

Now You See It, Now You Don't The Disappearing Collection of Western University's D.B Weldon Library

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Article abstract

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Now You See It, Now You Don't: The Disappearing Collection of Western University's D.B. Weldon Library

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ABSTRACT

The mass culling of libraries' print collections has often been questioned by librarians and library users, yet it has become more common in recent decades. Despite several high-profile controversies, the removal and subsequent disposal of significant portions of physical collections are still seen by many library administrators as an effective way to create space and pave the way for innovation. Guided by a progressive series of photographs, this article examines the large-scale removal of books from Western University's D.B Weldon Library as part of a renovation project in 2019. It also looks at the direct impact of these actions on a contemporary library research project that was undertaken by the authors. Focusing specifically on the E, HQ, and HV Library of Congress call number ranges, the changes to the stacks are shown in real time as materials are removed from the collection to be discarded or placed in storage. The authors raise questions about the functions and uses of libraries in our current neoliberal era as well as the logic of an academic library prioritizing study spaces and communal areas at the expense of a well-respected physical collection.

Keywords: *classification studies · critical librarianship · knowledge organization · neoliberalism*

RÉSUMÉ

L'élimination massive des collections imprimées des bibliothèques a souvent été remise en question par les bibliothécaires et les utilisateurs des bibliothèques, mais elle est devenue plus courante au cours des dernières décennies. Malgré plusieurs controverses très médiatisées, le retrait et l'élimination ultérieure de portions importantes des collections physiques sont toujours considérés par de nombreuses administrations de bibliothèques comme un moyen efficace de créer de l'espace et d'ouvrir la voie à l'innovation. Guidé par une série progressive de photographies, cet article examine le retrait à grande échelle des livres de la bibliothèque D.B Weldon de l'université Western

dans le cadre d'un projet de rénovation en 2019. Il examine également l'impact direct de ces actions sur un projet de recherche contemporain en bibliothèque qui a été entrepris par les auteurs. En se concentrant précisément sur les cotes E, HQ et HV de la Library of Congress, les modifications apportées aux piles sont affichées en temps réel au fur et à mesure que les documents sont retirés de la collection pour être mis au rebut ou entreposés. Les auteurs s'interrogent sur les fonctions et les usages des bibliothèques à l'ère néolibérale actuelle, ainsi que sur la logique d'une bibliothèque universitaire qui privilégie les espaces d'étude et les espaces communs au détriment d'une collection physique respectée.

Mots-clés : *bibliothéconomie critique · études de classification · néolibéralisme · organisation des connaissances*

Others, going about it in the opposite way, thought the first thing to do was eliminate all worthless books. They would invade the hexagons, show credentials that were not always false, leaf disgustedly through a volume, and condemn entire walls of books. It is to their hygienic, ascetic rage that we lay the senseless loss of millions of volumes.

— Borges, "The Library of Babel"



PHOTO 1 Signage posted in the D.B. Weldon Library in the summer of 2019 as the removal of books began.

Often when we embark on a project, task, or venture with a specific vision in mind we uncover another, larger story taking place. We stumble across a different agenda working quietly in the background. A situation like this arose in the late spring of 2019 when the authors, eager Library and Information Science graduate students, entered Western University's D.B Weldon Library to begin the second stage of a research project in the stacks. Specifically, we envisioned the project as an

examination of the Library of Congress Classification (LCC) that would focus on the spatial arrangement of the library's collection, the relationships that were created between the books in the stacks, and the effects that those relationships may have upon library users. Some of the questions we were keen to investigate focused on the arrangement of books in the stacks and how library patrons might react to seeing the following examples:

- the implied relationship reflected in the side-by-side placement (through LCC call numbers) of a book on homosexual relationships and one on pedophilia;
- the placement of volumes on gambling and addiction adjacent to those concerning intellectual and physical disabilities; or
- the derived connotation between books on sex and morality.

These were some of the questions we set out to explore. We were acutely aware of the difficulties we would face, as the intellectual structures that govern and organize libraries tend to be hyper-rational in the way they collocate and divide subjects.

Classification systems are presented in a way that may appear to be neutral, hidden tools, and many library users may look to the classification as an authoritative statement on the relations between different subjects (Mai 2013, 242). However, like the books and the libraries that house them, they too have histories. These systems, particularly LCC, as it is the standard for academic libraries, show a questionable rationality. Many of the tools (structures, processes, and practices) found within classification systems are equipped to universalize and privilege certain kinds of knowledge, presenting subjects that don't conform as inferior or rendering them invisible. As Goldberg (1993, 208) points out, "the rational, hence autonomous and equal subjects of the Enlightenment project turn out, perhaps unsurprisingly, to be exclusively white, male, European, and bourgeois." This type of Enlightenment-era reason is highly apparent in the historical structure of LCC and its contemporary variations as it is heavily based on default-style categories such as those mentioned by Goldberg—namely, whiteness, patriarchy, and heterosexuality.

