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June 2019

The More You Know, the More You Owe

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The More You Know, the More You Owe

Keywords
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Acknowledgements

About Author
Megan Price (mmeprice.org) is a recent graduate of SJSU iSchool's MLIS program. She currently lives in Europe where she is seeking to do good work with good people at the intersection of culture, arts, and information

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The More You Know, the More You Owe

YA author, Luis J. Rodriguez exemplifies his quote, “The more you know, the more you owe,” through his work as a leader and activist. He employs his personal experience and his professional success to foster growth, connection, and empowerment in his community. Like Rodriguez, the authors in this, the SRJ’s 17th issue, identify field-wide opportunities for LIS professionals to do the same with patrons in their communities, moving outside of familiar or engrained roles toward active equity work.

As a youth advocate, parent of a teen-aged girl, and former high school educator, I gratefully welcome this issue’s invited contribution by Dr. Mary Ann Harlan, SJSU iSchool Associate Professor and Teacher Librarian Program Coordinator. In this excerpt from her new book, The Girl-Positive Library: Inspiring Confidence, Creativity, and Curiosity in Young Women, Dr. Harlan reveals that YA fiction serves not only as an information source for self and world discovery, but as both a perpetrator and challenger of the norms and expectations of young women. Youth services librarians, with this awareness, can suggest books and provide library programming that guides their patrons toward new archetypes of girl heroines.

Current SRJ editor Channon Arabit’s evidence summary evaluates a 2015 study of the accessibility of two content management systems, RELX’s bepress, and OCLC’s CONTENTdm for users with visual impairments. This study provides data in support of increased accessibility measures in digital information, research, and archive platforms.

Author Suzanne S. LaPierre’s article confirms the positive effects of artist and archivist collaboration, and how it evolves archival collections and collection processes, increasing their diversity, accuracy, access and availability. This work broadens the audience’s involvement and draws attention to a wider range of collections for use and exploration.

Author Georgia Westbrook reviews Eric Klinenberg’s Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life. Westbrook confirms Klinenberg’s assertion that public libraries are essential to communities, responsible for providing needed services, information access, and community spaces for members from all facets of society to gather, explore ideas, and expand knowledge.

With service to others as the foundation of our work, we can use our positions as community leaders to keep equity and access at the forefront of professional conversations and strengthen the voice of the field so that we can continue to empower others. We must work to ensure that all are welcomed in our
institutions, and to support each patron’s right to live a life of liberty and pursue happiness.

Acknowledgements

It has been a great honor to serve in as Editor-in-Chief of SRJ. As I leave my position and pass the torch to the ever-capable and dynamic Greta Snyder, I want to thank the team that made this issue possible: Stephanie Akau, Channon Arabit, Claire Goldstein, Terry Shivers, Tayci Stallings, and Havilah Steinman. A special thank you to our Managing Editor, Rachel Greggs, who managed an onslaught of submissions this semester, and who organized and facilitated their rigorous and detailed review. Rachel has been an excellent thought partner, an advocate for all voices, and a model colleague. My deepest thanks to Dr. Anthony Bernier for his guidance and unending support of the journal and its mission. And finally, to our Editorial Board, led by iSchool Director Dr. Sandra Hirsh and Associate Director Dr. Linda Main, and to all the faculty and staff at the iSchool, we thank you for your continued support.
June 2019

Challenging Girlhood

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Challenging Girlhood

Keywords
information literacy, literacy, young adult literature, literacy criticism, girlhood, teens, YA literature, fiction, sexuality, representation, identity

Acknowledgements
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About Author
Mary Ann Harlan is an Assistant Professor at the School of Information at San Jose State University. She earned her PhD in 2012 completing research that focused on information practices of teen content creators. Since that time she has been researching representations of girlhood in popular texts, particularly Young Adult literature. Her current research investigates how teens understand fiction as an information source, and the practices they engage in while reading fiction that uses information to learn. She also is the Teacher Librarian Program Coordinator, having spent 10 years in school libraries in California.
Information literacy, the ability to effectively seek, evaluate, and use information, is a concern of library science and instruction as evidenced by a variety of evolving standards from professional organizations (American Library Association, 2018; Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), 2016). A close look at these standards reveals an assumption that information is fact based, and information literacy is an academic skill. This makes sense as the mission of organizations such as ACRL and AASL is to support librarians in teaching at both the higher education and K12 levels (About AASL, 2006; About ACRL, 2011). Research in information literacy, as well as information behaviors and information practices, however, has developed a broader understanding of information—one might say they position information as anything that is informing (Bruce, 2008).

Furthermore, everyday life information seeking and information behavior research extends the notion of information sources including the people around us, media we encounter, and all manner of less academic sources. Recently I have begun to ask how non-informational texts or aesthetic texts, in other words, fiction, work as an information source. Do we read fiction to learn? Are stories a way to learn about ourselves and the world and in what ways might they be?

Current conversations including #ownvoices, #weneeddiversebooks, and a reemergence of Rudine Sims Bishop’s 1990 article on books as windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors assume that fiction is a source of information. While these conversations occur in multiple communities, they dominate conversations in the young adult literature world. The basic premise is that reading fiction can tell us something about our world and/or ourselves within the world when we engage with story. I think this is an assumption worth investigating. However, for the purposes of this article I accept the belief that there is some truth to the idea that we read fiction to learn about ourselves and our world. Based on this assumption, critical reading requires us to examine fiction as information source in terms of what constructions are presented in the stories, as representation has many facets, and the information in stories can both perpetuate and/or challenge social norms and expectations.

In the humanities, specifically literary criticism, there has been a consistent call for critics to apply the same rigor of critique to literature classified as young adult as there is for other literary categories (Hill, 2015; Trites, 1998). However, within the Educational and Library and Information Science fields the focus of research has been primarily on the reader and/or literacy programs including classroom reading pedagogies. I often read the argument in both the professional and research literature that the
value of Young Adult (YA) literature lies in “giving voice” to adolescents. This is particularly acute by those promoting the use of YA literature in areas such as classroom instruction, bibliotherapy, and creating lifelong readers (these three things are not necessarily interrelated). This argument is reader-focused rather than textually-focused, and does not apply critical theory to the texts in the way literary criticism might. This is problematic in failing to acknowledge the interplay of text and reader. In focusing on the reader with little to no critical analysis of the text we may miss the larger patterns of YA literature that “reinforce the contradictory positions of adolescents in our culture” (Trites, 1998, p. xi). By focusing on what we imagine of the reader experience, either through anecdote or questions that frame reader experience and neglecting the text we forego our own information literate reading of a text, and do a disservice to our patrons by not thoroughly examining the text we recommend them to use to make sense of their world.

My own interests and current research focus on girlhood as a specific form of adolescence (Harlan, 2017; 2018). To establish the concept for my reader: girlhood is the construction of girl through representations of girl in various forms of media. I am particularly interested in how girlhood is presented in YA literature and how YA literature reinforces or challenges systemic structures, particularly the patriarchal structure of American culture. As a medium, YA literature is produced for a teenage audience in ways that other media such as film and television might not entirely be. Despite its intended audience, YA literature is written by adults, bought and produced by adults, and reviewed and promoted primarily by adults. To this end it has been argued that YA literature promotes adult concerns (Trites 1998; Younger, 2009). As both a medium that is grounded in adult worldviews and one that is understood to be representative of youth experience, we should interrogate the construction of girlhood within the story. Critiquing texts highlights adult sensibilities, emphasizing that what a text provides for a reader may be more complex than a surface reading of themes and plot. In doing so, assumptions should be and can be challenged and we problematize representation, as well as simplified notions of the role of YA literature in helping youth read their world.

