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INFO 652-02: Reference & Instruction
Reference to Incarcerated People – Final Report
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Summary of Questions & Answers and Description of Search Process

Letter 1 (m13):

- *Question:* Why was Simon [of Cyrene] mentioned by name in the gospels?
 - *Answer / Search Process:* This first question was daunting, since it was such an open-ended question, with no obviously “correct” answer. I started by Googling this question exactly as it was sent to me, which returned tons of results. Since I wanted to find an assortment of theories posited by different theologians and member of the clergy, I used this criteria to narrow the resources available, since most of the search results offered similar postulations, or were sources that seemed questionable. I copied and pasted some quotes from books and articles, but also did a fair amount of summarizing and paraphrasing to make the answer cohesive.
 - *Resources Used:*
 - Pastor John Piper, [desiringGod.org](https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/whats-the-significance-of-simon-carrying-jesus-cross), <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/whats-the-significance-of-simon-carrying-jesus-cross>
 - Selection of biblical scholars and theologians who books and work were cited in the Substack *The Humble Skeptic*, <https://www.humbleskeptic.com/p/simon-of-cyrene-an-intriguing-archaeological>
 - Pastor Clay Carter, The Sampson Independent, <https://www.clintonnc.com/news/65768/simon-of-cyrene-the-man-who-carried-jesus-cross>
- *Question:* What was the religion in Cyrene during that time?
 - *Answer / Search Process:* I began by Googling “Cyrene,” as I was hoping for some sort of encyclopedia entry that would run through the history of the city (including the dominant religion during the time). Unfortunately, the Britannica entry (one of the top search results) did not have the information I was looking for, but slightly further down was a search result from the World History Encyclopedia. Though this entry also did not include information about the dominant religion, I felt it provided great background information, so I included large chunks of it in the answer. I then tried Googling “what was the religion of Cyrene.” One of the top results was from Watchtower Online Library, “a research tool for publications in various languages produced by Jehovah’s Witnesses.” I was hesitant to use a source produced by a religious institution (which now seems silly when contrasted to my feeling comfortable citing members of the clergy), but what I liked about this source was that they referred to Simon of Cyrene specifically while discussing the religion of Cyrene at that time, which was ultimately the driving factor in this letter. I included this entry in my answer as well, and noted that it was specifically published by Jehovah’s Witnesses

(similarly to specifically noting the ecclesiastics in the previous answer). Finally, in reviewing my answer, I noticed that there was a lot of varying references to BC/AD and BCE/CE, so I wanted to include a graphic to help keep things clear. I found this by Google image-searching for “AD vs BCE.”

- *Resources Used:*
 - Graphic from englishstudypage.com, <https://englishstudypage.com/vocabulary/bc-and-ad-or-bce-and-ce-historical-terms/>
 - World History Encyclopedia, <https://www.worldhistory.org/cyrene/>
 - Aid to Bible Understanding, accessed through Watchtower Online Library, <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1200011073>
- *Question:* What was his trade (job)?
 - *Answer / Search Process:* This was the one question I could find absolutely no answer for. The only reference to his “job” that I was able to find was by a 19th-century German Roman Catholic nun and mystic, who made claims about Simon in her book *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, which was quoted in one of the sources I had reviewed when researching the first question. I included the quote in my answer, but caveated that many of the details in the passage are not included in scripture or corroborated by any historical record, just details Emmerich claimed to know based on her visions.
 - *Resources Used:*
 - Anne Catherine Emmerich, cited by Aleteia <https://aleteia.org/2022/04/12/what-happened-to-simon-of-cyrene-after-the-crucifixion>
- *Question:* How long of a trip from Cyrene to Jerusalem? By foot? By boat?
 - *Answer / Search Process:* In researching the first question, I had found a blog post by Tyler G. Mower, an author who published a historical fiction inspired by Simon of Cyrene. I felt that this blog post had contained a lot of valuable, well-researched information, so I bookmarked it and referred to it when looking into the other questions from the letter. Helpfully, Mower had a section of the blog post titled “How Far is Cyrene from Jerusalem?” To ensure this would provide the best answer to the question, I also Googled “how far is Cyrene from Jerusalem” and checked out some other search results, but felt Mower addressed the question in the most fulsome way.
 - *Resources Used:*
 - Tyler G. Mower, <https://tylergmower.com/blog/questions-about-simon-of-cyrene/#how-far>
- *Question:* What made it known that he was from Cyrene? Clothes?
 - *Answer / Search Process:* For this question, I was able to refer to sources I had found when researching the first question (but had not used because they were less relevant). Additionally, I wanted to include a visual resource, which I found by Google image-searching “Pharisees Sadducees New Testament,” which returned a graphic made by National Geographic Channel in promotion for their show *Killing Jesus*.
 - *Resources Used:*

