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# Performing Refuge/Restoration

## The role of libraries in the African American Community – Ferguson, Baltimore and Dorchester

MYRON M. BEASLEY

I started reading. I read everything I could get my hands on.... By the time, I was thirteen I had read myself out of Harlem.... I had read every book in both libraries and I had a card downtown for Forty-Second Street.

James Baldwin (Mead and Baldwin 1971: 161)

One of the most subversive institutions in the United States is the public library ...

bell hooks (2004: 95)

Libraries are ... essential to the functioning of a democratic society ... [L]ibraries are the great symbols of the freedom of the mind.

Franklin D. Roosevelt (American Library Association 2012)

The American Library Association (ALA) was chartered in 1879 on the premise that libraries are the cornerstone to American democracy as they 'must ensure that citizens have the resources to develop the information literacy skills necessary to participate in the democratic process' (American Library Association 2012). Therefore, the library in the context of the United States occupies a potent status in that it symbolizes and links the concepts of literacy with democracy. As the statement of purpose of the ALA suggests, libraries make knowledge accessible by providing tools for literacy, a space for civic debate and a depository of records for its citizens to participate in a robust democracy. Yet at the time of the ALA's founding, as with that of the United States of America, the concept of democracy was limited to the white colonists; literacy for the enslaved was considered an act of sedition. The foundation of the institution of slavery relied on the premise that black bodies were commodities. Slaves were not given equitable status of being recognized as human and were excluded from the

technologies of democracy, including libraries. The library, particularly the public library, for African Americans thus inhabits a precarious site: one of performative and transformative possibilities for education and the participation in the democratic process – fraught with exclusionary politics and ensconced in a history of violence and death.

In the winter of 1859 a community of free African Americans in Philadelphia founded a literary magazine and the Reading Room Society, a clandestine library, to promote the discourse of freedom. Considered the first established library for African Americans, The Reading Room Society was opened with the purpose not only to educate and produce good citizens but to 'imbue the spirit of restoration' of the community (Tucker 1998: 36). Restoration in this context is the process of self-acknowledgement and the recognition of self-worth. According to hooks (2004), the acknowledgement and the valuing of self are essential steps to comprehending one's agency and thus the ability to engage in subversive strategies of emancipation.

This essay plays with the concept of 'subversion', as noted by hooks above, to suggest libraries as contested sites of restoration and ones that produce, what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o considers, enactments of power (wa Thiong'o: 1988). This essay both highlights and situates the role of public libraries during the recent racial protests in Ferguson (Missouri) and Baltimore (Maryland) to locate libraries as theatres of restoration and refuge. Furthermore, this essay also extends the performative modes of restorative enactments by considering the *Dorchester Projects* (2009) by community-

based artist Theaster Gates. The place of African Americans in library history, or African American library history, particularly in relation to the public library system in the United States, is significant yet little referenced. In the space available, I will offer a brief history to provide context to foreground three moments: Colonial, Civil War/Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement. I also consider the history of 'reading' as performance.

#### SOCIAL LIBRARIES

The public library movement, which began in 1833 at the Peterborough Town Library in New Hampshire, was the first to be supported by a 'literary tax' and was followed by the Boston Public Library in 1854. Prior to 1833, libraries in the United States were private, emerging from churches and social clubs and private estates (such as that of Benjamin Franklin). Public or private, libraries were not open to African Americans. The history of the library for African Americans is vast, but here I provide a small glimpse – in the context of Colonial history, Civil War/Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement – to place the institution of the library in the context of African American performance spaces. The Civil War and Reconstruction periods brought little, if any changes regarding access to libraries for African Americans.

Under the name of 'social libraries', free African Americans established literary groups, particularly in the Northeast (the majority in New York and Pennsylvania) to parallel those established by whites during the 1800s. The two earliest on record are the Free African Society and the Reading Room Society, both established in 1828. Others followed, such as the Female Literary Association, whose charter stated that its objective was not only 'the mental improvement of females', but also to develop 'morals' and educate the black communities (Albritton 2000: 30). Similarly, the objective for the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored People was the 'mental improvement of the people of color in the neighborhood

of Philadelphia' (Battles 2009: 10) while the Phoenix Society of 1833 aimed 'to promote the improvement of the colored people in morals, literature and the mechanical arts' (Albritton 1998: 29–30). Freed slaves were able to gather and form such groups, but for the vast majority of black Americans who were enslaved, reading and learning to read was prohibited – a powerful indication that the slave-owner understood the power of reading and its relation to subversion. Indeed, the imposition of strict 'unlawful assembly' laws in the South was passed to prevent 'mental instruction' because 'reading and knowledge in a slave is both useless and dangerous' (Monaghan 1998: 324, 326). In the North, freed and educated African Americans were forbidden access to the public libraries because the stigma of their marked bodies was explicitly forbidden by social moral laws. Because of such exclusionary politics, a network of 'social libraries', functioning as alternative spaces, remained underground to educate the enslaved. The Civil War and Reconstruction periods brought little, if any changes regarding access to libraries for African Americans.

The Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 announced the freeing of the enslaved but was replaced with the concept of 'separate but equal', which was endorsed by the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896. This continued to prevent full and equal access to libraries. While major philanthropists, such as Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller and Rosenwald, endorsed the concept of public libraries by giving funds to major cities and schools to establish libraries as public spaces, the US apartheid system ('separate but equal'), meant that African Americans were denied full access to even 'public' libraries. As a result, the social libraries morphed into 'black independent libraries'. However, with little if any economic resources to support them many diminished or disappeared. The Negro Society for Historical Research is one example of an independent 'black' library that survived. Established in 1911 by Arthur A. Schaumburg, its purpose was to collect books, ephemera and other material culture that related to the black experience

in the United States. This society developed into a space that was pivotal for the Harlem Renaissance writers and artists; it was a space for circulating books within the community, an archive and a space for performances and the visual arts. Although the 'separate but equal' policy was the law of the land, because the Northern states had an established commitment to libraries and education, many black independent libraries were able to continue. This was in contrast to the Southern states, which lacked education and resources. In the South, African American communities suffered greatly. Even at the overturning of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* with the Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), which was the landmark decision that found it unconstitutional for there to be segregated public schools, full access to public libraries for African Americans would not occur until twenty years later.

The Southern states became even more recalcitrant in response to the rapidly changing racial equality laws brought about through the *Brown vs. Board* decision. The Civil Rights Movement created freedom summer programmes that established ad hoc libraries for black communities in Mississippi. A programme established by the Council of Federated Organizations arranged for books to be delivered from communities mostly in the North, to create pop-up libraries, called Freedom Libraries. The volunteers came mostly from the Western and Northern states; some were librarians or graduated students in library science programmes while others had no library science experience at all. These libraries were an integral part of the community centres whose function included services such as voter registration, cultural and arts exposure and job training – 'basic services' long denied black residents in the state. Each centre had a 'well-rounded' library, a space providing materials attending to the intellectual, personal and political needs of the community. The young college-educated organizers understood the revolutionary potential of books and reading. Although rarely acknowledged, libraries during the Civil Rights Movement 'were often

the staging areas of enormous social change, sometimes with violent consequences. African Americans were beaten, arrested, and often lost their jobs for attempting to register for library cards' (Tucker 1998: 43, 112). The *Brown vs. Louisiana* (1966) case finally established the right for full access to public libraries, as the Supreme Court enforced the use of public facilities: 'equally applicable to all'. The library is a powerful institution in the United States. African Americans' history with this institution is marked by exclusionary laws that prevented access. To transgress the laws risked violence and even death. For African Americans, full admission to the library was an entree to learning, but more significantly, ingress meant being recognized as human, because through learning, self-worth is acknowledged and tactical skills of emancipation are acquired, thus the restoration of one's personhood.

#### ENACTMENTS, PERFORMANCE, RESTORATION

In his 2007 lecture, *Enactments of Power: The politics of performance space*, performance theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who has posited that even writing is a liberatory act in the face of the colonial state, suggested that carved-out spaces for reading, writing and creative thought are always transgressive because the arts provide tools to educate and thus dismantle oppressive discourses. He expressly attends to the lingering mental clasp of colonialism but insists that creative spaces are contested or, in his words, interstices of 'enactments of power' for the marginalized (wa Thiong'o 1998: 5). The institution of the library in the United States is a performance space that reveals the power of the political anti-black discourse alongside the subversive tactics of African Americans. This section takes up the concepts of restoration and reading as performance to further locate the library as a performative space of and for enactments of power.

As noted, social libraries were established to improve the lives of African Americans. In addition to the education and the moral

betterment of the community, the charters of these early groups articulated goals intimating care for the mental well-being of the black community. One of the early groups of the 1800s writes of 'mental improvement' and 'lifting up self-esteem' (Tucker 1998). The need for attention toward the psychological well-being of the black community speaks to the trauma of daily living in an overtly anti-black society in which African Americans are dehumanized. The etymology of the word 'restoration' is seventeenth-century French, which explicitly refers to healing, to the renewing of something lost. In *Rock My Soul* (2004), hooks links the low pervasive self-esteem among African Americans with historical enslavement and the lingering negative representations of blackness in media and contemporary American culture. Further, she posits that to exercise agency one must first acknowledge the self. Restoring an awareness of self-concept, and developing a healthy sense of self, will therefore propel a political awareness and action. For African Americans, the 'social library' is a site of refuelling and healing from a racist world – it is a place of restoration.

