

“We Should All Be Social Justice Warriors”:

The Library as a Battleground for Equity

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IS 212 Values and Communities

It is no hyperbole to say that the world has changed dramatically during my first year in the MLIS Program. In the fall of 2019, my worries as a graduate student centered around massive student loans and my inability to find a campus job; by Spring 2020, those worries were largely replaced by a deadly global pandemic that has uprooted economic, social, and political infrastructures; appalling instances of police brutality and systematic racism against people of color; and the deformation of the American political system into fascism. Our new normal is one of uncertainty, isolation, and despair. Now, and in the months to come, librarians and information professionals will play an important role in providing citizens with necessary resources, truthful information, and moral guidance that the current government is withholding from its citizens. This paper is a reflection of these times, and an affirmation of the role of libraries and other cultural institutions to lead the fight for a more equitable and informed society in the face of bureaucratic obstacles and biased opposition. While this paper may not be as academic as I would have liked, it's what I can manage during these disturbing times.

Back in October 2019, I went to the Hammer Museum to see “A Conversation with Susan Orlean and Roxane Gay on Libraries.” This was a free event in honor of the Susan’s work, “The Library Book,” being released in paperback, and the auditorium was packed. For an hour, we listened to the writers discuss the impact libraries have had on their lives, the history of the Los Angeles Central Library, and the kinds of innovative programming that libraries are developing across the country. Then the floor was opened for audience questions.<sup>1</sup>

An older white man sitting in the row behind me asked the following: “I wanted to follow up on the idea of mission expansion into social services. Do you believe there would be a tipping point wherein the volume of street people or homeless” – Roxane looked shocked and disgusted at his choice of words – “might crowd out homed patrons” – Susan shifted in her seat – “in particular, children with red wagons?” (This last point alluded to an earlier moment in the evening when Susan talked about her childhood visits to the library.)

The auditorium was filled with a tense silence. The subject of homelessness had not been discussed during the previous hour, and now it was abruptly thrown into the spotlight. I wondered – and worried – how Roxane would respond to this man. She writes frequently about the prejudices she faces as a large, queer woman of color, and does not shy away from confrontation, particularly on Twitter. I had a cowardly fear that if she were to publicly call him out on his prejudices, it would alienate half the audience, and the previously pleasant evening would devolve into something more contentious.

Roxane’s response was firm but tactful: “Um. I have to say... [pause] who cares? They’re part of the community!” At this, to my relief, many audience members applauded. She

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<sup>1</sup> I have transcribed this particular moment in full from the Hammer’s recording of the event because I feel that the words and body language spoke volumes about the tensions that pervade our society. Video available here: <https://hammer.ucla.edu/programs-events/2019/10/susan-orlean-roxane-gay-for-the-love-of-libraries> (Relevant event occurs at 55:35-58:15.)

continued, “I think that that concern reveals discomfort with people’s personal circumstances. And I don’t think it’s any of our business whether someone has a home or not, as long as they’re in the library, using the library for what it’s supposed to be used for! It’s just none of our business.” The audience applauded again.

Roxane’s answer echoes the words Sanford Berman (as quoted in Wong’s “Homelessness in Public Libraries”) who “called this hostility, the lack of sympathy, and fear of contamination [based on a group’s social and economic status] ‘classism’” (Wong 2009, 399). Everyone who uses the library has the same right to be there, regardless of their housing situation, health issues, or appearance. Wong notes that our society has an implicit (or explicit) bias against people who are homeless in which we assume that they will be “potential problem users” (Wong 2009, 399) in the library. LA County Library’s 2018 iCount Equity Initiative encouraged library staff to take Implicit Association Tests (IAT) in order to become aware of their own assumptions and learn how focus on specific situations rather than rely on general reactions. Implicit biases can affect how library staff treat people of different ages, races, appearances, genders, and other attributes; by acknowledging that everyone has biases, they are taking the first step in overcoming them to provide more equitable treatment towards all patrons.

Susan also responded to the question: “I would also say that, at the point where anyone feels... I mean, let’s just be honest: we need to do something about the homeless situation, period. And the fact is if anyone feels there are” – here she used air quotes – “‘too many’ homeless people in the library, there are too many *homeless* people, and there’s a problem. And I think it’s a crushing, devastating... situation, that... *that’s* what’s important.”

Similar to how Richard Wright said, “There isn’t any Negro problem; there is only a white problem” (Lipsitz 1995, 369), Susan’s response pointed out that the real issue was not a

group of people who don't fit into an ideal population (i.e. one that has a fixed residence), but a societal condition that causes them to be considered a problem for that ideal population. Wong notes that a person may be homeless for a variety of reasons, such as mental or physical illness, addiction disorders, domestic violence, and unemployment; furthermore, that there are deficiencies in our societal infrastructure that *keep* people homeless, such as a "consistent decline of public assistance, welfare programs, and subsidized housing" (Wong 2009, 400) These deficiencies cannot be solved by any one person or group of people; it takes legislative measures on local, state, and federal levels to enact any real change – which is why it is important to elect people who are prepared to make those changes.

