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Organizing for Organizers: the Power of Fugitive Libraries for Liberation

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Abstract

As part of a group project on avenues for libraries to become true sites of community, inclusion, and liberation, I've written a paper focused on fugitive libraries. I begin the paper discussing the oppressive aspects of traditional libraries, then define fugitive libraries and discuss the history from which they emerged, asserting that they first arose in Black communities in the 1800s. Then, I review three fugitive libraries: The Free Black Women's Library, Noname's Book Club and Radical Hood Library, and the ECHO Mobile Library.

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It's fair to say, I think, that most librarians go into the field of librarianship out of a desire to make information more accessible — to share books and other resources with as many people as possible. So it's disappointing, even disheartening, once entering the field, to find that libraries, like all historic institutions in this country, were built on a racist, sexist, transphobic, ableist, xenophobic, heteronormative, capitalist, and otherwise oppressive foundation. It's a hard pill to swallow when you discover that, for example, Dewey Decimal Classification, the most commonly used and well-known classification system in the United States, is deeply racist, or that according to the ALA's most recent "Diversity Counts" study, conducted in 2009-10, out of a total of 118,666 credentialed librarians, 86,107 were white women ("Diversity Counts 2009-2010 Update" 2012). I'm not very good at math and they didn't list percentages, but I believe that's around 70 or 80 percent.

Sadler and Bourg (2015) put it best: "In spite of the pride many libraries take in their neutrality, libraries have never been neutral repositories of knowledge. Research libraries in particular have always reflected the inequalities, biases, ethnocentrism, and power imbalances that exist throughout the academic enterprise through collection policies and hiring practices that reflect the biases of those in power at a given institution." (p. 1).

Personally, I'm of the belief that there is no such thing as neutrality, and any institution priding itself on neutrality is a huge red flag, because it means that they're likely doing next to nothing to actually deal with or mitigate bias; they're just pretending it doesn't exist. As librarian and

founder of We Here Jennifer Ferretti has said, “As a librarian, you engage the issues that arise in your community, your nation, your world. Neutral librarianship intentionally ignores marginalized communities and experiences” (2017).

So, we should do things differently. That much is clear. But how? Is the library a lost cause entirely? In her article “The Library Commons: An Imagination and an Invocation,” Jennie Rose Halperin writes about the commons, or commons theory, in libraries. “The spirit of the commons is the spirit of imagining, of bringing people and resources together, and creating a necessarily positive vision for the world not as it is, but as it could be” (Halperin 2020). But the commons isn’t always implemented in the true spirit of community; sometimes, it’s just a buzzword or a surface level concept that librarians throw around while continuing to function in a fundamentally capitalist, individualistic way. “The problem with the Information Commons,” writes Halperin, “is the institution it protects rather than the idea it espouses. In critiquing the institution to uplift the worker and the patron, the commons can be reconstituted and revealed” (2020). She offers many ways to do so, but I’m going to focus on one in particular: fugitive libraries.

“By choice or by necessity, many marginalized communities have established their own independent, itinerant, fugitive libraries, which respond to conditions of exclusion and oppression” (Mattern 2019). These libraries exist usually outside of the library institution and in opposition of it.They create a space and a resource for communities who aren’t welcomed into traditional libraries. And Shannon Mattern’s “Fugitive Libraries” is one of the most

comprehensive documentations of fugitive libraries, describing what they are and why they exist, and then profiling 6 of them.

The first fugitive libraries were Black libraries; during slavery, Black communities in free states who were barred from entering white spaces, including libraries, created their own libraries and literary societies. Even long after slavery was abolished, Black people continued to be barred from accessing libraries and often created their own, spanning from living rooms to back rooms of traditional libraries to, eventually, segregated Black libraries. In 1930 at Howard University, Dorothy Porter became the curator of the university's "Negro collection," a library dedicated to Black culture and history. The library she worked for was supported by a university, by wealthy donors, and by the community, but I think it was still a fugitive library in that it was a space to celebrate Blackness during a time when Jim Crow laws were in full effect. Porter ended up writing a whole new classification system that better served the Black community, and that certainly wouldn't have been possible in a white library (Helton 2019).

Fugitive libraries are one of the most concrete embodiments of fugitive pedagogy, a way of knowledge sharing that "is rooted in the covert acquisition of knowledge by slaves and their descendants and has evolved into the practice of Black educators covertly teaching counter-hegemonic ideas through subversive practices" (Givens 2021). This is especially embodied by the Free Black Women's Library, one of the fugitive libraries Mattern profiles. The library started on a Bed-Stuy stoop in 2015 with 100 books, all written by Black women. The

earliest iterations were simple book exchanges that only had one rule: all the books had to be written by a Black woman.

