Leaky Ceilings, Staplers, and Nazis: Collocating Reference Work and Social Justice

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"I really want you to understand me," he said.

A student—I'll call him Hector—had approached me at the reference desk seeking assistance. He needed to find sources on a specific type of classical music. Complicating things was that his professor insisted on his using print sources only. I get so angry when students tell me things like this, because this outdated perspective places unneeded obstacles in a student's path for no valid reason I can think of. In this case, Hector's path was impeded by his professor's antediluvian view that the only "good" sources available were printed on paper. His professor was obviously wrong, and Hector knew it, and I knew it. He had wanted to use Oxford Music Online, which is precisely where I was going to direct him before learning of his restriction. I tried to not display my anger too obviously, though. I want to empathize with students but I don't want to appear to be critical of their professor. I'm a person, though, and maybe sometimes that criticism leaks out a bit, but I try to keep it in check.

"That must be frustrating," I told Hector. He agreed.

Hector told me more about this classical music term he was researching. I was unfamiliar with the term in question, so Hector defined it for me, but I was still a little unclear. I had a pretty good music education in high school and college, and this, coupled with my own actual interest in classical music, makes me reasonably well-informed about the subject. But

I just wasn't connecting with Hector for some reason. I couldn't follow his explanation. So I Googled the term and found the Wikipedia entry, displaying it on the patron-facing monitor of the reference desk dual monitor setup. We read through the entry together, and I made a joke about consulting Wikipedia. Hector said that he found Wikipedia to be very useful when it came to classical music, and I agreed. We talked through the subject a bit more, and he cited examples of this kind of music. Then I started to catch on. I understood what he was talking about.

"I really want you to understand me," he said again. And I did. I looked directly at him, made eye contact, and I felt warm. I allowed this warmth to soften my facial expression and body language. We were connected. It was one of those moments where everything felt exactly right, where we were two human beings in relationship to one another. The energy of our encounter shifted somehow. We had been speaking cordially and warmly; now our interaction felt more electric, alive. Hector then started to tell me about the leaky ceiling in his apartment, how he had reported it to the maintenance office, how he hoped it would be repaired by the time he got home. As he narrated his tale, I could see the leaky ceiling, hear the water dripping, feel the anxiety of wondering if and when it would be repaired. We had moved beyond a sterile transmission of information. We were two people, connected. I wasn't sure why or how Hector had drifted from talking about classical music to talking about his leaky ceiling in his apartment and wondered if I had missed a transition. I would like to think that he felt free to talk about his personal concerns because I made an effort to humanize our conversation, to indicate that I cared about him as a person, because he thought I seemed nice and helpful and friendly.

I admit that this is not the kind of encounter I had in mind when I was grudgingly constructing a reference desk staffing schedule this past summer. A few years ago, due to some internal organization of roles among the librarians at my institution, I had the coordination of reference folded into my ever expanding grab-bag of responsibilities. I was now the Coordinator of Instruction *and* Reference, and at first, I was very excited about this development. I have ideas about reference services and staffing, a vision, strategies I'd like to explore. However, given the demands of my role as instruction coordinator, it soon became clear that my role in coordinating reference would purely be administrative. In short, the thankless chore of creating the reference desk staffing schedule was now my job. I realize how churlish and ungracious this attitude sounds, but this is how I felt at the time.

The reference desk at my library is staffed only by faculty librarians with master's degrees, and there is a librarian sitting at the desk for as

long as the library is open, and this includes evenings and weekends while school is in session. I have complicated feelings about this staffing model, but until I have the time or energy to do otherwise, this is the model we use. Creating the summer schedule is an especially trying task that has to take into account the many absences of librarians taking time off. Rather than creating a standard schedule that is the same for the whole summer session, just as I do in fall and spring semesters, I essentially have to create an entirely new schedule for each week in order to accommodate everyone's vacation plans. This logistical challenge becomes especially vexing when I considered the fact that summer enrollment was down ten percent from the previous year, which was also down from the previous year, which means the library was nearly empty during the summer sessions. It seemed absurd to expend so much energy and angst trying to staff a desk that hardly anyone needed.

