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Spencer-bennett, Kate

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Libraries in women's lives: everyday rhythms and public time

Kate Spencer-Bennett 

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper asks how libraries have rhythmised women's education and everyday lives. It draws on women's narratives of library use in a multicultural suburb of Birmingham, UK. It shows that women's use of libraries exists in rhythmic relations with other times and places, both public and private. The narratives reveal the value of the library in offering space for women to claim time for themselves in the Lefebvrian "weak time, the stops, silences, blanks". Routines, cycles and continuity of use over various scales are important in women's engagements with libraries. Memorable too are particular *moments*. Punctuating the quotidian rhythms of library use, these moments are individual stories of rupture; times of great significance in women's lives. Changes to library provision have, therefore, rhythmic consequences, with reduced opening hours and library closure bringing *arrhythmia*. Through the library, women are linked to particular histories and they enter into shared rhythms, within both the present and the past. Libraries, this paper argues, offer not only an important public space but also public time.¹

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1. Introduction

"The library", wrote Jorge Luis Borges (2000, p. 85), "is unlimited and cyclical". Borges here captures concerns with space and with time. Libraries are important educational spaces. But the educational significance of libraries has various temporal dimensions too. Like Borges' conception of the library, and drawing especially on Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis (2004), this paper unites the spatial and the temporal to ask how libraries have rhythmised women's education and everyday lives.

This focus on specifically women's experiences of libraries is not accidental. Historically, libraries were spaces of male occupation, once judged to be dangerous places for women (Pearson, 1999). Strongly normative accounts of libraries in women's lives remained as they came to be seen as appropriate (Burek Pierce, 2007) and, later, safe spaces (Worpole & Greenhaugh, 1996) for women to occupy. Women's increasing use of public libraries during the twentieth century is seen as holding an important place in women's journey to public identities (Sicherman, 2010).

Today, public libraries within the UK are used by women in greater numbers than men (DCMS, 2015). Recent research has identified the importance of the library in women's everyday lives (Norcup, 2017; Robinson, 2020). Internationally, girls and women

CONTACT Kate Spencer-Bennett  Kes709@bham.ac.uk  School of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK

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experience educational inequality (UNESCO, 2016). And, since cuts to public libraries and library closures disproportionately affect women (Frederiksen, 2015), and women also make up the majority of librarians (Kelly, 1977; Norcup, 2017) cuts, closures and questions around the relevance of libraries are gendered matters. So too are instrumental accounts of the value of the library which present a narrow picture of its significance (see, for example, Crawford & Irving, 2013; Shenton & Dixon, 2002). In this context, understanding the role which libraries have played in women's lives is important. To explore this concern, I present a rhythmanalytical investigation of narratives collected in conversation with twenty-five women in Hall Green, a multicultural suburb of Birmingham in the United Kingdom.

Libraries are important to women for a great many reasons. But this paper argues that temporal concerns are often overlooked and that libraries offer not only important public space but public *time*. Through the library, women are linked to particular histories and they enter into shared rhythms, within both the present and the past. The narratives reveal the value of the library in offering a space for women to claim time for themselves in the "weak time, the stops, silences, blanks" (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 78), "beyond the reach of work and family" (Middleton, 2014, p. 93). Routines, cycles and continuity of use over various scales are important in women's engagements with libraries. But memorable too are particular *moments*. Punctuating the quotidian rhythms of library use, these moments are individual stories of rupture; times of great significance in women's lives. Thus, this paper argues that changes in provision necessarily have rhythmic consequences, with reduced opening hours and library closure bringing *arrhythmia* (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 68). On a methodological level, the paper points to the value of narrative research for performing rhythmanalysis in the library and in other educational spaces.

The paper begins by laying the theoretical ground for the research, with a discussion of theoretical approaches to time and rhythm. Here, I introduce Henri Lefebvre's concept of rhythmanalysis. I then introduce the context in which I conducted the study and describe the procedure. The discussion which follows is then organised into six sections. The first sections considers how women's everyday lives have been rhythmmed by libraries; the relations between library use and the library's own rhythms; and the intersection of the rhythms of family life with women's library use. The paper then moves its focus to one particular woman for whom everyday library use involves visiting a library every day, revealing the way in which the library might be important for some marginalised groups. The final section considers how certain experiences might puncture the everyday and how these memorable experiences or "moments" find the library acting as a site for women to enter into shared rhythms on a different scale and for personal histories to be linked to social histories.

2. Rhythm

This paper brings together concerns with women, libraries and time. It draws theories of space, time and rhythm together with feminist theory in order to make sense of women's experiences. Libraries are important public spaces and "critical sites of knowledge acquisition" (Livingstone, 2010, p. 780). But this paper argues that there are important temporal

aspects to the value of the library in women's lives which are often overlooked. As well as offering public space, it argues, libraries offer public time.

