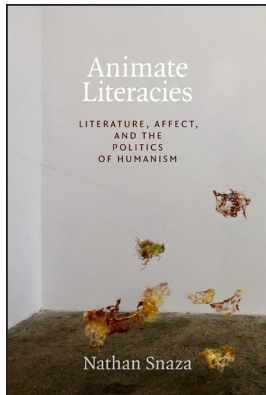


Book Reviews



Nathan Snaza, *Animate Literacies: Literature, Affect, and the Politics of Humanism* (Duke University Press, 2019); **Jack Halberstam**, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Duke University Press, 2020); **Julietta Singh**, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Duke University, 2018)



“Wildness, instead, disorders desire and desires disorder.”

Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things*

When people think of academic libraries, they don’t usually think of them as wild places, or *dehumanizing* institutions. Quite the opposite, in fact. The disciplinary order of the library is generally considered to be, along with higher education itself, an expression of the highest form of humanist discourse and ideals. Not only do these books bear an intellectual kinship with one another, but they are also all published by Duke University Press, and in their writings, the authors have each acknowledged one another as friends. The lessons offered by Nathan Snaza, Jack Halberstam, and Julietta

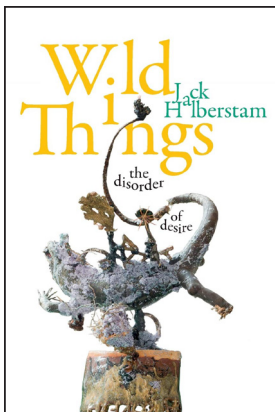
Singh are useful to academic librarians because they call into question some of the metaphors, objectives, and stated values of our profession—things we tend to take for granted like mastery, discipline, universality, and order—and describe some of the ways in which these concepts are derived from colonial projects. Together, these books provide insight into what queer desire and decolonization have to do with each other, calling some of librarianship’s foundational principles into question and expanding the range of what can be thought in our own field.

What I find so enchanting about this group of books is their embrace of bewilderment and wildness as method. Some readers may find them frustrating for their idealism or use of theory, but my view is that readings like these and ongoing discussions about the questions they invite are necessary background work that prepares us for going about what-should-be-done. These works will resonate with people who resist the politics of correction, or who respond to the irrationality of library bureaucracy with bewilderment.¹ Library workers and researchers are increasingly calling attention to our histories to consider the ways in which libraries and information support colonial imaginaries, and the books reviewed here can serve as guides for thinking about dismantling colonial practices and structures. They also offer techniques for revising our professional standards, values, and the metaphors we live and work by.

Nathan Snaza’s *Animate Literacies: Literature, Affect, and the Politics of Humanism* will resonate most obviously with information literacy librarians, but his critique of the institutionalization of reading practices is also useful for people across library departments. Snaza is interested in the situatedness of literacy and suggests that all the dimensions of books and reading comprise a scene of politics. His starting point is what Sylvia Wynter, Franz Fanon, and Paulo Freire have already described: “Humanizing education cannot proceed without simultaneous dehumanizing” (13). Difference is affirmed through differential access to humanizing education, and education rewards and upholds certain humans while exploiting or otherwise diminishing

others. In the context of librarianship, this would mean that we might consider the hidden costs of our services and resources, in part due to a legacy informed by a history of colonialism. Snaza draws from Frederick Douglass's autobiographical narrative and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to illustrate just how dehumanizing literacy education is, as it depends upon an Other who may not only be barred access from literary resources but also produces the material conditions that make "humanizing" literacy available to some. As so many critical librarians have observed, one of the barriers to changing ordering techniques in libraries is because they become "increasingly durable, tangible, and real in part because its reality is built into the material configuration of institutions and their disciplinary divisions" (67). Snaza suggests we dwell with hauntings—that we pay attention by turning "toward questions of how that particular social order was able to emerge and at what costs" (21). He extends Sara Ahmed's observations of the gendered "conditions of emergence or...arrival" and suggests that they require our attention: "Those materials—the table, the paper, the ink, the pencils—also involve exploitative extraction and expropriation of labor and natural resources along linked circuits of production and transformation."² One is affected by all of the objects and conditions, and "this larger affective situation creates the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the human" (67). These possibilities for becoming fully human vary based on one's place in time.

