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CAPAL 2016

Productive Interpretations: Encouraging Patron Agency Through Cultural Criticism

Introduction

Productive Interpretations

Encouraging Patron Agency through Cultural Criticism

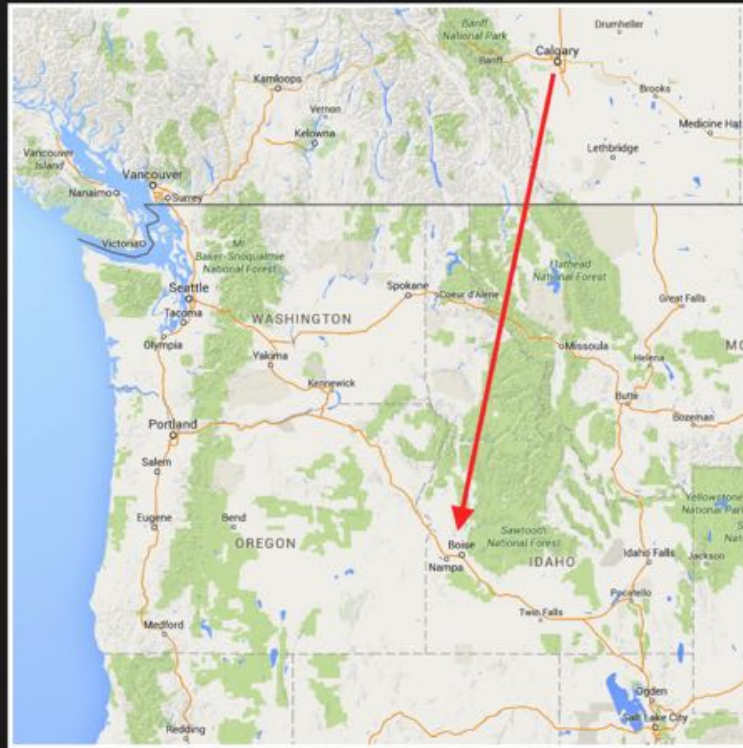
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If you'd like to follow along, load this in your browser:
<http://www.ryanpatrickrandall.com/talks/capal16.html>

As you know, CAPAL16's theme this year is "Beyond the Library," a chance to situate the discourse of academic librarianship more clearly within agency, practice, and society.

Hello!



Slide02

I work in Idaho as an Instruction & Outreach Librarian at the College of Western Idaho, a young community college serving the greater Boise area. Although I think there are components of education in all aspects of libraries, being an instruction librarian means that I do some of the more overtly academic functions at a library that blurs boundaries between public and academic libraries. So it feels fitting that while preparing today's talk, I've ended up somewhat deemphasizing the thinkers I initially mentioned in my abstract and will spend a bit more time presenting concrete examples from public libraries, examples of what I think libraries can do to discuss or promote patron agency.

As we're looking "beyond the library," I want to focus not on academic institutions as the next adjacent frame. Instead, I'm asking us to look at a much larger socio-historical context for how patrons engage with resources libraries provide. Examining this type of context and its local variations in depth would, of course, take far longer than a single presentation allows, so I'll be making some broad gestures rather than truly refined and nuanced delineations.

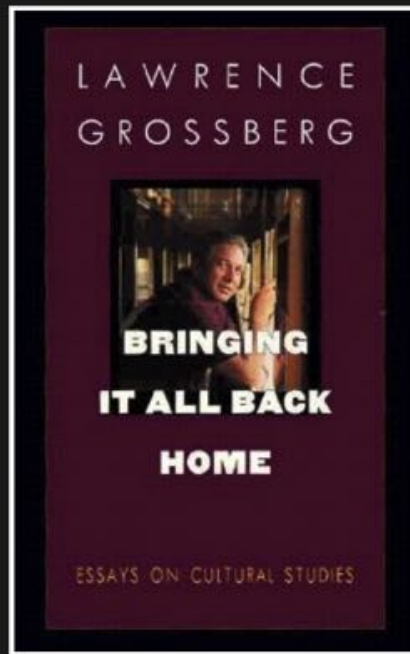
Overview

- Cultural studies on agency & cultural criticism
- Traditional LIS accounts of patron agency
- Examples of how to encourage agency

Slide03

In the next few minutes I'll present an overview of a cultural studies understanding of agency and of cultural criticism. Then I'll remind us of the most common ways that library & information studies describes our contributions to patron agency in order to show how cultural studies goes beyond that traditional idea of how we contribute to our patrons' actions. Finally, I'll talk about those concrete public library examples and suggest how they can guide what we might do in academic libraries as well.

