A Collective Effort :
Healing, Trauma, and Precarity in Public Librarianship

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This essay was adapted from a final course paper written for Professor David Shorter's "Healing, Ritual, and Transformation" in the Department of World Arts and Cultures. The class took place in Winter 2019 and was a cross-cultural exploration of healing practices. Our coursework and discussions aimed to destabilize preconceived assumptions about care outside of Western medicine, the scientific authorities that inform societal understandings of the body and health, the role of healers in a variety of culturally-specific contexts, and healing outside of object-oriented epistemologies.

Introduction

Public libraries are in the midst of a transformation wherein the majority of new labor opportunities are both precarious and traumatic. In response, I argue that looking at these issues through the lens of collective healing, alongside theories of radical empathy and a feminist ethics of care, facilitates movement building and encourages community responsibility. Examining the precarity of present labor conditions, and naming them as trauma, frames current questions about the future of library work in a more serious light. Collective healing, then, functions as a potential salve to this longstanding, possibly unending issue that threatens to upend the profession. My intent with this project is to encourage library workers, administrators, and graduate library programs to engage with issues of precarity in tangible ways so as to mitigate harm in the present and find solutions to eliminate it throughout the field in the future.[1]

In order to explore these questions, I will examine the rise of trauma, direct and indirect, in the library and how it impacts workers, citing precarity as a form of trauma. I will then shift my argument to establish the value of collective healing, care, and community building for the ever-evolving world of public librarianship. To conclude, I will suggest additional paths for further scholarly inquiry as well as practical questions to explore while engaging in library work.

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[1] In earlier explorations of this topic, I mapped the origins of the public library alongside more recent cultural and political threadlines, factoring in neoliberalism and the ways in which libraries have absorbed social services that were previously tended to by other government-funded organizations. While doing so, I also linked the historic feminization of librarianship to this present crisis in traumatic labor, thereby grounding gender bias as explanation for why assumptions of care-related duties are easily relegated to library workers.

Establishing Precarity as Trauma

Frontline public library work is traumatic in multifaceted ways. Traditional day-to-day service tasks and unwritten external job duties, many of which relate directly to harm reduction, often put library workers at risk for burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety.[2] Discussions of trauma vis-à-vis harm reduction are relatively common in a great deal of contemporary library scholarship. Other forms of trauma, however, are less frequently discussed or examined through the same critical lens. An additional result of the rise of neoliberalism and the Great Recession of 2008, employment precarity and an overinvestment in contingent, part-time, or temporary labor, I argue, has become another form of trauma experienced by library workers. Trauma refers to an"emotionally harmful or life-threatening" experience or series of events "that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, emotional, social, or spiritual well-being."[3] Unlike frontline trauma, both direct and indirect, that comes from working with patrons who lack adequate care or resources, labor precarity in both libraries and archives is less acknowledged by popular media and internally reinforced through things like temporary term-based diversity fellowships[4] and unpaid internships.[5] Similar to the expansive mental health

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[2] Anne Ford, "Other Duties as Assigned: Front-line librarians on the constant pressure to do more," *American Libraries Magazine*, last modified January 2 2019, https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2019/01/02/ mission-creep-other-duties-as-assigned/.
[3] Samantha Blanco, "A Trauma-Informed Approach To Libraries," (Los Angeles, 2018), 3-4.
[4] April Hathcock, "Why Don't You Want To Keep Us?," *At the Intersection*, last modified January 1, 2019, https://aprilhathcock.wordpress.com/2019/01/18/why-dont-you-want-to-keep-us/.
[5] Karly Wildenhaus, "Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries," in "Evidences, Implications, and Critical Interrogations of Neoliberalism in Information Studies," eds. Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019).

ramifications of, for example, administering Narcan[6], labor precarity and resulting experiences of poverty cause undue trauma that may manifest directly in the body or through things like post-traumatic stress disorder.[7] Though labor precarity is a direct result of broader external factors like a lack of fiscal community investment in libraries, this phenomenon, unlike the above-mentioned issues related to social-service responsibilities, is perpetuated and upheld internally by library management and administration.

