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The Public Library as Resistive Space in the Neoliberal City

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Abstract

With reduced hours, decaying infrastructure, and precariously positioned staff, local public libraries provide much needed services in cities devastated by inequality and slashed safety nets. In this article, I draw on ethnographic research of a small public library in a diverse, mostly working class neighborhood in Queens, New York. I show that in addition to providing an alternative to the capitalist market by distributing resources according to people's needs, the library serves as a moral underground space, where middle class people bend rules to help struggling city residents. Although the library occasionally replicates hegemonic ideologies about immigrant assimilation, it provides a striking example of cross-class and inter-class solidarities and resistance to the neoliberal social order. I conclude by discussing the potential of public libraries as everyday spaces of subversion and emancipation, as well as research sites for urban scholars.

The Public Library as Resistive Space in the Neoliberal City

Surveys indicate that roughly half of Americans have visited a public library in the past year, and three quarters say that their local public library provides them with the resources they need (Horrigan, 2016). Yet, sociologists and urban scholars have largely left the study of the over 17,000 public libraries in the US to the field of library studies (Audunson, 2005; Wiegand, 2015), even as public libraries' significance as key institutions intensifies in the context of neoliberal austerity and skyrocketing inequality. The archetypal image of libraries conjures up places with rows of dusty books, presided over by shushing librarians. The social imaginary also includes grand iconic library spaces, like the New York Public Library with its carved lions and hallowed reading room. Municipal leaders tout the new multi-story flagship libraries whose coffee shops put the visitor in mind of a chain bookstore at the mall. But American cities are full of a different breed of library. These small public libraries are buffeted by budget cuts as they attempt to cover expanding gaps left by the failing social safety net and other public institutions. Librarians become more like social workers struggling to provide a myriad of services and a safe space for struggling urbanities under siege in increasingly unequal cities.

This paper presents a case study of one such library. Located in a gentrifying working class immigrant neighborhood in Queens, New York, it is composed basically of one room, with scuffed linoleum floors and a periodically flooded basement. Much of the time, the library is filled with boisterous children, people struggling with mental illness

and memory loss, and others making the most of its handful of outdated computers and one printer to apply for jobs and government benefits, check email, or study for citizenship tests. It is a place to cool off in the summer under the struggling air conditioning, warm up in the winter, use the bathroom, and chat with friends and neighbors.

Drawing on extended ethnographic fieldwork, I analyze the way patrons and staff use and make sense of this small library space. I consider the ways in which the library enforces and reproduces the hegemonic social order, from immigrant assimilation to individual self-improvement. At the same, I show the ways in which the library fills in the expanding gaps in essential services for the increasingly marginalized sections of the city. The primary focus of the article is the analysis of the ways in which the library operates as an alternative and resistive space, with practices of cross-class and inter-class solidarity.

Public Libraries as Hegemonic Institutions and Emancipatory Spaces

From their beginnings in the mid-19th century, American public libraries have been much more than storehouses of reading material. Public libraries reflect and reproduce societal inequalities (Sin and Kim, 2008; Wiegand, 2015). At the same time, they have the potential to serve as sites of resistance to capitalism-induced alienation, and some argue for their role in supporting democracy, tolerance, and right to the city (Buschman, 2003; Iveson and Fincher, 2011). Public libraries are set up as an alternative to market exchange (Wright, 2013), and they provide vital services in cities disciplined by neoliberal austerity

measures (Terrile, 2016). As alternative spaces, public libraries can function as sites of resistance to economic injustice.

Public libraries have a long history of participating in the reproduction of social class through social control, enforcement of social norms, and representations of dominant ideologies and hierarchies. The hundreds of public libraries founded through Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy in the early 20th century stressed individual improvement over class solidarity, helping to reproduce an atomized and compliant workforce (Augst, 2001; Wiegand, 2015). At the same time, library policies reflected prevailing mechanisms of exclusion along lines of class, gender, and race (Wiegand, 2015). Today, as in the past, public libraries are hailed as key nodes for acculturation of the urban immigrant into the American culture, creating English-speaking workers who improve themselves through library resources (Audunson, 2005; Gitner and Rosenthal, 2008; Shen, 2013). Libraries often privilege middle-class norms and focus on helping people conform to these norms (Hodgetts et al., 2008), as happens in the case of homeless patrons (Terrile, 2016). They reproduce hegemonic narratives, including those about race and belonging, and serve as arenas for powerful political agendas. In a study of a public library in Monterey Park, California, Chu and Honma (2007) demonstrate how a public library can become a site of struggles over community identity, collective memory, and racist ideologies. Their analysis of contestation over languages in the library collections underscores the power of elite representations of space (LeFebvre 1991).

Public libraries can also be viewed as microcosms of society, reflecting larger patterns of stratification (Molz and Dain, 1999). There is significant inequality in

resources among library systems as well as between neighborhoods in the provision of library services (Ottensmann, 1994; Sin, 2011). There are also patterns of inequality in library access and use. Research on the circulation of library materials and neighborhood characteristics indicates that higher socioeconomic status, higher proportions of white and Asian residents, and neighborhood social capital are associated with higher circulation figures in New York City (Gong, Japzon, and Chen, 2008; Japzon and Gong, 2005). On the individual level, there appears to be an overall positive correlation between library use and levels of education and income (Horrigan, 2016; Sin and Kim, 2008).

