Library time: in pursuit of liberatory leisure

Jeremy Keen Abbott

Abstract

Introduction. Our contemporary perception and experience of free time and leisure has been deleteriously degraded by the work-leisure binary. However, the public library's leisure mode affords a distinct experience of time to its public that has the potential to exist outside the binary, and with that potential, the opportunity to imagine larger possibilities as well.

Method. This paper is exploratory, applying a syncretic, interdisciplinary approach to applying theories of work and leisure to critical librarianship.

Analysis. I fill a research gap by analysing the public library as a leisure space, applying the paradigms of Robert Stebbins, Julie Rose and Tricia Hersey among others.

Results. Public libraries are unique leisure spaces with the potential to offer patrons experiences of leisure beyond the dominant leisure-work binary: library time.

Conclusion. While public libraries are ripe with liberatory potential, attention must be paid to extant barriers to access for all members of the public, particularly those experiencing homelessness, who arguably have the greatest need for and least ability to realise leisure.

Introduction

Recreation is the Atlas on the shoulders of which the other roles of the public library rest. (Williamson, 2000, p. 184) Rest makes us more human. It brings us back to our humanness. (Hersey, 2022, p. 27)

The industrial age, which not coincidentally coincides with the public library age, has seen a steady degradation of leisure into a mere component of effective work, the work-leisure binary. Much of this is due to metastasising inequality, the neoliberal hollowing of social services and a normalisation of precarity, but no small part of this de-leisuring can be traced back to a general failure to conceptualise leisure as a meaningful part of human existence unto itself.

This paper seeks to reactivate and harness the leisure role of the public library. Specifically, the paper argues that when examined as a leisure space, the public library affords a distinct experience of free time to its public, one with the potential to exist outside the work-leisure binary, and afford the library's public the opportunity to imagine liberatory possibilities beyond that capitalism-clouded dichotomy. By resurfacing and centring both the library's historical role as a leisure space as well as its unique contemporary leisure qualities, this paper explores the potential of the library operating outside the leisure-work binary in a specific model of liberatory free time: *library time.*

The public library as leisure space is an underexplored facet of both LIS and leisure studies, and this paper offers contributions to both fields. It explores the library's leisure role through multiple paradigms, building on Robert Stebbins's and Jenna Hartel's work using Julie Rose's *Free time,* while interrogating those paradigms with the critiques of E. P. Thompson and Martin Hagglund, and ultimately looking to the liberatory potential of applying Tricia Hersey's vision of rest as resistance to library spaces. Although this paper focuses on the potential of activating library time in public libraries in the United States, its analysis is widely applicable.

This paper is not a step-by-step guide to breaking capitalism's degradation of free time, rather it marks an initial exploration of the library's role in realising that possibility. Systemic transformation is needed for any true liberation from our neoliberal moment, but as a knowledge, curiosity and leisure centre, the public library has great potential as a space in which and around which to begin organising towards that liberation. Our framing of leisure itself sets the limitations for what it can accomplish. We can view it as a restorative adjutant to work, or, as this paper argues for, we can recognise it as an independent resource with liberatory potential.

The paper first examines relevant paradigms of leisure and leisure spaces in terms of their capacity to either reproduce or reject the neoliberal status quo, with particular attention paid to the work-leisure binary and Ray Oldenburg's third place concept. It then examines public libraries as leisure spaces according to those criteria, ultimately suggesting that libraries as leisure spaces offer the potential for realising liberatory leisure, and offering the concept of *library time* to describe that potential, while also recognising the limits on liberation that the leisure divide and neoliberal funding requirements present.

Leisure and leisure spaces defined

Two key concepts need to be defined to shape the rest of this paper: leisure and leisure spaces. This paper consciously bypasses discussion of leisure activities themselves, which have been widely discussed in previous LIS scholarship into leisure (Barniskis, 2023; Hartel, 2003, 2009). While the importance of LIS scholars and information workers understanding information behaviour and retrieval around serious and casual leisure pursuits is clear, the question of how public libraries create the potential for leisure activities in the first place merits exploration. The implications of the answers to this question will be the focus of this paper.