- Reverend Henry Masters, UM News, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/pastor-puts-on-musical-about-simon-of-cyrene>
 - Tyler G. Mower, <https://tylergmower.com/blog/questions-about-simon-of-cyrene/#why-jerusalem>
 - National Geographic Channel, retrieved from <https://x.com/DrKatieTurner/status/1453392734287540227>
- *Question:* What were the streets like in Jerusalem at that time? Merchants, stands, people, etc.?
 - *Answer / Search Process:* I first Googled “Jerusalem in the time of Jesus,” which returned an article of the same name from Matthew J. Grey, Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. I felt that this provided a great description from a solid source, so copied and pasted it into my answer. I wanted to flesh this out more, so I used another source from my search (from the Christian History Institute), since it highlighted more of the daily life of the people of Jerusalem. Finally, in order to include some visuals, I Google image-searched the same term, and found a painting depicting an aerial view of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem at that time, a still from videos attempting to show Jesus’s life in ancient Jerusalem (produced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), and an early 20th-century oil painting which depicts a street view. I also included another aerial view of Jerusalem, that I hoped which filled a request (at the end of the letter) for a map of the area at the time, without being censored for being a true “map.” I also found this in my Google image search.
 - *Resources Used:*
 - Matthew J. Grey, Liahona (official magazine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2023/06/digital-only/jerusalem-in-the-time-of-jesus?lang=eng>
 - Christian History Institute, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/life-and-times-of-jesus-did-you-know>
 - Archaeology Illustrated, retrieved from [https://tarsus.ie/resources/Australis-2019/05-Communion-\(Hebrews\)-PDF.pdf](https://tarsus.ie/resources/Australis-2019/05-Communion-(Hebrews)-PDF.pdf)
 - The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://news-au.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/bible-ancient-jerusalem-set>
 - Georg Macco, retrieved from <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/macco-georg-1863-aachen-1933-duesseldorf-am-damas-3734-c-0e2493093f>
 - ESV Study Bible, retrieved from https://static.esvmedia.org/media/esv-global-study-bible/images/big/illustration_16_jerusalem-in-the-time-of-nehemiah.jpg

Letter 2 (m35):

- *Question:* Afghanistan – known as the “Graveyard of Empires.” It is my understanding that this term goes back to Alexander the Great. The Soviet Union is buried in

Afghanistan and previous British governments in the 1800s also have history in Afghanistan. What other countries, nations and empires ruled Afghanistan and when did they leave Afghanistan? Is the American empire the next grave to be dug in Afghanistan? (Possibly by 2030?)

