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Kathleen Spring
Linfield College

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Shush: A Creative (Re)Construction

Kathleen Spring

How can any lover of freedom and the human spirit find tolerable that goddamn insulting, repressive hiss directed at them? That sound! As if a face had just been punctured. As if an elephant had just raised his leg and let go. Is anything more disruptive of silence than that abrupt and isolated sound? Is anything more totalitarian than an order not to express one's self? (Plotnick 7)

I'll do the shushing around here . . . shushing is the job of the librarian. (The Neverending Story III: Escape to Fantasia)

July 1, 2011

It's my first day at my new job. As I begin to go through my predecessor's office to prepare for moving my things into the space, I find a number of small gifts hidden in various places. In a desk filing drawer, I find a small claw-toothed hammer that, viewed on its side, immediately calls to mind the rock hammer with which Andy Dufresne escaped from Shawshank Prison. In this drawer I also find a brand-new flashlight in its unopened plastic case, complete with batteries (best used by February 2004), and an unopened package of cleaning wipes. Maybe my predecessor is trying to tell me something—perhaps she, like Andy Dufresne before her, has been secretly tunneling an escape route in her spare time. These goodies could be her escape supply kit—after all, one needs to be able to see where one is tunneling, and one wants to be able to clean up after the dirty task.

In another filing drawer, I find a greeting card and two bottles of booze. Score! Yet another drawer contains an old, wooden centimeter ruler that has generously been bequeathed to me. (It is used for measuring the heights of books so as to be able to include the correct dimensions in catalog records.) But the big

Kathleen Spring is Collections Management Librarian and Associate Professor at Linfield College, where she also serves as the DigitalCommons Coordinator. She holds an MLIS from the University of Alabama and an M.S. in speech communication with an emphasis in performance studies from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Her research interests focus on the intersections of libraries and communication studies, particularly the performance of librarianship, as well as institutional repositories and digital collections, collaborative library partnerships, and international librarianship.

prize is tucked away in yet another drawer. Wrapped carefully, in a sealed plastic baggie, is the holy grail of librarian décor . . . the Librarian Action Figure, with “Amazing push-button Shushing Action!”¹

The action figure, all five inches of hard plastic glory, is modeled on Nancy Pearl from the Seattle Public Library. Push a button on the back and she shushes into action. Too bad it actually looks more like she’s picking her nose than shushing an unruly library patron (not to mention, said unruly patron is nowhere to be found). And where is the audio? Without an accompanying shush sound, it feels more like a librarian *passive* figure than a librarian *action* figure. Maybe I’m supposed to provide my own accompanying shush?

September 2016

Although I didn’t know it at the time, the librarian action figure had sparked great debate amongst librarians when it first came to market in 2003. On one side were librarians who railed against the injustice of the negative stereotype the action figure represented.² On the other side were librarians who thought the action figure was a wink and a nod to the old stereotype, representing the librarian image of the past (Broom, “Not All”), and who, like Nancy Pearl, had “a sense of humor” about the cliché (Broom, “Toymaker”). *Seattle Times* readers even got involved, with some wondering why toymaker Archie McPhee would focus on a negative stereotype like shushing since “silence stops communication, which, after all, is what being a librarian is all about” (Broom, “Not All”).

That librarian action figure has sat on my desk for the last six years, joined by a few other tchotchkes gifted to me along the way. Off and on, as I’ve observed and participated in discussions about other issues in libraries related to perception,³ I’ve thought about what that toy communicates and what questions it raises for me. Why do we shush? Is a silent shush still a shush? Does a shush function

¹ A newer action figure, minus any shushing references, was released in 2017; see <https://mcphee.com/products/librarian-action-figure>. For the original described in this essay, refer to <https://mcphee.com/pages/history-of-the-librarian-action-figure>.