Leisure and free time

We begin with the definition of leisure crafted by leisure studies pioneer Robert Stebbins, whose definition of the concept was introduced to LIS by Jenna Hartel (Hartel, 2003). Stebbins offers a seemingly straightforward conception of leisure as '*uncoerced activity undertaken during free time where such activity is something people want to do and, at a personally satisfying level using their abilities and resources, they succeed in doing*' (Stebbins, 2005, p. 350). Two terms within this framing however need further unpacking for this paper's discussion of public libraries: *uncoerced* and *free time*. For Stebbins, the absence of coercion is the essence of leisure: '*Lack of coercion to engage in an activity is a quintessential property of leisure. No other sphere of human activity can be exclusively characterized by this property*' (Stebbins, 2005, p. 350). And while voluntary use is also a key characteristic of public library patronage, and will be discussed in later sections of this paper, the implications of *free time* need further unpacking before we proceed.

Implicit in free time's construction is the perception that time that is not inherently free. The presence of *free* as a modifier signals a deviation from an unfree norm. Whether our time is not actually our own is temporarily beside the point, as the ubiquity of the phrase such that it inserts itself into a leisure theorist's conception of leisure shows that the premise is widely accepted. This is the effect of neoliberal time degradation. Value is extracted by breaking time into discrete measurable units, and comparing the amount of productive labour compressed into each time unit. That time that cannot be exploited is returned as free time. To use Miranda Fricker's formulation, this dilution of leisure constitutes a form of epistemic injustice, specifically a *hermeneutic injustice* (Fricker, 2010), in which people are denied epistemic access to an entire concept: leisure as an experience divorced from work.

This blinkered view reflects a warning from E. P. Thompson half a century ago that one of industrial capitalism's most insidious and subtle effects is to ensnare our conception of time in a work-leisure binary. Thompson cautions:

> If we are to have enlarged leisure, in an automated future, the problem is not 'how are men going to be able to consume all these additional time-units of leisure?' but 'what will be the capacity for experience of the men who have this undirected time to live?' (E. P. Thompson, 2017, p. 36)

The problem has not improved in the intervening decades. Writing in this century, Martin Hagglund describes the work-leisure binary as a recursive loop, almost an ouroboros of wage labour, arguing that the leisure itself has become too captured by capitalism to have meaning outside of restoring workers' vitality. Hagglund writes:

> Our wage labor is a means for the end of leading our lives in a realm of freedom that opens up beyond our working hours. Our free time outside of work, however, itself becomes a means for the end of restoring our strength and ability to work. (Hagglund, 2019, p. 316)

The bleakness of these analyses points to the need for both a change in systemic conditions as well as theoretical engagement with leisure and free time.

Julie Rose productively engages with that theoretical need by disrupting the conceptual work-leisure binary. Rose points out that leisure is not so much the antonym of work, but rather an objection to necessity (Rose, 2016, p. 39). Echoing the emphasis that Stebbins places on the absence of coercion, Rose argues that leisure is its own end: '*leisure is associated with contemplation because it is done for its own sake, unlike those activities that are done because they are instrumentally necessary to one's ends*' (Rose, 2016, p. 37). Rose conceptualises the ultimate root of this anti-necessity as free time, an all-purpose resource on par with income and wealth:

the time beyond that which one must devote to meeting one's own, or one's dependents', basic needs. In order to pursue a wide range of individual ends, to pursue one's conception of the good whatever it may be, one generally requires free time.' (Rose, 2016, p. 41)

Rose proposes these reconceptions as part of a broader intervention into distributive theories of justice, arguing that in a just society, free time must be adequately available among all people. Rose recognises that theory alone will not disrupt dominant leisure practices, but this requires state intervention as well: '*The theory [of justice] must both treat free time as a discrete component in its distributive metric and realize a just distribution of free time with specifically targeted interventions*' (Rose, 2016, p. 68). As will be shown in this paper, the public library becomes a valuable proving ground for such theories of justice, as well as liberation.