- *Answer / Search Process:* At first, this question was overwhelming, because it felt like such a complex issue to try to address. I ultimately decided that the best approach would be to try to provide a comprehensive overview of the history of Afghanistan (including its various conquerors and occupiers), and then address the “Graveyard of Empires” nickname. Remembering how useful I found encyclopedias in answering my first letter, I decided to start with the Britannica entry for Afghanistan. This entry provided an expansive history of the country, which was helpful, but I also Googled “history of Afghanistan” to see if I could find a source that seemed better. This search returned an article from PBS News, which was a concise overview of a more recent history (whereas Britannica’s entry starts in pre-history), and with a particular focus on American involvement in the country. I decided to include both (the PBS article in full, and most of the Britannica entry, noting to the patron which sections I left out in case they wanted to request the rest of the entry). To address the question regarding Afghanistan’s nickname, I Googled “graveyard of empires” and found an older article from The Diplomat (published in 2017) that analyzes the reasons why Afghanistan has earned such a moniker, as well as one from Politico that argues that the nickname is a cliched misnomer. I included both to provide the patron with varying opinions on why Afghanistan might (or might not) be considered the “Graveyard of Empires.” Finally, I wanted to include a list of suggested books in case the patron wanted to do a deeper dive on Afghanistan’s history and American involvement in the region. To assemble this list of books, I googled “best books on history of Afghanistan,” and selected titles from recommendations from the Economist, NPR, and Five Books. I then added blurbs from publishers’ websites, to give brief descriptions of the books.
- *Resources Used:*
 - Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan/The-arts-and-cultural-institutions#ref129450>
 - PBS News, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>
 - The Diplomat, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/why-is-afghanistan-the-graveyard-of-empires/>
 - Politico, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/28/afghanistan-graveyard-britain-us-russia-506990>
 - The Economist, <https://www.economist.com/culture/2021/08/16/afghanistan-a-reading-list>
 - NPR, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/120576400>
 - Five Books, <https://fivebooks.com/category/world/asia/afghanistan/>
 - Steve Coll, Penguin Random House, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/292947/ghost-wars-by-steve-coll/>

- *Question:* Please provide a copy of any other references to the Goat of Mendes by E.A. Wallis Budge only. See Google Books: The Gods of the Egyptians, page 353.
 - *Answer / Search Process:* This question sent me down a bit of a rabbit hole. I first Googled “EA Wallis Budge Goat of Mendes,” then “Ram of Mendes EA Budge,” “Ram of Mendes Wallis Budge” (since Budge specifically referred to the “Ram” of Mendes in the book the patron referenced). I did get one hit on another reference Budge made to the Ram of Mendes (which I included in my answer), but felt so committed to hunting down more references that I started going off on weird tangents based on other things in the two passages (i.e. searching for “Osiris Wallis Budge,” “Banebdjedet Wallis Budge,” “Baphomet Wallis Budge,” “Wallis Budge Djedjet”). In this flurry of research, I stumbled across a Reddit post where several responses noted that Budge is considered obsolete and that his translations are inaccurate. The reasons for these claims resonated with me (an early, imperial-age Egyptologist who was translating through a very specific lens and with not enough information), so I switched gears and tried to track down an academic resource explaining that Budge is now considered outdated and inaccurate. This was extremely difficult to find (I Googled “has EA Wallis Budge been discredited,” “Wallis Budge translations inaccurate,” and tried searching JSTOR and WorldCat for journal articles that mentioned Budge) because I couldn’t find any more “official” resources that explained his obsolescence (I assumed because it’s such an established fact in the field of Egyptology that there’s no need to argue it in an academic journal). Finally, I found a blog that linked an old FAQ page from the British Museum (via Wayback Machine) that explained why they did not have any books from Budge. I added their explanation to my answer, and included a recommendation for a book by an Egyptologist who has written about the Ram of Mendes (and who has not been discredited), who I found when searching for “Ram of Mendes,” as his book was one of the top search results.
 - *Resources Used:*
 - E.A. Wallis Budge, retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/osirisegyptianre00budg/page/222/mode/2up?q=mendes>
 - The British Museum, retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20050610083041/thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/aes/faqs/budge.html>
 - Donald B. Redford, *City of the Ram-Man*, https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691142265/city-of-the-ram-man?srsId=AfmBOooBaOH6_O0oB9saMlqOdzCtMWbEwYGBvHy97dUY3Meb0o_np2hm
- *Question:* A bibliography of books by and about Carl Jung
 - *Answer / Search Process:* Of the questions in this letter, this one was the most straightforward. My search started by Googling “bibliography of books by Carl Jung.” I was intending to find a list of books written by Jung, then try to cobble together a list of books about Jung, but luckily one of the top results was a list from Speaking of Jung, a website dedicated to exploring the work of Carl Gustav

