

Love is a Lens: Finding Love in Library and Information Studies

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ABSTRACT

Library and information studies (LIS) has yet to see an exploration of the 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, and collective, relations. This paper draws on selected literature in order to present such an exploration for the first time. As this paper illustrates, love provides a distinctive, feminist lens onto structures and power dynamics. It can illuminate, and create opportunities to address, divergent challenges within LIS and the world at large.

INTRODUCTION

In working to build an inclusive, heterogenous discipline, library and information scholars continue to bring new concepts into conversation with the traditional concerns of our field. For example, explorations of affect and embodiment are expanding our understanding of people’s information experiences, as well as the very nature and character of information and information institutions. Recent work in this direction includes examinations of pleasure (Fulton 2009; Kari and Hartel 2007), fun (Ocepek et al. 2018), happiness (Tinto and Ruthven 2017), hospitality (Cooke 2019), spirituality (Kari 2007), religious experience (Chabot 2019; Gorichanaz 2016; Vamanu and Guzik 2015) and, as this special issue highlights, joy (Hartel and Siracky 2020).

It is fascinating to us that, within this recent work, explicit mention of “love” has remained largely absent. On the library studies side of the field, analyses addressing love are just beginning to emerge (Allison-Cassin 2020, Barnett and Witenstein 2020). It is striking that these analyses have begun so recently, considering the enduring and widespread tradition, among members of the public, of expressing affection for libraries in terms of love. In this paper, we examine the dichotomy between the abundance of expressed “library love” and the relative rarity in our field of analyses addressing love. We bring selected theoretical work on love into conversation with current concerns in library and information studies (LIS), in order to illuminate the benefit of greater integration of love as a lens in our field. Overall, the purpose of this paper is to explore the current, and potential future, workings of love within LIS from a feminist standpoint.

By doing so, we propose ways of examining and discussing collective experiences, within a field where concern with individual needs, choices, and actions still predominates. Love, as conceptualized in its contemporary sense, is an inherently social concept; we think of it as “joy plus solidarity.” To date, LIS scholarship around adjacent emotional experiences such as pleasure and happiness has largely focused on the internal experiences of individual people. While experiencing or acting on love can certainly feel joyful, it can also feel less than joyful; it can be a subjectively awkward, vulnerable, or otherwise challenging experience. Exploring the “force” that is love involves focusing on social, or collective, relationships and experiences.

Love as an analytical concept enables us to reach beyond individual information experience in distinct ways, providing a lens onto structures and power dynamics within LIS and the wider world.

We argue that love both explicitly and implicitly underpins practices and rhetoric within our field. How can an understanding of love as a force encourage necessary transformation within information institutions such as libraries? How can love, as a concept, contribute to urgent conversations in our field? This paper explores these questions by bringing select concepts and literature into dialogue with LIS practice and scholarship. Like Suzanne Briet, we hold that our field's norms and institutions are not universal and fixed, but ever-evolving (1951).

Love, which as a starting point should be understood as an “important ethical, social and/or political force,” has received increasing scholarly focus over the last decade (Ferguson and 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 love from a feminist, cross-disciplinary, and inter-theoretical perspective (“Feminist Love Studies Network” n.d.). In LIS, love can be seen as a tacit basis for emotionally-intentional practices such as contemplative librarianship (Moniz et al. 2016), trauma informed practice (Ford 2019; Taylor 2019), and social justice advocacy and activism (Morales, Knowles, and Bourg 2014; Russo 2018). We aim to bring love out of the shadows in LIS, to consider its place within our field and its literature. Grounded in Jónasdóttir's theory of “love power” (2014), which advances a dialectical concept of love, we assert that love is a force that, like labour, can be exploited, is productive, and is an agent for change. Our love, in relation to library work, is not romantic or idealized, but rather a key factor in the inter- and intra-personal work and practices that form the basis of what LIS practitioners do. As such, we approach love power (Jónasdóttir 2014) understanding that the love we bring to work is defined in the concept of *philia*, and harnesses the framework of compassionate love (Underwood 2008), where our goal is celebratory, liberatory, resistant, and transformative.

