# Review of Deconstructing Service in Libraries: Intersections of Identities and Expectations

Emily Komornik
*Sacred Heart University*, komornike@sacredheart.edu

## Recommended Citation

Komornik, Emily (2022) "Review of Deconstructing Service in Libraries: Intersections of Identities and Expectations," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 9 , Article 8.
Available at: https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol9/iss1/8

# Review of Deconstructing Service in Libraries: Intersections of Identities and Expectations

## Cover Page Footnote

**Veronica Arellano Douglas and Joanna Gadsby, eds. *Deconstructing Service in Libraries: Intersections of Identities and Expectations.* Sacramento, Calif.: Litwin Books, 2020.**

If one were to ask a librarian what it is they do, one might receive differing answers based on the librarian's education, experience level, or research focus. Nearly all librarians, however, will identify service at the core of their professional values. Veronica Arellano Douglas and Joanna Gadsby bring together nineteen essays from the perspectives of library workers of differing race, ethnicity, gender identity, and job title to discuss service and what it means in their respective roles. Arellano Douglas and Gadsby's edited volume offers essays that highlight the frustrations of librarians who feel underappreciated, undervalued, and, perhaps most importantly, underestimated in their professional spaces. They ask why this is a widely shared experience among library staff and pose the question: is it a good thing that we collectively place so much emphasis on service? Further, what concepts should we look to develop alongside, or perhaps, in place of service? In today's professional landscape, librarians and archivists prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace and beyond, including self-care and mental health advocacy.[1] Within *Deconstructing Service in Libraries*, Arellano Douglas and Gadsby collect insightful, real-world examples of library professionals tackling such issues and offer solidarity as well as valuable professional advice.

An overarching theme of the essays compiled in *Deconstructing Service in Libraries* is the frustration shared by library workers, especially those from marginalized or underrepresented groups, with their current service expectations and the challenges they face in initiating direct change. In their introduction, Arellano Douglas and Gadsby argue that holding service in such high regard devalues not only the intellectual but also the emotional work done by librarians as simply "part of the job," and that library staff who identify as part of marginalized groups carry this responsibility with a greater emotional and mental toll (3). Their thesis argues:

> …the concept and practice of service in librarianship is inseparable from power…. In this book we aim to explore this—at times fraught—relationship between service and power. Enacting service within oppressive power structures forces us to negotiate our professional identity and sense of personal worth with institutions that profit from our exploitation, individuals whose idea of service is servile, and a profession that holds service as a professional value without examining what it really means. (3)

Much current professional scholarship concentrates on unrecognized mental and emotional labor within libraries and archives, and therefore, this book fits neatly into a growing field of focus. As noted by Carolina Hernandez and Mary K. Oberlies in "We're Not Libraries, We're People," professional service expectations impact workers in ways that cause emotional distress, disproportionately negatively affecting marginalized racial and ethnic minority groups (180). *Deconstructing Service in Libraries* adds to the conversation surrounding this problem via firsthand accounts of library service providers navigating challenging topics such as class barriers, implicit bias, mental health, and microaggressions in the workplace, an approach that feels accessible to workers in a wide range of positions.

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[1] Society of American Archivists, "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Work Plan" (Draft Strategic Plan, 2021), 1–9.

*Deconstructing Service in Libraries* is divided into two sections: those essays that discuss intersecting identities and service, and those that rework the concept of service in the library. Though the editors discuss this division at fair length in the introduction, it is unclear from the physical structure of the book that this is their intent. The essays are not grouped in a way that is immediately obvious to the reader but rather are laid out in a standard-format table of contents. Readers may miss this important note if they choose to skip the introductory essay. While this does not negate the value of the essays individually, the essays may have been more impactful as a whole if they were more clearly identified as belonging to one of the two groups listed above. That said, perhaps this was the editors' intent, so that the reader must carefully analyze each essay to deduce which best fits in each category.