Feminist researchers have approached time in particular ways. They have often been concerned with women's biographies (Bryan et al., 2018; David, 2016; Thompson, 2000; Weiner, 1994). They have asked how time is experienced by women (Hughes, 2002, p. 137), observed that understandings of time are bound up with women's self-understanding (Hughes, 2002, p. 142), and sometimes identified a "complicated relationship" with time (Segal, 2017, p. 174). Feminist research has traditionally challenged the dominance of linear clock time (Hughes, 2002, p. 142), arguing that cyclical time is sometimes "more reflective" of women's lives than linear time (Hughes, 2002, p. 136). More recently, these concerns have been taken up as concerns with the way normative accounts of linear time might be another way to under-represent or marginalise women. Michelle Bastian contrasts common sense notions of time as successive and "all encompassing" with the "multiple and contradictory" (2013, p. 216) temporalities which might better represent some women's experiences of time. The "cultural particularity" of time (2013, p. 218) and complexities of social life which Bastian identifies as missing from temporally normative accounts chime with previous concerns of feminist researchers that everyday life should be approached not as an object of study but as located in particular experiences (Smith, 1987, p. 88).

The historian Sue Middleton approaches the "particular experiences" of a group of doctoral students with a temporal lens (Middleton, 2014). Her focus is on the relationships between the linear time of the institution and the cyclic time of women's lives. She draws on the writings of Henri Lefebvre, with a focus on his work on rhythm. Although Lefebvre's work was not written specifically with educational institutions and spaces in mind, Middleton argues that "Rhythmanalysis offers a methodological focus for the critique of everyday life in educational settings" (2014, p. 13).

Henri Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* (2004) was first published in 1992 as *Elements de Rhythmanalyse*. Lefebvre wrote that "everywhere there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy, there is a rhythm" (2004, p. 15). Lefebvre was concerned with thinking about space and time together, and with the everyday lives of individuals. In recent times, education researchers, such as Middleton, have come to explore the value of Lefebvre's, and others', work around rhythm.

In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre exploits the double sense of the *everyday* – "a dual meaning found in English and French – le quotidien – meaning the mundane, the everyday, but also the repetitive – what happens every day" (Elden, 2004, p. iv). Both senses are important to this work; the ordinary as well as the habitual. I consider the library's role in rhythming women's educational activity as well as their lives more broadly. Consistent with Sue Middleton's observation that the rhythm analyst's zones of inquiry will "range in scale" (2014, p. 118), my discussion will deal with multiple time scales; the rhythm of an embodied activity performed over a short timeframe, the rhythm of a day, a week or longer periods of time. Further, Lefebvre writes that the rhythm analyst is sensitive to "moods" (2004, p. 87). The writer Alberto Manguel's reflections on his own library capture something of its mood. Rhythmic shifts alter the meaning of the library for Manguel; by day "the library is a realm of order" (2006, p. 12), but "by night the atmosphere changes" (2006, p. 13).

Read in conjunction with Sue Middleton's writing, the work of cultural geographers who take up concerns with rhythm (for example, Edensor, 2010), and with feminist theory, rhythm analysis (Lefebvre, 2004) offers new understandings of social and educational practices and processes. It provides a useful tool for the analysis of experiences around libraries and paying attention to rhythms and cycles in appraising the women's narratives sensitises one to relations of cyclical and linear time.

3. The study

The findings presented within this paper are part of a larger project, "Libraries in Women's Lives", which investigates the role of libraries in women's lives. The research took place in the Hall Green district of Birmingham. Hall Green has four community libraries: Hall Green Library, Kings Heath Library, Balsall Heath Library, and Sparkhill Library. The Birmingham City Council Wards in which these libraries sit are all in the most deprived 20% in England and two of them (Balsall Heath West and Sparkhill) are in the most deprived 10% (Birmingham City Council, n.d.). A greater percentage of people in this district have a language other than English as their main language than for England as a whole and the same is true for the percentage of people without formal qualifications (Birmingham City Council, n.d.). There is an inner-city ward in the district (Balsall Heath West) as well as a ward on the southern boundary of Birmingham (Hall Green North). My aim was to include a diverse group of women in the research but not to obtain particular quotas of women across any particular demographic categories.

In 2017 I visited the libraries in Hall Green. The temporal context for the research is important since Birmingham libraries were subject to a public consultation as I began this research. The council's proposal was to "reshape" the community libraries into a "tiered system" (Birmingham City Council, 2016) with the tier determining the hours of opening. At this time, I began to display posters advertising the study. Some women responded to the adverts and others were introduced to me by librarians. I collected narratives from twenty-five women in all across a number of meetings. These meetings ranged from just ten minutes on a single occasion, to two or three meetings of up to an hour.

