

“Reflecting the World Increasingly Made Right”: From Response to Action in Public Libraries

Abstract and author’s note: This is an adaptation of a presentation given in November 2015 at a symposium on Historical Trauma at the University of Montana, USA. Librarianship is a profession primarily and rightly focused on practice. This essay on public libraries and historical trauma should be understood from that perspective. So many professional librarians, doing real work in communities to address issues of trauma and community development – whether they use that language or not – don’t always have the luxury of time to reflect on where our work might fit into the larger discussion on historical trauma. The essay suggests ways in which librarians can address issues of historical trauma through stories and space.

In a 2015 piece on what librarians can learn from social workers, Sara Zettervall wrote “one of the primary tenets of social work is that each person is an expert on his or her own life. Another is that each person should be viewed in the context of his or her full existence because we are all inseparable from the systems in which we live.”¹

I came across this piece while preparing remarks for a symposium on historical trauma. The symposium was broadly interdisciplinary, bringing

■ Julie Biando Edwards is an Associate Professor at the Mansfield Library at the University of Montana in Missoula. A public librarian at heart, she began her career working in public libraries in Wyoming and Massachusetts. She holds an MSLIS from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, an MA in English from the University of Connecticut, and a BA in English from the University of Montana. She has authored numerous articles, including “Community Centered: 23 Reasons Why your Library is the Most Important Place in Town” in *Public Libraries*, and co-edited or co-authored two books, including *Transforming Libraries, Building Communities: The Community Centered Library* (Scarecrow 2013).

■ KEYWORDS: Public libraries; Historical trauma; Library services; Community.

together scholars and educators from a variety of fields. As the only librarian presenting, my contribution was to explore the ways in which public libraries might address issues of historical trauma in their communities. If we apply the social work concept that people are inseparable from the systems in which we live, in what ways can librarians, and public library systems in particular, address historical trauma with individuals and communities?

Mohatt, pulling from the literature, defines historical trauma as “a complex and collective trauma experienced over time and across generations by a group of people who share an identity, affiliation, or circumstance” and note that in the past twenty years the concept of historical trauma, originally used to describe “the experiences of children of Holocaust survivors ... the term has been applied to ... many other cultural groups that share a history of oppression, victimization, or massive group trauma exposure.”²

The library literature is silent on the subject of public libraries and historical trauma. Keyword searching in subject databases turned up very little, and nothing that directly uses historical trauma as a concept in service provision. Given the dearth of professional literature, I will draw upon some sources outside our profession and fold them into professional practice in a way that I hope illustrates how librarians can address issues of trauma in order to promote healing and agency. In the process I’ll demonstrate how librarians are moving beyond simple response towards deeper, more deliberate action – what librarian Michael Stephens calls “reflective action” – that can help people think in new ways about the library and about themselves.³

I’ll share two examples.

When I was in graduate school I recall someone saying that the purest intellectual contribution that librarianship can make to the world is through cataloging. Particularly before the development of electronic catalogs and keyword searching as a common practice, the ability of researchers to locate information in a library depended almost entirely on how librarians classified an item. When speaking to audiences of non-librarians, I urge researchers to think about this for a minute – because access to the materials essential for their research depended not on systems and language devised by members of their own fields, but by members of ours. This put librarians in a profound position of power over access to information.

Cataloging language often reflected the ethic of the time, or what Sandy Berman calls the “prejudices and antipathies” of both the population at large and the professionals developing standardized subject headings, which he deemed “chauvinistic.”⁴

Berman contends that Library of Congress subject headings could only “satisfy” parochial, jingoistic Europeans and North Americans, white-hued, at least nominally Christian (and preferably Protestant) in faith, comfortably situated in the middle- and higher-income brackets, largely domiciled in

suburbia, fundamentally loyal to the Established Order, and heavily imbued with the transcendent, incomparable glory of Western civilization.”⁵

