

## INTRODUCTION

I find myself finishing the manuscript of this book in a strange, stomach-churning time: the months following the inauguration of President Donald Trump. Each day since January 20, 2017 has produced a new horror that prompts disbelief, resistance, despair, or drives me to stick my head in the sand like some kind of freaked out ostrich in denial. As I write this, I see librarians entering the fray, pushing for a place in the conversation fighting the scourge of “fake news” and “alternative facts.” I am one of those librarians. I am a librarian who has spent much of her career teaching students how to evaluate information, so I understand the impulse to connect our work to current events, provide a solution to a dangerous problem, and, in so doing, legitimize the entire premise of our pedagogy and practice.

But I am also a librarian who feels strongly that simple solutions, checklists, and teaching strategies are not enough to eradicate “fake news,” because everything is much more complicated than that. I am a librarian who believes that the intersections of feminist pedagogy and the reference desk matter a whole lot, and that these intersections are a way of complicating the superficial and overly simplistic approaches our profession sometimes seems to embrace. As a feminist librarian, I fully understand and wholeheartedly value the power of consciousness-raising and what Paulo Freire called *unveiling of reality*: “Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 81.

I believe that librarians have the power to help unveil reality. I have personally experienced and witnessed this happening in interactions with students at the reference desk, such as the time when a student searching for books about the Incas was surprised and disturbed to learn that Library of Congress Subject Headings centered the colonizer rather than the colonized. I'm also reminded of a time when I helped a student find primary sources related to Japanese internment camps during World War II. We were both horrified to find a 1942 *New York Times* article that claimed that the detainees *liked* the internment camp. But I don't believe these kinds of unveiling of reality moments are moments that one can reasonably expect to enact in every single one-shot instruction session or in a single reference desk encounter. At best, we can plant seeds.

I'm reminded of a song from *Hamilton*, another cultural reference from the time I'm writing this. In the scene in which Alexander Hamilton is killed in a duel, he contemplates his imminent demise before the bullet strikes: "Legacy. What is a legacy? It's planting trees in a garden you never get to see."<sup>2</sup> Having listened to the soundtrack roughly a thousand times, I was surprised to be struck anew by these lines when hearing them performed live in Chicago in January 2017. For the librarian who engages with students primarily through one-shot classes and one-shot<sup>3</sup> encounters, we don't always get to see the impact of our work. We're planting seeds in the hope they will sprout into a garden that we will more than likely never see, at least not face-to-face, but we have to believe that this garden matters, that those seeds will sprout, and that we can also find ways, whenever possible, to witness the garden flourish.

Garden metaphors have been making their way into my writing over the past few years, and I've learned that it's better to embrace the metaphors that want to be made known rather than fight them. Growth, life, green things, flowers, tomatoes, and even weeds give me new language to understand and describe how I try to approach the work I do at the reference desk from an intersectional feminist

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2 Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America*. (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 273.

3 Please note that I am exercising major restraint in not turning this into another *Hamilton* reference.

point of view. This means that when I think about this book, I think of companion planting. My wife, who was once a certified Master Gardener, tells me that companion planting is an approach to gardening that understands that some plants have mutually beneficial relationships, so it makes sense to plant them next to each other. Marigolds and tomatoes, for example, are companion plants, because marigolds have some sort of quality that repels the pests that want to destroy the tomatoes. When I conceived of the idea of *The Feminist Reference Desk*, I thought of it as an extension of my 2013 book *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*, a companion volume that expands upon the ideas in my book and opens the conversation for other people to participate. Like the tomatoes and marigolds planted in the same bed, these books are helping the other exist, providing mutual support, helping the other to grow and take on new life. Companion planting also strikes me as a parallel to feminist pedagogy, in that it values collaboration, mutual respect and support, and sees each entity as valuable and necessary to the survival and thriving of others.

The story of this book contains two important intertwining tendrils that shaped how it came into existence and supported its growth and flourishing.