While this is a much larger research agenda on my part, this paper is an introduction to how girlhood is constructed culturally, and how those dominant girlhoods are represented, problematized, and reinforced in YA literature. This is a grounding to the much bigger question: how do adolescents experience fiction as information? Or even, do they?
Defining Girlhood

Catherine Driscoll writes that “girls are brought into existence in statements and knowledge” (2002: 5). This is the foundation of girlhood, the narrative of the experience of being a girl, built on assumptions that have calcified into truths and direct the way we talk about girls in our culture. There are multiple ways we construct narratives of girlhood. These include, but are hardly limited to developmental understandings of youth, policy narratives, artistic representations, and public performance by girls. These constructions are then circulated through media.

Figure 1: Cycle of Media Circulations

Figure 1 renders a simplified cycle of elements of media circulation in social constructions of singular identities; note that while there is a possible starting point it is an iterative process. Constructing modern girlhood often begins with researchers exploring questions regarding girls’ experiences – sometimes these questions come from observations, other times from previous cultural truths that need to be challenged. Research takes time but when results are published it is often with clear limitations to the findings, and caveats. Journalists then report findings, often focusing on the most sensationalistic element, ignoring the limitations and caveats (or in order to maintain funding, press releases focus journalists on the sensationalistic elements). Then, other journalists write human interest stories purporting to uncover the newest trend. These trend pieces suggest that the most sensationalistic finding is more widespread, or more prevalent than it is. This more often than not leads to a moral panic. Examples include sexting, oral sex parties, hook up culture, etc. Moral panics are fear-based and sensationalistic, and journalism feeds on itself in regard to both more trend pieces and full length parenting texts. Trend pieces evolve into fictional representations in movies, television shows, and books, and because we are now inundated with a media vision of “girl,” a cultural narrative of girlhood emerges. The best example of the process in recent years is the research on relational aggression, the resulting parenting texts Odd Girl Out: The Hidden
Culture of Aggression in Girls (Simmons, 2002) and Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping your Daughters Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World (Wiseman, 2002). Wiseman’s book resulted in a Tina Fey-produced movie Mean Girls (2004), and the now firm belief that girls are emotional bullies. In the cycle of defining girlhood through media, some of the concerns of girls may be identified, but these concerns are filtered through adult expectations, readings, production, and therefore, present an adult construction of girlhood.

So how are these girlhoods represented in YA literature? What information is within the texts of YA literature? In the past twenty-five years, there have been three dominant narratives of girlhood – the Ophelia or at risk girls, mean girls, and the emergent Alpha girl. In this paper, I explore those narratives and include samples of how they are represented in YA literature, noting how literature can problematize the narratives.

**At Risk Ophelias**

In the early 1990s the narratives about adolescents were rooted in developmental psychology, including a long term understanding of adolescence as a time of storm and stress as defined in G. Stanley Hall’s notion of adolescence. In terms of defining girlhood, the construction of adolescence as a time of risk undergirded research related to girls’ loss of self-esteem and the risky behaviors they engaged in as they entered middle school. For instance, in 1994 the publications Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap, by Peggy Orenstein and Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls by Mary Pipher brought attention to the negative impact of low self-esteem on girls. Through interviews, reviews of research, and their own analysis, Orenstein and Pipher described how girls entering middle school demonstrated a loss of self-esteem resulting in slipping grades, eating disorders, cutting, or other behaviors that were deemed harmful. Pipher’s book, in particular, spent three years on the New York Times bestseller list and sparked numerous public discussions. Despite critique over the years regarding the biological determinism of Pipher’s work and the resulting media focus on suburban white girls, Americans came to believe all girls were at risk – of sexual assault, of self-harm, of eating disorders, slipping grades, promiscuity, and other behaviors that concerned adults.

Twenty-five years later, YA literature girl-at-risk stories are still quite prevalent. In the pages of YA literature, girls are victims of abuse, sexual assault, and bullying. They engage in self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders, cutting, drugs and alcohol addiction and binge drinking, and participate in self-imposed social
isolation. The difference between adult media narratives and YA literature is that often the arc of the YA novel is related to girls finding their voice, or to recovering from their trauma. This pattern is particularly clear in Laurie Halse Anderson’s work, which has given us two significant girls at-risk: Melinda in *Speak* (1999), who is a victim of a sexual assault and is learning how to be a survivor and Lia, in *Wintergirls* (2009), who is coping with an eating disorder and her grief at the loss of her friend. In both novels, the girls are learning to find their own strength. This is primarily how at-risk narratives work in YA literature. The nature of plotting, conflict and resolution leads to struggle and survival. As protagonists, girls are subjects of their story rather than a constructed object of girlhood which does problematize the narrative of at-risk girlhood. Yes, there is risk, but girls are subjects who can heal, develop strategies for living, and become healthy survivors.

Despite fiction presenting a complexity in girls’ experiences through the use of interior voice of the character and leaning into girls’ own subjectivity, there is a presentation of rightness. In girls at-risk and recovering narratives in YA literature, girls are also overwhelming isolated from community, they are responsible for their own healing and move individually toward subjectivity and voice. The story therefore emphasizes personal responsibility for one’s own healing rather than exploring how community can assist and support healing. As an information source YA literature perpetuates individual heroism, and a need to find inner strength on ones’ own. On the other hand, in stories in which building relationships can be a catalyst for healing, too often the relationship is a romantic relationship such as the one in *Just Listen* (Dessen, 2006) and *Saint Anything* (Dessen, 2015). It is the emergent relationship with boys that lead to characters having the strength to speak up. (Although the latter Dessen has an adult mentor.) This information can be read as suggesting the girl is heterosexual and in need of male support. This construct furthers patriarchal definitions of girlhood rooted in notions of male protection and, therefore, ownership. As Trites (1998) suggests, this “socializes adolescents into their cultural positions” (p.54). A cultural girlhood that is heterosexual, in which girls need male protection to speak up. While not all YA literature featuring girls at-risk takes this approach, for instance, the aforementioned *Speak* and *Wintergirls* do not, it is strikingly common.

Furthermore, one could critique the sheer number of titles across all genres that have at-risk girls as protagonists as giving the impression that all girls are at risk of either self-harm or trauma. While the numbers related to sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and self-reported behaviors such as eating disorders, cutting, addictions, and bullying are concerning, they are not every girl. Additionally, we can critique YA literature for the same reasons and in the same ways we criticize the media focus on white
girls; particularly middle class, suburban white girls, which ignores the impact of traumas and experiences of girls of color. Most often the girls in the pages of YA literature who fit within a construction of risk due to eating disorders, self-harm, sexual assault are the white, suburban middle class girls.

Bad Girls?