In "Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries," Karly Wildenhaus links precarity with the guilt, shame, and anxiety often felt by unpaid interns in information work. She asserts that, "precarity refers to an overall tendency towards less secure and more temporary jobs and the subsequent increase in exploitation and alienation of workers."[8] This alienation, in tandem with the above mentioned emotional responses, is a critical part of the problem as reliance on precarious employment is often tied to management's intentional avoidance as well as our "very inability to talk about it."[9] Networks of isolation are created throughout information workplaces as though our precarity is something of our own making rather than a systemic, institutionally-driven manifestation. This hybrid experience of alienation and precarity is core to how Franco "Bifo" Berardi organizes his analysis of the commingling, affective evolutions of labor, neoliberalism, and technoculture. In *The Soul at Work*, Beradi suggests that, "precariousness is the transformative element of

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[6] Ford, "Other Duties."
[7] Hathcock, "Why Don't You Want To Keep Us?"
[8] Wildenhaus, 12.
[9] Myron Groover, "On Precarity," Bibliocracy, January 6, 2014, http://bibliocracy-now.tumblr.com/post/72506786815/on-precarity.

the whole cycle of production… The wages of workers on permanent contracts are lowered and broken down; everyone's life is threatened by an increasing instability."[10] Across these texts, precarity is a leading affective component of the current conditions of labor.

In addition to transforming the nature of work, precarity is also linked to the assumed psychic stability of entire cultures as "the events of economic depression and of psychic depression have to be understood in the same context."[11] Writer and theorist Mark Fischer pointedly argues that rising rates of depression in the U.K. are deeply tied to capitalism and neoliberal governments. He asserts that, "under neoliberal governance, workers have seen their wages stagnate and their working conditions and job security become more precarious… Given the increased reasons for anxiety, it's not surprising that a large proportion of the population diagnose themselves as chronically miserable."[12] When looking at public library salary breakdowns in Los Angeles County, signs of precarity and their psychic influence become immediately evident. Though *permanent* librarian positions come with benefits and salaries that are well within living wage calculations for individuals, paraprofessional positions, those held by workers without graduate degrees, are not guaranteed to offer either. With wages ranging between $10 and $19 an hour throughout branches in the Los Angeles Public Library system and the County of Los Angeles Public Library system, the average salary is barely within the realms of an

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[10] Franco "Bifo" Beradi, "The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy," (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 191.
[11] Beradi, 208.
[12] Mark Fischer, "Why mental health is a political issue," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/16/mental-health-political-issue.

individual living wage for the area.[13] In a 2017 assessment by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, a shocking half-million low income Los Angeles residents were at risk of losing their homes.[14] This statewide crisis in housing affordability, paired with the precarity of library employment due to lack of consistent hours and low-wages, places countless library workers on the verge of homelessness as well as at-risk for mental and emotional harm.

Utilizing publicly available salary information from the University of California (UC) system, Diana Ascher offers another striking labor visualization through examining the breakdown between male and female temporary librarians.[15] This dataset, from 2016, reveals that out of the thirty temporary librarians documented as working throughout the UC system, only three are male. Though this number could be explained away as evidence that more female hires are being made, even if they are temporary, the significant contribution of this visualization is that the lowest salary held by a temporary male employee is around $62,000. Out of the twenty-seven female employees with temporary status, however, eleven earned under $55,000 in 2016, while six earned under $25,000. Even if some of these lowest numbers are for part-time employees, which is difficult to extrapolate as the original UC dataset does not feature

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[13] Wage data was gathered from Glassdoor in early March of 2019. For the Los Angeles Public Library, refer to https://www.glassdoor.com/Salary/Los-Angeles-Public-Library-Salaries-E149623.htm. For the County of Los Angeles Public Libraries, refer to https://www.glassdoor.com/Salary/County-of-Los-Angeles-Public-Library-Los-Angeles-Salaries-EI_IE343897.0,36_IL.37,48_IM508.htm. Information related to living wages for Los Angeles County can be found here: http://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/06037.