² Negative stereotypes in librarianship (including the shush) have been addressed repeatedly in the professional literature for decades. See, for instance, discussions of the librarian image and stereotype in general or across genre/media (Adams; Hall; Keer and Carlos; Luthmann; Pagowsky and Rigby; Posner; Radford; Radford and Radford, “Power” and “Libraries”; Schuman; Seale; White), as well as discussions specific to film (Helms; Radford and Radford, “Librarians”; Tevis and Tevis; Walker and Lawson; Yeagley), television (Black), online videos (Attebury; Poulin), comic books (Highsmith), the press (Shaw), and male librarians (Carmichael; Morrisey and Case).

³ Examples might include how faculty librarians are viewed by non-librarian faculty, the branding of library services when introducing new tools, or the apparent impact of a library’s social media presence.

the same in all types of libraries and for all types of patrons? Are some shushes worse than others? Can a shush be censorial? What are expected, or reasonable, responses to being shushed? Can you “one-up” a shush? Should librarians be expected to denounce the shush entirely? When is a shush just a shush, and when is it an act of silencing?

I am in the throes of putting together my promotion and tenure file while simultaneously crafting a sabbatical proposal for Fall 2017. I’m ready for a break from the applied scholarship I have been doing and would like to focus my energies more creatively, drawing on my other graduate education in communication and performance studies. As I think more about how this vague idea might manifest itself, I realize I want to interrogate topics germane to library and information studies through performative means and explore what it might look like for scholarship in library and information studies to be expressed through alternative modalities. Why not start by interrogating the shush as a performative act, preferably through some mode of performance? This could be interesting . . .

October 2017

Having spent the first month of my sabbatical primarily working on another project (researching and reading about different types of bias in cataloging and classification systems), I am ready to turn my attention to shushing. I have decided there should be an audio component to this project, so I begin there. In addition to recording a variety of shushes, I have recorded various “sounds of the library.” My intent is to construct an audio piece solely from these sounds, something in the neighborhood of what a visual artist might do when creating a found object sculpture. I have never created music in this way before, and the learning curve is steep.

I realize after a couple of false starts that I need to think about this piece in terms of rhythm first, melody second. To help me with this mind-shift, I call on my cataloging and classification skills. I inventory the recordings I have and group the sounds into these two categories. Then, I listen to the recordings to determine whether they can be deconstructed into smaller constituent parts. I begin small, with a single rhythmic idea, layering sounds until I have a phrase upon which I think I can build. The work is painstakingly slow, but the measures begin to accumulate. I learn that, without melody (I am still working exclusively in rhythm), it is really hard for me to convey a message. What is the story this piece will tell? How will listeners make sense of it? I want the piece to have its own narrative perspective even without the benefit of an accompanying essay; it has to be able to stand on its own. One day in the shower, I get a flash of inspiration as to how to achieve this, so I set aside my current work and start crafting an intro section to achieve that purpose.

I am in the midst of this self-imposed, semi-rigid compositional environment when, on social media, I see too many #MeToo declarations to count. I think about the weight of those declarations. I think about how many of them have been shushed out of existence before now, and I wonder if it will be different this time. The readings on bias I completed in September shift in my gut, their resonances and timbre demanding my attention on this project, too. I recognize now that the prevailing theme of my sabbatical is acts of silencing, and I wonder how I failed to see this previously. I debate the merits of self-censorship, and I see the privilege in being able to have that debate. I push—no, dare—myself to make a declaration public, but I stop short.

If all those declarations, despite their bone-crushing weight, could be contained in a balloon that floated up beyond the thermosphere and into space . . . if we watched that balloon through a long-eye lens to make sure we didn't lose track of it . . . if we observed that balloon's behavior with the requisite objective and physical distance to counter any naysayers . . . what would happen if we somehow pierced that balloon ever so gently, ever so precisely, just enough to cause a slow leak?

Would the balloon whisper those declarations, letting them escape into the void as if they never existed? Would the balloon drizzle hellfire and brimstone on the naysayers? Would the balloon pinpoint a gutterfall of suffering on those who filled it with their declarations?

Or would the balloon explode with the force and majesty of the creation of the universe, releasing a deafening roar—a tinnitus for a new era—that could not be turned off, turned down, denied?