BACKGROUND

Philia

Love, as an affect and philosophical concept, has definitions and manifestations reaching back to antiquity, more than this foray into its application as a theoretically useful concept in LIS could possibly explore. For our purposes here, we offer a selective background and definition of this complex concept. *Philia* (filial love) is perhaps the best place to start. Having said that, it is worth noting that Toye (2010) argues that separating the word “love” into disparate elements, “allow(s) for rendering the subject of love into discourse through a substitutive sleight of hand, such that, for example, ‘care’, especially in much work in feminist ethics at the moment, has started to stand in for ‘love’,” and questions what might be lost in this “carving up” (p. 42). Our analysis is not meant to disregard other elements of love, nor to use one element to stand in for all aspects of love, but rather to call attention to which part of the whole is most serviceable to our present purposes, just as the finger types the words that the brain conceives or the hand turns

the page of the article that the mind contemplates. The love called *philia* is altruistic, given regardless of the needs of the imagined or intended recipient, for “the good of another” (Aquinas). Aristotle characterises *philia* as “wanting for someone what one thinks good, for his sake and not for one’s own, and being inclined, so far as one can, to do such things for him” (Cooper 1977, 621). Arguably, *philia* may exist within or alongside *storge* (familial love), but *storge* is needs-based, and implies an element of possession: the child needs their guardians’ love in order to survive. In *philia*, the good of others is the goal, but there is no need-based imperative. *Philia* is a loyalty to friends, family, community, based in the idea of collective good, rather than need.

Compassionate love

Another way to understand *philia* is to relate it to empathy and compassion, which are often associated with religious belief. This association can be seen in Barnett and Witenstein’s recent work on applying Brooks’ critical theory of love to library-related equity work within a private Catholic university (2020; 2017). However, bioethicist Underwood (2004) explains that compassionate love is a virtue in many microcultures, and not exclusive to religious groups. Such love has cultural variants, but exists across most societies. As ethics, compassion and empathy are more universal than others more culturally situated or socioeconomically bound, such as pleasure, fun, happiness, or success.

Underwood offers a research framework for compassionate love, defined as “giving of the self for the good of the other” (2008, 4). It includes the following characteristics:

- free choice (for the other);
- some degree of cognitive understanding of the situation;
- some understanding of self;
- fundamentally valuing the other;
- openness and receptivity; and
- a response of the heart (“heart” is here defined as “core,” where emotions and cognition integrate) (2008).

In other words, compassionate love is not a solitary experience, and it is only partly an internal one. It cannot exist or be understood by one person in isolation, without reference or connection to others. However, it can be experienced by many people at once. It is compassionate love’s inherent relationality that enables it to operate and be understood as a collective force. Although Underwood’s framework originates in biomedical ethics, librarians will recognize the characteristics of compassionate love as underpinning policy, rhetoric, and practice surrounding traditional core concerns such as reference interviews, public service, user experience, and information literacy instruction (not to mention Ranganathan’s 5 Laws of Library Science). Indeed, an approach such as Underwood’s could also be applied to other areas such as technical services (Galvan 2019) and cataloguing (Laroque 2018).

Love is resistance

Philia is often described as “brotherly love.” However, we argue that compassionate love offers a type of resistance to patriarchal structures, and one well-suited for a feminized profession, such as librarianship, which struggles to adopt non-patriarchal notions of power

sharing and consensus-based decision making. Compassionate love also fuels the ethic of care (Gilligan 2008) in care-focused feminism. As Gilligan asserts, “the sacrifice of love is the thumbprint of patriarchy. It clears the way for establishing and maintaining hierarchy” (Gilligan and Snider 2018, 33). Such sacrifice can be resisted through practices grounded in *philia* and compassionate love. Resistant practices, such as projects to decolonize the library catalogue, redesign online systems following universal design principles, and enable critical insights in the LIS classroom, reimagine the distribution of power and negate the structural dominance inherent in the everyday work of information access. Further, reintegrating knowing/logic with caring/emotion is another form of resistance within a capitalist-patriarchal world, and is evident in the examples above, where people with technological and pedagogical expertise use care to connect their work with others. The LIS literature, particularly from BIPOC scholars, points to additional examples that build social capital, such as “microaffections,” discussed below (Espinal, Sutherland, and Roh 2018).

