Publications and Research   New York City College of Technology

2017

Many Hats, One Head: Considering Professional Identity in Academic Library Directorship

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Chapter 12*

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Considering Professional Identity in Academic Library Directorship

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It's early morning and I'm sitting at my desk at home, writing. I expand the draft I'm working on to fill my computer screen, to minimize distraction; I'm grateful for the cup of coffee that my spouse brings in to me, which also helps me focus. Some mornings the pull to check my work e-mail is strong; thoughts about my to-do list for the day threaten to intrude rather than wait patiently until I arrive at the library, as I would prefer them to do. The research I'm working on often seems like a less demanding taskmaster, even projects with external deadlines (like this one). But I need to take this regular time to write and research—it's a core part of who I am as a scholar-practitioner, and I feel incomplete without it.

In this essay, I study myself as a Chief Librarian with a background in multiple disciplines—a PhD in anthropology and a master of library and information science—who is active in scholarly research. My background is not entirely unusual, and many academic librarians come to the profession with graduate training in both library and information science and an additional discipline. Library faculty at my university must maintain an active research agenda to progress through tenure and promotion, and, for many librarians (including me), this requirement is a welcome part of the job. Chief Librarians at my university are both faculty and administrators. As the former, we serve as chairs of the Library Department and guide library faculty through the promotion and tenure process; as the latter, we supervise library faculty, professional staff, and clerical staff to

provide library services and resources for the college community and manage the library facilities.

Prior to becoming Chief Librarian I was Instruction Coordinator in the library where I work, and in my years on the tenure track I worked to develop my research agenda and publish and present on my scholarly work. As I was hired as Chief Librarian, my research in several areas was beginning to gain more recognition. During 2014, which included my last semester as Instruction Coordinator and first as a director, I made fifteen presentations at conferences, professional development events, and invited talks, most with my research partner or other collaborators. My research partner and I published four articles, and I wrote or cowrote two additional articles and submitted them to scholarly journals.

In my first year as a library director, I was very tired. Research and scholarly work was the only area with any flexibility, the only place I could see to scale back, and I did begin to say no a bit more often and let deadlines for interesting CFPs pass on by. But I'm not ready to leave research behind (will I ever be ready?), so I hold onto it doggedly and try to focus on the parts that give me energy. I'm still overbooked, still tired (though not as tired), and still stuffing my research into any time I can find for it as I negotiate these roles. Sometimes that perfect space and time for scholarship is early in the morning, drinking coffee and fighting that urge to check work e-mail, even if only for half an hour.

Betwixt and Between

Using autoethnography, a qualitative research method that "seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience,"[1] I aim to explore my professional identity as an academic library director. As is common in autoethnographic research, I collected data primarily via reflective journal entries that I wrote over nine months, from spring 2015 through the end of that year; these journal entries constitute the primary field notes for this study. I also considered several short, informal essays and blog posts that I have written over the past several years about

topics of relevance to this research—including my previous research projects and aspects of my job transition from Instruction Coordinator to Chief Librarian. I followed my usual practice in research projects in which text is the primary data source (for example, interview transcripts), and I coded both the field notes and other writings to surface themes relevant to my research interests. I used these themes in my analysis of the data, drawing context from previous autoethnographic research on professional identity in the workplace, academia, and library and information science.

The primary data sources in this project are my own—the researcher's—lived experiences. I submitted this research to the institutional review board at my college, and it was determined not to require review. While there are no other participants in this research—as there are in projects that involve interviews, focus groups, or surveys—some of my narrative in this essay includes my colleagues and collaborators. I don't include their names here, since this study focuses on my own professional identity; however, my collaborators have much experience with their own research and publication, and they are difficult to anonymize. To address the challenges of consent in this essay, I followed the lead of other autoethnographic researchers who consider "others implicated in or by their texts, allowing these others to respond, and/or acknowledging how these others feel about what is being written about them and allowing them to talk back to how they have been represented in the text."[2] I offered the opportunity for my collaborators to review multiple drafts of the chapter as it progressed through the peer-review process before publication. They have told me that they are comfortable with the ways in which they are included in this essay, and the feedback they offered was incredibly valuable to me as I wrote and revised this chapter.

