



Introduction

American Libraries and Agencies of Culture

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To think about libraries is to think about the material forms that culture takes within a social landscape. Each essay in this special issue examines some of the agencies by which Americans have invested particular goods and practices—especially printed books and the act of reading—with a diverse array of meanings and documents some of the functions that libraries play in the lives of individuals and communities at particular moments. In the pages that follow, the library is a protean thing. It is a painstaking record of books loaned to neighbors. It is a soaring, marbled space designed to produce silence in a noisy cityscape populated by immigrants. Libraries take historical form in the circulating records of social libraries in the nineteenth century; in the gendered cliché of the female librarian reading aloud to children in the early twentieth-century; in the 1930s, in a collection at the Library of Congress or the plans Franklin D. Roosevelt made for the preservation of his papers; in the 1950s in reading programs at the New York Public Library or state and local tax referendums. At the end of twentieth century, the library is an absence from a planned community built by Disney.

Each of these essays proposes that we analyze culture from a particular place within a landscape that is at once social, historical, and physical. It is within these institutional locales of culture where communities broker the tensions between the individual and community, the public and the private, the material and the symbolic. As sites where often lofty, ideological claims about

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the value of knowledge collide with seemingly mundane problems of access, management, and technology, libraries allow us to think more fully about the processes of American culture more generally. Historically the library has borne the particular weight of defining culture and devising means for its practical administration, all within a tangible set of problems regarding circulation, cataloging, and storage.

Only when we attend to the seemingly mundane and ordinary ways in which institutions work can we fully appreciate how and why the idea of culture has literally come to matter in the lives of individuals and communities. This becomes palpable and tangible in collecting books, in a bookmobile traveling rural outposts, and in buildings that haunt the horizon of small towns and large cities across the United States. In the remainder of the introduction, I situate the essays in this special volume of *American Studies* in relation to major issues that have defined the production, dissemination, and consumption of American culture: issues of social access, the construction of public life, and the organization of knowledge. Agencies of cultural formation become newly visible when understood from comparative historical locales. What a library is depends on what it does: it is a social enterprise, a physical infrastructure, a symbolic site of collective memory. In the contests waged within and without the walls of libraries we see with particular clarity how culture came to be institutionalized as the order of individual and collective lives, at once a powerful symbol of democratic liberty and an effectual safeguard against its excesses.

The Social Enterprise

The modern history of the library has become inseparable from the form and fate of print. In medieval archives manuscripts were chained to desks because they were so costly to produce and difficult to replace. The idea that large numbers of people might remove books they did not own from a shelf or room for days and weeks at a time depended on the industrial production of printed goods. Along with the expansion of literacy, a crucial part of the revolution sparked by the printing press was new modes of access that brought printed books to audiences outside of cosmopolitan circuits of learned elites.

The history of American libraries is distinguished by innovations in the institutional and social forms of reading, beginning with the Library Company of Philadelphia. In 1729, Benjamin Franklin and several of his peers created the first circulating library open to public subscription. In doing so, they helped to invent social libraries, organizations the primary purpose of which was to make reading available to its members, and which operated essentially like joint-stock companies whose members agreed to pool resources for their mutual benefit. Prior to the Library Company, the only libraries in the colonies aside from a few private ones were academic and theological, designed mostly for the training of ministers: collections at Yale, Harvard, and William and Mary, and the several collections established by the Anglican missionary Thomas Bray and the Soci

ety for the Propagation of the Gospel.¹ Most of these collections were formed by donations from Britain. By contrast, the Library Company purchased books to meet the tastes of its members, taking a pragmatic rather than ideological approach to the supply of books. It defined culture itself in terms of access, and it drew upon the entrepreneurial energies and managerial strategies of commerce to facilitate the provision of ostensible “public goods.” Although one had to own stock in the Library Company to use it, Franklin himself referred to it as the “public library of Philadelphia,” and its orientation was self-consciously inclusive and egalitarian. As its eighteenth-century catalogs demonstrate, it had relatively little of the theological literature that dominated most elite libraries, and the only works in Latin and Greek it had were donations rather than purchases; it was increasingly stocked with contemporary literature by Alexander Pope and others, as well as the novels of Henry Fielding and Ralph Richardson.²

Like so many reformers, educators, and philanthropists who would follow him, Franklin described the fruits of learning in the explicit language of a civilizing mission. In his *Autobiography* he saw social libraries such as the Library Company as a specifically republican institution that promoted equality and a national consciousness: “These libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans, made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries, and perhaps has contributed in some degree to the stand so generally made throughout the colonies in defense of their privileges.”³ The wonder of America, as his own life attested, was that an artisan might become as intelligent as the sons of the gentry, limited only by his own curiosity and ambition. Franklin’s comment epitomizes the myth and ideology that would distinguish both the history of the library and the development of what we might call the cultural agencies of liberalism. Here the individual pursuit of self-interest (young men seeking to “improve” through reading) would rebound to the good of the civic enterprise. In the new world, access to cultural goods usually reserved for the well-born would, not only transform “common tradesmen and farmers” into gentlemen—as Franklin’s own story so famously attested—but also improve conversation and intelligence, crucial elements in the citizens’ defense of their political privileges. At that same time, such liberal agencies of culture were non-coercive, creating opportunities and rewarding individual initiative rather than prescribing lessons or enforcing dogma. Young men were more inclined to recognize the importance of public goods if they had had some material, personal benefit from it, if they catered to their desires as well as their duties.

