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Review of Queer Library Alliance: Global Reflections and Imaginings

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Montague, Rae-Anne, and Lucas McKeever. *Queer Library Alliance: Global Reflections and Imaginings*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017.

<http://libraryjuicepress.com>

How do libraries meet the information needs of global LGBTQ populations? What are the historical precedents that have shaped the institutional responses of the information professions to intellectual freedom or civil rights issues concerning LGBTQ citizens? In *Queer Library Alliance: Global Reflections and Imaginings*, a new anthology that aims to promote visibility and understanding for “a network of identities that can be difficult to define” (xi), the contributors share a multitude of international perspectives shaped by case studies, analytical research, and activist passion.

The impetus for the book stems from the creation of an LGBTQ Users Special Interest Group under the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions in 2013, the first group of its kind in the IFLA’s eighty-year history. At the group’s first meeting, in 2014, it was decided that a larger audience of information professionals could benefit from an anthology with a global focus devoted to discussion of the critical issues involving LGBTQ identities and user populations and the challenges involved in reaching these populations using existing library classification, organization, and taxonomy schemes and methodologies.

Methods of organization are fixed, the editors tell us. *Queerness*—which they identify as a complex and ever-fluctuating matrix of identities that adapt to concurrent political realities within an intersectional framework—alas, is not. But even if the systems for organizing and classifying information that information professionals regularly engage with are not attuned to the dynamic cultural nuances of queerness, that is not a reason to give up. As Montague and Lucas note, “achieving equity in library services is an ongoing process rather than a project with an end date” (xiii). Investigating new possibilities for closing the information access gap, the contributors to *Queer Library Alliance* advocate for a robust and critical response to institutional indifference or worse, and for challenging all information professionals to be better informed and more capable and effective in their work with and on behalf of marginalized communities.

While *Queer Library Alliance* is resolutely international in scope—similar to another recently released chronicle of an international social justice movement, Annelise Orleck’s *We Are All Fast Food Workers Now: The Global Uprising against Poverty Wages* (Beacon Press, 2018)—the book is heavily informed right from the first chapter by *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the landmark 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in favor of marriage equality. As chapter 1 illustrates, it was a librarian who, at great professional cost, was a pioneer of both the movement for marriage rights and for LGBTQ library professionals and patrons. In the article “Disruption Is Not Pleasant but Sometimes It Produces Results . . .,” Noriko Asato and Andrew B. Wertheimer consider the case of Michael McConnell, a gay librarian whose offer of employment from the University of Minnesota in 1970 was rescinded after McConnell and his partner received local media attention for attempting to obtain a marriage license. In the aftermath, he fought to push the American Library

Association to be more courageous in defense of its LGBTQ members and their rights. Though his efforts were met with little measurable success at the time, he was later championed by the ALA Task Force on Gay Liberation, which he addressed at the 1971 Midwinter Conference. McConnell called for a new focus on reaching LGBTQ communities with Pride Week library displays and building quality collections of information on homosexuality that would be free of bias. He eventually received an apology from the University of Minnesota for his treatment and subsequently donated his archives to the school. He is now considered one of the early instrumental figures of the marriage equality movement. Asato and Wertheimer tell his story in part to inspire the information professionals engaged in similar activism on behalf of LGBTQ rights in countries that are behind the United States in this regard.

In “‘We Have Made a Start but There Is a Long Way to Go’: Public Library LGBTQ* Provision to Children and Young People,” Elizabeth L. Chapman examines the multitude of factors affecting the current state of library services offered to LGBTQ* minors in the UK—from the limited book title selections available from major library vendors to the lack of cultural competencies training for UK librarians. In a later chapter with a similar theme, “What Is It We Do Not Know? LGBTQ and Library Staff,” Ragnhild Brandstedt profiles a single Swedish library and the research efforts by community advocates over the course of a year to enhance its library services for LGBTQ patrons. One essential problem identified through the course of the community advocates’ research was that the lack of outreach to the LGBTQ patron population was not based on institutional reluctance but rather the fact that it was a population that remained largely invisible to them. Once the staff underwent comprehensive training in LGBTQ issues the library’s services toward them were demonstrably improved.