Lower class girls and/or girls of color have different narratives within our cultural constructions of girlhood (if they are represented at all). For instance, girls of color are often cast as “bad” or criminal within media narratives, which is somehow not presented as at-risk (Brown, 2011). The casting of girls of color as likely criminal ignores the structural ways girls are constructed through legal policies and the societal expectations that place more responsibility for their actions on them, than within the more biological determinism of the at-risk narrative deployed for white middle class girls. An example of how media reporting on a rise in arrests of girls constructs a narrative out of context is the ignoring of policies that could potentially change the understanding of the story. For instance, the following policies increase arrest rates for crimes that are not particularly new:

- **Relabeling** of girls' status offense behavior into criminal behavior, which sometimes involves the arrest of girls involved in scuffles with family members for assault.
- **Rediscovery** of girls’ violence by media and policy makers alike. Self-report data has consistently shown that girls engaged in more violence than arrest statistics indicated, in past decades. We simply did not arrest girls for this behavior, but that has now changed, due to policy shifts in enforcement.
- **Upcriming** refers to policies (like "zero tolerance policies") that have the effect of increasing the severity of criminal penalties associated with particular offenses (National Resource Center for Domestic Violence, 2004).

These policy shifts have a larger impact on girls of color, particularly African Americans and Latinxs. Furthermore, comparison of school suspension rates indicates that this is true in the institution of school, as well.

The impact of the bad girl narrative as it is deployed against girls is underexplored in narratives of girlhood, both in adult popular media and YA literature. One exception to consider is Nova Ren Suma’s “The Walls Around Us” which explores incarcerated voices. For instance, the narrator muses about how the girls found themselves incarcerated:

Maybe, long ago, we used to be good. Maybe all little girls are good in the beginning. There might even be pictures of us from those early days, when
we wore braids and colorful barrettes, and played in sandboxes and on swing sets, if we knew days so easy or wore such barrettes... But something happened to us between then and now. Something threw sand in our eyes, ground it in, and we couldn’t get it out. We still can’t (p. 155).

This book explores how race and class can protect perpetrators through societal expectations, while working against lower class girls and girls of color. Despite this example, YA literature perpetuates the idea of at-risk as being behaviors related to white suburban middle class girls, therefore perpetuating societal understandings of what risk is, related to girlhood. It fails to adequately problematize how institutions apply systemic racism and classism in a way that is legitimately risky to girls.

**Mean Girls**

In the 2000s, perhaps as a response to the at-risk narrative of the 1990s, a narrative of girlhood-as-mean girl emerged. In 2002, Rosalind Wiseman published *Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boys, and the New World of Being a Girl* (updated in 2009). Also published in 2002, and dealing with a similar topic, was Rachel Simmons’ *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. Both books detailed relational aggression; how girls used name-calling, ostracization, and other emotional bullying tactics to navigate peer relations. The books reported research findings wrapped up in anecdote, writing in an easy manner for parents, teachers, and others to read. They were full of familiar stories and telling quotes from girls. In keeping with the cycle of defining girlhood as the books became best sellers, the media supported the narrative, circulating stories of girls perpetrating damage through relational aggression, including the Tina Fey movie *Mean Girls* (2004) based on Wiseman’s book. Like the at-risk narrative, mean girls themselves were racialized, as girls of color were more often cast as physically rather than relationally violent, despite research that detailed how relational aggression existed in a variety of racial groups (Currie, Kelley & Pomerantz, 2009). Additionally, by focusing on girls, the role of patriarchy and heterosexism in power structures that allowed for relational aggression to occur was not critiqued in popular media, even though research suggested heterosexism played a powerful role (Brown, Cheney-Lind, Stein, 2007; Brown & Tappan, 2008; Currie, Kelley & Pomerantz, 2009).

In YA literature, mean girls are rarely the protagonist—they are often the antagonist. However, when they are the protagonist the interiority of the characters problematizes simple constructions of mean girls. As narrators they are unlikable in the beginning, but they also are revealed to have reasons for anger, mostly rooted in trauma. Courtney Summers provides examples of this complexity in both *Cracked Up to Be* (2011) and *Some Girls Are* (2009) as both novels focus on mean girls and
power struggles within girl friendships. Parker from *Cracked Up to Be* was on the surface a perfect girl who has unraveled, but she was also a bully. In the beginning of the book she has isolated herself from her friends through anger and sarcasm, trying to be alone. Regina also does not lose her mean girl edge despite her fall from grace in *Some Girls Are* so even while you recognize that what is happening to her is based in a lie, it is still hard to initially empathize with her. In both stories, Summers gives us girls who are operating within a culture that values boys, and leaves girls creating power structures in systems where they have little actual power. The antagonist Anna in *Some Girls Are* “doesn’t like being single for any lengthy periods of time” (p. 88), recognizes that having a boyfriend affords her power and therefore sides with the boyfriend rather than her friend, Regina. This problematizes easy narratives of mean girls as powerful and places their actions within the context of a patriarchal system in which avenues to power are limited for girls. Both Parker and Regina demonstrate an interior awareness of their faults as mean girls, while recognizing the need to maintain that identity for self-protection and power.

Another example of a mean girl protagonist is *Before I Fall* (Oliver, 2010) a story in which the author gives her mean girl a chance to transform into a better person. In various iterations of a repeating day, Samantha displays a complicity of cruelty as well as an awareness of her complicity. However, her private thoughts (interiority) and her own discomfort with her actions are also represented, and eventually she begins to make choices to atone, to be a different girl. In YA literature, mean girl protagonists provide complexity through interiority, reminding us of the mean girl as a person. Unlike the perpetuation of the Ophelia girl, the mean girl in YA literature is problematized within the structure of her community, providing glimpses into how power lies within their choices and how tenuous their experiences are. Mean girls become whole, and their actions are placed within context, that makes them understandable, even sympathetic, offering a critique of a simple construction of mean girl. To this end YA literature constructs mean girls differently than mainstream narratives, but these examples are few, and primarily YA literature positions mean girls as antagonists which indicates an adult sensibility to simplify bullying into the duality of right/wrong without examining motivation deeply, or the very real complexity of relationships.

**The Alpha**

The overarching societal expectation of girls could be framed as good girl, the tabula rasa of girlhood against which other girlhood narratives are framed. In American culture good girls are just that – good, a vague adjective. They are sweet, they are friendly, they do well in school. When they are little they play princess and dress up. As they grow up they settle into being good students, are on student council, and participate in
extracurricular activities but are not overly ambitious. They do not draw attention to themselves in public. They do not get in trouble, or if they do it is easily rectified. Good girls have close friends but are friendly to everyone. They have historically been “the girl next door,” or an “all-American girl.” They are presented as a girl with natural beauty, but they are not so beautiful that the average or ordinary boy cannot interact with her without feeling intimidated. Good girls are easy to talk to. Most importantly good girls are nice, they are likable, and they represent the girl adults want to know.

As research examines the impact of girl empowerment programs and post-feminism on girls’ experience, a different version of good girl has appeared. The good girl is also the smart girl, sometimes referred to as an alpha girl, gamma girls, perfect girls, and “do it all” super girls. This girl does well in school, participates in multiple extra-curricular activities, has an active social life, and does all of this effortlessly. Media stories about these girls document their successes, often as evidence of the success of girl power programs and an equitable society. In a 2002 Newsweek article Americans got to “Meet the Gamma Girls,” nice girls who were independent without breaking rules, involved in school, and had a healthy social life, without being mean or at-risk. In 2006 Dan Kindlon introduced us to them in his book Alpha Girls: Understanding the New American Girl and How She Is Changing the World, detailing girls who are leaders, ready to make a difference in our world. Interestingly ten years later Pomerantz and Raby challenged the narrative of alpha girls when they published their research in Smart Girls: Success, School, and the Myth of Post-Feminism (2017). In this title the authors investigated the pressure to be perfect and the fall-out that these girls were experiencing, placing them back into the narrative of the at-risk Ophelias. Still at the core of the narrative good girls are a girlhood that reminds us of a simpler experience of youth, —one in which we can believe that girls should be good: likable, quiet, virginal and friendly.