In my analysis of the ways in which I experience and negotiate my professional identity as an academic library director, I am of course influenced by the context in which I live, including my background. I am a white, heterosexual, cisgender, abled woman from a middle-class background and as such experience the privilege (and, sometimes, constraints) that those identities are afforded in the contemporary American cultural and social context. While I do

not explicitly address those aspects of my background here, as core attributes of my identity they are necessarily involved in any research and analysis I undertake.

I am not the first to employ autoethnography as a method to explore professional identity in academia or librarianship, nor the first to use liminality to frame and make sense of it. The concept of liminality can be traced back to anthropologist Victor Turner's study of initiation rituals among the Ndembu of Zambia, which extended Arnold van Gennep's work on rites of passage: a "series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another."[3] Turner referred to the transitional time between states as marginal or liminal and noted that initiation rites "best exemplify transition, since they have well-marked and protracted marginal or liminal phases."[4] Turner later elaborated on this intermediate stage, and suggested that "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."[5] In describing the liminal as transitional, Turner posited that extended liminality is uncommon (perhaps impossible?); Christopher Turnbull, in his exploration of liminality in fieldwork, noted that liminality is temporary with the exception of "ritual priests and prophets."[6]

More recent research has framed the study of professional identity by using liminality to highlight its transitional aspects. Nic Beech, a scholar of business and management, defines identity construction in the workplace as "a mutually co-constructive interaction between individuals and social structures."[7] He describes three phases in identity construction as liminal practices: experimentation, reflection, and recognition. Beech uses a traditional interpretation of the concept of liminality that stays close to Turner's original work; in the workplace narratives that Beech analyzes, he presents liminality in professional identity as a transformational state that must be passed through with a different person emerging on the other side. It is interesting to note Beech's claim that for professional identity construction in "organizational work," extended liminality is negative[8]—this claim is taken up by several other autoethnographic researchers studying professional identity in higher education contexts.[9]

When coding and analyzing my field notes and prior writings, I reflected on paired categories describing aspects of my professional identities: anthropologist and librarian (my multidisciplinary training); research and practice (the context of my work tasks); faculty and administrator (the professional roles I inhabit). These paired categories are similar to what Elizabeth Root refers to as the "opposing energies" that she negotiates in her role as interculturalist, the only faculty member specializing in intercultural communication at her university.[10] My experiences moving between and within these paired categories are best understood as liminality, the "betwixt and between" that Turner initially described. Here I follow many researchers who discuss professional identity in an academic context in my use of liminality "both as a theoretical framework and as an explanation for making sense of interactions."[11]

Between and Within

When our former Chief Librarian announced his retirement in early 2014, I spent a long time thinking before applying for the position. I knew that the job of an administrator (even one in which I'm also faculty) would be different from a solely faculty position and would impact my ability to do research. It would also keep me out of the classroom, at least initially while I'm settling in and learning the job. In addition to enjoying teaching, I've developed research interests in teaching with games and in open educational technologies that would be challenging to continue if I moved into a director position. However, becoming a director would bring new opportunities to implement what I've learned in my research. My research partner and I have studied how, where, and when students do their college work, experiences that could help me think holistically in the role Chief Librarian about the library as a space, services, and resources for our students, especially as I represent the library at various college meetings.

Idiosyncrasy is a term that appropriately describes the position of Chief Librarian on each campus at my university. Most obviously, each college library only has one director. But the job is a hybrid administrative and faculty position: my full title is Chief Librarian and Department Chair, Library. I'm the only department chair also supervising (if

usually indirectly) full-time and part-time technical and support staff, a multilevel facility, and physical and digital collections. I'm excluded from the faculty union, and I'm not elected to my term as chair. My colleagues in other administrative positions who report to the Provost—in their roles directing assessment, academic technology, the learning center, and more—don't directly hire, supervise, or mentor faculty along their path to tenure and promotion to higher faculty ranks.

