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Death to the Professional:
Re-envisioning Labour in the Public Library

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       "We're not social workers." It's a line becoming all too common amongst public library professionals and students, a lamentation issued in response to the realities of the social needs being newly placed on the library. As our social services crumble, and the public library becomes one of the last free public spaces, librarians are rushing to fill the complex needs of increasing numbers of socially excluded individuals; and, in so doing, are faced with a number of overwhelming questions as to the nature of public library work. Yet, professional public librarianship has been in a state of peril since at least the 1980s (Birdsall, 1982). From budget cuts to staff reductions to the introduction of technologies and the paraprofessional, contemporary library labour is faced with a bevy of catalysts for change, pointing to what Crowley has famously termed the "Suicide of the Public Librarian" (2003). In the context of so much change, little has been written on the intersection of library deprofessionalization and the rise of community and social librarianship.

       By bringing the nature of professionalism into conversation with the changing public needs, structures, and values of community librarianship, I invite us to imagine what the future of library labour might look like. If we, as present and future library workers, shift our concern from the professional arrangements that are being lost and onto the skills which are newly being required of us, what potential does this open? How will this shift the experience and efficacy of the public library for new and longstanding workers, and the communities we serve? We are in a time where our ability to actualize social justice and inclusion through the public library is being revealed. In order to take advantage of our significant strengths, to serve the ultimate good of our communities, we must reimagine how our labour is organized. And we must reimagine it not from a place of fearing change, but in a way that seeks to intentionally adapt to the circumstances at hand. With help from the work of social justice facilitator, healer, and activist adrienne maree brown, and her works *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds,* and *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good,* I propose an approach to asset-based public library labour organization, a model that makes use of personal passion and interest, while taking into consideration skills, personal attributes, and education. A model that will leave room for those of us who recoil from the idea of performing 'social work,' and those of us who come to librarianship with just such work in mind. If letting go of our investments in professionalism can change library work for the better, why not let it die?

Professionalism & Library Professionalism

       Despite extensive sociological debate over an exact definition, we know a professional to be defined by a number of key characteristics (Adams and Welch, 2008; Roberts & Donahue, 2000). Broadly, these are: organization, including the foundation of professional associations; social status, encapsulating the social, market, and labour influence of professionals within their fields; labour autonomy, government funding and privileges, and, perhaps most dominantly, educational requirements, those of specialized training and often high levels of post-secondary certification (Adams and Welch, 2008; Roberts & Donahue, 2000). The goal of such certification is a claim to mastery of a specialized theory or body of knowledge—the basis for establishing professional jurisdiction, a cornerstone of the theory of professionalism. To be a professional is to have mastered "the development and maintenance of an abstract system of knowledge" which is your exclusive domain (Covaleski, et al, 2003). In order to maintain this professional jurisdiction, there enters the

characteristic of social closure—a profession is able to deny professional status to those unable to achieve certain benchmarks, and therefore holds a monopoly on certain knowledge and tasks (Adams and Welch, 2008). Education, especially the high tuition rates of many post-secondary programs, is a major form of social closure. Historically, and contemporarily, those who were not white cisgendered men were similarly subject to professional exclusion through social closure along racial and gendered lines.

An overview of literature on professionalism reveals that trends towards deprofessionalization have been identifiable since at least the 1980s, posing a threat to the "cultural authority and legitimacy" that many professions have worked hard to shore up (Adams and Welch, 264; Birdsall, 1982). Deprofessionalization has a number of sources, perhaps most notably for our purposes, the increase of popular education and general access to technology and technological skills. Deprofessionalization also has characteristic patterns —the increase of managerial control in the day to day operations of professionals, the expansion of other professions to challenge previously defined professional jurisdiction, cuts and shifts in government funding, professional and organizational restructuring, and new consumer demands. "Together," Adams and Welch note, "these changes appear to signal a fundamental challenge to professions and perhaps their demise" (264).

