

## The living library: some theoretical approaches to a strategy for activating human rights and peace

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**Abstract:** Since November 2006 a group of community members from Lismore and its region have involved themselves in a project that aims to create the conditions for peace. Each month the 'living books' of Lismore's Living Library engage with any interested or curious community member by making themselves available to be 'borrowed' for half-hour 'readings'. The 'living books' form part of a collection of people who might be subject to stereotyping or prejudice in the local or national community, including in the media. This project aims to dispel negative stereotypes by bringing people together in one on one conversations, and is underpinned by the belief that under the right conditions such conversations have the power to undermine the fears we may have of others. These aims are often outlined in living library literature by appealing to common sense and are rarely, if ever, articulated using theoretical literature from the social sciences or humanities. The purpose of this paper is to begin this theoretical discussion of living libraries and their aims. It begins with a brief survey of the living library idea, followed by discussion of three theoretical threads which may be useful for further research on how and whether living libraries achieve their aims: intergroup contact theory that has developed from the seminal work of Gordon Allport; the connections that have been made between conversation and successful cosmopolitan societies, particularly in the work of Kwame Anthony Appiah and Ien Ang; and research on the politics of representation and listening by a range of thinkers, of whom Susan Bickford and Tanja Dreher are but two.

**Keywords:** living library; intergroup contact theory; cosmopolitanism; representation; listening.

### Living libraries: some background to their development in Europe and Australia

The living library concept is a grass-roots response to discrimination and stereotyping. The first living library was organised for the 2000 Roskilde Festival in Denmark by the *Stop Volden* (in English 'Stop The Violence') non-government organisation (Council of Europe, no date). The project aimed to bring individual young people together in a short conversation that would put a story to 'difference'. In the words of the organisers participants are encouraged to '[m]eet your own prejudice! Instead of talking *about* it, simply *meet* it' (Abergel *et al* 2005: 9).

In living library projects the living books are members of groups who are subject to discrimination and stereotypes. In a living library session a library of living books makes themselves available for borrowing by members of the public for a thirty-minute or so 'reading'. Living libraries can take a number of forms and be organised for a range of purposes. Generalist living libraries are comprised of living books representing a range of backgrounds who might give themselves 'book titles' according to intersections of, for

example, ethnicity, religion, sexuality or ability. Some living libraries operate on a regular, ongoing basis, while others are organised for one-off special events such as festivals. Alternatively, living libraries can be organised for celebratory or commemorative days, for example for International Day for People With Disability. In all cases the aim is to provide 'ordinary' community members with the opportunity for a conversation with a person they may not ordinarily meet in order to dispel negative stereotypes and prejudice.

The success of the project at Roskilde saw a number of other organisations trying this simple, low cost strategy, which since 2003 has been promoted by the Council of Europe. Their handbook *Don't judge a book by its cover! The Living Library Organiser's Guide* (Abergel *et al* 2005) has been an invaluable starter kit for many living libraries. The idea was also a key component of the Council of Europe's *All Different – All Equal* youth campaign against racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and intolerance that ran between June 2006 and September 2007 (Salto-Youth Resource Centres, 2008).

In Australia the first living library was launched in Lismore, on the far-north coast of New South Wales, Australia in November 2006. Sabina Baltruweit, a community activist, was inspired by an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* titled 'Library that's having a lend of us' (Rennie, 2005). The article told of a living library operating in the Malmö library, Sweden. Concerned at the level of community fear directed at 'others' in Australia at this time (on this see Lawrence 2006) Sabina initiated a project in Lismore New South Wales, Australia that involved the Lismore City Council, the Lismore branch of the Richmond-Tweed Regional Library, and a community-led committee. This living library operates monthly and is the first generalist living library to operate on a continuing basis (for more on Lismore's Living Library see: Baltruweit, McIntyre and Garbutt 2007; Richmond-Tweed Regional Library 2007; ABC TV 2007; Rapley 2007; Williams 2007).