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of essays relate to service within front-facing aspects of librarianship, such as reference and outreach. Archivists, particularly those who work primarily in processing positions, as well as catalog librarians, may have difficulty relating to some essays because their positions do not necessarily involve direct user relations. One essay that does discuss the archival perspective is Jennifer Kinniff and Annie Tang's "Shared Service in the Archives: The Johns Hopkins University First-generation Students Oral History Project." Kinniff and Tang offer insight into the shared service relationship between archivists (interviewers) and first-generation students (interviewees) during an oral history project focused on closing a gap in the student-centered history of Johns Hopkins University. Kinniff and Tang realized that their archives prioritized student *records* as opposed to the student experience and sought to fill that gap to better fulfill their professional mission to serve a diverse student community (327). They concluded that the traditional role of the archivist in the position of service was not eradicated but rather replaced with a mutually beneficial and more balanced power dynamic between the storyteller and the interviewer. However, both parties also shared the burden of emotional distress during the interview process. Therefore, Kinniff and Tang suggested adding a trained counselor to the team for future oral history projects. The project still leaves unanswered the question of intersectional student identities and how to best represent them in the archives. In conclusion, participants on both sides noted that "the service role in the project…belonged to both parties in equal measure" (340), a promising result for those looking to foster a more collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship between librarians or archivists and their communities.

Though Kinniff and Tang's essay is valuable and this reviewer (an archivist until recently, now a metadata librarian) is grateful for its inclusion, this volume would have benefitted from another essay or two written by archival workers, as librarians and archivists both traditionally identify service as a core element of their respective professions. Processing archivists do not typically interact (directly) with the public, but arrangement and description within finding aids do reach a public audience. Therefore, this volume could have included an essay from a processor's perspective, potentially relating to projects involving arrangement, description, or access point creation.

Several essays discuss Roma Harris's *Librarianship: The Erosion of a Woman's Profession* and relate her connection between traditional library roles and femininity to their own experiences.[2]

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[2] Roma M. Harris, *Librarianship: The Erosion of a Woman's Profession* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1992).

Though hers is a critical piece within the field, a critique of Harris's work is that she does not take race into account within her analysis—only binary gender. The essays in *Deconstructing Service in Libraries* push the conclusions Harris formed nearly thirty ago to include further marginalized groups within this "all give and no take" relationship, including members of the BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and plus-sized communities, as well as intersections of these, and other, communities. Arellano Douglas and Gadsby's volume feels like a natural progression from Harris's due to the growth of several social, political, and cultural movements in recent years, such as Black Lives Matter, body positivity and/or neutrality, and the #MeToo movement. As these and other movements continue to grow in popular culture, so should the goals and expectations of librarians, archivists, and other information professionals, with respect to how they can best connect with members of their communities.

By way of example, in "Bottoms Up: A Queer Asian Perspective on Service in Academic Librarianship," author Andrew Wang connects the traditional role of the feminine librarian to the pervasive "model minority" trope placed upon Asian American library workers.[3] Wang unpacks the unequal relationship between librarians in service roles and faculty as seemingly innocuous, though a clear representation of the difference between the "server" and the "served." Further, Asian American librarians struggle with not only this traditionally feminized view of service but also with the expectation of a work ethic above and beyond their white coworkers (43). Wang proposes that librarians disrupt this current power balance in favor of a mutually beneficial one, where "collaboration" replaces "service," and that librarians celebrate empowering, traditionally feminine traits, such as community and the ethics of care. "If an interest in fostering collective growth, caring, and providing service are to be codes as feminine and weak," he argues, "then perhaps the pursuit of masculinity warrants reexamination" (46). Wang acknowledges that this shift may take time, and that his is not representative of all minority experiences (nor of all Asian American experiences), but contends that replacing the current, stereotyped role of service with a more holistic and collaborative approach is key to empowering library professionals. Wang does not argue that librarians eradicate the "femininity" of librarianship but rather choose to highlight its most empowering characteristics, a stance that could easily be shifted toward library workers in diverse roles and settings.