Although there are clearly ways in which public libraries reproduce social hierarchies and hegemonic ideologies undergirding exploitation, there is theoretical grounds for expecting that they also host practices of resistance. As Certeau (2011) argues for space in general, everyday activity of ordinary urbanites is never completely colonized by the capitalist order (see also Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011). The imperatives of the elites who control the libraries can be subverted by the interests and quotidian behavior of library users. These users can impose their own meanings on the space, appropriating it and challenging or subverting authority (LeFebvre 1991). In theorizing space, both Certeau (2011) and LeFebvre (1991) point to everyday practices as holding the potential for liberation. LeFebvre's (1991; 1996) theories of urban space and the right to the city highlight the promise of spaces like public libraries to center the needs of users, fostering cooperation, solidarity, meaningful connections, and grassroots democracy (Purcell 2013). Libraries can be seen as crucial nodes in people's right to the

city, with potential for redistribution of resources and power (Buschman, 2013; Iveson and Fincher, 2011).

Others connect libraries to democracy and tolerance. Using Habermas's (1989) conceptualization of the public sphere as essential for democracy, some have argued that libraries are a part of the public sphere, and therefore have an important potential effect on democracy (Buschman, 2003; Frederiksen, 2015). Like other public spaces, libraries can provide opportunities for interaction with diverse others, development of tolerance, and formation of ties that transcend categorical identities (Audunson, 2005, Iveson and Fincher, 2011). Iveson and Fincher (2011) qualify this promise of tolerance by pointing to its tension with the typical segregation of library space to suit different types of users (children, teenagers, seniors).

Although they are not perfectly emancipatory or liberating institutions, Eric Olin Wright (2013) uses libraries specifically as an example of a "real utopia", an alternative institution that empowers people to transcend capitalist markets and move away from consumption-centric ways of living. He points out that libraries "increase equality in access to the material conditions necessary to live a flourishing life" (Wright, 2013, p. 10). In their very set up, public libraries are organized to distribute resources based on need rather than payments, illuminating the workings of an alternative economic system. Access to materials that are scarce are regulated through waiting lists. Libraries are institutions that can help move society towards eliminating oppression and help people live fulfilling, meaningful, and connected lives (Wright 2013).

Libraries have become spaces of essential service provision at a time when many US cities are in the grip of neoliberal austerity policies. The American Library Association includes helping the poor as part of librarians' job description (Anderson, Simpson, and Fisher, 2012), and some urban libraries even add social workers to their staff (Blank, 2014). While themselves under assault, libraries often compensate for the decline of other public services by providing educational opportunities for poor children, job search assistance, free access to information, as well as helping bridge the digital divide (Bertot, McClure, and Jaeger, 2008; Frederiksen, 2015; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Terrile, 2016). As access to formal education becomes more difficult, libraries can provide alternative spaces for learning (Mickiewicz, 2015). They also offer a safe place for the marginalized (Blank, 2014) or even space of privacy for those who find little privacy at home (Sequeiros, 2013). Although earlier I noted the potential of libraries to impose middle class social norms, there is evidence that in some libraries, those who deviate sharply from mainstream societal norms and suffer high levels of exclusion can find a relatively safe and tolerant space that caters to their needs (Mickiewicz, 2015). These functions are not new, poignantly echoing the experience of Depression Era libraries, which provided shelter and information for millions of unemployed amidst draconian budget cuts (Wiegand, 2015). Notably, measures of circulation fail to take into account many of these ways in which people use libraries, and surveys measuring library use are unlikely to adequately represent the most marginalized library patrons, such as the homeless (Terrile, 2016). Even though libraries in poor communities often have relatively few resources, they can become institutions of central importance (Mickiewicz, 2015).

As spaces organized around non-capitalist principles, public libraries are critical in providing much needed services to vulnerable populations whose access to them would otherwise be limited by poverty. They are also settings of class intersections where middle class library staff routinely encounter low income patrons. Putnam (2000) and Oldenburg (1999) identify libraries as places of solidarity, which can reduce social fragmentation. I show that that the cross-class solidarity at the public library examined in this article is an example of resistance to economic injustice through what Lisa Dodson (2011) defines as the *moral underground*. Dodson (2011) shows how some employers and supervisors of minimum wage workers, those who work with children in schools and childcare settings, and health care workers all bend and break the rules to help the struggling poor survive daily challenges. These workers take considerable risks because they derive meaning from taking the side of "others who are being damaged by an unjust system" (Dodson, 2011, p. 7). I argue that library staff, as well, participate in the moral underground, and subvert the system in their everyday practices to help those in need.

