellectual and emotional reactions. Further, the article highlights the importance of the book's tactility and its spatial organization in a highly classified space – the library – for these interactions. Throughout, I make a case for the benefits of employing an ethnographic approach for studying classification.

The article has the following sections. I begin by describing The Hive and the research context from which this article draws. Here, I walk through the material and spatial implications of library classifications as they appear in this one space. The second section outlines literature on cultural sociological approaches to classification in both sociology and Library and Information Studies (LIS) and highlights in particular the contributions of Critical LIS scholars to thinking with classification. It then outlines how cultural sociological interest in materiality and objects intersect. Here, the importance of thinking about classification in library spaces as a material practice with consequences for how meaning is negotiated across and assigned to objects (books) is highlighted. The substantive part of the article returns to the Hive for two further examples of the lively, comic, and contingent nature of classificatory practices in library spaces. The first episode is solitary and analyses reflective encounters with bookshelves holding diverse materials together via their classification. This encounter reveals key arguments around the classificatory encounter. Firstly, it highlights the extent to which socially constructed and historically contingent *formal* classifications can produce chaotic classificatory relationships on the shelves which can then be enrolled into processes of lively, meaningful reflection and organisation by library users. Secondly, it highlights the importance of the material and spatial organisation of libraries to these processes. The second episode analyses a more social, intersubjective encounter based on observing – and being drawn into – a group's discussion on books classified within DDC 305.5 ('groups of people -> people by social and economic levels'). As well as emphasising the previously described insights into classification in library spaces, the vignette demonstrates how groups of people can be brought together in social moments of shared meaning-making through performing classificatory work.

2.1. *Introducing the Hive: spatial classification in the library space*

I now introduce The Hive through an ethnographic analysis of a spatial encounter with classification.

'So, what do you want to do, Dad? Explore? Read, learn, imagine? Discover the past?'

As I pause in front of the ground-to-ceiling library floorplan I hear a middle-aged man ask his father this question as he pushes the old man's wheelchair. The son is met with an understandably perplexed eyebrow raise from his father, a wide opening of palms skywards, resting on his lap. We are just within the hush of the library's glass double doorway, an area where 'Happy to help!' badged volunteers stand eagerly with clipboards and leaflets, ready to pounce their help upon visitors. The floorplan has the hallmarks of the one-word imperatives that characterised public-corporate messaging in the early 2000s, and the out-of-fashion status of the word 'library'. We start at the top:

Level 4 – Research

Level 3 – Read, learn, imagine

Level 2 – Explore the past

Level 1 – Discover

Level 0 – Shared study

The descriptions fall down somewhat by the time we get to level 0 ('shared study'), a subterranean expanse which coincidentally – or not – is colloquially classified as 'the teen space' by staff and users of the library. Instead of going down the stairs, I walk the wide wooden central steps from my base in Level 1 (where to 'discover' means to attend to council services, use the loos, go the café, or browse the children's library) through the atrium level 2 (where to 'explore the past' encompasses archive and archaeology services, a 'business lounge', and meeting rooms) to level 3, the main library (where to 'read, learn, imagine' happens among the integrated, shared and co-located collections of the University of Worcester and Worcester City Council).

Here, the physical library space of The Hive is shown to be structured through various forms of structured and subtle classification. Activities, groups of people, and objects are here ascribed not only spaces and positions in isolation from one another, but also in relationships that describe a structure in its entirety (Zhao, 2005, p. 187). The hierarchical positioning of activity spaces and knowledge types seems mutually constituting: the silent study of the fourth floor is physically positioned as 'higher' than the others. The fact that Special Collections are also held there, in locked glass cases, seems to reflect this elevated purpose. In the other direction, the 'shared study'/'teen-space' of floor –1 is positioned as far away as is possible from the higher pursuits of the library, and struck me as an overflow, a container for surplus DVDs and excess energy. The spatial classification of the library demonstrates the extent to which physical distance and spatial arrangement 'feeds into our experiences with social and symbolic boundaries' (Pachucki et al., 2007, p. 345). There is also something comic about this spatial classification, with the son in this scene performing the library's logic to his baffled father. This highlights the extent to which classifications are always interpreted and cannot be understood universally (Vlegels & Lievens, 2017, p. 77). As I spend the day moving from section to section, reading, note-taking, listening, talking, I smile at the memory of the pleasantly confused exchange at the floorplan. I come to think that the query of whether the old man wanted to 'Read, Learn, imagine, discover, explore the past' was an unlikely but accurate description of the lively classificatory encounters that can happen while being besides, among, and between books, shelves, people.

2.2. *The Hive as a research site and the use of ethnographic methods*

I happened upon The Hive and its bookshelves while I was studying for a Masters in Librarianship in 2014 and had returned to my hometown of Worcester. The library is the product of a collaboration between the University of Worcester and the local authorities of Worcester (Worcester City Council and Worcestershire County Council), made possible through a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) administered by Galliford Try Plc and opened in 2012. Although in the UK there are a small number of other examples of university and local authority libraries coming together in formal and material partnership⁴ the Hive is unique in creating a purpose-built premises of full *integration*, rather than *co-location*. The main library on the third floor has fully interfiled collections, with books from both library's partners appearing together on the bookshelves, organised using the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) scheme, and available to all users. Staff are trained to respond to academic and non-academic queries, and The Hive's doors and events are open to all without turnstile barriers.