Social libraries like the Library Company transformed advanced learning from the complacent privilege of inherited status to a symbol of individual freedom and opportunity. Franklin and the thousands of successors who formed these institutions recognized that culture could be rationalized according to democratic agencies of supply and demand, in ways that effaced republican distinctions between public goods and private interests, between citizenship and con-

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sumption. Before 1876, over 3,000 social libraries had been founded, largely in the northeast United States. Many were small and short-lived and did not survive the initial enthusiasm of their founders.⁴ The most successful of them, such as the New York Mercantile Library, drew on strategies of commercial enterprise, mastering practical strategies of promotion and service to deliver reading matter while “fresh,” as annual reports often described it. As private organizations that depended on the satisfaction of dues-paying members, social and “proprietary” libraries had economic incentives to define their market for reading, and to figure out the most effective means of exploiting it.⁵

Limitations of gender, class, ethnicity, and race belied the rhetoric of republican equality, and social libraries helped to institutionalize a more democratic print culture that valued books not as a form of elite property but rather a medium of mass circulation. Instead of enforcing status in educational and social hierarchies dominated by the learned ministry and gentlemen, books acquired social life through exchange and use. The essays that follow document the scope and nature of this social life of books and suggest some of the ways that American culture has been shaped by contests over access. Before the twentieth century, real access to books would continue to be limited by gender, class, ethnicity, and race, in ways that reflected the limits of American democracy itself.

The new social life that books acquired with popular libraries challenged not only the monopoly that traditional elites had on access to books, but also the practices and values through which readers became engaged with them. In her research note on two social libraries in antebellum America, Emily Todd demonstrates how we can use circulating records to specify the nature of readers' engagement. At both the Richmond Library Company and the Lyceum and Library Society of New Orleans, individuals used the intellectual freedom afforded by social libraries to read fiction, as they typically did in social libraries in the nineteenth century, and as they would continue to do in public libraries in the twentieth century. In the pace and the pattern at which readers borrowed the novels of Sir Walter Scott we see the emergence of a compulsive style of emotional and psychological attachment, at once extensive and intensive, that would become endemic to the popular tastes for mass culture. The experience of Scott's novels in the 1830s were, in some rough sense, equivalent to the repeated viewings of *Titanic* or fanatical devotion to Harry Potter novels in the 1990s.⁶

In balancing access to “useful knowledge” and self-improvement, with the social pleasures of leisure and consumption, libraries give shape to emerging communities.⁷ The spread of a mass culture of print promoted new kinds of consumption because, as Ronald and Mary Zboray point out in their groundbreaking essay on private libraries in antebellum America, it entailed a profound decentralization of cultural capital from the exclusive colleges and private libraries of gentlemen to the parlors and kitchens of the middle class. As printed goods saturated everyday spaces in nineteenth-century America, the func-

tions of a library were assumed in the domestic habits of collection, preservation, cataloging, and reference. In their analysis, a library ceases to be a particular place and a set of objects, a formal institution built of brick and mortar. It becomes instead a continuity of practices, a complex of habits among family, friends, and neighbors that assimilate books into the rhythms and rituals of house-keeping and sociability. In making these patterns and functions of the library visible in the quotidian practices of everyday life, the Zborays suggest how strongly our ability to see what culture is came to be colored by the large buildings that sprang up in the late-nineteenth century. As informal functions of the domestic library were delegated to public libraries, an entire habitus of culture was overshadowed, if not eclipsed, by forces of centralization and professionalization—by formal protocols of cultural authority that became embedded in bureaucratic institutions.

The Public Infrastructure

In the age of the social library, the major contest was over access, but in the age of the public library, it would be over the boundaries of public and private life, the infrastructure of civic space. Following the innovations in paper production and the steam-powered press, the printed book was the first truly mass medium, one that to social elites and reformers seemed indifferent, if not corrosive, to moral standards and social hierarchies, indeed to the very inheritance of Western learning. The canary in this particular mineshaft was the popular novel, the development of which in the eighteenth century coincided with the spread of social and circulating libraries. At the end of the eighteenth century, Caritat's immensely popular commercial library in Manhattan catered to upper-class tastes with its impressive supply of fiction and its appeal to the genteel conventions of intellectual improvement and moral edification. In his 1804 catalog Caritat included "explanatory" notes and excerpts from critical reviews that argued for the moral propriety and literary worth of some of the hundreds of novels that he rented out.⁸ Debates about the value of the fiction in social libraries continued throughout the nineteenth century and persisted well into the twentieth century, as public libraries and the library profession struggled to define acquisition and circulation policies. These debates reflected larger anxieties about the moral consequences of mass culture and marketplace values for the democratic polity.

Few institutions were more important in making a new ideal of public culture palpable and visible in the material and social landscape of nineteenth-century America than the public library. In their first annual report, the Trustees of the Boston Public Library paid homage to the Gutenberg Revolution as having produced "the great intellectual revival of the modern world" by making books cheap and abundant. But what good was the invention of printing and the spread of literacy without the means to put these books in the hands of a reading public? The trustees admitted the presence of many libraries in Boston, and pointed out that two-thirds of Massachusetts towns that had social libraries were

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“languishing.” Despite all the other libraries in Boston, “multitudes among [them] have no right of access to any one of the more considerable and important [of] these libraries.” The brilliant strategy of the advocates of public libraries was to redefine the agency of culture in terms of progress and abundance. Like canals and turnpikes and railways, or the modern freeway system, libraries should be seen as part of the physical infrastructure and capital improvements by which society invests in its future. As the Trustees continued:

The old roads, so to speak, are admitted to be no longer sufficient. Even the more modern turnpikes do not satisfy our wants. We ask for railcars and steamboats, in which many more persons—even multitudes—may advance together to the great end of life, and go faster, farther and better, by the means thus furnished to them, than they have ever been able to do before.⁹

Since the eighteenth century, the laissez-faire philosophy of liberal capitalism had equated the free traffic in goods with the spread of knowledge and the diffusion of cosmopolitan manners and refined customs that marked a people as “civilized.” As new modes of transportation and communication fed the growth of markets and commerce, so too libraries would make the trade in ideas more efficient, taking us “to the great end of life” in a way that is “faster, farther, better” than by previous means available.