Love can be harnessed for both liberation and oppression

Feminist love studies is an emerging area that is well developed in several disciplines, but has not yet connected with LIS. Jónasdóttir, one of feminist love studies’ founding scholars, attributes the expansion of love studies to growth in the use of the term “love” among scholars, the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary use of the term, and the emergence of the understanding that love is “a creative power, a productive force with [...] positive value” (2014, 12-13). Jónasdóttir posits a dialectical concept of love, focused on causes of patriarchal continuance in the face of superficial progress toward equality. In turn, her conceptualization shapes our assertion that love is a force for liberation in feminized professions, such as librarianship, where patriarchal structures and their corollary inequalities continue, despite the predominance of capable, educated, and experienced women. Jónasdóttir’s characterisation of love, which we apply throughout this paper, includes the following:

- Human love is comparable to human labour,
- Love is a transactional human activity arising from interaction,
- That “love power” is exploitable and alienable,
- That patriarchy persists through exploitation of love power,
- That love as a creative and productive power can enact change and shape history, and
- Love is a creative power that stands alone socially, capable of both liberation and exploitation. (2014, 12-13)

The conditions created by other social forces, such as culture and politics, shape the way love occurs in the public and private spheres. The oppressive workings of love, particularly in capitalist patriarchal societies and their institutions, is undisputed; they can be observed in familial and romantic/sexual contexts where love is a tool wielded for unpaid, immaterial labour. Love can be, and is, exploited. However, our exploration here focuses on love’s role in reinforcing care, compassion, and solidarity; creating opportunities for improvements to social and material conditions; and producing and (re)producing loving practices and relationality in information institutions and the public sphere.

FINDING LOVE IN LIS

“Libraries can’t live on love”

There is so much space for deeper exploration of love in LIS because there is so little such exploration in the discipline’s literatures and formal discursive channels. However, the peripheral nature of love within the LIS literature is thrown into sharp relief by the abundance of loving rhetoric that occurs about libraries among members of the public. Upon examination, public expressions of “library love” begin to suggest why love is little-examined in the literature.

Examples of public expressions of library love are plentiful. In 2018, the *New York Times* collected testimonials from prominent authors under the headline “12 Authors Write about the Libraries They Love.” Here, capturing the shared sentiment, Annie Proulx observes simply that, “the library is beloved” (“12 Authors” 2018). Susan Orlean, author of *The Library Book*, states in an interview that one of her favourite parts of promoting this book is “hearing how much people love libraries” (“Author Talk” 2018). LIS scholar Wayne Wiegand, citing public opinion research, describes Americans’ love of libraries as an “indisputable fact” (2015). Similarly unequivocal affection is expressed in *Scandinavian Library Quarterly*: “The Danes love their library!” (Kristensen 2016). Public expressions of library love often refer to libraries as places of refuge and comfort, as manifestations of democratic ideals, and as starting points for people’s lifelong love of books and reading.

People working to promote books and reading, along with library workers, are often directly involved in fostering library love. They frequently do so through campaigns to raise awareness, and material support, for libraries. In 2014, in the thick of a decade that saw Britain’s public libraries decimated by federal austerity measures, *The Guardian* newspaper published a series called “Love Letters to Libraries” in partnership with the Scottish Book Trust (“Love Letters” 2014). The series features love letters from authors, and from the newspaper’s readers, who “jumped at the chance to express their own love for libraries and librarians” (“Readers’ Love Letters” 2014). The American Library Association’s campaign to promote the value of libraries is called “I Love Libraries” (ALA 2020). The Australian Library and Information Association promotes “Library Lovers’ Day” each year, “an opportunity for library and information professionals to show off their libraries and for people across Australia to show their love for libraries” (ALIA 2020).