Integration-by-default allows more to happen than simply allowing the non-university-going-public into an academic space. Prior to opening, the Hive's founding directors described their vision that there be 'no concept of 'academic' or 'public' areas within the building' (Dalton et al., 2006, p. 542). As I moved from working as a librarian into doing sociological research on libraries this declaration stuck with me: in the very moment of collapsing categories ('there is no concept of...'), such categories are named and brought into creation ('academic' or 'public'). These practices of classification alongside simultaneous practices of convergence developed across the library, particularly as the council budgets declined and the UK student-fees debate sharpened positions on either side of the integration over time (Quinn, 2022).

I conducted an ethnography influenced by the creative turn in sociological research termed 'live methods' (Back & Puwar, 2012). Live methods call for a supple approach to temporality, tools, the broad theoretical and the highly situated. This approach to sociology as a 'crafty science and artful sensibility' (Back, 2012, p. 37) became insightful for me as I came to appreciate the sticky, affective spaces between what I understood as its structure (the library as completed classification) and agency (the library as constantly reclassifying). My ethnographic methods overall included drawing spaces and interactions, conducting mobile interviews with library staff and users, and 'dwelling' and writing in the space itself as a user, sometime 'local', sociologist, and librarian (Quinn, 2023). While I spent a concentrated year doing fieldwork, I also spent several years either side of that period in the building and did a lot of writing there. My research was facilitated with approval from the administration at The Hive, and ethical approval was granted through the University of Warwick.

The Hive acts as a case for analysing interactions with classification in the vein of what pedagogical theorist Elizabeth Ellsworth calls a 'non-example' (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 9). As Ellsworth describes in reference to engagement with anomalous sites of learning (in her case, museums, monuments and civic art), 'non-examples' are useful because they are 'genotypes embodying the essence of an idea' (p. 10). These genotypes accentuate patterns found elsewhere but can then speak back to the 'norm', or to more common frameworks. The contrasts found in The Hive's collections may be greater than elsewhere, but versions of its classificatory dance are inherent to all libraries. The Hive's exaggerated reality helps us to consider classificatory practices in more conventional locations. Working at the level of ethnographic accounts - the edges and pages of The Hive - is to take seriously its specific circumstances while also employing it as a case for investigation and imagination beyond its walls. The following section takes a step back from the Hive and describes how two of the key concepts in this article - classification and materialities - relate to thinking with libraries.

3.1. *Literatures of classification and materiality: building the bookshelf*

Classification and materiality are two dominant themes in recent cultural sociology. Lessons from both - in combination - are key to informing the arguments in this article. These centre the studying of interactional encounters when studying classification systems and attending to the ways that these interactional encounters rely on the materiality of cultural objects. In this section I outline pertinent arguments around classification from cultural sociology. Following this I move on to outline the important - and currently underexamined - contributions of Critical and queer theory informed Library and Information Studies to sociologies of classification. Finally, I describe the key contributions of materiality studies, the book as a cultural object, and book spaces.

Classification and allied concepts of boundary formation and maintenance have long been preoccupations of sociology. As Zhao (2005, p. 180) has outlined, work in this area can itself be broadly classified into two trends: studies employing classification schemes as research tools, and studies of classification schemes in themselves. In the last two decades a series of correctives have been issued to what has been seen as an overly rigid view of classification formation, maintenance, and meaning making. Michele Lamont and her colleagues argued that researchers of classification should better account for the multiplicity, mobility, and dynamism by which individuals navigate boundaries in their everyday lives (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). In a further review article for *Poetics*, Lamont and others (Pachucki et al., 2007, p.344) summarised future avenues for researchers of classification which included 'conceptualising multiple, interacting boundaries...[and] how organisational and institutional structures influence boundary processes'. My work here responds to these calls, given the singular complexion of library spaces as classified and classifying described above.

Elsewhere, Lamont (2010, p. 132) argues that rather than applying fixed classifications to cultures, she has sought to 'look at classification systems comparatively and from the ground up'. The idea of studying classification 'from the ground up', rather than the imposing height of the 'top down' has inspired varied and valuable research. Studies of formal classification have benefitted from an

⁴ For example, 'The Forum' library in Southend-on-sea is a collaboration between the University of Essex, Southend College, and Southend Council.

infrastructural ethnography of the international classification of diseases (Star, 1999), document analysis comparing French and American wine classification (Zhao, 2005), and ‘inductive analysis’ of genre categories in fiction (Michelson, 2022). Research analysing *ad hoc* classifications in everyday life includes interview analysis of the navigation of privacy in working households (Lan, 2003), ethnographic insight into how art is classified by creatives (Koppman, 2014), and network and comparative analysis on music genres (van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2018; Vlegels & Lievens, 2017). Beer (2012) work on genre is important to my concerns in the library. In coining the idea of the ‘classificatory imagination,’ Beer argues genre boundaries are much more vital, contested, and contingent than a ‘top down’ analysis implies. Concurring with the earlier work of Bowker and Star (1999), Beer (2012, p. 146) argues that genre classifications are neither fixed nor final, and should be viewed as points of communication, ‘sites of tension, play, demarcation and difference’ rather than impenetrable barriers.

