

CHAPTER 22

WITH LITERACY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL: LIBRARY PROGRAMS FOR REFUGEES AND NEWCOMERS

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ABSTRACT

According to the UN High Commission on Refugees, over 82 million people are currently displaced globally and of those nearly 25 million are refugees. Every community in the United States – urban, suburban, and rural – is shaped by newcomers seeking safety, opportunity, and self-improvement. Libraries are often the place that feels most welcoming to refugees and newcomers, making them well positioned to offer relevant and impactful programs and services to these communities. Using the International Federation of Library Associations' (IFLA) conceptual rubric of sanctuary, storehouse, gateway, and bridge, my research explores a variety of programs and services deployed by libraries to address the needs of refugee and newcomer populations. Based on fieldwork in the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany, this chapter describes how libraries impact refugees and newcomers in decisive and meaningful ways. From informal gatherings to national government collaborations of digital content, libraries provide an array of compassionate, effective, scalable interventions for newcomers. Such interventions also positively impact the non-displaced communities in which they operate, fostering deeper connections between newcomers and their communities. Library services to refugees and newcomers provide a broad collective impact in the global crisis of displacement and belonging.

Keywords: Library programs; refugees; newcomers; community outreach; engagement; literacy

Nothing is harder on the soul/than the smell of dreams/while they are evaporating.

Mahmoud Darwish

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF IMMIGRATION

Across the globe, human migration is a huge crisis and, along with climate change, one of the gravest challenges of the twenty-first century. The UN High Commission for Refugees estimates there are currently 84 million forcibly displaced human beings on the planet ([United Nations High Commission on Refugees, 2022](#)). Millions of people have fled their homes due to war, political persecution, and direct or indirect impacts of climate change such as drought, flooding, and economic collapse. Millions of people have no access to basic rights such as citizenship, paid employment, freedom of movement, or education. An estimated 25 million people are refugees seeking asylum in another country, and half that number are under the age of 18.

Of the 84 million forcibly displaced individuals, some have refugee status, many are without any official status, and many are awaiting asylum. It is important to underscore that an individual's status is subject to expert interpretation. It may even be unknown to them. The determination of eligibility for refugee or asylum status in the United States is an especially fraught process requiring lengthy periods of waiting and uncertainty, personal exposure, financial costs, and, often, expert legal representation ([United States Citizenship Immigration Services, 2022](#)).

Currently, nearly 700,000 asylum decisions are awaiting approval in the United States. In 2018, only 54,000 cases were approved according to the National Immigration Forum Fact Sheet ([National Immigration Forum, 2018](#)). Under President Trump, Congress reduced the cap and eliminated candidates from the top-three source countries of displacement at that time (Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan). President Biden's Citizenship Act of 2021 will begin to correct the unresponsive policies of previous administrations, but getting comprehensive legislation passed in the divisive climate of our current Congress will be hard going.

It is in the context of the shamefully inadequate immigration policy in my own country that I sought to explore how libraries support social justice through literacy with new citizens, refugees, and asylum seekers. My project involved interviewing library staff in three countries: the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany; each with its own definitions of legal status and political climate. Each of these countries presents a particular context for the individual seeking refuge; and yet many challenges for newcomers are shared. For this reason, I use the term "newcomer" as an umbrella term for individuals who are new citizens, refugees, asylum seekers, or have an unknown status.

For eight weeks in April and May 2019, I visited multiple libraries and interviewed library staff about their programs for newcomers. My inquiry focused on libraries as providers of service in the context of trauma, political marginalization, and displacement experienced by newcomers. I sought to understand how programs are shaped by cultural specificity, government support, public perception, and the local communities in which these libraries function.

I visited libraries in the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany, and interviewed library staff at nine institutions: Midland branch of Multnomah County Library (MCL), Portland, OR, and Brooklyn Public Library Central, New York, NY; Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (or OBA), and Centrale Bibliotheek Den Haag in the Netherlands; Stadtbibliothek Köln, and the Kalk branch library, Köln; Freie Universität Bibliothek; the Asylthek (now called Bibliothek der Heimat); and Zentral-und Landesbibliothek Berlin, all in Germany.