These days, there are multiple chapters of the library in cities across the country, and the founding New York chapter hosts pop-ups and events all around New York City, Akinmowo told the Los Angeles *Times* for a piece about the L.A chapter of the library, "everywhere from a museum to a church to a vintage clothing shop. Akinmowo invites artists, writers and other creative makers to activate these spaces. The library, in this sense, becomes a community gathering as well — a chance to get together with like-minded book lovers and take home something to read, all in one night" (Recinos 2019). This is part of why fugitive libraries in particular are uniquely well suited to building community — people stick around to chat and ask questions and carry on discussions. The Free Black Women's Library is also extremely intentional about serving the surrounding community and making every single patron feels welcome and able to participate in that community bonding, which means thinking about the physicality of the space in addition to how it will affect patrons emotionally and intellectually. "Akinmowo's first concern is that the space be free and accessible to different body types and abilities, with lots of ways to sit and chat and engage in activities" (Mattern 2019). And since the library is not beholden to any institution for funding, it allows the librarians involved to speak freely without censoring themselves in order to fit the limitations of so-called politeness or professionalism that an institution might impose. As Mattern writes, "Conversations on police brutality, domestic violence, capitalism, patriarchy, and racism can be frank and confrontational, because she does not rely on public funding" (Mattern 2019). Even though the pop-up style has

been conducive to organic community building and discovery lugging around a large number of books is physically exhausting, and Akinmowo did raise money this year for a bookmobile and reading room — having a homebase in which to store and organize the books would allow her to expand even further, potentially even issuing library cards or creating a database (Mattern 2019).

One fugitive library that does have a home base, as of this year, is rapper Noname's Radical Hood Library, which opened its doors in October of 2021 in the Jefferson Park neighborhood of Los Angeles as a headquarters for the book club and a community space for all to gather. The library is a headquarters for her book club, which she launched in 2019 as a way to build community through political education. The book club offers two books every month for members to read, and each month they host a discussion on Patreon, a platform where supporters of the library and members of the book club can pay a monthly fee of between $1-$10 to access exclusive content and keep the library and the book club going. Discussions are also held in person, in library or bookstore spaces (*Noname Book Club*, n.d.).

In addition to all of this, the book club also maintains a list of Black-owned bookstores for members to buy from, and partners with some public libraries across the country to ensure that members can access the books of the month for free. The book club has 12 chapters across the country, and also maintains memberships for people who are incarcerated through their Prison Program, raising money to send them the books of the month by mail (*Noname Book Club*, n.d.). Noname also tweeted out the organization system she uses in the library, and it's far from what libraries traditionally use. The categories are titled things like "Fuck the Police (FTP)" and

“What’s a Theory?” with subcategories like “Racism Sucks” and “E’re’body Gay” (@noname, 2021). The active purpose of the library is to educate the people and build community for the purpose of liberation.

The third fugitive library I’ll discuss also has a clear, stated purpose of liberation. The ECHO mobile library is situated in a van in Greece, and since 2016, its librarians have been traveling “around 250km to 11 locations in and around Athens each week, offering access to free reading material for the 115,000 refugees currently in Greece” (ECHO librarians, 2020). The shelves of the library are organized into the different languages that its books are written in: rabic, Farsi, Turkish, Kurmanji, French, English, German, Greek and a few others. They don’t check residential or citizenship status; all they need in order for someone to check out a book is their name and “simple accommodation details” (ECHO librarians, 2020). Their goal is to offer community and education to refugees, and to reject the concept of borders between countries. The library relies on donations in order to operate, and their organization is radical and communal not just in its services, but also in the way it’s organized. The organization is made up of coordinators, volunteers and trustees who are on equal footing; any hug decisions are made collectively, via consensus. They offer educational programs in addition to lending services (“About,” 2021). As they write in their article for Verso books, “Spaces from which to access books have also acted as sites of struggle for equal access to knowledge, free speech, public life and self-definition. This is a history that has run in parallel with the spread of public libraries, albeit sometimes operating in active opposition or critique to those institutions” (ECHO librarians, 2020).

These are just three of the many fugitive libraries that are helping to create a spirit of true information commons, and learning about them has made me feel more confident in the importance of libraries in our world and their ability to serve the community organizers who need and deserve their services.

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