Analysing the ‘battlegrounds’ of classification (Vlegels & Lievens, 2017, p. 88) should not mean a disavowal of the potency of formal classification systems. Pachucki et al. (2007, p. 332) point to the consequential relationship of formal and informal, arguing that ‘institutional categories become material for individual boundary work’. This idea of formal classification precipitating intellectually and emotionally significant personal interactions underpins much of what follows in my ethnographic analysis of The Hive. When analysing the classificatory encounter, therefore, it is important to attend to the formal mechanisms by which objects – in my case books – have been organised, in order to better attend to the subtler and more personal forms of identification and reorientation they give rise to.

3.2. Library classification

Thinking with the work of LIS scholars is important for understanding encounters with library bookshelves: in order to understand the interactions of what Pachucki et al. (2007, p. 332) call ‘individual boundary work’, Beer calls ‘everyday forms of classification’ (Beer, 2012, p. 146), and I identify as subtly classificatory interactions with formally classified collections, the specificities of libraries’ formal infrastructure must not be overlooked. Institutional structures influence individual boundary work, and the formal organisation of the Hive is key for creating the opportunities of surprising juxtapositions that precipitate recognition and reflection.

Looking over fieldnotes from my ethnography, we see how gathering and arranging materials for spending time in the library can involve a multitude of practices of classification, retrieval, and arrangement, many of which intersect with formal classification as it is spatialised in the library.

On the bookshelf to my left I glance and then pull down ‘Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography’ by James Clifford and George Marcus at classmark: 305.6CLI. After walking to the library catalogue PCs to search for and note down classmarks and locations, I walk to the other side of the library floor, noting its curious proximity to the celebrity cookery books, and collect Barnett’s ‘Imagining the University’ at class mark: 378 BAR. Over by the public PCs and the daily newspapers stand is a short stretch of Library and Information Studies books including ‘Joint Use Libraries: Libraries for the future’ by Susan McNicol at 021.64 MCN which also gets added to the pile. Finally, back in the home I’ve made for myself on the desks at 305, I reach into my bag for the copies of Jack Halberstam’s ‘The Queer Art of Failure’ and Elizabeth Ellsworth’s ‘Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy’ that form part of my personal library, and add those to my stack.

‘Library work’ can involve searching for known titles using controlled vocabularies, searching for additional titles highlighted by the catalogue search, and bumping into additional titles found by analogue, mobile, browsing. The core librarianship practices of cataloguing (the process of creating and maintaining bibliographic and authority records by describing items) and classification (assigning the catalogued item with a class location within a pre-existing classification scheme) shape these retrieval practices by delineating and spatializing relationships between knowledge forms. The language used to describe items circumscribes their retrievability, denotes their placement in the library, and delimits the possible connections between and among multiple items. In the reflection above, we can see how decisions made by librarians prior to any book’s arrival in a library result in objects being placed in certain fields of relation, and not others.

Yet the classification and cataloguing schemes that organise libraries worldwide tend to fly under the radar even of those researchers whose work is – in part – moulded by them (Adler, 2017, p. 125). The two most common classification schemes, Library of Congress Classification (LCC) and DDC are simultaneously the products of and ‘apparatuses’ for ‘cultural assessment’ (Rohy, 2010, p. 345). DDC was established by Melville Dewey in 1876 and remains dominant in public libraries worldwide. LCC was developed in 1897 to replace the system originally developed by Thomas Jefferson and remains dominant in academic libraries worldwide. Though aspects have been slowly updated over time, both schemes remain in thrall to the eras in which they were developed. An important voice in Critical LIS, Olson (1998, p. 234–235), describes these issues of cultural bias as they relate to territory:

Allocation of 80 % of DDC’s religion section (the 200 s) exclusively to Christianity and the existence of a separate section for American Literature (the 810 s) when all other literatures are arranged by language is not surprising given the origins of this classification... The other major North American classification, the Library of Congress Classification (LCC), exhibits similar biases. For example, the allocation of space and the sequence of development in Class K for law, with separate volumes for individual North American and European countries was published in the 1960s and 1970s with only one volume appearing in 1993 covering Asia, Eurasia, Africa, Pacific Area and Antarctica.

The Hive is ordered using DDC. The normative impulse of the scheme is highlighted by Ireland (2013, p. 311) who says that ‘for Dewey, the public library was not a place of natural memory; rather, the library serves to aid artificial memory and actively shapes self-guided education’. Formal classification via DDC is two-way street: ‘the attempt formally to evaluate *and improve* [cultural

distinctions] forms much of what we think of as information systems. We then take cultural cues from the systems so created' (Star & Bowker, 1998, p. 185, my italics). Thus, what appears and where it appears on library bookshelves reflects social patterns, and may be said to encourage them. The advent of the DDC system in the nineteenth century revolutionised library usage in ways that can be said to empower library users while simultaneously circumscribing their engagement. While the LCC system was built for use only by trained librarians in private stacks (so readers would not necessarily see or engage with the entire scheme), DDC enabled a simple, highly replicable system of library organisation designed to be navigable by library users themselves. Open-stacks, organisation by subject, legible class marks on spines, and signs illustrating library layouts characterise this change in the agency afforded to users.