Whenever I'm in a meeting on campus, I experience the idiosyncrasy of my position most vividly. In the college Personnel and Budget Committee or other meetings of department chairs, I'm aware that my colleagues don't field concerns about the heat being too high, the databases or website going down, students talking loudly on the quiet floor while other students around them are studying. In the Provost's senior staff meeting I'm aware that my colleagues don't need to navigate the complexities of hiring librarians with an interest in both the librarianship and scholarship sides of a library faculty position, who will not just survive but thrive on the tenure track. On a typical week with multiple meetings, I move between my faculty and administrator roles multiple times throughout each day.

Time is in short supply for a Chief Librarian. I'm both in the office for longer hours each day and busier when I'm there. Though some days I come in early to write or research, sometimes something happens early that demands my attention. I find myself working more regularly on my research on the weekends. While I'm still eligible for library faculty professional reassignment leave, even during the semesters when I'm granted leave, it's challenging to find days when my schedule is clear enough that I can take it. Sometimes the need to move quickly between my different roles is a challenge; the need to switch tasks can cause discomfort. And sometimes this seems like a liability when I want or need to fully focus on one role and one of the other roles intrudes.

Exhausting and Energizing

As a librarian I have several research interests, though my longest running project is a collaborative study with my research partner of

how, where, when, and with what tools undergraduate students at our university do their academic work. We have recounted this story many times, the story of how we started working on the project we began years ago (I dig through our online documents and find that our earliest file is dated February 14, 2009), a project that has evolved and is ongoing. And it goes like this:

After finishing my MLIS, I worked as an adjunct at the college library where my research partner works. We presented together in 2007 at a local conference, and one of the keynote speakers was Nancy Fried Foster of the University of Rochester, discussing the use of ethnographic methods to learn more about how students use the university library. My research partner and I were absolutely enthralled during the keynote. We both have graduate degrees in anthropology and immediately started brainstorming, planning, scheming. How could we do something similar at our university? Early the following year, I was fortunate to be hired in my tenure-track Instruction Coordinator position at a college in the same university as my soon-to-be research partner. And we were off and running.

Fast-forward to 2010. My research partner and I are well into data collection for our project. She's been granted a sabbatical and, with my junior faculty research leave plus a few small grants from our university, our ambitions grow. We ultimately end up interviewing 178 students and 60 faculty members at six colleges in our university system. We travel to three boroughs of New York City for the interviews, taking subways and buses, carrying everything we need for the day with us, and generally immersing ourselves in many of the same experiences that our students have in their commuter undergraduate careers. Occasionally I eat my lunch on the subway (and in my head I apologize to my fellow commuters). We're busy.

We learn so much in our conversations with students and faculty, and so much more during our experiences of traveling to and working at the different campuses. We find our favorite spots for sitting quietly during down time (sometimes in the library, sometimes not), figure out where to eat on campus or nearby, learn that none of the campuses really have terrific restroom options. We find ourselves comparing our experiences to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

and decide to write a parody essay in the style of the book for our university libraries' newsletter.[12]

It's early 2015, and my research partner and I are on a train in southern Connecticut, far out from our intense data collection days. We followed up two years of data collection with two years of analysis and writing, plus another year of getting things published (and conferences along the way). On this day we braved early morning Penn Station crowds to head to a state library association conference at which we've been invited to share our research on commuter students' use of their college libraries. It's a busy time in the semester for us, so we're just going up for the day. This is our seventh presentation this academic year, including two research methods workshops that we taught with another colleague at our local library advocacy organization. We're tired.

But our research with students is terrifically enjoyable, even if tiring. And after a few years of presenting and publishing on our data, we realize that we have new questions and want to know more about what's changed since we last interviewed students about their work. So we jump back into fieldwork in late 2015, this time with additional collaborators at our university and others. With our new data collection efforts, we see new ways to draw on our anthropology backgrounds[13] and get new bursts of energy as we continue to move back and forth between our research and our library work.[14] Our fieldwork and analysis are simultaneously exhausting and energizing, and in this work I experience the productive tension in the liminal space between research and practice and my roles as anthropologist and librarian.