THE ACTIVIST HISTORY OF US LIBRARIES

I want to underscore the rich history of libraries in responding to social crises. American public libraries have long offered a variety of services to refugees and asylum seekers, services that are grounded in the Enlightenment values on which many American public libraries were founded. These values include the intellectual freedom to pursue ideas without censorship, access to information in the support of democracy, and the betterment of individuals through literacy and knowledge. As an American librarian, this history offered a foundation for thinking about library programs in the United States and comparison to other countries.

As such, libraries are institutions that are instrumental in supporting responsive and inclusive participation within communities as described by United Nations Sustainable Development Goals #16 ([United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, 2022](#)). By providing access to information, and the practical means of interpreting information through literacy and community building, libraries implicitly protect fundamental freedoms that undergird democratic values. Newcomers share many of these values and provide possibilities for the expansion of more inclusive communities and institutions.

The work of belonging to a community – of having a voice and agency in that community – requires literacy, and this is true for newcomers as well as the communities that receive them. Indeed, for American citizens, libraries as institutions are singular in demonstrating a level of social capital unlike any other, and hundreds of American public libraries participate in programs that support newcomers.

In some ways, libraries have been performing literacy triage since the establishment of the first public libraries almost 200 years ago, whether delivering books to remote locations, providing books and literacy programs in Black communities in the age of Jim Crow, and bookmobile service to migrant work camps ([Brady & Abbott, 2015](#)). The promotion of literacy and access to information for all are codified in the American Library Association's own code of ethics which explicitly advocates for and upholds democratic values vis-à-vis principles of intellectual freedom, equitable access, and affirming "the inherent dignity and rights of every person" ([American Library Association, 2021](#)). Recent examples of literacy triage include numerous library services for the unhoused/homeless, multilingual storytimes for children in many public libraries, outreach to communities in poverty, and for families navigating the carceral system.

INFORMATION POVERTY

Many library programs for newcomers are fueled by similar concepts of social justice. Activities designed for newcomers are strategic interventions addressing the multitude of challenges experienced by newcomers directly. I have found the concept of “information poverty” developed by Dr Elfreda Chatman to be applicable in this context ([Chatman, 1999](#)). Dr Chatman was a librarian and sociologist who did extensive research in the 1980s and 1990s within two marginalized communities: women prisoners and impoverished, rural communities in the American South. Her research explored how people living in conditions of precarity (such as incarceration or remote rural poverty) are disadvantaged by the complexities of formal information systems.

Individuals and communities experiencing information poverty struggle to understand what information is, how it works, and how it can improve their condition(s). Often, this results in distrust with information from outside the trusted network. For example, in rural communities’ distrust of government agencies, lack of access to broadband, and economic and social isolation can result in information poverty. Similarly, incarcerated people are mired in complex legal and carceral knowledge systems resulting in extreme forms of information poverty ([Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2022](#)).

According to Chatman, the designation of who is “inside” and who is “outside” is a social construction based on accepted sources of knowledge, and is fundamental to the concept of information poverty. As librarian [Natalia Bowdoin \(2021\)](#) describes in her work with refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR) living in Georgia, USA, many refugees remain challenged by profound cultural shifts required to adapt to childrearing, notions of discipline, housing, and understanding the law. In some instances, cultural differences compound these newcomers’ ability to integrate into local communities, thus experiencing information poverty.

Chatman’s concept of information poverty does not assume or equate to low intelligence. Many newcomers are highly educated individuals with advanced degrees, professional expertise or otherwise skilled, and who may also be proficient in multiple languages. Chatman’s concept centers on the *inability to understand the information systems outside one’s own support networks*, resulting in self-limiting behaviors. We also see evidence of information poverty in the concept of insider/outsider knowledge that parallels political discourse in the US today. The branding of individuals with high levels of education as “elites” creates us/them rhetoric that discounts learned knowledge as not relevant to the common (presumed to be “uneducated”) worldview.