## I

In January of 2015, my wife Constance and I bought a house in order to move her mother Addie in with us. In December 2015, Addie was diagnosed with cancer, and in the summer of 2016, while I was in the midst of reading and editing the first drafts of this book, she began in-home hospice care. It soon became clear that I could not pay attention to the hard work of the wonderful contributors to this volume while also navigating the heartbreak of caring for a dying family member. When I found myself weeping while listening to Willie Nelson in a coffee shop where I was trying to read chapters from this book, I knew that I was going to have to take leave from work at some point, and take a break from this book, while my wife Constance and I made the most of Addie's last months on earth. She died on September 1, 2016, in a hospital bed in our family room, where usually we watched *General Hospital* together, but instead now we watched her. Constance and I were with her when she died, as was our little cat, Gertie, who was best friends with her Grandma.



*Gertie and Grandma,  
three days after her admission to hospice*



*Playing cards on Addie's 84th birthday,  
January 9, 2016*

Caring for Addie, and witnessing her death, transformed me in ways that I barely understand now, eight months later as of this writing, and I will probably never completely untangle. One of the many, many important and challenging insights that emerges from the haze of grief is that work is work, and life is life, and sometimes those things overlap, and that's fine, but other times these things need distinct and definitive boundaries, and that's not just fine; it's necessary. In retrospect, insisting on those distinct and definitive boundaries between work-life and life-life feels like a feminist act to me, although I certainly didn't have the presence of mind to think that way at the time. I prioritized self-care, and caring for my family, and made use of the option of paid leave from my job instead of struggling to negotiate work-life and life-life in pursuit of the fictional impossibility of "work-life balance."

## II

Also in the summer of 2016, I had the great pleasure and privilege of supervising an MLS practicum student at Indiana University, Tessa

Withorn<sup>4</sup>. She lived in Bloomington, a two-hour drive from my IU regional campus in New Albany, Indiana, and once a week she made the four-hour round trip to spend the day on campus with me, while completing the rest of her tasks remotely. I know Tessa says she learned valuable things during our summer together, but I contend that the experience was just as valuable and educational for me.

When we met for the first time to envision what she wanted her practicum experience to be like, I consciously employed feminist pedagogical strategies to collaboratively develop the goals while privileging her voice, desires, and needs. Based on my previous interactions with Tessa, I knew that she was interested in critical and feminist pedagogies, so planning her practicum seemed like an ideal way of modeling and enacting feminist approaches. There were requirements she needed to fulfill in order to earn academic credit, but I knew that these requirements didn't need to be limiting. There was plenty of room to shape this opportunity to meet her own needs and desires and goals. I tried from the start to use language that would empower her, not subordinate her. While filling out the necessary paperwork, Tessa asked what her title should be. Neither of us liked the word "intern," and instead we settled on "library instruction assistant," which accurately represented her role in supporting the library instruction program without the exploitative connotation that is often associated with "intern." While we brainstormed goals and projects and plans, I encouraged her to write the goals in terms of what *she* wanted to do, what *she* wanted to accomplish. I wanted her to know that she was not a source of cheap labor; she was a *person*, a talented individual full of potential, and I wanted to help facilitate her growth working alongside her. Technically, I had to be her supervisor and sign off on her timesheets and official academic paperwork. But in actual practical application, I tried to be the guide on the side, rather than the sage on the stage, that reference and instruction librarians often talk about and strive to be.

I also wanted Tessa to know that I didn't necessarily prioritize or privilege the traditional markers of what makes a "good" practicum. Yes, she had projects, and yes, there were going to be tangible deliverables, but the intangible was just as important to me as the facilitator of her summer experience. The affective dimension of learning was just as important, as was her intellectual growth, observations, and lived experience.

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<sup>4</sup> Tessa read this introduction and consented to my writing about her.

