Alternative libraries as discursive formations: reclaiming the voice of the deaccessioned book

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Abstract

Purpose – Deaccessioning, the deliberate culling, disposing, or selling of books from a collection, is one of the most controversial aspects of the collection development function of the library. This article aims to examine what can become of this universe of deaccessioned books through a consideration of two alternative libraries, or libraries-which-are-not-libraries. The existence of such alternative libraries allows one to address questions such as: Can the value of a deaccessioned book be reclaimed and, if so, how? Do these books continue to have a voice and, if so, what is it possible for that voice to say?

Design/methodology/approach – The themes are explored through the work of Michel Foucault, in particular the analyses of statements and discursive formations found in his book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

Findings – Foucault's work is found to offer a means by which to conceptualize and describe the place and value of deaccessioned books as they are reclaimed by the alternative library.

Originality/value – What is new in this article is the consideration of books and other texts that are otherwise considered worthless by the institutions that deaccession them. The librarians and artists who bring these texts back to life say something unique about the value of texts in contemporary society.

Keywords Libraries, Deaccession, Discursive formations, Archaeology of knowledge, Books, Collections management

Paper type Conceptual paper

It is a common belief that libraries keep every dusty tome that has ever found its way in the door and onto the shelves. This belief is far from the truth. Deaccessioning, the deliberate culling, disposing, or selling of books from a collection, is one of the most controversial aspects of the collection development function of the library (see, e.g. Baker, 2001; Bee, 2008; Budd and Harloe, 1997). Librarians have the privilege and responsibility of deciding which published materials are deemed culturally worthy and worth preserving, and which are not. This is indeed a profound decision.

Librarians offer many and diverse reasons why books and other resources are removed from collections. These include items becoming physically worn or damaged, the information in those items becoming outdated, and the appearance of new editions rendering older editions obsolete. There is also the physical problem of storage capacity. Every library's collection is intrinsically limited by the space available to house it. Such reasons may seem quite mundane. However, a decision to preserve the original physical artifact frequently comes down to judgments as to whether the item has "intrinsic value" (Bee, 2008; see also Budd and Harloe, 1997; Council on Library and Information Resources, 2001).

Whatever the reasons, the deaccessioning of books creates a universe of discarded texts that exists beyond the institutional structures provided by the library. They are now books without an official category. They no longer have a place on the library shelf and hence they cannot be understood in terms of their relationships with the books that once physically surrounded them. They have become textual outsiders, or perhaps even a kind of textual other. Deaccessioned books have become one feature of what can be termed alternative libraries, places which reclaim deaccessioned books and bring them to life in new ways. Alternative libraries are here defined in a relational sense, positioned as decidedly not-conventional in their operational mission. They perform one or more of three functions:

- serving as a space for the refiguring, reuse or repurposing of books and other media in ways that libraries do not offer;
- presenting libraries as alternative spaces in contrast to conventional institutional notions; and
- providing services that are typically left out of or deliberately excluded from the services of conventional libraries.

There are a number of alternative libraries which address and play with the process of deaccession and the reuse or repurposing of materials, including the art installations of Jeffrey Schiff (2011), the Prelinger Library (2011), the Chicago Underground Library (2011), the Interstitial Library Circulating Collection (2004), and the Morbid Anatomy Library (2011). Links to additional alternative libraries (both digital and physical) can be found at the Reanimation Library (2011) and Radical Reference (2011) websites.

It is argued here that by claiming the title of library, and by deliberately using library terminology to describe their work, these alternative libraries simultaneously undermine and reinforce notions of the library and librarianship. They provide sites of resistance to traditional notions of value and utilize conventions of libraries as a mechanism of rebellion, resistance, and play. What is interesting is not so much that these sites of discursive resistance exist, but that they identify and perform themselves as libraries, deliberately situating themselves in opposition to traditional modes of archival responsibility and authority. Among other things, these alternative libraries unsettle librarian stereotypes, play with notions of the library as an institutional authority of knowledge, and acknowledge the potential pluralities of social spaces (see also Radford and Radford, 1997).