Identities and Connections

As large (sometimes enormous) gatherings of personnel working in the same discipline or profession, often drawing national and international attendees, scholarly and professional conferences are a prime location in which the construction of professional identity can (and perhaps must) take place, as other researchers have shown.[15] They're a temporary workplace away from the usual campus locales, and

conferences may perhaps themselves be thought of as liminal spaces. Some researchers have highlighted a focus on the academic conference as a performance—even for those there solely as attendees,[16] which echoes Turnbull's assertion that fieldwork can be a performance marked by liminality.[17]

Conferences have also been the site of some of my own formative experiences with professional identity. It's fall 2013, and I'm at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) conference in Chicago, presenting with my research partner and four other collaborators. Anthropology and archaeology conferences used to feel so familiar to me, used to be my primary experience of conference-going, but now they're not. Our session is something that this conference labels a roundtable but most of the library conferences I've attended would call a panel, with the six of us offering perspectives the qualitative study of academic libraries and research practices. The room is somewhat on the small side and the attendees nearly fill it, and we end up with an energetic, productive discussion that includes faculty, graduate students, and even undergraduates. We've definitely earned our post-roundtable treats from the fancy doughnut place in downtown Chicago.

My research partner and I do attend other sessions at the conference, a few that focus on applied ethnography, though neither of us goes to any sessions from our former anthropological specialties. I see a few folks that I went to graduate school with out of the corner of my eye in the exhibit room or in passing walking between sessions, though none are folks I've kept up with, so I don't stop and say hello. The conference is in Chicago, where I went to college, so my research partner and I do a bit of sightseeing and visiting with a good friend of mine. It's unseasonably cold and the famous wind is windy. Other than our session, the conference feels like a life I can no longer commit to, seems like a place for those who fully professionally identify as anthropologists. I'm still interested in many of the topics being discussed, but I've taken a different path and the liminal space where I currently dwell does not encompass only anthropology. I feel like I don't quite belong there, as if I'm no longer enough of an anthropologist to fully participate, and I'm not prepared to perform that role.

Library conferences are different. Bigger, for one: even the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) conference, with its focus solely on academic libraries, is much larger than the archaeology conferences I attended in graduate school. The sessions are in larger rooms, too, often rooms that hold over 100 attendees (which I admit brought on a bit of stage fright the first time I presented on a panel). There are keynote speakers and a huge exhibit hall and snacks and many concurrent sessions and session formats. While presentations and posters discussing research results are included, there are also lots of practice-based presentations at the conference.

It's spring 2015 and my research partner and I and several (now longtime) collaborators present at a panel at ACRL. It goes well and is terrifically fun; again the discussion is lively, and our attendees share lots of useful feedback. I feel more comfortable at ACRL, and indeed am feeling more and more comfortable each time I attend—this is my third time at this biannual conference. My membership in a professional identity here is more secure; I am currently working as an academic librarian in an academic library, so I clearly belong in this space. But I still can't shake the liminality because it's not entirely familiar or completely comfortable, either. It's different, and I often find myself wanting something smaller and more conducive to discussions about academic research. While my performance of the role of librarian at library conferences is (I think) visibly successful, it sometimes feels internally inauthentic, and the anthropologist part of me doesn't always feel that I belong.

Conferences are among the situations in which I experience liminality in my professional identity most acutely. In part this is a result of the work that my research partner and I do with our collaborators, who also have varied backgrounds in anthropology, sociology, and librarianship. For many years my research partner and I have found conferences to be a persistent space for making and building on connections with those doing similar work. We collaborated with others on a poster at in 2011 at ACRL, then contributed a paper to a themed session at AAA in 2011. I attended ACRL in 2013 to present on a different research project of mine, though our collaborators were there too and I attended their presentations (and met for meals as well). All of which led to the two conference experiences discussed above. And

continue to expand: as I write this essay my research partner, frequent collaborators, several new collaborators and I are in the analysis stage of a project and beginning to submit proposals to several conferences. It seems clear that conferences, as sites of active construction of professional identity, will continue to be occasions in which I experience the productive tension of liminality, at least for the foreseeable future.