By the end of the summer, Tessa accomplished amazing, impressive work that made a substantial impact on the library instruction program I coordinate. For example, she designed and created high-quality information literacy modules in Canvas completely on her own, based on program outcomes and infused with critical pedagogical concepts. These modules address a previously unmet need for library instruction for students in 100% online courses. Tessa also served as an editorial assistant for this book. She read early drafts of a number of chapters and helped me provide editorial feedback, and her astute and insightful perspectives helped me see things in fresh and different ways. But in addition to her measurable accomplishments, the things that I put on her official evaluation and she can put on her CV, she also made a substantial impact on me as a librarian and a person. Beyond the actual literal work of her practicum, my work with Tessa was a real-life illustration of this work-life and life-life tension I was grappling with last summer. As Tessa noted on her reflective blog that summer, “The highlight of this weekend was definitely witnessing Maria snag tickets during her reference shift to *Hamilton* in Chicago. A feat to be admired, for sure. ‘We’re real people at the reference desk, right?’ she joked.”<sup>5</sup> It was a joke that was almost painful in how true it was. I was *such* a real person at the desk that summer, and it was fortunate for me that summer reference desk shifts are not that busy, because I was being undone by my home life. I had very little to give to the people who approached the desk, needing things from me. Public-facing work felt excruciating at times because my bandwidth was so low.

Due to Addie’s rapidly declining condition, my presence at work during that summer was spotty at best. I was crushed to be absent on Tessa’s last day of her practicum, where she presented the results of her work over the summer to the library faculty and staff. As Tessa noted on her blog, “On my final day at IUS, I’m sad to be spending it without Maria. She wasn’t able to come in today for personal reasons, but that’s okay. My time with Maria this summer has been personal. A feminist instructor strives to understand the student as a whole person, with autonomy and feelings about a million other things

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<sup>5</sup> Tessa Withorn, “Burnout and the Information Spectrum,” Accessed May 5, 2017, <https://acriticalsummer.wordpress.com/2016/06/24/burnout-the-information-spectrum/>



going on in their head that affect how and what they learn.”<sup>6</sup> It is very interesting now, in retrospect, to see how my emphasis and insistence on seeing the whole lives of students when we encounter them in the classroom and at the reference desk suddenly felt very real when I applied that same logic to my own self. I am a whole person, with autonomy and feelings about a million other things going on in my head that affect how and what I learn, and did, and how I worked. Feminist pedagogy insists on seeing and honoring the full humanity of learners, and this includes the reference and instruction librarian as well. Valuing my own humanity, my own worth and value as a person who deserves to be in the world, seems to be something that I have to keep learning and re-learning. It is not a thing you learn and then you’re done—hooray, you’re a Whole Person, welcome to the rest of your life. No, it’s more iterative, something you keep seeing anew in different eyes and from different perspectives.

#### ABOUT THE BOOK:

New eyes and different perspectives form the backbone of this book. The essays in this book provide exciting and diverse visions of feminist work at the reference desk. Feminist methodologies see and affirm that there are multiple ways of knowing and seeing the world outside of the realm and rigors of blind peer review, or IRB-approved studies, or numbers crunched in SPSS. This is not to suggest that those methods are *invalid*—in fact, some pieces in this book do make use of these important and useful and valuable methods, such as Rose Chou and Annie Pho’s study of intersectionality and women of color librarians. But creating and disseminating and legitimizing knowledge does not need to be restricted to those methods, and creative writing and personal narrative are just as important to the story of this book as well. Thus, I deliberately tried to invite a variety of approaches and voices in this book in order to be consistent with feminist methodologies. The value of lived experience and personal narrative is reflected in multiple chapters in this book, such as Kelly McElroy’s essay about the gendered nature of public-facing reference work.

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<sup>6</sup> Tessa Withorn, “Final Reflection,” Accessed May 5, 2017, <https://acriticalsummer.wordpress.com/2016/08/16/final-reflection/>

And in the editorial process of shepherding this book from proposals and abstracts to the fully realized chapters you're about to read, I was very mindful of and intentional about using a feminist approach to working with the authors of these chapters. I tried to balance my role as editor in a way that also honored and respected the voices of the contributors. I wanted this process to be as collaborative as possible, while still acknowledging that I still had responsibilities as an editor. I wanted the writers to feel comfortable with my suggestions, and I was genuinely glad when both they responded positively to my suggestions, and equally as genuinely glad when they told me that they weren't comfortable with a particular suggestion. This kind of negotiation felt similar to the kind of negotiation that happens at the reference desk, where I strive to flatten the hierarchy that confers power and authority to me and subordinates the student.

