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Queering Library Space: Notes Toward a New Geography of the Library

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The insights of critical geography have made few inroads in the professional literature of librarians. When librarians do think and talk about space, our conversations are generally confined to the vocational concerns such as the placement of computers in library space, or the merging of libraries with writing centers. This paper represents an initial gesture toward the liberatory potential of a queer theory of library social space. I begin with an analysis of spatial organization as a reflection of the ideology that imagines libraries as spaces of citizen-making in the smooth functioning of democracy. Next, I turn to a particular abridgement of democratic rights that took place in 2005 at the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library. In this case, the County Commission responded to a display of GLBT materials by banning expressions of pride of any kind. This response suggests the limits of library space as it is currently conceived, and poses the potential of specifically queer sexuality as a site of resistance and re-thinking of library spatial practice.

Libraries as Democratic Space

The discursive construction of the public library—the way we construct the library through the stories we tell about it—explicitly reflects democracy as an ideology. Kathleen de la Peña McCook points to Oliver Garceau's 1949 work, *Public Library in the Political Process*, as the origin of "'the library faith'—the belief that public libraries support the democratic process" (D'Angelo, 2006, x). The public library is imagined as a space where Everyman can self-educate from the multitude of political positions, each represented equally, even democratically, in the library collections. These stories are central to the way that libraries are understood by librarians—the workers whose daily labor produces and re-produces the space of the library. If we look to the American Library Association's Freedom to Read statement, we see this democracy and reading as explicitly linked: "The freedom to read is essential to democracy," claims the ALA in a statement first promulgated in 1953. The statement goes on to argue that attempts to censor library materials "rest on a denial of the fundamental premise of democracy: that the ordinary individual, by exercising critical judgment, will select the good and reject the bad." The public library thus becomes a kind of crucible, producing citizens for the democratic republic.

This democratic ideology is reflected in the organization of both intellectual and material space in the library, spaces which are mutually constitutive and reproductive of ideology itself. Classification schemes organize materials intellectually, collating like materials with like and producing a space on an intellectual map for any given book. This abstract construction is essentially democratic. If citizens are to choose from any number of materials in a library, those materials must be made intellectually accessible. Classification schemes do this work. The intellectual construction is then literally mapped onto the physical space of the library, determining the placement of shelves and the physical arrangement of books, those singular manifestations of ideas good and bad. For example, the Dewey Decimal System orders the ethics of recreation and leisure in 175, followed by the ethics of sex and reproduction in 176 and the ethics of social relations in 177. In this scheme, sex is seen as distinct from recreation and from social relations, but intimately tied to reproduction, and all three ethical categories are seen as related to each other, following in turn but maintained as individual categories and collectively subsumed by the broader 170s and 100s. The entirety of the classification could be read in this way, weaving an intellectual web that contains the totality of human ideas within the universe of the library. This 'story' exists both in the mind of the classifier, and in the material space of the library, where books are ordered on shelves according to the intellectual map. To the extent that the democratic ideal is fulfilled by the presence and accessibility of the materials' citizen-making, this ordering and arranging of space both represents the discursively-produced democratic ideal and creates—in limited ways, as we will see—use of that same space in ways that fulfill the democratic ideal.

Moving Through Space

So far, we have looked at the space of the library as a discursive construction, and as an intellectual and material reflection of that construction. But the library is not simply the stories we tell about it, or an empty space neutrally reflecting the morals of those stories. As Henri Lefebvre has argued, social space is produced by the people who move and act through it: "In reality, social space 'incorporates' social actions, the actions of subject both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act" (1991, p. 33). The central insight of Lefebvre's work is his demand that the study of space shift from abstract theorization to the study of space as composed of subjects who interact with and within the space. In Lefebvre's articulation, "instead of emphasizing the rigorously formal aspects of codes, I shall instead be putting the stress on their dialectical character. Codes will be seen as part of a practical relationship, as part of an interaction between 'subjects' and their space and surroundings" (1991, p. 16). To understand how library space functions, we must look at how social relations are lived in the space.

Certainly, the organization of library space determines in part the way people will move within the space. Let's return to the sense of the library as a spatial reflection of the classification structures that organize the space intellectually. Just as classification schemes determine the location of particular books on particular shelves, they also determine the way a subject will need to navigate that spatial construction to find a particular book. For example, a library user is interested in abortion rights. She looks up the subject in the OPAC and gets a book title and class number. She walks to the shelves until she finds the appropriate call number area. Once she finds the appropriate shelf, she reads along the book spines until she finds the specific title for which she is looking. Even if she is only interested in a single title, the

organization of the space determines how she looks for that title and what she'll have to look at in order to find it. She may be interested in a book that traces the origin of a right to an abortion in the United States; due to the spatial organization of the library, she will find this title amid books that challenge the basis of that right. In this way, the structure of the space encourages a kind of democratic interaction between subject and the book—objects that instantiate the democratic mix of opposing ideas in the library. This echoes Foucault's formulation of 'government rationality' in public spaces that includes "a system of regulation of the general conduct of individuals whereby everything would be controlled to the point of self-sustenance, without the need for intervention" (Foucault, 1984, p. 241). In this scenario, the social space of the library smoothly produces and reproduces the democratic ideal as subjects interact with democratic structures on their way to becoming citizens.

