

“Stripping the Stacks: Librarians, Pornography and Pedagogical Possibility.”

Thank you! I'm really excited to be here with Bobby and his students and to talk about librarians, porn and pedagogical possibilities. Many of you in this room no doubt will have worked with librarians as guest speakers in your classrooms, where we often are invited to come and help students figure out how to navigate library systems and collections in order to improve their research skills. What you may or may not know is that there is a growing body of literature in the scholar librarian community about our pedagogical problems as guests in your classrooms, our desire to move beyond skills based training and our belief that we have the capacity to offer more critical perspectives about the politics of knowledge production, organization, communication and preservation to the academic communities of which we consider ourselves core members.

So today I want to talk about how my work as co-investigator on the feminist porn project allowed me to make such a shift in my teaching. I will start with problematizing how librarians teach/or are forced to teach by the institutional structures we are enmeshed within and then I will tell the story of what I did in the porn studies classroom and the impact it might have had. And I'll look to our student co-panelists to confirm or deny the truthfulness of my account...

Unsurprisingly, librarians like faculty have been hit hard by the learning outcomes movement. “Information literacy,” which is the name we give to what we are teaching, is primarily governed by the ACRL's information literacy competency standards for higher education. IL as we call it, is defined in utilitarian and instrumentalist terms in this context as “a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is

needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." This definition is followed by a set of learning outcomes and performance indicators which are meant to allow us to assess students, and to assess the competence of librarians in instilling these behaviours in our students. Key components of audit culture. As a further piece of context, librarians are operating not only, like you, in a neoliberal edu-factory pedagogical environment, but as stewards of public knowledge in an increasingly commercial and hegemonic information landscape. Where we used to buy collections and indexes from publishers and own them for as long as we deemed necessary, and share them with whomever we wanted, in a digital environment we often operate as renters - negotiating licences from big multi-million dollar corporate information vendors, who do their best to monetize and lockdown every element of scholarly output. Problematically, these are not tools we have built ourselves and we are often unaware of the proprietary search algorithms that govern search and retrieval functions. We also have little control over which journals are indexed or dropped from within these tools, or which ones are given priority in large federated search tools or discovery layers.... how certain pieces of information are pushed at readers over others. Information is a commodity, it is big business. And as we pay more and more money for less and less, library administrators increasingly see librarians in the classroom less as teachers, but more as marketing and outreach people - trying to get bodies into the library to increase the gate counts, and increase online click-throughs to our expensive subscriptions in order to justify their purchase. In the current neoliberal logic of the university, the library is an expensive cost centre - it is near impossible to articulate our value inside the logic of profit.

In resistance to this complex corporate environment however lies a sense that librarians need to think more about their own teaching agendas in relation to the ethics and issues of our profession - which, despite various theoretical problems and gaps, is essentially knowledge stewardship, sharing of information, and common space. We are increasingly concerned about how and where we might talk about open access, copyright, the politics of knowledge organization, and the issues of access and preservation in an increasingly commercial and hegemonic landscape. How might we foster not only the consumption of information but the critique of the socio-political landscape surrounding information and the making of information? We sense that we have a responsibility to do this critical work, and to take up a theoretically informed approach to teaching that recognizes education is not apolitical - and yet many forces conspire against this, in and outside the library - including faculty who primarily see librarians as people who can teach the ins and outs of bibliographic technologies, rather than as pedagogues in their own right. And librarians ourselves are complicit, we are steeped in service culture that is rooted in the gender and class politics of the profession and we struggle to break free.

However, in falling back on skills-based training, utilitarian standards, database marketing sessions, and market research agendas in our pedagogical work, we have become complicit in the corporatization of higher education and the production of students as marketable disposable commodities/widgets for the information age. In the earlier part of my career, I embraced the IL standards as a necessary evil, and was convinced librarians had an important pedagogical role to play that the standards helped to articulate. Now as the implications of the audit culture of the university become more clear, I worry about the direction we have gone in, the overemphasis on standards and

mechanical e-learning, the treatment of librarians as fungible rather than as specialists in certain fields, the ways in which research and teaching are severed in librarianship or research agendas not even considered relevant to librarians' classroom work. We risk becoming taxpayer-subsidized training instruments for commercial entities at worst, and marketing outreach programs for the library at best. In this environment, librarian-as-trainer becomes complicit in the formation of the student-as-commodity for the market.

