

Library research as a transgressive activity

The changing role of the librarian

by Jeffrey Garrett

There was a time—and it wasn't all that long ago—when being a librarian meant living as priest in a temple of order, an order that was to be preserved and defended, in which gaps were detected and filled, a system that reflected the orderliness of the universe and the subtle but recognized hierarchy of the sciences.

Assisting students and scholars amounted to guiding them along a twisted but ultimately clear and unequivocal path from the reference desk, from a question, from an identified research need to the right shelf, the right answer, the right book.

With the collapse of a consensual system of the sciences, this role has radically changed. Library searches do not lead anymore from Point A (the catalog, the reference desk) to Point B (the book, the answer, the truth), but instead invite computer-literate library users to explore on their own or with a librarian's help the many recesses of a multicursal maze, placing them again and again in decision situations, at forks or nodes where multiple paths run crisscross through and over and around the hierarchies of subject headings, on their way to what may or may not be a useful or even existing document—perhaps to nothing but an empty spot

on the shelf waiting for an answer that only the questioner can provide.

Through the extraordinary versatility of keyword and Boolean searching, the modern library environment has come to resemble what Umberto Eco calls a rhizome labyrinth, where if pushed, none of the walls will hold firm, in which "every path can be connected with every other one."¹ In effect, the library user creates with every search his or her own ad hoc library of five, fifty, or five thousand book and journal citations, cut out from that great virtual library that is the universe of all accessible books, all stored information.

The library, no longer a lawgiver, has become in the words of Debra A. Castillo a "transgressive space," preserving "all the most potentially disruptive forms, all the most potentially explosive energies as yet unharnessed by society."²

Journey to the unknown

Being a co-investigator and co-transgressor rather than priest at the altar of a fixed order is an exciting role shift for academic librarians. When our community seeks our help, we no longer know just what is going to walk in through our door and where these investigations may take us.

About the author

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Several weeks ago, a student was referred to me by her professor with a question, whether Buddhism might have had an influence on thought and art in fin-de-siècle Vienna. We spent an hour in my office as mazetreaders in the recesses of the library, not only Northwestern's, but everyone else's, too, and by the end, we had discovered bibliographic evidence that even before Jung, there were profound influences of Eastern thinking in Vienna. My guest and co-explorer left with a list of references. I ran into her later at interlibrary loan, for no library is an island, now less than ever. The point of this example is that the inspiration to this exploration was hers, neither of us knew what would come of it, and I was grateful to be taken along for the journey.

Graduate student research especially is today almost defined by its transgressive quality—by pushing against the walls not to see if they give way, but until they do.

Here are some of the topics that we have worked on with humanities students over the past year: "Violence and Erotic Literature"; "British Writings on the Eucharist, 1500–1699"; "Temperance, Alcoholism, and Homosexuality in U.S. History"; "Victorian Britain and Renaissance Florence"; "A Literary Review of Eighteenth-Century Legal Handbooks"; "Contagious Disease Acts"; "The Politics of German Orthographic Reform"; and "The Sexualization of Colonialism in 18th Century West European Literature." Just this week, a student came to us trying to link the semiotics of silence with the policy of covert operations under Eisenhower. (Where will this take us? I can only imagine.)

Tools for the trip

It clearly helps us that the tools we have these days support and even invite this kind of transgressive exploration. Many of our online bibliographic databases can be searched individually or altogether, allowing our users to check for co-occurrence, say, of the words "gender" and "dominance" in MLA, the linguistics data-

base LLBA, Sociological Abstracts, and the Philosopher's Index—all at once.

The hundred or so electronic journals available through Project Muse on campus or at home can be searched for names like Foucault or Büchner or Mishima one at a time or simultaneously, almost guaranteeing a multidisciplinary retrieval set. Then, of course, there is end-user access to WorldCat, opening up the monographic holdings of thousands of research libraries with a single search.

The danger today is not that our patrons will leave empty-handed, but instead may end up choking on the glut of information they call forth, or losing their nerve or even their minds—like the library users in Borges's stories. Librarians must be there to help, for in this age, winnowing is just as important a survival skill as finding.