In YA literature, good girls reflect the construction of girlhood as defined above. They are well liked but not popular per se, particularly not in the mean girl-trope of popularity. They usually have a small circle of friends. They often have part time jobs, get along with their parents and family, mostly, and do not exhibit typical at-risk behavior in terms of limiting their drinking of alcohol (if at all), no drugs, little sex, healthy body image, and no self-harm. They have crushes on boys or develop relationships with boys over the course of the novel so they are primarily presented as heterosexual, although not always. If they are queer they have the same characteristics; well-liked, good students, and so on. They are often found in contemporary realistic stories and romances—and yet even within these stories young adult literature can problematize simple definitions of the good girl.

In Sarah Dessen’s Along for the Ride (2009), Auden is a good student, accepted into a top college, with extra curriculars, and who never
gives her parents problems. She is on the surface a proto-typical good girl. But because we get to know Auden we come to realize that she has no friends, and she has used perfection as an escape and an attempt to have her parent’s attention. It is not particularly healthy or strong in the ways we purport to want girls to be. Other examples include Samantha Reed, who strives for perfection in her sterile and lonely home, while yearning for the chaos of the Garrets in My Life Next Door (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Macy in The Truth About Forever (Dessen, 2004) tries hard to be perfect, so that none will know her grief, or pity her, but she is also quite isolated. On paper, Auden, Macy, and Samantha look put together with perfect lives but they all face a particular pressure towards perfection that leaves them isolated. This is consistent with real life girls discussing the pressure they feel towards perfection, and the internal narratives of not being enough and the sense of aloneness they feel in their striving (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). It also circles back to narratives of risk, emphasizing adolescence as a time of “storm and stress.” While the nature of fiction requires conflict, the unassailable message within all of these narratives reinforces developmental beliefs of adolescence that perpetuate adult narratives of who we think youth are.

The good girls of YA literature inhabit and present an existence as kind, quiet, and unlikely to cause trouble. They do not get angry. Even Sam, who chooses to tell her mother’s secret is making the right and ethical choice, and therefore despite having knowledge of a crime is a likable girl. Furthermore, she becomes a caretaker, and ultimately provider for the Garret family. Insomuch as YA literature contributes to a construction of girl, the good girl presence furthers ideas of a right way to be in the world. While Trites writes that the “driving force of YA literature is to interrogate social constructions foregrounding the relationship between the society and the individual” (p. 20) I would argue that good girl constructions within YA literature reproduce a world that valorizes girls as nice, and expects them to conform to caretaking, emotional givers inhibiting capacity to express anger or assert ambition. Good girls in YA literature do not often dare to “disturb the universe” in seeking their own subjectivity in the world, rather they conform to feminized ideals of woman inherent in patriarchal systems.

Conclusion

How fiction provides information to a reader and how a reader experiences fiction as information is an ongoing area of interrogation. However, fiction, as a part of media, falls firmly in the conversation of does art reflect or create reality? This is a question that is explored in a variety of fields, media studies, literary criticism, and popular forms of art – film, music, etc. – among other areas. I argue that if we are going to engage in roles in readers advisory for youth and supporters of information literacy, we also should engage that question. YA fiction for
both adult readers and its intended teen readers is part of a constellation of media representations of youth that impact how we construct youth and their experiences. To be information literate readers of YA literature we must critically examine the intended and unintended constructions of youth. For girls, the girlhood in YA literature represents girls individually finding voice within power structures of our culture, including patriarchal systems that control behavior through expectation (be a good girl) and protection. On the other hand, YA literature does problematize girlhood, and its breadth allows for a variety of representations. Still, critical reading can suggest adult agendas may complicate any intended empowerment of girl through situating girls within expected behaviors—of healing, of reforming, of being nice—and within institutions—age hierarchies, school,—and within culture—patriarchal, racist—without examining the impact of institution and culture on those expected behaviors. And so, representation matters, but we should look beyond the demographics of that representation.
References


Author’s note: Much of this material is modified from my book *The Girl-Positive Library: Inspiring Confidence, Creativity and Curiosity in Young Women.*
June 2019

Contemporary Art and Historical Archives: Collaborations and Convergences in a Digital Multicultural Age

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Contemporary Art and Historical Archives: Collaborations and Convergences in a Digital Multicultural Age

Abstract

Literature illuminating the relationship between contemporary art and historical archives around the turn of the twenty-first century and how these interactions inform the evolution of archives in a digital multicultural age is the topic of this review. The literature reveals the extent to which art has been a means for members of marginalized groups to address their representation in historical archives, and also a means for archives to connect with a broader audience. Collaborations between artists and historical archives add new dimension to the debate about the nature of the archive as a creation in and of itself, and in turn the question of whether participatory culture may be a necessary component in achieving more complete representation of all segments of the community. Types of relationships explored in this review include: the questioning of and re-imagining of the archive by artists, particularly those from marginalized groups; the blending of art and digital archives; and how such collaborations have informed the mission and practical concerns of archives. As digitization leads to increasing convergence of previously distinct cultural heritage collections and enthusiasm for participatory platforms accelerates, interactions between individual artists, people from marginalized communities, and GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) will continue to evolve and expand. From this literature review emerge observations about prior collaborations from around the world as they inform future developments.

Keywords
diversity, outreach, contemporary art, historical archives, museums, libraries, galleries, artists, GLAM, LAM, marginalized groups, exhibit design, conceptual art, contemporary culture, multiculturalism, historical narrative, collaborations, partnerships, participatory culture, non-custodial archives, inclusivity, installation art

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About Author

Suzanne Summers LaPierre holds a MLIS from University of South Carolina, Columbia, a MA in Museum Studies from The George Washington University and a BFA in Painting from Rhode Island School of Design. Her career has included working in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM). Current research interests include media literacy initiatives and GLAM collaboration. She currently works in Information Services for Fairfax County Public Library in Virginia.

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Contemporary archives are undergoing significant changes brought about by digitalization and increased inclusion of diverse perspectives. While much has been written on collaborations of artists with art museums and galleries, this review examines collaborations between artists and historical archives as indicative of significant developments in the field. A review of the literature reveals the extent to which the interaction between contemporary artists and historical archives has contributed to diversification of the historical narrative, as art has often been a means of questioning and re-imaging the archive by people from marginalized groups. This literature review explores the core question: How do interactions between contemporary art and turn-of-the-21st century archives inform the evolution of historical archives in a digital multicultural age?

Art has been a means for members of marginalized communities to address their representation in historical archives, and also a means for archives to connect with new audiences. Exploring literature and collaborations from members of the art community reveals the extent to which art has empowered individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups, to correct their perceived absence or misrepresentation in traditional cultural institutions. Literature generated by archivists and librarians on the practical aspects of collaboration with artists reveals challenges including the time and effort involved in coordination, reconciling differing expectations and methods, along with vital benefits such as expanding collections, broadening the historic record, and increasing relevance to the community.

