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Review of Reference Librarianship & Justice: History, Practice & Praxis

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Kate Adler, Ian Beilin, and Eamon Tewell, eds. *Reference Librarianship and Justice: History, Practice, and Praxis*. Sacramento, Calif.: Library Juice Press, 2018.

Reference Librarianship and Justice: History, Practice, and Praxis situates itself in the continually expanding literature on critical librarianship and libraries and social justice by focusing specifically on the work of reference services. While numerous other volumes, particularly from Library Juice Press, detail the role of social justice in libraries and the application of critical pedagogy to library moments of teaching and learning that happen both inside and outside of the classroom, this title centers its utilization of critical theories of librarianship on reference interactions with patrons in a variety of settings. It exemplifies its call for an emphasis on social justice and shared ways of knowing in reference librarianship by incorporating contributors with diverse experiences, as well as by maintaining an inclusive definition of reference librarianship and a flexible organizational structure. The authors represent the experiences of reference services in academic, public, and prison libraries. Additionally, of particular interest for this journal's readership, there is the inclusion of archives and museums. As a result, a broad definition of the work and responsibilities associated with reference librarianship takes shape in the volume, which maintains a loose structure identified by the editors in the introduction as consisting of three sections: History, Practice, and Praxis. Although the inclusivity of this title mirrors its stated values, it also results in its shortcomings by producing a narrative that is at times too broad and disjointed.

Apart from the content, the formatting of this volume makes its organizational structure difficult to ascertain. There is no indication through formatting or titles that a particular section is about to begin nor are these indicators present in the table of contents. A reader is left to assume, given the editors' stated organization in their introduction and the themes of the introductions to each section, that a new part is beginning. This is a weakness that persists throughout the book. As a result, in the summary and analysis that follows, parenthetical page numbers indicate the portion of the book under discussion.

The book begins with a foreword by Maria Accardi (1–10), which sets the tone for the following chapters through examples from the author's personal experiences with reference librarianship. In particular, emphasis is placed on a desire to move toward a reference practice focused on human relationships, empathy, and truly understanding one another. Accardi also applies elements of critical theory and pedagogy to the autobiographical anecdotes of the essay. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the author acknowledges the very real political tensions currently playing out in the United States and their affective impact on both librarians and patrons. All in all, the foreword nicely introduces the themes of the anthology.

A second introduction is provided by the editors (11–17). Here, they announce their intention to highlight an aspect of librarianship that is "too often overlooked" by the profession but is "possibly the most humane thing that we do in the library" (11). Additionally, they provide a short history of reference librarianship, beginning with Samuel S. Green's seminal 1876 article "Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers" and continuing through contemporary applications of critical pedagogy and political activism to reference work. The editors wrap up the introduction

by highlighting the chapters to come in each section, which they outline as “History,” “Practice,” and “Praxis.”

Ian Berlin introduces the work’s first section, “History,” which is meant to provide perspective and contextual background for both the role of reference librarianship and social justice’s relationship to libraries (19–22). The chapters in this section do the important work of providing the historical background of reference librarianship and situating reference librarianship’s role in social and political conflicts of the past and present, both in the United States and internationally.

In “Urban Information Specialists and Interpreters: An Emerging Radical Vision of Reference for the People, 1967–1973,” Haruko Yamauchi details the efforts of librarians to provide better, more relevant reference services to urban patrons of diverse racial backgrounds during the civil rights movement (23–55). For contemporary librarians participating in current conversations about the overwhelming whiteness of the profession, this chapter is particularly interesting. Yamauchi outlines the ways in which white, middle-class librarians and library school students were ultimately unsuccessful in providing meaningful reference to diverse, urban patrons due to their cultural differences. Instead, these patrons were more likely to rely on information services provided by other social services through information and referral centers.

The three remaining chapters in this section focus on the role of librarians and archivists in documenting historical and political events. “Unbound: Recollections of Librarians during Marshall Law in the Philippines” (56–72) and “‘I Did What I Was Told to Do’: Ukrainian Reference Librarianship and Responding to Volatile Expectations” (73–85) both detail the shifting expectations for librarians amid fast-changing political contexts. While the firsthand testimony found in these chapters is fascinating and relevant as the American political landscape becomes more polarized, the narratives have little to do with reference services. The bulk of both discussions focus on collection development. For archivists, they are informative snapshots of the ways in which appraisal and collecting can serve social justice outcomes. However, this is an anthology dedicated to social justice in reference services.

Finally, archival audiences will likely be critical of Jeff Hirschy’s “Social Justice and Birmingham Collecting Institutions: Education, Research and Reference Librarianship” (86–102). The intent of the chapter is to demonstrate how the Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute have supported social justice through their public education programs and research services. However, the chapter focuses on appraisal and collecting and glosses over the specifics of how education, outreach, and reference impact social justice outcomes. Moreover, Hirschy neglects to frame the chapter in archival theory and practice in the areas of instruction, outreach, or reference. The chapter’s argument would have been greatly enhanced by more archival literature.

Kate Adler opens the “Practice” section with an introduction that emphasizes the affective components of reference librarianship (103–12). The author writes, “I join others who have argued that a critical reference should be understood as affective care work” (104). The introduction also notes the ways in which feminist critiques have problematized emotional labor, especially in a feminized profession like librarianship. With this framework in mind, Adler closes with a brief summary of the chapters ahead. Of these chapters, the first four focus on prison librarianship.

