Graduate Journal of Food Studies • Volume 5, Number 2

Attention: No Food or Drink in the Library!

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Published on: Oct 12, 2019

Updated on: Dec 19, 2019

DOI: 10.21428/92775833.944d58fd

Introduction

Have you ever felt it to be difficult to find food studies research? Have you found yourself traveling all over the library to find information about a particular food-related subject? Researchers in most academic fields do not have the same plight. Food studies, however, as a new and multidisciplinary field, causes issues for traditional information organization systems, like the Library of Congress (LOC) Classification System, the scheme according to which most U.S. academic libraries are organized. This essay will explore the causes and effects of that problem and also discuss it as a potential contributing factor to the lack of a common bibliographic canon in food studies.

How Are Food Studies Books Organized?

Almost all U.S. academic libraries organize books based on the LOC Classification System. Unlike other book organization systems (for example, you may or may not have heard of the Dewey Decimal or the Harvard-Yenching), the LOC Classification System is organized by subject. This is helpful because it allows for *collocation*, or stumbling upon a useful book while looking for another. Have you ever been to your library looking for a book, and realized that the books sitting directly next to it might be helpful for your research as well? This is not an accident: it is collocation. LOC Classification System works this way by giving every subject a corresponding area of a library. Once a cataloger determines a book's subject, it is shelved in that subject's corresponding physical location next to similar books.

To describe subjects, catalogers create a long string of numbers and letters, or code, called a “call number.” Call numbers are universal; all LOC-classified libraries will put the same book in the same call number section of their library. Amy Bentley's *Inventing Baby Food: Taste, Health, and the Industrialization of the American Diet* (2014), for example, has the call number RJ216 (which, by the way, encodes the subject “nutrition of infants and toddlers”). No matter which academic library you use, this book can always be found in the RJ216 section. Note that the architectural arrangements of library buildings and bookshelves might alter the physical expression of the classification system but call numbers will always be in sequence with other similarly classified materials. The RJ section, therefore, could be in the same room as the Q section (for science call numbers), but it might also be in a different room or even a different floor. However, R subjects (medicine) will always follow Q subjects.

The LOC system can encode any subject because it is a hierarchical taxonomy—the longer a call number is, the more specific a subject it describes. In this way, it has the power to encode every subject you can imagine. The first letter of a call number is one of twenty-three broad subject areas, such as H (social sciences) or S (agriculture). Often a second letter is added to further specify the subject. Whereas T represents technology, TX, for example, represents home economics (as a subset of technology). Subjects are then further specified with numbers. Home economics is actually split into

over one thousand different subjects. Whereas TX1 is “home economics periodicals, societies, etc.,” TX1110 represents the subject “recreational vehicle living.”

And here is where it gets frustrating: the power to encode every subject means some subjects can be encoded in multiple ways. TX367 (“Home economics—Nutrition. Foods and food supply—Research”) is a completely different subject than QP143 (“Physiology—Nutrition—Study and teaching. Research—General works”). The two essentially describe the same idea but are organized in two separate locations. This theoretical problem has existed as long as the system has been in place. The way around it has always been the praxis of bibliographic cataloging and research: researchers get to know their discipline, and they memorize pertinent call numbers and bookshelves in the library. Catalogers get to know these disciplines as well, and the two work cooperatively. Practiced sociological researchers and catalogers know that Krishnendu Ray’s *Curried Cultures: Globalization, Food, and South Asia* (2012) should be classified GT2853 (“Geography—Manners and customs (General)—Customs relative to private life—Eating and drinking customs—Foods and beverages”) and not TX724.5.I4 (“Home economics—Cooking—Cookbooks—1800—Oriental. Asian—By region or country, etc., A-Z—India”), where historians might find K. T. Achaya’s *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (1994). However, food studies scholars would unquestionably be interested in both.