Collaborations between artists and historical archives highlight the extent to which the archive is a creation in and of itself. As a human creation, the archive reflects the experience and perspective of the creators; therefore, only by enabling a diverse multiplicity of participants can the historical record be truly representative of the multi-faceted world in which we live. Earlier collaborative efforts between artists and archivists foreshadowed the current participatory culture movement which is enabling further diversification of the historical record by allowing more involvement of individuals from underrepresented groups.

Use of the term “contemporary art” in this literature review refers to the time frame during which the art was created rather than a particular method or style of art. That is, the artwork was created current to the archive-related project discussed in the literature. The section “Collaborations and Convergences” examines literature on art projects since the 1990s in which the dominant narrative and its archival representation were called into question. These projects often took the form of conceptual art installations within cultural heritage institutions. The section “Practical Challenges and Benefits” reveals experiences of collaboration from the perspective of archivists. In these examples the artwork involved, while contemporary in time frame, often consists of more traditional materials such as painting and types such as regional, folk, and “outsider” or “visionary” art. “Digital Overlap” explores the extent to which digital methods have accelerated the existing overlap between collecting and creating spheres. It includes some examples in which both art and archive exist entirely in digital format. The conclusion looks forward, positing that progress towards more inclusive representation in the historic record will continue as participatory
culture becomes more integral to GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums).

Literature Review

Collaborations and Convergences

Many conceptual artists have worked with archives as a theme and source, questioning how historical collections are acquired and organized, and the narratives that emerge from those arrangements. From the literature on these projects emerges theory about the construction of archives and the historical narrative that archives represent and co-create. Much of the literature also touches upon the efforts of archivists to invite, accommodate and even absorb new perspectives. Many of the most thought-provoking projects have involved artists from marginalized groups expressing a sense of alienation and asserting a presence in the archive.

In a seminal 1992 interpretation of the collection of The Maryland Historical Society (MdHS) from an African-American perspective, artist Fred Wilson created an installation by re-juxtaposing objects and documents from the collection. The title of the exhibition, *Mining the Museum*, reflected the process—mining the collection for items, most of which were in storage as well as the emerging theme—a representation of history that felt more “mine” to the artist than that previously presented. Wilson displayed a pair of shackles amid fine silver serving pieces and a whipping post among elegant upholstered furniture. He placed a Klan hood in a vintage baby carriage and spotlighted an estate log listing enslaved humans alongside livestock, including an elderly woman named Hannah who was valued at one dollar (Wilson, Corrin & Contemporary, 1994). Wilson created powerful statements merely by changing the arrangement of the collection, raising the question—how neutral is our telling of history? Are archivists and curators creating narrative as they acquire and arrange items? Was Wilson’s narrative any more or less valid than that presented previously?

In “How Mining the Museum Changed the Art World” (2017), Maryland Institute College of Art curator Kerr Houston wrote that Wilson’s installation permanently changed the way MdHS presented their collection. For example, Wilson added a spotlight illuminating the image of an enslaved boy in the shadows of a portrait of a white child. The MdHS now recognizes the enslaved child as well as the white child in its labeling and cataloging of the painting. Wilson’s project demonstrated that curating, archiving and exhibit design are powerful acts of narrative, blurring the line between the artist and the archivist/curator.

Wilson’s work was an intervention by invitation, however. The project was rooted in then-director Charles Lyle’s desire to expand the relevance of the MdHS and garner increased engagement from the public, particularly from members of the community who may previously not have felt represented (Ciscle & Lyle, 1994). MdHS is located in Baltimore, a city with a majority-black population. Visitation surged during the exhibit and also ignited some controversy among those who found it inflammatory (Ciscle & Lyle, 1994; Houston, 2017;
Wilson, Corrin & Contemporary, 1994). Even the exhibition catalog was an example of more inclusive practices: employing a form of low-tech participatory culture, it included input from docents and audience members in addition to that of curators and historians (Wilson, Corrin & Contemporary 1994).

Wilson’s pivotal creation was facilitated by an early 1990s identity crisis among cultural heritage institutions, marked by growing realization of the need for deeper inclusivity and outreach (Corrin, 1994; Ciscle & Lyle, 1994). While there were several projects involving the de-mystification of museums in the late 1980s and early 1990s, most involved art museums rather than historical collections, and Wilson’s was unique in its direct confrontation of racial issues (Corrin, 1994). Mining the Museum (1992) paved the way for similar projects that would specifically address marginalization, and it foreshadowed some of the concerns integral to the current participatory culture movement and digital GLAM.

While Wilson highlighted an African-American perspective on the MdHS, Susan Hiller’s 1994 installation at the Freud Museum in London projected a contemporary American woman’s perspective on Freud’s living quarters and collections. In “Working Through Objects” (2006), Hiller, whose background in anthropology preceded her art career, explained how she grouped objects in boxes, adding titles and annotations to provide narrative to otherwise disparate items, describing her project as similar to an archeological dig or psychoanalysis, with layers to be excavated and reconstructed (Hiller, 2006). Rejecting the notion of objectivity, she stated that people have a choice among “these histories and fictions” (p. 44). In one piece she combined seemingly-innocuous creamers shaped like cows with a photograph of a Western cowgirl/outlaw brandishing a gun with Freudian swagger. “Cowgirl” is an ironic title she explains, because “cow” is an insulting term for a woman in England. Hiller described this piece and its context within the Freud Museum as “a way of dealing with sexual insult…there was a particular pleasure for me in situating this in the house of the father” (pp. 45-46). In other pieces, she incorporated words from many languages “to give a sense of being outside the discourse” (p. 47).

In “Contemporary Art, the Archives and Curatorship: Possible Dialogs” (2018), Brazilian curator and professor of art Priscela Arantes explores contemporary Brazilian artists who have drawn on content from historical archives to interpret the way history is told, as well as those whose conceptual art re-imagines the way archives are constructed, classified and presented. Among the work she discusses is that of Rosangela Renno, who purchased collections of photographs from the 19th century through the 1980’s and exhibited them arranged by color, emphasizing how the organization of material changes the manner in which it is perceived and interpreted. Arantes also discusses the work of Mabe Bethonico as an example of “problemizing the archive” (pp. 457-459). The artist was invited to develop a project for the Museu de Arte da Pampulha in 2004 and chose to work with material from the museum’s database rather than objects from its collection. Bethonico’s displays created from the raw data highlighted the cataloging process as representing a choice of narrative. Arantes’ piece concluded with observations on the impact of contemporary art as it calls
upon museums to reflect on their practices regarding collections and archives management, and their role as democratic spaces. The fact that the selected artwork critiquing collection methods was created by women, whose place in traditional art museums has historically been that of subject matter rather than creators, adds an unspoken dimension of outsider-ness that Arantes, perhaps deliberately, does not address directly in her essay.

In the book *The Archive* (MIT Press, 2006), editor and art historian Charles Merewether compiled essays and excerpts on the theme of archives as explored by theorists and artists since the 1960s as a means of exploring individual and collective memories and histories. Among the projects Merewether discussed in his introduction to *The Archive* is that of the Arab Image Foundation, created by photographers in 1996 in Beirut to collect and preserve images of the Arab world. The group collects family albums, studio photography, and other existing imagery to “map the forgotten or suppressed micro-histories of twentieth-century Arabic culture” (Merewether, 2006, p.17). Founded by Arab photographers to preserve examples of their art and culture, this project represents an interesting case of artists-turned-archivists. By creating work for the archive as well as collecting, the photographers are merging the endeavors of artists and archivists. However, the cross-over goes both ways. In his essay for *The Archive*, “Photographic Documents/ Excavation as Art” (2006), photographer/videographer and co-founder of the Arab Image Foundation Akram Zaatari describes the incorporation of historical documents in his art. He collects photographs, documents, notebooks, email attachments and testimonies from areas of conflict in the Arab world and uses them in his video work, essentially building an archive into the artwork to inform the issues he is exploring creatively. *The Archive* includes many such examples in which the distinction between artist and archivist is blurred.