The existence of thousands of libraries in towns and cities across nineteenth-century America—in common with Sunday schools, lyceums, hospitals, and prisons—was not enough. Libraries had to become permanent fixtures in the civic landscape. Already by 1869, when Edward Edwards made his comparative study of free town libraries in Europe and America, he was struck by the great enthusiasm in the United States for tax support of libraries and other educational institutions: “In the course of the rapidly increasing attention bestowed, throughout almost all parts of America, upon public libraries as powerful and indispensable instruments of civilization” attention soon fastened “upon the municipal action of incorporated towns, as offering the best of all machinery for making Free Libraries thoroughly progressive and truly permanent.”¹⁰

The most persuasive and influential argument for how public libraries served this civilizing function and why they needed tax support to be “thoroughly progressive” came from their partnership with public school systems. What good was education if, in fitting students with the equipment for learning, it left them without a “right of access” to the universe of knowledge? “It awakens a taste for reading, but it furnishes to the public nothing to be read. It conducts our young men and women to the point, where they are qualified to acquire from books the various knowledge in the arts and sciences which books contain; but it does nothing to put those books within their reach.” The “public makes no provision

whatever” by which young people “can carry on their education and bring it to practical results by private study.”¹¹ Republican ideology of education allowed reformers to justify the enormous “provision” that, in the following century, would be made by the “public” for libraries in cities and towns across the nation. Indeed, prior to the cascade of library legislation later in the century, most nineteenth-century towns already had libraries attached to their local schools. Legislation in the late-1830s permitted school districts to levy taxes for school libraries. By 1850 Massachusetts had 2,084, while New York schools had some 1.5 million library books.¹²

As with the huge public investments in internal improvements, the public library became a fixture in the urban landscape. Aggressive campaigns by urban reformers and private philanthropists effected a profound transformation in the social habitat of the modern liberal state. A new public culture emerged from the partnership of private philanthropy and tax-supported agencies of local and state government. John Jacob Astor left \$400,000 for a library because, as his will stated, he wished “to render a public benefit to the city of New York, and to contribute to the advancement of human knowledge and the general good of society. . . .”¹³ In the early-twentieth century Andrew Carnegie’s benevolence was especially important in spreading the library as a public agency across the United States. Carnegie’s money built 1,679 libraries in the United States, and perhaps more important, extorted public commitments to libraries from communities, since the gifts came with the obligation that communities pay for their maintenance and support in perpetuity. Built in more than 1,400 communities between 1880 and 1920, Carnegie libraries were often the only government buildings besides the county courthouses. Today, more than 1,000 of them are still being used as libraries.¹⁴

In striking contrast to state sponsorship of arts and letters in other nations in the developed west, much of the infrastructure for public culture in cities across the United States was initiated by private philanthropy. As Peter Dobkin Hall has argued, this may have been a result of the historic openness of the American political system. As the franchise was opened to white males in the early-nineteenth century, elites in the northeastern United States made innovative use of non-profit corporate charters to develop a network of non-profit institutions that afforded them new channels of leadership, new agencies of social control. As Anglo-American Protestants lost their dominance at the ballot box, they made philanthropic institutions such as the library a preferred mode of politics by other means.¹⁵ In this regard, the magnates who forked over the enormous sums made no bones about their motives. As Carnegie, who gave away more than \$50 million for libraries, declared in 1900: “I choose free libraries as the best agencies for improving the masses of the people, because they give nothing for nothing. They only help those who help themselves. They never pauperize. They reach the aspiring, and open to these the chief treasures of the world—those steeped up in books. A taste for reading drives out lower tastes.”¹⁶ As Carnegie’s

comment succinctly summarized, the “agency” of the public library was moral uplift and social control, not a system of welfare that would “pauperize” steel workers by robbing them of their initiative and independence. It was an agency of self-help that would reward the “aspiring” of talent and will, substituting baser instincts for drinking, dancing, and sex with the “higher” taste for books. Such benevolence invited the working classes to think about abstract “treasures of the world” rather than their wages, to focus on opening up their minds rather than the sensate pleasures of their bodies or their impoverished living conditions. For Carnegie, Pennsylvania steel workers would rise above the working classes by trusting their futures to individual ambition instead of collective organization.