Ok so by now you are wondering WHEN IS SHE GETTING DOWN TO THE PORN... so 3 or 4 years ago, Bobby and I met up in a thoroughly pedagogical context, to talk about some library instruction sessions for a large multi-section first year Women's Studies course. We were chit chatting at the end of the meeting and I asked him what he was working on and he mentioned he was trying to get funding for something called the Feminist Porn Archive and Research Project. I immediately launched across the room jumped him and held him down til he agreed to let me join the project as honorary archivist or something and he surprised me and went one further and asked me to be co-investigator on the grant application. Initially we thought we had separate research questions, he was looking at feminist porn as a form of cultural production (I realize this is a gross oversimplification) and I just wanted to write about the practical and theoretical struggles we might have in building an actual physical or digital archive of this material, as I knew from both my academic and practitioner background that it was going to be a bit of a doozy. However as time went on our research questions we realized, were mutually constitutive...one can't figure out what to archive for instance, til one can define the term feminist porn and the processes of archivization are also definitional at the same

time... so we found we were working more closely and productively together than we had imagined.

Naturally when Bobby proposed a course on Porn Studies, I wanted to be involved and came out to show institutional support from the library when the course was challenged. He also asked me to come and visit the class, this time not to teach research skills per se, but to talk about my own research about porn and libraries as he thought the class would be interested - and I think we both thought it possible they might pick up a few research tips along the way as well.

So this was exciting to me, to come in acknowledged as researcher rather than trainer, and immediately shifted the pedagogical ground on which I normally rest. My goal was to encourage the class to think critically about libraries as historically contested spaces which both support and subvert dominant modes of knowledge production ... and in particular to think about this in the context of feminism and sexuality ... through the lens of porn, especially feminist porn. I wanted to explore, for instance, and to paraphrase a librarian scholar I admire, Emily Drabinski, how a critique of subject headings related to gender and sexuality [might] yield concrete classroom strategies that help students find materials about gender and sexuality while also learning something about how gender and sexuality are regulated more generally. I wanted to queer the catalogue essentially, teach classification schemas as texts, and by exposing some of the epistemologies at work inside them and in the institutional library more generally, defamiliarize the library's pretenses of neutrality and model a kind of case study for examining the kinds of ruptures created by feminist porn. My analysis of the library in relation to porn, would of course also be similar in a way to the work they were doing in

the course. I hoped as well to demonstrate how the library was complicit in the hegemonic contextualization of knowledge and how the library's framing impacts their research and research strategies.

So I gave a little lecture that I called the secret sexy history of libraries and then framed the rest of the class as a series of questions/problems – attempting to respect their previous knowledge, and make the class discussion-based.

Wanting first to frame the library in relation to sex, moral panics and the regulation of sexuality I discussed the emergence of free public libraries as spaces to foster working class literacy in the Victorian period, which suffered deep anxieties over what was appropriate to collect and make available and who should be allowed into reading rooms. As Janie Radaway has noted, reading was considered a dangerous almost sexual practice and the library as physical/intellectual space which might lead young women to illicit activity. At the same time there were private libraries... where the porn was held. In fact, Walter Kendrick argues that libraries had a definitional role in establishing porn as a category. Pornography was originally defined as “the memoirs of prostitutes.” It came to have a much wider definition – in part as libraries decided what they could not house, and as private collectors decided what would be titillating to collect. In regulating collections and excluding certain material, public libraries had a role in determining the contours of what was considered pornographic.

We then discussed how models and taxonomies of scientism infiltrated library ‘science’ to the extent that disciplinary collections were conceived as reifications of both objective biological, natural and social realities, and the research practices for objectifying and defining those realities (Frick, 1975).