In fact, he suggests there is something to be said for a "wild literacy" or for bewilderment itself. Rather than focusing on answers and permanence, we might privilege the state of wonderment and ephemerality—the affective experiences of seeking information, being in a body in a library, of being bewildered by the library and its classifications, and exploring one's curiosities.

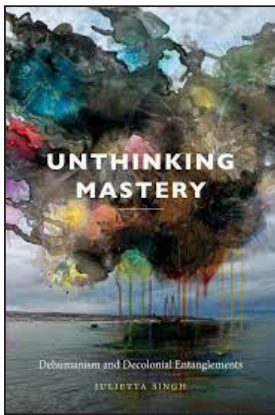


This is why Jack Halberstam's subtitle, *The Disorder of Desire*, is more striking than the title proper and why his book is so relevant to academic libraries. *Wild Things* invites readers to embrace bewilderment, to privilege desire (especially queer desire), and *unmaster* the disciplines.

Halberstam trains our attention toward critiquing and refusing the settler colonial desire that inscribes so many cultural and educational institutions. The book opens with a description of *Where the Wild Things Are*, a children's book, which, as Halberstam notes, some libraries chose not to circulate when it was first published. The desire and rage and threats to domestic serenity were apparently not fit for children in some librarians' eyes. For so many people who visit the library, the rationality that drives ordering practices is completely bewildering and befuddling, so we can hardly suggest that the ordered library is not always already organized by desire. The desire for mastery, authority, dominance, and control is a very particular type of desire that frames and contains knowledge and experience. Of course, it is true that the desires of readers and the contents of their reading materials exceed those structures. What if we intentionally undisciplined the library and reorganized in ways that privilege excess and contradiction? Bewilderment is something like enchantment, wondering and longing, mystery, and sitting with not knowing and being lost. It is a "disorientation to space with a wandering moment free of any destination" (67).

For Halberstam, "Wildness names simultaneously a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorization, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulation, loss of control, the unpredictable" (3). "The wild" also stands for subjects who have been

marginalized because they can't be explained, don't fit within universalizing frames, or fall outside of a specified norm. It is a "space of potential" (3). And so, to privilege the wild is to privilege the subject who "escapes and defies the regimes of regulation and containment that shape the world for everyone else" (23). Halberstam works with and through a wide range of cultural materials about the natural world, from Roger Casement to Nick Cave, from the performance of *The Rite of Spring* to the paintings of Kent Monkman (an Indigenous Two-Spirit artist who appears frequently as Miss Chief Eagle Testickle), and a variety of texts on falconry and children's books. His chapters on domesticated animals and the pet industry are not obviously relevant to critical librarianship, but, on the whole, his work supports his observation that "the very classifications that seem established and right in the nineteenth century begin to wobble and topple over" (23). There is much to be said for applying Halberstam's method to inquire into long histories of authority control, and its resultant marginalization of subjects in our library classifications. In many ways, the hierarchies and naming techniques are rooted in ideas about nature, what is natural, and the promise of discipline.



Julietta Singh's *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* is in direct dialogue with the other two books and gets at the very heart of the problems with colonial institutions. Singh's critique of mastery as a concept provides a map for dismantling the metaphors underlying knowledge production and acquisition. Indeed, most of us take for granted that students and faculty aspire to master an academic subject and that one aspect of a librarian's work is to support researchers in this quest. One could argue that a library is organized and designed with mastery in mind. But Singh makes it clear that we can't talk about the mastery of academic subjects without thinking about master and slave relationships and the history of the plantation.