The success of Lismore's Living Library led to national publicity, which inspired others in Australia to take on the idea. By November 2008, two years after the Lismore project began, there were at least 70 living library projects completed or in progress in Australia (Rendall 2008). In 2007 Lismore City Council, was successful in obtaining a Living in Harmony Partnership grant to develop a National Living Library Strategy for developing and promoting resources and a network of living libraries in Australia (Living Libraries Australia 2008). The organisers of the first living library at Roskilde now also have an international website for living library resources and networking (Living-library.org, no date).

## **Theoretical approaches to living library research**

This paper has been written alongside close experience and observation of the development and maturing of Lismore's Living Library, and of the National Living Library Strategy project. As such it develops from observing and discussing grass-roots experiences with the living library organisers and these discussions define the limits of this paper, as we develop ideas and search for theoretical concepts which can further our understanding of the ways that stereotyping and prejudice can be reduced through community level action. To these discussions I bring my experience as a cultural studies early career researcher of place and belonging (Garbutt 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008) with the many limitations that implies. As such, we are always interested to hear from others who might suggest further avenues for thinking through our concerns.

Within these limitations, the theory discussed here has the strength that it comes from contact with living library projects and the issues the projects encounter and bring to the fore. Some

theory, such as that which has formulated around Gordon Allport's writings on intergroup contact, has become relevant in the quest for justifying the projects to managers and funding bodies, but also for organisers who want to understand: (How) does this work? The role of theory here is not to prove the success and worth, as organisers understand this through experience, but to provide a framework for organising evidence. This is very much a situation of praxis, of connecting theory and activism.

Other theory is invoked by the projects' concerns beyond local relationships to broader issues of inclusion, exclusion and belonging in the context of contemporary local-national-global settings. Kwame Anthony Appiah's writing on cosmopolitanism strikes many chords with living library experiences because of his emphasis on the role of conversation in societies where living alongside 'others' is inevitable (Appiah, 2006; Ang, 2008).

Finally in this paper, and in connection with conversation is the importance of attention to other voices. This political question of where, why, when and how attention is paid to various groups in a community and society is a key issue for activist projects. Who are the living library readers? Who will they influence? How do we reach readers? Each of these is a practical question that arises from the activist aims of the living library project. Meanwhile, within the confines of the living library and the individual conversations, listening is a key component of the exchange, as is an unmediated voice to listen to, respond to, and engage with. Listening theory (see especially Bickford) is one area that provides concepts for thinking about a number of issues that relate to the micropolitics of living library projects.

The following sections of this paper expand on each of these concepts, prior to a brief conclusion.

## Intergroup contact and living libraries

The idea behind the living library is that personal contact between people is very powerful in breaking down barriers—seeing the human being in the 'other' and realising that the stereotype never does justice to a person. The saying 'Don't judge a book by its cover' translates this idea into everyday language, and following the Council of Europe's lead, has become a tag-line for many living library projects (Abergel et al, 2005, and Figure 1).



Figure 1: Lismore's Living Library logo

Beyond this common-sense rendering, there is a well-developed body of research to support the idea that personal contact counters the rush to judgement based on stereotypes. This, in essence, is what Gordon Allport demonstrated in his classic study *The Nature of Prejudice* where he concluded that '[p]rejudice ... may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals' (281). While Allport based his

contact hypothesis on observations of racial and ethnic encounters, subsequent research has demonstrated that this same effect can be observed for a range of marginalised groups (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006).

Allport's contact hypothesis is not without qualification (see Valentine 2008 for excellent recent discussion of some limitations, and Allport: 263-4 for his initial writing on this subject). In making his conclusions Allport noted a number of factors that make contact between individuals more likely to result in positive outcomes:

Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports ..., and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups (281, and see also 489 for an alternative formulation).