Information poverty intersects with the experience of many displaced people. Lack of language skills, emotional trauma, cultural difference, and byzantine social services systems all function as impediments to newcomer integration. The privatization of education in the United States is especially impactful for newcomers who are also economically marginalized. Through the development of thoughtful community programs, public libraries are becoming increasingly adept at addressing social needs.

THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF LIBRARY ASSOCIATIONS

To shape my understanding of the programs I visited, I borrowed a rubric of metaphors from the IFLA, an international organization that advocates for the recognition and promotion of libraries and library users globally. In June 2018, IFLA published a statement titled “Libraries’ Role in Making Refugees Feel Welcome,” calling on libraries to create programs for refugees and newcomers using the spatial metaphors of *sanctuary*, *storehouse*, *gateway*, and *bridge* ([International Federation of Library Associations, 2018](#)).

The IFLA rubric is remarkable in its description of services using *affective* metaphors rather than prescriptive programs. Common library programs such as those that target literacy, social connection, and multicultural exchange are not explicitly named. The IFLA statement instead centers the meaning of said programs on the *user’s experience* of library programs rather than specific literacy program outcomes.

As it happened, the metaphors of sanctuary, storehouse, gateway, and bridge proved to be an extremely evocative framing device for my itinerary. The metaphors functionally ascribe the needs of individuals who are experiencing extreme levels of precarity and uncertainty. The metaphors also created latitude for me as a researcher to interpret programs based on a range of fieldwork inputs: interviews with staff, observations of library spaces, interactions with library users, and promotional materials developed by the library itself.

As human beings, we need sanctuary. We aggregate our understanding of the world into knowledge, and we need gateways and bridges to link ourselves to others. Refugees and newcomers relocate with a broad range of educational, economic, and social experience. They navigate multiple ways of relating to new circumstances, develop a sense of belonging, and define community for themselves.

Library programs embody these metaphors fully. The following are selected examples of programs serving newcomers in the libraries I visited.

THE LIBRARY AS SANCTUARY

What makes a library a sanctuary? Sanctuaries are places of safety and refuge and libraries offer sanctuary to users. Every library employee that I interviewed in all three countries noted a shared belief that newcomers experience significant grief and uncertainty, financial stress, and trauma. The Asyllotheke in west Berlin (now called Bibliothek der Heimaten) is a volunteer-run library housed in a resettlement residence (Asyllotheke, 2022). Approximately 30 people live in a cluster of residences in a leafy, suburban neighborhood with the Asyllotheke in a community space. Originally housed in the Templehof Refugee Intake Center – a vast former Nazi-era airport hangar turned refugee housing – the Asyllotheke provides a quiet space to read, study, and learn with collections of fiction, nonfiction, and learning in multiple languages. It is homey and low-key, and offers a reading circle, computer access, and informal German language tutoring. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (2022), Germany took in over

one million refugee newcomers in 2015/2016, the largest number of any European country, and exponentially more than the USA.

The cozy, informal character of the Asylothek is a deliberate antidote to the impersonal nature of state bureaucracy. While Germany has a comparatively sophisticated intake system for refugees and asylum seekers, the sheer number of people using this system results in many impersonal interactions. Public libraries in Berlin provide rich content and formal literacy programs, and the Asylothek functions as a neighborhood “home base” for refugee residents to learn new skills and increase integration (Asylothek, personal communication, 2019). The Asylothek attracts many volunteers – some of whom live in the neighborhood – who assist residents with programs such as dessert and movie screenings, job searches, and facilitated discussions. Similar volunteer-run libraries have been created in multiple locations in Germany, in small towns, in suburbs, and in urban areas. In general, these programs promote personal well-being, build supportive networks for children and adults, and improve social integration within the local community.