Critical LIS researchers and librarians have sought to adjust the oppressions that have been built into cataloguing and classification standards (Olson, 1998). Much has entailed the renaming of offensive subject headings which reflected social attitudes at the time of their inception and moving them to different categories (Berman & Gross, 2017). This work has included petitioning for the adaptation of the subject heading of 'Homosexuality', both renaming it from 'sexual inversion' and also moving it 'from the shadow of 'Sexual Deviations' to the clear descriptive light of 'Sexual life' (Drabinski, 2013, p. 98). A more recent revision has been the long-enduring campaign to 'change the subject' regarding the use of the term 'illegal alien' in LCC subject headings to describe undocumented migrants (George et al., 2021). Beyond being merely an issue about terminology, library classification has a material and spatial impact in the library itself – whether physical or digital. Decisions made during cataloguing and classification impact whether a book on homosexual soldiers in the US military is shelved in the military history section, or in the 'sexual life' section, for example (Morales et al., 2014). Inclusion at either location shapes that classmark, and the publics that are likely to come across it. As such, the 'besideness' – or magic circle – created by the classification scheme is as important as its contents. The classified object does not exist alone; the consequences of its classification are borne out in its relationships with other singularly classified objects.

While these examples of CLIS practitioners imply the improvability – perhaps the perfectability – of classification schemes, Drabinski (2013, p. 94) has argued for 'queering the catalogue' instead. In this approach, she advocates for a supple engagement with classification and its historicity, as opposed to what she calls a 'politics of correction'. She says:

Viewing classification and cataloguing from a queer perspective—one that challenges the idea that classification and subject language can ever be corrected once and for all, outside of the context in which those decisions take on meaning—requires new ways of thinking about how to be ethically and politically engaged on behalf of marginal knowledge formations and identities who quite reasonably expect to be able to locate themselves in the library.

With this approach, Drabinski argues that critical engagement with the classification scheme is more important than seeking to fix (both in terms of temporality and correction) the values of the catalogue once and for all. In this sense Drabinski's work chimes with queer theorist Sedgwick (2003, p. 124) who – beyond the field of LIS - calls for us to move from 'a rather fixated question, "is this piece of knowledge true, and how can we know?" [to asking], "how is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?"' This is something that library users are apt to do in interaction with the library bookshelf.

Queer theory informed interventions into LIS are vital additions to the conceptual work happening in cultural sociology regarding classification described earlier. Beyond highlighting how 'formal' classification schemes are themselves sites of struggle and human decision-making, they also show how location and description are not the end of the story of classification; shelves and knowledges can be and are reshaped by the live practices of interaction – identification, classification, refusal - that library users employ when they come into contact with them.

3.3. *The cultural object in classification*

Recent studies in materiality support and intercept studies in classification. This turn has been important in foregrounding the interactional importance of objects and the aesthetic immersion they afford for cultural meaning-making and culture-in-action (McDonnell, 2023). Recent literature seeks to correct the treatment of objects as merely through-ways for thinking about culture, or as inert vessels of meaning. This so-called 'third wave of cultural sociology' recently reviewed by McDonnell (2023) foregrounds the cultural object as lively, interactional, and even agentic. Composed of both 'meaning and material, and more specifically, the binding of significance to a material form' (Taylor et al., 2019, p. 1), cultural objects are increasingly understood as being enrolled and enrolling, collaborative as well as representative. There is a spectrum of interpretation as to the agentic or otherwise nature of objects – with a 'strong' theory viewing objects as having agency independent of human interaction (McDonnell, 2023, p.10), and a 'weaker' version seeing the significance of objects as 'mechanisms' that are enrolled into programs of action (Davis, 2020). As Benzecry and Dominguez Rubio (2018, p. 323) put it, the 'process of subjectification is not one-way with subjects wilfully imposing or co-opting objects to construct their identities but rather a process that is more like a dance or choreography in which the object and the self co-produce each other through a delicate equilibrium of bodies, techniques, mediators, and situations'.

Approaching the book as a cultural object is essential for understanding the choreography of classification. Books are specific and multifaceted objects in themselves and in company. Thumala Olave's work on the book as icon (Thumala Olave, 2020, p. 2) examines three distinct facets of books: the material, surface properties; the 'highly valued, sacred cultural goods' that they 'represent and realise'; and their role in the meaningful act of reading. Although books have served as throughways for discussing issues of class, taste and distinction (Michelson, 2022), Thumala Olave's work importantly foregrounds the objects themselves. Here, the ways that intersubjective attachments to books are both afforded by form and by personal recognition is clear. Rather than either simply transmitting knowledge to readers, or holding the projection of readers, books afford experiences of 'immersion'.

Interactions among multiple books in organised spaces have also received attention in cultural sociology though not with specific reference to libraries and library classification schemes. Smith's (2023) ethnography of an independent bookshop draws attention,

through an account from the book's owner, to how its importance is 'not, necessarily, related to the books his shop stocks, as much as what the bookshop offers to, and space for, sociability'. Liddle's (2019) research on feminist bookshops demonstrates how shared community activism is grown between the wealth of knowledge curated on the shelves. In both there is the sense that it is not the text of books alone that is important, but their overall context, spatial distribution, and interactional capacity. This analysis correlates with a more general conclusion that sensory reach and grasp is important for cultural objects' meanings to be recognised and enacted. McDonnell (2023, p. 19) argues that 'in addition to the powerful effects of the distributional availability of objects, material environments can both reproduce and dynamically alter social orders'.