Roxane continued: "For sure. I mean, we live in a city that has unfathomable wealth – and yet – not a day goes by when I don't see people – families, pets – living on the street. And we drive by in our nice cars and our nice little lives, when we should be advocating for more housing and for making sure maybe that our libraries could stay open later so people have safe spaces where they can access things like the internet – because you can't apply for a job without the internet, and you can't get rid of living on the street if you don't have any money, and you don't have any money if you don't have a job. And so it becomes this vicious cycle, and so we have to start somewhere, and I think for now, libraries are, in many ways, that first line of defense. But also, our communities have to respond and not say, 'It's making me uncomfortable that there are homeless people around my children.' *That's* not the problem. The problem is that they don't have a home to go to, and so they want to sit in a place that's climate-controlled, and clean, and has a bathroom they can use."

Roxane's argument emphasized the fact that real change can only happen when the community – as a whole, but particularly those whose voices count most in our society – speaks

up and demands legislative change that will benefit their less privileged neighbors. It often falls to the marginalized groups themselves to fight for their own causes, on top of the struggle to survive in a society that actively makes their lives difficult. Murugami (2009), writing about disability and identity, notes that “Society desires that a person with a disability fit into societal structures, rather than structures fitting into the person’s with disability needs. This can be facilitated through legislations that take into account impairments as well as promoting new attitudes towards disability in all areas of society” (Murugami 2009). In our current state of affairs, anyone that isn’t a white, straight, cisgender, financially-stable, Christian male could be considered to have a “disability” that prevents them from fully participating in the current system as designed.<sup>2</sup> It is up to the people with privilege – the ones who are less impeded when navigating the social infrastructure (i.e. white people) – to advocate for those with less privilege and make changes that promote equity within society. Not only does this demonstrate compassion for one’s fellow human beings, it raises the overall standard of living for everyone rather than a select few.

The evening’s Q&A continued on a more conventional note, but I have not forgotten the palpable tension on display in the room. While many audience members found the writers’ response to the question to be satisfactory – as evidenced by the applause – there were others who weren’t entirely convinced, including the original question-asker, whom I heard grumbling to his companion as the auditorium cleared after the event. Wong says that many people “often are unaware of the problem of homelessness as a social or community-based issue [and] are under the false impression that the library has the right to refuse service and access to anyone

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<sup>2</sup> DIGRESSION: One thing that has always bugged me about prostate medication ads is when the disclaimer says, “Women should not take [Name of medication] due to a specific birth defect.” I’ve personally never regretted my lack of a prostate, but if it’s a “birth defect,” am I missing out? Also, as far as I can tell, there is no counterpart to this disclaimer in birth control ads, implying that this “birth defect” statement is a one-way street.

based on complaints from other users” (Wong 2009, 402). Although Pawley (2006) mentions the business/management curricular model of LIS – where information is a commodity and patrons are customers who want something – unlike a restaurant, the library does not have the right to refuse service to anyone. Preventing someone from accessing the library, or calling the police on “potentially problem users” directly violates the American Library Association’s Core Values of Librarianship, particularly those of Access, Democracy, Diversity, Service, and Social Responsibility. Instead of getting a concrete action solving “the homeless problem,” the question asker was forced to consider his own discomfort with the biased social structures that benefit him while excluding others, which he probably didn’t expect to happen during an evening glorifying the virtues of libraries.

Seven months later, Ron Solórzano gave our Values and Communities class his perspective on these issues as a Regional Librarian in the Ventura County System. He told us that public librarianship requires skills beyond those that are taught in a typical MLIS program: situational awareness, cultural competency, de-escalation tactics, empathy, and courage. Because it is impossible to teach every possible scenario that a public librarian might face, these skills can only be developed while on the job and are necessary for navigating difficult situations.

One of my classmates voiced concern over not feeling prepared to handle conflict, and that, as a young female librarian who strives to be accommodating to all users, patrons might take advantage of her. I share this concern: as a young, white, introverted female, I have been culturally-raised to be helpful, polite, and unassertive, all of which can be read as weakness (even, at times, by myself.) Ron stressed that, as a staff, librarians need set clear boundaries with patrons – keeping in mind that people have different comfort levels – and that when talking to a patron about acceptable behavior, to have clear language cues establishing boundaries and have

other staff members nearby as back-up. Ron also said, “When you’re being kind to somebody, keep in mind somebody you’re being unkind to,” which is to say that permitting certain behaviors (like letting someone camp in front of the library) may impact other patrons’ library use (like if they’re blocking the walkway for people with mobility issues). The library should have a code of conduct in place—echoing Wong’s point of “establishing consistent library practices” (Wong 2009, 403) – that applies to all patrons, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Ron emphasized the importance of listening to each library’s specific community of users to find out what programs the users would most like to see, rather than prescribing programs that the library thinks their users should want. A library that caters to mostly white retirees would have more visiting speakers or life-long learning programs, while a library that caters to Latinx families should have bilingual staff and programs available in both Spanish and English. Developing community connections and networks is a type of praxis that allows librarians to figure out how to best serve the needs of their users.

