

Social and Cultural Role of Libraries

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Social

- **3. B. Of a human being: living or disposed to live in groups or communities; naturally inclined to be in the company of others. Also of a person's nature: characterized by a need to live in groups or communities.**
- **5. a. Of or relating to society,**
- **c. Of an institution or mechanism: of, belonging to, or concerned with the organization of society; that constitutes society...**

Historically...

- 1. Adj Designating a war fought between allies.
- a. Usually with capital initial.
- 2. Devoted to home life; domestic. *Obsolete.*

*"Social," *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www-oed-com>

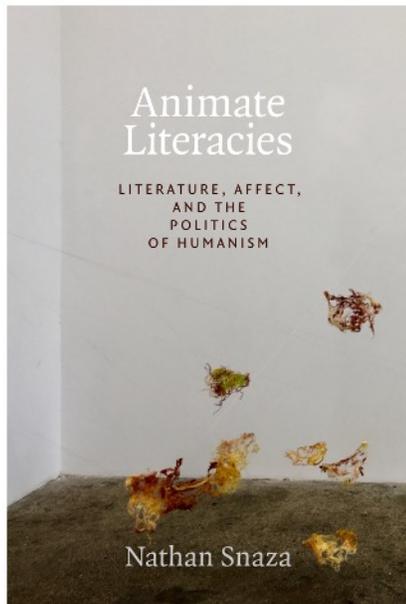
At its root there is a potentiality for violence between the individual and the organization of the community within which they live. The concept of society, like that of literacy, is a political situation, a contract between individuals that encourages them to release aspects of their individual identity in pursuit of the greater good for all. It also assumes the conditioning of individuals to relate to each other through their class or position or role within the system.

Culture

- **1. The cultivation of land, and derived senses.**
- **5. a. The cultivation or development of the mind, faculties, manners, etc.; improvement by education and training.**
- What we mean is:
- **6. Refinement of mind, taste, and manners; artistic and intellectual development. Hence: the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively.**

**"Culture," Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www-oed-com>*

The activities of socializing are reinforced through the training that occurs through cultivating. Culture is taught and learned and participated in as a form of participation within the social group that one is within.



Nathan Snaza, *Animate Literacies: Literature, Affect, and the Politics of Humanism* (Duke University Press, 2019).

Through literacy training, the humanities are one way to be indoctrinated within society and culture. They do not concern the human, but a specific version of human. In 1987 Terry Eagleton wrote of in a forward to Daniel Cotton's *Social Figures* that the "crisis" of the humanities is an effect of modernization. The so-called-crisis is caused by the attempt of the humanities to "produce the commonplace understanding of the human that allows for the relatively smooth functioning of social and cultural life under capitalism." (Nathan Snaza, 2) Art, culture, and society are activities that people use to draw borders that define what is human and what is not. It restricts the activities of some while authorizing the movements of others. The ongoing process of drawing borders is related to economic and political interests, these divisive borders define what is human and what is not, and are heightened through defining what sort of human is more human than others. This work, this process effectively enables one certain group of people by marginalize others who do not belong within the definition... some may participate in the politics and others may not. Historically the human has been defined through negation, in the West what is human is not "the animal, the machine, the slave, the colonized native, the poor, the disabled, the improperly gendered, and so on." (Snaza, 13) We may add the advantages of ecological conditions, as Greta Thompson highlights, how some groups of people are legally

privileged to pollute the ecologies of others (and effectively destroy their potential to live healthy lives). “There are...countless people who have never been allowed access to being recognized as fully human.” (35)

Currently there are discussions questioning if there is anything then worth staying with literature, society and culture for. How can one ethically participate in this situation?! Snaza says yes, but that it must become “haunted,” and attends to all of the violence and messiness that it has historically caused. Most of us have been educated to be compliant with this process and to not interrupt it; To be polite. It will require some of what is currently considered “delinquency.”



Laura Raicovich, "Why Libraries Have a Public Spirit That Most Museums Lack," *Hyperallergic*, November 7, 2019.
<https://hyperallergic.com/525985/why-libraries-have-a-public-spirit-that-most-museums-lack/>

Images from Hyperallergic article
 Left: Central entrance Brooklyn Public Library (image courtesy Brooklyn Public Library)
 Below: From Score to Speculative Lit. Participants collectively author a text.