Food Studies Books Around the Olin Library

The Olin Library, the main research library for Washington University in St. Louis (where I informed the graduate food studies community of this problem at the 2017 GAFS Conference), offers an example of the problem I discuss. Ray’s *Curried Cultures* (GT2853) and Elizabeth Cromley’s 2010 *The Food Axis: Cooking, Eating, and the Architecture of American Houses* (NA7205, “Architecture—Special classes of buildings—Classed by use—Domestic architecture. Houses. Dwellings—Special regions or countries—America—North America—United States—General”) are not only on different shelves, they are separated by two floors (see Figure 1)! This means that scholars would likely never collocate one while looking for the other. Summarizing this problem, Nancy Duran and Karen MacDonald point out: “[r]esearchers are generally familiar with the books, and scholarly and trade journals in their field, but tend to overlook materials that are published in other fields.”^[1]

Olin Library Level A Map and Olin Library Level 2 Map, from <https://library.wustl.edu/units/olinlibrary/levela/> and https://library.wustl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Olin_Level22018-web.150.jpg respectively.

Multidisciplinary Madness

Confusion in finding food studies scholarship is in part due to the field's relative youth; however, food studies' multidisciplinary nature, which does not easily fit within traditional subject categories, is a larger problem. Cross-disciplinary study, which includes multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary fields, first gained popularity among scientists in the 1970s.^[2] As Julie Thompson Klein asserts, "new classification schemes differentiated forms of disciplinary interaction, motivations for teaching and research, degrees of integration and scope, modes of interaction, and organizational structures."^[3] Academia in the 1970s, therefore, saw many traditional disciplinary boundaries break down as fields begin to share techniques and theoretical perspectives. It was not long before the idea took root across literary studies, art history, music, and other humanities and social sciences.^[4] According to Klein, multidisciplinary fields are characterized by how they "juxtapose separate disciplinary approaches around a common interest, adding breadth of knowledge and approaches."^[5] Within this category, food studies therefore positions food as a common interest around which perspectival frames are attached from established disciplines. Sidney Mintz describes this topic in his forward to *The Handbook of Food Research* (2013):

The methods used to realize what are usually (in the United States) called food studies do not stand apart from other kinds of research. The authors of a dozen books arguably describable as "food books" may well be using methodologies as numerous and as different as the books

themselves: ethnobotany, cooking, the history of agriculture, the biochemistry of fermentation, and so on. In contrast, a subject defined as a discipline such as chemistry or mathematics or English literature, is bounded by its methodology, the ways its scholars learn more. Such disciplines take their shape from the specificity of their methods. We have no difficulty in perceiving that those methods are applicable to the study of food, much as they would be to a wide variety of other subjects.^[6]

By its nature, food studies is spread across categories of knowledge; therefore, food studies scholarship must be spread around libraries using the LOC Classification System.

While what I have described thus far is frustrating for food studies scholars, I have also shown it to be a necessary part of multidisciplinary study: that a food studies frame is always added retrospectively to research generated from other disciplines. Instead of a single field, therefore, food studies scholars always have multiple fields of study within which they are working. As Duran and MacDonald write, “it is important that food studies researchers become familiar with the literature in several disciplines to improve the overall quality of research in the field.”^[7] In other words, scholars are tasked with memorizing food-centric call numbers, as well as the food aspects of their respective sub-disciplines.

A Larger Problem: Where Is Food Studies’ Meta-Scholarship Home?