In “In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a Defiant LGBTQ Community Flourishes,” Louis Kamwina Nsapo assesses the possibilities offered by underground community-produced LGBTQ digital archives to subvert state-enforced homophobia, which has rendered local LGBTQ histories and populations invisible in the DRC’s National Archives. It is a fascinating example of community archiving as a form of protest in the face of an oppressive government. A later archives-focused chapter, “From Gay Surfers to Old Lesbians Organizing for Change: Developing an LGBT Initiative at a State University in Florida,” Matthew Knight uses an initiative of University of South Florida Libraries to expand their LGBT special collections as a case study on how to plan, build, and market such a collection. One of the key takeaways from this chapter is that the community value of archives and special collections has to be repeatedly demonstrated through outreach efforts in order to be successful.

In “Universal Decimal Classification: A Universal Discriminative Classification?” Gregory Toth considers the merits and drawbacks of using UDC as an alternative cataloging method that, by allowing catalogers to use complex compound classification numbers, has the potential to improve discoverability of queer content in a library catalog and to counteract forms of discrimination embodied by the outdated vocabularies embedded in more traditional classification schemes. Echoing Hope A. Olson’s influential *The Power to Name: Locating the Limits of Subject Representation in*

Libraries (Springer, 2002), Toth states: “Our catalog users must indeed be able to locate desired subjects, related to their interest, on their first attempt—without being confused, misled, prejudiced against, or offended by the very terminology that discovery platforms use” (101). He notes, however, that this remains more of an ideal than the lived experience of LGBTQ library users, who may be poorly served by inflexible systems of classification that cannot be easily modified by librarians. Toth writes that “what subject classification indeed achieves is quite often the blocking of access to human knowledge, especially for some vulnerable reader groups” (114).

While Toth’s research tends to support his pessimism, there are experimental methods for enhancing the discoverability of library resources such as folksonomies, which have the potential to serve as a corrective to outdated cataloging systems. Rachel Wexelbaum writes in her chapter, entitled “Global Promotion of LGBTQ Library Resources and Services through Social Media,” that libraries without sufficient LGBTQ resources could turn to the public for content creation through projects such as podcasting, e-book publishing, and blogging. Such projects “could potentially encourage LGBTQ individuals to use the library, provide security for individuals under threat, and support native language LGBTQ cultural development” (224).

In “Rural and Urban Queering Alliances out of the Library towards Legal Protection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning People in India,” Bharat Mehra and Lisette Hernandez offer cogent analysis of how library professionals in India can combat homophobia by offering “queering alliances of support” in defiance of the country’s 2013 re-established ban on gay sex. As the authors explain, “information poverty is foremost among India’s many social and economic challenges” (126), which has an outwardly negative effect on marginalized groups such as LGBTQ populations. They propose to address this information poverty using an intersectional approach—fighting discrimination through “alliances at the economic, educational, legal, political, and social levels to promote lawful protection of sexual minorities in India” (126) and building India’s libraries and professional associations into determinedly progressive institutions that promote the protection of sexual minorities.

Mehra and Hernandez advocate pointedly that the libraries of India should “establish their own trajectory in their varied manifestations and not necessarily replicate the limitations and successes of library growth and development in the Western world (particularly the United States)” (49). The skepticism the authors have about replicating what they perceive to be the neutral, passive stances of American library institutions would be more illuminating had they been more specific about which policies they thought should be avoided. Also, of all their ideas regarding how libraries could serve as safe spaces for India’s LGBTQ citizens, it is not clear that their suggestion to use libraries as forums where opponents of LGBTQ civil rights would be invited to speak would actually serve that purpose.

Queer Library Alliance serves as a mostly excellent resource for critical thinking about the role of information service providers serving a multiplicity of diverse user populations. While the book could have benefitted from more discussion of the specific

ways in which queerness interacts with other components of intersectional identity and how that affects access to information, it is a great primer for starting an important discussion that could lead to critical improvements for LGBTQ library users worldwide.