Zaatari and the other artists participating in the Arab Image Foundation (Merewether, 2006; Zaatari, 2006) have something in common with Brazilian artists such as Renno (Arantes, 2018). These artists’ work uses techniques of the archivist in promoting the value of imagery produced by common people documenting ordinary lives, rather than that of more notable figures that historians might traditionally study, collect and value more highly. In arranging and presenting such items the artists assert the importance of overlooked voices in telling a fuller story.

While much of the work written about in *The Archive* leans esoteric, a reinterpretation of historical records in art that has been widely embraced by popular culture is illuminated in “‘Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story’: The Use and Representation of Records in Hamilton: An American Musical” (Madison, 2017). The musical *Hamilton* explores the construction of narrative via the documentation of history, inviting audiences to reflect on the process with the questioning refrain: “who tells your story?” Documents appear throughout as props, plot devices, and subjects. One of Hamilton’s claims to fame is having been the writer of some of the most valuable documents in American history. While exploring this widely recognized narrative, playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda also frequently refers to Hamilton’s outsider status as a bastard, orphan,
and immigrant. He alludes to the slaves hidden behind the scenes of history, writing the music with a rap beat for a majority African-American cast, bringing historically suppressed voices to the forefront, at least symbolically. Miranda also delves into lesser known stories such as that of Hamilton’s wife Eliza, who has a large role to play in the record-keeping aspect of Hamilton: in one scene she is seen burning letters to prevent future generations from speculating on the content, whereas in the finale she is lauded for her labor gathering Hamilton’s work for publication, including recording the stories of unsung men who fought alongside her husband in battle. Through selective collection of records, Eliza is the archivist of Hamilton’s story (Madison, 2017). By thoroughly footnoting the many ways documents are incorporated into the play’s meaning and presentation, Madison adds to the question of the archive as an act of narration and art as a re-examination of that narrative (Hiller, 2006; Madison, 2017; Wilson, Corrin & Contemporary, 1994).

**Digital Overlap**

As both art and archives have become increasingly digitalized and internet-accessible, some overlaps have occurred that enable further participation from artists previously outside of mainstream discourse, including those from under-represented groups. However, changes brought about by the rapidly evolving digital landscape may also lead to potential misinterpretations, whether in terms of cultural misunderstandings or format-related altering of the original intentions of an art work. Digitization and web accessibility also serve to further blur the distinctions between art and archive.

Some of the attending quandaries are explored in literature about the archiving of unrealized or ephemeral contemporary art projects. In this case the very artwork itself occupies marginalized status as projects that have been rejected and/or are outside the traditional purview of collecting organizations. When the conceptual art movement began in the 1960s, art was created that had no lasting object attached to it; thus the record of the art often became its tangible representation. Documentation of the art process became the art (Arantes, 2018). A concrete example of this process is MoRE, a digital archive founded in 2012 consisting of documentation of never-produced art projects from the 1950’s onwards. As described in “MoRE, an Archive of Signs and Traces of Artistic Practices: Creating a Tool for Research in Contemporary Art and Curatorial Practices,” “the primary task of the curators is to reconstruct a working process, and the methodologies and ideologies behind it, through the combined codified tools of the archivist and art historian (cataloging rules, controlled vocabulary, and thesauri)” (Zanella, Bignotti, Modena & Scotti, 2015, p. 67). While many contemporary conceptual artists have explored the idea of the archive as art—a creation in and of itself—the MoRE project explores the idea of art as archive. Are the unrealized MoRE projects art, but art that exists only in the form of a digital archive? Is the archive the art?

Concerns regarding the creation of documentary surrogates for works of ephemeral contemporary art are also explored by archivist Katrina Windon in
“The Right to Decay with Dignity: Documentation and the Negotiation between an Artist’s Sanction and the Cultural Interest” (2012). This essay examines considerations surrounding the preservation of surrogate documents for art projects—whether textual, audio-visual, or material—as they pertain to the intentions of the artist and the integrity of the art work. Surrogates may be created by the artist, the cultural institution acquiring the work, or a third party. Windon emphasizes the importance of careful planning of the documentation process from the point of acquisition because the manner in which surrogates are produced and organized impacts the future interpretation of the art. If the process of archiving the art becomes enmeshed in the perception of the art and its essence as perceived by future viewers, this represents a blurring of the boundary between art-making and archiving as separate processes (Windon, 2012; Zanella et al., 2015).

The strong arguments made for the importance of the surrogate in the future interpretation of art (Arantes, 2018; Windon, 2012) bolster the concept that participatory culture is necessary for marginalized communities to achieve accurate archival representation. While any artist runs the risk of having their work misinterpreted, if the artwork in question was created by an artist from a marginalized group, it is reasonable to question whether archival staff—in which members of mainstream society are traditionally over-represented and members of the marginalized group in question may be totally absent—may not accurately interpret and represent the work even when acting with the best of intentions. This is an important factor to consider when evaluating production and preservation of surrogates, digital or otherwise (Arantes, 2018; Windon, 2012). Participatory methods of archiving, including non-custodial archiving and crowdsourcing, enable input from members of groups typically underrepresented in the staff of cultural heritage institutions (Schreiner & de los Reyes, 2016).

**Practical Challenges and Benefits**

On a more prosaic level, what does the relationship between art and archives mean in terms of bridging the archives with its community, and contributing to core efforts such as acquisitions and research? Several academics and professionals in the field have written about initiatives in which interactions between artists and archivists lead to enhanced collections and stronger community relations, particularly with marginalized segments of the community (Post, 2017; Schreiner & de los Reyes, 2016). Their work highlights some of the challenges as well as benefits of such collaborations.

For example, the importance of, and special considerations surrounding, the practice of archiving materials pertaining to regionally significant and self-taught artists is explored in “Ensuring the Legacy of Self-Taught and Local Artists: A Collaborative Framework for Preserving Artists’ Archives” (Post, 2017). In this piece, Colin Post, a doctoral student at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (UNC), wrote about a project designed to create a sustainable collaborative arrangement between a significant local painter, Cornelio Campos, and the Durham County Library. The case study highlights the challenges and benefits of working collaboratively with a local artist to organize and preserve his
materials for the archive, as well as for his personal use. Some of Campos’ work was also made digitally available to expand access to the community. Challenges included a great deal of time spent in hands-on cooperation and communication as well as negotiating copyright and intellectual control issues. Benefits included preserving an important part of the community’s cultural heritage and developing a stronger relationship between the library and the Mexican-American and arts communities.

Post (2017) extrapolated from this case a framework to provide guidance to local artists in preserving and organizing their personal materials, whether or not those may eventually be acquired by the archive. This type of outreach is of particular benefit to those sometimes known as “outsider” artists, whose work might not meet benchmarks considered valuable by current collecting organizations. Overall, the project demonstrated how a cultural institution may enrich its collection while also becoming more inclusive and accessible to multiple under-represented segments of its community. While working with Campos helped bridge the archive with its Mexican-American community, the project is a reminder that marginalized groups can also include those of under-privileged social classes or those representing currently unpopular viewpoints (Merewether, 2006; Post, 2017; Zaatari, 2006.)