The public library can be a moral underground *space* characterized by practices of solidarity and resistance to the neoliberal urban order. Facilitated by institutional structures, library workers as well as library patrons subvert hegemonic logics through everyday use of the space (Certeau 2011; Lefebvre 1991). I demonstrate that although the library is not a perfect emancipatory institution, there are institutional and contextual factors that lead to resistive practices and potential for emancipation. I begin by describing the institutional context of the Queens Library as a whole and the neighborhood context of this particular branch. I follow with a description of my

ethnographic methodology, a presentation of results, and a discussion of findings and their implications for the role of public libraries as resistive institutions in the neoliberal city.

Institutional and Neighborhood Context

There are three public library systems within New York City, with a combined total of over 200 locations: (1) New York Public Library, serving the boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island, (2) Brooklyn Public Library, and (3) Queens Public Library. Queens is the most ethnoracially diverse borough of New York, and one with the highest percentage of immigrants (48%, Lobo and Salvo, 2013). The Queens Library is a system of 62 local public libraries with over 2 million users, and is the highest circulating US library (Gitner and Rosenthal, 2008). Its funding comes overwhelmingly from the local city government, supplemented by the state and federal governments, as well as private donations. The library system aims to address the needs of the diverse population of Queens. With the help of a staff demographer, a unionized library staff representing dozens of language backgrounds, partnerships with local organizations, and a 40-year-old New Americans Program, the library assesses evolving needs of the local population. Special multilingual collections include books, CDs, videos, and periodicals in 25 languages, with the largest collections in the United States in Spanish and Chinese, and extensive collections in Korean, Russian, and South Asian languages (Berger, 2012; Queens Library, 2013). The library explicitly aims to guarantee equity of access to the diverse population, and to "assist in the acculturation process and to help maintain a

connection to native languages and cultures" (Queens Library, 2017). There is extensive programming in a multitude of languages, including workshops on immigration law, tenant rights, job training, parenting, and health, as well as literary events and cultural performances. Local branches host English classes and resources for English-language learners. Library cards are easily obtained by presenting a piece of mail with a New York City address, and many events and services are available even to those without library cards.

This paper presents a case study of one local Queens library branch. It is housed in a small and dilapidated building located in a mixed neighborhood of small homes and apartments, light industry, and car repair shops. The library is a five minute walk from a large public housing development, as well as several new buildings catering to affluent new residents, which herald gentrification. The neighborhood around the library is a diverse mix of immigrant groups and native-born Americans of various racial and class backgrounds: 41 percent non-Hispanic white, 31 percent Latino, 9 percent Black, 16 percent Asian, and 13 percent some other race, with 42 percent foreign born (Social Explorer, 2017). In the decade prior to fieldwork, there was influx of new immigrant groups from many different Asian, Latin American, and North African countries. This wave of immigration was the latest in a long history of working class immigrants living in the neighborhood, creating a population diverse in immigration status, length of residence in the US, immigrant generation, and English language fluency. As is typical of New York, where walking and public transportation are common ways of getting around,

residents tend to go to the local branch library, rather than travel to a branch in another neighborhood, unless seeking special services (Japzon and Gong, 2005).

Inside the extremely limited library space, patrons can access books, periodicals, CDs, and DVDs in languages such as Spanish, Greek, Urdu, Bengali, French, Chinese, Italian, and Arabic. There is a children's section with a large selection in Spanish and, at the time of research, a children's librarian who was a local resident and native Spanish speaker. Among the staff members there were also native speakers of Chinese, Portuguese, Greek, and Macedonian, although no one on staff spoke Arabic or one of the South Asian languages common among the patrons. An important and much utilized library resource were five computers with internet access and a printer available for library card holders for half hour intervals and a daily limit of 20 printed pages. The library provided the scarce amenity of a public bathroom, as well as air conditioning in the summer. A city-run free lunch program for anyone under 18 operated out of the library basement during the summer, filling in for public schools that normally provide this vital service. Due to budget austerity, at the time of research, the library was not open on the weekends and was open in the evenings only one day per week. Throughout its history, library hours fluctuated between an even more limited schedule to being open on the weekends and evenings. Waves of budgets cuts also threatened the jobs of library staff, or as one of the staff members put it in an interview: "the politicians are always playing with our livelihoods." There were young women hired as part time homework helpers for the dozens of students who used the library after school. As in other Queens Library branches, children's and young adults' late fines on library materials can be "read

down" by reading in the library: fines are reduced one dollar per 30 minutes of reading to oneself or to another child.