Cultural Studies & Agency



Slide04

A cultural studies understanding of agency—exemplified by Lawrence Grossberg—views agency not just as individual person’s capacity to act. Instead, agency expands this conventional and somewhat narrow definition to include an understanding of how powers and potential paths are arranged. Throughout the essays collected in his 1997 *Bringing It All Back Home* he refers to this spatial conception of agency as “mattering maps,” or an awareness of how individual or collective “empowerment is enabled at particular sites and along particular vectors” (367).

The potential for empowerment and change is not equally distributed, in other words. Instead of agency meaning a flattened, individualized capacity to decide and to move that is universally applicable to everyone, this view recognizes that there are differences in subject positions. In talking about “positions,” this spatial conception is both a mental model of “social space” and material spaces and practices. I apologize for not knowing the Canadian context well enough to use CanCon in the next two examples, but I hope they’re justified by their explanatory value.

"Capitol Crawl" for the ADA



1990 protest for Americans with Disabilities Act

Slide05

The March 12, 1990 “Capitol Crawl” in which protestors demonstrated for the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act shows how people can use particular sites to help secure more agency. When the bill’s passage seemed to have stalled, people who use wheelchairs or other mobility devices seized upon the fact that the U.S. Capitol building is highly charged with meaning—as are most national governmental offices—and they physically demonstrated the egregious lack of access by crawling up the stairs. Although physical accessibility wasn’t the full extent of the ADA, protesting at this site in this particular way helped secure the bill’s passage.

Washrooms



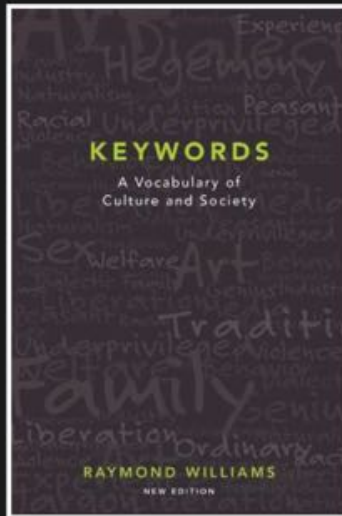
Slide06

Washrooms are another site particularly charged with meaning in the United States, as attested to by the sad fact that a number of states have recently sued the Obama administration to bar transgender students from using the washrooms that fit their gender identity. Although transgender, nonbinary, and genderqueer students and adults are profoundly more likely to be assaulted when using washrooms that do not fit their gender identity, bathrooms have been linked to very patriarchal and essentialist notions that connect femininity with vulnerability and masculinity with predatory potential. These essentialist ideas about gender downplay the actual current risks facing children in favor of “what if” scenarios that would already be illegal. While universal design and equal rights for people with disabilities are often countered by claims of being “inconvenienced” by making accommodations, the contest over washrooms is charged with much more vitriol because of people’s investments in the purportedly essential gender attributes.

If certain physical or discursive sites are more charged with meaning than others, a first step for a person to gain agency might be to recognize the peculiarities of the terrain and where there are obstacles, easier paths, or places where there are greater potentials for change. And perhaps, another step toward making this distribution of potential more equitable to different subject positions might be

realizing that there are indeed differences in how these positions are treated in practice. These differences often correlate to—and arguably are caused by—cultural assumptions, beliefs, and practices we recognize as racism, classism, sexism, ageism, etc. I argue that cultural criticism is one way people can see these differences.