Another example of the arts bridging traditional archives with underrepresented communities is explained in “Social Practices Artists in the Archive: Collaborative Strategies for Documentation” (Schreiner & de los Reyes, 2016). The authors describe a 2015 project which utilized the arts and post-custodial digital archiving techniques to expand documentation of the Filipino-American community in Queens, New York. Queens Memory, the Queens Library local history project coordinated by Maggie Schreiner, collaborated with My Baryo My Borough, a project conceived by artist Claro de los Reyes, and the local Filipino-American community, to create a collaborative collection made public via the website queensmemory.org. The process included creating arts-based events to attract community members, collecting oral histories, and photographing culturally significant items belonging to the community for inclusion in the digital archives. This project helped foster trust and engagement with the community while building the archival record of a significantly under-represented group.

Both the North Carolina and New York projects represent innovative use of the arts as part of community outreach, expanding collections pertaining to underrepresented groups in the area while building trust and interest among community members. The artists involved were local members of the community, in contrast to some of the collaborations outlined in the first section of this literature review. Literature generated by archivists tends to be more prescriptive, and that from the arts field more theoretical; however, a common theme is the use of the arts and participatory culture as a means to increase diversity represented in the archives as well as reaching a broader diversity of users.

In order for such collaborations to occur, archivists must interact with artists, a group of people who by nature of their work represent a group that is outside of traditional norms when it comes to their use of the archives (Lazar,
2013; Mulligan, 2011). Artists have unique ways of utilizing archives that may present challenges but that may be better facilitated by archivists through foresight, understanding and preparation, as reference librarian Lisa Lazar of the Bierce Library, University of Akron, Ohio explains in “Hidden Gems: Creative Artists and Historical Society Libraries and Archives” (2013). This piece explores the benefits of artists making use of historical archives and explains why those collections may be under-utilized by this group. While there are other more general studies of the information-seeking habits of artists, Lazar’s piece is tailored for those in historical societies and archives who may be interested in making their collections more accessible to artists. In her analysis, Lazar notes a significant lack of literature regarding the information-seeking habits of artists outside the realm of visual arts, such as musicians and theatrical artists. This article, like that of many archivists (Lazar, 2013; Mulligan, 2011; Post, 2016), is of prescriptive and practical use for those in the archives field, as opposed to the more theoretical aspects of artists’ use of archival collections explored by many in the arts field (Arantes, 2018; Hiller, 2006; Merewether, 2006; Wilson, Corrin & Contemporary, 1994).

Conclusion

While much has been written on the relationship between art and archives in general, there is relatively little literature specific to the relationship between contemporary art and historical archives; however, this later type of collaboration is illuminating when it comes to improved representation of marginalized groups within the dominant narrative. Literature from those in the art, art history, and art curation fields tends to focus on the theoretical and conceptual vision of projects, while literature from archivists and librarians tends to be prescriptive and anecdotal, deriving practical guidance from case studies. Wider empirical studies on the overall history and impact of such collaborations is lacking but would be of value in informing current developments and potential future directions. While the compilation volume The Archive (2006) gives broad perspective on such projects from the art world’s point of view, it was published over a decade ago and thus lacks coverage of more recent projects.

The future of collaborations between artists and cultural heritage organizations is bound to be impacted greatly by digital formats and online participatory platforms. Digitization is bringing together previously siloed cultural institutions internationally in what is becoming known as LAM (libraries, archives and museums) or GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museum) collaboration (Marcum, 2014). The digital presence of GLAM as it pertains to the inclusion of marginalized communities on an international level and the challenges attending those efforts are explored in “Stepping Beyond Libraries: The Changing Orientation in Global GLAM-Wiki” (Stinson, Fauconnier & Wyatt, 2018). The advent and expansion of GLAM participatory platforms will likely make greater collaboration possible among individual artists and cultural heritage institutions; however, not much literature yet exists on this topic.

Existing literature reveals the value of expanding the archives’ collection
and outreach as a means of attaining a more inclusive and thereby broader and more accurate historical narrative. A comprehensive study of late twentieth and early twenty-first century collaborations between artists and archives, particularly as they informed the representation of marginalized groups in historical archives, would benefit the field as a foreshadowing of current participatory culture issues. The material covered in this literature review does not include examples specific to LGBTQ+ representation; the author suggests this as a topic for future development as content is rapidly emerging in this area. Further research on the growth of GLAM and participatory culture as means by which members of marginalized groups are achieving fuller representation in archives would also be illuminating. Analysis of how the merging of art and historical archives via digital platforms served as a precursor to current GLAM developments would be relevant in grounding the future outlook.

Overall, collaboration between archivists and artists, particularly those from marginalized groups, has furthered examination of the narratives that are constructed via methods of acquisition, organization, and presentation of collections. These efforts have helped remediate the long-standing absence or misrepresentation of marginalized groups in historic collections. Digital methods and platforms such as post-custodial collection methods and crowdsourcing have also played a role in increasing inclusivity which, in turn, creates a richer and more complete historical record. As archiving methods become more participatory, the line between art and archives continues to blur. With openness to ever-expanding methods of collecting, curation and communication, archives of the future may be more relevant than ever to the multifaceted communities they serve and represent.
References


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**Keywords**
public libraries, social infrastructure, community space, urban sociology, crisis informatics

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**About Author**
Georgia Westbrook is an MSLIS candidate at Syracuse University. She holds a BA in art history from Binghamton University.
Andrew Carnegie called libraries “palaces for the people,” and nearly a century after the industrialist’s death, his phrase has become the title of sociologist Eric Klinenberg’s book about the value of social infrastructure. *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* considers the role of meeting places, including, but not limited to, public libraries, in building social bonds and fostering community resilience and wellbeing. There is much at stake for our increasingly mediated society, but Klinenberg suggests there are still steps we can take to build social infrastructure in a way that dovetails with conflicting political and economic priorities. *Palaces for the People* provides a critical look into the role of physical spaces for well-being, taking the reader through examples of social infrastructure, making connections to related disciplines, and contextualizing the significance of social infrastructure in times of crisis.

Social infrastructure, as defined by Klinenberg, is “the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact” (Klinenberg 2018, p. 5). The book opens by looking at the research Klinenberg began while working on his doctorate, studying how social infrastructure affected the outcomes of communities after a significant heat wave in Chicago in 1995. He pays special attention to public libraries, making the point that they allow members of different groups to connect with each other and other groups, including new parents meeting in the children’s room and senior citizens joining together to play virtual bowling games. Throughout the book, Klinenberg acknowledges the privileged experiences he has had which might put him at odds with those who rely on social, rather than private, infrastructure. However, he writes again and again of seeking out opportunities to engage through the social infrastructure he describes. He ultimately concludes that even those who are creating products which encourage disconnect and its attendant harms — i.e. online social media networks, like Facebook — would and do benefit from sharing and partaking in a physical community.