[14] Josie Huang, " HUD estimates half a million low-income LA renters at risk of losing homes," *KPCC 89.3*, August 9, 2017, https://www.scpr.org/news/2017/08/09/74523/in-la-half-a-million-low-income-renters-at-risk-at/.

[15] Specific UC wage data is public information and can be found, by year, through https://ucannualwage.ucop.edu/wage/. The visualization I've referred to was created by Diana Ascher and is available here: https://public.tableau.com/profile/dianaascher#!/vizhome/UCLAAssociateLibrarianLibrarianbyGender/UCLAAssocLibLibbyGender.

this information, there is still a notable trend of non-permanent, lower wage, and, possibly, part-time positions held by female librarians in the UC system.

The feminization of librarianship has largely influenced both external and internal devaluation of labor; the trauma attributed to precarity, as well, is deeply tied to how gender hierarchies are reproduced and evident in libraries as a workplace. In "The Pink Collar Library: Technology and the Gender Wage Gap," Meredith Broadway and Elisabeth Shook observe that as more male-identified librarians join the field, "men, at disproportionate rates, take both limited management roles and higher pay in a profession ubiquitously thought to be womanly." They muse that, according to data collected by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), "the pink-collar was only made to be worn by the woman librarian."[16] If female librarians, despite comprising the majority of the field, are excluded from promotions and higher-paid positions, what links can be made between precarity-induced trauma, expectations of emotional labor, and gender? Further, how can we examine those links with regard to how each experience is validated or made further invisible by those in power?

Further, the trauma of precarity is an intersectional phenomenon – impacting not only gender minorities and those with the fewest external financial resources, but library workers of color as well, if not most significantly.[17] Analyzing how power moves

[16] Broadway and Shook, "Pink Collar."

[17] Though this assessment engages directly with questions of gender and race, I do not explore the impact of precarity on disabled library workers or, beyond this initial statement, those of working class backgrounds. A more in-depth exploration of these topics would benefit from additional research as well as specific analysis surrounding disability and precarity in libraries. In discussions surrounding precarity, I often assume that there is an inherent attention given to class as workers who suffer under these labor practices exist without additional financial resources or safety-nets. Despite this observation, future writing on this topic would also benefit from an even more attentive analysis of class.

in work environments is critical when attempting to find solutions that improve the lives of all workers even though the issues they face, including precarity, vary because of racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia. Just as librarians and libraries continue to uphold literacy empowerment and information access as cornerstones of the profession, systemic inequity and institutional oppression are equally woven into the field's legacy.[18] April Hathcock adeptly argues that precarity and temporary positions, in combination with the overwhelming whiteness of librarianship, further pushes librarians of color out of the profession. She states that, "we need to stop dancing around these coy discussions about early career experience and shifting budgets and confront the true nature of these temporary solutions we uphold. The whiteness of our profession is a problem that is persistently and historically entrenched."[19] Precarity in librarianship operates within broader cultural dynamics that are deeply tied to histories of settler colonialism and white supremacy. Though teasing out and adequately addressing the ways in which racism impacts precarity is incredibly difficult to do in such a brief investigation, highlighting and critiquing discriminatory hiring practices as well as workplace dynamics creates space for more generative and broadly beneficial conversations around future paths forward.[20]

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[18] The history of white supremacy, sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia within libraries and archives is well documented. Some significant recent contributions include, but are absolutely not limited to, nina de jesus' "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression" (2014), *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* (2018) edited by Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, and *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science* (2017) edited by Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, and numerous issues of the Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies.
[19] Hathcock, "Why Don't You Want To Keep Us?"
[20] Though the following article is specifically about the invisible labor of faculty of color in universities and colleges, there have been comparisons made between this phenomenon and the experiences of academic librarians of color, especially on Twitter. https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Invisible-Labor-of /234098