Library campaigns’ reliance on love rhetoric reflects the perceived effectiveness of this rhetoric. More importantly, however, love rhetoric, and the enduring necessity of it, illustrate that public expressions of love have not generally resulted in stable or secure funding for libraries. This means that public expressions of library love are implied reminders of the distance between people’s affections, and dependable material support for libraries. At the same time, people’s love of libraries is often so tethered to books, and to library stereotypes, that it is difficult to locate evidence that people generally understand libraries in their contemporary complexity. These gaps, between rhetoric and support, and between traditionalist and contemporary understandings of libraries, may explain why librarians rely on love rhetoric in their campaigns, but have yet to delve deeper into examining love in our disciplinary literature. The longstanding

maxim, “Everyone loves the library but libraries cannot live on love alone,” captures this bind that librarians inhabit (Clubb 2008, 188).

The following sections of this paper offer examples of rich starting points for applying love as a lens on different practice areas and scholarly concerns within our discipline. All point toward the current need to work beyond conventional expressions of library love, to frame and activate an understanding of love as a force for collective action and solidarity. It is through such action that libraries can attain the material support they require, and equally importantly, transform into institutions capable of shedding the oppressive structures that are not acknowledged in conventional library “love talk,” while meeting all information seekers in a place that best serves them.

The commons: Locating love power

As feminist philosopher Federici says about her proposal to re/create the common/s, “this task may now seem more difficult than passing through the eye of a needle” (2018, 109), and certainly the project of re/imagining the library as a site of love power is no easy task. Information professionals often pride themselves on ostensibly creating sites of the commons in a neoliberal world. Information institutions’ status as commons can be questioned, at the very least, and revealed as false in contexts such as academia, where people pay high prices, in multiple ways, to access campus libraries and the publications within them. The commons, as conceived of in the current siloed, neoliberal library, recreate power structures upheld outside the library. We suggest, then, that Federici offers a model that would benefit libraries in reexamining models of power, in enacting change for the whole, and creating a significant site in which love power can be enacted and reproduced. Further, given the public’s longstanding and voluble love of libraries, where better to enact practices that build real commons, in Federici’s sense: “a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation, and a responsibility to each other” (120) where love power can flourish? Practicing in LIS involves re-examining whether our professed commons truly are commons. Moves to eliminate fine systems, issue no-cost public library memberships, and preserve openly-available government information are all examples of humanizing, community-building, and grounded loving practices.

From adulation to microaffections

As we have described, in LIS, love is brandished most often in the context of marketing, creating library “brand love,” and encouraging love of books and reading. We can look to the literature on diversity, and the lack thereof, in LIS, for discussions of affect that pierce through our discipline’s generally functionalist orientation to service offerings, reorganization strategies, and library adulation. For example, Espinal, Sutherland, and Roh address the history and persistence of whiteness in libraries (2018). Sutherland practices love in librarianship through her approach to interpersonal relations, “as a radical act of solidarity and my unwillingness to surrender that love as an act of defiance against a system that would otherwise silence and dehumanize me” (2018, 152). Espinal, Sutherland, and Roh advocate for “microaffections” with library workers of colour, to counter the racial microaggressions inherent in conventional library spaces. Microaffections are small acts of affection and acknowledgement, such as writing notes of gratitude, that show recognition of invisible and immaterial labour. Small moments of

affection create opportunities for others to feel recognized as “dignified, respectable, truly beloved members of society” (158). Decentering whiteness and its manifestations can be accomplished with love, and Espinal, Sutherland, and Roh end with the request: “Love us. Love librarians of color. Don’t just tolerate us. Love us and celebrate us” (160). Doing so requires white female librarians (like us) to reject complacency—in a profession that still touts “neutrality” as a virtue, a possibility, and a goal—and to act on Espinal, Sutherland, and Roh’s advice.