Living libraries satisfy a range of these conditions. In living libraries status is reversed between minority and majority groups, as the title of 'living book' recognises particular expertise and knowledge by the living library organisation. In the joint activity of a living library conversation, however, the status is shared with both taking responsibility for a common goal which is itself directed towards 'perception of ... common humanity'. Allport's conclusions also indicate the importance of the living library organisation partners in meeting project goals as their sanction provides legitimacy which is important to many majority group 'readers'. For example, with Lismore's Living Library, Lismore City Library and Lismore City Council support provides the conversations with 'mainstream' sanctions, as does the local Member of Parliament who is the Living Library's Patron. This is particularly important for more conservative sections of a community.

Since the 1980s until recently Allport's focus on majority prejudice has tended to be sidelined as activist movements became more concerned to affirm difference and achieve social change through struggles for the recognition and rights of oppressed groups. However, there has been recent renewed interest in the ways that 'social contact and encounter' (Amin 2002: 959) can reduce majority prejudice. This interest was stimulated amongst British academics and policy planners seeking to develop responses to racial disturbances in three northern English cities in 2001 (see for example, Cantle 2005). One cause of the disturbances, it was officially determined (with some significant dissent; see Burnett 2007, for example), were the parallel lives led by various ethnic groups (Cantle: 15), including the self-segregation of the white majority. This, it was argued, led to anxiety and suspicion developing between groups along ethnic lines of difference, with the solution to parallel lives being to create opportunities for intergroup social contact and to developing a sense of interdependence between communities (Valentine 2008: 330). Policy responses were various, and among them was a developing distrust of festivals and celebrations that were seen to reinforce difference (cultural and multicultural festivals for example), in favour of strategies for bringing groups together, especially strategies that included the 'mainstream' (Cantle: 81-3). Amongst both sides of politics this was accompanied by an anti-multiculturalism rhetoric and was replaced, critics argued, by a rhetoric of assimilationist integration (Burnett 2007).

These policy directions have found favour in a number of places, including Australia. In Australia the anti-Lebanese/Islamic riot at Cronulla in December 2005 provided the context for similar anti-multiculturalism rhetoric and policy responses that worked to bring multicultural communities together with 'white' Australians. Politicians and bureaucrats in

Australia have been careful to avoid reference to majority prejudice or racism in this rhetoric, instead focusing on community harmony.

Community harmony is the conservative expression of renewed interest in intergroup contact. Of more radical intent, with no squeamishness in naming majority prejudice and racism, both academics and activists have sought ‘micro-publics’ of everyday encounter which can forge intergroup interdependence (Amin 2002) and destabilise oppressive cultural formations (Sandercock 2003). Similarly, Sabina Baltruweit, the activist who brought living libraries to Australia, saw the living library as a way of interrupting a politics of fear and division that was prevalent in Australia in the early and mid 2000s by bringing people together. The common goal of living together peacefully has sometimes seen the convergence of conservative and progressive interests in cultural contact, on the one hand in terms of integration of the minority with the mainstream and with the latter interested in creating destabilising ‘micro-publics’ that challenge dominant, mainstream thinking. This, for example, provided the unusual context for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to partner with Lismore City Council and the politically progressive organisers of the Lismore’s Living Library to develop a national living library strategy by means of a Living in Harmony partnership grant.

New research, then, on micro-publics provides a potentially productive set of ideas for further living library research. Meanwhile, while many evaluations of the effectiveness of living libraries have been carried out by organisers (see for example McIntyre and Garbutt 2007), there is still fundamental work to be done using classic intergroup contact theory to develop a rigorous evidence-base for the role of living libraries in promoting long-term attitudinal change. Further to this, as Valentine argues, creating micro-publics by themselves is unlikely to be scaled up to achieve sustainable social change (2008: 332-334; on this same topic, see also Allport: 507-10). Other strategies are required which address, for example, the sense of majority victimhood which can provide the conditions for wide-scale prejudice; the belief that immigrants are taking jobs, or that particular groups are being unfairly supported by the state, are two examples of this discourse of majority victimhood. In light of such issues, how living libraries can be utilised as one element of a wider program of social change is worthy of investigation.