These public libraries were not only “instruments” of social control, but also the nineteenth century’s most impressive symbols of what Astor termed the “general good of society,” of liberal capitalism’s capacity to create “civilization.” Franklin’s biography, after all, traced the movement of a self-made man into public obligation: it was an advertisement of how the pursuit of self-interest could produce public goods. No idea became more central to liberal ideology than the opportunities for social mobility afforded by education, the freedom realized through access to books. As they looked back to modest beginnings, figures as diverse as Franklin, Carnegie, Frederick Douglass, and countless others celebrated the miraculous power of reading to transform one’s material and social circumstances. Just as the blighted social and economic landscape of industrial capitalism was putting the power of the individual in question, this liberal ideology was propagated with missionary zeal by a new cadre of professional librarians and educators. As they spread the gospel of public culture to small towns across the United States, public libraries would acquire status as a public good, worthy of tax support, by giving the unwashed or provincial masses the chance to worship the civil religion of liberal individualism. Ushered into these ornate temples of self-improvement, educated citizens were assumed to become more capable of assuming the duties and enjoying the fruits of liberty and less likely to challenge the social inequalities that grew with each decade.

The early campaign for tax support of libraries coincided with a comprehensive effort to define librarianship as a professional mode of civic service. The passage of the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act in 1883 sought to give government service a more “professional” character, at a moment when professionalism was increasingly defined by positivist and managerial norms of objectivity, efficiency, and expertise. While political appointees would occupy the upper tiers of government agencies, the machinery of governance would remain relatively undisturbed by the tides of popular whim and the political corruption that seemed to have compromised the integrity and quality of civic life. Like the post office or other departments of an expanding network of municipal and state bureaucracies, the modern library specialized in “services” that could be evaluated and standardized according to rationalized, bureaucratic methods. The

smooth, continuous operation of municipal administrations—like the monolithic buildings that housed them—became powerful symbols of democracy's ability to survive the winds of political fashion. The major argument for this extraordinary expansion of state sponsorship of "instruments of civilization" such as the public schools and libraries in the Progressive era was the influx of millions of immigrants and the social havoc wrought by industrialism in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Like the urban settlement houses that sprang up at the turn of the century, public libraries helped give new institutional forms to civic life. They did this in large part by challenging the gendered meanings that had defined roles and responsibilities of public life. In "'We Have Become Too Tender-Hearted': Gender and the Language of Negotiation in the Public Library," Jacqueline Eddy examines the language in which library professionals employed the rhetoric of gender to claim cultural authority for the library and enhance the status of their profession from 1880 through 1920.¹⁷ Eddy analyzes the "official" language of the library movement, primarily drawn from the American Library Association and (until 1906) its primary organ, *The Library Journal*, as they addressed professional education, the admittance and segregation of children, the new strategies of community outreach, and other issues. The library became a fixture in the public landscape during the decades when the very shape of the civic sphere and the limits of private life were being profoundly transformed by modern conflicts over gender roles. In issues relating to poverty, education, and children, thousands of women occupying the rank and file of progressive reform sought to bring moral conscience and practical skills associated with Victorian domesticity into the urban landscape. At Hull House, Jane Addams and her colleagues literally set up house in an immigrant ghetto, applying their own expertise with the "home economics" of hygiene, nutrition, and maternal care to problems of urban life. These problems could no longer be managed by male-dominated political systems that, like so many fathers in Victorian melodrama, had become incompetent, corrupt, or derelict in their public duties. With the entrance of women into education and social work, the rise of the "new woman" and networks of women's clubs, the grass roots mobilization against drinking and other social pathologies, and the struggle for the vote, questions about the social status and moral authority of women became integral to every aspect of municipal, state, and national reform. One wonders whether massive investment in public libraries would have been possible without the moral authority that women brought to bear in their new roles. As public libraries opened children's reading rooms and offered counsel to immigrants, women came to play new roles in public life without challenging Victorian proprieties, and they did so at a lower cost to municipal taxpayers.

The institutions of public culture built by private philanthropy and the state brought the "advancement of human knowledge" to otherwise dark provinces of American life, outposts in an expanding national culture in the twentieth

century. Two essays offer contrasting perspectives on the diffuse process by which libraries became enmeshed in larger contests over the meaning and form of American culture during the middle of the twentieth century. If in the nineteenth century freedom had been a largely moral category—freedom from lower tastes, as Carnegie put it—it became, with the emergence of the United States as a military and economic superpower, an increasingly political category. Jean Preer offers a case study of how the New York Public Library came to develop a new kind of service called “Exploring the American Idea” (EAI). Like the Great Books Program, EAI was an adult education program designed to foster an awareness of democratic values, at the same moment when agencies such as the Voice of America or the United States Information Agency were seeking to spread the empire of American liberalism abroad.¹⁸ Through reading lists and discussion groups sponsored by the program, popular audiences gained access to an emerging canon of literary works that, like the first academic programs in American Studies or influential studies such as F.O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941), expressed a cohesive and exceptional cultural identity. As Preer reconstructs the particular history of Exploring the American Idea, however, its ideological meaning becomes less cohesive and certain once we see the complex negotiations between individuals and groups, elites and popular audiences—from which cultural agencies develop in complex social and institutional environments.

What then can the case of the library teach us about otherwise familiar episodes in the development of liberal hegemony? As libraries and other institutions became quasi-governmental agencies, processes of cultural formation became increasingly contested and more diffuse than scholars have sometimes imagined. In “Reading versus the Red Bull,” Christine Pawley tells the story of the Door-Kewaunee, Wisconsin Regional Library Demonstration Project, which between 1950 and 1953 established rural bookmobile service, expanded small-town library collections, and introduced cooperative cataloguing and book selection. Focusing on an electoral referendum in 1952 about whether the county would continue funding the initiative, Pawley demonstrates how political abstractions playing out nationally became palpable at the grass roots level as a conflict over taxes, pitting liberal/progressive views of the civic role of libraries against forces of social and cultural conservatism. As library advocates and local politicians manipulated rhetoric of the Cold War to their own ends, their arguments were in large part resisted by the patrons of bookmobiles, who continued to be interested mainly in reading fiction. Whatever the national and global meanings that elites attach to them, cultural agencies are constituted in practices and uses, within particular communities and local lives. No less than Ben Franklin and his fellow artisans, the ordinary people who gathered in reading groups at the New York Public, or took books from the bookmobiles in rural Wisconsin were using institutions to their own purposes. To understand the role of the library in American life requires that we understand agency itself in terms

of appropriation. To read a book is to borrow from established forms of cultural authority and to refashion that authority within personal and communal contexts of meaning and practice.