This is the context, then, in which the Library of Congress subject headings for Homosexuality and Lesbianism were created – with a note to *see also* “pathology” and “sexual perversion” or, later, “sexual deviancy”⁶ – and in which the Dewey Decimal Classification of Homosexuality was categorized as an “abnormal sexual relation.”⁷ The cross reference was deleted from the 14th edition of Dewey in 1942, though in 1989 homosexuality was “classed under Social Problems” before finally being reclassified under “Sexual Relations.”⁸ Thanks in part to Berman’s advocacy, the Library of Congress cross references were deleted from the subject headings in 1972, two years before the American Psychological Association depathologized homosexuality.⁹

Retroactive de- and reclassification is no small undertaking for a library, however, and in this way a patron researching homosexuality at the Los Angeles Public Library found himself browsing books about gay men shelved next to books about “incest and sexual bondage.” Librarian Linda Rudell-Betts was so struck by her patron’s dismay at the library’s organization that she vowed to begin reclassifying the books, one by one. She justified the monumental task of reclassification by writing “while we librarians can’t take away the history of discrimination and neglect of civil rights of LGBT people, we can reflect the world increasingly made right and fair in how we group our books, DVDs and other materials on the library shelf.”¹⁰

I’ll shift to the east coast now, to the Ferguson Municipal Public Library. On August 9, 2014, an unarmed black teenager named Michael Brown was shot by a white police officer. What many outside the profession (and outside Ferguson) might not know is that the Ferguson Library, under the direction of a librarian who had been on the job for *five weeks* and who had *one* full time staff member, was the only agency in Ferguson that remained open to all during protests that rocked the city. Ferguson library director Scott Bonner posted a simple sign in the library: “During difficult times, the library is a quiet oasis where we can catch our breath, learn, and think about what to do next. Please help keep our oasis peaceful and serene. Thank you!” The message is significant because it identifies the library as not just as a place to learn and catch one’s breath, but as a place where one can “think about what to do next” – a place not just for reflection, but for action.

During those days in August, the library served not only as an oasis, but as an *ad hoc* school where children who were unable to attend classes could come and engage in learning with each other. Bonner made the deliberate decision to keep the library “open and to partner with teachers and community agencies to provide education, information, and emotional substance to the citizenry” of Ferguson.¹¹ In addition to providing this oasis of space, the library directly addressed issues of trauma by creating “Healing Kits” backpacks containing

books and worksheets about coping, source material about civil rights history, a list of resources for adults to get free or inexpensive mental health information nearby, and a teddy bear. Patrons were able to check out the backpacks, use the materials, and return the packs for others – though they were welcome to keep the bears.¹²

As the protests died down, the library maintained its commitment to being a safe space.

In the fall of 2014 they were one of the galleries that hosted an art exhibit called “Hands up, don’t shoot!,” a show “organized by the Alliance of Black Art Galleries to give local artists the chance to respond to Brown’s killing.”¹³ And in November, after a grand jury decided not to indict the police officer who shot Michael Brown, the library posted to Twitter, “Many other orgs closing. But we will stay open to serve people of #Ferguson as long as safe for patrons & staff ... Love each other.” In interview after interview, Bonner reiterated that “this is a library. It’s what we do” and that his library was “not notable, just noticeable”¹⁴ – but it was notable enough that 100 of his peers from around the country nominated the Ferguson Municipal Public Library for the *Gale-Library Journal* 2015 Library of the Year Award.

How can we connect these two examples to the ways in which libraries can address issues of historical trauma? It comes down to two fundamental services libraries provide their communities – space and stories.

Lia Frederiksen writes that “it is commonly known among library workers that public libraries are often the most accessible public spaces for those who are excluded from other public spaces.”¹⁵ Liz Brewster looks at library space as a “therapeutic landscape,” placing emphasis on the “public library as a space of restoration and the promotion of well-being, rather than as a curative environment.”¹⁶ If we think of historical trauma in part as resulting from the removal or restriction of people from a certain space, and if it is indeed true that public libraries are often the most accessible public spaces for those who have been excluded, then there is great potential for libraries to serve as restorative spaces, as the Ferguson Public Library demonstrates.