Methodology

The library was selected as a research site as part of a larger research project focusing on diverse public space in one area of Queens. I identified this library branch as a key public space in a resource-poor neighborhood. It appeared to reflect the demographic diversity of the area, and promised to serve as a rich research site for observing interactions, institutional norms, and the construction of social space. The library also allowed me to conduct ethnographic research year-round, which was more difficult in outdoor public spaces like parks and gardens. I conducted research from the summer of 2011 through the spring of 2013. I used the library as a patron at different times during its open hours. I borrowed and returned material, sat at the tables reading and writing, attended programs, signed up to use the computers and printed. I also became a volunteer in various capacities, including shelving books and tidying up DVDs and children's materials and helping children with homework. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the manager of the library and another staff member, and engaged in less formal conversations with additional library staff and patrons. Because this research was part of a broader project, I knew some of the patrons from other places in the neighborhood. I am a white middle class immigrant woman in my thirties. While there were many immigrant women who patronized the library, the vast majority were not white or middle class, and did so while accompanying their young children. Therefore, I was a bit of an unusual presence at the library, and my regular visits and participation in homework help

positioned me more as a teacher/social worker type rather than someone visiting the library to meet her own needs. Given my positionality, it is was easier for me to establish relationships with library employees than with some of the patrons who perceived me as an authority figure (although the latter facilitated patron relationships in other cases, when I was seen as a resource). In some cases, being an immigrant and having grown up in New York helped me gain trust of other immigrants. It is likely that I missed some of what was going on in the library among the working class immigrant patrons due to my language limitations and caution that some patrons might have exercised around a white middle-class appearing person.

I took abbreviated notes and wrote more detailed fieldnotes at the end of each fieldwork day. Altogether, I spent more than 125 hours at the library, and wrote close to 100 single-spaced pages of fieldnotes. For comparison, I spent about five hours over several visits to another local branch of the Queens Library. I analyzed data by reviewing the fieldnotes and interview transcripts, identifying emerging themes and categories, such as different ways people used the library and types of assistance provided by differently positioned social actors. I analyzed interactions among patrons and staff, and the meanings that people attached to the library. I began fieldwork while immersed in a range of theories about public space, diversity, and gentrification – from urban culturalism to contact theory and theories of everyday life and conviviality – which shaped my fieldwork and questions. Following an abductive approach, I moved back and forth between empirical observation and theoretical generalizations, continuously returning to

my fieldnotes and the field (Tavvory and Timmermans, 2014). I tested my evolving theoretical explanations of the nature of library space and its social relations.

Uses and Users of the Library

In analyzing social patterns in this public library, I focused on the everyday use of the space to identify practices and meanings that reinforced and challenged the dominant social order. The public library that serves as the site for this case study accommodated a variety of users and uses. After the nearby elementary schools let out around 3pm, dozens of agitated and rowdy children flood into the library, some with caretakers, and many without. Noise levels spike as the kids fill the children's area, the homework help area, and spill over into the main library space. Every chair is taken, and kids, mothers, baby siblings, and some middle schoolers share the floor. The library was a safe supervised space for children to be until their parents could care for them, as well as a place to get help with homework and socialize. These children were overwhelmingly Latino, Asian, and North African immigrants, including those with limited or no English skills, children of immigrants, and African American and Puerto Rican children. Mothers spent time in the library to socialize with each other, often in languages other than English, as their children sought help with their school worksheets from English-speaking staff and patrons.

The library's computers and printer were used by older children and poor and working class adults for whom the library provided access to the internet. A sampling of the uses I observed includes: adults checking their facebook pages and email, groups of

middle schoolers clustered around a video game or a K-pop video, young adults typing up community college homework, people editing and printing their resumes and filling out online job applications for entry level jobs, an elderly couple watching videos about the citizenship exam, men flipping between sports sites and pornography, other men looking up Thanksgiving recipes, a woman filling out a FEMA relief form[1], and a man printing out images to give to his friend in prison who put them on handkerchiefs. A few brought their own laptops to connect to the library's wifi network. Public libraries are often the only source of free public internet access in communities, as was the case here (Bertot, McClure, and Jaeger, 2008). Some older adults were regulars for whom the library was part of a daily routine and a place to companionably share the local paper. African American women of all ages came into the library to browse through and borrow from the book collection, particularly from the shelves of urban literature. Some locals, such as residents of the nearby public housing, came in for short and long periods of time to chat with the staff and each other. The library was also a space more comfortable than the homes (or lack of homes) for some patrons in terms of space, temperature, and potential for companionship, as I learned both from speaking to patrons and overhearing their statements to that effect.

In its current state, this particular library meets many needs, but certainly not all, and several categories of people are rare at the library. Despite a collection of teen-oriented graphic novels, there are few high school age children, who likely prefer a space with more privacy than this one-room library can provide. Since the library is not wheelchair-accessible and has a considerable number of steps at the entrance, mobility-

impaired people cannot get in. Although the neighborhood experienced an influx of white middle class US-born residents, few in this group came to the library. When they did, they came and left immediately after picking up materials they had put on hold through the library website.

I visited another nearby library for comparison, as well as speaking to library staff on several occasions about their sense of the differences between neighborhood libraries. The other library I observed was roomier, with newer computer equipment and larger staff. One librarian at the case study library reported that the newer, larger nearby branches were able to obtain grants from local non-profits for programming, but that their library was too small to interest these organizations in investing. Another librarian said that the library system as a whole was focused on "renovating and doing flashy stuff… like the Central Library with the Children's Discovery Center," rather than improving the local branches. He also explained that at larger and better resourced local libraries, librarians themselves did not help with homework, as he often did, but that "I am sure other, smaller branches… have some of this issue too because if you don't have enough staff, and you don't have an activity assistant, or you don't have like, homework helpers, or volunteers."