### **‘Cosmopolitan multiculturalism’ and living libraries**

The critique of multiculturalism discussed above has led to a range of theoretical responses. Initially, the distinction is typically made between multiculturalism as a policy position on the one hand, and as a state of affairs on the other. As a state of affairs—that is that national populations are increasingly multicultural in nature—many authors (for example, Ang 2008, Appiah 2006, Turner 2006) note the reliance of the modern capitalist state on immigration and a mobile workforce to satisfy its labour requirements. The consequence of this, in Ang’s words, is that ‘[l]iving with difference is an unavoidable part of social experience in the twenty-first century, everywhere’ (230).

Within this social context, a range of government policies for working with difference have developed (Turner: 611): from a multiculturalism that works towards integration of new communities with the host society; to a cosmopolitan society which advocates civil social bonds and norms while allowing for difference; to a ‘fragmented pluralism’ where ‘groups retain their internal solidarity, but the society as a whole is fragmented’ (ibid). With such a wide range of multiculturalisms to draw from, critics can choose or construct their targets carefully before launching their attacks.

Multiculturalism, then, is a varied response to a multicultural society that makes sense for many authors and has too much baggage for others. Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, denigrates multiculturalism for its lack of consistent definition: a 'shape shifter, which so often designates the disease it purports to cure' (2006: xi). Despite this, Ien Ang, is able to draw on Appiah's ideas of cosmopolitanism (his preferred term) to develop the concept of 'cosmopolitan multiculturalism' which has a great deal of resonance with those who work with living libraries and are interested in thinking about the purpose and outcomes of such projects.

For Ang, the value of Appiah's cosmopolitanism is its practical orientation—that we can agree on the terms by which we live together in a multicultural society, even if we may not agree on why (Appiah: 67). Thus, in a multicultural society we don't have to 'agree on our values and identities to live in harmony, as long as we agree to make living together work' (Ang: 230). Ang names this stance 'cosmopolitan multiculturalism', a concept that acknowledges 'that people are different, but also recognises there is much to learn from our differences', particularly with regard to ways of living together. As Appiah writes 'in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence' (xvii). For Ang, following Appiah, the principle habit of coexistence is conversation in the older sense of living together or association as well as the contemporary sense of dialogue (Ang: 230; Appiah: xvii). 'By cosmopolitanising multiculturalism,' Ang writes, 'we can arrive at a new, non-assimilationist mode of integration. Conversation plays a central role in this' (230-231).

It is in this sense that living library advocates can find synergies in thinking about the worth of their projects as well as the outcomes. Whatever the differences being worked with, for example, whether multi-cultural, multi-abled, multi-sexed, multi-sexual or multi-faith, the intended outcome is not assimilation of less-powerful positions in society but of finding ways of coexisting in our differences. Through the practice of conversation, living library participants and organisers are seeking a form of integration that does not leave hegemonic positions undisturbed and unchanged, nor one in which all values are necessarily shared. In this sense, living libraries are 'laboratories' of multicultural cosmopolitan practice worthy of greater study and research. By bringing people together who might not ordinarily meet, stereotypes of difference are challenged resulting in the unfixing of difference and norms. Thus, when Ang calls for developing practices which 'stimulate the density of interactions between the different perspectives that rarely come into contact [and] ... whose *modus vivendi* ... is conversation' (237) living library organisers and participants understand on a very practical level just what she is asking for.

## **Voice, representation, listening and living libraries**

Issues of voice and representation begin to connect the philosophical approaches to diversity pursued by Ang and Appiah to the micro-publics of encounter and contact analysed by Allport, Valentine and Amin. However, as Tanja Dreher points out, a wider framework than voice and representation is needed to adequately account for conversation, because too often this puts responsibility to be heard back on those in marginalised positions. Thus, following the work of Susan Bickford and others, Dreher argues for including listening as a focus of research. As Susan Bickford writes (1996: 4), it is necessary to 'stress *both* speaking and listening [as] central activities of citizenship'. This implies that listening to a range of voices is a mainstream responsibility for media and the public.