Library time

To that end, this paper proposes another gloss on *free time*. Free time is time that cannot be bought, only shared. It is *free* because it cannot be rationalised into monetary understanding. Free time thrives in public leisure spaces, in particular those that are organised around the provision of free services and freely occupied public space. Within the public library context, we could call this *library time*. This paper offers a new coinage in part because analysis of free time needs to be context-specific. Missing from the high-level conceptions of leisure and free time described above is the embodied nature of leisure time. Because human bodies must be somewhere, so too must leisure happen in particular spaces, especially the leisure typical of library spaces: '*To consume culture, which takes place in space, is to use time*' (Henderson and Frelke, 2000, p. 21). Library time is a specific intervention into place, and accordingly we next turn to leisure spaces.

Leisure spaces

Leisure has a prerequisite need for space. As leisure geographers Henderson and Frelke put it: '*People make decisions about leisure based on a combination of time and space. Time and space taken together are likely prerequisites necessary for leisure*' (Henderson and Frelke, 2000, p. 21). Or, as David Crouch sums up: '*When individuals are 'doing' leisure … they find themselves in a place*' (Crouch, 2000, p. 64). These statements are so basic as to be taken for granted, and in fact spatial analysis is underexplored within LIS-leisure studies, but this does not negate its importance. Leisure is a product and process of spatial practices and design. Here, it is worth clarifying that this paper is focused only on physical leisure spaces. While the debate over whether leisure spaces can exist online opens intriguing lines of interrogation, that discussion lies beyond the bounds of this exploration. Specific spaces are conducive to specific leisure activities, and the possibility of leisure at all. In their early study of the relevance of place to leisure studies, Henderson and Frelke emphasised the centrality of the relationship between space and leisure activity, writing: '*People use spaces as containers, or sites, for leisure and recreation activities. All leisure is space specific*' (Henderson and Frelke, 2000, p. 20). Again, this is a basic point, but an essential one for analysing leisure, as space is '*the context that gives these activities meaning and colors people's encounters*' (Henderson and Frelke, 2000, p. 20). However, even these definitions focus more on leisure than space, so we must next turn our attention to a major, though inadequate for liberatory purposes, paradigm of leisure space, the third place.

In *The great good place*, Ray Oldenburg conceives of our time as split between three *places*: first, home and family; second, work; and third, places outside the first two spheres that allow for conversation, socialisation and relaxation. Oldenburg describes third places as '*public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work*' (Oldenburg, 1997, p. 16). Or, more succinctly, '*the settings of informal public life*' (Oldenburg, 1997, p. 16). Although Oldenburg did not include libraries in his conception of third places, in fact pointing out that unlike '*hospitals or libraries, which have exacting,*

complicated, and expensive internal requirements, third places are typically modest, inexpensive, and small by comparison,' (Oldenburg, 1997, p. 203), public libraries and LIS scholars have seized upon the third place framing as an explanation for how libraries fit into the greater sociological picture of human experience (Harris, 2007; King County Library System, 2024; Klinenberg, 2018; Lawson, 2004; Wood, 2021). And at first glance, it would seem that the recognition of the need for protected spaces outside of work points to a conception of time that exists beyond wage time.