Reproduction of Hegemonic Ideologies and Social Relations

American public libraries have a long history as spaces where powerful elites attempt to shape the behavior of the working class and immigrant urban populations (Augst, 2001; Wiegand, 2015). Neither are libraries so isolated from their social contexts that they fail

to replicate at least some of the prevailing processes of exclusion and stratification. In the Queens Library branch analyzed here, the treatment of immigrants and non-English speakers by the staff occasionally highlighted the ways in which the library was a space where ideologies of assimilation could be reproduced.

Queens Library has a dual mission of acculturation and maintenance of immigrant languages and cultures (Queens Library, 2017). In the context of New York City, linguistic diversity and accommodation is coupled with an expectation that immigrants learn English (Aptekar and Cieslik 2015). Part of a normative story of immigrant assimilation and success in the city, these expectations are not pervasive but are certainly present in the library as well. In one instance, Jonah, a native-born white staff person, reprimanded a recently arrived young Haitian man for not following turn-taking rules around computer use. As an aside to me, he expressed his suspicion that the man was pretending not to understand English to get out of following the rules. In general, Jonah was quite friendly and accommodating of library patrons. In this instance, I happened to know Jean-Pierre, the young Haitian immigrant, from my position as a volunteer English conversation teacher at a nearby charity, and he, indeed, had very poor English comprehension skills. No one at the library spoke his native language, as was the case for the even more numerous speakers of Urdu and Arabic, although materials in all these languages were available. The staff person had acted on an assumption of a level of fluency in English, perhaps based on Jean-Pierre's youth, normalizing it, rather than attempting to accommodate linguistic diversity or at least giving him the benefit of the doubt.

While some staff members were themselves immigrants or children of immigrants and expressed solidarity with immigrant patrons, Mrs. Harrison, an older African American employee consistently expressed frustration with language difficulties among immigrant patrons and was rude even to children of immigrants who spoke English fluently. While this worker's selectively unfriendly demeanor and tone were an outlier at the library, it remained unaddressed by other staff. Mrs. Harrison's treatment of immigrant patrons reflected tensions in the neighborhood at-large over demographic changes resulting from the recent influx of new immigrant groups from North African, Asian, and Latin American countries. Another staff member, Maria, herself a Latina immigrant but one who has lived in the neighborhood for many decades, told me: "Remember that movie, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*? A while ago, a lot of Asians moved to [the neighborhood] and I would tell my sisters, 'It's the invasion of the Asians." Maria was particularly struck by the rapid influx of Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants. Deprived, isolated, and long racially segregated, the area around the library continually hosted new waves of struggling immigrants who were able to find shelter in its substandard and crowded housing stock, as well as, increasingly, diversifying the mostly African American and Puerto Rican public housing. While there were no overt racialized conflicts, multiple poor and marginalized populations relied on the same set of eroding public services like schools and libraries, which were continually gutted by budget cuts.

Tensions over English-speaking abilities among immigrant patrons of the library also indicated the pull of assimilative ideologies tied up with the function of the library

system as an acculturative institution. For example, the library organized events such as Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, and even Christmas celebrations that engaged discourses of diversity and tolerance while communicating typically American versions of such holidays. Maria, the Latina staff person mentioned above, criticized immigrant mothers for not trying to learn English hard enough: "The only thing that frustrates me to no end, is that the moms do not make an effort to get out of from, from wherever they are." This criticism of mothers, specifically, fits with the broader cultural tendency to blame bad parenting choices of impoverished mothers for their children's problems. Dodson (2011) identified this narrative of personal blame as a major way in which middle class workers, such as teachers, made sense of working with poor children who struggled with instability and lack of resources. Thus, the library was an institutional space that sometimes reproduced the social order, particularly through ideologies of assimilation and personal responsibility that undermined the right to this space by immigrants and their families. While surfacing occasionally, these narratives were not central, nor seemed to pose a significant challenge to access. More often than not, the library was instead a promising case of moving towards solidarity and anti-capitalist logics (Wright 2013).

Solidarity and resistance

The library provided for a diverse set of needs among the local population, including those underserved by other institutions and lacking access to informational and material resources. In doing so, the library distributed resources based on need, creating an emancipatory alternative to the capitalist market, and exemplifying Wright's (2010)

concept of real – if imperfect – utopia. The library improved the living conditions of marginalized urban residents, helping even out access to resources and knowledge. Furthermore, the library revealed emancipatory potential beyond the ways in which it distributed resources. In their everyday exchanges and interactions, library staff and patrons created a moral underground space where they resisted economic inequalities and ideologies that supported the neoliberal social order.