For this reason, Mai (2013, 245) contends that classification tools would be better identified as sites of political and ethical work since, broadly speaking, taxonomies and systems of classification are so deeply biased through their construction on pervasive and dominating beliefs that they form a vision of the known world that is fictional and imaginary. As Popowich (2018, 62) writes, "In order for these structures, processes, and practices to appear neutral, in order for them to continue to function smoothly, they must remain obscured, mystified, [and] not open to theorization." Our study of the stacks was meant to help unmask and demystify these processes. With these problems in the back of our minds, we knew the physical analysis of the library

space would be no easy feat. However, we quickly discovered that the absurdity of the stacks was to become twofold as, in the process of trying to gather the necessary information to help answer our research questions, the mass weeding that was taking place at the time made it apparent that we were recording something else entirely.



PHOTO 2 A well-stocked shelf in early July 2019, showcasing how LCC puts disparate and unrelated subject matter side-by-side; in this case, books on sexuality and morality. These were the types of relationships we aimed to capture as we began to gather our research.

Into the Stacks

To conduct our research, we spent time between May and October of 2019 physically photographing and documenting particular areas of the D.B. Weldon Library collection—specifically, LCC sections E, HQ, and HV (History of the Americas, and those Social Sciences subclasses concerning The Family, Marriage and Women; and Social Pathology, Social and Public Welfare, and Criminology), which were located on Weldon Library's third and fourth floors. Our initial goal was to capture and analyze data about the contrived relations between books in the stacks so that we could later include it in our research study in a documentary way. Visual data in the form of photographs are a highly effective way to establish the basic properties of an immediate information space, including its scale, size, and layout, and to survey, quantify, characterize, and typologize the artifacts therein. The photographs were intended to capture the spatial layout of the shelves and provide reference points for the subjects contained on each shelf (Hartel and Thomson 2011, 2221).

Since we were both full-time graduate students with part-time jobs and other responsibilities, we had limited time to visit the library, but most shelves required several photographs to record the required data. As a result, the process was spread over the late spring and through the summer. In the midst of this documentation

process a curious thing began to happen: each time we ventured into the stacks, books had disappeared. At first only small numbers were missing, but soon they had disappeared in such great volume that it negatively affected our research. Several books we had specifically targeted for use in our study could no longer be found on the shelves. They were suddenly and surprisingly gone.



PHOTO 3 *MacArthur in Korea*, one of the books we intended to use for our project, is shown in its original location in section E45 on July 10, 2019. By August, it had been weeded.

One example of this phenomenon occurred with a work titled *MacArthur in Korea: The Naked Emperor* written by Robert Smith, which we first recorded on July 10, as shown in photo 3. We photographed this book along with a number of other works in the E45 range (an area of the classification dedicated to North American history) in the stack analysis portion of our research. However, as is visible in photo 3, the books appear blurry in our initial photograph and some of the call number information is difficult to read. This information was important to properly record as, in addition to collecting information about the shelves, we also wanted to gather some call number data to use in our analysis, mainly to parse out detailed subject matter information. We returned to the library in early September, before the fall semester began, to take another photograph of this specific work. Unfortunately, we could not find the book and after consulting the catalogue we determined it must have been removed from circulation.



PHOTO 5 The shelf in photo 4 is shown here on September 16, 2019, after being weeded.

Mass Weeding

So, what motivated Weldon Library's administrators to take away so many of the library's books? Libraries are traditionally about knowledge and, historically, books have proved a formidable way to access and retrieve said knowledge. So, it seems natural that books would have a prominent role in organizational plans and future arrangements for academic libraries. As we were to discover in this particular case, the answer to the question about what a library is was not clear cut. Although library spaces are traditionally fluid, and weeding library material is a natural part of collections management, we discovered that this mass removal of materials was related to something bigger. As we were conducting our research, Western Libraries had begun to move forward with the next stage of their Space Master Plan, a long-term renovation project for the larger Western library buildings, originally set in motion over the 2016-17 academic year. The Space Master Plan was an extension of the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan for Western Libraries, with the intention that the two documents would provide the comprehensive strategy for the future of Western Libraries (Western University and Perkins + Will 2017, 2). This stage of the plan consisted of a large-scale collection maintenance project with the short-term goal to reduce the library's overall physical holdings by 35% (Western University and Perkins + Will 2017, 54).

