

## Public Library Workers, Unconditional Hospitality, and Shared Leadership

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### Abstract

Public libraries are one of the few places that offer opportunities to engage with people and exchange resources without structural partitions or economic demands. This video (<https://vimeo.com/1005189344?share=copy>), drawing on ethnographic research with the Brooklyn Public Library, explores the role of library workers as agents of radical hospitality. Hospitality extends protection, enables survival, fosters connectedness, and conveys respect. It converts strangers into familiars and repositions outsiders as insiders. As such, it acts as a mode of caring. As libraries develop consequential services for immigrants, elders, the unhoused, and those transitioning out of correctional systems—filling gaps not covered by social services—parameters of alliance are redrawn. Commitment to distributed leadership revalues labor beyond hierarchies and fosters equitable and supportive relationships across the broader library ecosystem. This expanded notion of care is explored through visual ethnographic artifacts that illuminate formal and informal inclusionary practices initiated by workers and active at the public library.

### Keywords

libraries, hospitality, care, reciprocity, shared leadership

As an offshoot of a larger project that ran from 2018-2022 in conjunction with the Parsons Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability Lab (DESI Lab), we conducted ethnographic research with workers and patrons at the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL). A visual and sensorial orientation guided our inquiry that explored how ensembles of relations and improvisation are constitutive of a form of “infrastructure”<sup>1</sup> that sustains people. We found that shared leadership at the library facilitated relationships between library workers and patrons and engendered trust and efficacy. With a focus on BPL’s programming related to incarceration and reentry (the return to communities after being held captive), the research contributed to the work of the library’s Justice Initiatives. In their 2018 Strategic Plan, BPL imagines its branches as aspirational spaces, offering a system-wide approach in meeting the needs of individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities whose lives have been impacted by the criminal justice system. Our research built on this, and as a team, we spent several months engaged in participatory research with library staff, patrons, and community members. What emerged was an understanding of care as a choreography of quotidian acts with ethical, political, and affective implications.

John, along with longtime collaborator Pawel Wojtasik, has developed a meditative practice of filming that is both subtle and sensate in its engagement with people and atmosphere. As experimental and adaptive, this spirit and mode of research easily welcomed the social science disposition brought to the project by Barbara. This methodological openness also led to Elaine Smalls’ participation as library staff turned co-researcher. Moving away from the strictly observational, we were attuned to everyday moments of connection (and disconnection) and the sensorial environments from which these emerged. We aimed to convey this embodied and relational experience to the audience at the conference, positioning care as performative and propositional—as a form of prefigurative politics that enacts interdependence, hospitality, and solidarity as essential components of living together.

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<sup>1</sup> We understand infrastructure in those terms put forth by AbdouMaliq Simone. See for example, his discussion in *Cultural Anthropology* (2012):

<https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/infrastructure-abdoumaliq-simone>.