Like all libraries, the library profiled here had rules about the use of its space and materials. Patrons are not supposed to eat or drink, shout, or run, and there are processes for checking out and returning books and DVDs and using the computers. Other rules are less formal and arise from the use of the library as a public space (Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011). For instance, while library staff do make attempts to enforce turn-taking around computer use, the users often negotiate with each other without staff intervention, letting someone with particularly urgent needs jump ahead in line, or donating their daily allotment of printing to each other. For instance, one day, I observed an older white woman ask a Latina middle schooler to use her account to print. The woman had signed herself up for a computer, but did not actually want to take it, as she just needed to print and had used up her allotment on utility bills earlier in the day. The girl, who had not been on the list for a computer, logged into her account so she could print. The librarian, holding the clipboard with the computer line, watched as they negotiated, as the staff tended to do. It is regular patrons who can be observed enforcing rules over computer use when newcomers break them or teenagers ignore them.

What is notable in this library, however, is how much the rules are bent by the staff to accommodate people's needs. For instance, library staff may look the other way when children eat or drink in the library, and they tolerate a high level of noise and running around in the afterschool hours. One fall afternoon, there was a new volunteer – a white woman in her late 30s – who sat among the chaos of the children's area attempting to help a small Latino boy with his homework. She looked visibly discomfited, and got up several times to ask Maria whether she could not make the children be quiet. Maria patiently explained that she would not do so, and pointed out that the low ceilings amplified the noise. To me, Maria and other library workers noted the children's need for activity after hours of sitting and doing worksheets in school. Similarly, library staff defended the children and advocated for them in interactions with guest service providers, such as a visitor running the gardening program. This white middle class gardening enthusiast was seen as too harsh because she did not allow the children to harvest produce. Library staff allowed children to use the office phone to call home, bandaged cuts and scrapes, and celebrated milestones like birthdays and graduations.

A wider-than-expected range of behavior was tolerated among adult users of the library. The library often sounded like a coffee shop, with multiple friendly conversations. Some people even made calls on their cellphones from within the library. Sleeping patrons were left alone. (Notably, at the comparison library, I observed library staff yell at sleeping patrons to wake up. When I asked Jonah, the librarian at the case study library about it, he said that he would not yell to wake people up. At the same time,

Jonah expressed sympathy for the other, female, librarians, who had to deal with intoxicated male day laborers who came from the bar across the street.) Homeless people came in to use the bathroom and rest, and were usually not disturbed. The staff exhibited a supportive attitude towards patrons with mental illness, picking up the slack for the set of institutions that serve this population. For instance, one of the regulars, an African American man in his thirties, often talked to himself while in the library. Jonah and another white man on library staff, Dino, were concerned that the content of these conversations was sometimes violent. Yet, Jonah and Dino explained that this patron was quite self-aware of his behavior and tried to normalize it by wearing a broken Bluetooth headphone so it would look like he was talking on the phone. Like they do with other regulars, the Jonah and Dino knew of this patron's interests, and showed him relevant new books when they came in. Dino pointed out that Rob, a middle aged Latino janitor, who had been working there the longest, remembered when this patron was younger and acted "normal". For the library staff, tolerance toward sleeping, body odor, and the use of the library by the homeless to meet basic needs, as well as not calling the police, fell within the institutional imperative. Jonah explained that the Queens Library does not want to hear about problems like that and does not want them to call police because it would conflict with their image of welcoming immigrants. Thus, even as some institutional aspects of the library undermined the right to this space by immigrants and their families, others legitimated the presence of marginalized and stigmatized people.

In addition to placing a high premium on accommodating the needs of patrons, which clashed with keeping the library quiet and food-free, and providing a safe space for

marginalized members of the community, the library filled in gaps left in the provision of services by other institutions. This was especially clear in the case of the public school system. As well as providing help with homework and school projects, library staff were cognizant of the high stakes standardized tests faced by the mostly poor and immigrant children visiting the library. They used scarce library resources to photocopy test prep booklets for the children, trying to bridge the gaps in preparation in the overcrowded schools, particularly for children whose parents were unfamiliar with the testing system, and had difficulty navigating it due to language and literacy barriers. Despite her frustration over what she saw as their lack of initiative in escaping their circumstances, Maria reported accompanying Spanish-speaking mothers to parent-teacher conferences on her own time. Maria expressed a strong sense of solidarity with fellow immigrants, denouncing the disrespectful behavior of the local school principal towards immigrant parents: “I will tell you because you are an immigrant too. They just want to keep the immigrants down… They want our kids to be wiping their bottoms.” On days that they got their test scores or report cards, children rushed into the library to share their results with the library staff and regulars.

The library served as a local node for access to information and resources for adults. Library staff provided crucial bridges between public agencies and city residents. Staff helped write and translate letters from government agencies and bill collectors, and assisted in filling out forms to get government benefits like food stamps or to apply for jobs. They referred battered women to shelters. As Jonah explained to me in an interview:

> Ever since I came here.. it's not necessarily.. it's not technically my job to do that… but you end up doing it because it's the focus of this library. You have to make adjustments. Not everything is going to be under your [job] title.