However, despite the tripartite structure, Oldenburg's construction of the third place provides an archetypal example of work-leisure binary theorising. By its very terms, third places depend on the existence of the binary to come into existence. The third place needs work to exist in order to have meaning. Ultimately, Oldenburg's tripartite theorisation reflects a rather dim view of humanity and our capability to live meaningful lives outside of capitalism:

> The second place is the work setting, which reduces the individual to a single, productive role. It fosters competition and motivates people to rise above their fellow creatures. But it also provides the means to a living, improves the material quality of life, and structures endless hours of time for a majority who could not structure it on their own. (Oldenburg, 2023, p. 16)

Efforts to stretch the third place framing to include libraries are no doubt well-intentioned, offering an updated explanation to taxpayers for the value of libraries generally through analogy with other generally treasured social spaces. But this represents a missed opportunity to demarcate what distinguishes public libraries from other spaces and institutions. James Elmborg presciently pointed out that attempts to fit libraries into the third place framework risks sacrificing their inherent character to compete with commercial establishments by becoming more like commercial establishments. Glossing Henri Lefebvre, Elmborg warns '*adopting commercial practices in space will transform the library from an absolute space to an abstract space, one devoid of any real meaning or purpose. Following the Third Place model seems destined to take us in that direction*' (Elmborg, 2011, p. 349). Indeed, some LIS literature proposes that public libraries do just that (Harris, 2007, p. 150).

Of course, theories can evolve and be adapted by the theorist's successors. A posthumously published essay by Oldenburg and his frequent collaborator Karen Christensen actively included libraries as a third space, although without elaborating on what had changes had occurred either to libraries or the third place paradigm to make libraries a fit (Oldenburg and Christensen, 2023). And none of this is to say that third places do not offer valuable social goods within the current neoliberal context. But the point is that the theory's necessary entanglement with the work-leisure binary places limits on libraries when we attempt to push them into the framework, and it is an ill fit. The third place envisions socialisation, not liberation.

If the possibility of imagining and liberation is the goal of leisure, this leaves us with a need for a working definition of leisure spaces that can allow for spaces beyond the work-leisure binary. In the next section, this paper will analyse libraries as leisure spaces along the following criteria: leisure happens 1) in spaces built to accommodate it, 2) where coercion is absent, 3) and people do actually engage in leisure.

Libraries are leisure spaces

When describing leisure spaces, two factors come into play: the physical plant and the governance of that plant. Leisure is an embodied act, and the layout of a leisure space must be conducive to bodies engaging in leisure activities (Crouch, 2000), and the space must be free of coercive regulatory controls (Stebbins, 2005). Accordingly, this section will examine public libraries as leisure spaces along the tripartite scheme outlined above: 1) they were intended to be leisure spaces; 2) they are actually used as leisure spaces; and 3) they are free from coercion.

Leisurely roots: libraries were intended to be leisure spaces

From their inception, public libraries represented state and library administration intention to create leisure spaces. This section resurfaces the leisurely history of public libraries by looking at the early discourse surrounding library use as well as the physical plants that were constructed.

Although the educative mission of the public library tends to get more attention, early library administrators and workers recognised that the library's potential leisure functions were just as, if not vastly more, popular with their publics. Among the first vehicles of leisure that public libraries provided was access to fiction. Writing of the nineteenth century United Kingdom context, Robert Snape points out that although a precise accounting is elusive, '*there is no doubt that leisure was of major importance. Fiction and other recreational literature were provided for both reading at home or on the premises from the beginning*' (Snape, 1995, p. 22).

Indeed, early libraries induced patronage as much through the provision of pleasant spaces to pass the time as much as through access to knowledge and information. This was partially motivated by desire to get people through the door: '*Smoking rooms were introduced in a small number of libraries as a way of attracting people who might not otherwise have visited them*' (Snape, 1995, p. 24). In Denver, John Cotton Dana recognised the value of library leisure spaces, writing in his widely influential *Public library handbook*: '*Of all possible advertising the best, perhaps, is a cheerful and accommodating atmosphere. ... The library is not a business office; it's a center of public happiness first, of public education next*' (Dana and Denver Public Library, 1895, pp. 14–15). Likewise, Cardiff librarian John Ballinger described the design of the library's reading room to allow for and encourage rest:

> the room was to be so large as to allow of every newspaper and periodical having a fixed place, with plenty of space for readers to move about without knocking against chairs, jostling other readers, and generally making things uncomfortable; also that a few seats and tables should be provided where people might sit to write, to read odd papers not given a fixed location, papers brought in by themselves, or, if they wished, to idle, neither reading nor writing, but just resting. (Ballinger, 1908, pp. 68–69)

Library administrators also hoped to inculcate middle-class values by modelling middle-class leisure spaces in libraries. As Hayes and Morris note in their survey of the leisurely history of the public library: '*A major argument for the establishment of public libraries ... was the part they could play in maintaining social order and promoting moral values by providing better leisure opportunities*' (Hayes & Morris, 2005a, p. 77). The New York Free Circulating Library literally modelled these values by situating their collections in '*converted houses and storefronts, and their interiors were carefully designed to foster a more intimate, welcoming atmosphere. They were to serve as model homes, as both an example and a refuge for the poor crowded into dark and noisy tenements*' (Glynn, 2015, p. 204).

Libraries also afforded the state opportunities to encourage *healthful* forms of recreation. Early St. Louis public librarian Arthur Bostwick's Progressive Era survey of American public libraries highlighted the library's leisure role: '*It is good public policy to encourage healthful and innocent forms of recreation; hence municipal parks and playgrounds. These offer physical recreation; the library furnishes intellectual entertainment – surely no less desirable and legitimate*' (Bostwick, 1910, pp. 25–26). Time in libraries was also time not spent in saloons and public houses, allowing temperance reformers another opportunity to *uplift* the working class (Stauffer, 2016; F. M. L. Thompson, 1981). Though not all recreation was perhaps as healthful. Snape recovers the submerged history of libraries as gaming centres: '*A further and generally less well-known aspect of recreational provision in public libraries before the First World War is that of games, smoking and conversation rooms*' (Snape, 1995, p. 24). The point remains that public libraries have intentionally

offered a variety of leisure activities from their inception, and as will be briefly discussed in the next section, patrons accepted these offerings.

Libraries were actually used for leisure activities

Whether by librarian design or innate desire, leisure activities formed the early basis of public library patronage. More than that, facilitation of leisure reading is what initially secured the success of public libraries: *'The leisure role in spite of being disliked and considered less important within the profession did, however, secure its usefulness by making public libraries popular ...'* (Hayes and Morris, 2005a, p. 80). Describing his majority patronage, Justin Winsor, an early superintendent of the Boston Public Library, testified that:

> What will harm some will work no harm to others, thought it may do them no more good than to grant them a pastime, and it is with this object that three quarters of the reading of people not professedly bookish is carried on; and whether it be desirable or not, the pastime readers are the most of the people to whose wants public libraries of the popular sort minister. (Winsor, 1876, p. 431)

Citing studies from Snape and Thomas Kelly, Hayes and Morris found that the vast majority of early libraries primarily lent fiction, with loan percentages ranging as high eighty-three percent. (Hayes and Morris, 2005a, p. 77). And, they note, leisure remains the primary driver of public library usage today: *'Traditionally the role of the public library in providing leisure opportunities has been undervalued, yet evidence suggests that this is the main reason why people use libraries'* (Hayes and Morris, 2005b, p. 138). But as Stebbins and Rose both remind us, the most important factor in determining whether the public library functions as a leisure space is freedom from coercion and necessity (Rose, 2016, p. 41; Stebbins, 2009, p. 619), which will be discussed in the next section.