Residents in group houses often lack privacy and quiet, so the Asylothek also functions as a place for solitude in stressful conditions. A beautifully illustrated book about English roses became a touchstone for a Syrian woman living in Berlin. After her home and garden were completely destroyed by bombing, she found that gardening books offered her solace and helped her cope with deep emotional loss (Asylothek, personal communication, 2019).

The Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (or OBA) offers sanctuary in another way. While many libraries provide safe space for all genders and sexual orientations, refugees who identify as LGBTQ will find a number of features to encourage an explicit sense of belonging at this library. During my visit, an exhibit of photographs and personal narratives featuring LGBTQ refugees was on display. Situated nearby, a bookcase painted bright pink highlighted resources of importance to LGBTQ people from the library’s collection. These pink bookcases are on wheels so they can be easily moved and provide focal points within collections, exhibits, or contexts. Low cost, mobile, and flexible, the pink bookcases also function as signifiers of relevance, belonging, and safe space for the LGBTQ community within the library setting.

THE LIBRARY AS STOREHOUSE

A storehouse primarily contains the inventory of value and utility. At MCL Midland branch, a multilingual collection serves library users in six languages of significance in the greater Portland community: English, Chinese, Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, and Somali. Midland branch collects fiction, non-fiction, magazines, and film/video in these world languages, which is then circulated across the Multnomah system (Multnomah County Library, 2022). The program “We Speak Your Language,” centralizes the work of multilingual library staff who coordinate the library’s programs, collections, and outreach throughout Portland. Midland branch serves as a hub-and-spoke radiating in multiple directions and to multiple communities (Multnomah, personal communication, 2019).

Citizenship classes, ESL conversation circles, computer skills classes, story-times for toddlers, and activities for elders (among other offerings) are coordinated by a diverse library staff. This group is also responsible for the planning and coordination of activities with other local social service organizations both on-site and through “pop-up” activities at health clinics, schools, and neighborhood events (Multnomah, personal communication, 2019).

Another example of the library as a storehouse is the EU digital project to collect personal narratives of newcomers at the Stadtbibliothek in Cologne. Over a three-year period, the EU supported libraries in four countries to record and collect an archive of personal stories by newcomers. The result is *A Million Stories, Refugee Lives*, a digital repository of stories, drawings, videos, and interviews created by refugees now living in Germany, Greece, Sweden, and Denmark (A Million Stories, Refugee Lives, 2019). This complex project offered newcomers an opportunity to be creative, to be expressive, and to be heard as individuals, sharing their lived experience.

The Stadtbibliothek Cologne was one of the participants in this ambitious archival effort. This undertaking required considerable coordination of videographers, interviewers, transcribers, and translators – many of whom were volunteers. It also required willing participants to share very personal stories, including tragic or traumatic experiences, the loss of family and friends, displacement, and also small successes (Stadtbibliothek, personal communication, 2019). As an archive, *A Million Stories* creates both a historical record of a specific period of human migration and stands witness to the conditions and realities of displacement, and how our collective human experience is shaped by war and disaster.

THE LIBRARY AS GATEWAY

The gilded entrance to Brooklyn Public Library Central is massive and almost mythical. Walking through the majestic grand portal can feel overwhelming and functions viscerally as a threshold. Within a few feet of the door, one can discern a symphony of world languages: Spanish, English, Arabic, Turkish, French, Haitian Creole, and Yiddish, and multiple flavors of English. Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) is a comprehensive system of 59 branch libraries across the borough; a sister to the New York Public Library and the Queens Public Library systems. Phenomenally, according to the BPL website, there is a public library branch within 0.5 miles of *every single resident* in Brooklyn. Over 120,000 individuals participate annually in programs specifically designed for newcomers at BPL, including citizenship classes, English language learning, children’s story times, job training, book clubs, and interview practice (Brooklyn Public Library, 2022).