These themes are explored through the work of Michel Foucault, in particular the analyses of statements and discursive formations found in his book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1972). Foucault's work is deployed here as representative of a wider tradition of discourse analysis, which is gradually establishing a significant

place in Library and Information Science (LIS) scholarship (see Buschman, 2007; Budd, 2006; Budd and Raber, 1996; Frohmann, 1992, 1994, 1997; Olson, 1997; Radford, 1992, 1998, 2003; Radford and Radford, 2001; Talja, 2001). Frohmann (1994) describes discourse analysis as a method that "takes discourse as its object of analysis. Its data is talk; not what the talk refers to, but the talk itself" (p. 120). Similarly, Foucault's (1972) *Archaeology* "tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed in discourses; but those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules" (p. 138). Essentially, discourse analysts consider the ways in which objects and ideas are spoken about, rather than the ontology of the objects and ideas themselves. A discourse analyst would ask such questions as: what allows some discourses to become dominant, and others to remain marginalized? What are the institutions through which these discourses are arranged, disseminated and legitimized? The institution of the library has a key role to play in the maintenance and legitimation of particular discourses at the expense of others (see Radford, 1992) and deaccession is one particular material process which enables the library to do this. The alternative library, on the other hand, reclaims the physical book discarded by the library institution and does something different with it. It is "what is done" with the discarded texts, rather than what these texts mean, that is important here. By focusing on the material existence of discourses themselves, rather than what these discourses talk about, one is able to situate claims in new contexts, and thereby allow a description of the construction and interpretation of fundamental concepts. It is in this spirit that this article focuses on two alternative libraries for which deaccession plays a crucial role, both as an institutional purpose and an archival practice: the Reanimation Library (2011), and the Public Library of American Public Deaccession (2011). Using Foucault's discourse analysis as a guide, the means by which these two alternative libraries situate deaccessioned texts in new contexts is described and the implications for the resulting arrangements are considered.

The Reanimation Library
The Reanimation Library, located in Brooklyn, NY, contains a collection of "out-of-date, deaccessioned, and generally forgotten about non-fiction books that have been found at thrift stores, stoop sales, garage sales, church rummage sales, in boxes on the street, in dumpsters, and at other people's houses" (Reanimation Library, 2011). Launched by Andrew Beccone as a website in 2005 and ultimately housed in a physical location since 2006, the central project of the Reanimation Library in Brooklyn is the "reanimation" of deaccessioned books, that is, bringing them back from a state of disuse and placing them in conditions where their usefulness can be recognized and implemented (Beccone and Walker, n.d.; Reanimation). The website states:

> To reanimate means to restore life. More often than not, library collection development policies recommend discarding the type of material that comprises the Library's Primary Collection. From this perspective, the books of the Primary Collection are dead to most libraries because they aren't kept, maintained, or valued. The Reanimation Library finds, acquires, catalogs, and provides access to this material: it reanimates.

Although the Reanimation Library has a teleological interest in being open to how people use (or reanimate) the assets, one explicit aim of the library is to encourage the use of the collection as source material for artists, either directly as scanned or copied images for collages or indirectly as inspiration for illustration. Thus the reanimation

library displaces standard notions of the library by offering texts as a catalyst for a creative endeavor rather than as a source of information. The books certainly contain information, but the information is entirely secondary to the artistic creativity the text might inspire.

The reanimation of discarded books provides an understanding into the ways in which a society uses its texts. Michel Foucault's work describes and considers the implications of western civilization's uses of discourse. He considers the ways in which particular arrangements of discourse come to constitute the epistemes of the social sciences (Foucault, 1973), medical science (Foucault, 1975), sexuality (Foucault, 1980), madness (Foucault, 1988), and discipline (Foucault, 1979). In Foucault's analyses, the appearance and arrangements of discourse are central. Some texts are able to appear, others are not. Some texts are taken into the library, others become deaccessioned. Some texts fit, others do not. Such themes are considered in Foucault's discussion of the discursive formation, and this concept will provide the means by which the value of the alternative library may be articulated.