Voluntary use

The public library cannot compel library attendance, nor can it compel specific use of library materials, perhaps to the dismay of some librarians. Granted, educators can create compulsory assignments for students requiring library research, and parents may take their children to the library against the child's will, but these are outgrowths of external compulsory institutions, the school, the family, not the internal operation of the library itself. This inability to compel frees both the library and the patron to promote and pursue leisure. As Lawrence White noted, *'the significant difference between the mandatory use of the primary and secondary public schools for most families with children and the voluntary use of the public library by adults and children'* (White, 1983, p. 7). According to White's study, *'most adult usage of the library's reading materials is for recreational purposes (broadly defined), not education'* (White, 1983, p. 7).

Closely related to the library's voluntary use for patrons is the unstructured quality of that use. It may seem contradictory, given the immense amount of intellectual and physical labour devoted to creating and maintaining accessible structures of knowledge organisation throughout the library's stacks and hard drives, but what I am pointing to is the absence of any agenda being foisted upon library patrons when they enter the building or access the library's home page. Patrons are free to begin their enquiry from any point, A or Z, and likewise are free to not make any enquiry at all. While there are echoes of Oldenburg here, crucially the commercial focus of third place framing still structures the access and use of third places. While conversation may flow freely, customers are still expected to buy a cappuccino before hanging out in a coffeeshop for hours. Conversely, there is no way to *win* at *library patron*, and there is no measurement or requirement of effective patron use beyond the scope of whatever personal project might inspire a given patron to access the library's resources or physical space. That said, metric tracking certainly is a reality for library staff when it comes to funding. Embracing the library's leisure mission for patrons may eventually trickle down to library worker experience, but for now, this paper confines itself to the patron experience.

Further, the unstructured quality of library mission applies not only to information provision, but also to clientele choosing. Public libraries aim to serve their entire community through universal service. Andreas Vårheim argues that:

> the public library is one of the most universalistic institutions there is in that it is open to all, not only people entitled to specific universal benefits as the child benefit (in some countries) or public schooling because they have children, but everyone, young and old, black and white. The public library has a wider clientele, in principle every member of society. (Vårheim, 2009, p. 376)

This universality allows for a wide spectrum of leisure information retrieval: hedonistic information searching (Elsweiler et al., 2011), task-based searching and serious leisure searching (Hartel, 2003, 2009). Beneath specific leisure activities, the absence of constraint afforded by the public library is uniquely positioned to encourage perhaps the most powerful of voluntaristic motivators: curiosity.

Curiosity

Here we focus on the primary motivations of curiosity, rather than the secondary information-seeking behaviour that flows from them. And not only is curiosity a primary motivation, but it has long been recognised as something that reconnects us with our humanity. Centuries ago, Hobbes included curiosity in *Levithan's* catalogue of human motivations, arguing that it is curiosity that sets humanity apart from other animals:

> *Desire*, to know why, and how, CURIOSITY; such as is in no living creature but *Man*; so that Man is distinguished, not onely by his Reason; but also by this singular Passion from other *Animals...* [capitalisation, italics, and spelling all Hobbes's] (Hobbes, 1996, p. 42)

More recently, eminent curiosity scholar Daniel Berlyne concurred with the Hobbesian assessment, breaking curiosity into two categories: perceptual and epistemic curiosity, which Berlyne defines respectively as the '*curiosity which leads to increased perception of stimuli and the curiosity whose main fruits are knowledge ...*' (Berlyne, 1954, p. 180). Importantly, epistemic curiosity is a particularly human trait. Berlyne writes: '*Human 'epistemic curiosity' [is] to be distinguished from the 'perceptual curiosity' that is found in lower animals as well as in human beings ...*' (Berlyne, 1954, p. 189). The former is found in all animals when they encounter a novel object or situation, but the latter is a distinctly human quality. And importantly, it exists as a voluntary activity as well as a stimuli response.

As discussed above, people will of course seek out information because of external pressures, whether they were given a research assignment by a teacher or because they need to find an address for an appointment. But internal motivation also drives people to pursue knowledge for the pleasure of gathering more knowledge. Whether that pleasure derives from the reduction of boredom or the reduction of confusion, curiosity is a fundamental human drive nurtured by library time.