My work with libraries and their bookshelves builds on these conversations by demonstrating the extent to which the various understandings of classification – and the contrasts found among them - infuse and enliven interactional practices with books. The idea of the 'magic circle' created when discrete books are placed in formation is testimony to the notion of objects as enrolling action rather than being inert reflections of prior action: their placement together enrolls new interpretations, and provokes interaction and reflection. At the same time, the 'magic circle' evokes Beer's (2012, p. 146) idea of boundaries being neither final nor finished, but rather becoming 'sites of tension, play, demarcation and difference'.

4.1. Practices of emplaced, live (re)classification of books at The Hive

This section returns to The Hive to analyse the multidimensional aspects of classification that take place there. After describing the overall space of the library and its shelves, I analyse two bookshelf encounters which illustrate and draw out the article's arguments regarding classification as invitational, material, and intellectually significant.

The main library book collection of The Hive contains multitudes; fiction and non-fiction; academic and not. Rows of book shelving are collected in groups in different corners of the floor, with arrangements of sofas, coffee tables, desks, and computers interspersing these at various places. The shelves never appear as a compression of high, closely packed stacks. Though sometimes a foot or so taller than head height, many of them are chest-height or shorter. The shelves are white and there is a spacious width between them. In contrast to archetypal visions of national or ancient libraries – perhaps like the British Library, where a huge height of books stack through the central column of the multi-floor building - here, the banks of books are deliberately malleable.

Across most banks of shelves on this third floor of The Hive there is a small section where a rotated piece of shelving allows a few books to be laid flat, rather than stacked on their sides. The view of the book thereby changes from titles and spines to the volume's front-cover. Through these front-facing shelves there is an acknowledgement that the bookshelf is not only storage but also advertisement. There is an invitation here to explore and be enticed by book covers unexpectedly. Springer et al. (2016, p. 7) point that libraries constitute a 'hybrid site for performing the book' finds expression here, with the curatorial role of library work meeting the solitary-social practice of reading (Loh et al., 2019). There are unarticulated classifications happening when librarians choose which books to promote on front-facing shelves, which calendar events to highlight with decorated book displays, and which of the library's publics to appeal to, and when.

4.2. Vignette one: gender trouble meets top gear

I now turn to two specific encounters within the space described above. The first encounter is solitary, and the second is social. Both illustrate the dimensions of classification laid out above. Both alone and in social groups, the classificatory encounter prompts reflective relationships towards ordered objects, and prompts personal re-orderings of their constellations.

I find myself again in the 305 section of the library. Today, it is the 'gender or sex' and 'women' subsection that catches my eye from where I sit at a table facing an enclosed corner of books; bold spines and bolder titles easily readable, easily graspable. Sat at arm's length, I am struck by how the books seem to fly at unexpected registers and appear to be written for different audiences. A bristling incongruency begins to show itself, and I feel myself distracted: taken away from my previous task of chapter writing and ethnographic observation. After zooming in on the shelf from my seat, I stand and walk to the shelves so I can feel and handle the books.

My eye is first caught by the Top Gear⁵ presenter James May's 'How to land an A330 airbus and other vital skills for the modern man' (305.31/May) sitting alongside an edited academic collection called 'Constructing masculinity' (305.31/Ber). On closer inspection, Berger et al's anthology is said to take 'us beyond the status of masculinity itself, questioning society's and the media's normative concepts of the masculine'. I have to pull the book out to read this on the back cover. As I do, I get a flash of James May's face on the adjacent book; reworked, cartoonishly, in wartime military aesthetic: the modern (white British) man. The juxtaposition of these two books makes me laugh. I scan across the spines, and next see a book called 'Why men can only do one thing at a time, and women never stop talking' by Allan and Barbara Pease (305.3/Pea). Along the shelf, the title 'Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity' by Judith Butler (305.3/But) almost seems to flash out of the shelf like a Vegas sign, gesturing in bright typeface to Allan and Barbara Pease.

I enjoy finding these examples, find others, and lose minutes playing a game of finding book pairings that seemed to correspond to each other. Pulling books out and creating piles on my desk also allows me to reshuffle Benjamin's 'magic circle', and form a new one;

⁵ Top Gear is a long-running British motoring television programme, controversial due to its hosts' performances of masculinist and at times homophobic, sexist and racist values.

combining formal classification, through touch, with personal associations. Opening the books I consider their provenance, condition, and guess at the journeys they may have been on, the homes they've visited. Many still had the due-date stamp slip prit-sticked on the inside cover – a slightly bygone object now, thanks to digital replacements. Those date slips that have remained give a partial glimpse of popularity, temporality, community; the reshuffling of other people's magic circles. I guess which partner in *The Hive* originally bought it. On taking the book from the shelves, opening its cover boards and scanning them for an institutional stamp, I realised I was not always successful in guessing the book's 'home'. There was a time in the early 2000s when Silvia Federici's 'Caliban and the Witch: women, the body and primitive accumulation' would be bought by public libraries, I learn, and when it was popular. I consider how the bookshelf might be said to fix or freeze time periods in its boards, and how nowadays, with short-term currency such a factor in weeding both academic and public libraries, this facet of the bookshelf is declining.