As Dreher notes (2008: 3-4), there is a vast literature regarding increasing the diversity of voices in the media and public life. This literature addresses not only 'giving voice to the voiceless' but also issues of representation: who is represented, who represents who, how representation takes place, and the form of the representational narrative (that is, whether narratives are closed, or fluid and complex) (Dreher [drawing on Fuersich] 2008: 4). Living libraries excel as a strategy for giving voice to marginalised groups. Living library conversations allow for direct self-representation, unmediated by third parties. Moreover, such conversations are not closed but allow for individual, and importantly, local complexity in the narrative, at least within the confines of a half-hour conversation. Beyond voice and representation, however, it is self-evident that listening is a key element in living libraries for conversations involve both speaking and attentive listening. Of course it is the quality of the listening that is important here.

Conversations set up around difference initiate a dynamic between two people that from the outset precludes the refusal to hear that is the prerogative of dominant social groups. Living library readers are already willing to listen to new voices, though they may not be prepared for what they are about to hear. From the start they are political conversations, in which attention to each other evokes empathy and compassion, though not necessarily complete agreement (Bickford: 2-3). Speaking and listening are also interdependent. The conversation requires silence from the listener, but also question posing: a response that co-produces the conversation (156). Further, being *listened to* is also an important experience of the world that is not extended equally to all (157).

A focus on listening, then, provides some key insights into living library conversations that organisers intuitively understand and explicitly convey to 'readers' in the form of guidelines of what makes a 'good' reader (see for example Abergel *et al.*: 55). Readers, and for that matter living books, are not required to give themselves up to what Bickford (145) calls 'self-annihilation', or exchanging one's views for the other's. What is enabled, however, is being open to alternative understandings of the world and one's locale and doing this together across differences. This is not representative thinking about others done alone or within a group of dominant sameness but an interaction of a different order that has an uncertain path: 'we cannot go anywhere, we do not know what direction to head, without a joint effort' (148). The journey is risky and personal. As Bickford puts it, drawing on and quoting Merleau-Ponty, '[w]hat I come to understand is not simply the other's perspective, but my perspective in light of his [sic], and his in light of mine—"I learn to know both myself and others"' (147). The possibility is that at a personal level the type of non-assimilationist integration Ang calls for (above; and 2008: 230-231) can begin in living library conversations; integration based on joint effort and that does not leave dominant groups unchanged. As Appiah puts it, '[y]ou enter a conversation, and conversation is about listening as well as talking; it's about being open to being changed yourself, but it's not about expecting consensus or seeking agreement' (Brooks and Appiah 2006).

Just as living books are courageous in making themselves available to repeated conversations with strangers, readers in living libraries often participate with courageous listening that is open to changing one's opinion. It is also listening that expands how one listens: whether to views not normally encountered, to ideas one cannot agree with, to complexities that confound stereotypes, with empathy to someone against whom I hold prejudices, or to accents which require effort to understand. These are conversations in which strangers get used to each other's presences: developing habits of coexistence (Appiah: xvii); of actively making sense of the world we live in together (Bickford: 173).

## Conclusion

Research on living libraries, whether in terms of theoretical frameworks for thinking about their operation, or evaluating their effectiveness as one of a range of tools for anti-racism and anti-prejudice work in communities, is in its early stages. In this paper I have attempted to provide a brief sketch of some approaches or lines of enquiry which might be productive. Perhaps the most pressing research need is for evaluations that gauge how effective living libraries are in meeting the aims of reducing negative stereotypes and prejudice. This evaluation requires a range of approaches that could draw on existing methods used by intergroup contact theorists in their research, but that also considers the effect of conversations beyond actual living library events—the ripple effects. Ripple effects that reach those in the community who may not have an immediate interest or curiosity to listen and talk to others outside the bounds of local ‘normality’, or the effect of local media stories in which a wide range of community members are the subjects of positive representations. Such research would not only be valuable for developing the evidence for the degree of effectiveness of this innovative grass-roots anti-prejudice strategy, but in providing practical guidance for organisers on how best to target their work.

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