

Library Lineages

Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History*

Battles examines the *global* history of libraries through intersecting media, cultural, and political-economic histories; he acknowledges their long-standing role as both cultural and political apparatuses that embody their societies' core values and social hierarchies (whether noble or not); and he recognizes their place as geopolitical battlegrounds (including, as Arjomand demonstrates, in Kabul).

We might also ask how our city's public libraries are products of their own media, cultural, and political-economic contexts; and how they, too, have served – and continue to serve – as cultural and political apparatuses.

Battles also addresses classification politics, a theme we'll discuss in a few weeks.

Shannon Mattern, “Library as Infrastructure”

Thinking back to our conversation in Week 2, what difference does a metaphor make? How does the library function as a technological, architectural, epistemological, social, and ethical infrastructure?

What roles do we expect our contemporary public libraries to play? What unites these functions? Have we stretched the library's mission too far? How might the tools and methods of media studies (...or anthropology, sociology, data visualization, or any of the other fields you represent) help us think differently about how a library works?

Brooklyn Public Library, “NOW → NEXT”

Five core principles: (1) to foster literacy and the love of learning; (2) to supply trusted, up-to-date information resources, and guide patrons to the ones they need; (3) to connect residents to educational and economic opportunities; (4) to strengthen relations between residents and promote civic engagement; and (5) to provide inclusive and inspirational places

Noah Arjomand, “The Struggle for Kabul's Libraries”

We could ask all the same questions of Kabul's libraries – and university libraries around the world: who funds them, in whose interests does they serve, who are their publics, what ideologies underlie their foundation and operation, etc.?

“...a big part of the problem is cultural. At the heart of the lack of interest shown by the Ministries of Higher Education and Culture in training (and paying) librarians, according to Wiles, is that in Afghanistan information is viewed not as something people have a right to access but rather as a resource to be possessed. And so libraries are viewed as simply places where individuals' or organizations' collections of books are stored, and library staff enjoy a status comparable to guardians or custodians. There simply isn't a conception of librarian as a profession. “They call everyone a librarian [kitabdar : “keeper of books”], whether they clean in the library or garden [for] the library,” Rawan told me...” (385)

“...Wahdat was using a tribal network to create a public good that he distributed as personal patronage” (392)

Library Lineages Processing Posts

LILIANA: ... Information was always a key part in gaining and retaining **political power** and libraries exercised the control of the hegemonic narrative throughout history. The modern library, the public library, **switched its role from knowledge [custodianship] to a social hub**. ... Nowadays, even if someone is lucky enough to be born in a city with a substantial public library, the convenience **makes the Internet the de facto world public library and search engines the librarians**.... the search engines interfaces are less than perfect. The most used one, Google, monetizes on information access and conceals the logic by which the “digital librarian” suggest content to its users. / More than the new Alexandria I see **Google as Borges’ “Library of Babel”**. A universe that contains all the possible iterations of knowledge, but whose access is mediated by the prevailing gibberish.

LEILA L.: Matthew Battles’ sweeping history of the library, which in turn is also the history of the organization and consumption of knowledge, provides a fascinating survey of the roles libraries had served as **custodians of wisdom, status symbols, objects of conspicuous consumption**, and, more recently, a space of gathering for purposes of **community, literacy, and access to information**. / ... Big cities like NYC aside, **most public libraries nowadays do not have very much scholarly literature at all, let alone access to academic databases**. I can’t help but think that this **university/public divide** is very problematic as it **makes independent scholarship without university affiliation much more difficult** (and expensive), while the public libraries are being stretched thin to serve the community’s needs for baseline English as well as digital literacy.

LAYNE: The **BPL’s 2018 Strategic Plan lays out a comprehensive “epistemological framework,”** detailing its current and future plans for **promoting learning** (by providing communities with necessary resources and opportunities) **and for stewarding knowledge** (by fostering connections and communication between patrons, communities, librarians, branches, and other boroughs). However, BPL’s professed intention to serve “all Brooklyn residents” does not seem to square with its plans to construct new facilities in two of Brooklyn’s wealthiest neighborhoods ... Recognizing that there are other renovations planned, I wonder **whether the temporal prioritization of certain neighborhoods or branches over others can be attributed to the BPL’s interest in cultivating a community-specific approach** (Strategic Plan, 65) – or if there is a **hierarchy of publics** nested within the greater public of Brooklyn as a whole. **Is “public” here merely “a vehicle for publicity”** (Battles, 68)?

ALONSO: I was particularly pleased with this week’s readings, especially since **we don’t have a strong link with public libraries in Mexico**. / In Battles’s text, one of the things that caught my attention was how Panizzi, through the design of the library catalog, **aimed to develop a more independent reader**. I was wondering how that spirit has changed throughout the years, especially since we are **used to receive information that is tailored to us depending on our online behavior**. In that sense, it was no surprise to see [this](#) [Book Match] initiative by the Brooklyn Public Library. / ... I started wondering about **labor, budgets and what it means to be a librarian nowadays**. It seems to me that the role of libraries is to work as **bastions of Democracy and truth**, at the same time, they are being challenged with **limited budgets in a time when they need to incorporate new technologies and people who know how to work with them**. / **Are academic programs tackling the needs of public libraries?** Has the role of library foundations and group of **trustees** become more important? Is the **collecting of data going to affect the distribution of books and activities** that are available for the public?