(C.G.) Jung. This bibliography not only included books by Jung, but also books that included commentaries by him, as well as books about him. I cross-referenced other pre-made bibliographies of Jung and found Speaking of Jung's the most comprehensive, so included it in full in my answer.

- *Resources Used:*
 - Speaking of Jung, <https://speakingofjung.com/books>

Letter 3 (m65):

- *Question:* Activities couples can do over the phone
 - *Answer / Search Process:* I started by Googling “phone activities for couples,” which returned many search results, several of which lists and articles from well-known media outlets like Good Housekeeping and Cosmopolitan. It was relatively hard to select activities that were applicable to an incarcerated person who (likely) has limited access to certain things. For example, many activities required computers (virtual museum tours, virtual concerts, virtual movie nights, taking an online workout class together), kitchens (cook the same meal while on Zoom), access to the outdoors (go on a walk while on the phone together), etc. This eliminated many of the options, but I was still able to find a few that I thought could work for this specific circumstance, which I copied and pasted into the answer. One outlet suggested that the couple learn each other's love languages, so I Googled “love languages” to find an article that would explain the love languages in a simple, concise way. I also wanted to include the love languages quiz, so I searched Google Images for “love languages quiz pdf” to find a version that was formatted in a way that would make it easy to include in the letter. Similarly, another outlet suggested that the couple build love maps, citing the Gottman Institute, so I went directly to the Institute's website to use their directions in the letter. Finally, Cosmopolitan suggested playing “would you rather” over the phone, so I googled “would you rather questions for couples” and chose a selection from Paired.com that I thought were a good mix of silly and more profound.
 - *Resources Used:*
 - Mindbodygreen, <https://www.mindbodygreen.com/articles/the-5-love-languages-explained>
 - City Church, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/587d1987f7e0ab6a70306955/t/592739e0cd0f686565292b16/1495743821942/SS+-+Home+-+WK+1+-+The+Five+Love+Languages+Quiz+%28Couples%29.pdf>
 - Brides.com, <https://www.brides.com/long-distance-relationship-ideas-5112041>
 - The Gottman Institute, <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-sound-relationship-house-build-love-maps/>
 - Paired.com, <https://www.paired.com/articles/would-you-rather-questions>
- *Question:* Intimate surveys for couples
 - *Answer / Search Process:* My immediate thought for this question was suggesting the 36 Questions to Fall in Love, which I read about in the New York Times several years ago. Since Mindbodygreen had explained the love languages so

succinctly, I was happy to see they also had an explanation of the 36 Questions, as well as the full list of questions, which I copied and pasted into the answer. To offer another option, I also included questions from the website of the card game We're Not Really Strangers, which I found when searching for activities for couples to do over the phone.