Thanks to the free and voluntary access to varied information resources they provide, public libraries are ideally suited to engage with the curiosity drive. Although the biases, omissions and erasures of cataloguing schemes and library collection development have been well-documented, public libraries still ostensibly operate as spaces of free enquiry. Indeed, Hayes and Morris explicitly note that '*Overdue considers libraries to be "curiosity satisfaction centres" where people can research family history, read books, listen to music, watch videos, surf the Internet ...*' (Hayes and Morris, 2005a, p. 80). With the exception of some special collections, patrons are not required to justify the need for any materials they request. Alleviation of boredom is just as acceptable a justification for information access as *lifelong learning*. Public libraries are perhaps the only public

institution that recognises human curiosity as an epistemic need that is also its own end, and one that merits satisfaction without charge.

Curiosity reconnects us with our humanity on a deep level and invites imagination, as well as interrogation of norms. The uniquely curiosity-enabling character of the public library signals the liberatory potential of library leisure. The character of free time enabled by public library leisure is unique, and merits the introduction of a new frame of leisure afforded by library time: liberatory leisure.

Liberatory leisure

Theoretical foundations

Our perceptions of a given space can be as important as the physical layout of that space, and this affords us the opportunity to experiment with the kind of leisure space we want public libraries to be. Johnson and Glover remind us:

> Space creates conditions for the reproduction and resistance of social structures in society. Our perceptions of a space enliven, animate, and occupy it, thereby offering complex coded, re-coded, and de-coded versions of social life. Consequently, different experiences of space give rise to radically different spaces. (Johnson and Glover, 2013, p. 192)

It is in this spirit of spatial recoding that this paper argues for a radical vision of the library leisure space. While Rose foregrounds free time as justice, the public library's unique leisure status both requires and invites a further step. A liberatory vision of free time and leisure recognises that neoliberalism's conception of time traps us in work, both physically and mentally. This reality leads Tricia Hersey to posit that the path out of degraded time is one of rest, and that for '*our rest to be generative we must be always leaping from an anticapitalist agenda*' (Hersey, 2022, p. 72).

Given how long we have lived under the work-leisure binary, E. P. Thompson points out that breaking free may well mean applying capitalism's industriousness to rediscovering leisure:

> But if the purposive notation of time-use becomes less compulsive, then men might have to re-learn some of the arts of living lost in the industrial revolution: how to fill the interstices of their days with enriched, more leisurely, personal and social relations; how to break down once more the barriers between work and life. (E. P. Thompson, 2017, p. 37)

Hersey restates this proposition in terms of forgotten rest, while also emphasising rest's power:

> Everything we know about rest has been tainted by the brainwashing from a white supremacist, capitalist system. As a culture, we don't know how to rest, and our understanding of rest has been influenced by the toxicity of grind culture. We believe rest is a luxury, privilege, and an extra treat we can give to ourselves after suffering from exhaustion and sleep deprivation….Like hope, rest is disruptive, it allows space for us to envision new possibilities. (Hersey, 2022, p. 60)

And this is where the library's status as a knowledge centre and curiosity generator comes to the fore. The library is already well-positioned to help awaken the imaginations of those seeking liberation from the binary, and to help to rediscover forgotten alternatives. It is a place where we can begin the work of taking back time, as Sheila Liming exhorts us to do in *Hanging out*, her own treatise on resisting productivity and external time management:

> This is why hanging out begins with taking time, looting and liberating it from the coercions of fear and complicity. We must take time in order to kill it and render its

defenses against us inert. We must take time in order to understand what it means to have it, which is the first step to dreaming about what else we might do with it. (Liming, 2023, p. 208)

But liberation cannot be accomplished alone. And here the public aspect of public libraries comes into focus, for better and worse.