Contributors to this book continually illustrate that the stereotyping of library workers is not limited to race and can also include age, gender identity, ability, and socioeconomic status. Similarly to Wang, Ali Versluis, Carli Agostino, and Melanie Cassidy argue in their essay "Fat, Fit, and Fem: Exploring Performative Femininity for Female Librarians" that fat female library workers[4] experience more stereotyping than do their thinner counterparts. Their service is also exploited and undervalued; however, stereotypes further paint the fat female librarian as "lazy" and thus, her "otherness" is amplified. In a service role, such as a liaison or reference librarian, she is in a seat of increased visibility and therefore must work harder to prove herself in the face of implicit bias. The authors contend that intersecting identities exacerbate these biases, leading to increased feelings of exclusion. In order to fight these pervasive stereotypes, and to provide visible support for staff, administrators must include implicit bias against fat people, specifically fat

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[3] Wang uses the phrases "Asians" and "Asian Americans" within his essay to reference members of the AAPI community. The reviewer chose to continue use of these phrases for consistency across his essay and this review.

[4] Versluis, Agostino, and Cassidy use the phrases "fat librarian" and "fat bodies" throughout the course of their essay. The reviewer chose to continue use of these phrases for consistency across their essay and this review.

women, as part of the implicit bias training programs they offer (73). Further, academics must add fatness to the research on intersectionality to better understand and support the lived experiences of the fat female librarian. In a similar vein, Kelsey George explores differing expectations of "othered" staff in her essay "DisService: Disabled Library Staff and Service Expectations," noting the implicit biases and microaggressions experienced by librarians of differing abilities, including those whose disabilities are not immediately visible (110). Versluis, Agostino, Cassidy, and George remind readers that service expectations do not look the same for every library worker.

Another theme discussed in *Deconstructing Service in Libraries* is the often contentious relationship between administration and library workers who struggle to prove their success in measurable, quantitative outputs. In "Service, Gender, and Liaison Librarianship," Megan Browndorf and Maura Seale discuss the difficulties liaison librarians (a term they use interchangeably with "subject librarians") face within academic institutions to balance the conflicting needs of their patrons with the wants of administration. Further, they comment on the precarious position of subject librarianship due to the fact that, by definition, it focuses on a small subset of academia and not the larger picture of the institution. Their vision for subject librarians, therefore, includes new skills, ways of working, and tools, ultimately evaluated using different metrics for success. The problem, therefore, is not with liaison librarians themselves but rather how they are perceived and their value measured (25–26). Browndorf and Seale argue that altering the lexicon surrounding subject librarians can also strengthen their position. By trading "serve" for "partner with," "service" with "impact," and "provide information" with "provide informed *advice*," liaison librarians can better describe their own activities and more effectively communicate their unique value to administrators who might not immediately recognize it.

Though vital to analyze and discuss, the essays included in this volume unpack emotionally charged topics. Therefore, a final, light-hearted touch that this reviewer enjoyed was the autobiographies of each contributor at the end of the book, as this section provided an opportunity to learn about the authors outside of a professional lens. This reviewer always finds biographical information helpful, so the personal nature of the autobiographies allowed for a deeper connection to each author, which in turn strengthened each essay's impact.

In their acknowledgements, Arellano Douglas and Gadsby dedicate the book to "all of you doing the unrecognized and undervalued labor that makes libraries function" (vii). This is a statement of appreciation for library workers tackling not only their workloads and "other duties as assigned" but also the unseen mental and emotional labor inherent in a profession of service. Contributors offer firsthand accounts of how the service relationship directly impacts their work, their coworkers, those whom they serve, and ultimately, their communities at large. *Deconstructing Service in Libraries* is a key addition to today's professional literature because it encourages readers to think critically about the definition of service and how librarians can empower one another while honoring a commitment to information literacy, educational support, and inclusion in their spaces.