Collective Healing & Care

Through exposing the trauma that precarity engenders, libraries can begin to assess possible solutions with the hope of mitigating harm. As I've argued, precarity facilitates alienation, which then severs relationships between workers as well as prevents those impacted from seeing their blight as part of a larger system of inequity. Collective healing, conversely, offers a critical, pertinent perspective that embraces struggle as communally experienced and liberation as communally dependent.[21] There is no singular or narrow definition of collective healing as the term's meaning and use shifts with each audience that employs it. In my research, collective healing is often called upon as a tool after a community experiences or elects to confront a collective trauma like genocide, war, or lineages of oppression.[22] For this essay, I define collective healing as any consistent and continued healing practice (talk, body movement, energy work, etc.) that is grounded in a singular community to serve that community and their shared trauma. Here, I utilize collective healing in order to move away from modalities that see healing as something that happens once rather than a constant engagement with a source of trauma. Collective healing can be a tool that encourages libraries and library workers to acknowledge that precarity-based trauma is continuous and impacts each of us in differing ways, so singular or individual person-based solutions will never

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[21] A great deal of my understanding surrounding collective healing comes from the podcast Healing Justice. This show gathers together a range of practicing healers, social justice advocates, and community organizers to discuss the intersections of collective healing and justice movements.

[22] There are many resources related to collective healing and collective trauma, approached the concepts from different vantage points. Two encountered in my research include the work done by the Healing Foundation, "a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that partners with communities to address the ongoing trauma caused by actions like the forced removal of children from their families," and psychologist Jack Saul's book, *Collective Trauma, Collective Healing: Promoting Community Resilience in the Aftermath of Disaster.*

be the entire answer to this problem. To locate emergent strategies for growth that foster slowness, community investment, and care, I suggest that librarianship consider collective healing as a realized "feminist ethic of care" as well as an extension of relational community responsibility that can be acted upon through anything from wage transparency and unionization to open dialogues about position boundaries and inequitable workloads.

In the early pages of *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, adrienne maree brown offers an invitation to heal, stating that "we all have the capacity to heal each other..."[23] brown then continues, suggesting that in order to seek healing, trauma is something that must be fully acknowledged and examined. Discussions of precarity, and the trauma it produces, are often kept outside of the workplace and, likewise, those who experience it are often made powerless in seeking solutions. An intentional step towards embracing an ethos of collective healing in librarianship begins with transparency. Moving past precarity will require library workers to be open about the conditions of their employment with one another, see their colleagues as allies rather than enemies seeking the same full-time position, and identify their struggle as one that is felt in countless others. The potential role of a collective healing ethos in these situations is not one that places all responsibility upon workers. Instead, the elements of collective healing, in the most promising of settings, would be welcomed by management and workers alike.[24]

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[23] adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, (Oakland: AK Press, 2017), 34.

[24] Though I do not imagine many library administrators who would talk on an ethos of collective healing, I introduce the concept as a form a hope. Hope that the field, which puts so much labor into uplifting others, finds a path wherein we can better uplift ourselves.

In her most recent book, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, brown furthers notions of collective healing in relationship with both transformative and restorative justice. She states that, "I believe in transformative justice – that rather than punishing people for surface-level behavior, or restoring conditions to where they were before the harm happened, we need to find the roots of the harm, together, and make the harm impossible in the future."[25] Part of seeking out collective healing as a path forward involves reckoning with the past as well as how harm has been perpetuated. If we look at contemporary conditions of precarity as something that never needed to exist and is, in fact, the result of forces that flow throughout as well as beyond the public library, there is space to examine how mutual responsibility can exist as a collective attitude in the future. In "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor push the paradigm of archival rights logic away from nation-bound definitions of human rights and towards a feminist ethics that is driven by models of radical empathy and care, thereby, "advocating a feminist conception of ethics built around notions of relationality, interdependence, embodiment, and responsibility to others."[26] This ethics of care grounds brown's attention to transformative justice within the continuum of archival theory. Both notions encourage a mindset that looks outside of punitive forms of justice and, instead, emphasize the need for collectivity.