Love leads to radicality and social justice

Yousefi, in critiquing diversity work within libraries, introduces “bringing your whole self to work,” to encourage vulnerability and, thus, a greater sense of shared humanity among colleagues (2018). This is an idea that is antithetical to the historical perception of information institutions as “neutral,” but one that has potential to more equally distribute creative expression, decision-making, resources, and power. The discipline, however, continues to maintain structural whiteness (Santamaria 2020); the profession is feminized but not feminist in both power structures and practices; and calls for more love can seem as though they stitch at the margins of affective practices in libraries. Nicole Cooke’s work is centred on the notion of radicality in LIS pedagogy, something she defines using Pratt and Homan’s definition: “going to the center, fundamental, or source of something; fundamental; basic” (2018, 120). Indeed, when considering the call for microaffections by Espinal, Sutherland, and Roh (2018), it seems that love is a radical ethic in LIS. Much of what demonstrates love in practice in LIS is not in the literature, and does not factor into the theoretical frames applied by LIS researchers, but resides in the actions of individual information workers who stand against societal inequities and exclusionary practices through labour that is immeasurable and qualitative. As such, social justice and advocacy work is an example of love in the information professions, as are approaches to humanizing pedagogy in LIS education (Cooke 2019). Cooke reaches outside LIS literature to unite discursive practices from a variety of disciplines, but most prominently from education, where Paolo Friere’s radical pedagogy has laid the foundation for current movements toward humanization, anti-racist education, and decolonization and Indigenization of curricula.

“The fantasy of the library,” as Santamaria describes, stands in the way of humanization (2020). “The fantasy” is founded in whiteness, and enacted through library-related affects of awe, nostalgia, and trespass (432). It reinforces a binary of belonging and not belonging, and the feelings that flow from that binary. It is precisely this binary that “love power” could dismantle, enabling an LIS for all. In turn, vocational awe incorporates the library fantasy as it ascribes saintly characteristics to library work, situating it in the auspices of a divine calling where it is impervious to aspersions (Ettarh 2015). The notion of the library as a neutral, “safe” space is no longer accepted without question (Gibson et al. 2017). Cooke’s work on radicality offers ways to approach LIS pedagogy that both complicate and humanize information work, and topple it from pedestals where it is kept beyond critique.

Affective labour: Love is work that holds power

We caution, too, that love as (and at) work should not, thus, be subsumed into the larger economy. Instead, as Jónasdóttir (2009) and Lynch, Baker, and Lyons (in Bryson, 2014) assert,

love represents its own system, one that holds power in its ability to radicalize, transform, and otherwise unite silos and binaries. It is too easy for this work to go unnoticed, and to be chalked up to individual preference, placing the burden onto those who choose to enact it rather than have it be a systemic norm. For example, equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work in information organizations is often done by small, committed groups; statements and pronouncements are created without processes, norms, and expectations necessarily changing. What if EDI work meant reconceiving how career achievement and advancement are determined? How does an information professional demonstrate that how they treat people, and how they contribute to lessening exclusionary structures, are measures of success? Bryson reminds us that the temporal nature of love work is quantitative, whereas other aspects of this work are more highly subjective and qualitative (2014). This complexity is present in information work in many ways, where inputs are significant but often unrecognized, and outputs are measured through assessment practices that fail to get at the immaterial, affective work involved in their creation. Academia, for example, includes systems that reward certain practices, such as research, and outputs, such as publications, in which the collective contributions of information professionals are rarely acknowledged.