I admit that, in the grand scheme of things, memorizing multiple call numbers or running around to several parts of a library does not seem like a major research obstacle. However, this cataloging chaos might generate a much deeper problem: difficulty in establishing a disciplinary canon. This lack of a common core food studies curriculum is addressed in Shingo Hamada, Richard Wilk, Amanda Logan, Sara Minard, and Amy Trubek’s “The Future of Food Studies” (2015). When key researchers in the field and participants in a higher education workshop were asked to list books that every food studies student should read, there was “no single book on everyone’s list, and the degree of overlap was very low,” which indicated to the authors “a relative lack of consensus, suggesting that there is no coherent set of books that encapsulates food studies.”^[8] The authors contend that the multidisciplinary nature of food studies causes siloed and fragmented perspectives on important work: an uncommon core of scholarship. They argue that this situation contradicts Marion Nestle and W. Alex McIntosh’s “Writing the Food Studies Movement” (2010), which makes the case that it may be “time to establish a food studies canon.”^[9] I suggest that one unexplored explanation for the lack of a canon is that food studies *meta-scholarship* (that is, scholarship about the field itself—handbooks, historiographies, bibliographies, research methodologies, etc.) have no call number and are therefore impossible to collocate. Perhaps if these works were grouped together physically, more researchers across food studies would use them.

After twenty years of existence, these works are beginning to be published with regularity. Some examples are Warren Belasco's *Food: The Key Concepts* (2008), Jeff Miller and Jonathan Deutsch's *Food Studies: An Introduction to Research Methods* (2009), Mustafa Koç, Jennifer Sumner, and Tony Winson's *Critical Perspectives in Food Studies* (2012), Anne Murcott, Warren Belasco, and Peter Jackson's *The Handbook of Food Research* (2013), and Ken Albala's *Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies* (2013), to name just a few. However, even after eight semesters of food studies courses, I have yet to be assigned or recommended a single one. Further research is needed to explore whether food studies scholars are familiar with these works, and if so, whether or not they could help consolidate the field.

Conclusion: Can It Be Fixed?

In this essay, I explicate and elucidate the problems involved with organizing food studies scholarship in the library. I explain that, although it is necessarily difficult in a multidisciplinary field to find pertinent research in the library, it may be to the detriment of a common cannon and the discoverability of food studies meta-scholarship. Now, I will discuss what can be done to work around and within this issue.

To attempt to create a bibliographic home for food studies meta-scholarship, in December 2017, with supervision from New York University's Serials Cataloger & Authority Control Librarian, I completed a proposal to the LOC Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) to add "food studies" as a subject heading to the LOC thesaurus. (This is not the same as LOC classification but the first step toward it.) Figure 2 is an image of the first page of the proposal. Unfortunately the proposal was denied. What follows is a relevant section of the response I received on January 12, 2018:

Many of the headings in the form **[topic] studies** had the same problem of ambiguity. Most of them have been cancelled in favor of **[topic]—Study and teaching** (e.g., Asian American studies; Byzantine studies; Islamic studies; Jewish studies; Ethnic studies; Middle East studies; Soviet studies; Arabic studies). There are a few **[topic] studies** headings remaining, and they represent classes of persons (either explicitly or implicitly).

The meeting prefers to continue the practice of applying headings that specifically reflect the subject of the work. The works being cataloged are about several topics including one on the methods of studying food and another on the results of research. Headings appropriate to their focus should be assigned, such as **Food—Study and teaching**, **Food—Religious aspects**, **Food consumption—Social aspects**, **Nutrition—Study and teaching**, etc.

The proposal was not approved.[\[10\]](#)

SUBJECT AUTHORITY PROPOSAL FORM FOR NON-PCC INSTITUTIONS

This form is for non-PCC institutions only. PCC institutions should use the [Minaret Subject Proposal System](#) for submitting subject authority proposals.

Complete this form, save it with a new name, and attach it to an email message to policy@loc.gov

Please consult the Subject Headings Manual (SHM), Instruction Sheet H 200, Preparation of Subject Heading Proposals, to complete the form. The SHM is available in Cataloger's Desktop, or can be downloaded from <http://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeSHM/freeshm.html#H0200>.