For the additional reading for this presentation, we found "Why Libraries Have a Public Spirit That Most Museums Lack

"Published last week by the cultural website Hyperallergic. It compares and contrasts the social and cultural roles of libraries and art museums, asking why public libraries successfully incite more participation than art museums. Why do they "feel different?" She focuses on the Brooklyn Public Library. Not surprisingly the author describes that people feel more invited in public libraries, more welcome there, and are thus more enabled to participate and be engaged. She describes

"Museums and libraries in the US originated in similar places and via similar patronage models with their foundational collections coming largely from wealthy collectors of books and art objects, sometimes in conjunction with institutions of higher learning. However, the word "public" remains embedded in what we call the library. And while some branches are named for generous funders, these are secondary to the overall system."

This public focus makes the public library more dedicated to accessibility. The library is dedicated to providing tools and exercises whereby its community may become active participates in the civic body. She discusses specific public programming and arts programming that invite users to learn more about the library, its resources, and to participate in activities. Describing, "In this sense, the library is a space of

collective knowledge *creation* as well as a site of exchange and storage. “ One of the projects that I was particularly drawn to was the “28th Amendment Project”, which she describes,” will invite the people of Brooklyn to imagine what should be added to or omitted from the US Constitution. Comprising negotiations and workshops that take advantage of the dispersed conditions of the library branches, participants will think together about the role of the US Constitution historically and in the present day. “

So far there are 2 comments to the article, and the first I think is very important to consider, highlights the political situation that stems from the financial health of the public library verses the art museum. Because the public library is funded largely through public taxes, it has the ability to host such public projects and to devote themselves more to what we may call “the public good.” On the other hand, art museums and institutions have long been privatized and must find their funds through individual donors, who frequently want secure investments, and protege of having their name associated with the institution. Furthermore, “bettybarcode” describes, the professional culture is different: “The dominant museum ethic in regard to their collections is security and protection. The dominant library ethic in regard to their collections is access and sharing.”

Laura Raicovich, November 7, 2019. <https://hyperallergic.com/525985/why-libraries-have-a-public-spirit-that-most-museums-lack/>

So, then...
what is the Social and Cultural Role of Libraries?



Bibliotheca Alexandrina, inaugurated 2002.
Design by Snøhetta of Oslo, Norway.

Features: millions of books, digital centers, 6 specialized libraries, 3 museums, planetarium, 8 exhibition spaces, a conference center, 7 research institutes...

One of our readings had to do with the role of libraries in cultural tourism. It focused on the Bibliotheca Alexandria in Egypt. And was published in a journal for economics to declare the concept that culture should be seen as part of tourist development. The culture then is appreciated for its economical use-value... and the theme of the article is the potential to market Egypt in PR for the Bibliotheca Alexandria ... Yet this idea echoes the definitions that I opened this lecture with and ignites contemporary critiques of identifying culture as a political tool rather than a part of an individual's identity.

As Prof Weech discussed in one of our first meetings of this class, the Great Library of Alexandria was one of the most important events in the History of Libraries. As the largest and most significant library in the ancient world, the library was run by *aggressive* collection development tactics. With the intent to collect all knowledge of all cultures with the concept that it would collect the world's wisdom in one place and make it accessible ... to centralize power. According to our article 700,000 scrolls were believed to be stored here. It was a symbol of knowledge, like the Tower of Babel.

It was established in the 3rd c BC, and many of the celebrated scholars studied there: literature, mathematics, engineering, etc.

but had a gradual decline before Julius Caesar infamously burned some of it in 48BCE. ... purging of intellectuals from Alexandria in 145 BC and head librarian exiled himself...many scholars followed... lack of funding and support... probably completely destroyed by 270-275 CE.

In 2008 Egypt decided that it would be fantastic to rebuild the library. They had an international competition, with over 700 entries. Winning design by Snøhetta, a Norwegian architecture firm based in Oslo. The building was completed and opened in 2000 and opened in 2002.

It costed about 220\$ mill USD, mostly paid for by the Egyptian government. With space for 8 mill books, and leading technology.

As the article that we read describes, it is a fantastic achievement of architecture, and serves as a center for culture, knowledge, and tourism. Yet I was struck when reading this article by the dates that all of this occurred. Because 2000-2010 were not very peaceful times in Egypt. And because I am skeptical. Anytime that a country begs for international attention for social and culture... as I discussed in the first two slides... it may be trying to distract you from looking at what the other hand is doing...