The idea that people narrativise their experience of the world and their own role in it (Bruner, 1990, p. 115) has become an important one. Narrative research can be viewed as part of a set of related approaches (Squire, 2008) which include life history interviews and oral histories but it tends to involve an "oral narrative of personal experience" (Labov, 2013, p. 223) delivered in a research context following a prompt or "story eliciting question" (Squire, 2008). Narrators are often invited to talk at length and to "take the lead" (Plummer, 1983, p. 70).

After an initial conversation about the project, the women were invited to talk about what they have valued about libraries. This project takes a deliberately wide view of libraries and what might constitute a library so that, although I met the women through public libraries, the women also talked about academic libraries, college and school libraries and home libraries. Equally, the women's reflections incorporate both memories of time spent in libraries and memories associated with books and other library objects as they were encountered elsewhere. I was keen to allow the narrators to talk on topics of their choice and without interruption. However, departing from the aspirations of narrative purists I did not limit *all* "interruptions". My own "semi-verbal cues" (Sealey, 2012, p. 207), gestures and

expressions shape the narratives to some extent, but I see this as an inevitable consequence of research of this kind. The narratives were recorded and transcribed. Reading the narratives, I began taking notes which linked to my engagements with the literature and generated some “emergent themes” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 553).

The women that I spoke to were born between 1933 and 1988. So, although the women are united in having used one or more of Hall Green’s libraries, they have had very different lives and reflect on a changing place and places. The narrators are a heterogeneous group. And yet as women they all occupy, to a greater or lesser extent, marginal positions. The margin functions both in a literal and in a metaphorical sense within this research. But despite this abstraction, “margins”, as a concept, ties together a range of concrete aspects of lived experience. Most prominent for my purposes is the experience of being a woman. Women’s marginality has important educational consequences; rendering women invisible (Bryan et al., 2018) and alienating them from knowledge-making (Middleton, 2014; Smith, 1987). Other factors might contribute to experiences of marginalisation. These factors might have to do with social class – the DCMS (2015) study *Taking Part* found public libraries to be particularly important to those who are economically disadvantaged – religion, ethnicity, age, family relations, health, habitation, language, education, and so on. And, of course, such factors might intersect. In *Women, Class and Education*, Jane Thompson speaks of “intensifying marginalisation” (2000), suggesting that women experience marginalisation and other factors act to intensify this position.

I do not see the women that I have spoken to as typical or representative of women in general. Instead, they are “individual women talking about their lives” (McCordle & Rowbotham, 1977, p. 1) – which, nevertheless, reveals certain structures of feeling (Williams, 1977) around libraries, offering “personal interpretations of past time” (Steedman, 1986, p. 6) and illuminating important aspects of women’s education and everyday lives. The women’s narratives, of course, revealed many things but I focus in this paper on those parts of those narratives which have most to say about temporal rhythm.

The project brings narrative, an established technique in educational research, together with Lefebvrian rhythm analysis. Rhythm analysis, “requires equally attentive eyes and ears, a head a memory and a heart” (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 36). Narratives, in capturing those events which have been recast as experiences, foregrounds precisely those rhythms which have been, in Lefebvrian terms, “grasped” (2004, p. 36).

4. Rhythming the everyday

Women’s uses of libraries exist in rhythmic relations to other times and places, both public and private. Women remembered library visits taking place on particular days or at certain times. Such “time-locked” (Young, 1988, p. 7) rhythms are evident in the following examples.

My parents used to take us once a week definitely.
(Jabbean)

I started going there and then it just became routine to go every week.
(Janice)

We've always used libraries. We brought them [the children] every Saturday.
(Jill)

These patterns of use reveal the way in which library use is both *rhythmed by the week* and itself *rhythms the week*.

When her children were young, Talat remembers taking them to Sparkhill Library and then:

We used go to the park sit there and enjoy and the children would play. Then we used to buy fish and chips. Sitting on the bench. Then we would go further til the end. Springfield. Window shopping or shopping. So this was a weekend we used to do.

The library was part of “a weekend” they “used to do”. For Talat, the weekend, incorporating a library visit and a trip to the park and some walking was a way of spending a weekend. It was a pattern of use to return to.

For Ferhat, visiting the library has been a routine in childhood, in college, and now again as a mother of young children. As a child she remembers:

We'd go there and have a little treat on the way back. We used to catch the bus because we didn't have a car so it was like an adventure for us. We'd all get on this bus. Go to Swan Centre as well. It was like a thing.

Later, in college, she would use the college library every lunchtime.

At college we went everyday ... they'd always chuck us out for making too much noise but we'd always be back in.

Then in the school holidays she would meet her friends at Birmingham's Central Library:

We'd all meet at the library and everybody would be doing their assignments and all have a chat and then we'd go up to McDonalds and have a breakfast or whatever and then we'd all go back to the library so our holidays were spent around that library.