When it was time to think about how all of the chapters fit together and should be organized, I struggled at first, because I saw interrelationships between everything. How could I possibly impose some sort of order on all of this? But I realized that I needed to step back and tried to see the how the tomatoes and marigolds fit together instead of seeing individual plants, and then a design made itself known to me. I saw how the chapters could be divided into three groups: 1) Emotional Work and Ethics of Care, 2) Ways of Doing and Rethinking the Work, and 3) Intersections and Collaborative Work.

The Emotional Work and Ethics of Care section contains chapters that examine, describe, and illustrate how a feminist ethic of care operates in and affects reference work, as well as how the gendered nature of emotional labor makes feminist work more complicated and fraught. The Ways of Doing and Rethinking the Work section contains chapters that outline feminist approaches to rethinking reference desk staffing and training, the accessibility of collections, and cataloging. Finally, Intersectional and Collaborative Work focuses on intersectionality, the interconnections of collaborative relationships, and how these intersections and collaborations might inform the education of future library professionals. Bookending these three sections are two creative works: a poem by Michelle Reale, and a work of lyric scholarship by Corinne Gilroy and Alexandrina Hanam. Both works are quite different in form but are equally innovative in the creative expression of how feminist pedagogy informs the interactions and relationships that happen at the reference desk.



This book is a tangible object that represents the intangible tensions between work-life and life-life that existed alongside my work in midwifing it into the world. I read and reread chapters and wrote emails and read and reread revisions. I watched eggplants ripen in my backyard, which I picked and cooked and ate, and I watched the okra plant climb to impossible heights, which I abandoned, because Addie loved okra but no longer had any appetite. I watched Tessa thrive. I watched Addie die. This book is the companion plant that gave me hope, something to look forward to, and enabled me to connect to work I love when everything else seemed bleak and hopeless.

Another thread that has been emerging in my work in recent years explores burnout in academic instruction and reference librarians—what it is, what it looks like, its origins, its ramifications. As I contemplate burnout, I find myself pulled away from the language of problems and solutions, just as I resist the simplistic checklists that seek to thwart “fake news,” and instead I’m finding myself repeatedly drawn to this passage in the New Zealand version of the Anglican Daily Office: “Let us be filled with the presence of the great compassion towards ourselves and towards all living beings.” I have this written on the back of an old catalog card and it’s taped just below my computer monitor in my office. Our students deserve this great compassion. We, the librarians who teach them and learn alongside them, deserve this great compassion, the compassionate companion plant that enables us to thrive and empowers us to enact a vision for peace and social justice in our libraries, in our classrooms, and at our reference desks.

During this rich and difficult and generative time that provided the fertile soil that informed this book, I happened upon this passage from Wendell Berry’s *Standing by Words*: “It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work and that when we no longer know which way to go we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.”<sup>7</sup> The message of these words, for me, is that the stuck places can actually be productive places, places of growth and transformation, and when the path seems hazy or obscured by weeds and I’m not sure what to do or where to go next or even how I’m supposed to feel, this is an opportunity to embrace the uncertainty and growth that this stuck place promises. The intersection of feminist

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7 Berry, Wendell, *Standing by Words: Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 97.

work at the reference desk is one such stuck place, a place where we can grapple with approaching our work with a vision that ultimately wants to change the world, while knowing that we're doing this work in a culture and context that wants to see librarian-student interaction as a sterile transaction, a dehumanizing exchange of information. In the end, a brook cannot babble if there are no stones in it. The music, the beauty, the richness of our lives cannot happen if there are no obstacles, nothing to provide friction. Attempting to be explicit, overt, and visible about feminist work in the academic library in a culture that is hostile to feminism and social justice is a kind of friction that is simultaneously heartbreaking and life-giving. This babbling brook is a place for work-life and life-life to co-exist. Let's navigate this impeded stream together.

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