“Making culture less important in terms of tourism is neither logical nor justified, because culture is overall intellect of society, and tourism is a sum of all material and spiritual resources and lifestyle of a nation.”

– Totic, V. and S. Lazarevic (2010), "The Role of Libraries in the development of cultural tourism with special emphasis to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt," *UTMS Journal of Economics*, V 1, 2, 107-114. 2010.

Meanwhile...

Images from "Egypt Revolution: 18 days of people power," *Al Jazeera*
<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2016/01/egypt-revolution-160124191716737.html>



This article appeals to the “goodness” of the library, the celebration of cultural development, advances in lifestyle. And communicates the excitement of cultural tourism.

Tourism is after all, “the third fastest- growing field on the economic market.” (108) Defines libraries as a symbol of social progress. And discusses ways that libraries can attract tourists: such as tours, video presentations, websites, exhibitions on location to visit... children’s’ programs (109) Catching our hearts, intentionally, with their repeated emphasis on “*Educated and experienced staff* is a library’s main asset.”: the role of the skilled librarian!

Yet, Oddly enough, this article was published in 2010, a year after massive PR campaigns were enacted by the government, because all of the protests were having a bad effect on the cash cow of tourism.

The world became aware of massive problems when the Arab Spring anti-government revolutions beginning in early 2010... leading to the Egyptian Revolution in 2011.... whereby unprecedented mass demonstrations against poverty, corruption, and political repression broke out in several Arab countries, challenging the authority of some of the most entrenched regimes in the Middle East and North Africa.

January 2011: Activists in Egypt call for an uprising in their own country, to protest against poverty, unemployment, government corruption and the rule of president

Hosni Mubarak, who has been in power for three decades.

Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, was a leading supporter of this library project, yet he was also whose regime protesters were demonstrating against.

[While some of Egypt was thriving, there was (at least) a 10% unemployment rate, with many living (or trying to) off of earnings of only \$2-6 a day.]

Anti-regime chants jostle for attention as protesters spill into Cairo's Tahrir Square to demand dignity, liberty, and social justice. Police respond violently, with tear gas, batons, and arrests of peaceful demonstrators.

hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets in an ideologically and socially diverse mass protest movement that ultimately forced longtime president Hosni Mubarak from office.

Feb. 11: At least 800 protesters have been killed and thousands injured since the first demonstrations 18 days ago. A wave of public sector strikes has further threatened the regime's stability.

March 9: A monthlong sit-in at Tahrir Square is forcibly dispersed by the military. In the adjacent Egyptian Museum, torture and "virginity tests" for female protesters—the military's crude euphemism for sexual assault—reveal a darker side to the ruling generals.

A protracted political crisis ensued, with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces taking control of the country until a series of popular elections, which are known thought to have been tampered with, brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power. During this time the Bibliotheca Alexandria was again in the newspapers such as The Guardian as the protests worked through Alexandria and the countries PR wished to put a positive spin on things:

library director Ismail Serageldin described how when a million demonstrators passed by the library "He describes how the new generation of Egyptian youth, many of whom studied at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, armed only with cell phones and iPads, confronted the troops, tanks and thugs of the old regime at Tahir Square in Cairo. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/01/alexandria-youth-protecting-library#comments>

Are these the students with iPhones and iPads that The Guardian applauded?

"Rebirth of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Future of the Arab Spring

an article by David Adams

March 19, 2013. <http://cpnn-world.org/cgi-bin/read/articlepage.cgi?ViewArticle=1170>

“I care not how affluent some may be, provided that none be miserable in consequence of it. But it is impossible to enjoy affluence with the felicity it is capable of being enjoyed, while so much misery is mingled in the scene.” – Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, 1797.



"9 Teachers Arrested Outside Sterling Bay's West Loop Office," *Book Club Chicago*, October 29, 2019.
<https://blockclubchicago.org/2019/10/29/9-teachers-union-protesters-arrested-outside-sterling-bays-west-loop-office/>

But what about locally.... Surely the United States is doing better than all that? Here is a recent news photo of CTU protesters, who are demanding that there should be librarians available within public schools, of which *only 1 of 5 public schools have*. Protestors were trained in civil disobedience and had a shocking sit-in at the Sterling Bay headquarters on October 29th this year. Several were arrested.