I shush myself to listen for my sisters' cries. I don't want to miss them.

November 2017

I continue to work on the audio piece as I dive into the literature on the image of the librarian and stereotypes. I watch an array of films, television episodes, and online videos in which a librarian or library worker shushes,⁴ recording my descriptions of each shush. Some descriptions are straightforward and realistic, while others show an impressionistic bent. By the time I've viewed a dozen videos (and there are many more than that), I am unsurprised yet simultaneously dazzled by the predictability of these displays. The shush is almost always played for laughs, with the librarian as the "straight man" (or, more commonly, "straight woman") in the gag. After viewing these representations, I begin to think the likelihood of spotting a particular stereotype or shush is ripe for translation to a party game—shushing bingo, anyone? The game could be played like traditional bingo

⁴ Librarians and libraries in film are surprisingly well-documented. Most studies reference the annotated filmography compiled by Martin Raish.

but with the caller showing clips from films or videos rather than calling out letter/number combinations; to make the match, players would need to match the description to the clip shown. I get to work making some sample cards.⁵

Watching all of these depictions of the shush begins to bleed into my work on the audio piece, as I play with rhythm and repetition and seek to give the piece its own arc. Perhaps because I have seen so many of these shushes in their fully embodied forms, I find myself using physicality (hand gestures and other full-body movement) to help me compose certain sections, something I have never done before. After rather lengthy consideration, I decide I need some additional shush source material, so I ask my husband to record a few variations. When I listen to them, they sound markedly different to my ears—the pattern of breath both within and between shushes is distinct from the ones I recorded. I can see in wave form what each shush looks like, but I need to understand the anatomy of a shush as it emerges from my body. I go to the quietest room in my house, center my awareness, concentrate, and attempt to describe a shush.

The Inbale.

I breathe in through my nose. Quickly, if I will need to expel it forcefully. With measure, if I will need to steel myself. Without thinking, if the act will be done reflexively.

The Pursing of the Lips.

I bring my teeth together, lips toward the center, almost like a kiss. My tongue is slightly up in the middle (but not touching the roof of my mouth) and down a bit at the front.

The Exhale.

I breathe out through my mouth. No vocalization, only air, but not to worry—air contains many meanings. All at once, if I will need sharpness, or force. Slowly, if I will attempt to soothe. Slower still, if I want to be annoying and slide into speech-whistling territory.

The Face and Head.

Here there be options. Depending on my choice of shush, the rest of my face responds accordingly: a furrowed brow; eyebrows raised and ears pulled back; a neutral mask but a gradually tightening neck; eyes wide open, rolled, maybe narrowed; a quick shake of the head, or an accusatory slow turn. Flying spittle or saliva bubbles are always a possibility.

⁵ For sample bingo cards, refer to Appendix 2.

After going through this corporeal exercise, it's time for me to stretch my brain. I dig in.

December 2017

One month remains in my sabbatical before I return to my usual responsibilities. How will this interrogation come to a close? I'm heartened by the notion that my inquiry, like much work before it, represents understandings at specific points in time—the meaning doesn't need to be fixed, or even finished (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 78). Everything I've been reading related to the shush continues to jam up against the current socio-political soup that is United States culture in the 21st century. Dissonance abounds, reflected at least to some degree in the audio piece I've titled *Shush Me Awake*.

Although most of the authors I've been reading relegate the shush to the trash heap and/or tie it up with the image of the librarian (rather than looking at it as a distinct behavior unto itself), not everyone thinks the shush is a bad thing. Cameron Johnson says we need the shush to maintain our sanity (68), and Leonard Kniffel agrees that shushing has its place. But by far, the library literature condemns the shush for contributing to a negative stereotype of librarians, a stereotype which in turn hinders recruitment into the profession, diminishes the respect librarians receive from various constituencies, and curbs the advancement of the profession (Morrissey and Case 454). Ray and Brenda Tevis, in their study on the image of the librarian in film, go so far as to argue the shush is a “negatively-charged connotative word” that “reinforces the stereotypical image and continues the unflattering cinematic depiction of librarians. Associating the stereotypical images with the most obnoxious word in the occupation's lexicon reinforces the stability, the inalterability, of the image” (40).