The End of the Beginning

This autoethnographic study illustrates the liminal state that I occupy in the overlap between the paired categories of anthropologist/librarian, research/practice, and faculty/administrator. In the liminality of these simultaneous identities, aptly described by Turner's phrase "betwixt and between," I locate, negotiate, and perform my own professional identity as an academic library director.

Much thinking and writing about liminality views it as a stage that must be passed through to enable a transformation to become complete, and thus some scholars highlight the potential negative effects of extended liminality when an actor lingers for too long in the transitional state.[18] Indeed, several academic autoethnographers who use liminality to explore professional identity take a negative view of prolonged liminality and focus especially on the anxiety of the liminal space. It's worth noting, however, that these researchers discuss instances of change or reorganization in academic structures, situations that involve transformation in which there is an expectation that actors will move completely from one identity to another, for example, academic administrator to faculty.[19] In these instances the anxiety of liminality is not unexpected, and it may be challenging to embrace the productive tension of remaining in a liminal space during a time of transition in which a role change is the expected outcome.

Alternatively, I experience my professional identity as a continuous process of negotiation between the paired categories of anthropologist/librarian, research/practice, and faculty/administrator. As my research has revealed, this liminality is not without its challenges. However, I also experience productive tension in this liminality, and I suggest that the occasional discomfort of the extended liminal state of

overlap between these categories is a foundational aspect of my professional identity as an academic library director. Occupying a liminal space requires me to keep questioning the work that I do—both in my research and in the library—and guides me in making meaning from my experiences. As in Ingo Winkler's study of his day-to-day experiences as an academic—Winkler is German, lives in Germany, and works at a university in Denmark, and thus crosses both a cultural and geopolitical border in traveling between home and work—for me as well "identity work is always ongoing."[20]

In the course of this research, I have realized that my residence in a state of extended liminality predates my role as Chief Librarian; it actually began as soon as I accepted my job as Instruction Coordinator. Overlap in the paired categories of anthropologist/librarian and research/practice and negotiating the liminal space of those roles has long been a part of my professional identity. My familiarity with the productive tension of liminality in my professional identity before becoming an academic library director helped make it possible for me to consider, apply for, and accept that position, with its requirement to inhabit the liminal space of faculty/administrator.

Scholarly research is time-consuming, can be exhausting, and is not strictly required for my administrative role as Chief Librarian (even one with a multidisciplinary background), yet I know that it makes me a better librarian and administrator to keep on with my research. In interviewing students I gain insight into their lives as students and people, and what I learn and share with my colleagues in the library can inform our services, resources, and facilities. In my faculty role as chair of the Library Department, I advise and mentor my untenured colleagues, and maintaining an active research agenda helps me keep their research needs in mind as well. Ultimately, existing in the liminal space and working with and through the productive tension therein, especially in doing research that draws on my background in anthropology as well as my library experience, is a crucial component of my professional identity as a Chief Librarian.

Notes

1. Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 12, no. 1 (2011): 273.

2. Ibid., 281.

3. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 2–3.

4. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 95.

5. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 95.

6. Christopher Turnbull, "Liminality: A Synthesis of Subjective and Objective Experience," in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 76.

7. Nic Beech, "Liminality and the Practices of Identity Reconstruction," *Human Relations* 64, no. 2 (2011): 285, doi:10.1177/0018726710371235.

