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The Right Tool for the Job?

Ignorance, Evolution, Reflection, and the #Resistance

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“Librarians are Swiss Army knives for the #Resistance,” tweeted musician and activist Neko Case on January 27, 2017, a characterization both fortifying and thought-provoking for library workers everywhere. Like any tool, a knife is useless without an agent to wield it—and destructive if applied incorrectly or to the wrong material. If library workers are instruments to be plied to all manner of social ills, what are the potentialities and limits of our agency, and how can we best equip those who would put us to use? This essay works to unpack Case's metaphor within the context of Oregon libraries, casting its gaze back to Mary Frances Isom's early push to democratize libraries, ahead to librarian Angelica Novoa de Cordeiro's efforts to serve immigrant populations in rural areas, and around at evolving political discourses and circumstances as well as their precursors. In many ways, the challenges Isom identified and addressed were akin to those that now confront libraries on a national scale as they contemplate means of resisting the multiphobic, and shortsighted rhetoric and policy that suffuse the contemporary political climate while adhering to the ALA's core values of democracy, diversity, equitable access, intellectual freedom, privacy, and professionalism.

Whose Hands Are We In?

Even while asking how libraries can equip their users to do the respond to these challenges, this essay considers a more cautionary metaphor from activist Audre Lorde (1993), who advises us that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” Lorde was referring to her experiences with feminist work in academia, where she too often found that conference programs and scholarly journals habitually marginalized or omitted considerations of difference based on race, class, sexuality, and ability—in other words, that



they replicated the very patriarchal structures they purported to strive against by centering the views and concerns of white, heterosexual, cisgender women. The issue applies equally, albeit in different ways, to public, academic, and other kinds of libraries. How, with the understanding that we are part of institutions that are often complicit in legislative and social injustices, can we ply our tools and ourselves as tools to the eradication of those injustices?

Having felt, since the election, energized but unsure precisely where or how to channel my zeal, I was initially tickled to be so anointed by one of my musical idols and prepared to embrace the notion wholeheartedly. Yet the more thought I gave the metaphor, the more double-edged its meanings seemed. The genius of the Swiss Army knife is that it serves as whatever its owner needs it to be, but it bears noting, too, that a plurality of Swiss Army knife functions serve not to incite resistance but to overcome it: wood, paper, cork, food, tin cans, etc. This doesn't mean that Case's metaphor is flawed, necessarily, but it reminds us that as with much technology, the tool's beneficence or malignancy is wholly contingent upon the aims and actions of those who wield it. I don't know how carefully she considered the conceit any more than I know the intent or character of many of my library's patrons—nor do I know what percentage of librarians even support the resistance movement or consider themselves part of it, and this ignorance is at once discomfiting and galvanizing.

Reflectio Ad Absurdum?

I'm currently enrolled in an MLS program, and I work at a public library. In both environments, I'm struck by the evident willingness and ease with which library students, staff, and faculty in all roles can admit that they don't know the answer to something, but will endeavor to find out. In my previous grad school experience, some unwritten but universally recognized code of conduct dictated that a student admitting ignorance would have been only slightly less shocking than a student admitting that they enjoyed punching puppies. But, in my new milieu, I feel not just able but impelled to admit that I didn't actually know what the Tweet meant. Whether Case put as much thought into her metaphor as I am here is ultimately irrelevant; in the age of social media, any utterance into the digisphere immediately escapes the reins of its author's intent. The crux of the problem was not that Case's metaphor exceeded the bounds of her intentions, as all metaphors and indeed all language slip away from their utterers; it was my initial, unexamined presumption that I understood.

On the surface, the Tweet constituted an incitement to change and a call to action. It goes without saying that action is essential to change and that both are imminently needed at this juncture. Yet action without constant reflection too easily becomes dogma, and—as historical attempts at authoritarian communism have demonstrated—intractable, unexamined dicta too easily become oppressive, however far left they fall on the political spectrum. I'm using this essay, therefore, as an opportunity to address a gap in my knowledge in a way that I hope also provides avenues of thought in what has been, for many, a time of stultifying enormity: an exercise in identifying and contending with what we don't know in order to make ourselves better informed and, therefore, better able to act.