- *Resources Used:*
 - Mindbodygreen, <https://www.mindbodygreen.com/articles/36-questions-to-fall-in-love>
 - We're Not Really Strangers, https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/1448/3500/files/questions_for_meaningful_connections.pdf?v=1687377745
 - We're Not Really Strangers, <https://www.werenotreallystrangers.com/pages/long-distance-pack>
- *Question:* Significant anniversary gifts for females
 - *Answer / Search Process:* For this question, it was harder to find an answer than expected, as when I Googled “significant anniversary gifts for women,” the search results were mostly lists composed of product links. This did not seem like helpful information to pass on to this patron. Thus, my next Google search was for “best handmade anniversary gifts.” One of the first results was an article by wedding website, the Knot, from which I chose selections that seemed applicable to this patron, given that they are incarcerated (similarly to the first question, a number of the gift ideas simply didn't make sense to suggest.) Looking at lists of handmade gifts reminded me of a handmade gift I gave to my partner that I originally saw on Pinterest – creating a deck of cards that has 52 reasons you love your partner. Though I felt confident explaining how to do this myself, I wanted to include visuals, so Google image-searched “deck of cards anniversary gift” and “52 things I love about you” to source some images. Finally, I synthesized a couple ideas from some of the first lists I looked at, to include some non-DIY options in case the handmade gifts didn't resonate.
 - *Resources Used:*
 - The Knot, <https://www.theknot.com/content/diy-anniversary-gifts>
 - Pinterest, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/2955556001464148/>
 - Pinterest, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/crafty-things--1970393581703958/>
 - Cosmopolitan, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/g34565548/best-experiences-to-gift/>
- *Question:* How to obtain a car dealers license
 - *Answer / Search Process:* This was a fairly straightforward question. I searched Google for “car dealers license New York.” I first checked out the NY DMV website, but it didn't explain the process as comprehensively as a number of insurance and car auction websites, which I also found in the search results. After reading a few, I felt that the process was best laid out by ACV Auctions, so I copied and pasted their article into my answer. The only thing that explanation was missing was a list of DMV-approved vendors who sell the required starter kits, which the DMV does list on its website, so I included that too.
 - *Resources Used:*

- ACV Auctions, <https://www.acvauctions.com/blog/how-to-get-a-dealer-license-in-new-york>
 - New York DMV website, <https://dmv.ny.gov/business/open-a-dealership>
- *Question:* Affordable places/activities for women and kids in New York City
 - *Answer / Search Process:* For this question, I Googled “affordable activities for families in New York City.” The NYC gov site did have a page of suggestions, but another top search result was from Mommy Poppins, which I’ve heard from my friends with kids is a great resource for NYC. Their list of suggestions was so comprehensive that I copy and pasted the full list. Because the list started off with an inventory of museums offering free hours, I noted that the answer to this question also answered a later question, “Different museums in New York.”
 - *Resources Used:*
 - Mommy Poppins, <https://mommypoppins.com/new-york-city-kids/best-of-lists/nyc-budget-cheap-things-to-do-money-saving-tips-families>
- *Question:* Things women love to do and hear
 - *Answer / Search Process:* As I discuss further in the reflection section below, this question stumped me and I wished I could clarify with the patron. I Googled both “things women love to do” and “things women love to hear.” For the first search term, there was nothing that I felt confident about including (see more in the reflection section). For the latter, there were enough search results from sources that had some level of credibility (i.e. relationship coaches, vs. sites with no clear source) to include a selection of suggested sentiments that women might appreciate in a relationship context. I felt compelled to include the caveat that the patron should focus on sharing sentiments that are an honest reflection of how he or she feels about their partner, but couldn’t find a source for that suggestion, so my personal opinion definitely crept in a little here.
 - *Resources Used:*
 - Laura Bilotta, wikiHow, <https://www.wikihow.com/What-Do-Ladies-Love-to-Hear>
 - Jennifer Johnson, <https://livingreframed.com/things-women-love-to-hear/>
- *Question:* Different museums in New York
 - *Answer / Search Process / Resources Used:* See above under “Affordable places/activities for women and kids in New York City.”
- *Question:* Marques Houston – Naked lyrics
 - *Answer / Search Process:* This was a simple and easy Google search, and I used one of the top search results to copy and paste the lyrics into the answer.
 - *Resources Used:*
 - AZ Lyrics, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/marqueshouston/naked.html>
- *Question:* Psychology Trivia Questions
- *Question:* Hip-Hop and R&B Trivia Questions
- *Question:* House of Dragon Trivia Questions
- *Question:* Tim Burton Movies Trivia Questions
 - *Answer / Search Process:* For all of the trivia questions, I used the same search process. I Googled each question, and then looked at the various sites to evaluate the trivia questions listed. I was surprised that “psychology trivia questions” led to many trivia questions, whereas the remaining three all had less trivia questions