Publicness, mutuality and the leisure divide

The public library's very publicness, in both the sense of being a state institution and a community space, works to position it as a potential site for liberatory work, transforming individual satiation of the needs for curiosity and rest into social needs. It is a site where Hersey's call for community care might be realised:

> I am clearly stating that to center rest, naps, sleep, slowing down, and leisure in a capitalist, white supremacist, ableist, patriarchal world is to live as an outlier. A pilgrimage infused with softness, intentionality, and community care. We will not be able to interrupt the machine of grind culture alone. We need each other in more ways than we are allowed to believe. This work is about radical community care. (Hersey, 2022, pp. 18–19)

The library's freedom from mission beyond providing access to knowledge and information to as many people as possible means it is a site free for people to enact care work. This inclusiveness is especially essential when grappling with the *leisure divide*. Because while libraries are spaces where '*homeless men can leave their status as "streeties" at the door, passing as just another library patron and thus gaining respite for a while at least*' (Hodgetts et al., 2008, p. 944), the library's legacy as an institution of middle-class respectability also works to exclude, especially when it comes to unhoused patrons.

The problem of access to leisure has been an object of study and criticism since at least *The theory of the leisure class* (Veblen, 1934), and access to library time is not immune from socioeconomic barriers either. Borrowing the concept from Payal Arora, Will Marler writes: '*The "leisure divide" describes differential access to digital entertainment, play, and socializing between socioeconomic groups*' (Marler, 2023, p. 1317). This differential can be triggered by broader societal dismissal of the very poor. Justin Harmon vividly describes the struggle for leisure time while homeless:

> The pervasive reality is that, while many homeless people may find time for recreational or leisurely activities, those activities are often relegated to the fringes of their existence due to the simple fact that the struggle for many, life-sustaining activities have been criminalized, thus criminalizing poverty and the right to exist ...; there is simply no time, nor space, for leisure. (Harmon, 2021, p. 39)

But it is not only broader societal forces that squeeze out leisure time from the marginalised, but library policies as well. While facially neutral, common library policies like overdue fines, residency requirements and baggage rules tend to affect unhoused patrons far more than the middle-class, limiting access to leisure. But we can also diminish the divide with patron-centric solutions. For instance, Michigan's Capital Area District Library offers a mid-day movie, scheduled specifically so that their unhoused patrons can make it back to overnight shelters in time for check-in (Kelleher, 2013, p. 27). It is in bridging the leisure divide that we see some of the immediate practical effects of embracing the library's leisure mandate. But beyond the merely practical, Barniskis notes that providing access to casual leisure activities to the marginalised '*may be an act of love, useful for solidarity in the face of oppression, or the need to regenerate*' (Barniskis, 2023, p. 7). This is the potential of library time.

Conclusion

There are limitations to the library time framework. Neoliberal funding schemes for taxpayer-supported institutions such as public libraries tend to reward the quantifiable and economically rational. But the sort of library use and promotion this paper encourages necessarily defies this sort of rationality. Indeed, the resistance that Hersey offers up through rest is to the very notion that our experience of time is quantifiable and commodifiable. These ideas may not be immediately practicable in today's neoliberal environment, but the point of this paper is not to offer a ten-point programme for overthrowing capitalism, but rather to offer an idealist reset about the mission of public libraries. Getting too bogged down into current budgetary limitations also limits our imaginative horizons. If we cannot imagine a library better than the one we currently maintain and reproduce, we surely will not realise it. But this does not mean there are not leisurely interventions that we can take now. Further research into where and how these programmes have had success is needed. Again, the library alone cannot bring about economic shifts. But it can open a temporal crack in our patrons' experience of their world. Maybe not a wide one, at first, but the more the work-leisure clock slows down, the more our liberation speeds up.

About the author

Jeremy Keen Abbott is a Ph.D. student in Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, California, USA. He received his MLIS from UCLA and JD from George Washington University. His research interests include the mission of public libraries, and discourses of publicity and homelessness. He can be contacted at jkabbott@ucla.edu.

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