Some librarians (Adams; Attebury; Hall; Keer and Carlos; Posner; Radford and Radford, “Librarians”; White) suggest flipping this supposedly inalterable script; rather than allowing professionals in other fields to “create, perpetuate, and own our images,” librarians should “take charge of their own images” (White 149). In one article, Gary and Marie Radford employ Foucault's discourse of fear to discuss how libraries and librarians are represented in pop culture. The discourse of fear, which they contend is the basic organizing principle at work in libraries, is “a fundamental fear of the power of discourse itself” (“Libraries” 324). As they argue in an earlier article (“Power”), libraries preserve and control discourse, but they don't control the stereotype—so, the question becomes, who is ultimately served by the librarian stereotype? Certainly not librarians or library users, according to many in the field. A few librarians suggest taking the script-flipping a step further by calling for a postmodern deconstruction that embraces and subverts the negative stereotype, in essence using the stereotype against itself.

As Beth Posner says, “Understanding various aspects of an image is the first step towards embracing or combating it” (123). Katherine Adams explains further:

[T]hrough the appropriative gestures of parody and mimicry, librarians can change the associations made with the old maid and transform this representation into something positive. Library and information science workers could take on stereotypical characteristics in order to diffuse and disarm the power dynamic that created them in the first place . . . and contest it from within. One can use the stereotype against itself by redeploying the signs that compose it. In a move from deconstruction to reconstruction, librarians can use these signs for their own ends. (291-92)

Radford and Radford (“Librarians”) agree that images can be contested from within, but in their analysis (which uses a cultural studies framework and the work of Stuart Hall) they caution that contestation is a continual act because meaning can never be finally fixed. Gretchen Keer and Andrew Carlos provide an additional warning for librarians against a loss of agency when those outside the profession define it for those within (78). Agency also matters to Art Plotnik, albeit of a different kind. Rather than the librarian’s loss of agency, he worries for the patron’s loss:

Perhaps I harbor more hostility than many others, but I must confess that when someone tells me to shush, when that finger touches their lips, I am ready to do violence. It’s not always a rational response; there is just something about that symbol, that gesture, that puts me down. . . . To me that gesture says, “Slave!” It says, “Slaves may not speak!” (8)

Agency is a concern, but so is complicity. H. L. Goodall articulates this clearly, noting that scholarly storytellers should “reveal both the good and bad . . . sometimes through questions we raise but cannot adequately answer; sometimes through deeds we witness but do not condone; sometimes through our own troubled complicity” (207).

Why do we shush, and how are we implicated by our decision to do so? What purpose does it serve? Does it always come from a place of privilege? Is it possible for a shush to be an exhale, a blowing away of what was there—a verbal air freshener, if you will—a chance to start anew?

Why do we shush?

We shush because we can.

We shush because we want to shut something down.

We shush because that’s what we’re expected to do.

We shush because it feels good.

We shush to silence.

We shush to deafen.
We shush because it's satisfying.
We shush to soothe.
We shush to control.
We shush to have the last word.

How do I square these ideas with one another? My interest in the shush as a performative act is not with combating negative stereotypes, or creating a more positive or realistic image for librarians, or rhetorically dissecting a librarian action figure that is short on the action. Rather, through this essay and audio piece, I find myself heeding Adams's call to move from deconstruction to reconstruction. Many of my questions are still unanswered, but my curiosity is situated in the act of interrogation itself, in what I might learn from this sense-making process, and in how those meanings might impact my own choices in the future. It's bigger than I'd imagined it would be; tendrils reach towards every corner. But, narratives in all their forms require readers to do work, to develop their own interpretations and meanings and "bring them into dialogue with [their] own experience" (De-itering 12)—so why should my narrative(s) be any different?