associated with the topics. For each, I chose the site that seemed to have the most questions, then chose a selection of questions for each topic. The exception to this was for the Tim Burton movies trivia questions, which (shockingly, to me) did not have a single site that had more than a handful of questions, so I had to source from several sites. It was necessary to be a little discerning in selection for all the trivia questions because there were a lot of duplicates, even within the individual sites, and some questions just seemed too obvious or easy (my barometer being whether or not I could answer the question with absolute zero knowledge of any of the topics.)

- *Resources Used:*
 - Water Cooler Trivia, <https://www.watercoolertrivia.com/trivia-questions/psychology-trivia-questions>
 - Trivia Nerd, <https://www.trivianerd.com/topic/hip-hop-rap-trivia>
 - Kwizzbit, <https://kwizzbit.com/house-of-the-dragon-quiz-questions-and-answers/>
 - BuzzFeed, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sarrahm23/tim-burton-films-trivia-quiz>
 - How Stuff Works, <https://play.howstuffworks.com/quiz/tim-burton-quiz>
 - Spooky Little Halloween, <https://www.spookylittlehalloween.com/blog/tim-burton-trivia-game>
- *Question: Affordable Vacation Spots*
 - *Answer / Search Process:* This was another question that I wished I could discuss further with the patron to get a better sense of what he or she was looking for. When I Googled “affordable vacation destinations,” it became apparent that most media outlets highlighted places with low-cost of living, making the vacation “cheap” even though flights to such places from NYC might make the trip prohibitively expensive. Therefore, I changed my Google search to “affordable vacations from NYC” and found an article from Culture Trip that highlighted affordable vacation destinations that are relatively easy (and lower-cost) to fly to from NYC. I included this list in full in my answer. Then, to provide more options, I included a list I had found in my first search that highlighted affordable destinations specifically within the U.S. (since domestic flights can be more affordable) and put an asterisk next to any destinations that would not necessarily require a flight to get to from New York.
 - *Resources Used:*
 - Culture Trip, <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/new-york-city/articles/8-affordable-warm-weather-getaways-from-nyc>
 - U.S. News, <https://travel.usnews.com/rankings/best-affordable-usa-destinations/>

Reflection

Coming into this semester, more than any other upcoming project, I was most excited for the Reference to Incarcerated People assignment. Prison reform is something I have long been passionate about, an interest that was first kindled by my grandfather, who spent decades providing religious services to incarcerated people at high-security prisons. Since my involvement with reform organizations (such as Innocence Project and Parole Preparation

Project) thus far has been through donated support, I looked forward to contributing to the lives of incarcerated peoples in a more hands-on way by responding to reference requests.

Furthering my enthusiasm were readings related to Services to Incarcerated People (SIP), as well as a visit to our class by Emily Jacobson, Supervising Librarian of the New York Public Library's Jail & Prison Services, who spoke to us about NYPL's Reference by Mail program. While I found Emily herself inspiring and motivational, I was also energized by her "Reference by Mail to Incarcerated People" chapter in *Reference Librarianship & Justice: History, Practice & Praxis*. In this chapter, she explains that "NYPL has an ongoing collaboration" with Pratt whereby student volunteers in introductory reference classes answer "the most challenging questions" that are sent in (this was contrasted to reference classes at other schools "that offer experience by hunting for "Easter eggs"—obscure facts in hard to find places") (Jacobson, 2018, p. 155). Notably, the number of letters received by the Reference by Mail program has "grown steadily over time, especially since NYPL began working with Pratt" (Jacobson, p. 156). Gaining a better understanding of Pratt's collaboration with NYPL on this program made me feel proud to be involved in something so enduring and fruitful, especially relative to how reference experience is gained at other schools.