A discursive formation refers to the ways in which a collection of texts are organized with respect to each other. Think of the books arranged on the shelf of an academic library which some group of people with the appropriate qualifications and authority has placed there in a particular order. Faced with this arrangement, one might legitimately ask: Why are these titles arranged this way and not some other? An academic librarian would reply that the books are arranged according to the proximity of their subject matter. In the Library of Congress classification scheme, for example, books about language and literature are cataloged under the letter P, philosophy under the letters BS, science under the letter Q, and so on (Library of Congress, 2009). Similarly, collections in public and school libraries are organized within the ten schedules of the Dewey Decimal Classification system (i.e. 000s-900s) (Dewey, 2011). The idea of a discursive formation embodies the same principle as the arrangement of books on a shelf. There is something beyond the books themselves that enables the librarian and cataloguer to group particular books together in particular ways, and not in other ways. As Foucault (1972) describes: "Whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order . . .), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation" (p. 38).

The comparison of the discursive formation with the books on a library shelf is pertinent because it foregrounds Foucault's contention that discursive formations are real; that is, they consist of material objects, such as books, that are arranged in material ways in material places such as library shelves. Discursive formations can be seen, touched, and experienced. The purpose of Foucault's archaeology is to raise the discursive formation as a legitimate object of inquiry. Foucault (1972) writes:

> We must [. . .] question those divisions or groupings with which we have become so familiar [. . .] These divisions – whether our own, or those contemporary with the discourse under discussion – are always themselves reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types; they, in turn, are facts of discourse that deserve to be analyzed beside others (p. 22).

The presence of the alternative library foregrounds questions such as these by focusing on the "reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types" that must be violated when a particular text is deaccessioned,

and which offer new ways of classification through which such texts come to take on new life and significance. In other words, the importance of the text is not contained in what it says, but rather the ways in which it can be ordered and arranged within a universe of other texts. The Reanimation Library is concerned with multiple kinds and sites of play where previously discarded books take on new significance by being organized into a totally different kind of discursive formation. It uses the Library of Congress cataloging system to catalog its books, meaning that items are organized by precisely the same set of rules as most academic libraries. However, in this case, these rules are being applied to books that have been deemed non-valued and being put to uses that the cataloging system could not foresee. The books in the Reanimation Library are no longer about "philosophy" or "art." Indeed, following Foucault, what the books are "about" is of secondary importance. Instead, the founder of the Reanimation Library, Andrew Beccone, sees these discarded texts as playing rich roles in the work of artists:

> Contemporary cultural production often draws upon earlier cultural materials. Artists, historians, writers, musicians, and scholars all build their creative and intellectual work on the images, ideas, words, and sounds of previous generations. Pastiche, collage, and sampling are fundamental tools of our creative vocabulary. The Reanimation Library presents a fertile environment for patrons who wish to participate in these creative processes (Reanimation Library, 2011).

Here, what is done with texts gives them value, rather than what they say. The Reanimation Library re-engages discarded texts and provides a space, both physical and conceptual, that allows them to become "things to be dealt with and manipulated" (Foucault, 1972, p. 130). The texts come to "shine, as it were, like stars" whereas in the confines of the traditional library they are "already growing pale" (Foucault, 1972, p. 129) before succumbing to their fate of deaccession which finally snuffs them out. That is, of course, until they are given the opportunity to shine again in a place such as the Reanimation Library.
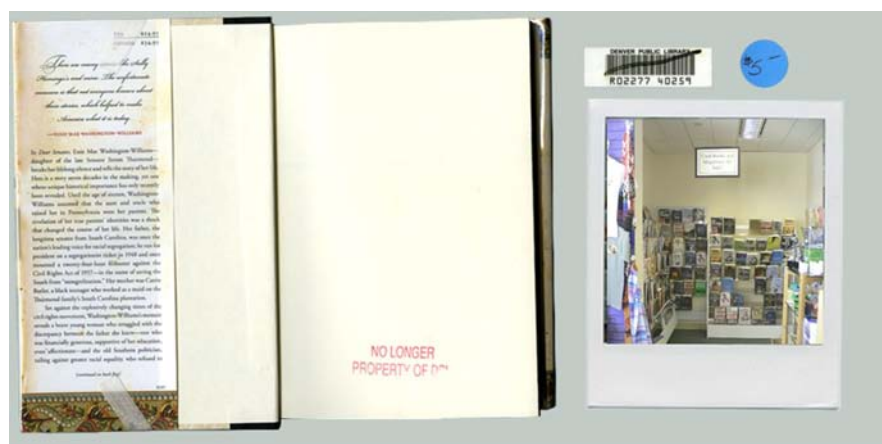
The Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession

The Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession (2011) is an art installation by Julia Weist and Myaan Pearl intended as "an exploration of the books that libraries withdraw from their collection" (Weist, 2008, p. 145). According to Weist (2008), the goal was "to create an archive, both physical and digital, of books I found being discarded from the libraries of the US's most literate cities. After a year, the catalog I created included over five thousand deaccessioned books from twenty five states" (p. 145). These deaccesioned books formed the foundation of Weist and Pearl's art installation, which opened in May 2007. The installation functioned as a "usable and productive reading room of discarded material" (Weist, 2008, p. 151) and as a "sculptural exploration of out-dated, inaccurate, unpopular and consequently discarded information" (Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession, 2011) (see Figures 1-3). In some ways, Weist and Pearl did something similar to Beccone's Reanimation Library: they reclaimed deaccessioned books and allowed them to operate in a new discursive formation. However, for Weist and Pearl's project, the contents of the books in the new collection are less important than the fact they are deaccessioned. It is the book's discarded status which makes one view its value in a new way.

Note: Photograph reproduced by permission of the artists, Julia Weist and Mayaan Pearl

Figure 1.
Screenshot of the Enoch
Pratt Free Library
collection page, Public
Library of American
Public Library
Deaccession website
(http://deaccession.org/
md.html)

Note: Photograph reproduced by permission of the artists, Julia Weist and Mayaan Pearl

Figure 2.
Screenshot of the Denver
Public Library collection
page, Public Library of
American Public Library
Deaccession website
(http://deaccession.org/
denver.html)

Weist and Pearl also constructed a searchable database of the deaccessioned texts in LibraryThing (2011) which is a website that allows individuals and organizations to create and openly share book holdings and collections through socially constructed tags. Johnson (2007) describes his experience of using the deaccessioned database:

A less poetic aspect to the piece, but of inestimable value is the fact that the library actually works. Almost inevitably, the user should find results to search terms they actually find interesting; witness my 374 search results for the term "Art." While most of these books seem to be either written by someone named Art or about "art" of something else, which in and of itself is rather amusing, I like that at least in theory, the results should give us an idea of what kind of art is deemed inaccurate, outdated or is simply unpopular with the residences of a particular city.

Note: Photograph reproduced by permission of the artists, Julia Weist and Mayaan Pearl

The Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession makes a political statement about weeding policies, collection development and archival culture. By individually gathering a catalog of texts that had been institutionally discarded, Weist and Pearl set up a reflexive paradox of worth, where a challenge has been issued to the processes of rendering judgment on texts as applicable or not applicable to a collection, or useable or not useable by library users.

Deaccesioned books as statements

The value of the deaccessioned books in Weist and Pearl's installation can be understood using Foucault's (1972) concept of the "statement." The statement is a concept that is difficult to pin down. It is not simply the appearance of a particular utterance or text. The concept of the statement also embodies the set of background assumptions that enable an utterance to become meaningful. What a statement is able to say is always limited by "all the other statements among which it figures, by the domain in which it can be used or applied, by the role and functions that it can perform" (Foucault, 1972, p. 103). Foucault (1972) continues:

> The affirmation that the earth is round or that species evolve does not constitute the same statement before and after Copernicus, before and after Darwin; it is not, for such simple formulations, that the meaning of the words has changed; what changed was the relation of these affirmations to other propositions, their conditions of use and reinvestment, the field of experience, of possible verifications, of problems to be resolved, to which they can be referred (p. 103).