If the 305 section mostly brought a sense of playful classificatory identification, other collections clashed and produced what felt like sad and confusing shelves. Later, away from the 305s, I notice an enormous swathe of books on one side of the floor which cover dieting and losing weight. I react in an embodied way to seeing these, and feel transported to darker feelings, associations, and conjectures at the unhappiness associated with disordered eating and bodily estrangement. I notice that another quirk of collection integration is afoot here, too. The many 'practical' weight loss books (council bought) were interfiled with a range of psychology and education books covering the damage to mental health done by these very beliefs and practices (university bought). These juxtapositions included 'Mad Diet: how your diet can help you lose weight and cure depression' (616.8/LOC) sat alongside 'How to disappear completely: on modern anorexia' (616.85262/OSG). Elsewhere, I see two public library bought books in conversation: 'The Ten Commandments of Losing Weight' (613.25) promising 'tough love' and 'no-nonsense' nearby 'The reading cure: how books restored my appetite' (616.85262 FRE), an 'account of hunger and happiness...addiction, obsession and recovery'.

I felt conflicted by these shelves. Seeing the swathes of – extremely popular – dieting books felt wrong, and the interfiling of books tacking between weight loss and associated therapy initially heightened and accentuated this feeling. In her study of feminist bookstores Liddle (2019, p. 64) finds that focused, feminist collections helped to create the ethos and mood of the space. Rather than 'searching through the shelves at a mainstream bookstore' for feminist books, them being held in one place, besides like-minded neighbours felt positive. In fact, one of her research participants explicitly references diet culture as something they are happy to be able to avoid seeing at feminist bookshops. Liddle's interviewee takes 'heart that her daughters would have access to something besides the "be thin", "get a guy" fluff of the mainstream [bookshops]' (p. 64). I take the point. But I also wonder about the positives of such books being there, classified besides other books with such different aims and ethos. The conversation between them is certainly prickly; however, in a world where diet culture exists, having titles in unexpected juxtaposition with one another struck me as positive, evoking Sedgewick's vibrant definition of 'besides' as including powers of 'differentiating, rivalling...warping'.

I later wondered whether this game of 'book snaps' carried a judging inflection when it came to the gender books. Was I actually engaging in an inadvertent teasing of tastes, seeking to redraw the boundaries about what belonged on the bookshelf, classifying anew what should be held in the category of 'sex and gender' and what should not? Part of me didn't want to see the James May book anywhere near feminist books; I saw the Peases stereotyping title and probably had a slight scoff. However, I came to think that the bristling quality I projected as existing at the creases between the books was positive. Rather than reinforcing division, the books were merely in correspondence – or 'collaboration' (Benzecry & Dominguez Rubio, 2018, p. 322). One book would almost 'answer', 'trouble', or simply supplement the issue posed by its neighbour: gender stereotyping besides its appropriate theoretical deconstruction; a celebrity biography that enriches its academic gender-theoretical neighbour. These were spaces where expectations 'broke down', the circumstance by which it is argued both classification systems (Beer, 2012, p. 147) and cultural objects (McDonnell, 2023, p. 2) routinely become visible. The visibility of the contrast, and my surprise at it, reflected the choreography by which the object (or in this case, series of objects) and the self-co-produced one other (Benzecry & Dominguez Rubio, 2018, p. 323).

The Hive therefore provided a low-level, low-risk container for gently challenging flexes of the classificatory imagination (Beer, 2012), as well as a diverse collection of books. I learn during my time at The Hive that a reasonably significant minority of each library partner's stock is borrowed by members of the 'other' partner's public (cross-borrowing). A little more than 10 % of the university stock is borrowed by 'public' library members, and vice versa, with History books being a particular popular collection for cross borrowing. When I asked librarians at The Hive about these surprising shelves many felt it was useful as a tool for discussing validity with students, and for opening more reading possibilities for both – public and academic – communities. One librarian told me, 'you do sort of see these texts and think "gosh I wouldn't have thought they would go together"... but it's good for the students to see [unlikely books together], and the public as well I think'. In another conversation, the sense is given by a member of library staff that the 'publics' books can be used as a prop for explaining what not to use in an academic essay, because 'you can't just write off the top of your head'. Undoubtedly, classification work is happening here too; and the converged concepts of 'academic' and 'public' are liable to being rescored, with values ascribed to organised objects. Ultimately the impact is positive, since groups of people encounter texts they would not have done otherwise, and are given opportunities to reflect on their formation both in the library space and beyond it.

These bookshelves demonstrate the extent to which the consequences of formal classification retain vitality and can provoke new associations in the way they are arranged together. Moreover, the interactional encounters with the products of formal classification can be emotionally and intellectually meaningful. The episode precipitated reflections and processes of meaning making that would not have happened without the physical consequences of classification being within my grasp, organised in this specific space.

4.3. Vignette two: playing with books and alternative futures

This second vignette moves from my own experience to an observation of a group encounter. While even 'solitary' activities like

reading or browsing are inherently relational, even social, the following encounter highlights the interactive experience of engaging with the surprising products of formal classification. It is important to note the fleeting nature of this encounter, and the fact that it is an observation of a group of individuals I do not know. There is an extent to which the episode I observe matters more – or, matters for longer – to me than it might have done to those involved. Nevertheless, the interactional, interpersonal work on display shows again the complexity of classification, as a choreography between always already reclassifying objects. It is a choreography that can bring people together to reflect on and to rescore meaningful boundaries.

305 again: The usual rumble from the children's library downstairs is loud and the sound of burbling kids and their even louder grandparents percolates up to the third floor. The atrium, a ubiquitous and contentious feature that implies openness and innovation in contemporary design is holding and softly transporting these sounds, smells and rhythms of the lower floors up.