If we think about historical trauma in part as resulting from the disruption of a narrative by the people who *should* be telling it, what role can public libraries play in helping people reconstruct their own narratives, particularly when we’ve established the level of control librarians have traditionally exerted over the organization of and access to information? Researchers in other fields have pointed to instances of indigenous families crafting narratives for healing and self determination, and of resilience itself as a response to historical trauma.¹⁷ More broadly, and in the context of our own profession, which provides access to rather than constructs stories, we need to consider biases towards dominant narratives. Mark Brimhall-Vargas, a librarian, cuts directly to the issue. He writes that as librarians we need to consider “our own stories, our own beliefs

and ideas about what counts as knowledge and who gets to produce it ... [for example], we think about publication as a legitimate form. But what if that is not available to particular communities, especially if they have subjugated knowledge?"¹⁸

It should be the librarian's duty, within that privileged place of power over collections, and within that "therapeutic landscape," to be sure that people can find themselves represented in the narratives on our shelves. This has huge implications – it means understanding what people are really looking for when they come to the library; it means collecting from small presses, non-mainstream authors, and non-print materials. It means, where you can't collect these, that you connect people with them in other libraries. It means, also, that you provide the space for people to connect with each other, to share their own stories, to build or reclaim their own narratives and to develop collections and programs and services locally produced and reflective of the community. It means that people can recognize themselves in their libraries.

Linda Rudell-Betts's patron didn't recognize himself in the stacks in part because "dominant cultural narratives" often serve mainly "as reminders of historical trauma" whereas family and community narratives speak to resilience, action, and aspirations.¹⁹ Libraries can challenge these dominant cultural narratives, which can in turn influence how people not only understand the library, but themselves and each other.

Brimhall-Vargas moves from narratives of resilience to a "narrative of resistance" noting the roles that public libraries can play in the "triangulation of information" and the "production of knowledge" that leads to resistance. I'll quote at length:

It is often assumed that members of marginalized communities know everything about their own identity or history. Yet even saying this reveals how patently untrue it is. To develop a rich understanding of one's own experience, certainly to be able to contextualize and historicize that experience, requires access to information often housed outside the community. Making connections between communities and their libraries is critical for the preservation of a larger narrative of resistance. Access to these resources allows for a reinterpreted reintroduction of one's own experience into a larger body of information. In other words, histories that seem static can come alive again when literate and knowledgeable citizens produce their own reinterpretations.²⁰

A third example of libraries engaging with communities in this way comes from the State Library of Western Australia, where their Storylines project, an "online archive ... relating to Aboriginal history" helps correct the fact that as librarian Damien Webb so perfectly puts it, "collections were built *about*

[Indigenous peoples], but not *for* or *with* them.”²¹ As an example of the good work Storylines is doing, photos that were initially given to the library and cataloged by non-Indigenous people are being identified by Indigenous communities and re-cataloged with “additional genealogical and biographical information.”²² Storylines allows people to remotely access digitized materials, search in Indigenous languages, and add stories about images. In a powerful nod to cultural protocol and, I would argue, recognition of historical trauma, users can ask that the library restrict access to images for reasons of “sensitivity” or “sorrow.”

In helping people discover their own narratives of resistance, libraries demonstrate what Rebecca T. Miller, writing about Ferguson, calls “stepping in with heart” – which she notes calls for a “deeper engagement, especially in difficult times.”²³

Most public librarians I’ve met share Linda Rudell-Betts’s and Scott Bonner’s sense of justice. We also tend to share Bonner’s sense of humility. Librarians are more likely to categorize their work in these areas as response to community need, where I contend that their work represents action and, in the cases of the LA Public Library, Ferguson Municipal Public Library, and Storylines project, significant action. You can’t reclassify even a portion of the books in the third largest public library system in the United States and call it simply a response. You can’t hold classes for children when schools are too afraid to open or host an art exhibit called “Hands up, don’t shoot,” and call it simply a response. You don’t create beta searches in Native languages, feature a prominent “restrict” button in your database, and regularly engage in digital repatriation and say that you are simply “responding” to patron needs.