As I think about shushing and what it represents for me as both an occupational performance choice and as a communicative choice from an interpersonal standpoint, I still wonder about my own complicity in silencing. If, as Radford and Radford say, "Libraries are understood through metaphors of control, tombs, labyrinths, morgues, dust, ghosts, silence, and humiliation" ("Libraries" 325), I want to offer alternative interpretations for understanding those metaphors. I want to make something new, to (re)construct the shush.

Will you listen?


Appendix 1: Films and Videos

- Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Directed by Blake Edwards, Paramount Pictures, 1961.
- City Slickers: The Legend of Curly's Gold*. Directed by Paul Weiland, Castle Rock Entertainment and Columbia Pictures, 1994.
- "Come to the Library." *YouTube*, uploaded by CNLibrary, 26 Jan. 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NBm_coZx8I.
- An Extremely Goofy Movie*. Directed by Douglas McCarthy, Walt Disney Pictures, 2000.
- Ghostbusters*. Directed by Ivan Reitman, Columbia Pictures, 1984.
- The Good Companions*. Directed by Victor Saville, Fox Film Corporation, 1933.
- Goodbye, Columbus*. Directed by Larry Peerce, Paramount Pictures, 1969.
- The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag*. Directed by Allan Moyle, Buena Vista Pictures, 1992.
- Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* Directed by Douglas Sirk, Universal Pictures, 1952.
- "Hip Hop Librarians RRISD Book Cart Drill Team 2016." *YouTube*, uploaded by forestnorthlibrary, 15 May 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijLXsrv5flg.
- I Love Trouble*. Directed by Charles Shyer, Touchstone Pictures and Buena Vista Pictures, 1994.
- I Love You, Beth Cooper*. Directed by Chris Columbus, Twentieth Century Fox, 2009.
- Ironweed*. Directed by Hector Babenco, Home Box Office and TriStar Pictures, 1987.
- King County Library System. "Patrons Gone Wild." *YouTube*, uploaded by KCLSTraining, 17 Mar. 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=px9m-0wAREc.
- "The Librarian." *Saturday Night Live*, season 42, episode 1, NBC, 1 Oct. 2016. *YouTube*, uploaded by Saturday Night Live, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrMTLV2cR2Q.
- "The Librarians and the Cost of Education." *The Librarians: Season Two*, written by Kate Rorick, directed by Courtney Rowe, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2017.
- "The Librarians and the Happily Ever Afters." *The Librarians: Season Two*, written by Geoffrey Thorne and Jeremy Bernstein, directed by Rod Hardy, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2017.
- "The Librarians and the Rise of Chaos." *The Librarians: Season Three*, written by Marco Schnabel and Dean Devlin, directed by Dean Devlin, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2017.
- "The Librarians and the Sword in the Stone." *The Librarians: Season One*, written by John Rogers, directed by Dean Devlin, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2016.
- A Man Betrayed*. Directed by John H. Auer, Republic Pictures, 1941.
- The Misadventures of Merlin Jones*. Directed by Robert Stevenson, Walt Disney Productions, 1963.
- Monsters University*. Directed by Dan Scanlon, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar, 2013.

- The Music Man*. Directed by Morton DaCosta, Warner Brothers, 1962.
- The Neverending Story III: Escape from Fantasia*. Directed by Peter Macdonald, Miramax, 1994.
- Party Girl*. Directed by Daisy von Scherler Mayer, Party Productions and First Look International, 1995.
- Sauer, Tammi. "Dancing with Tammi Sauer (The Librarian)." *YouTube*, uploaded by dsantat, 1 Sep. 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSlzoR_3-YM.
- "*Sesame Street*: Cookie Monster in the Library." *YouTube*, uploaded by Sesame Street, 6 Aug. 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3ZHPJT2Kp4.
- 7 Faces of Dr. Lao*. Directed by George Pal, George Pal Productions and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1964.
- Stanley & Irl*. Directed by Martin Ritt, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1990.
- Straight Talk*. Directed by Barnet Kellman, Hollywood Pictures and Buena Vista Pictures, 1992.
- University of Texas-Arlington Library. "Librarian vs. Stereotype: Introductions." *YouTube*, uploaded by UTA Libraries, 10 Apr. 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOoYjfpdlzw.
- Wonder Man*. Directed by Bruce Humberstone, Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1945.

