

LIBRARIANSHIP AND RESISTANCE

by Sandy Iverson

In "The End of Innocence," Jane Flax concludes her essay by stating that "at its best, postmodernism invites us to engage in a continual process of disillusionment with the grandiose fantasies that have brought us to the brink of annihilation." (Flax, p. 460) To me, this is the hope of postmodernism and since reading Flax's article I have reflected on some of the particular "grandiose fantasies" or "metanarratives" that have structured my own life both personally and professionally.

I am trained as a librarian, and for a number of years I have focused my work in the "alternative" library sector. In this work I have been engaged in building and providing access to collections of resources not usually found in public, academic, or other mainstream libraries. Both in my training and in my work I have often felt ambivalent about librarianship and been at odds with the "library establishment." In reflecting on some of the metanarratives that underlay librarianship I begin to understand my own discomfort with the library establishment and with the practice of librarianship. I also begin to understand that I continue to accept unquestioningly too many of these metanarratives.

As our global society becomes increasingly based on the commodity of information, power becomes increasingly focused and managed by those with access to information. Those without such access remain marginalized. Librarians have been trained in the management of information. Therefore, I see their role as inherently political. Unfortunately, all too often librarians have rejected the political nature of the work they do. In these times of increased commodification of information librarians have sought to play leading roles in the new "information society." In order to do so, they have uncritically accepted the ideals of professionalization and have embraced the principles of objectivity and neutrality.

William Birdsall, a librarian at Dalhousie University, has examined this issue and he fears that by uncritically adopting the stance of objectivity

librarians might too easily perceive their role to be at the service of the knowledge elites: indeed, they could too eagerly concentrate on trying to insure for themselves a place among these elites while losing sight of their obligation to serve a broad clientele. (Birdsall, p.223)

Librarians tend to see themselves as neutral service providers, rejecting any stated political stance, and certainly their training encourages this position. As Henry Blanke maintains: "librarianship's reluctance to define its values in political terms and to cultivate a sense of social responsibility may allow it to drift into an uncritical accommodation with society's dominant political and economic powers." (Blanke, p.39)

While librarians are trained to maintain an objective or neutral stance they are also expected to make decisions regarding "good" and "bad" materials. Librarians are often seen as "experts" in determining the literature and other resources that their clientele needs. Unfortunately, they do not often recognize the inherent bias at work in making these decisions. Librarians generally regard the selection of materials as apolitical.

Donna Haraway has written a compelling critique of the "myth" of objectivity. She sees "objectivity doctrines [to be] in the service of hierarchical and positivist orderings of what can count as knowledge." (Haraway, p. 188) Certainly, librarians have served these same "hierarchical and positivist" orders in determining the "knowledge" that will be made available to their public. Haraway calls for a new feminist understanding of objectivity. "I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges." (Haraway, p.188) Haraway explains that what we have accepted as "objectivity" claims to be a vision of the world from everywhere at once. "But of course that view of infinite vision is an illusion, a god trick." (Haraway, p. 189) We can not see from all perspectives at once, we each have our own particular views that are shaped by our own identities, cultures, experiences, and locations. "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge..." (Haraway, p. 190). I suggest that librarians could better serve the interests of all of their public by adopting Haraway's model and recognizing their own multiple, situated knowledges and those of their constituencies.

Connected to the "metanarrative" of objectivity within librarianship is the concept of intellectual freedom. Librarians have been vocal defenders of

freedom of information and freedom of speech. In many cases, librarian's anti-censorship stance has been in reaction to their being lobbied to censor or ban certain materials. This stance has been directly related to their belief in their own objectivity. They believe in their responsibility to provide access to a wide variety of information.

However, as Philip points out "the ideological framework of Western democracies has been erected upon and is supported as much by the ideology of freedom of the individual (and its offshoots) as by the ideology of racism. However, one discourse, censorship, becomes privileged; the other, racism, is silenced." (Philip, p. 210) While librarians have been avidly anti-censorship, they have not been avidly anti-racist. In fact, they do not acknowledge the inherent racism that is active within the discourse of anti-censorship.

Philip discusses the debates that have raged around the issue of white middle class writers writing from the point of view of those of differing class or racial backgrounds. In doing so, these writers make it even more difficult for writers of other cultures and races to become published as these groups have, by the "exploitive practices of capitalist economies ...[been deprived] of the ability to express themselves through writing and publishing." (Philip, p.213) Systemic racism in our society typically limits access to resources to all but the privileged white middle class, by doing so society effectively "censors" many voices. Consequently, librarians responsible for acquisitions may be recreating racist censorship in their daily practices of selecting from lists of materials produced by mainstream publishing houses and other organizations that perpetuate these patterns.

Additionally, librarians need to examine the practices of how they treat the materials that they do receive. For instance, David Lane, an American librarian has examined the practice of libraries obtaining information on South Africa from the South African consulate. Consequently, he found that many library's pamphlet file collections neglected to include any information that was critical of apartheid. While it may be useful to include overtly racist materials in a library collection, the challenge for librarians is in how these materials are categorized and filed. Librarians must be challenged to treat racist materials as racist materials. Generally, libraries adopt standard classification schemes, such as the Library of Congress, which do not encourage such treatment. Therefore, we might often find hate propaganda classified as historical documents, or literature, rather than as hate literature.