Further underscoring this sense of gratification is, of course, the positive impact the program has on its patrons. Not only does Jacobson point out that patrons have "expectation that they will be treated like people and not inmates," which "is significant," she also notes that "it is well documented that education reduces recidivism rates significantly" (p. 156). I read all 66 letters that were provided to our class because I was curious about what kind of questions were being asked (and I am also a naturally nosy person), and a considerable portion (if not the majority) seemed to indicate that the patron was attempting to educate his- or herself with an eye toward the future, and potential return to the free world. Such questions ranged from developing an online business, to grants and scholarships available for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. Indeed, Jacobson goes on to note:

[P]repar[ing] people for coming back to a community is a benefit for the individual, their family, and their entire community. To withhold or cut people off from information is not only a disservice but also an unjust and malicious act. To keep someone willfully ignorant imposes a level of punishment that is unnecessary. People are entitled to access to information and the right to improve their lives. (p. 157-158)

It is clear from an educational standpoint (at the very least) that these reference letters are enormously valuable.

However, I also feel that that this service (and generally the provision of information services to incarcerated people) is valuable from a connectivity standpoint. As Jeanie Austin, Melissa Charenko, Michelle Dillon and Jodi Lincoln explain in their article, "Systemic Oppression and the Contest Ground of Information Access for Incarcerated People" (2018), incarcerated people "have described the role of books in changing and saving their lives, providing a means to maintain themselves under terrible conditions, and providing a feeling of community both with others who are incarcerated and with the outside world" (p. 171). (Though Austin et al. are emphasizing books in particular, due to their article's focus on the Books to Prisoners program, I believe this also applies to any form of information, especially that which is specifically requested.) The article by Austin et al. highlighted correspondence that Books to Prisoners has

received that expressed gratitude and appreciation for the organization's programs – something that was also present in several of the letters to NYPL. Clearly, access to books and information is crucial for the mental health and well-being of incarcerated people by providing a feeling of connection. Moreover, my grandfather routinely said that all the incarcerated men he worked with had no one left supporting them on the “outside” after five years (with family and friends either choosing not to contact them, dying, generally “giving up” on them, or otherwise moving on with life). Though this is an anecdotal piece of data and mostly applicable to those serving long-term or life sentences, I think it also highlights how critical it is to provide services to incarcerated people that can help to preserve a sense of community, strengthen existing connections and possibly forge new ones.

Indeed, Austin et al. note that “considerable literature exists which suggests that strong social ties improve quality of life while incarcerated and after incarceration,” however, “prisons and jails routinely break these social bonds” (p. 180). This was exemplified in some of the questions I addressed, which made it clear that the patron was seeking information to help “renew these bonds by building connections between those who are incarcerated and those in the free world” (Austin et al., 180). For instance, in one letter, the patron was looking for information regarding “activities couples can do over the phone,” “intimate surveys for couples,” “significant anniversary gifts for females,” and “affordable places/activities for women and kids in New York City.” Presumably this is a person who is attempting to maintain a romantic relationship while he or she is incarcerated and is looking for ways to strengthen that connection despite being physically separated. For that reason (and despite understanding logically all our cumulative answers were important and impactful), these felt like some of the most “important” questions I answered throughout the assignment. It was impossible not to feel pressure to find the “perfect” activity for this couple, especially operating under my biased assumption (learned through my grandfather's experience) that all relationships between incarcerated people and those on the outside are tenuous and fragile. This is a bias I was able to identify and check partly due to our readings on critical librarianship and cultural humility (particularly “Others-Oriented Reference: Employing Cultural Humility in the Reference Interview” (2022), by Grace Andrews, Bethany Radcliffe, and Garrett Trott). It felt mildly uncomfortable to have the realization that I was making a broad assumption, but I think that gaining awareness of my “own weak points” did in fact discourage my “tendency to approach the patron as less than themselves,” as argued by Andrews et al. (p. 6).