Core Values of Librarianship (ALA)

- Access
- Confidentiality/Privacy
- Democracy
- Education and Lifelong Learning
- Intellectual Freedom
- Preservation
- The Public Good
- Professionalism
- Service
- Social Responsibility

Meanwhile, going back to our articles for class today, we are discussing the marketing of the library.

Libraries are facing a lack of funding and requirements to defend their operational budgets: tax cuts, deregulation, and reduction of public services (sparked by the policies of the Reagan administration in the 1980s) led to libraries being reimagined as businesses.

Since the pass of the Government Performance and Results Act in 1993, libraries and all government agencies must show measurable results of their performance goals. As Sarah Clark describes, libraries must “adapt or die”. Library users are being described as “customers” and libraries are “adopting marketing strategies and customer-oriented practices to secure their future.” and implementing more data-based measurements to defend their expenses.

But the real value of libraries cannot be measured, and there is an offense for the government to consider its citizens as “customers.”

Sarah Clark’s article draws back to the ALA’s Core Values of Librarianship, reminding us that libraries are about more than efficient businesses with the goal of, and happy customers.

They are essential to maintaining democracy, informed citizenry, and access to information, and include a dedication to equity and education.

The importance of the library towards these aims is getting lost in the requirements for libraries to market themselves and to prove their relevance.

Civic librarianship centers on library's role to provide *information* rather than education... and I personally believe that this *recentering towards information* puts into question the politics behinds library's interests in offering cultural and social programs that go beyond providing access to information.

“If we fail to make the case that libraries are central to a democracy, to individual learning, and ultimately to our future well-being as a nation, then access to knowledge may well become not an entitlement, but a privilege for those who can afford it.”

-Sally Gardner Reed, quoted in Clark, Sarah (2009J), "Marketing the Library? Why Librarians Should Focus on Stewardship and Advocacy." *Progressive Librarian*. Summer/Fall, 2009. 97.

Reed argues that creating support for libraries is crucial for “influencing information policy and legislation at the state and national level.” (97)

Is the library a place for customers to become entertained? Or to serve their communities’ information needs?



The role of the library as being essential for democracy are emphasized as well in Buschman’s article, where he refers to access to information as a democratic fundamental right. He critiques the replacement of information services with marketing-speak. Such public relations, management schemes, and marketing goals, he describes, have colonized public spaces and given rise to the tendency of the press to speak for and to manipulate public opinion; public speech has devolved into publicity. [cough, **Bibliothèque Alexandria** article] And the basis of healthy critique and debate, which are essential aspects, and expressions, of our individual equal opportunity, democracy, and freedom. (2) The result is a an “information commodification” which effectively threatens to our security and a growing corruption of research through economic influences over information access [see: climate change “debate”]. He emphasizes that the public sphere “relies on a highly educated, cohesive class of people” The goal of education, in a way that echoes Friere from last week, is not only to acquire jobs (as, even if there are no jobs available, it is still worthwhile to be informed and educated) but rather to participate in the political sphere within which we are bound, in order to resist marginalization and to protect ideas of democracy.

Like Sarah Clark he insists that the values and effects of a library (like teaching) are difficult to quantify in the same way that economic businesses may be measured.

His discussion of the economic shift of public policy, which has attempted to “shift libraries away from public funding” and towards “new economy,” whereby public libraries are believed to be in the same market as bookstores, and thus actually perceived to be competing with them for “customers” (whereby the bookstores, which actually *are* businesses, of course win)... this discussion promptly recalls to me this article that was published in *Forbes* ... and then nearly immediately un-published as a reaction to public outcry on the arrogance of the article. This conflict, he describes, is *invited* when directors of libraries consent to actually promoting and marketing their libraries as such, and managing their libraries as though they were businesses *instead* of information centers. That this repurposing of libraries has caused us to forget the democratic essentiality of what a library is and what purpose it serves. “aping business rhetoric and models doesn’t save libraries; it transforms them into something else.” (6)

*Buschman, John. (2005) [“On Libraries and the Public Sphere,”](#) Library Philosophy and Practice Vol. 7, No. 2 (Spring 2005)

Forbes magazine:

Panos Mourdoukoutas with the headline “Amazon Should Replace Local Libraries to Save Taxpayers Money.”

Published 21 July 2018.

Article is now deleted.