"Culture"



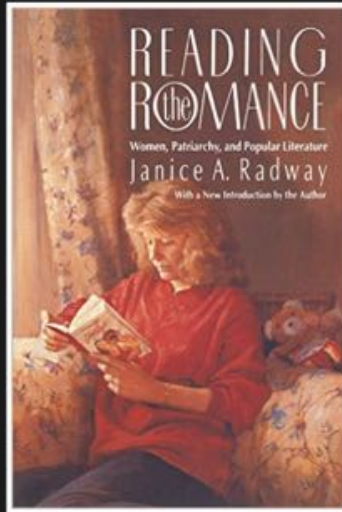
Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*

Culture as practices not just elite connoisseurship

Slide07

As demonstrated by Raymond Williams and others, “culture” is a contested term that sometimes means elite art or literature and sometimes means something more anthropological. For its part, cultural studies is far more interested in social and cultural practices than elite connoisseurship. So in advocating for cultural criticism as a way to promote patron agency, I mean that we can refine ways to help patrons consider a wide variety of social and cultural practices, not attempt to start debates over which books or films belong in a canon.

Cultural Criticism



Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* and reader response criticism focusing on how readers use texts

Slide08

Janice Radway provides an example of focusing on cultural practices. The type of “reader response” criticism she pursues looks at how people use the genre fiction that they read. In the case of her 1984 *Reading the Romance*, this means looking at what patrons do with popular, even avowedly “trashy,” romance novels. How do readers use pocket paperbacks to structure the rhythm of their day, perhaps reading on their lunch break or on the bus? What meanings do they make out of representations that might not initially seem very empowering? She concludes that the protagonists of many of these romance novels aren’t always laudable female representation, nor do the novels aspire to be more literary than genre fiction. However, the readers she interviews observe how these fictional characters contend with and create space for themselves in often highly patriarchal novelistic worlds and perhaps take lessons or at least inspiration from these characters’ choices.

Standard Library Discourse & Its Shortcomings around Agency

Critiques of Library Discourse around Agency

- John Buschman, *Libraries, Classrooms, and the Interests of Democracy*
- Wayne Wiegand, "To Reposition a Research Agenda"
- Henry Giroux, "Schooling and the Culture of Positivism"

Slide09

From what I've found so far, the way that something akin to this cultural studies understanding of agency shows up in traditional library and information studies literature is mostly couched in discussions of how libraries relate to education and democracy. However, I'd argue that the traditional literature on this in fact downplays our contribution to democracy by promoting an understanding of "agency" that largely ignores cultural practices and subject positions.

In the interests of time, I'll limit myself here to saying that John Buschman's 2012 *Libraries, Classrooms, and the Interests of Democracy* provides a great overview of these links. Wayne Wiegand's 2003 "To Reposition a Research Agenda: What American Studies can Teach the LIS Community about the Library in the Life of the User" is particularly productive for thinking beyond the library. He shows how libraries since the 1700s have often focused on "useful knowledge" rather than the types of knowledge we gain from the humanities, an early orientation that has led to our field's overly "constrained definitions of 'information,' 'learning,' and 'education.'" (372) Henry Giroux's 1979 "Schooling and the Culture of Positivism: Notes on the Death of History" also laments a tendency to

equate instrumentalized knowledge with gaining agency. He asserts that students instead need more history in order to see themselves as potentially gaining agency, a prudent suggestion to which I'm adding cultural criticism as well.

What Might We Do?

Thankfully, as I was trying to figure out ways to make this somewhat theoretical and abstract discussion of agency more concrete, I came across a lovely article detailing how Vivian Harsh, the director of a Chicago library from the 1930s to 1950s, promoted agency in part by hosting a series of patron-led discussions.