However, I recently reconsidered this perspective of what constitutes a "need" for a librarian sitting at the reference desk. This semester, after having taken myself out of the rotation for about a year, I resumed a once-weekly evening reference shift. I'm the Monday night librarian, which means I sit at the desk from 5 pm to 10 pm in a state of constant readiness and approachability, just in case someone needs me. Thus far, people have needed me for printing help, refilling staplers, and pointing out the bathrooms. I expect that this sounds familiar to many academic librarians who sit at a reference desk. I was recounting my first evening shift of the semester to my therapist, who remarked wryly, "Right, and you got a master's degree so you can help people print." He was making a joke, and, to be candid, he was echoing words I have previously said myself. But suddenly, as he said these words, something shifted inside of me. The shift was initially wordless, just an intuitive sense that something was changing inside of me, and then, when I talked it through with my wife, I realized: No, I *didn't* get a master's degree so I could help people print. But I *did* get a master's degree so that I could be a helpful, friendly person who could make a difference of some kind in the lives of college students. This is exactly why I went to library school. My route to academic librarianship was circuitous, but the teaching experience I gained as a master's student in English, specifically when I took my English 102 students to the library for instruction, illuminated a previously unimagined career pathway, a way of working with students and helping them access the information they need to be successful in personal, academic, and other settings.

So, yes, I honestly really and truly did get a master's degree so I could be a helpful person in the lives of college students. I just never imagined it

would involve refilling so many staplers. In the early years of my career, I became interested in the literature on student retention and what role the library might play in helping students complete their degrees. I felt—and still feel—uneasy about the research linking things like student GPA and frequency of library use, because I am opposed to surveilling and policing and tracking student behavior. I think it is creepy and immoral. I did, however, feel a sort of intuitive resonance with the research that pointed to the impact of having helpful adults actively involved in the life of college students.[1] This strikes me as infinitely more meaningful and powerful, this emphasis on relationships, on actual human beings connecting and seeing each other, than it is to count how many times a student walked into a library and then correlate it to their GPA. I'm paraphrasing, but this is the general idea, and it is the one that is most in alignment with my philosophy of librarianship, a worldview and approach that sees social justice as the ultimate goal of my work and practice and praxis.

It is hard, though, to continue to find meaning and purpose in *just* being a helpful grownup refilling the stapler when there are actual literal Nazis marching in the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia. While I was working on the draft of this foreword you're reading, a literal actual white supremacist Nazi drove his car into a crowd of anti-fascist protesters and killed a woman. As someone who considers feminism and social justice as organizing principles of my philosophy of librarianship, I consider myself pretty conscious and enlightened and aware of the injustice and oppression that are baked into the very bones of our world, but even so, everything I'd already drafted for this introduction I was asked to write suddenly seemed astonishingly trivial. Those in position of privilege profess shock and disbelief that violent and disgusting acts of emboldened white supremacists could be possibly be happening in the United States of America in 2017. Those whose lives are regularly imperiled emotionally, physically, psychically and in all other ways because they are not white, straight, cis, or able-bodied are saying, "How is this a surprise?"

And yet, *isn't* it a surprise that it has somehow become controversial to assert that Nazis do not belong in libraries or anywhere? The library-land blogosphere appears to be experiencing intermittent noxious eruptions of "but free speech!", as if "free speech" excuses and justifies the emotional and physical violence experienced by those whose very humanity

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1   Maurie Caitlin Kelly, "Student retention and academic libraries," *College and Research Libraries News* 56, no. 11 (Dec. 1995): 757–59.

and existence actual literal Nazis in the year 2017 want to erase. Based on my cursory reading of a Wikipedia article about volcanoes, it doesn't look like there's much you can do about this geographical phenomenon. I don't think you can stop volcanoes from erupting, so here is where my extended metaphor no longer coheres: we absolutely can and must stop the toxic sludge that the "but free speech! Libraries should be neutral!" perspective promotes. Our profession is polluted by this perspective, which seeks to reinforce and undergird the white supremacist status quo at the expense of the vulnerable. It is immoral to remain silent and allow this to persist while people are suffocating on the toxic ash of white supremacy.