I had been sitting at this table - for four- alone, but gradually the spaces and seats around me have been filled with young men who all know one another. My new co-studiers are white, and I guess they're of traditional undergraduate age (late teens and early twenties). They are dressed in casual but carefully constructed outfits: caps, hoodies, long hair tied in high buns. The three on 'my' table are working on Apple MacBook laptops, and have pulled together their own mini library of Business Studies and Economics textbooks. Some of these books are pulled from their bags, but a few have the blue 'University of Worcester' stickers on the spines. I notice one of my new neighbours has a university 'Ski Society' sticker on his MacBook marking him out as a student at another university – a well-known and elite London university. I realise from this and other eavesdropped conversations that they are students from other universities who have returned to their childhood city of Worcester for the holidays. They're therefore one of The Hive's publics I hadn't previously anticipated. The integrated publics are not only [Worcester] academic or [Worcester] public. Rather, there are almost infinite further internal classifications and overlaps.

Quite a gang is developing around me now; the tables in front and behind seem all to know one another, and all talk is about exams and coursework. My island of privacy – and the boundary between us - has blurred all around me and I feel awkward. Without moving, my position has nevertheless changed, and I'm suddenly a bit of a lemon in the middle of them.

After a few minutes of near silence, the blond ski-society guy reaches out from where he's sat to the bookshelf that encloses our table and pulls out Black Feminist Thought by Patricia Hill Collins (university-bought). He sticks it in the faces of his friends, saying 'woah, bloody hell!'. I suddenly feel a bit of dread, pre-emptive guilt; wondering what my role needs to be; not wanting to be there anymore.

His opposite neighbour says: 'yeah that's a good one for you!'

Reply: 'why? Are you saying I'm some kind of racist sexist?'

Guffaws and denials.

Then, a different friend joins in and pulls out 'Chavs' by Owen Jones (council-bought).

More guffawing from all

'Here you go! It's you!'

'No it's you!'

This kind of things goes on for a few minutes, and the table enjoys stacking up books in front of themselves, creating their own and each other's personal collections, on top of their business studies books, in among their personal items.

After a few moments of lull, the original one, still holding the Black Feminist Thought book, open at the contents page, having thumbed across the pages, says:

'So many books here I want to read...but I never will... I could do a whole gap year reading just this shelf...but I never will....'

His friend, the guy holding open the chavs books says 'what, you like reading about poor people and feminism do you? Har har har'

'well yeah, like...I loved anthropology...I love this stuff...'

Attention at the sharing tables has, for some, long since moved away, the new books are skirted to the edge of the tables and eyes have returned to the laptops. For these two, a quiet browsing continues until one says:

....

...anyway, enough fun and games' marking the end of the episode.

This episode shows unevenness, drama and mundaneness, uplift and shadows, and is illustrative of how formal processes of classification are overlaid, multiplied, and operationalised through practice and interaction. In engagement, the classified books are enrolled into the services of 'everyday forms of classification' (Beer, 2012, p. 146) and subtle forms of identity work. There is ease, both between the group members and the physical ease of grasping at various aesthetically appealing books stacked at arm's reach. As cultural objects of value and iconicity (Thumala Olave, 2020), the books and their titles were 'emotionally resonant with a collective' (Benzecry & Dominguez Rubio, 2018, p. 322). They became props to relational moments of play, identification and reflection. The jumbled nature of integrated collections again seemed a key element to this playful episode's unfolding, but versions of it can happen

in any library. The students went between ‘serious’ academic texts to more ‘popular’ commentaries and back again, with the straightforward classifications of ‘high’ and ‘low’ becoming overdetermined, and interpersonal group dynamics – forms of social classification – playing a part. They noted through interactive, relational, boundary drawing their positions and belongings in the world. The ‘dance’ of co-production between ‘bodies, techniques, mediators, and situations’ (Benzecry & Dominguez Rubio, 2018, p. 323) involved enrolling objects into individual boundary work. Without being included I observed how the shared encounters evolved into what seemed like a wistful reflection on possible pasts, possible futures, and alternative knowledges. The encounter was fun, too.

Less comfortably (for me), there were classificatory practices involving a fractious understanding of race, class, and gender. It would be wrong to ignore the mocking overtones of the playful episode, and the groups’ comfort at expressing these. The group was sonically loud and unconcerned by my presence or the fact I was alone studying. Unlike many other episodes I observed in the library where behaviour classified as ‘anti-social’ would be quietly swept away using the ‘behaviour management’ practices of roving, amiable staff, this one went well below that radar. The group seemed instead to share and reinforce a confidence in their acceptability; this group was classified as belonging, as appropriate. While ‘official conceptions of spaces are adjusted and adapted through everyday uses’ (Loh et al., 2019: 402), it matters who is doing this work. People and books rub up against one another in The Hive and this sometimes seemed to heighten the self-beliefs of one against the other; a further series of classificatory practices taking place as to who had the ‘right’ to be there, and who had the right to the books. We can think back to the coveted ‘silent study’ of the fourth floor, a place I am told - incorrectly - by a student is a ‘university only’ space. Additionally, and as I have explored elsewhere (Quinn, 2022), physical markers of difference crept across the shelves over time to make clearer which were university-bought books and which were council-bought books. This action of making visible a previously converged category was taken in order to – in the words of one librarian – ‘acknowledge and meet that expectation’ that fee-paying students should not have to defer their books to the general public. Thus, in a sometimes disheartening sense, the striving for equality through bringing groups into proximity, *besides* one another, seemed to give way to pre-existing hierarchies and classifications being underlined more vividly. As static classifications of publics, staffs, and epistemes were erased by ‘integration’, new practice-orientated classifications could be re-scored.