As the funding and administration of libraries was transferred from philanthropy to the public purse, libraries became as integral to the local infrastructure of civic life as roads and bridges were to transportation networks. As programs such as "Exploring the Idea" or the Wisconsin Library Demonstration suggest, these municipal agencies of American culture would develop according to bureaucratic imperatives that accompanied the enormous post-War expansion of the scope and complexity of government at the local, regional, and national levels. Professional initiatives such as the Public Library Inquiry, published by the Social Science Research Council in 1950, found that the nation had a "multitude of libraries, some of them magnificent institutions, but it has no library system," and recommended an "integrated or interrelated machinery" of management that has now become commonplace in services such as interlibrary loan and on-line catalogues. The federal government became involved in expanding the infrastructure of public library service with The Library Services Act in 1956 and the Library Services and Construction Act of 1964, perhaps in response to the report's observation that "communist countries have been most active in promoting public library growth within their borders."¹⁹ In the mid-1990s, there were over 16,000 public library buildings in 9,000 library systems, with more than half part of a municipal government. Almost 80 percent of the total operating income of \$5.9 billion came from local sources, with 12 percent coming from the state and 1 percent from the federal government.²⁰ The "machinery" of library service had indeed become more centralized as well. More than 71 percent of the population was being serviced by only 11 percent of the public libraries, and almost 70 percent of public libraries were members of a system, federation, or cooperative service.

Public libraries and other institutions established boundaries between public and private life that have become crucial to the modern meaning and experience of community. In their comparison of two libraries in Florida, Gottlieb and Dilevko open a window on the fate of the community at the end of the twentieth century, in a social landscape increasingly shaped by the private forces of global capitalism, and mass consumption. When the Disney Corporation first built the private residential development of Celebration, it made no provision for a town library. We might see this initial omission as a symptom of the corporate takeover of public life occurring at every level of education. The public library in Celebration eventually differed from the one next door in neighboring Osceola County in an emphasis on therapeutic self-help books that, as Dilevko and Gottlieb argue, reflects a profound shift in the ideology and social fabric of community. In its residents' desire for a library, one can see nostalgia for an image of small town life, the same fantasy of Main Street U.S.A. that Disneyland has sold for generations. For those who can afford it, this fantasy entails stan-

standardization, homogeneity, and control of the social environment that ethnic and class diversity make impossible elsewhere. As the case of Celebration suggests, the privatization of community is eroding the infrastructure of civic life that allowed earlier generations of Americans to recognize collective goods as distinct from goods in the marketplace. Community in postmodern America has itself become a function of niche marketing, in which “culture” has become synonymous with leisure and consumption.

Sites of Memory, and the Memory of Technology

Libraries enlarge our understanding of agencies of culture from two perspectives: the competition for goods and status and the construction of an infrastructure for public and national culture. In both regards, the history of libraries exemplifies conflicts—between individualism and community, between private and public—that are endemic to the process of cultural formation in the modern United States. But as the essays in this volume also demonstrate, the library itself has a more specific history as a unique kind of agency, related to the storage, retrieval, and organization of knowledge. All cultures, of course, develop tacit and formal means for preserving the past for the benefit of future generations. From the campaign of ancient rhetoricians to devise “places of memory,” to the modern campaigns to devise a universal standard bibliography, the Western ideal of the library has represented not merely a collection of books gathered for some purpose but also arguments about the location, form, and power of knowledge in particular social and historical contexts. As a symbolic space, a type of collection, a kind of building, the library gives institutional form to our collective memory.

This can be seen in the case of Presidential libraries, which as Benjamin Hufbauer demonstrates in “A Shift in Commemoration,” was invented by Franklin D. Roosevelt. By naming his memorial a “library,” Roosevelt sought to be remembered for posterity by trading on the prestige and good will associated with libraries. And yet, in its pragmatic organization and architectural form, the complex was meant to operate as a popular museum as well as archive, appealing to a general public of tourists rather than a coterie of scholars. Such institutions intervene in our collective memory less through the functional preservation of documents and archival material, than through the production of national history as an locus of symbolic imagination. Through his analysis of the physical design and layout of the library, Hufbauer demonstrates how the institution creates “narrative circuits of settings and objects” that conflate an individual’s life with a national past, shrouding public history in the aura of the sacred. We have no kings in America, but the growth of the imperial presidency in the twentieth century has helped to satisfy a thoroughly aristocratic desire to elevate particular objects and individuals above the democratic horde—to worship at the tomb of presidents grown Pharaoh-like in their cultural stature.