Similarly, librarians should challenge the standard resources that they use and supply to their public. Polly Thistlethwaite, an AIDS activist and librarian, examined the problem of exclusion of AIDS information in periodical indexes. Thistlethwaite found that "gay/lesbian periodicals and community-based health publications containing vital, often vanguard HIV/AIDS information are systematically excluded from mainstream indexes and database services." (Thistlethwaite, p. 35) Thistlethwaite maintains that how the decisions to ignore these materials are made "lie deeply embedded in Western politics and culture, reflected in our media, government, and religious institutions defining mainstream and alternative 'lifestyles,' normal from deviant sexual behavior, innocent from deserving people with AIDS." (Thistlethwaite, p. 35-36) In other words the exclusion of these materials from standard indexes and databases reflects the homophobia that is rampant in our society. Librarians, by their non-critical reliance on these standard sources perpetuate homophobic practices.

Free and universal access to information (like literacy and education) is often upheld as a major tenet of the democratic society. Ostensibly the Canadian system of public libraries was established on this fundamental belief. However, some would argue that the establishment of public libraries was not as connected to the professed good of the people, as it was established to counter popular movements and popular knowledge with the provision of established "good knowledge." In a study of township libraries in Canada West during the period 1846-1860, Bruce Curtis found that in establishing these libraries

even those eager to guard what they described as "our religious liberty" and "our civil and social right and natural interests" argued that well-regulated libraries were important because of the consequences of literacy upon "the favourable development of the individual character."...Many political glosses might be given to the concept of "popular intelligence," but library proponents commonly pointed to "the great importance of furnishing the working population of our country with food for the mind" as a crucial "means of raising them in the scale of moral intelligence." However much library proponents were convinced of the inherent "goodness" of public libraries, it is at least clear that libraries were conceived as alternatives to some cultural practices, and as politically potent institutions. (Curtis, p.8)

It seems that the "cultural practices" that libraries were conceived as alternatives to, was primarily the habit of public house drinking and the types of discussion and literature that was shared during these evenings of comradery and drink. Great concern was expressed by the ruling class of the day as to the idleness and public house habits of the working class. Libraries were established, at least in part, to counteract these subversive activities.

Given these less than equitable and politically oppressive beginnings, it perhaps should not surprise us that many of the underlying concepts that govern the everyday work of librarianship continues to perpetuate systems of domination in our society. However, librarians continue to be educated and to progress in their careers with the belief that their role, while crucial to a democratic society, is not in the least political. The role of information in our society becomes increasingly central and as it does many questions need to be raised. If we accept that information is connected to knowledge and knowledge to power, we must examine the connections between power and information in our postmodern society. What are the implications for increased access to information by the dominant segment of society? Librarians are trained in the expert manipulation of information by mastering the technology connected to the production, dissemination, and retrieval of information. However, what are the implications for society in not questioning what kinds of information are accessible and what kinds are not, and who has easy access?

While technology has increased access to information, at the same time we are experiencing funding cutbacks to the public library system. At the very time that universal access to information may be reachable, financial support by the state diminishes. This "coincidence" should not go unexamined. In order to continue service libraries are beginning to charge user fees for certain services. This practice contradicts the tenet of equal access to information, and may eventually result in the extinction of the public library system. In order to continue to provide career opportunities for their students, many library schools have shifted their focus to train librarians for careers in the corporate (or private) library world. Less and less attention is paid to public or community library service. I would like to call on librarians, and librarian educators, to examine their practices in light of postmodern thought. We need to question our practices, and the underlying concepts that govern these practices. I grant that during this time of "emerging national and global structures of information-capitalism"

(Jansen, p. 196) librarians do have a critical role to play. However, I would argue that their role should not be to act in "collusion with the forces which perpetuate disadvantage" (Harris, p.75) but to redefine their role to assist in the establishment of a truly equitable society. In order to do this I would urge librarians and librarian educators to begin to question the "metanarratives" that librarianship is built upon. I would urge us all to begin by following Donna Haraway's advise to adopt a position of situated knowledge and partial perspective. Adopting such a position is key to our learning to live together equitably. As Haraway pointed out:

We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledge make possible. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular. (Haraway, 197)

Specifically Haraway urges us to pay particular attention to those knowledges that have historically been marginalized:

"Subjugated" standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world. (Haraway, p.191) Perhaps by following her advice, we can succeed in establishing a truly alternative library sector, one that can be instrumental in resisting the dominating influences "that have brought us to the brink of annihilation." (Flax, p. 460)

WORKS CITED

- Birdsall, William F. (1982) Librarianship, professionalism, and social change. *Library Journal*, (February 1), 223-226.
- Blanke, Henry T. (1989) Librarianship and political values: Neutrality or commitment? *Library Journal* (July), 39-43.
- Curtis, Bruce (1985) "Littery merritt", "useful knowledge" and the organization of township libraries in Canada West, 1846-60. Unpublished paper written at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto.
- Flax, Jane (1992) The end of innocence. In J. Butler and J. Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Toronto: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. New York: Routledge.
- Harris, Kevin. (1991). Information and social change in the 1990s. *International Journal of Information and Library Research*, 3(1): 75-85.
- Jansen, Sue Curry. (1989) Gender and the information society: A socially structured silence. *Journal of Communication*, 39 (Summer), 196-215.
- Lane, David. (1990) Your pamphlet file supports apartheid. *Library Journal*, (September 1) 174-177.
- Philip, Marlene Nourbese. The disappearing debate. In L. Shier et al. (eds.), *Language in Her Eye*. Toronto: Coach House.
- Thistlethwaite, Polly. (1991) AIDS information in periodical indexes: A problem of exclusion. *Reference Services Review* (Summer), 35-38.