A sociologist by training, Klinenberg frames his arguments with paradigms and studies drawn from that discipline. However, there are notes from other fields incorporated in his arguments as well, especially criminal justice. He details the idea of crime prevention through environmental design, a theory which suggests environmental factors make crime less likely in some areas when compared to others (Klinenberg 2018), and the “broken windows” theory, which posits that signs of physical disorder lead to acts of civil disorder, though he questions the latter at length. Klinenberg wonders if the original theory was misguided; what if the focus was on the actual “broken windows” rather than on the crime that might have been occurring nearby? He goes on to cite the work of John MacDonald and Charles Branas, who are working in Philadelphia to build and study community green spaces and their effects in preventing gun violence, as evidence of this new view on the theory.

The book gives equal space to discussion of social infrastructure in times of stability and in times of crisis, both political and physical. Crisis informatics is an increasingly important scholarly field, mainly within library and information science research, which examines the role of information networks and
technology before, during, and after disasters. Patin (2015) writes that researchers are now focusing on the role library spaces and workers play in natural disasters, rather than only on how to prevent damage to library materials. She writes that after Hurricane Sandy devastated parts of the northeast, the Princeton (NJ) Public Library was a hub for filling out FEMA forms, but also for “responding to information inquiries, creating community contact centres, staffing shelters in the library buildings, housing city command centres, distributing food and supplies, providing power to recharge electronics...providing library materials to evacuees in shelters, and offering meeting space for emergency responders” (Patin 2015, pp. 61-62).

Klinenberg picks up the discussion of community spaces during times of crisis, first with his introduction about the Chicago heat wave and later with a chapter on storms and natural disasters, during which he highlights the ideal of combining social infrastructure with physical infrastructure. While the focus of *Palaces for the People* tends to be public social infrastructure, Klinenberg at several points mentions the decline of previously strong private social groups, and the resulting importance of social spaces that serve as alternate, albeit casual, meeting spaces. Those connections, Klinenberg argues, are what allow people to weather storms, both metaphorical and literal. They allow people to check in with each other, to make sure they are in good health and safety during natural disasters, and provide resources like supplies and labor, and well-maintained spaces to wait out the storms. To that point, Klinenberg discusses the role of a community church in allowing one family in Houston to recover from Hurricane Harvey. He suggests that, moving forward into an era where climate change is causing more severe damage, communities should follow the leads of cities like Rotterdam, New York, and New Orleans which are working to mitigate that damage by combining social and physical infrastructure. In New York, for example, architects, scientists, and government officials are working together on the Living Breakwaters project to protect Staten Island. That plan includes “natural infrastructure — rocky sloped walls full of finfish, shellfish, and lobsters...” as well as educational programs that bring community members together as stakeholders and collaborators (Klinenberg 2018, p. 203).

Klinenberg is a noted sociologist, and he is currently a professor and the director of the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University. He has published widely, including several other books for popular audiences focused on the sociology of relationship and networks, including *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (2003), *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* (2012), and *Modern Romance* (2015), the last of which was written with actor and comedian Aziz Ansari. While written with the popular audience in mind, *Palaces for the People* is not without the research apparatus of a more scholarly form. It contains an extensive notes section and index, as well as credits for the photos included on the first pages of each of the chapters of the book, most of which were taken by the author or drawn from the public domain.

*Palaces for the People* is written with the popular audience in mind, though both scholarly audiences and casual readers will find merits in writing
style and content. Librarians and other information professionals reading the book will likely be affirmed in their current community-focused practices and ideals, but may also find new ways to frame the necessity of their work and new ways to collaborate and expand upon the work they are doing. While the book does not necessarily present discrete steps to take in building and supporting social infrastructure in our communities, there is plenty of inspiration to be taken from *Palaces for the People* nonetheless. Current discussions of the role of public libraries in social life, and the responsibilities of libraries and communities to each other, will find an important voice in Klinenberg’s writing.
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Digital Commons and CONTENTdm: Not Entirely Accessible

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Abstract

Objective: To explore the accessibility for visually impaired users in Digital Commons and CONTENTdm software.

Design: Unstructured interview of prearranged pages in each system.

Setting: The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library and their instance of Digital Commons by Bepress and CONTENTdm by OCLC.

Subjects: A student that is visually impaired participated in the interview.

Methods: The authors interviewed a student using prearranged pages in Digital Commons and CONTENTdm system. The student examined home pages, browsing entities, papers, an overview of policies, and collections. More specifically, the pages ranged from ScholarWorks, the Student Research Experience, the Montana Memory Project, and the Boone and Crockett Club Records. In total, 20 pages were used in the interview; nine of those pages were based on the CONTENTdm software and 11 of the pages were from the Digital Commons platform. The authors did not prepare questions for the interview and allowed the student to “think-aloud” and provide feedback during the session (van Someren, Barnard, & Sandberg, 1994). Also, the authors provided an introductory explanation of the interview and assistance when necessary.

Main Results: The student noted similar accessibility features in Digital Commons and CONTENTdm software, which include headings, descriptive links, and downloadable files. However, the student noted varying challenges in both systems that prohibited straightforward navigation. This includes inconsistent headings and the structure of the content. Comparing the two platforms, the student was not able to understand the content hosted on CONTENTdm, whereas Digital Commons had fewer problems with its accessibility. The authors indicate that the pages and structure of Digital Commons and CONTENTdm have varying accessibilities, which could hinder visually impaired users.
Conclusion: While there have been advances in accessible technology, Digital Commons and CONTENTdm are not fully accessible. The authors noted that developing accessible digital collections is challenging, even with the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and its standards. Based on the results, the authors suggest that developers continue to address such issues and that additional participants are needed to assess accessibility with screen readers and its search functionality. Moreover, the authors suggested that other software could be analyzed for its accessibility, such as Luna Insight.

Commentary

As the Web and its content continues to grow, a large percentage of sites and databases have limited accessibility (J. N. Tatomir & J. C. Tatomir, 2012; Hardesty, 2016). This includes the noted applications in this study; according to the platforms’ sites, CONTENTdm allows institutions to showcase their online collections and “increase visibility through WorldCat,” while Digital Commons hosts and publishes works from an institution, which includes faculty scholarship and student-run journals (OCLC, n.d.; Bepress, n.d.).

The methodology was thoroughly described, showing reliability. More specifically, the authors described the interview process, which included the “think-aloud” method, where the student provided feedback with little interference (van Someren, Barnard, & Sandberg, 1994). This is similar to conducting usability tests and scenarios for websites or software (Schmidt & Etches, 2012). Along with the methodology, the results detailed the positives and negatives of Digital Commons and CONTENTdm system. These findings are consistent with previous research, indicating a need for further research on digital collections and “best practices” for those with visual impairments (Southwell & Slater, 2012, p. 469).

To improve the research, several participants are needed to evaluate the software for accessibility; although interviewing numerous participants could be time consuming, this would provide developers with data to continue creating accessibility features in these systems. Just like other studies indicated in the article, the authors primarily focused on visual impairments for their research. However, including interactions with other impairments are needed.

Accessibility, especially within the digital realm, relates to libraries and archives worldwide. In particular, the article connects to the information profession through its practices, which involve accommodating patrons and ensuring that resources are available. With this in mind, information professionals alike can advocate for accessibility features in systems Digital Commons and CONTENTdm. Furthermore, this research is a reminder to ensure that websites and software within libraries follow accessibility standards.
The article emphasizes a need for accessibility within digital collections and its software. Overall, the authors have added to this field of research and are closer to closing the digital divide and ensuring that users have access to information electronically, which in return empowers users.
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