By bending the rules and working well beyond their job descriptions – even as they faced threats of layoffs – the staff made the library into a site of the moral underground (Dodson, 2011). They helped the struggling locals to patch together resources or simply provided a safe place. Like some of the teachers of poor children that Dodson (2011) interviewed, these librarians have let go of their job descriptions to embrace the much wider range of services, even describing their work as that of social workers. Branch library staff work in difficult conditions for relatively low pay, yet their college degrees and unionized positions place them in much more secure economic situation than most of the patrons they help. Daily confronted with evidence of urban inequality and the erosion of the public safety net, library staff derived meaning from siding with their patrons, even if it meant going above and beyond their duties and bending rules. For some, like Maria, who was herself an immigrant, the choice to do much more than what was required of her to meet the needs of struggling families was a matter of immigrant solidarity. For others who blurred lines of professional roles, like Jonah and Dino, it is their identification of the library as a key local space for addressing urgent needs of a marginalized population that pushed them to bend the rules. In this way, the library became a moral underground space, driven by a combination of the institutional prerogatives of the larger organization, high-need local population, staff members' moral orientations, and small size where

specialization and professional boundaries were more difficult to enact. Thus, aside from the emancipatory potential of the library stemming from its non-market resource distribution system, it became a space of resistance to the neoliberal urban order through the everyday work of its staff.

As a resistive space, the library fostered flexibility and even elision of class hierarchies. Given its small size, the staff took on a wide range of tasks to fill in for coworkers who were on breaks, late, or out. For example, I observed Rob, the Latino custodian, sit in the library manager chair behind a desk, pick up the clipboard containing the line for computers, and call the next patron. He did so when he noticed an open computer and his supervisor's absence from his desk. Rob also picked up the phone when it rang and wrote down requests for DVDs. The use of space by the patrons, too, was indicative of this flexibility with hierarchies. While the head librarians took turns sitting behind a desk at a computer, the patrons routinely circled the desk to come around and stand or sit next to the librarians to chat and look at the computer screen together while they were getting help. All but one library worker – the selectively rude Mrs. Henderson – were usually addressed by their first names, although the children added Mr. or Ms. It is not that the library became a place without hierarchy as library workers did exercise power over patrons on other occasions. But the fluidity of these hierarchies complemented the bending of the rules and professional job descriptions, and stood in contrast to what I observed at another local library, where such routine interactions reinforced power differentials.

While much assistance flowed from the better resourced, more educated staff to

the patrons, there were also many examples of everyday help and solidarity among the patrons. In addition to the staff, fellow library patrons, especially the regulars, provided homework help to children. Children would approach these regulars, some of whom they knew from the community, and others only through the library, and asked for assistance. On multiple occasions, I watched very young children come up to Jorge, a slight Latino man in his 30s, who spoke haltingly with a speech impediment and appeared to have a mild development disability. Despite these difficulties, Jorge was able to help the youngest of students with homework. One April afternoon, a young Latina first grader ran up to Jorge to ask, in English, what time he would be in tomorrow because her mother (who spoke Spanish only) wanted to know when they could count on his help. Later that same afternoon, I could hear Jorge helping another young child with an assignment, saying "You can write…".

People who were less computer literate asked those who were more proficient for help in looking up information or negotiating online forms, email, and websites. One of the regulars, Jane, an older US-born white woman who was living in public housing after a spell of homelessness, was particularly popular with both children looking for homework help and adults who did not know how to use computers or internet. One time, I was using a computer between Jane and David, a middle aged Puerto Rican man. Squinting at the screen through a broken pair of glasses, David was trying to fill out an online form. As on other occasions, he asked Jane for help with spelling various words, which she did, but still had trouble typing them. I typed the words on my screen in a large font, and he painstakingly copied them, musing that this was why it is good to get an

education and explaining, sadly, that he had been working since he was 11. After observing Jane help multiple middle school age children with school projects, I asked her about her helpfulness and she told me a story of helping a girl she had never met before with a school report on the Bubonic plague, which involved showing her how to copy and paste from Wikipedia and print within the daily allotment of pages. Jane said that one of the librarians intervened to claim that Wikipedia was known for false information, and she defended her strategy by explaining how to use Wikipedia as a research tool. At times like these, Jane was able to not only provide help to fellow library users but to buttress her own identity as a competent citizen. One day, while updating me on her facebook feuds, she kept being interrupted by an older white woman who had serious trouble operating the computer. This woman complimented Jane on how well she understood computers, and Jane generously, but with obvious pride, said: You should have seen me two years ago, I couldn't do anything!" Jane was occasionally confused for a staff person. Notably, this was not because her presentation of self conformed to the stereotypes about female librarians: she spoke in a booming voice and laughed loudly, and often wore a combination of denim and bright pink that exposed extensive tattoos.