Appendix 2: Shushing Bingo⁶

Card A

S	H	U	S	H
The Outside-the-Library Shush	The Impatient Shush	The Shush-in-a-Row, or the Cascading Shush	The Disapproving Shush	The Bend-and-Shush
The Soft Shush	The Shush and the Shush-Back	The Be Quieter Shush	The Rhythmically Regular Shush	The Punctuated Shush
The Collective/Group Shush	The Prolonged Shush		The Comedic Shush	The Temper Tantrum-Calming Shush
The Admonishing Shush	The Shush to Cut Someone Off	The Silent Shush	The Stern Shush	The Shush-and-Response ("Shhh!" "Up yours!")
The Quick Shush	The Patron-to-Patron Shush	The Sexy Shush	The Tag-Team Shush	The Shush to Quiet Young Lovers

From top to bottom within columns, clips would be shown from the following films/videos/television episodes:

S – *Goodbye, Columbus*; “Come to the Library”; *The Music Man*; *7 Faces of Dr. Lao*; *I Love Trouble*;

⁶ The shushing image in the “free space” from Linnaea Mallette is used under a CC0 Public Domain license.

H – *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones*; *The Neverending Story III*; *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones*; *An Extremely Goofy Movie*; *Breakfast at Tiffany's*;

U – *Monsters University*; “The Librarians and the Sword in the Stone”; “The Librarians and the Rise of Chaos”; “The Librarian” (*Saturday Night Live* skit from 2016);

S – *A Man Betrayed*; *City Slickers: The Legend of Curly's Gold*; *City Slickers: The Legend of Curly's Gold*; *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones*; “The Librarians and the Cost of Education”;

H – “Hip Hop Librarians RRISD Book Cart Drill Team 2016”; *City Slickers: The Legend of Curly's Gold*; “The Librarians and the Happily Ever Afters”; *City Slickers: The Legend of Curly's Gold*; *The Music Man*.

Card B

S	H	U	S	H
The Tit-for-Tat Shush	The Reprimand Shush	The Be Vewy Qwiet, We're Hunting Wabbits Shush	The Reverse Shush	The Sidelong Shush
The Why Did You Have to Blow It, Now You'll Have to Leave Shush	The Here's a Taste of Your Own Medicine Shush	The Put You in Your Place Shush	The Hold on a Second Shush	The Back-to-the-Camera Shush
The Quick Sidle Shush	The Stereotypical Shush		The Echoing Shush	The Exasperated Shush
The Sarcastic Shush	The Dancing Shush	The Ghostly Shush	The Mostly Male Annoyed Shush	The Pronounced Lip Shush
The Fast-Draw Shush	The Urgent Shush	The Follow-Up Shush	The Offscreen Shush	The Muppet Shush

From top to bottom within columns, clips would be shown from the following films/videos/television episodes:

S – *Breakfast at Tiffany's*; *Ironweed*; *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?*; “Patrons Gone Wild”; “Come to the Library”;

H – “Come to the Library”; *7 Faces of Dr. Lao*; *The Gun in Betty Lou’s Handbag*; “Dancing with Tammi Sauer (The Librarian)”; “The Librarians and the Sword in the Stone”;

U – *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*; “Librarian vs. Stereotype: Introductions”; *Ghostbusters*; *City Slickers: The Legend of Curly’s Gold*;

S – *The Music Man*; *Party Girl*; *Straight Talk*; *Wonder Man*; *A Man Betrayed*;

H – *I Love You, Beth Cooper*; *The Good Companions*; *Stanley & Iris*; *Monsters University*; “Sesame Street: Cookie Monster in the Library.”

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