Flash forward to the contemporary period... if anything more confusing politically...as we saw last fall in Ontario... libraries under attack for carrying microfilm copies of *Playboy*, arguments about installing technologically unsophisticated porn filters in libraries to protect the children... the openness of the library is still a source of moral concern, as well as a corporate concern as the emphasis on free sharing of information works against information as commodity. Are the moral panics a shield for the corporate interest in the library? I tried to frame libraries as potentially subversive spaces like bit torrent and napster... the original file sharing software. Libraries are also sites of contemporary feminist activism according to Kate Eichhorn, for instance the radical recontextualization of the riot grrl collection at NYU, or girls zines at Barnard ... libraries have a legitimating role in identifying/canonizing what sort of knowledge is worth knowing and contextualizing it in new ways, and feminist librarians and archivists have been using this power to generate new readings.

On the other hand, public libraries are also sites of neoliberalism, focused on job training and newcomer acculturation. Current trends in the practice of librarianship ignore our democratic history and assert that the library is merely a neutral institutional mediator in the information marketplace, and a facilitator of a knowledge economy constituted by passive information consumers. We have critical gaps and silences in our collections. Many marginalized communities don't trust our archives with their papers. We have problems in how we organize our material in ways that actually render non-dominant communities/ideologies visible. We are enmeshed inside institutional structures.

So with these admittedly somewhat binary poles in mind, I began problem posing and asking questions. Should libraries collect porn, what kind of porn, how should we

make it accessible and to whom, how should we organize it, what kinds of libraries should collect it? What is missing when porn is missing from libraries? The conversation was smart, and fascinating. We talked about canonization and collection building as related activities. What is worthy of preserving in a scholarly context? How archival logics differ in grassroots archives and libraries. Staff concerns about creepy patrons. We looked at the bibliographic record for *50 Shades of Grey* (hilariously – the subject heading is college students- fiction) and discussed the information retrieval implications of that heading 100 years down the road, hopefully encouraging students to think about the ways in which libraries have to take the long view. And how our view is often problematic. We talked about the problem of classification schemas framing porn as a social problem rather than a cultural artifact. How one might frame porn in a scholarly context which looks at porn in relation to the social issues commented upon or demonstrated within it, as well as differentiating between subclasses and genres of porn. We talked about Hope Olson's work who noted that classification schemas construct and fix subjects into place, generally in a hierarchical manner, and how feminist epistemology resists such fixing... so how might we create a web of subject headings that operate more like a network than a pyramid? We thought about how to deal with material, like feminist porn, that resists taxonomy, specifically gender/sexuality taxonomies, that fucks with the categories. And we ended with a little Derrida and Foucault and talked about the laws of enunciability and political power and asked what the introduction of this material does to the library? In vexing us, what does it reveal about institutions whose purpose might not be for democratization and progressive social change but instead works to rationalize hegemonic social control? Or, in excluding porn from

libraries, what kind of (queer) futures do we risk not coming into? What/who are we erasing from the historical record? As archivist Marcel Barriault insists in his great *Archivaria* article on gay male pornography - how do we ensure archives as bodies of knowledge also have knowledge of bodies? How can we archive the unintelligible in public discourse – that is, relations of intimacy?

I enjoyed it! I think most of them did too. What a change from an hour of trawling through databases teaching mechanical search techniques. We still looked at databases, but as critical thinkers and researchers of sexuality, not as just users. I had a much better dialogue with students than ever before, I feel like more learning and thinking went on than usual, that the library was good and estranged for them, and I even had follow up visits and emails from students wanting more directed help with their papers – which doesn't happen that often believe it or not, in the library outside of the reference desk. And I took a similar approach with a graphic novels class I lectured in later that term. In short, the pedagogy of porn was generative for me of an entirely new approach to teaching and I'd like to thank Bobby for giving me the inspiration to do it, the students for playing along and you all today for listening. And I challenge you to go back home to your librarians and challenge them in the same way. Thanks.