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What the World Needs Now? Love as a Lens on Library and Information Work Today (Paper)

Abstract

Library and information studies has yet to see a committed theoretical analysis of the social, relational, and political workings of love, as a force that both explicitly and implicitly underpins practices and rhetoric within our discipline. Understanding the “force” that is love requires analysis of social, or collective, relations. As such, love provides a distinctive lens onto structures and power dynamics that can illuminate and address divergent challenges within LIS and the world at large. This paper draws on selected literature in order to present such an analysis for the first time.

1. Introduction

Love, an “important ethical, social and/or political force,” has become a focus of scholarly inquiry over the last decade (Ferguson & Tove 2017, 5). It has moved from a footnote to a serious consideration, particularly in feminist discourses around affect, ecology, social justice, and gender and sexuality. For example, the Feminist Love Studies Network, founded in 2013, approaches ideas of love from a feminist, cross-disciplinary, and inter-theoretical perspective. In library and information studies (LIS), love can be viewed as an unexamined basis of emotionally intentional practices such as contemplative librarianship (Moniz et al. 2016), trauma informed practice (Ford 2019; Taylor 2019), and social justice advocacy (Morales, Knowles, & Bourg 2014). Indeed, LIS scholars have circled close to love with recent turns to notions of pleasure (Kari and Hartel 2007), fun (Ocepek et al. 2018), happiness (Tinto and Ruthven 2017), and joy (Hartel and Siracky, forthcoming).

At the same time, the discipline has yet to see a committed theoretical analysis of the social, relational, and political workings of love, as a force that both explicitly and implicitly underpins practices and rhetoric within our discipline. To date, scholarship around pleasure has largely focused on individuals’ choices and experiences, and by contrast, understanding the “force” that is love requires analysis of social, or collective, relations. As such, love provides a distinctive lens onto structures and power dynamics that can illuminate and address divergent challenges within LIS and the world at large. This paper draws on selected literature in order to present such an analysis for the first time.

2. Reciprocity in LIS Practice

Library and information research and practice require us to be mindful of students, “users,” “patrons,” and so on, no matter our area of focus. Without a sense of reciprocity, we risk operating under a mistaken assumption that our decisions have no impact on anyone; they do. We contend that love, understood as a “particular kind of creative/productive human power” (Jónasdóttir 2010, 21), leaves its fingerprints all over the decisions made in the name of

information, and the practises undertaken to satisfy information needs. Toye (2018, 90) cites Oliver (2007) and Brennan (2004) in arguing that “group dynamics could help contribute to a political notion of love” where circulating affects are seen as a group choice; such an idea is exciting for LIS practice as a field where collectivity is assumed, partly because of the supportive, often invisible, nature of the work. In other words, Further, Toye draws on the similarities between feminist affect and feminist love studies in their highly self-reflexive nature – a parallel that may be extended to practice in LIS.

3. Redistributing Power

As library workers grapple with issues of social justice and anti-oppression, the notion of the library as a neutral, safe space is no longer accepted without question (Gibson et al. 2017). Libraries, and library workers, are increasingly recognized as wielding varying amounts of power. For example, Laroque (2018) unpacks the social power integral to the technical work of cataloguing, and particularly of decolonizing and otherwise correcting historical biases in information description. She argues that “social biases have been reflected within classification systems, and we cannot only rely on our technical skills to solve these social problems that libraries have helped to reinforce” (n.p.). Yousefi (2018), in analysing diversity work within libraries, introduces the idea of “bringing your whole self to work,” to encourage vulnerability (and, thus, a greater sense of shared humanity) among colleagues. This is an idea that is almost antithetical to the historical perception of libraries as “neutral,” but one that has potential to more equally distribute creative expression, decision-making, resources, and power, thereby embodying love. Further, neoliberal institutions, including libraries, are sites of rapidly increasing calls to do more with less, and such demands for production have recently been met with feminist calls for “slow” practices, for contemplative approaches (Berila 2014), for acknowledgement that good, thoughtful scholarship, teaching, and service takes time (Mountz, Bonds, Mansfield, Loyd, Hyndman, Walton-Roberts, Basu, Whitson, Hawkins, Hamilton, & Curran 2015).

4. Aspiring to Higher Things

Even as concerns with justice, anti-oppression, and thoughtful ways forward dominate much library-related conversation and scholarship, little has been said of love’s power and place in the information landscape. Stephens’ (2019) recent offering, *Whole-Hearted Librarianship*, which encourages practitioners to “find balance,” promotes adjacent qualities such as humanism, grace, compassion, and kindness, and offers practices such as allowing children in academic libraries as exemplary of librarianship with heart. Kari and Hartel’s (2007) work on the “higher things” presents a positive psychology approach to information that transcends many of the commonplace concerns of daily LIS work; such thinking sparks joy in a seemingly endless sea of problems to be resolved. Jónasdóttir’s (1994, 2018) theory of love power — the basic human ability to “empower each other as worthy human existences” (Gunnarsson, García-Andrade, & Jónasdóttir 2018, 4) — corresponds to Kari and Hartel’s (2007, 1133) exemplars of the “profound,” which purport to make life meaningful, provide purpose, “shape our very identity,” and speaks to the higher things to which LIS work might aspire. What our analysis adds is an emphasis on apprehending the social, political, and embodied elements of whole-heartedness and profundity, which is where love, and by extension solidarity, can be located.

5. Conclusion

Recognizing that library and information work does involve love power, requires that we acknowledge that such power can have a negative, oppressive effects as well. This was in

evidence recently, in the American National Archives' photographic display that blurred anti-Trump rally signs in the 2017 Women's March. As Cherry (2019) demonstrates, reminiscing the work of Ahmed (2017) and Chemaly (2018), there is a place too for anger in love, and a powerful place at that. However, this research has as its goal to draw threads of connection between the affective, materialist ideas presented in feminist love studies and the possibilities, and challenges, of enacting such ideas in practice in our discipline. Because this paper focuses on the potential of a new lens to help us see library and information work in fresh ways, including entrenched struggles and controversies, it closely complements this year's CAIS conference focus on divergence and convergence.

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