While acknowledging the shadow-sides of these encounters, it struck me that the process was nevertheless productive. I do not want to underplay the classed and racial dynamics at play, particularly given that they were developed in a space historically built with gendered, classed, and racialised infrastructure (Adler, 2017). I hope I am fair in my sense, however, that the encounter moved from something mocking and with an offensive potential – to a place where reflection, nostalgia, and a reappraisal of attitudes became possible. As Rohy (2010) has described, the processes of ‘identification’ that occur with books is often less about finding an answer and more about the acts of piecing together, creating, through and by things placed beside and adjacent. She says (2010, p. 355), ‘in the process of discursive identity formation, what appears as a moment of discovery is really a moment of invention’. Just as the DDC system is a mechanism of ‘active memory’ rather than a neutral replica of universal knowledge, processes of classification are constructed. Through everyday classificatory practices with always-already reclassifying collections, people came together to create new meanings, new positions, and new boundaries.

5. Conclusion

This article has analysed the diverse processes of encounter between formal classification systems and their everyday usage. I have argued that the material and spatial aspects of classificatory systems are infused at multiple levels of library practice, and that in order to account for this multidimensionality, studies of classification should attend to classificatory encounters: those interactional moments where the consequences of classification are made sense of through user practices. Observing these interactional spaces with reference to the formal classification schemes provides insight into the implications and consequences of classification schemes as interactional devices. While studying classification systems in isolation is important for understanding how societies order themselves, doing so shows only how classification systems are socially constructed at their inception and may miss how they are re-constructed in practice. By the same token, while studying classification from the ground up is revealing of the way informal practices of boundary drawing are common, multilayered, and meaningful, doing so without examination of the formal classification systems that objects have been sorted through would neglect their potency. Employing an ethnographic approach infused with analysis of how formal classification schemes – like DDC – work is therefore a uniquely suitable methodology.

Several arguments follow which contribute to sociological research on classifications. Analysis of bookshelves at The Hive illustrates how classification does not end with the allocation of items to a classmark, or a shelf, or a space in the library. While classification *schemes* might be formal, their material consequences are not, and these create unexpected adjacencies in collections. Formal classification systems do not themselves produce formal, static, classified collections; they are always already in the process of reclassification. In the case of library bookshelves, classification schemes might impose order on collected discrete items, but chaotic ‘magic circles’ of objects will emerge as they are placed together. At the Hive, while adhering to the DDC scheme, the juxtaposition of books shows their boundaries to be communicative interfaces; one title could invite, refuse, mimic, or deny the other. The Top Gear book itself was altered by its interface with the ‘Studies in Masculinity’; the dieting literature was reorientated through its relationship with psychological studies of anorexia. In less obviously diverse libraries than the Hive, other factors will affect the collections of classified books, and these too will create vital, vibrant and invitational dynamics. The alphabet that organises titles within the same classmark by author, the historic contours of cataloguing procedures, the personal foibles of the individual who originally assigned subject headings to the book’s metadata, and – perhaps most importantly – the stock acquired by the library. These all bring an element of chance to the eventual makeup of any library bookshelf, and the show that classification is therefore a vital and lively process, even prior to human interaction.

I also argued through attending to the encounter at the library bookshelf that materiality is vital to classification, and provokes

further classificatory practices. As cultural objects, the book, the bookshelf, and the library space all provoked and responded to classification at various levels. How the library space was ordered and spatially organised illustrated how assessments of usage, appropriateness and purpose were made and valued. These decisions affected the way the space went on to be used but did not determine it. As we saw with the group of young men and the social-class titles, the products of these classification were apt to become props for meaningful reflection. Multiple classificatory processes undercut and overlaid one another in a delicate and occasionally fractious choreography. The books' tactility, their titles, and their constellation within the library space was essential to their being enrolled into classificatory meaning-making by members of the group. It mattered that the shelves were visible, reachable, and available to being remade in a space that was culturally recognisable. The study therefore bridges work within classification studies and materiality studies by providing important examples of how cultural objects become mechanisms for individual boundary work within institutionally categorized environments.

Finally, I argued that these interactional encounters with classified books can be emotionally and intellectually meaningful for those involved in them in diverse ways. Encounters with space, people, and books prompted immersive, reflective relationships towards ordered objects and personal identifications – or rejections - of their constellations. Whether between one person (as in vignette one) or within a social group (as in vignette two), engagement with classification at the bookshelf involved interactional processes of recognition, discovery, connection. The magic circle of the bookshelf – and contrasts and juxtapositions it made material - was integral to the bringing together of groups of people in unusual encounters and for stimulating revelations that might otherwise go unsaid. These contrasts were often liable to precipitating comic responses, but could also provoke less affectively positive – but equally valuable – ones. Just as the floorplan in the foyer of the Hive suggested, to interact with bookshelves may be to 'read, learn, imagine, discover, explore the past', in unexpected and meaningful ways.

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