To be a master of one's domain has historically meant that the "colonial master understands his superiority over others by virtue of his ability to have conquered them materially and by his insistence on the supremacy of his practices and worldviews over theirs, which renders 'legitimate' the forceful imposition of his worldviews" (9). Singh begins by critiquing humanitarian literature, including the work of Mohandas Gandhi and Franz Fanon, and then works through the ethical possibilities and limitations of the concept of mastery in postcolonial writers including Mahasweta Devi, Indra Sihha, J.M. Coetzee, Jamaica Kincaid, and Aimé Césaire. Singh is direct in her account of the dehumanizing aspects of books and reading, converting the terminology into a critical practice she calls *dehumanism*. Such a practice involves "stripping away the violent foundations (always structural and ideological) of colonial and neocolonial mastery that continue to render some beings more human than others. Dehumanism requires not an easy repudiation and renunciation of dehumanization but a form of radical dwelling in and with dehumanization through the narrative excesses and insufficiencies of the 'good' human" (4). Like Snaza and Halberstam, Singh is not looking for a solution. What matters is the critical practice and the questions it gives rise to, as well as finding "new forms of living together, gathered in collectives that promise to astonish us" (174). She writes, "To survive mastery, we must begin to deconstruct our own movements (intellectual, activist, corporeal) that remain entangled with the violent erasures of other lives, and of things we declare insensate" (173). I feel compelled to add that Singh's other recent publications—*No Archive Will Restore You* (Punctum 2018) and *The*

Breaks (Coffee House Press 2021)—are beautifully and honestly crafted projects, which many readers will find relevant to LIS.

While the (anti-)principles set forth in these books may appear to be antithetical to a library's purpose, and even a threat to ideals that so many of us hold dear, perhaps a wild "framework" born out of a "utopian hopefulness" can help us to imagine our way out of the colonial structures that order academic libraries and librarianship. As Halberstam writes, "It is within the epistemologies established by colonial encounters, by colonial brutality, and by a colonial will to know that the wild is established as a space of otherness" (18). We can start by questioning "mastery," "disciplinarity," and literacy itself, considering the ways in which libraries have become spaces that have othered wildness in order to contain it. It seems very possible that privileging enchantment, bewilderment, fugitivity, relationality, and the erotic in our libraries would help to rearrange the library according to queer, anti-racist, and anti-colonial principles. Sometimes I wonder if the purpose of a library's order is to contain desire. If what Anne Carson says is true—that reading and writing are erotic experiences that reside in "the play of imagination called forth in the space between you and your object of knowledge," a library is an overflowing erotic place.³ If readers and researchers and library workers all encounter their desires, their wonder, their beloved objects of study, then the space in which this happens is indeed a wild one. Helping current and future readers and researchers inquire into and gain access to their own desires is an indispensable (and too often unacknowledged) aspect of our profession.—Melissa Adler, *Western University*

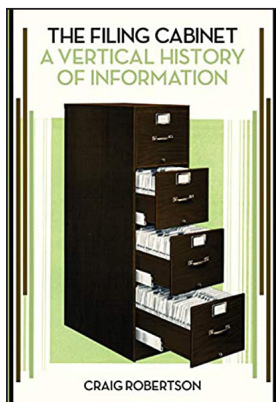
Notes

1. See Emily Drabinski, "Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction," *Library Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2013): 94–111; Karen P. Nicholson, Jane Schmidt, and Lisa Sloniowski, "Editorial," in Special Focus on Academic Libraries and the Irrational, *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 6 (December 2020): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v6.35194>.

2. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientation, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), quoted in Snaza, *Animate Literacies*, 93.

3. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 109.

Craig Robertson. *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. 280p. Paper, \$27.95 (ISBN 978-1517909468).



Take a moment and think: when did you last consider the humble filing cabinet? Ubiquitous to the point of invisibility, especially for anyone who has worked in or simply passed through an office, reading Craig Robertson's *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information* set this reviewer's mind adrift, wondering when I had last seen this piece of furniture. Once a required presence in any office, the filing cabinet now appears to be the purview of interior designers looking to add an *industrial chic* edge to a loft, or a cheap DIY project of choice for smoked meat enthusiasts.¹ Has the filing cabinet's moment passed, condemned to become a relic—much like slide rules, banker's lamps, drafting tables, barrister shelves, and the like—to be fetishized by weekend flea market

browsers?

Robertson would argue otherwise. It would be tempting to be pithy and state that, regardless of its physical presence in our lives, this is the filing cabinet's world and we're just living