Libraries not only create access to the cultural goods, but they also institutionalize through their collections and policies changing ideals of culture. The creation of large national libraries throughout the early modern period were coincident with the invention of traditions that helped to legitimize the modern nation-state. Along with museums, monuments, and other public places, libraries and their collections helped to locate a disembodied historical consciousness in physical and symbolic sites of what Pierre Nora has diagnosed as the realms of national memory.²¹ In narrating the development of the Archive of American Folk Culture in the Library of Congress, Jane Aikin helps us to understand the process of institutional innovation and adaptation that helped to shape our collective heritage in the modern era. In the nineteenth century, Charles Jewett's advocacy for making the Smithsonian institution a national library depended on a moralistic distinction among the objects of culture. "Standard" books in research libraries demanded the gravity and intensity of "study," unlike the "ephemeral works" and cheap publications that were piled up like so much lumber on the shelves of circulating libraries, athenaeums, book auctions.²² It was only in the twentieth century that folk music and other ephemeral pieces of the vernacular past came to have a value for scholars. Aikin describes the efforts of Herbert Putnam and Robert Winslow Gordon to expand the scope of the Library of Congress' mission and function, given its unique legislative status, and given the low status of music as an object of scholarly and historical inquiry. Aikin reminds us of the contingent, pragmatic process by which popular "culture" came to be discovered in the 1920s and 1930s, newly visible pieces of a rapidly evolving national patrimony.

Like the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress, large public institutions founded in the nineteenth century made historical arguments about the meaning and purpose of "culture" in the modern world. Adorned with imposing and classical proportions of the Beaux arts tradition and the "City Beautiful" movement, huge edifices such as the New York Public Library were designed to promote and protect a traditional ideal of civilization from the anarchic, benighted modern urban life. In "The Sound of the Civic: Noise and Urban Subjectivity at the New York Public Library," Ari Kelman takes the silence of libraries as the occasion for thinking about the phenomenology of civic life. The immigrants who sat quietly awed by the majestic splendor of the Public Library's reading room in the early twentieth century found refuge from an urban social life that, as Kelman argues, is always noisy. Seeking to control and regulate this noise of the modern city, the philanthropists and reformers who agitated throughout the later nineteenth century on behalf of libraries and other municipal institutions (the art museum, the concert hall, the opera house, the park system, etc.) saw themselves as what Dee Garrison once termed "apostles of culture."²³ In sharing the British educator Mathew Arnold's definition of culture as the "best that has been thought and said," their efforts were motivated by a moralistic, if not spiritual, quest to create a space for tradition, proportion, and reverence in a modern

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social landscape grown crowded and noisy with mass consumption and ethnic pluralism. Their elitist ideal of civic life was embodied in the cold, imposing, silent spaces because the hustle of work and leisure in the highly commercial and industrial spaces of the city were seen as alienating to ordinary peoples' capacity for thinking and acting as citizens. Whatever their efficacy in "improving" or "controlling" the masses, these buildings allowed Americans literally to hear the sound of the civic, to develop a sensory and corporeal attachment to a symbolic ideal of democratic culture and a Victorian creed of liberal individualism.

With their granite and limestone walls, with the echo of one's footsteps on their polished marble floors, these large edifices have become monuments to a moral ideal of learning that now seems obsolete. These libraries are mausoleums for the bounded "corpus" or unified "body" that knowledge seemed to have, prior to its virtual decomposition in the digital age. In the mid-twentieth century, librarians embraced an alternative epistemology subsumed in the term "information," with its connotation of "scattered disjunct fragments of fact."²⁴ As federal defense and intelligence agencies sponsored research and technology in information systems and data analysis, schools of librarianship expanded their discipline to include "information science." Increasingly, the agency of the public library would be identified less with buildings and the lending of books, than with centralized, cooperative systems of information classification, storage, and retrieval. As early as 1940, an early prophet of information systems, Vannevar Bush, imagined a "memex," a "sort of mechanized private file and library" using microfilm to store books, records, and communications on a device that resembled a desktop computer. New technologies would dispense with the cumbersome "artificiality of systems of indexing" that had been designed for books, operating in a more organic or natural way by "the association of thoughts," as "an enlarged intimate supplement" to memory.²⁵ As Bush predicted, the computer age would help to make private and virtual those agencies of knowledge that the libraries of the nineteenth century had made so insistently public.

In twentieth-century America, the agencies of culture became identified with "progress" in media and technology in ways that fundamentally challenged the public function of the library. In the 1957 film comedy *Desk Set*, we find an acute parable about the potential anachronism of the library as a human institution, in a universe of knowledge grown inhuman in scale and esoteric in its particulars. Spencer Tracy plays a "methods engineer" who installs an "electronic brain" in the "Research and Reference" office of the Federal Broadcasting Corporation, threatening to replace the entire office. As it is imagined in the film, the library became the province of a group of eccentric and endearing office "girls" adept at the recall of trivia and the intuitive solution of brain-teasers. Amidst the dusty piles of books and the clutter of corporate office, the library's traditional challenges of storing and retrieving knowledge are drama-

tized in the spectacle of Katharine Hepburn reciting verses of Longfellow and naming all of Santa's reindeer. The comic premise of the movie is that technological progress and corporate efficiency cannot do without the quirky charm of a librarian, no less than a work-obsessed engineer can do without a gal.

Marrying off the spinster to the computer geek, the film manages reconciliation between the traditional form of the library and new technology that has proved more problematic in real life. Reduced to its functionality for "reference," that "knowledge" long idealized as the humanist end of civilization has been rationalized as information. It has ceased to represent a public good, a means to developing one's capacity for enlightened reason and furthering the collective inheritance of "culture," and has become instead a commodity within the all-encompassing world of the multinational media corporation. Decorated in the steel shelving and desks that would become ubiquitous in administrative offices throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the library depicted in the film is a vestigial artifact in the evolution of media technology and the social institutions under corporate capitalism. The feminized images of the library and librarians in *Desk Set* or in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* have become part of our collective memory. They recall social and institutional forms that have been bypassed by what came, in the late-twentieth century, to be called the information superhighway.