Sloniowski's critical examination of the affective labour inherent in LIS is particularly germane to this discussion (2016). Using a feminist lens, she examines the "pink collar" affective labour underpinning public service functions in academic libraries, emphasizing the predominance of immaterial labour in the current, corporate university. She traces the idea of love work from its genesis as a political and theoretical subversion in the domestic sphere, and as a site of possible resistance to capitalist structures. As Sloniowski observes, the gendered division of material versus immaterial labour in the private sphere is reflected in academic librarians' labour, particularly in supporting faculty and students through reference, teaching, and collection development, where the contribution of such immaterial labour to the greater academic effort often goes unrecognized. Sloniowski rightly posits that digital work is similarly gendered, and valued above the care work traditionally seen as the domain of women. Further, she argues that library work is both productive and reproductive but that, with the advent of digitization, "certain forms of digital immaterial labor are valorized as mind work over the emotion work of liaison librarians, and such valorizations have their roots in gendered divisions of labor" (653).

Though we argue that love is a lens that may be applied across the silos of information work, care work is more visible and apprehensible in specializations such as reference and instructional librarianship. Sloniowski clarifies: "intellectual immaterial labor is valorized over emotional labor in autonomist theory. This valorization replicates the gender binary and suggests that emotional labor requires no intellectual capacities or that 'mind work' does not require the management of feeling" (657). Most recently, Allison-Cassin's (2020) work traces the mechanization of library work with the coeval shift in genderization in LIS, explaining the importance of the capitalist drive to continue the seamless flow of information through hidden labour. Accordingly, women have been expected to fit into male-designed systems, and our work is meant to be "underrecognized in knowledge production" (Allison-Cassin 2020, 419). She asserts, too, that "a call for care and love is provocation in the context of affective labour" (p.427), concluding that love is needed but the question of how to enact it is a big one. Allison-Cassin sees love's potential for disruption through networks, communities, and connection.

Indeed, it is our hope that considering love an essential affect might encourage resistance in the corporate world of academia, and that seeing all aspects of LIS work, both humanized and mechanized, through the lens of love might help to offer solutions to the challenges library workers face, particularly on where labour value is assigned within the profession and what is considered productive. The many parts make a whole and information institutions cannot subsist on digitization alone, just as they cannot live on love alone.

Aspiring to higher things

We have emphasized that love-based practices often involve power-sharing, subversion, and other activities that may be joyful, albeit not straightforwardly so. However, we must also highlight works that helpfully explicate emotional experiences, while simultaneously also encouraging the kinds of solidarity we have encouraged throughout this paper. For example, Stephens' (2019) recent offering, *Whole-Hearted Librarianship*, which encourages practitioners to “find balance,” promotes adjacent qualities such as humanism, grace, compassion, and kindness. Stephens offers practices such as allowing children in academic libraries as exemplary of librarianship “with heart,” while we, in turn, would frame this example as an equity-minded choice to reduce barriers for parents, particularly those who may not have easy access to childcare. 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, and Jónasdóttir 2018, 4)—corresponds to Kari and Hartel's (2007, 1133) exemplars of the “profound,” which make life meaningful, provide purpose, “shape our very identity,” and speak 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.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing that library and information work does involve love power, requires that we acknowledge that such power can have 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 paper 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.

To conclude: why love? Love is the backbone, the invisible glue, that brings together the concepts explored in this work. It is the motivating force behind the ideas we have discussed: power sharing, care work, compassion, and radicality. Their immateriality makes them especially intangible, but all the more rewarding to explore. As we step back from this discussion, seeing the possibility of love knit everywhere within the literature and practices of LIS, there are

perhaps more questions to ask than answers revealed. How do we demonstrate the importance of love-based practices in a neoliberal reality? What does feminist love look like as a rarified, yet everyday, power within LIS? How and what do we measure in the peer-to-peer interactions required to centre love in our discipline? Our hope for this work is that it is a start, offering a glimpse at fruitful areas to be studied, a beginning to a long, shared conversation. There is much room here for us all.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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