In the minutes of the African American Minerva Literary Society of 1834 (Tucker 1998), among the listed activities of this social library is included, 'reading and recitations of original and selected pieces'. Similarly, another charter states the activity of 'a public event featuring reading aloud' (36). The term 'reading', I argue, means the act of interpretation. The discipline of Performance Studies, in the US academy, has its roots in the field of Oral Interpretation, a sub-area of the discipline of Speech Communication Studies. Oral Interpretation is the study and the public performance of literary texts. The concept of 'reading hours', commonly associated with Oral Interpretation programmes, were events where individuals would recite literature. Thus, the word 'reading' refers not only to the solitary individual act of engaging with a literary text but also the art of public delivery of a literary text. From this perspective, 'reading', in the context of African American library history, was both a transgressive act in violation of legal laws and

the learning of rhetorical forms of persuasion through oral interpretation. Libraries function as performative spaces of enactments, where tactical skills of survival are learned and developed. They are also and simultaneously sites of refuge, facilitating restoration – for the sake of re-engaging in social protest and activism, the stakes of which were survival.

#### FERGUSON, BALTIMORE AND DORCHESTER

The purpose of this essay is to contemplate and illustrate how the institution of the library in the United States has functioned as a space of emancipation through performance for African Americans. Above, I outlined a brief history of African Americans' relationship with libraries in the United States by highlighting three historical moments (Colonial, Civil War/ Reconstruction and Civil Rights Movement). I then discussed Thiongo's concept of enactments of power in order to propose restoration and reading as performative tactics established by early 'social' and then 'independent black' libraries, havens for learning and education, creative production and psychological healing. In this section, I turn my focus to contemporary conditions and recent political occurrences to demonstrate how libraries continue to function as performative spaces of enactments, responding to contemporary social issues affecting African American communities. The actions staged in the Ferguson and Baltimore public libraries renewed the discussions about the role of libraries in our communities, recalling and reconnecting to the earlier history of African Americans and libraries.

#Black Lives Matter is a social protest group formed in 2013 after the acquittal of a white man for shooting unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin. But it was the death of Michael Brown, shot by a police officer in Ferguson (Missouri) in the summer of 2014, which catapulted the group and the city of Ferguson into national and international discourse. Baltimore drew similar international attention following the death

while in police custody of 25-year-old black man Freddy Grey. Both cities, with substantial African American residents, became symbols for a long history of injustice towards black bodies in the United States and instantly became sites of massive social protest, drawing individuals from across the nation and disrupting the cities for weeks. Shops, all city schools and public services closed and violence ensued. Although both cities were effectively 'shut down', the directors of the libraries demanded that the libraries remain open. In Ferguson, Scott Donner, the only full-time employee of the library, who had been Director for just two months, posted on Facebook and Twitter during the turmoil:

Because of the Grand Jury decision [of acquittal], many organizations will be closed, but the Ferguson Municipal Public Library will stay open as long as it is safe for patrons and staff. If the Ferguson-Florissant schools close, we will be hosting activities for the children. We will do everything in our power to serve our community. Stay strong and love each other. (Ferguson Municipal Public Library 2014a)

He also posted on Twitter:

We are here for all of our residents. If you want to come, get water, read, check email, we are here. (Ferguson Municipal Public Library 2014b)

Only a block from the centre of the disruption, the library doors remained open as a place for solace and restoration. The library was a resting place for journalists, and with public school classes suspended, teachers arrived to create programming for children. The library even provided each child with a 'kit' that included books for dealing with trauma and a stuffed animal toy. As Donner's messages trended via social media, within hours the library garnered both financial support, and other forms of support, such as books from other libraries and social organizations, as well as groups of volunteers, mostly librarians and many graduate students in Library Science programmes.

Weeks later, in Baltimore, similar unrest unfolded. The Governor of Maryland placed the city of Baltimore in a State of Emergency. The Enoch Free Public Free Library, located