Unpacking the Metaphor

The Swiss Army knife was developed in the late 1800s by the Ibach, Switzerland-based company Karl Elsener as a compact, versatile tool for use by Swiss soldiers. Case's conceit therefore points the way to another conceit whose linkages carry even more powerful implications: Switzerland is a country notorious for the policy of "armed neutrality" it maintained



throughout both World Wars. While the Swiss adopted some measures to shield against a German invasion in the 1930s, their aims were based primarily in self-protection, not in aversion to genocide. The Swiss military took action against Germany only when Axis forces made incursions on Swiss borders and interests; it also prohibited Allied advances through its land and airspace. Further, and with a chilling resonance, Switzerland's strict immigration policy resulted in the turning away of thousands of Jewish refugees between 1933 and 1945. Those refugees admitted were proscribed from gainful employment, and many were interned in so-called "reception camps," as political asylum was not granted on the basis of ethnic or cultural persecution (Bergier et al., 2002). The parallels to the travel ban that is currently bouncing around various courts likely need not be belabored to bring home the gravity of this historical moment and the directions in which it threatens to head.

The masters of Swiss Army knives did not, then, wield their tools in the interest of ending a global atrocity. With this historical context in view, the Swiss moniker seems less of an honorific and more a caution against neutrality. As library workers, we are committed to serving every patron regardless of their political views or demographic attributes. Whether the promise of universal service necessarily entails political neutrality is up for debate, and numerous library publications have questioned this notion before and since the election, reaching various conclusions. It behooves libraries in Oregon and nationwide to engage in this type of rumination and arrive at answers themselves as well as a vision of the forms that neutrality or non-neutrality takes; they may be aided by such resources as the 2008 essay collection *Questioning Library Neutrality* edited by Alison Lewis.

In a democracy as envisioned by the Constitution, the core values of the American Library Association would be commonsense and unremarkable: access, democracy, diversity, intellectual freedom, privacy, and so on. However, one needn't read far into our nation's founding document before stumbling onto hollow clauses, false universalisms, and notions of freedom that belie a history of genocide, slavery, misogyny, and a class system that turns a blind eye to all three, perpetuated by fantastical narratives of prosperity through diligence. So where, at a time when the Constitution is under threat by an administration whose leader and followers embrace many of the inequalities it glossed over, do libraries stand?

I spent most of Election Day 2016 at the public library branch where I work, watching individuals and families drop their ballots into the big blue box, checking the news on my breaks, and trying unsuccessfully not to fall apart on the bus ride home as the outcome became inexorably clear. Since then, I've found that focusing on small, everyday thoughts and actions helps to keep me focused and energized, whereas trying to think about how to "fix" all the issues, the racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia that were present before the election—less inescapably for some than for others—plunges me quickly into inertia and despair. We need to acknowledge that these problems are systemic, but we also need actionable plans to end them and the faith to carry those plans through.

On the Origin of Oregon Libraries

If this country is the master's house, its rooms are walled by state borders varying in design but built from the same bricks. I would be remiss to quote Lorde (1993), who was instrumental in illuminating the shortcomings of mainstream feminism with regard to race, in an article about Oregon institutions without acknowledging the hardwired racism upon which the state was founded.



As one of thousands of Portland transplants over the past decade, I can't deny that my qualifications to comment on the directions that Oregon's libraries might take are suspect; I learned only recently about the state's ignoble genesis as a would-be white utopia. However, my upbringing in Kansas—where public funding, civil rights, and intellectual freedom have been in crisis as long as I can remember—afford me what I hope is a useful view on the largely-but-not-entirely chiasmic paths of these two states. Kansas entered the Union through the Wyandotte Constitution, which banned slavery and accorded property rights to married women but stopped short of granting suffrage to females or people of color (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d.). Embarrassingly recent news to me and perhaps my fellow relocatees is the fact that the Oregon Constitution also prohibited slavery when statehood was granted in 1859, but three separate exclusion laws banning all African Americans from Oregon and providing for their forcible deportation were passed at various points through the latter half of the nineteenth century (Nokes, 2014); the final exclusionary clause was not removed from the Constitution until 2000. According to the most recent census data, a mere 2.1 percent of Oregonians identified as black or African American, compared to 13.3 percent nationally (US Census Bureau, 2016). It's impossible to know, of course, precisely how this skewed population has shaped Oregon's libraries, but it's equally impossible to deny that it has and still does inform how we serve patrons of color. We need to know whom we are serving and whom we are not; we need to understand the negative spaces and the demographic gaps that contour the populations we serve because they are inextricably linked to the facts and contexts that structure our ignorance.