Is this the way library space—specifically, library *social* space—operates? Or do we see irruptions, fissures that indicate rents in the democratic ideal? When we look to the case of the Hillsborough, Florida City Council, we see that the presence of queer ideas and bodies in social space disrupts the tidy formulation of democratic ideology manifested through spatial arrangement.

Having Sex in the Library

In 2005, Tampa-Hillsborough County, Florida library worker Meagan Albright was enrolled in a course about children's and YA materials for diverse populations, including people of color, the disabled, and GLBT patrons. As part of a classroom assignment, she developed an exhibit of about 20 books, a pamphlet directing young people to GLBT support services in the area, and a bibliography of relevant YA literature for an exhibit scheduled to coincide with June celebrations of gay pride. The display at the West Gate branch received patron complaints almost immediately. According to Linda Alexander, the instructor for whose class Albright erected the display, several patrons made complaints about the exhibit, including one who contacted the library director to express concern that the display was located close to the children's section of the library (Alexander, 2005, p. 24). The exhibit was moved to the adult section of the branch, but by then it was too late—the County Commissioners, alerted to the display by complaining patrons, moved to ensure that no such displays would be mounted in the County library system at all, regardless of location. On June 15, the Hillsborough Board of County Commissioners voted 5 to 1 (with one abstention) to approve a policy mandating that the "Hillsborough County government abstain from acknowledging, promoting or participating in gay pride recognition events, little g, little p" (Varian, 2005). They also voted 6 to 1 that the decision could be repealed only with a supermajority of 5 to 2 (Oder, 2005). Joe Stines, director of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System, ordered the West Gate display, along with two others, removed in order to be compliant with the County policy.

Response to the county's decision—and the library's decision to comply rather than resist it—was swift. The Florida Library Association resolved to boycott the county; they decided they would not hold conferences, meetings of the Executive Board, committees, or other FLA groups in the county until the policy was reversed. Equality Florida, a local GLBT advocacy group, hosted a public read-in at the embattled branch and organized "a quiet protest, in which we encourage people to borrow [books] from the display that was taken down" (Oder, 2005). At the national level, Kathleen de la Peña McCook noted the ALA Council's passage of a resolution concerning "Threats to Library Materials Related to Sex, Gender Identity or Sexual Orientation" as an indicator of profession-wide opposition to the events in Hillsborough County.

At the core of many of these responses was a claim to the library as a space of democracy. The problem with the county decision was its violation of the democratic mission of the library. FLA president Nancy Pike articulated her opposition to the commissioners' decision specifically by way of democratic ideology: "Public libraries are a particularly American institution, intended to ensure an informed electorate and to serve as a forum for the free exchange of ideas that is required in a democracy. The Florida Library Association is committed to continuing that tradition and providing library services to all Floridians" (Alexander, 2005, 26). Others couched their opposition in the ideal of the library as a space of citizen self-education. Kathy Hoeth, head of the FLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee, argued that "librarians have an ethical responsibility to represent all sides of the issues in the collections. Public libraries in particular are the open university of our country. Anyone can go and be an independent

learner” (Alexander, 2005, 26). Joe Stines, the embattled library director, engendered much criticism for his compliance with the commission policy, and still defended his actions in terms of a continued commitment to intellectual freedom. Writing in *Florida Libraries*, he argued that “there is no indication of interference in the professional decision-making regarding book selection. This collection remains the key to intellectual freedom” (2005, 25).

We see in these arguments a repetition of the discourse of democracy. The outrage on the part of librarians speaking for the profession is directed not at the repression of certain sexualities or the sweeping, autocratic power wielded by the commissioners, but at the violation of the story the library tells about itself. The discursive construction of the library as a space of democracy, and its concomitant mapping on social space, should structure social relations such that the library contains everything and everyone, including the ideas and realities represented by the books put on display for Pride month. What happened in Hillsborough County thus tells us something about the limits of democratic ideology in the library.

Hiding in Plain Sight

If we think of space as in motion, the Florida problem makes more sense. Library space is not static, constructed and then left to function according to its ideological purpose as a citizen-making arm of democracy. Rather, both the space and the subjects within are in a continual process of becoming—this is how social space functions, continually making and re-making. Foucault writes specifically against the fantasy that we could construct a space that would construct freedom, arguing that no social project “is functionally—by its very nature—absolutely liberating. Liberty is a practice” (1984, p. 245). A democratic space, then, is not a stable object that is aspired to and then finally acquired but rather an ideology that has meaning only insofar as it is, in Foucault’s formulation, *practiced*. The library may be constituted as a space of democratic citizen-making, but it only becomes so when subjects enter and act in the space. The gay pride display at the West Gate branch constitutes a site of just such practice—the movement of people and ideas in a structured social space.