on Pennsylvania Avenue and directly across from the burning CVS drugstore, was located at the epicentre of the protest. According to staff member Roswell Encina, 'It's at times like this that the community needs us ... That's what the library has always been there for, from crises like this to a recession to the aftermath of severe weather' (Sillers 2015). When asked what the next steps will be following the unrest, Carla Hayden, the CEO of the Baltimore Library System, affirmed, 'We'd like to use art and music to capture what's going on and be a place where kids can talk about their feelings, capturing their experiences' (Cottrell 2015). The two libraries, located in cities where the majority of the population is African American, responded to crises by keeping their doors open and thus providing a place of refuge and restoration. In addition, the action of keeping the libraries open more aptly performs what Homi Bhabha (1994) and Edward Soja (1996) before him labels as a 'third space' – an in-between place occupied by diverse actors with divergent ideologies negotiated in a neutral space. School children, teachers, journalists and police officers – white, black and Latino – occupied the impartial and nonpartisan corridors of the libraries shaped by the tenacity of the librarians. After months of investigation by the Department of Justice, the police departments of both municipals were found to participate in an arrest-for-profit system in which the more arrests made, the more the city garnered revenue for the municipal systems. In the case of Ferguson, more than half of the city revenue base came from arresting and ticketing black bodies. However, the bulk of the funds went to the judicial and police departments, not to the scarcely funded community library (United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division 2015, 2016).

The events in Ferguson and Baltimore occurred amid ongoing debates regarding the future of libraries in the digital age. Through recycled materials and refurbished houses, Theaster Gates created locales of refuge and restoration for people of Chicago's south side. The *Dorchester Projects* expands the concept of libraries by

working with opportunities offered by the digital transformation of the libraries. According to Michael Agresta, libraries are ‘morphing into a bookless social club for gearheads and gadget nerds’ (2014). The physical books are met with the possibility of becoming e-books and other digital platforms that enable video, audio streaming and other digitally enhanced interactive software that transform what we know as the book and other printed objects. Such evolution calls for a reconfiguration of space. The removal of card catalogues, slide projectors, photo albums and even bookshelves has given way to more experimental uses of library spaces, with more computers, 3D printers and digital sound-editing booths. In creating social spaces for the community, Gates performed a rupture in the discourse of the ‘bookless’ library filled with ‘gearheads and gadget nerds’, insisting on a space of human social interaction and tangible objects.

The *Dorchester Projects* refers to a cluster of abandoned houses on the South Side of Chicago purchased by Gates and reclaimed as social spaces for the ‘uplift’ of the community. Gates, a trained city planner, social worker and ceramicist, is expanding and creatively conceptualizing the field of community-based and engaged art in a meaningful and critical way. The first fully developed space is a renovated two-storey building from re-used materials, mostly from neighbouring University of Chicago libraries. At a time when libraries are rethinking acquisitions/collections and designs because of technology, Gates reuses the card catalogues, albums, books, slide collections and record players to create spaces of ‘uplift’ in the predominately African American south side of Chicago. This area of the city was hit worst during the economic recession, and today access to a library is limited for many. Gates created a space where the community can use items, programme performance events, screen movies and create performative dinners in the Soul Food Kitchen. Dorchester is a site for the community, but restoration takes on another meaning of literally restoring a building, restoring the life of objects discarded from libraries and restoring the community.

The turntable and albums are reintroduced to people who only know of CDs and iTunes, and thus garner an appreciation for and decipher the difference between digitized sound with vinyl. The card catalogue is not a relic of the past, but an active study in typography, coding, and arranging of knowledge. And the slide images projected from the slide projector encourage a communal looking, discussion and a rethinking of time, different from the instant digital, fleeting image. Dorchester is not only a site of performance; it is a performance.

#### ON LIBRARIES

The library is an arena of possibility, opening both a window into the soul and a door onto the world.  
Rita Dove (Block 2011: 225)

Rita Dove, US Poet Laureate from 1993 to 1995, was the first African American and the youngest poet to be appointed to the esteemed position. Like bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates and many other African American literary figures and academics, she writes often of both the precarious and the emancipatory role of libraries in her life. Growing up in segregated communities, hooks, Dove and Gates bore witness to the dangers and violence associated with libraries but have also experienced the power and the sacredness of the space that propelled them to become great thinkers, writers and liberators. Earlier in this essay, I appreciated hooks’ framing of the library as subversive. It suggests that in its invention, the public library represents accessibility to knowledge. For African Americans the library also carries with it participation in the democracy. More importantly, learning to read provides a capacity of reflection and interrogation of the self – hence, providing ways of acquiring tactics and strategies of survival. Dove helps us to remember the library as a site of possibility. This essay is an attempt to recall the contested nature of the library for African Americans in the United States, but also to remember that libraries are subversive performance spaces of endless possibilities, including restoration and refuge.

## C O D A

The Negro Society for Historical Research founded by Arturo Alfonso Schomburg was designated as one of the research libraries of the New York City Library in 1972 and renamed the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The Schomburg is a research centre and archive with galleries and performance spaces. Carla Hayden, the Chief Executive of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore (who kept the library open during the protest), was just recently named the Librarian of Congress. She is the first woman and first African American to head the Library of Congress.

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