These actions might have been catalyzed by something external to the library, but they are actions nonetheless. These three libraries serve as examples of what can be accomplished when librarians move beyond response and towards that “reflective action” that Michael Stephens writes about. And, as Ferguson shows us, when you’re the only agency that stays open for everyone in the midst of a city burning, you’re sending a powerful message about the role that libraries play in helping people rise from those ashes and reclaim their own voices, communities, and lives.

NOTES

- 1 Sara Zettervall, “Whole Person Librarianship,” *Public Libraries* 54, no. 2(2015): 13.
- 2 Nathaniel Vincent Mohatt, et. al. “Historical trauma as public narrative: A conceptual review of how history impacts present-day health,” *Social Science & Medicine* 106(2014): 128.
- 3 Michael Stephens, “Actions and Answers,” *Library Journal* 140, no. 1(2015): 52.

- 4 Sanford Berman, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads concerning People*, (1971): 1.
- 5 Berman, *Prejudices and Antipathies*, 15.
- 6 Tatiana de la Tierra, "Latina Lesbian Subject Headings: the Power of Naming," in *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front*, ed. K.R. Roberto (North Carolina: MacFarland & Company, 2007): 94-95.
- 7 Linda Rudell-Betts, June 16, 2015, "LGBT collections moving to new call number area," *Central Library Blog*, http://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/central-library/lgbt-collections-moving-new-call-number-area#disqus_thread.
- 8 Doreen Sullivan, "A brief history of homophobia in Dewey decimal classification," *Overland* (July 23, 2015). <https://overland.org.au/2015/07/a-brief-history-of-homophobia-in-dewey-decimal-classification/>. Accessed on October 16, 2015.
- 9 Matt Johnson, "A Hidden History of Queer Subject Access," in *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front*, ed. K.R. Roberto (North Carolina: MacFarland & Company, 2007): 20.
- 10 Linda Rudell-Betts, June 16, 2015, "LGBT collections moving to new call number area," *Central Library Blog*, http://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/central-library/lgbt-collections-moving-new-call-number-area#disqus_thread.
- 11 John N. Berry III, "Courage in Crisis," *Library Journal* 140, no. 11(2015): 30.
- 12 Berry, "Courage in Crisis," 30.
- 13 Berry, "Courage in Crisis," 30.
- 14 Rebecca T. Miller, "It's What We Do: Service and Sanctuary in Ferguson," *Library Journal* 139, no. 15(2014): 8.
- 15 Lia Frederiksen, "'Our Public Library': Social reproduction and urban public space in Toronto," *Women's Studies International Forum* 48(2015): 144.
- 16 Liz Brewster, "The public library as therapeutic landscape: A qualitative case study," *Health & Place* 26(2014): 95.
- 17 Aaron R. Denham, "Rethinking Historical Trauma: Narratives of Resilience," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 45, no.3(2008) and Keri Lawson-Te Aho, "The Healing is in the Pain: Revisiting and Re-narrating Trauma Histories as a Starting Point for Healing," *Psychology and Developing Societies* 26, no.2(2014).
- 18 Mark Brimhall-Vargas, "Where the Rubber Meets the Road: The Role of Libraries and Librarians in Bringing Equitable Access to Marginalized Communities," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 85, no. 2, Special Issue: Diversity and Library Information Science Education (2015): 197.
- 19 Nathaniel Vincent Mohatt, et. al. "Historical trauma as public narrative: A conceptual review of how history impacts present-day health," *Social Science & Medicine* 106(2014): 132.
- 20 Brimhall-Vargas, "Where the Rubber Meets the Road," 196
- 21 Damien Webb, "Curating with Community," (Paper presented at: IFLA WLIC 2015 - Cape Town, South Africa in Session 168 - Indigenous Matters SIG.): 2. <http://library.ifla.org/1143/>.
- 22 Webb, "Curating with Community," 7.

- 23 Rebecca T. Miller, "Why libraries do 'what we do': The heart of service," *Library Journal* 140, no. 11(2015): 8.

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