In the early twentieth century, prompted in part by John Wilson's donation of a formidable reference collection appended to a stipulation that it be made freely available to the public, librarian Mary Frances Isom helped transform Portland's private, subscription-based library to a tax-funded, public venture open to all (Hummel, 2009); she identified its exclusionary nature as a problem and advanced efforts to provide free access and culturally relevant materials, actively seeking out patrons "who were not its traditional middle or upper class base" (p. 7). She also recognized the need for coalitions to advocate for libraries and worked to improve the services they provided, helping to found the Oregon State Library, Oregon Library Association, and Pacific Northwest Library Association.

In the early twenty-first century, Angelica Novoa de Cordeiro of Canby Public Library has conducted research to assess the library needs of Spanish-speaking populations, responding to growing communities in urban and rural settings alike (Novoa de Cordeiro, 2016). Lincoln City District Librarian Diedre Conkling has worked to identify environmental and social issues and take them up in free, open-access capacities both locally and globally, helping to establish a feminist book review called the Amelia Bloomer Project as well as a Women of Library History Tumblr (Fiore, 2017).

A Call to Inaction?

The core problems that Isom, Novoa de Cordeiro, Conkling, and others have identified are the same, though the legal and demographic contexts have shifted: social inequalities rooted in economic disparities that in turn derive from municipal and federal institutions and systems that prioritize the well-being of certain groups over others. These three librarians identified systemic problems and shortcomings within their communities and took steps to remedy them. How can library workers throughout Oregon, on however a minute and mundane level, do the same every day?



This issue's original call for papers framed change in terms of evolution—a word I read with some chagrin, as a native Kansan who attended public schools from K–12 amid a set of hearings in which the Kansas Board of Education ruled that evolution should be taught as theory, not fact, and that Intelligent Design could be presented as a viable alternative. Evolution is defined as a “process of gradual change . . . from a simpler to a more complex or advanced state” (*OED*, n.d.); it is defined, intriguingly, in opposition to the “sudden or instigated change” of revolution. In a biological context, evolution is a natural phenomenon that results from a combination of accident, genetic predisposition, and learned behaviors—but not necessarily on a conscious, informed level. And even when it is conscious, those efforts may be gallingly misguided. Former Oregon State Librarian Cornelia Marvin Pierce, who pioneered the concept of traveling libraries to provide rural access to books, saw evolution as justification for eugenics and supported the forced sterilization of the mentally, physically, and morally “unfit” that her future husband, Governor Walter Pierce, had legalized through a 1923 bill (*Oregon Encyclopedia*, 2017). To this day, Reed College maintains an endowed professorship in her name.

If Oregon libraries are to evolve rather than revolt, which I do not take as a given, how can they catalyze meaningful, beneficent change? Where does resistance become instigation, and when does open-mindedness verge into pathological neutrality? How does one right systemic wrongs that, even if at a head now, have persisted throughout the state's history and formed a part of its very foundation?

The risks that lie in the work of libraries are the risks that we see now all over with regard to free speech and universal access to services: we serve Muslim immigrants and we serve white men in MAGA hats; we are committed to providing them with information, shelter, Internet access, privacy, and more, and we have no choice but to accept the uncertainty of what they do with those resources. They're the same risks inherent in a democracy founded on freedom of expression and the same ambivalences of a profession in which someone can fight tirelessly to bring books to the rural poor even while fighting to deny others the ability to reproduce, and in them resonates the simultaneous privilege and jeopardy of working in public service. We are in the hands of autonomous beings in a putatively free society, the cost of whose freedom is uncertainty.

So after all of this, I have few answers but many implements with which to approach the problems at hand, as well as a renewed mindfulness that no utterance, figurative or otherwise, Tweet or legislation, is too banal to warrant examination. A rare presumption that I've found salutary amid these risks is the notion that I am always coming at every issue from a position of at least partial ignorance that requires conscious redress. Evolution's defining trait is its duration, and a process of gradual change makes room for—demands—reflection. Activism isn't always about action; it must be attended by the constant cognitive processes and exercises of paying ample attention to words, learning the deep histories of everyday surroundings, recognizing the limitations as well as obligations of one's agency, and assessing our past, present, and future positions to all of the above—especially those of us who, in 1859 and now, have dwelt in the master's house. 🐘



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