Public librarianship is a "profession in a state of flux" (Stevenson, 2020). Budget cuts, increased automation, reduction in employment numbers, and new user-centered models have left us in a mire of confusion. We are faced with a number of questions: what skills should be taught in professional programs? What ability do students have to reasonably ensure employment upon graduation? What is the capacity of library leadership "to plan and manage their human capital" (Stevenson, 2020)? Public libraries across North America are increasingly adapting to managerial models that reflect political agendas which treat information as an economic tool. As such, public libraries are beginning to exemplify a fundamental disconnect between the "numbers-driven evaluative framework" of the private sector and the community-serving ethics and values of librarianship (McMenemy qtd in Stevenson and Domsy, 2016).

The fear of the managerial is a constant in writings decrying the deprofessionalization of the public library. Stevenson's work on the fluctuations of public library professionalism in Ontario found that in 1966, signs of the deskilling or deprofessionalization of public librarians was already underway (Stevenson, 2011). A combination of "automation, outsourcing, and a new emphasis on the public librarian as manager and leader" rather than frontline worker, has found professional librarians moving progressively into positions of management and leadership, while formerly-professional service duties become the purview of non-professional library staff (Stevenson, 783). Crowley's "Suicide of the Public Librarian" bemoans this relegation of librarians into management positions, and the subsequent increase in 'paraprofessional' library workers. This transference of duties and reduction of librarian responsibilities, Crowley believes, undermines the autonomy of professional librarians while allowing managerial staff to usurp that autonomy and save funds (Crowley, 2003; Litwin, 2010). While professionalism has been recognized as an elitist ideology with the potential to operate "at great expense to…the individuals [whom librarians] serve," Litwin maintains that the autonomy granted by professionalism allows professionals to operate in opposition to the bourgeoisie, theoretically towards the public good (55). But the theoretical nature of this claim is important to highlight. While the autonomy of professionalism can very well allow for a greater ability to act towards the public good, we must consider *who* is able to access this autonomy. "Many library workers – particularly if they are white – enjoy the protection that professionalism affords," Robinson notes (2019). Professional librarianship remains

overwhelmingly white and middle class, bolstered by methods of social closure (Brook et al, 2015; Galvan, 2015; Hathcock, 2015; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2017; Espinal, et al., 2018). Although the state of professionalism is changing, the protection it offers continues to be given to the same dominant groups.

In fact, the argument has been made that old-fashioned models of professionalism are antithetical to the public library's ability to serve their publics with an eye to social justice (Birdsall, 1982; Abbott, 1998; Dilevko, 2009). Abbott considers the pros and cons of loosening the professional public library model, considering that professionals "[sacrifice] certain aspects of nineteenth-century professionalism for an increased ability to move and change" (442). While giving up "absolute credential closure," "monopoly of service" and, yes, some "personal autonomy" we gain "the generalist's ability to have some members of the profession ready for any contingency, some knowledge available to follow any new development" (442). In loosening professional strictures to respond to the sociological changes affecting our industry, we are better able to survive where other specialists are not.

But just as outdated professional models are not the way forward in a changed socio-economic landscape, neither is the replacement of professional models with managerial regimes that grip to values of economic growth above all else. We are in a unique time where new demands are being levied on the public library for social and community supports. In order to rise to this challenge, we must move away from the promotion of models that prioritize economic over social progress. To recognize the public library's current status as a social as well as a cultural institution requires a "creative restructuring of traditional staff hierarchies" (Selman et al. qtd in Robinson, 2019). The steps we decide to take now will determine the survival of public library work and its underlying values, and our capacity to effect real social good.

Social and Community Librarianship: New Skill Sets

The demands on public libraries and their workers are changing. As funding cuts to public and social services mount, the library has increasingly become a stop-gap for now-absent but still much-needed social aids (Moxley and Abbas, 2016). New demands, new publics, and new information needs means new skills are required of the contemporary public librarian, skills which are changing how we evaluate incoming workers. Emerging trends in the role of the public library require "a shift in traditional competencies such that, in some instances, the desire for certain skills and personal attributes trumps professional credentials" (Stevenson and Domsy, 2016). Pateman and Williment's "community-led public libraries," is one emerging trend which centers the importance of "people's competencies rather than just their educational background" (Stevenson and Domsy, 380; Stevenson, 2020, 48). If our goal as librarians is the ultimate social good of our communities, analysing models of social and community librarianship - the needs to which they respond, and the skills that they require - gives significant insight into the potentials of labour organization and orientation.