To further build upon collective healing, as well as transformative justice, within library and information science, Caswell and Cifor also highlight reciprocity in their

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[25] adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, (Oakland: AK Press, 2019), 17.
[26] Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,: *Archivaria* 81(Spring 2016): 30.

introduction of this new ethic. They state that, "in a feminist ethics framework subjects are constructed relationally, intersecting structures of violence are interrogated, and injustice is viewed as both structural and 'multi-scalar,' that is, operating on both the micro and the macro levels, in private and in public."[27] Highlighting mutual obligation that is dependent on culture and context is vital for incorporating notions of collective healing and radical empathy into future conversations around labor and precarity. Symbiotic obligations or responsibilities between workers, as possible within the space of the public library, are community-bound. These relationships co-exist and build/bend with one another. In the same manner that precarity is disseminated unequally across boundaries of marginalization, internal reactions to trauma and precarity must be cognizant of intersectional struggles that disproportionately impact non-binary people of color and women of color – specifically Black women, Indigenous women, and trans women of color. As library workers seek solutions for our profession's oppressive labor practices, acknowledging the fact that no two workers experience the world in the same way prevents conversations around collectivity from flattening difference or becoming universal. Though two workers experiencing precarity in the realm of the same public library may share individuated versions of a single form of trauma, this experience does not suggest that their relationship to trauma or precarity is bound by the same external constraints. Instead, incorporating an ethics of care, one that is grounded in radical empathy, supports collective healing as something that situationally dependent and more or less nebulous. Collective healing,

[27] Caswell and Cifor, 29.

then, functions as a way of interacting with one another and working towards finding common ground against the shared forces that exist in opposition to our mutually-dependent liberation.

Conclusion

In addressing questions of precarity and trauma in librarianship, there are countless theories and practical examples from disparate fields that, when interlocked, offer profound insight to these discussions. However, in this brief exploration of two complex concepts as they exist in the incredibly specific realm of public libraries, I was unable to include numerous resources that would have introduced a wider breadth and depth of analysis to my argument. Incorporating field reports from social work organizations and non-profit providers that engage in direct service, for example, could offer new ways to ask how management, as well as workers, are trained to identify and support individuals with symptoms of things like post-traumatic stress disorder. Additionally, future research on this topic would benefit from the inclusion of Marxist feminist theory, a closer assessment of the body and trauma, as well as an exploration of questions related to boundaries and the tangible methods to invite notions of collective healing into all facets of library work.

Creating new languages around harm will forever be imperfect. Regardless, seeking work environments and community spaces that are more attentive to the needs of workers as well as the outside world is the kind of practice that librarianship must pursue. In arguing that precarity is trauma and felt with varying levels of acuity

due to gender and race, my aim is for libraries to better address how harmful labor policies are negatively impacting workers as well as the field at-large. Since the term "trauma" is experiencing a moment of popularity in contemporary culture, I hope that conversations around this topic will be welcomed and come with ease in library and information science graduate programs, library and archival conferences, and individual libraries. Moreover, by suggesting that collective healing and logics of community responsibility offer a path forward in these discussions, I imagine a future for librarianship wherein our practice deemphasizes alienation and competition in favor of relational networks of support. Care and empathy can be liberatory when they are scaffolded in a way that acknowledges the realities of our world, when they do not mutate and evolve into continuous cycles of emotional labor output, burnout, and depression that ask the most out of those who are often supported the least. Towards the end of *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown offers a powerful assessment of contemporary movement building. She states that, "we are realizing that we must become the systems we need – no government, political party, or corporation is going to care for us, so we have to remember how to care for each other."[28] For the future of librarianship to be sustainable, workers throughout the field need to begin caring for one another. This powerful first step will push against the politics of precarity and offer up a healing space of collective possibility that is desperately needed.

[28] brown, 113.

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