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Lightning Talk: Not a Librarian Anymore

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Amelia Abreu

UX, Technology and Culture



March 30th, 2015

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"not a librarian anymore"

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I gave a lightning talk last week at the #critlib unconference, a great gathering of mostly academic librarians exploring library/information issues from a progressive and critical perspective. We talk about hashtag activism, but this was a coming together of activist librarians that generated from a hashtag. And since I'm self-employed and it was here in Portland, I went. I feel like if progressive librarian was a political party I would belong to it.

IRL, I had to explain to a bunch of librarians I didn't know or hadn't seen in awhile how I'm "not a librarian anymore" and what I'm doing instead and how I'm happy with it but still really value the library community and think of librarianship and library science as central to what I do. My talk addressed that but I afterwards wished I'd made more time to prepare for it and talked about a few things I hadn't. Here's what I should have said.

Hi, I'm Amelia, those of you who know here have probably had a conversation with me today about how I'm "not a librarian anymore". I moved to Portland in 2012 and I started a UX consultancy, a mostly one-woman shop, where I do user research, user experience design, usability testing, things that I first did and learned to do in libraries and as a library student. I'm still a PhD Candidate at University of Washington's Information School, but I've been writing my dissertation over the past few years while making my living outside of libraries and universities. And, I want to argue, not compromising my principles with any more regularity than when I worked in libraries. This is not to say that I am not 100 percent in solidarity with academic librarians. You are all fighting the good fight.

So I'll start with a little bit more of my story: I have always loved libraries, and starting as a kid, wanted to be a librarian. I loved my local library and the librarians, and I grew up in an immigrant family where almost everyone had what I call an "enforcer" job: lots of teachers and social workers, some lawyers, and a lot of service workers. I also went to Evergreen, where librarian was one of the only socially acceptable professional aspirations. I went to library school right after college.

I worked as an academic librarian and archivist for a few years, and while I was in those jobs I got really interested in the technologies libraries were using. Most of it wasn't very good, and I wanted to know how to make it better and have a job where I could help to make it better. I also, and I think this is something a lot of people from marginalized populations say, I thought I wanted to become the professor I never had.

But by spending time in two different library schools, it made it hard not to reflect on something that's troubling. It's this equation, and it goes something like this:

(number of ala accredited masters degrees / number of professional library/archivist job openings) * student loan debt

Here's something that should make us all a little uncomfortable: there's not comprehensive data on any of this. Some schools have public data on the number of students they enroll and graduate, some don't. Some schools have placement data, some don't. As far as I know, no one's keeping tabs on librarian student loan debt.

So, whether any of us like it or not, there are a lot of people that go to "library school" with every earnest intention of being progressive librarians and come out with not a lot of professional options in libraries or cultural institutions. What's more, is that many of these folks have massive student loan debt, either from library school or undergrad or both.

I had a baby when I was in my PhD program, and my experience was that I lost a lot of academic mentorship as a result of that. It was another really unsettling revelatory experience. There are a lot of ways that the academy, and institutions like academic libraries, do not have the best outcomes for women, or people of color, and to echo this thread, there's not a lot of data, especially not publicly available data to document this. (And I want to point out here that I am a white, blonde even, Cuban-American, able bodied, cisgendered, heterosexually partnered, middle class woman with lots of advantages and privileges in life that a lot of other folks don't.)

I had a set of experiences that made me come to the conclusion that I didn't have to work in a library or a university, and that in some respects I might be better off if I didn't, at least right now. And part of that meant that not only did I have to step away from institutions I thought I'd spend my whole career in, but also questioning a lot of the ideas of meritocracy you absorb in academic environments.

There's a set of statistics from a 15 year longitudinal study at USC:

92% of white men in the social sciences and humanities were awarded tenure

55% of women and faculty of color were awarded tenure

81% of white junior faculty (this includes men and women) were awarded tenure

48% of faculty of color promoted to associate professor

66.7% of white women were awarded tenure compared to **40% of Asian-American women**

Not included in these numbers are everyone who left before coming up for tenure.

And one thing to note is attrition is a real problem for diversity in libraries and in universities: women, minorities and folks from marginalized populations experience very structural forms of oppression in the workplace and have bad experiences, get burned out, and leave, often before coming up for tenure or promotion. In my experience, I've noticed that a lot of academics, even progressive academics, have these sort of unquestioned ideas of meritocracy. If you're good, you'll get the job, you'll get the grant, you'll get tenure. The numbers from USC tell a different story.

So I left, in a set of steps. One, I ran out of funding in my PhD program right before my daughter was born. Then, my partner took a job in Portland, and we moved here from Seattle. So I have a partner and a kid and I'm in a situation where can't, as I had done for my career so many times before, move to another city. I like living here and I wanted to make it work. And also, at this point I'm on a very specific career trajectory where I'm not sure what job I want or am qualified for.

But I had another set of experiences along the way: I had always been interested in usability, in interfaces, and in learning tactics for making better technologies. And I realized that these were really transferrable skills. While I was in my PhD program, I interned at Microsoft Research, and I worked with researchers at Intel in my dissertation research. Those experiences helped open the door to other projects, and helped me establish myself outside of libraries and universities.

Here's a revelation I've had: even though my job title is no longer "librarian" and I'm not working full-time at a university, there is critical librarianship, or critical information work in my work. I think most jobs have a component of critical information work. Here are some things that are a big part of my current work:

- Advocating for users, in understanding them and how to serve them.
- Thinking about labor and infrastructure. When I work with engineers building products, I tend to spend a fair amount of time urging them to think not only about the experiences of their end users, but also the people who will support the product.
- Content! Do you know how much I talk to my clients and people I work with about the implications of how they organize information? Answer: a lot.
- My big thing, my rallying cry right now, is urging designers and developers to think about digital preservation.
- Lastly, there is the crucial act of "calling bullshit". It's perhaps the most important critical information work. I call bullshit as much and as often as possible. It's central to my process.

To wrap up, I don't want to give the message that my choices and steps are for everyone. I don't need to tell anyone that the tech industry has some serious structural problems. Self-employment is not for the faint of heart, and it's only through a very particular set of circumstances that I've been able to pursue this. But I would like to urge us all to put less stock into the job titles we have today and how much they define us. Let's think beyond narrow professional identities, especially in institutions that are rapidly changing, and instead think about the broader politics, poetics, and ethics of progressive librarianship.

Besides, life is long, and my generation, our generation, has no expectation of traditional retirement. I plan to work until I'm 80. I hope that I'll be back in libraries and universities at some point, and I think my experiences doing my current work will be really valuable when that happens.

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