At Northwestern, our reference department offers what they call the Research Consultation Program. A user completes a form, it is analyzed by a subject-specialist reference librarian, and then there is a physical meeting at which the student or faculty member receives a map of reference materials that might help. Maybe the patron will be referred to one of the bibliographers like myself. We try to teach our users where the hills and the valleys are, and then send them on their way. We all have names, faces, telephones, and e-mail addresses so that we exist both really and virtually.

Another form of transgression taking place today is across what librarians know as "formats." We increasingly do not distinguish between paper formats and electronic formats—OPAC provides access equally to both, and to other formats, as well. They are all indispensable for humanists and social scientists and merge to form a single continuum of resources. Indeed, the administrative divide that has separated so-called book people from so-called tech people is being eroded as we watch.

This fall, a number of librarians like myself will be moving to new quarters in the university library that we will be sharing with humanities computing specialists and teaching technologists.

We are excited by this merge, for in principle and in deed, it reflects where the library is going, and we practitioners want to be there

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and catalog librarian and taught cataloging and classification. She began her career at Stanford as a generalist and a cataloger of German literature, but soon moved to the History Unit, of which she became the head. Keshkekian moved rapidly from her initial appointment as Library I to Librarian VI in 1975, and in a few more years was promoted to senior librarian. Keshkekian has also made contributions to the NACO and BIBCO programs (international, cooperative cataloging projects).

Gail Ronnermann has retired from her position as life sciences librarian at Queens College, CUNY, after a 25-year career.

Laura Gutiérrez-Witt, head of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin (UT), has retired from this position. Harold Billings, director of General Libraries at UT, said, "Prior to her appointment as head librarian in 1975, Laura spent ten years as Nettie Lee Benson's right hand and was, in fact, the chief operating officer of the world-class collection during that time." Gutiérrez-Witt is serving as executive secretary of the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials—an international consortium for the promotion of Latin American acquisitions, bibliography, and resource sharing. She is a lecturer in the UT Austin Graduate School of Library and Information Science, a regular participant in international programs relating to Latin American studies, and a frequent contributor to the literature of the field. She received a Certificate in Modern Archives Administration from the National Archives/American University and was an NEH Fellow in Spanish Archival Sciences at the Newberry Library in Chicago.

Deaths

Darwyn Jon Batway, former director of the Ashland University Library in Ashland, Ohio, died on December 20, 1999. He served on the staff of libraries in Ohio and Washington and directed the Ashland University Library from 1986 to 1991.

Errett Weir McDiarmid, 90, ALA President (1948–49), died on April 27, 2000. After teach-

ing at the University of Illinois, he came to the University of Minnesota in 1943 as a librarian and director of the Division of Library Instruction (as the Graduate Library School was then known). In 1951, he became dean of the College of Science, Literature and the Arts, the predecessor to the College of Liberal Arts. He held that position for 12 years and then served as dean of the Graduate School Fellowship Office and taught in the Graduate School and the Library School until he retired in 1978. Memorials can be sent to the Sherlock Holmes Collection (which he was instrumental in developing) c/o Special Collections & Rare Books, 466 Wilson Library, 309 19th Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455. A contribution will be sent on behalf of the ALA Executive Board.

Joyce McLeod Quinsey, 82, died June 3, 2000, in Eureka, California, following several years of illness with Alzheimer's. In 1935, Quinsey entered Dana College, and for several years thereafter she alternated teaching positions in the Nebraska public schools, from two-room country school to high school, with returns to college. From 1948 to 1950, she worked as a reference librarian at the University of Omaha, then accepted a position as head of the reference department at the University of Kansas Libraries in Lawrence, where she remained until 1961. In 1962, Quinsey moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where she was employed at the University of Nebraska, and later at the Nebraska State Historical Society. In 1964, she accepted a position at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California, as a humanities reference librarian, continuing in that position until her retirement in 1983. ■

("Library research . . ." cont. from page 604)

and working and helping our communities when it arrives at this destination.

Notes

1. Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984): 57.

2. Debra A. Castillo, *The Translated World: A Postmodern Tour of Libraries in Literature* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1985): 16. ■