008/06: (Direct or indirect geographic subdivision)

_____ (May Subd Geog) _____ (Not Subd Geog) I (No Decision)

#0 \$a TX367 \$a GN407 \$a GT2850

053 : _____

50
1 _____:

\$a Food Studies

50
4 _____ (UF):

\$a Food -- Research

50
4 _____ (UF):

\$a Nutritional anthropology

50
5 _____ (BT):

\$a Nutrition. Foods and food supply

50
5 _____ (BT):

\$a Nutritional anthropology

50
5 _____ (RT):

\$a Food scholarship

First page of the Subject Authority Proposal Form for Non-PCC Institutions filled out to apply for Food Studies to be a new LOC subject heading.

SACO's response indicates that "food studies" may be better represented by food—study and teaching. The corresponding classification, TX364 (Home economics—Nutrition. Foods and food supply—Study

and teaching), would eventually house the type of food studies meta-scholarship I have described. Unfortunately, the books currently populating this subject are primarily inapplicable works about nutrition pedagogy for children. They include the World Health Organization's *A Practical Guide to Developing and Implementing School Policy on Diet and Physical Activity* (2010), Jill Carter's *Planet Health: An Interdisciplinary Curriculum for Teaching Middle School Nutrition and Physical Activity* (2001), and Nancy Wanamaker's *More Than Graham Crackers: Nutrition Education & Food Preparation with Young Children* (1979). As you might notice by looking at them, these are not texts about research and methodologies that might help advance the field of food studies (see Figure 3).

The cover of "Planet Health" which reveals the book to be meant for children.

What else can be done to fix this problem? While my librarian colleagues and I revise proposals for SACO to add a section for meta-scholarship, there is one main technique that food studies scholars may

use to help researchers find their work: use the term “food studies” in your work! This may seem obvious but this powerful discoverability technique is sometimes overlooked. The term “food studies” does not appear as often in scholarship as it should. (In the future, I hope to quantify exactly how little the term is used.) You can help other scholars find your food studies scholarship by putting “food studies” in the bodies, abstracts, and author-provided keywords of your writing. This will help legitimize and consolidate the scholarship corpus from within. Think about it: if you were researching your particular food-related subject and found two results, one with “food studies” in the abstract, and one without it, which would you be more prone to read?

Biography

James Edward Malin is earning a dual MA/MSLIS in Food Studies and Library and information Science from New York University and Long Island University, respectively. His research focuses on food and the sciences, humanities, and in everything between.

Citations

1. Duran, N., & MacDonald, K. (2006). Information Sources for Food Studies Research. *Food, Culture & Society*, 9(2), 233–243. [↵](#)
2. Julie Thompson Klein and Carl Mitcham, *Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 16. [↵](#)
3. Klein and Mitcham, *Oxford Handbook*, 15. [↵](#)
4. Julie Thompson Klein, *Culture and Interdisciplinarity: The Changing American Academy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005): 83. [↵](#)
5. Julie Thompson Klein, “Interdisciplinarity and Collaboration,” in *Ethics, Science, Technology, and Engineering: A Global Resource*, Vol. 2, ed. J. Britt Holbrook and Carl Mitcham (Farmington Hills: Macmillan Reference USA, 2015): 576. [↵](#)
6. Sidney Mintz, “Prologue,” in *The Handbook of Food Research*, ed. Anne Murcott, Warren Belasco, and Peter Jackson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013): xxix. [↵](#)
7. Duran and MacDonald, “Information Sources for Food Studies Research,” 234–235. [↵](#)
8. Shingo Hamada, Richard Wilk, Amanda Logan, Sara Minard, and Amy Trubek, “The Future of Food Studies,” *Food, Culture & Society* 18, no. 1 (2015): 173. [↵](#)

9. Marion Nestle and W. Alex MacIntosh, "Writing the Food Studies Movement," *Food, Culture & Society* 13, no. 2 (2010): 159. ↵

10. "Summary of Decisions, Editorial Meeting Number 01," Subject Authority Cooperative Program of the Library of Congress, accessed April 4, 2018, <http://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/cpsod/psd-180112.html>. ↵