The article you are reading right now is a statement in Foucault's sense because of all the other texts to which it is related, for example, the collection of texts that can be found in the bibliography. This bibliography is itself indicative of an even greater discursive formation consisting of other statements which might address discourse analysis, Foucault's theory of language, library science, and so on. As Foucault (1972) notes, "A statement belongs to a discursive formation as a sentence belongs to a text" (p. 116). It has a place in a constellation of other texts which gives it value and meaning.

This article is also a statement, for you, the reader, because there is an identifiable history of other texts in your life that has made the appearance of this text possible for you. Foucault will ask you to forget whether you understand this statement or agree with it. He wants you to set aside any thoughts about whether the claims made here can be considered to be true or false, accurate or inaccurate, brilliant or naive. Instead, Foucault wants you to consider this statement as it has appeared in the context of a material discursive formation: that is, the context of other texts (other books, other journals, email exchanges, and so on) in your life through which the statement before you now takes on its worth. Why are you reading an article on alternative libraries? Why are you reading an article about Michel Foucault? What is it in your own reading history that gives value to this statement, or not? Discursive formations can be as grand as the classification system of the Library of Congress, or as personal as the bibliography of your doctoral dissertation or the pile of books at your bedside that you intend to read. The important fact for both Weist and Pearl and Foucault is that this article/statement has appeared in this setting, and that it stands in a certain relationship to those other statements around it.

Foucault (1972, p. 98) refers to such conditions as the "associated field" of a statement. The associate field is made up of "the series of other formulations within which the statement appears and forms one element" (p. 98). The associated field is also made up of all "the formulations to which the statement refers (implicitly or not), either by repeating them, modifying them, or adapting them, or by opposing them, or by commenting on them; there can be no statement that in one way or another does not reactualize others" (p. 98). The important fact for Weist and Pearl, as well as Foucault, is that the statement has appeared in this setting, i.e. within this associated field, and that it stands in certain relationships to the statements which appear with it. This notion is one way to understand and appreciate Weist and Pearl's deaccession installation.

Weist and Pearl's installation is a physical representation of deaccession, books rendered apart from their associated fields in the library, separated from their classifications and categories, and now, by being collected and organized by the artists, given new life and meaning in an associated field of deaccessioned statements. As one can see from the photographs of Weist and Pearl's installation, what are important are the conditions under which texts can appear, or don't appear, and how texts are physically placed in relationship with other physical texts. Deaccessioned books are placed in proximity to other books (see Figure 4); collections of books on shelves are split from the greater collection on a blank wall where perhaps other books should be (Figures 5 and 6). The blank wall becomes as meaningful as the books themselves, and foregrounds the absence of the associated field, the discursive formation, without which the books which are present lose their significance. The photograph of the solitary person sitting opposite a small and solitary bookcase (Figure 5) only serves to emphasize this absence. The gaps within the shelves in Figure 6 also capture this sense of absence. Not only is this bookcase placed against a blank wall, there are also blank spaces within the shelves.

Weist and Pearl's installation brings home the material and historical nature of the statement, of what statements can appear, what statements must be discarded, and how new statements can take on life in the rubble of the old. In Weist and Pearl's work, the deaccessioned book becomes a statement in a discursive formation by having the

Figure 4.
With, Drawn (Collection of
Discarded Library
Material Curated by Lumi
Tan), 2007

Note: Photograph reproduced by permission of the artists, Julia Weist and Mayaan Pearl

Figure 5.
With, Drawn (Sliced
Discarded Library Desk
Tops as Benches), 2007

Note: Photograph reproduced by permission of the artists, Julia Weist and Mayaan Pearl

status of being a "discarded book." The book's irrelevance is what makes it relevant in this particular context. It represents those things that were said, but are said no more. It also highlights the potential voices that can be heard if those texts are given a place in an alternative discursive formation.