This type of mass weeding is an increasingly common practice in libraries in this neoliberal era, where there is an overall trend among academic libraries to focus on access to materials through interlibrary loan and document delivery services rather than through ownership of physical materials (Nicholson 2015, 332). This reduction of physical library collections is often tied to issues of space, specifically

the repurposing of library space away from its traditional collections-focussed role towards computer stations, technology services, creative and social spaces, and study areas (Little 2014, 633). This is what we encountered as Western Libraries administrators began to introduce the renovation plan. The direct effect of these large-scale administrative plans on our research led us to reconsider the rationality of these types of library management decisions. These practices arguably call into question what an academic library is and what its function should be in the current moment.

Over the course of several months of photographing the stacks, it seemed that a significant number of books had simply been spirited away. Our later searches through the catalogue revealed, though, that many of the books had been moved to off-site storage. However, several others seem to have been either discarded or lost in the downsizing process, as we could find no trace of them. They could not have been checked out by patrons or registered as lost, as this information would have been visible in the catalogue.



PHOTO 6 Half of a fully stocked shelf in the HQ806-809 range, photographed on June 7, 2019. A number of these books can now only be accessed through requests from storage or for interlibrary loan.



PHOTO 7 The same shelf in photo 6, now photographed on October 16, 2019, showing the progression of the weeding over the summer months. Following up on slightly blurry photographs of section HQ8o6, we found that over half of the books in the section had been removed, mostly into storage.



PHOTO 8 The stacks begin to thin as more volumes are taken out of the library in July, as this photo shows. A number of the books pictured above—*Man Into Wolf: An Anthropological Interpretation of Sadism, Masochism, Lycanthropy: A Lecture Delivered at a Meeting of the Royal Society of Medicine*; *The English Vice: Beating, Sex, and Shame in Victorian England and After*; and *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*—are examples of volumes that have been placed in storage. Due to the subject matter of the books in this section, certain volumes—such as *Leatherfolk*—are also held in the collection of Western's Pride Library.

As the months proceeded, books in the HQ and HV sections of the library began to dwindle and the entire fourth floor became spartan. Images 6 and 7, taken in July and October respectively, showcase the drastic changes the shelves underwent in this

period. The photographs taken in the summer and early fall show the extent of the weeding process, with sizable gaps in the shelves revealing the sweeping nature of the changes.



PHOTO 9 Large gaps in the stacks start appearing as the renovation process moves forward. By October 3, 2019, multiple volumes had been removed from HV743I, an area of the classification dedicated to the prevention of crime.

The first question we asked ourselves as we saw books begin to disappear from the shelves at such a rapid rate was a simple one: What is a library? This question is asked frequently and it is one that many librarians ask themselves these days. It is not a simple question by any means and answers depend on many factors. Is it a place bursting with books? A space dedicated to computers, technology, and innovation? A community hub for individuals to gather together and engage in discourse and conversation? It's fair to say that contemporary libraries serve all these functions and many more. The large-scale culling of physical material from library collections is far from a unique occurrence; it happens on a regular basis. Collections are dynamic and constantly in flux, meaning that as new acquisitions arrive, older, damaged, and less frequently accessed materials are phased out. This process theoretically relies on a high degree of balance in managing library collections so as to avoid valuable shelf space being taken up by obsolete material.

However, the practice of removing mass quantities of books in a short period—under the guise of weeding—has often been used as an easy way for libraries to create space for other services. Modern university space is extremely contentious as it is both expensive and difficult to find in already crowded campus areas (Buschman 2017, 87). As a result, much of the space in contemporary academic libraries has been dedicated to functions that are not related to books but instead to communal areas,

study rooms, and computer stations which are seen to give more economic value (Buschman 2017, 87). For decades, the practice of repurposing space and downsizing collections has been viewed with suspicion and outright criticism by many librarians and library staff; a succession of high-profile public and academic library scandals have spoken to these frustrations. For example, in 1996 the San Francisco Public Library created a new building focused on computer terminals, which was found to be lacking in adequate space for books, and the subsequent outcry over the removal of over 200,000 works to landfills was highlighted publicly by *The New Yorker* (Baker 1996). Likewise, a 2015 controversy in the Berkeley Public Library system led to the library director's resignation after a poorly implemented centralized purchasing and deselection program led to the loss of thousands of volumes and united staff, library users, and local politicians in opposition (Peet 2015, 13). These incidents suggest that while many library users and staff are hostile to the process of mass weeding (Berman 2013, 28 & 35), it is still upheld as a necessary practice for library development by administrators who sometimes have different priorities.



PHOTO 10 More gaps are revealed in the stacks as the weeding progresses. Holes in the shelves became apparent throughout the library by mid-September.

The Issue of Space

These controversies ultimately bring us back to the question of why Western Libraries' administrators chose to dispense with so many of their books. The rationalization of collections and space does not in and of itself explain the mass weeding undertaken in Weldon Library. It is worth remembering that the decision to remove the books was made well before 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced

many academic libraries to rely almost entirely on their digital collections. Looked at through the lens of Western Libraries' own documentation, the decision seems to be irrational.