Mere days before I wrote the above words, mere days before actual literal Nazis marched through though the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, my library had its annual staff retreat, and I found myself in a heated and lively discussion with my colleagues about neutrality. Librarians are supposed to be neutral, right? We should present all sides of all arguments. If a patron approaches the reference desk asking a question about something we find personally repugnant or troubling, we should somehow ignore our own beliefs and perspectives and treat that interaction like a sterile, dehumanized transaction of information, right? I presented an argument so impassioned against such rhetoric that later a few colleagues approached me to make sure we were cool, that I wasn't mad at them or anything. I wasn't mad, I reassured them. I'm just a person with lots of feelings and my own bias and point of view. To ask me to somehow dissociate myself with those feelings and biases and point of view is akin to asking me to somehow be disembodied or dehumanized.

A few days later, however, after watching live footage of Nazis bearing torches and shouting Nazi slogans on a college campus, I realized that this is more than just a matter of disagreement. This is where I need to draw a distinct and definitive line. The issue of neutrality isn't one where reasonable people can agree to disagree. This is a moral issue, one that is not up for debate. The right of human beings to exist is not debatable. I don't care if this goes against the widely held view of the library as the intellectual heart of campus, as the bastion of intellectual freedom. Do not tell me that Nazis need the library, as though being exposed to more enlightened viewpoints will magically make them less hateful, because they don't and they won't. I would argue that those who need the library, its collections, and the people who keep the literal and virtual doors open, are people whose voices are usually silenced rather than amplified, whose factual existence is somehow regarded as some theoretical intellectual debate.

I acknowledge that it's perhaps easier for me to espouse such apparently contrary views because I'm an academic librarian. Teaching and learning are at the core of what we do at the reference desk. It's expected and normal for a librarian to treat the reference encounter as more than just the sterile exchange of information; we're *supposed* to find teachable moments. My library genealogy includes working as a library page and circulation clerk in public libraries in high school and college, but I've never worked at a public library reference desk, as some of those who have contributed to this volume. I've never worked in a special library. I've never provided reference services by mail to people who are incarcerated, and neither have I been placed on house arrest because I've been accused of inciting ethnic hatred against Russians via my reference work, as described in one of the chapters in this volume. I have immense privilege. I'm empowered by academic freedom. Librarians at my institution are tenure-track faculty, and I have tenure. I was recently promoted to full-rank librarian, the equivalent of full professor for librarians at Indiana University. All of this is to say that I know that I have privilege and freedom to make such claims, but I also have to note how mindboggling it seems that making such claims is so politically fraught that I need the protection of privilege.

Privilege means that I have an obligation to take risks, to try to bring about social change, to attempt to correct and write over the harm done to the people I encounter in my daily life the library. Here is where my current experience in psychotherapy has illustrated, and continues to illustrate, the power of corrective emotional experience, and I think it provides a useful parallel to envision the work we do in reference. As theorized by psychoanalyst Franz Alexander, "The patient, in order to be helped, must undergo a corrective emotional experience suitable to repair the traumatic influence of previous experiences. It is of secondary importance whether this corrective experience takes place during treatment in the transference relationship, or parallel with the treatment in the daily life of the patient."[2] In other words, the positive experience of the therapeutic relationship, especially if infused with the empathetic, nonjudgmental acceptance theorized by Carl Rogers as "unconditional positive regard,"[3] helps to heal the damage of past trauma by kind of writing over it with a more positive experience. It's almost like when you save a file with the same name as a preex-

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2   Franz Alexander et al., *Psychoanalytic Therapy: Principles and Application* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1946), 65.

3   Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 283.

isting file and Word asks you if you want to overwrite it. Similarly, I think we can see the work of advancing social justice through reference as a way of correcting and overwriting negative, demeaning, and dehumanizing experiences faced by our patrons with more positive, humanizing, and affirming ones. It means that the vulnerable are centered and protected and valued. It means that the relationship that happens at the reference desk or elsewhere is valid and important and a means of bringing about social justice. It means that libraries collect and make accessible materials that represent marginalized communities and subjects. And, yes, it means that I will refill the staplers, and refill them with joy, and also listen, with a warm and receptive heart, while Hector talks about his leaky ceiling.