Library staff coordinates and liaises with other organizations to provide programming for residents (Brooklyn Public Library, personal communication, 2019). Workshops on opening a food cart, career and business development, and training for nannies are popular, and the results of these programs are truly inspiring. For example, a group of Bangladeshi women developed a successful baby-sitting cooperative that was born and nurtured by Brooklyn Public’s support for small business planning (Brooklyn Public Library, personal communication, 2019).

BPL serves these newcomers' aspirations by designing tools and resources appropriately scaled for personal development. From entry-level English language learning to basic accounting to navigating city code, BPL programs offer extensive and comprehensive opportunities for newcomers. Scalable and no- or low-cost, these programs function as social and educational pathways for self-improvement, economic empowerment, and personal success in the newcomer's community.

The BPL is also a gateway in a more literal sense: both the Immigrant Justice Corps and the Immigration Advocacy Network provide consultations at the BPL Central branch. Advocacy organizations meet with thousands of asylum seekers every year to assist with paperwork, advise clients, and, in some instances, represent their cases in a courtroom. While the fear of Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) (and government agencies generally) is widespread in immigrant communities, the library maintains its identity as a safe space (BPL, personal communication, 2019). And finally, the library café, Emma's Torch, is a culinary training program for newcomers. A library visitor can order chai tea, Tibetan momos, and read a magazine in the library lobby while your baby chews on a board book. If we ever achieve peace among nations, I am convinced that it will transpire in a public library!

THE LIBRARY AS BRIDGE

Creating connections between newcomers and local government is another paradigm for library programming. Libraries in both the Netherlands and Germany benefit from and collaborate with government agencies that oversee immigrant and refugee resettlement and integration. Within a week of the first massive exodus from Syria in 2015, many Cologne residents contacted the library seeking ways to volunteer. Now over 120 volunteers at the Stadtbibliothek in Cologne are providing support for newcomers by connecting them with no-cost German language learning, assistance with job searching, and professional coaching at a space called the Sprachraum (or Conversation Space).

Sprachraum volunteers are trained and overseen by the library staff, but functions independently of the library with its own hours, and its own identity (Stadtbibliothek, personal communication, 2019). For example, a group of Kurdish newcomers have created an extensive support system through the Sprachraum, and informal lectures and concerts are held there. According to the Library's outreach director, Sarah Dudek, "the beginning was always putting out fires. Now volunteers understand that the process of integration is slow, even slower for some – and maybe even a lifetime." The library has arranged for experts to coach volunteers about issues of cultural sensitivity/difference, trauma awareness, and the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) such as anxiety and sadness from the effects of war, life in refugee camps, and loss of family. Over time, volunteer training became more structured, and also more effective. Dudek believes that offering asylum seekers and volunteers opportunities for sustained interaction and learning creates more grounded outcomes. Many clients have actually become volunteers themselves which helps to affirm agency in the larger community.

Another example of the library as bridge is Taalhuis (or Language House), a Dutch language learning initiative in the Netherlands providing multiple opportunities at locations in libraries and in the community. Each Dutch library develops programs best suited for its locale. Language learning initiatives at Bibliotheek Den Haag include books for babies delivered to homes, conversation groups, “easy reader” collections for language learners, and a variety of classes to support citizenship examinations (Bibliotheek Den Haag, 2022).

This rich array of programs supports newcomers from birth through senior years; programs are completely free and open to anyone to begin or resume at any time. Interestingly, Taalhuis supports literacy for both newcomers and Dutch citizens who have low literacy levels. This illustrates how library services developed with newcomers in mind can (and often do) benefit a wider community of users. Dutch primary school is based on a common curriculum that incorporates themes delivered throughout the school year across the country: democracy, poetry and language, nature and biology, and Dutch history, etc. The Dutch Ministry of Education has also developed materials for newcomer language learning for adults that intentionally follow these themes. By integrating language learning materials with the national common curriculum, children and their parents are able to learn topics and vocabulary in support of each other, enabling newcomer parents to take a more active role in their children’s learning and experience of school.