Examples of Using Cultural Criticism

Vivian Harsh, director of Bronzeville library in Chicago:

- Conversations with poets like Langston Hughes
- Readers' discussion forums (more than book clubs)
- Speakers from range of political parties
- Collecting African artwork & material culture

Laura Burt's "[Vivian Harsh, Adult Education, and the Library's Role as Community Center](#)"

Slide10

In Laura Burt's 2009 article "Vivian Harsh, Adult Education, and the Library's Role as Community Center," she explains how Harsh used her library to promote agency among her the predominately African American community of the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago. Her years as director began around the time of the Chicago Black Renaissance and continued through much of the Northern

Migration years of the 1950s. I don't have time to describe the myriad ways she worked to make the library a community and research space that reached out and sought to include its community members, so I highly recommend you read the article itself.

Her work ranged from having poets like Langston Hughes discuss their work with library patrons to inviting speakers of not just the Republican and Democratic parties, but also Socialist, Prohibition, and Communist parties to discuss their political philosophies with library groups. She also collected artwork and material culture from Africa (it's unclear from the article whether this also means work from some of the African diaspora), materially investing in a renowned collection that made outsiders acknowledge the cultural work pertinent to this African-American community.

If we're thinking about how we could use this history today, Burt provides the important caveat that Harsh may well have been savvy enough to turn benign neglect into an space of relative cultural freedom. Bronzeville in 1932 was not the Chicago Democratic National Convention of 1968; the whole world was not watching Bronzeville. Not even the whole of Chicago was closely observing this neighborhood. It may even be that the library system at large was willing not to scrutinize Bronzeville programming too closely and permit Harsh to bring in community members through unusual means. Burt's article describes the cultural work done at the Bronzeville library without giving transcripts or catalog level details of precisely how various readers' discussion forums were held or which artwork was collected. Of course, what worked in that context would not work in every context. If only we were so lucky that every community had a Langston Hughes!

Pedagogical orientation

- Problem-posing rather than banking model
- Signage that presents a theme rather than a set
- Investing in & displaying material collection with an eye to its pedagogical potential

Slide11

So instead of suggesting that every library mimic the interventions that succeeded under those particular historical conditions of possibility, let's look at guiding principles that might be able to travel across contexts. Librarians like Maria Accardi, Andrea Baer, Emily Drabinski, James Elmborg, and Barbara Fister have written at length about how the library is a space of learning and pedagogy—and that's just a selection of some relevant librarians toward the beginning of the alphabet. Many of these writers invoke critical pedagogy like that developed by Paulo Freire or bell hooks, which is often referred to as “liberatory” or “problem-posing” pedagogy.

A fundamental practice of this style of teaching is that instead of trying to push the truth out at students, a “banking model” in which “learning” mostly consists of amassing these unexamined nuggets of knowledge, teachers can more productively work with students to address problems together. This works for certain types of content more than for others, of course—if I were to stand up here and talk about highly technical computer programs that require a specific sequence of computer commands, this problem-posing approach would likely miss the mark. But for learners engaging

subjects like personal or community identity, ethnic studies, issues of social, juridical, or economic oppression, etc. — all of which even young students are likely to have personal experience with — a problem-posing approach seems both prudent and productive.

Even libraries without robust creative milieus like the Chicago Renaissance can encourage this cultural studies type of cultural criticism. When putting together displays, try to pose themes or problems rather than supplying examples of a known set. For instance, use signage with questions like “Who Are Idahoans?” rather than the more declarative “Here are Idahoans.” This question-posing approach might work to defuse tension in situations where there might be more pushback against progressive or overtly inclusive displays.

Another small practical example is considering what types of books you collect. Some academic publishers — I’m thinking of Routledge in particular — have excellent and engaging graphic design for their paperback covers but rather formulaic, pictureless covers for their hardback library bindings. So thinking about material collection, one might strategically purchase paperback copies of some works with an eye toward including these more engrossing covers in themed displays.

When trying to think beyond the library, I recommend that we as librarians recognize the various types of social and cultural knowledge that patrons can gain through critically engaging with fiction and other cultural works. There are robust holdings of fiction and other cultural works throughout academic and public libraries, and we sell ourselves and our patrons short when we disavow the potential of these collections by focusing almost exclusively on agency as instrumentalized knowledge.

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Thank You!