Reference work as social justice work strikes me as a natural alliance, a partnership that links similar items together. I'm reminded of how I explain to students the way in which call numbers collocate similar items, although I seldom actually use the word "collocate," because jargon can have a distancing effect. It makes intuitive and practical sense for reference and social justice to sit side-by-side on the shelf. The essays in this volume outline ways of engaging in social justice work through reference, describing how these concepts sit side-by-side on the shelf, and as I read them and re-read them and contemplate them, I see the work described herein coalescing around two broad axes: people and things. (I told you this was broad.) By *people*, I mean, of course, the *people*, the human beings we interact with, the relationships built through an approach to reference governed by an ethic of care, of seeing an information-seeker as a whole person, and seeing ourselves, as librarians, as whole people as well. And by *things*, I mean the materials, the collections, the information that people seek in order to meet whatever need they might have. I realize how reductive this might sound, and I don't mean to oversimplify, but this strikes me as the very essence of reference work. Without people and without things, we have nothing to do, nowhere to sit, no way of meeting anyone's needs, no one to benefit from the refilled staplers.

In other words, as described in this book, reference work advances the work of social justice through collecting and making accessible materials pertaining to groups who would normally be erased or dismissed, as well as through the people involved in doing such work, such as approaching reference work through a lens that seeks to humanize what is sometimes a dehumanizing process, the vulnerability of having a need and asking someone to help meet that need. The essays in this book describe ways of prioritizing access and use, collecting and preserving oral histories, providing materials to those who have little to no access to information sourc-

es, approaching pedagogy in ways that value the whole person, insisting on the importance of the interpersonal and relationship-building, and valuing alternative ways of knowing and seeing the world.

If I were called upon to define a social justice orientation to reference work, I think my definition would be informed by all of the above. The contributors to this volume are engaging in the important and necessary work of social justice through librarianship and these are voices we need to pay attention to. We need to let these voices shape our perspectives and influence our own work. My definition would be also be informed, in part, by Paulo Freire's *unveiling of reality*: "Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality."[4] What is the reality that I seek to unveil when I'm sitting at the reference desk, or ordering books for the collection, or teaching library instruction sessions, or, yes, refilling the stapler? The reality I want to unveil is that the world is unjust but we *can* make it more just, and that work begins when we insist on what is moral and what is right, and when we see each other, face-to-face—in person, through the snail mail, in an online chat box, in an email—as human beings in relationship to one another.

I want to note here that I think about words a lot more than maybe is normal. I was an English major, and I'm a big etymology nerd—high school Latin will do that to a person—and so when I was recently thinking about the term "reference interview," I looked up the etymology of the word "interview" and I was so delighted and fascinated to see that it comes from Latin via French, meaning "to see one another."[5] This is such a beautiful image, isn't it? But does an interview ever really happen this way? Think about the last time you talked to a patron at the reference desk, or at the circulation desk, or any kind of desk in the library. Did you really *see* the patron? And did the patron really see *you*? What would it mean to truly see each other when interacting with a patron? I think to truly see each other, "to respect and care for the souls of students,"[6] to borrow the

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4   Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 81.

5   "Interview." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed November 6, 2017.
    https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interview.

6   bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*
    (New York: Routledge, 1994).

language of bell hooks, means aligning the emotionally vulnerable parts of yourself to the corresponding parts of the patron. It means remembering what it felt like to be in a library and maybe not understanding where anything was or how to read a call number and what a call number is anyway. It means feeling incredibly stressed about your leaky ceiling, the seemingly unreasonable demands of your professor, and all of the other aspects of your life, and inevitably giving short shrift to one of those areas.

The work of social justice through the work of reference is one that is necessarily more energy consuming. You need more bandwidth. It takes more emotional and intellectual energy to refill a stapler with joy than it is to do it perfunctorily. Similarly, it takes significantly more emotional and intellectual energy to argue that no, Nazis are not welcome in the library, and then still have the emotional and intellectual energy to help Hector navigate his information need and manage his anxiety about his leaky ceiling. This work is hard, but it is necessary. Let these essays fortify you with the energy you need to stifle the volcanoes of white supremacy and other bilious forms of hatred. It means that you may also need to seek the kindness and support of like-minded people, to nurture your own soul, your own unique path and goals and gifts and talents, just as tenderly and compassionately as you would the anxious patron who is walking up to you at the reference desk right here, right now, and maybe, this time, you will finally see one another.

This is what I want this foreword to tell you. I really want you to understand me.

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