The repression brought about by this moment of practice suggests the limits of the capacity of library space to produce democratic citizens. In the case of Hillsborough County, the queers (represented by their proxies, the books that mark their existence on the library shelves) were cast out, banished by a 5-1 vote, victims of the democratic ideal that would appear to protect them. The error here lies in the burden placed upon the space to produce citizens. As Debra Burrington argues in her work on the political geography of the Utah high school, “there are prerequisite conditions that make possible the exercise of such [political] rights. . . of central importance among these prerequisites is the ability to occupy—literally to exist as an element of the public landscape” (1998, p. 108). The library is articulated as a space of democratic citizen-making, and yet not every subject is equally welcome in the space. In order to enter a library in the first place, the subject must already contain a kind of pre-citizenship, the capacity to enter the democratic public via movement through and interaction with the library space. The kind of democracy sought by the makers of the library can be practiced by only a limited number of subjects—not everyone has the capacity to become a citizen.

Embedded in Burrington’s formulation is the notion of a *public* landscape. Central to citizenship is an existence within a public, a public where subjects are visible to one another and legible to themselves. In a sense, it is the public visibility of these queer books that limits the capacity of library space to include queers in the citizen-making project. Prior to their inclusion in Albright’s gay pride exhibit, after all, these books—and the ideas contained within them—were already in the library. Aside from the few pamphlets Albright included about services for GLBT community members, the entire exhibit could have been found on the shelves, and still can be. The county decision did not require the removal of the books, merely the removal of their exhibition. As long as the queer books stayed in their places in the classification, where they could be read “just like any other,” they could stay in the library. The very difference of queerness—the fact that queerness isn’t “just like any other”—served as warrant for the display, which had the effect of making queerness simultaneously highly visible—the light of controversy is always particularly harsh—and invisible again, placed back onto the shelves in an order meant to contain it. Burrington calls this process a paradox, “for silences must be shattered for the demons to be born. Yet the demonization is

possible only because of the context of speech that allows the target group to be singled out for such treatment” (1998, p. 128). In rendering the difference at the heart of queerness visible through display, the exhibition allows us to “retrace lines of both continuity and rupture” (Das, 1998, p. 36) that comprise the social space of the library.

The difference represented by queerness poses a challenge to the construction of democratic space as essentially about sameness—the library has a place for everything, and will put everything in its place. In fact, all books are not alike, and carry different threats to the systems that contain them. For example, it is difficult to imagine an exhibit about heterosexual family life or auto repair causing the kind of consternation set off by a Pride exhibit. It is the difference marked by queerness that poses the challenge and prompts the appearance of what Burrington calls “three distinct mechanisms—silence, isolation and demonization—are used to marginalize those whose equal citizenship has not yet been established and cannot be allowed by a dominant culture in which ‘holding the center’ is founded on the exclusion of difference” (1998, 109). The response of librarians to the Hillsborough County incident failed to grapple with the contradiction between classification schemes that suggest every book is equally welcome in the social space of the library, and the reality of violent repression of certain materials, particularly those that mark difference.

Queers in Space

If we concede that sexuality generally, and queer sexuality specifically, makes a habit of exceeding bounded systems, the organizing principles of library space become open to question. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner locate queer culture in terms that make explicit the difficulty of containing it:

By queer culture we mean a world-making project, where ‘world,’ like ‘public,’ differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies (1998, p. 558).

When we think of queerness as this volatile and this much in motion, its escape from the containment of the classification scheme that would keep it housed in a particular class number is less surprising. This constitutes a fundamentally different way of imagining the role of the library. A space based on an ideology that centered notions of queerness and difference rather than of democracy and citizenship would need to reflect this kind of expansiveness. How might we imagine spaces of “incommensurate geographies”?

The field of queer geography engages this question and encourages us to think through the effect of queerness on social spaces. In Larry Knopp’s analysis of queer and feminist geographies, he articulates the idea of place through the lens of queerness. Places, he writes, “are constituted by ever-changing practices and purposes that are both informed by and generative of all kinds of lingering legacies, including myriad intended and unintended consequences. Many of these legacies are themselves products of the interactions between human beings, their material and semiotic creations, and nonhuman forces, in complex networks and relationships (such as those embodied in technologies, institutions, and infrastructures)” (2007, p. 50).

When we imagine space in this way, rather than in terms of the rigid ordering project of libraries as we currently imagine and manifest them, we open a possibility for a new kind of generative space. The social space of the library changes from that of an ordering machine that subordinates objects in a classification scheme that serves the citizen-making project of democracy. Instead, perhaps we can begin to imagine a spatial practice of the library that would place the queer books at the West Gate branch at the first order of social space. While this work of imagination is beyond the scope of this paper, I hope it gestures toward the space we might think next.

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