Managed from the offices of IBM, Disney, AOL-Time Warner, and other centralized, hierarchical corporate agencies, culture is not about prized goods, gaining their value from the social distinctions they enforce between gentlemen and plebians, the values they negotiate between learned and popular tastes, but about systems and processes—or what has, with the digital age, increasingly come to be called "networks." Culture is a pathway, or what the Trustees of the Boston Public Library termed in 1852 a "right of access": it is a set of relationships or links by which individuals become more effectively integrated into the production and exchange of information. Or, to put it in contemporary terms, any library is merely a portal to a network. From this perspective, the buildings and books they hold become secondary to the amorphous potential and magical promise of distributed systems in the postmodern organization of the information economy. When San Francisco built its new flagship public library in the 1990s, it engaged in wholesale "book dumping" because its director saw physical books as peripheral to its mission in the information age.²⁶ And, indeed, although libraries today receive more visitors than ever, it often seems that their most crowded spaces are where people sign up and patiently wait their turn at the computer terminals made available for public use.

The essays that follow help us to understand the social and historical life of print culture that libraries helped to institutionalize over the last two hundred years, and to appreciate the genealogy of an essentially Victorian symbol of public life. They also help us to see more clearly what the potential disappearance of the library from the local landscape of Celebration and elsewhere por-

tends for the processes of cultural formation in the twenty-first century. Where exactly is culture, in a world where the forms of knowledge have been reorganized by new media and digital technology, where the experience of public life is increasingly realized through private acts of consumption? With the development of new media and the gradual usurpation of state sovereignty by the multinational corporation, agencies of culture have shifted from particular objects and local sites, to institutional systems and networks on a regional, national, and increasingly global scale.

Notes

1. On Bray and his legacy, see Charles T. Laughler, *Thomas Bray's Grand Design: Libraries of the Church of England in America, 1695-1785* (Chicago, 1973).

2. Edwin Wolf II, *Catalogue of the Library Company of Philadelphia: a facsimile reprint of the edition of 1741, printed by Benjamin Franklin* (Philadelphia, 1956). Franklin referred to the Library Company as "Philadelphia Public Library" while others referred to it as city library or the Philadelphia library (v,vi). Many of the Library Company's texts were "standard," available at Harvard and Yale, and subsequently in the New York Society Library. From a total of 375 books in 1741, it had 114 in the area of history, 69 in literature, 28 in science, 38 in theology, 33 in philosophy, 28 in the social sciences, 13 in the fine arts, 10 in linguistics, and five others. Tradesmen did not view Latin and Greek as necessary to their advancement up the social ladder, and the Company's collection avoided books in foreign languages. It had only 13, while half the books at Harvard were in Latin. "As in the scheme of the library I had provided only for English Books, so in this new scheme my ideas went no farther than to procure the means of a Good English Education," Franklin later said about the Academy of Philadelphia in 1789. So too, the Company was noticeably light in theology, which filled two-thirds of Harvard's library in 1723 and half of Yale's in 1843. The literature collection was mainly contemporary and Augustan, with no Chaucer or Shakespeare. The only editorial comment in the entire 1841 catalogue is about *Locke's Essay Upon Human Understanding*, "Esteemed the best Book of logick in the world." Except for Pope and Vertot, there were more books by Locke than by any other author (xi). On the eighteenth-century context of the Library Company, see Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, eds., *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), and Edwin Wolf II, *The Book Culture of a Colonial American City: Philadelphia Books, Bookmen, and Booksellers* (Oxford, 1988). On social libraries within the context of colonial networks of book publishing and distribution, see James Raven, *London Booksellers and American Customers: Transatlantic Literary Community and the Charleston Library Society, 1748-1811* (Charleston, S.C., 2001).

3. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall, *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography* (New York, 1986), 57.

4. Haynes McMullen, *American Libraries Before 1876* (Westport, Conn., 2000). Also see David Kaser, *A Book for Sixpence: The Circulating Library in America* (Pittsburgh, 1980).

5. Thomas Augst, "The Business of Reading in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 50 (June, 1998) 267-305.

6. On intensive and extensive reading patterns, see David D. Hall, "The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600-1850, in *Printing and Society in Early America*, ed. by William Joyce et al. (Worcester, Mass., 1983), 1-47.

7. For studies that situate nineteenth-century print culture in a rich context of social practices and institutions, see Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1989); Ronald Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York, 1993); Christine Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa* (Amherst, Mass., 2001).

8. George Gates Raddin, Jr., *An Early New York Library of Fiction, with a checklist of the fiction in H. Caritat's Circulating Library, No. 1 City Hotel, Broadway, New York 1804* (New York, 1940).

9. *Report of the Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, July 1852* (Boston, 1852) 5, 15, 12-13. The history of public libraries was for decades aligned with the progress of liberal democracy. See Sidney Ditzion, *Arsenals for a Democratic Culture: A Social History of the American Public Library Movement in New England & the Middle States from 1850 to 1900* (Chicago, 1947), and Samuel Swett Green, *The Public Library Movement in the United States, 1853-1893* (Boston, 1913).