The importance of the community to the contemporary public library cannot be understated, especially when considering labour. In addition to shifting labour divisions, public library labour finds itself affected by the development of new contexts of expertise (Abbott, 1998). With the rise of democratized technologies has come the image of the public library patron as both consumer and producer of knowledge (Stevenson, 2011). As the American Library Association's 2015 report attests, new library staffing models are increasingly orienting towards a belief that "librarians cannot and should not be experts in all things," and that their knowledge must be supplemented and improved by "other human

resources," namely, those of the community (Rosa, 2015). Shaping both the collections and the physical environments of libraries, trends in strategic planning have focused on "the social web…as the locus of engagement," making "the library a kind of continuing conversation with its citizens" (Newman qtd in Stevenson, 785).

This patron-focused orientation has borne a new model of librarianship that recognizes the need and ability for the library to contribute to its community, especially in the face of social cutbacks. As the public library is asked to "pick up the slack" of failing social resource systems, we are becoming more aware of and intentional in our approaches to maximizing resources for increasing numbers of vulnerable patrons (Moxley and Abbas, 316). The Aspen Institute's 2014 report encapsulates this model, identifying that the "long-term health of libraries," is inherently linked to the "long-term health of the communities they serve" (Garmer, 11). First among their strategies of success is "Aligning Library Services in Support of Community Goals," calling on libraries to be "more intentional in the ways that they deploy resources in the community, and more deeply embedded in addressing the critical challenges facing [them]" (Garmer, 11).

The social library has emerged in response to the prominence of social inequality in library development discourse, and many public libraries are taking to heart that a response to issues of social inclusion requires "both functional and symbolic changes" from library institutions, including the removal of social barriers to becoming a librarian in the first place (Delica and Elbeshausen, 238). Consistent across studies of community librarianship are questions of how these new practices are impacting library work. Many believe that the future of professional public librarianship will lie in two spheres: management/leadership and community outreach (Stevenson, 2020; Moxley and Abbas, 2016). And yet, a CEO in Stevenson's 2020 study expressed that, although outreach is commonly a task assigned to librarians, "you might have an outreach opportunity that is best suited to someone who isn't a librarian. They might have the skill sets you're looking for" (48). The primacy of personal attributes also becomes significant in this scenario. Gonzalez-Smith has articulated the emerging centrality of identity theory in libraries, that "librarians are tuning into the identity aspect of the communities they serve" (Swanson et al, 2015). Part and parcel with this is the knowledge "that people respond positively to another person who is like themselves" (Swanson et al, 2015). In considerations of community librarianship, then, we must consider if those who have always been able to access the echelons of professionalism are the ones best suited for the job at hand. As public libraries become increasingly social and community-oriented, how do we decide who is best equipped to do this work?

A Passion Orientation

> While it is unclear what a librarian's job will entail in ten or twenty years, what we do know is that it will be community based. Effective librarianship will mean leveraging "the passion that librarians bring with them to the library and directing it towards serving the public"
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> Cai, qtd in Scott, 338

Let us consider the place of passion in the public library. As someone approaching library work through the traditional professional channel of the university, I have had the opportunity to observe what passions my classmates are bringing to the table. Specifically, I have noted a resistance to the community-oriented changes currently redefining public libraries. I have heard classmates advocate for being a 'normal librarian,' with its associations of collections management and reference assistance. These opinions are rife in the field as

well (Johnston, 2012). As Hildreth notes, "some professional staff that have been in the library field for a while did not come in to engage the community or do the work that they might think of as a "social worker." Current demands and goals of libraries push the traditional role of librarian beyond some people's comfort zones"" (qtd in Scott, 343).