8. Ibid., 287.

9. Pamela J. Bettis, Michael Mills, Janice Miller Williams, and Robert Nolan use reflective journals written over the course of a year of academic reorganization in which faculty from several different depart-

ments join a new department. Lynn Bosetti, Colleen Kawalilak, and Peggy Patterson chronicle three mid-career administrators who are transitioning to the faculty and observe their "needs to make meaning of our experiences as new or returning faculty." Both articles discuss liminality in individual professional identity as well as in higher education more broadly in this time of austerity and increasing research and administrative responsibilities for faculty members, and in each article the anxiety that the authors experience in their transformations is a prominent feature of their discussions of liminality in professional identity. Pamela J. Bettis, Michael Mills, Janice Miller Williams, and Robert Nolan, "Faculty in a Liminal Landscape: A Case Study of a College Reorganization," *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 11, no. 3 (2005): 51; Lynn Bosetti, Colleen Kawalilak, and Peggy Patterson, "Betwixt and Between: Academic Women in Transition," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 38, no. 2 (2008): 101.

10. Elizabeth Root explores professional identity through the lens of her role as the only faculty member specializing in intercultural communication at her university. Root probes at the tension she experiences, asserting that "professional identities are not stable, but are continually being negotiated; they are identity in-process," which suggests that she experiences extended liminality in her professional role. Elizabeth Root, "Opposing Energies of the Interculturalist Identity" (paper presented at the National Communication Association Conference, Las Vegas, NV, November 25, 2015), 10–11.

11. Justine Wheeler, Carla Graebner, Michael Skelton, and Margaret (Peggy) Patterson, four academic librarians with faculty status at Canadian universities, discuss their work in shared governance structures (including unions) at their institutions. While they confess to "experiencing liminality on more than one level," they conclude that their identity as both librarians and academics is stronger for their participation in faculty association work. Justine Wheeler, Carla Graebner, Michael Skelton, and Margaret (Peggy) Patterson, "Librarians as Faculty Association Participants: An Autoethnography," in *In Solidarity: Academic Librarian Labour Activism and Union Participation in Canada*, ed. Jennifer Dekker and Mary Kandiuk (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2014), 174–175.

12. Maura A. Smale and Mariana Regalado, "Hitchhiker's Guide to the CUNYverse," *LACUNY News* Spring 2011, http://lacuny.org/news/spring11/2011/08/14/hitchhikers-guide.

13. Maura A. Smale, "Digging into My Non-library Past," *ACRLog* (blog), August 24, 2015, http://acrlog.org/2015/08/24/digging-into-my-non-library-past.

14. Maura A. Smale, "Keeping Our Batteries Charged," *ACRLog* (blog), October 30, 2015, http://acrlog.org/2015/10/30/keeping-our-batteries-charged.

15. Business faculty members Mark Learmonth and Michael Humphreys reflect on their conference attendance, expressing both the academic idealism of conferences and the ways in which the quest for scholarly recognition aligns with aspects of the business world they had hoped to leave behind. Andrew F. Herrmann, Julia A. Barnhill, and Mary Catherine Poole craft a collaborative autoethnography about the individual and collective experiences of three graduate students—each involved in constructing their professional identity—attending a conference on qualitative research. Mark Learmonth and Michael Humphreys, "Autoethnography and Academic Identity: Glimpsing Business School Doppelgängers," *Organization* 19, no. 1 (2011): 100, doi:10.1177/1350508411398056. Andrew F. Herrmann, Julia A. Barnhill, and Mary Catherine Poole, "Ragged Edges in the Fractured Future: A Co-authored Organizational Autoethnography," *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 2, no. 1 (2013): 57, doi:10.1108/JOE-11-2011-0002.

16. S. K. W. Lang uses his experiences at a small conference on ethnography to consider the ways in which the liminality that exists between conference presenter and attendee can illuminate the ways "researchers navigate the liminal space between us and the people our research includes." S. K. W. Lang, "Notes at a Conference, CEAD 2010: Traversing the Liminal," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 12, no. 1 (2012): 25, doi:10.1177/1532708611430483.

17. Turnbull, "Liminality," 73.

18. Beech, "Practices of Identity Reconstruction," 287.

19. Bettis et al., "Faculty in a Liminal Landscape;" Bosetti, Kawalilak, and Patterson, "Betwixt and Between."

20. Ingo Winkler, "Moments of Identity Formation and Reformation: A Day in the Working Life of an Academic," *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 2, no. 2 (2013): 199, doi:10.1108/JOE-11-2011-0001.

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