Reka Dekkan-Makai, the librarian overseeing the program at Den Haag’s central library at the time of my visit shared many stories of success. One particular story of a Turkish grandmother was especially resonant for me. Though she had lived in the Netherlands for almost two decades, a strict marriage had kept this particular woman extremely isolated from Dutch society. When her husband divorced her and remarried, she embarked on learning Dutch at her grandchildren’s neighborhood elementary school. Now this grandmother regularly meets with friends to practice Dutch, reads books in Turkish and Dutch from the library’s collection, and has discovered an entirely new level of freedom in her early 60s. The library was a bridge into Dutch society that had previously not been available to her due to social constraints, lack of language skills, and gendered barriers (Bibliotheek Den Haag, personal communication, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This research prompted me to reflect on my own experience as an insider and outsider in different communities, and to reflect on assumptions I have made about newcomers in my own community and workplace. It has also enabled me to consider how information poverty is present in each of us to some degree. Each of us – as human beings of a particular place, time, and ability – is both an insider to specific bodies of knowledge and an outsider to others based on our social status, culture, gender, beliefs, etc.

Newcomers bring these same complicated selves to their new communities of residence. Newcomers bring knowledge, skills, and understandings of the world that are both necessary and relevant to every society in which they land. UN SDG

16 underscores the requirement of addressing the needs of displaced people, and of creating opportunities for social integration and community cohesion. The purpose of developing library services for refugees and newcomers is not simply to teach a person how to pass a test or get a job, though those outcomes are important. Libraries are mission-driven to help people reach potential *as they themselves define it*.

On the train trip between Cologne and Berlin, I happened to sit next to a young man, a refugee newcomer from Aleppo, Syria. Abdullah A. was friendly and open to conversation, and his English language proficiency enabled us to chat for the duration. Abdullah told me about his preparations for an entrance exam to study nursing. He was studying hard but deeply afraid of failure. He was new to the German language and still finding footing in German society but, in less than two years, Abdullah was embarking on the education necessary to begin a new chapter in life. We chatted about my research project, exchanged contact info, and hugged good-bye at the German train station.

Several weeks later, upon my return to the United States, I happened to watch a film called *Human Flow* by Ai Weiwei (Ai, 2017). Ai's film is a personal and visual reflection on the scale of human displacement across the globe. And then suddenly, there was Abdullah on the screen, engaging with the filmmaker in a mock "exchange" of identity, including exchanging their passports and domiciles: Abdallah's tent in a refugee camp for Ai's posh apartment in Berlin (where he has resided since exiled from China). It was a poignant interlude in the film that underscored how arbitrary and random our individual luck and stability might be.

Between the time of Ai's filming in 2016 and my train ride in April 2019, Abdullah had found sanctuary, was learning a new language, and was embarking on a journey of personal and professional development. He is a young adult with many of the same fears, hopes, and aspirations as we have reading this article: earning a living, finding friendship and love, and dreaming of a future in which he is a participant and not a victim. Already, through his display of courage, stamina, and resilience, he is an asset to Germany.

Whether or not Abdallah ever set foot in a library is irrelevant to my thesis that library services to newcomers are critical work we do for a sustainable human future. And yet, his story is a case in point why library services to newcomers are so vital to all our well-being. His success is vital to our well-being, just as every library users' potential is vital to social progress.

My research indicates clearly that the work libraries do is necessary for supporting newcomers as they seek to better their lives. Library programs and resources can be foundational to newcomer success by improving opportunities for social stability, skill-building, language development, and personal expression. The range of programs in the small set of libraries I visited, the care with which library staff approach problems, and personal expressions of care were truly remarkable. The metaphors of sanctuary, storehouse, gateway, and bridge offer a model for framing the needs of newcomers and mitigating displacement. Being conscious of and intentional about the many ways that library services and resources impact newcomer communities is an important step in creating meaningful, effective, and compassionate programs and services.

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