The importance of books to Western Libraries is highlighted in the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan, where the results of a systematic stakeholder engagement process (involving employee and campus partner focus groups, consultation with partner libraries, student whiteboarding, and both employee and student surveys) place the libraries' physical collection third in the list of Western Libraries' perceived strengths, behind only the staff's experience/skills and the level of service they provide to users. By contrast, Western Libraries' value as a physical/study space is fifth on that list (Western Libraries n.d, 10).

However, the Space Master Plan—which the university outsourced to a private design firm in May of 2016 (Western University and Perkins + Will 2017, 6)—states that one of the major aims of the project is to make up for a university-wide shortfall in available student study areas. The same document also records that, prior to the removal of books from Weldon Library, study space already accounted for 40% of the physical space of the library building. By contrast, the general library collection (from which the culling would take place) took up 31% of the building space (Western University and Perkins + Will 2017, 12). Despite the university's consultations revealing that stakeholders in 2015 considered their collection to be a greater asset for Western Libraries than the buildings' ability to be used as a study space, and despite there being already more area devoted to study space than to the general collection, that collection was still significantly reduced to make way for new study areas.

Most confusingly of all, the Space Master Plan—which conflated the stakeholder engagement data collected by both the Strategic Plan and Western Libraries' 2016 LibQual Assessment (Western University and Perkins + Will 2017, 38)—identifies the print collection as the “defining element in the library's character—as users from undergraduates to senior researchers agree (Western University and Perkins + Will 2017, 48).” Yet, despite this consensus from 4,600 students who took part in consultations, the Space Master Plan immediately cites decreasing the collection to make way for “new spaces for learning and discovery” as the first key goal of the renovation program (Western University and Perkins + Will 2017, 49).

Since Western Libraries' own stakeholder engagement shows both the value that Weldon Library's users place on the physical collection and the central position that the physical collection has in the library's identity, the removal of a full third of the books from the collection does not appear rational.



PHOTO 11 The barren fourth floor with empty shelving units on January 3, 2020. This floor previously held volumes in the HM to PN call number range.

Conclusion

Following up on our project in December 2019 and January 2020, we discovered that sections of the Weldon Library collection had shrunk to the point where materials from several floors of the library stacks had been combined on one. In keeping with the Space Master Plan, much of the third floor was emptied and the fourth floor had been entirely cleared of books, leaving behind only the empty orange shelving units. The sight of the empty library space, as shown in photos 11 and 12, was off-putting, with the shelves seemingly speaking of the inherent strangeness of a library devoid of books when mere months ago the shelves had been overflowing with them. Although Western Libraries has moved forward with the renovation of the Weldon Library building, starting to improve both the lighting and ventilation, and beginning to update the tired architecture, the rows of empty shelves left us with a sense of profound loss. The physicality of the loss of the books was immense and the weeding decision again seemed irrational as Western's physical collections were much beloved and touted as one of the library's greatest assets. As Alberto Manguel (2015) writes, "if we change the role of libraries and librarians without preserving the centrality of the book, we risk losing something irretrievable." This clash between the hyper-ordered world of LCC and the floors of empty library stacks situated our project in an odd and unexpected place. The vision of the library we had intended to study rapidly began to change before our eyes and it was difficult to situate ourselves in the frenetic environment.

In pursuing this project, we had initially viewed the library as a relatively static space, one where the books were anchored in fixed places through call numbers and

cataloging procedures. We accepted that individual books would come and go as they were checked in and out by patrons, and that perhaps a few would be removed from circulation in the months we spent surveying the library. However, we did not expect to see the books that were the crux of our project disappear. Understandably, the mass weeding caused numerous logistical problems for our project, as books were constantly being shifted and removed, taken to offsite storage, and updated in the catalogue. It was difficult to record an ever-changing library and attempting to do so added months to our established timeline. However, despite all the difficulties and frustrations we faced, the first phase of our project was completed in December of 2019. Surprisingly, trying to capture a space in flux has added depth and a broader level of understanding to a project that was predicated on the conception that libraries are largely unchanging. As we now know, this is simply not true—library space has an immense capacity for change—and we were forced to broaden our understanding of the factors which influence that change. In many ways we were fortunate that we had chosen photography as our means of documentation, as we were able to follow this process over several months and capture the resultant effects in real time.



PHOTO 12 More empty shelving units on the fourth floor, shown on January 3, 2020.

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Marnie James holds a BA in English Literature and an MLIS from Western University. Along with colleague Alec Mullender she won the 2019 Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) Research in Librarianship Grant for the project *Invisible Structures: How Classification Defines and Divides Us*. She currently works as the Archives Technician for the City of Medicine Hat and enjoys crafting and exploring in her free time.

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