My cohort, and Ron’s employees in the Ventura County System, are not outliers in the overall demographics of the library profession, in which 85.9% of librarians are white and 83.5% of librarians are female<sup>3</sup>. Oftentimes, a library staff does not reflect the demographics of the community they serve, which is why it is so important to have cultural competency training. Recently, I have had to dismantle my stereotype that all librarians are pro-social justice, anti-censorship, book-loving introverts. So-called liberal white women, even those who claim to be feminists, are not automatically aligned with other social justice causes. Seeing the chilling video of Amy Cooper – ostensibly a liberal – playing into the stereotype of a scared white female in order to threaten a black man she was arguing with, shows the insidious and pervasive power of

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<sup>3</sup> And even in this female-dominated field, men on average still make more money than women. Food for thought.

white privilege. The thought that someone could see me as a threat – I, who have been taught by society to be afraid of everyone and overly accommodating at the same time – is anathema to me. The reality is that for people seeking resources at the library, a white librarian is not automatically an ally by virtue of her position or gender, which may make them hesitant to ask for help.

I titled this paper after Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s “We Should All Be Feminists,” an essay in which the writer explains why it is so important to reclaim a once pejorative term (feminist) and use it as it was intended (in favor of equal rights for men and women). The term “Social Justice Warrior” developed a pejorative connotation during the Gamergate controversy in the mid-2010s, and has been used by conservatives to call out any person who claims to support social justice initiatives. Much like “liberal snowflake,” “virtue signaling,” and other terms that have been thrown around in the past few years, “Social Justice Warrior” is meant to shame people for their activism, and prevent the status quo from changing. There have been many protests since the presidential election of 2016, and the vast number of reasons to protest may have given people “compassion fatigue,” in which “we become overwhelmed and ‘desensitized’ by [the] depressing social problems around us” (Wong 2009, 399).

However, the current iteration of the Black Lives Matter movement, ignited by the horrific murders of several black people at the hands of police officers, seems to be different, due in no small part to the pandemic. Because people are sheltering at home, not having to commute to work or drive their children to school, they have the time to pay attention to the news and cannot be distracted by outside responsibilities. And because isolation has made us crave human contact, people who may not usually attend protests are joining them in record numbers. But the key reason why more people are finally saying “black lives matter” out loud – rather than an



awkward muttering of “all lives matter” while they shuffle their feet – is that the veneer of civility has been wiped away from law enforcement, and white people are seeing what black people have been experiencing all along: senseless violence and brutality from the people who were hired to serve and protect the community. Witnessing first-hand the double standard of how police treated the heavily-armed white civilians protesting quarantine in stark contrast to how they actively sought violence against unarmed BLM protestors, white people are finally getting the message that America’s system has always been broken. It is to be hoped that these protests might be the start of Lipsitz’s “explicitly antiracist pan-ethnic movement that acknowledges the existence and power of whiteness” (Lipsitz 1995, 384).

For library and information professionals, this is the time to be collecting and archiving the many articles, YouTube videos, online petitions, and Instagram posts being shared by people of color and antiracist activists across social media. Already, Trevor Noah’s “broken contract” vlog and Kimberly Jones’ “Monopoly” metaphor have been shared millions of times, both in their original form and cited within other articles and videos. There are lists of books for white people to read (rather than burdening their black friends to explain the history of racism for the umpteenth time); seeing these books temporarily sold out on Amazon gives me hope that, with all the time people have in quarantine, they might actually be read. Additionally, the inadequate government responses and examples of military force should be documented, both for future historians and current lawmakers to use as evidence in the efforts to divert funds from police departments and invest them in education, social welfare, health services, and other crucial departments that have been neglected for decades.

Cultural institutions like libraries, museums, and theatres, have been called upon to do better in their hiring practices and general treatment of their POC employees. Pawley suggests

that we “decenter whiteness” by “conceiving of libraries as ‘nonwhite’ or ‘race-neutral’ spaces” (Pawley 2006, 162). The Library of Congress has long been guilty of using offensive catalog subject headings, and while minor conciliatory changes in vocabulary, “white Christian male” is still considered the default category from which all other subjects differ. Implicit bias and cultural competency training for library staff, like those proposed by the LA County Library System, are important first steps in making the library a welcoming place for everyone.

The use of military force and language from the presidential administration and law enforcement shows that America is at war with social injustice, which is why we need as many “social justice warriors” as possible, fighting with the tools provided by democracy: education, political activism, and communication. Roxane Gay used military language when she described libraries as “the first line of defense” against the vicious cycle of poverty; those who are sharing information and directing the battle for equity could be considered the generals. White people “can only become part of the solution if we recognize the degree to which we are already part of the problem – not because of our race, but because of our possessive investment in it” (Lipsitz 1995, 284). By acknowledging our prejudices, recognizing the ways in which white privilege has made us complicit in an unjust system, and supporting causes led by people from those communities that have been marginalized, we might have a chance at creating the equitable society that is four hundred years overdue.

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