Note: Photograph reproduced by permission of the artists, Julia Weist and Mayaan Pearl

The creation of alternative discursive spaces for particular texts is an important part of Foucault's work. One of the reasons for the negative responses that Foucault's scholarship has aroused in his sternest critics is that he cites none of the historians in a given discipline. Instead, he refers only to "original texts that slumber in libraries" (Canguilhem, 1994, p. 82). Canguilhem's description of Foucault's work brings to mind Weist and Pearl's database of deaccessioned books when he writes: "People have talked about 'dust.' Fair enough. But just as a layer of dust on furniture is a measure of the housekeeper's negligence, so a layer of dust on books is a measure of the carelessness of their custodians" (Canguilhem, 1994, p. 82). Foucault deliberately chooses to use and reanimate books and texts that are not considered part of the traditional canon for historical writing, and he experiments with relating these texts together to form new and different unities. Foucault, like Beccone as well as Weist and Pearl, makes the familiar appear strange by foregrounding texts that have hitherto been considered irrelevant. As Foucault writes, "Although the statement cannot be hidden, it is not visible either; it is not presented to the perception as the manifest bearer of its limits and characteristics. It requires a certain change of viewpoint and attitude to be recognized and examined in itself" (p. 115). The art installation of Weist and Pearl is an attempt to create such a change in viewpoint, and to create a set of conditions under which one can, like Foucault (1973), conduct an "inquiry whose aim is to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted" (p. xxii).

Discussion

This paper has considered two alternative libraries in terms of Foucault's (1972) *Archaeology of Knowledge*. The first, the Reanimation Library, emphasizes making a space for texts that are otherwise considered a waste of space. The second, the Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession of Weist and Pearl, depends on other libraries' removal of texts in order to craft their collection. Only the Reanimation Library exists in a permanent physical location where people can peruse shelved books and ask reference questions. The Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession is more interested in processes surrounding texts rather than the physical texts themselves.

What is pivotal for both Foucault and the librarians and artists of the alternative libraries described here is to have the ability and the freedom to think in other ways. As Foucault (1990) writes, the "object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently" (p. 9). The alternative libraries seek both to reanimate and reorder in order to see old texts in new ways by explicitly foregrounding the task of deaccession which brings into sharp relief decisions pertaining to archival authority and organizational ordering. Deaccession represents a key moment in which a discursive formation is rendered tangible. The Reanimation Library and the Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession take advantage of this process both figuratively and literally. In doing so, they effectively construct a bridge between disuse (discarded) and use (discovered), conventional (trash), and alternative (treasure), theoretical (as discourse formation) and practice (as a site of artistic creation).

In Foucault's view, these endeavors show how the combining of existing statements with other statements in new and unique ways is generative of knowledge, even if those statements are deaccessioned books. Foucault writes that any particular book, even a discarded book, "may appear as merely another new book to be shelved alongside all the others, but it serves, in actuality, to extend the space that existing books can occupy. It recovers other books; it hides and displays them and, in a single movement, it causes them to glitter and disappear" (Foucault, 1977, pp. 91-92). Any particular book "dreams other books [. . .] books that are taken up, fragmented, displaced, combined, lost" (Foucault, 1977, p. 92). The library, whether it be traditional or (an) alternative, seeks to institutionalize discursive formations through formal or idiosyncratic systems of cataloging and indexing. The arrangements of statements made possible by such systems provide those spaces in which new statements can be placed, located, and given meaning.

Foucault writes that "knowledge is that of which one can speak in a discursive practice" and also "the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse" (Foucault, 1972, p. 182) and that "the frontiers of a book are never clear cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (Foucault, 1972, p. 23). As demonstrated by the alternative libraries discussed in this paper, the same is true for a deaccessioned book as much as it is for a book safely ensconced in the physical and abstract structures of the library. The libraries described here find and demonstrate connections among deaccessioned books that the conventional library is unable to foresee or capture in its catalogs. In these

connections the playfulness of both alternatives libraries discussed here is seen to be particularly important. The point is not to change history, or reveal the truth, or make such truth available to the population. The reason, it turns out, is ultimately personal: "There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all" (Foucault, 1990, p. 8).

The alternative libraries enable one to be open to the possibility of "thinking differently than one thinks." They create spaces and the potential for new discursive unities by forcing one to consider the relationships between texts deemed worthy of inclusion in the library, and those which have been discarded. The reclaiming and the reanimation of discarded books is one way in which one can transform the way one thinks. Alternative libraries, of the kind discussed here, can show us the nature of this transformation.

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