Of particular interest to archivists is Joshua Finnell's chapter, "2596 Girls School Road: The Indiana Women's Prison Far-Away Reference Desk" (113–31). The primary focus of the chapter is remote reference services provided by volunteers across the country for the Indiana Women's Prison, known as the Far-Away Reference Desk. What is most interesting about this strategy for providing reference services is its origins. The Far-Away Reference Desk was established to meet the need for reference services created by an educational program in the prison that charged the participating women with researching the history of the Indiana Women's Prison itself. This task required primary sources and the help of archivists, in addition to other librarians. Moreover, the service's social justice outcome is one of the most compelling in the anthology, with the incarcerated women in the program debunking through their research the narrative that the Indiana Women's Prison was established to house an increased number of women imprisoned for sexual offenses (125).

The other three chapters on prison reference efforts in the "Practice" section also provide intriguing glimpses into an area of reference librarianship that many in the profession do not get to experience. However, the contents of these chapters are similar and repetitive. In particular, they reference many of the same sources, examples, and case studies. Furthermore, these four chapters on prison librarianship do not fit thematically with the others in the section because they focus on a specific type of reference practice, rather than reference practices generally, yet they make up more than half of the section. As a result, organizing the volume with a separate prison librarianship section and its own introduction would likely have been more meaningful.

The remaining two chapters in this section move outside of the realm of prison librarianship but remain in the purview of unique areas of reference librarianship: data and archives. In "The Case for Critical Data in Public Libraries," Julia Marden advocates for public libraries to utilize the increased availability of open data to empower their patrons, especially those from marginalized communities (189–204). Marden not only argues for public reference librarians to aid patrons in accessing open data sets but also maintains that they should use reference interactions and community outreach and engagement to teach patrons critical data literacy skills. The chapter cites recent, grant-funded examples from the Chattanooga and Boston Public Libraries.

In the final chapter of the section, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Reference Archivists as Social Justice Actors," Rachael Dreyer notes that professional discussions of social justice in archives are often focused on appraisal and collecting; however, none of those social justice goals is truly met without the use of the collections (205–18). As a result, the author argues that providing users with a positive and equitable research experience is social justice work. In particular, Dreyer calls out collections with access restrictions and heavy reliance on technology as barriers to such experiences. While many of the chapters in this book are applicable to the work of archivists, this essay stands out as the only one that targets archival work and is grounded in archival theory and literature.

Eamon Tewell introduces the "Praxis" section by defining praxis as when "the non-exclusive categories of theory, practice, and reflection overlap, intermingle, and mutually inform one another to result in critical action" (219). Tewell sees this process as the uniting factor of the book's final

section (219–23). The first two “Praxis” chapters live up to this description by directly applying theoretical approaches to reference work.

“From Interpersonal to Intersubjective: Relational Theory and Mutuality in Reference” by Veronica I. Arellano-Douglas applies the cultural relational theory concept of intersubjective mutuality to reference consultations (224–42). The author defines the concept as “growth through empathy exchange” and carefully outlines the theoretical background that supports it (232). Most importantly, the chapter demonstrates the reflective element of praxis by using a description of the author’s own experience in a reference consultation to exemplify the application of intersubjective mutuality.

In “Social Justice, Sentipensante Pedagogy, and Collaboration: The Role of Research Consultations in Developing Critical Communities,” Carries Forbes and Jennifer Bowers provide a detailed, quick study in the seven agreements, or principles, of sentipensante pedagogy (243–76). They detail how each of the seven are applicable to one-on-one reference consultations. Additionally, the essay utilizes the examples set by the fields of social work and education to demonstrate how the principles can be incorporated in a care work setting. This chapter seems especially well placed as each of the principles reiterates elements of social justice–focused reference librarianship introduced in earlier chapters by other authors or editors.

The final two chapters of the “Praxis” section are both written by Shawn (ta) Smith-Cruz and confusingly have their own introduction, which appears to signal a new section. The first of these chapters, “Referencing Audrey Lorde,” calls on reference librarians to use the social justice–focused techniques and methods of Audrey Lorde’s librarianship, teaching, and activism to inform and inspire their work (279–92). While this chapter is interesting, it is difficult for readers who have little additional contextual background about Lorde to understand. It also does not clearly relate Lorde’s librarianship practices to suggested approaches to reference work. For archivists, it is worth noting that Smith-Cruz does include a section that summarizes materials from Lorde’s archival collections.

The second of the author’s chapters, “Lesbian Librarianship for All: A Manifesto,” is steeped in questions of identity and theories of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies (293–306). It is probably most applicable to academic librarians, as the discussion of faculty identity is worthwhile and not featured elsewhere in the anthology. With that being said, the application of the theories of identity construction found in the chapter to reference interactions is minimal. The author uses relationships with colleagues to exemplify these theories, rather than relationships with reference patrons.

As a whole, *Reference Librarianship and Justice: History, Practice, and Praxis* is broad and difficult to navigate. However, its individual chapters possess interesting and relevant snapshots of reference work with social justice aims and outcomes. Moreover, the chapters model the elements of theory, practice, and reflection found at the core of praxis. This volume does its best work by being reflective of the values and praxis for which it advocates. However, it suffers from a lack of definition. Despite its potential to fill the literature gap on the application of critical theories of librarianship specifically to reference work, this title fails to meet this goal because its definition of reference work is so broad. The work described throughout is often more closely

related to collection development and constructing identities of librarianship than reference interactions.