10. Edward Edwards, *Free Town Libraries: Their Formation, Management, and History in Britain, France, Germany, and America* (New York, 1869), 273.
11. *Report of the Trustees*, 7.
12. Michael Harris, *History of Libraries in the Western World*, 4th ed., (Metuchen, N.J., 1995), 190. In *Third Annual Report for the Massachusetts Common Schools*, Horace Mann put forward the same argument as the Trustees of the Boston Public Library, summarized the credo for school district libraries, which were another significant forerunner of the public library system, in similar terms as the Trustees of the Boston Public Library. After the rising generation has acquired "habits of intelligent reading in our schools what shall they read? For, with no books to read, the power of reading will be useless; and with bad books to read, the consequences will be as much worse than ignorance as wisdom is better." It was up to educators, intellectuals and legislators to decide for the "great mass of children in the State" what books are "moral and intellectual wants, and fitted to nourish their minds with the elements of uprightness and wisdom." Cited in Harris, *History of Libraries*, 189. Sunday school libraries were probably the most numerous and least known type of library in nineteenth-century America. Every church in north and west had a collection designated as Sunday school library—at times large general collections, but often only religious and inspirational texts; especially in areas without other libraries, they were consulted by children and adults alike. See McMullen, *American Libraries*.
13. Edwards, *Free Town Libraries*, 312.
14. On the construction and funding of public libraries since the late nineteenth century, see Donald Oehlerts, *Books and Blueprints: Building America's Public Libraries* (Westport, Conn., 1991).
15. Peter Dobkin Hall demonstrates "the reorientation of the Old Standing Order," "from an elite with public responsibilities to a group whose influence was mediated through private institutions," which included colleges, museums, libraries, hospitals, and other benevolent institutions. Only 12 percent of donations given for such institutional benevolence in Boston between 1800 and 1860 went to publicly controlled charities. Fundraising shifted towards larger donations by smaller numbers of donors who wielded greater influence over the institutions as a result. Donations from the private sector depended increasingly on the insulation of privately chartered institutions from public oversight: "The development of a national culture became the peculiar task of a small set of privately funded institutions in states in which public interference in the affairs of private corporations was minimal." Peter Dobkin Hall, *The Organization of American Culture 1700-1900: Private Institutions, Elites, and the Origins of American Nationality* (New York, 1984), 110, 122.
16. Cited in Harris, *History of Libraries*, 246-7. For an excellent study of Carnegie libraries in their social and cultural context, see Abigail Van Slyck, *Free To All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890-1920* (Chicago, 1995). For essays on the refusal of Carnegie libraries, see Robert Sidney Martin, *Carnegie Denied: Communities Rejecting Carnegie Library Construction Grants 1898-1925* (Westport, Conn., 1993).
17. For the best history of the emergence of librarianship as a profession, see Wayne Wiegand, *The Politics of an Emerging Profession: The American Library Association, 1876-1917* (Westport, Conn., 1986). On development of library ideology as it related to censorship and the freedom to read, see Evelyn Geller, *Forbidden Books in American Libraries, 1876-1939* (Westport, Conn., 1984).
18. On the international role of the libraries preceding and during the cold war, see Gary Kraske, *Missionaries of the Book: The American Library Profession and the Origins of United States Cultural Diplomacy* (Westport, Conn., 1985). For another analysis of professional ideology, see Michael F. Winter, *The Culture of Control and Expertise: Toward a Sociological Understanding of Librarianship* (Westport, Conn., 1988). For broader perspectives on liberal consensus and American culture during the 1950s, see Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War* (Chicago, 1989).
19. Robert Leigh, *The Public Library in the United States* (New York, 1950) 73, 7. The report summarized the principles that should govern the modernization of library service: 1) Democratic opportunity to learn; 2) Freedom of communication; 3) Popular control and expert direction: Public institutions carrying on specialized activities are properly subject to expert direction; 4) Institutionally represent the interaction of "expert and lay judgement"; 5) Special groups and the mediating function—need to serve the whole, "constituting an effective symbol of communal fraternity"; 6) Centralization and local participation; 7) Technological change and institutional tradition. For a parallel assessment of the national situation of libraries made in the 1980s, see *Alliance for Excellence: Librarians Respond to A Nation at Risk* (Washington D. C., 1984).
20. See Adrienne Chute and Elaine Kroe, *Public Libraries in the United States: FY 1996* (National Center for Education Statistics, February 1999), iii.
21. Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1992); Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 1996). Also see Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge, 1996).

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22. Charles C. Jewett, "Report of the Assistant Secretary, Relating to the Library," *Third Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, D. C., 1849), 39.
23. Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society* (New York 1979).
24. Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive* (New York, 1995) 5.
25. Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think," *Internet Dreams: Archtypes, Myths and Metaphors* Mark Stefik, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1996) 16, 17. For an analysis of the technological, practical and spatial issues faced by libraries in the electronic era, see R. Howard Bloch and Carla Hesse, eds. *Future Libraries* (Berkeley, 1995).
26. See Nicholson Baker, "The Author vs. the Library," *The New Yorker* (14 October, 1996) Nicholas Basbanes, *Patience & Fortitude: A Roving Chronicle of Book People, Book Places, and Book Culture* (New York, 2001). Also see Baker's essay on the destruction of old card catalogues Baker, "Discards," *The New Yorker* (4 April 1994). More recently, Baker has questioned the micro filming by libraries, which has led to the destruction of historical newspapers and periodicals Nicholson Baker, *Double-Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (New York, 2001).