Networks of assistance among the patrons added another dimension to the moral underground space of the library. Breaking down assumptions stemming from neoliberal ideologies about individual self-improvement and family responsibility, adults helped children who were not their own, in ways that may have drawn scrutiny and criticism from middle class teachers and parents. These unofficial helpers challenged dominant perceptions of competent tutor or mentor figures, due to their own stigmatized status as

variously unemployed, disabled, and poor. Adults helped each other, as well, pooling skills they may have developed through access to resources, such as computers and internet, at the public library itself. The moral underground space of the library housed interactions and relationships of resistance to the alienating social order, with rules bent to provide assistance across class lines, and fostering opportunities for collective empowerment. Although in some ways, the library reproduced the hegemonic social order, it was not all encompassing. Emancipatory practices flourished, driven by the needs of the people using the library space, pointing to the library as an institution with the potential to challenge the logics of capitalism.

Conclusion

Although this small public library occasionally replicated some hegemonic ideologies, particularly those about immigrant assimilation, it was, at the same time, a resistive space that featured cross-class and intra-class solidarities and helped struggling urbanites meet some of their needs in a context of neoliberal austerity. As Wright (2013) pointed out for public libraries in general, this library distributed resources outside of capitalist market exchange, making it a real utopia. But this library functioned as an alternative space of resistance in ways that extended beyond the principles of resource distribution typical of all public libraries. Daily life at the library was not fully colonized by the capitalist order, with users making the space their own through everyday practices (Lefebvre 1991). Rather than merely being an example of ordinary interstitial spaces, the bloom of practices of resistance, solidarity, and care holds out promise for emancipation (Certeau

2011). This promise is particularly significant in the context of a staggeringly unequal metropolis where business elites and real estate development trump the right to the city for working class New Yorkers (Moody, 2007).

It is not unusual to find users of urban space push back against the hegemonic representations of space through everyday practices that meet their needs (Lefebvre 1991). More striking is when paid employees of a major urban institution like the Queens Library system help create a moral underground space, driven by imperatives such as solidarity and care (Dodson, 2011). These middle class library staff, albeit themselves with not much more than a precarious hold on middle class, bent rules and exceeded their job descriptions to assist marginalized groups of children and adults. The moral underground space facilitates a cross-class subverting of the system to help those in need. The everyday social interactions, relationships, and formal and informal norms that constitute the library help create a space that is conducive to resisting the dominant social order. Even though ideologies emphasizing individual responsibility and atomizing citizens are present in the library as well, the practices of inter- and intra- class solidarity provide an alternative. The library's moral underground space was facilitated by the larger institutional framework of the Queens Library, which discouraged reliance on police, and the small size of the library that blurred hierarchies and placed staff as well as patrons in close proximity to each other's strengths and needs. In New York, the right of the wealthy to live in the most desirable locations and access the best resources is often painted as an inevitable and unquestioned condition of capitalism. Local libraries can serve as spaces where the presence and needs of poor and working class residents is

legitimated (Lefebvre 1996), in ways that subvert the imperative to shape them into compliant and assimilated subjects.

In this article, I have focused on a local library branch in Queens, New York, to investigate the formation of solidarities and resistance to the atomizing neoliberal order. Due to the limitations of this study, I focus on the processes within one public library, and am not able to generalize to other libraries within and outside Queens. Yet, my results suggest further exploration of the workings of interstitial non-market spaces within capitalist systems, with a focus on analysis of existing everyday practices that serve as a source of practical resistance strategies and critique (Certeau 2011). Mundane and taken for granted, public libraries allow us to see real utopias (Wright, 2013) and imagine other alternatives. This ability to imagine alternatives does not only make for a more hopeful vision for social change, but is a key analytical method that is increasingly more difficult to put into practice. Today, studies and critiques of neoliberalism contribute to a sense of monolithic pervasiveness of the dominant order and induce a sense of paralysis regarding the possibility of change (Roelvink, 2016). This study does not only illuminate an overlooked but widespread alternative to the capitalist economy, but shows how it can become a space where ordinary individuals resist authority and hegemonic representations of space and subvert the reproduction of the social order in a myriad of small everyday acts of resistance and solidarity.

Outside of library studies, social scientists, particularly in the US, have rarely examined public libraries (Audunson, 2005). For instance, libraries are public spaces, but scholars of public space are far more likely to focus on parks, sidewalks, and cafes

(Frederiksen, 2015). Yet, public libraries are important urban institutions. In neoliberal cities like New York, in particular, public libraries can play a key role in meeting the needs of vulnerable and increasingly marginalized communities facing continually eroding public services and skyrocketing inequality. At the same, libraries themselves are under assault. In cities suffering the effects of the foreclosure crisis, the dearth of property taxes can results in drastic cuts to library services at a time when local residents need them the most (Terrile, 2016). There is inequality across and within library systems (Sin, 2011). In this context, those interested in exploring everyday dynamics of urban poverty and inequality, everyday practices of resistance, diversity management, immigrant adaptation, racial segregation, the role of public space in building local democracies, and formal and informal social control, all would find fertile research sites in unremarkable-seeming branches of the local public library. Conversely, expanding the study of public libraries beyond the field of library and information studies is much needed to create a fuller portrait of the contemporary city life.

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Footnotes

1. Hurricane Sandy devastated New York City during the period of fieldwork.
2. All names have been changed.