Likewise, though I had zero reservations about working with incarcerated people, I noticed another unfavorable assumption I was making throughout the process of responding to questions. Primarily, I experienced a feeling of intellectual superiority, which was difficult to try to step away from, even though it also felt icky (for lack of a better word). I continuously had to challenge myself to confront my (extremely unfair) assumption that I was responding to patrons who were “not as smart” as me. One example of this was a question that asked for information on “things women love to do and hear.” I was stumped by this question and wished I could ask the patron to explain what they meant. The first part (“things women love to do”) was particularly baffling. The only thing I could imagine the patron was looking for was a sort of “one-size-fits-all” list of things that ALL women “love to do,” and this honestly ruffled my progressive feathers (more so than the “hear” part, since I believe that most people appreciate receiving compliments and praise, especially in a relationship context). I even googled “things

women love to do” in the hopes that I might gain clarity on what was meant, but it was as fruitless as I anticipated. Ultimately, I felt the only answer I could provide was basically one that provided a polite refutation to what I assumed the patron meant:

It would be great to get more clarity on this question if you write back to us in the future. I’m answering with my best guess at what you mean based on the rest of your letter. All women are unique individuals, so what one woman might enjoy doing (as a hobby, or as work, on a date or in a relationship, etc.) might not appeal to another woman. There is no real “one size fits all,” unfortunately, as some women love doing things that hold broader appeal (like watching TV or traveling), and some women have much more niche interests (like bird-watching or embroidery).

I’m honestly not satisfied with this response. Though I tried to make the tone neutral, I worry that my assumptions made the answer sound patronizing. In general, I was concerned that my letters would come across as didactic because of my bias, though I made a conscious effort to not let it color my responses. It felt valuable to practice confronting my sense of intellectual superiority, as I don’t think this feeling will be isolated to just incarcerated patrons, but rather most reference patrons.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed participating in NYPL’s Reference by Mail program. I feel that the service is invaluable to its patrons, from an educational aspect as well as an interpersonal one. Not only did this project make clear the importance of providing information services to incarcerated people, it also prompted me to confront biases and assumptions I wasn’t previously aware that I had. By taking cultural humility and critical librarianship into consideration, I was able to gain hands-on experience in a way that highlighted the importance of an empathy-based approach to the reference interaction.

Student Learning Outcomes

Project Title: Reference for Incarcerated People: NYPL’s Jail & Prison Services

Project Description: This semester, our class assisted New York Public Library’s Reference by Mail program, which responds to requests for information from incarcerated people around the country. Through researching and writing responses to three letters, I gained both hands-on reference experience and a greater perspective on cultural humility and critical librarianship.

Methods: Every other week, I chose a letter from a batch presented to our class, which was then due for review the following week. For each letter, I would evaluate the research required, considering which questions were straightforward and those that were less so. I then would research, mostly via Google, to find the strongest resources, and then distill that data into answers that provided as much information as possible in the most concise way, given the 18-page limit. For most questions, I tried to reply with at least two different sources (this was less necessary for the more straightforward requests, such as one for song lyrics). I also spent significant portions of time formatting the letters, in order to maximize the amount of information included in my responses.

My Role: This project was an individual effort, as I wrote responses to the letters on my own.

Learning Outcomes Achieved: User-Centered Services and Ethical/Creative/Critical Practice.

Rationale: I feel that the primary learning outcome achieved in this project was User-Centered Services because the objective of the project was to provide information to patrons (belonging to a very specific user group, with unique needs and circumstances) in a way that maximized its

value to them. This learning outcome was achieved through the careful consideration of what information would best respond to the particular needs of each patron, while also operating within the parameters of what was applicable to the user group (for example, the program is unable to send maps because they are prohibited in most prisons). The secondary learning outcome of Ethical/Creative/Critical Practice was achieved through the confrontation of my own assumptions and biases about the user group (which I previously had not realized) and recognition of the value in providing this service to incarcerated individuals.

Works Cited

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