These professional librarians, with their resistance and discomfort, are clearly not the best equipped to be fulfilling the library's new community roles. But just as being pushed outside of comfort zones does not make that uncomfortable work any less necessary, the increase of community work in libraries does not render the more traditional library services obsolete. Cataloguing, collection development, reference work, circulation, these must all be maintained for the public library to continue offering its much-loved services. We have present and incoming workers who deeply desire to do this work, just as we have those whose passions lie with the community. In order to best mobilize our workforce, we must work with, not against, these passions. What would library labour look like if it was re-envisioned through an asset-based model, these being human assets? If those who desired to work with collections or at the reference desk, did so, while those who entered the field with an eye to social justice take up those community positions?

The work of social justice facilitator, healer, and activist adrienne maree brown is a fruitful resource for imagining this kind of labour future. Her 2019 best-selling book, *Pleasure Activism* espouses an approach to social justice work based in pleasure. "In a nutshell," brown explains, "pleasure activism is learning from what pleases us about how to make justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have" (252). The things in which we find pleasure, be they organizing books or attending community meetings, are those we are more likely to put our energies behind, and to be energized by. As a core ethos from which to organize, a pleasure principle also makes our goals of social justice more achievable. Our sense of what is pleasurable, what is good, shapes the vision of the future towards which we are working; to recognize that "pleasure and liberation" are connected, is to work towards both simultaneously (8).

Brown also writes extensively about change. As we face major changes to what we have understood librarianship to be, and the professional models which have aimed to protect that definition of library labour, we must be intentional with how we respond, how we imagine our futures. Brown's theory of intentional adaptation attempts to curb the response to change as a thing of crisis, where we focus on what we have lost, or fear losing, and what we can't control (2017). In the process of intentional adaptation, we can bring our responses to change to meet with our underlying organizational values and ethics. Brown recommends an intentional adaptation towards pleasure, allowing the mobilization of individuals according to their personal passions, interests, and capacities (2017, 63). When we adapt in a direction inspired by pleasure, by passion, we create more sustainable organizations. As Brown puts it, "what is easy is sustainable" (2017, 72). This process of intentional adaptation, however, is not one that can exist only at the highest tiers of the librarianship hierarchy. Rather, implementing social justice models in the library space necessitates a more collective approach to our labour. To build trust and capacity within the organization and among its individuals, to optimize our ability to work for and with our communities, the rigorous turf-based lines of professionalism must give. A structuring of labour that accounts for skills, training, *and* passion is one that will be more sustainable, and fulfilling, for all its workers.

An orientation to library labour based on education, skills, and passion, rather than professional tick-boxes, is already being evidenced in public libraries across Canada. From the hiring of non-librarians for traditional librarianship roles, to the bringing in of employees specializing in social work and services, public libraries have been finding myriad

ways to break the professional mold for the good of their communities. The Thunder Bay Public Library's decolonization efforts are a rich example, in their continued practices of hiring 'non-librarians' for librarianship roles in Indigenous Relationships and community liaising (Talaga, 2019; Thompson, 2020). In the Halifax Public Library, the hiring of a Social Worker for the purpose of overseeing security staff has had significant impacts on the comfort of those patrons with a reasonable fear of policing and surveillance (Robinson, 2019). In these scenarios, as in many others, the priority of skills, passions, and personal attributes in response to community needs has meant better library service for that community. In re-envisioning labour in the public library, a passion orientation opens a world of possibilities for making our organizations more effective, our workers happier, and our communities better served.

Conclusion

Professionalism is a comfortable doctrine. It lends protection, legitimacy, and power to those privileged enough to wield it. But as the contemporary public library rises to meet increasing community needs and public demands, the old models of library professionalism are revealed to be out of date and in need of release. To re-envision labour in the public library as stemming from a shared ethical foundation to mobilize workers based not on the primacy of their education, but on a holistic understanding of their skills, motivations, and interests, will be to create a more connected, more effective, and more inclusive library work force. The Public Librarian is committing suicide? I say, let's give them a glorious rebirth.

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