Ferhat reflects on her library use as a routine. Echoing Talat's description above of a “weekend we used to do”, Ferhat describes those childhood visits as “like a thing”; a recognised, repeated activity and perhaps a significant one. And now, with her own children, a visit to the library “fragments the day, parcels it out” (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 77). She draws a parallel with others around her who use the library in the same way. Ferhat refers to her sisters-in-law who live locally and take their children to the library; “I've seen them do the same routine as well”. This is “le quotidien” (2004, p. iv) – the ordinary and the routine. There is a repetition in the narrative of the habitual “would” – “we would”, “they would” – indicating habitual use. Ferhat's mention of other women who “do the same routine” hints at the mundane but also indicates the importance of shared rhythms in women's everyday lives.

The library had an everyday importance for Ferhat during her time at college. Visits to the library would punctuate her day, as the rhythms of the college day offered lulls, bringing opportunities for the friendship group to congregate in the library. Rhythms on different time scales present themselves here. When the college holidays came around, Ferhat and her friends moved to the Central Library.

Social gatherings find their rhythm around the prescribed rhythms of the institutions, but they also work to bodily rhythms of hunger and thirst. Cyclic and linear rhythms overlap in the pattern of use around eating. As a child, Ferhat remembers they would

“have a little snack on the way back”. In the college holidays they would leave the library to go to McDonalds for breakfast.

Such cyclic rhythms make themselves felt for Margaret too, who remembers a group which would meet at the library in Kings Heath and would have “a cup of tea and a biscuit and then go and do their shopping on the high street”. Sher’s account of visiting the library with her grandchildren also features food:

We take books or read them there ... with nanna and sandwiches

Although this is Sher’s speech, much like with the literary technique of free indirect style (Toolan, 2012), we can hear in the third person narrative the voices of her grandchildren for whom a trip to the library is known to take place “with nanna and sandwiches”. Library visits here have certain props which indicate their place in daily life.

Rhythms of library use intersect with circadian rhythms and other natural rhythms in various ways. For instance, rhythms to do with sleep surface as important in some of the women’s narratives. Janice reflects on her preference for borrowing books from the library to using computers for research, noting “you can read them in bed for a start”. Jill associates the library with borrowing books to read in bed both as a child and now as an adult.

I can’t remember a time that I’ve never read at night – obviously my mum and dad would read to me and then once I could read ...

Engagements with the library, then, take their place alongside everyday routines. The references to food or to sleep are not inconsequential details within the narratives but instead reveal the way in which library use rhythms and is rhythmised by everyday social practice, taking its place around routine human activity and bodily rhythms.

5. The rhythms of the library and routinised practices

If women’s everyday lives exist in rhythm with the library, then the library’s own particular rhythms become significant and intersect with women’s lives in important ways. I began with Borges and his conception of the library as “cyclical”. Particular rhythms and cycles are inherent to the function of libraries. The cyclic nature of choosing, borrowing and returning materials is an obvious example. Janice remembers that, when her children were young, they would “have a book every time”; the borrowing of books and the due dates rhythmising the visits to the library. The potential for this cycle to continue without end is suggested by Janice, who, talking about her local library, Kings Heath, says:

I haven’t run out. I still come up and find things.

Jeanette, though she now lives in Birmingham, studied for a doctorate whilst teaching in Brussels and describes her patterns of working at this time.

One thing the library in Brussels used to do that was useful was they did a good inter-library loan and they ordered the articles and they’d come and I used to see the little thing with the green sticker on it and get really excited and think oh there’s my new article that’s come.

Thing is with the Brussels University, it was all closed stack so nothing was open on the shelves so you had to know exactly what you wanted and write it on a card and give it to the librarian who would tell you to come back in half an hour when she’d got it from the closed

stack and you'd get your book, which as you know, when you're researching that's not what you want. So I discovered Leuven library ... so Leuven was about a half hour's train journey away and Leuven is Flemish speaking and it turns out that Belgium is much more well resourced for libraries and things so I used to go on the train to Leuven and they had lots of little libraries and they were all 'open' so they had the Linguistics library, the Education library, the Business library and each library was in a gorgeous old building and I used to love those days out because I'd get there and photocopy maybe 50 articles and then come back on the train and put them all in their plastic wallets

Jeanette's rhythms for working were at odds with the pulses of Brussels University Library. At Leuven's libraries, by contrast, she experienced synchronicity; the routinised practices of browsing the open shelves, the rhythm of the photocopying, the break for lunch, the repetition of the articles being safely stored in plastic wallets, even the "half an hour train journey" home was memorable. Before taking possession of the ideas in these papers through her reading and thinking, Jeanette takes possession of them in a very physical way through her photocopying, ordering and organising of the objects. She takes pleasure in the haptic experiences of the library (see also Spencer-Bennett & Grosvenor, [in press](#)). In Brussels there is the joy of the "green sticker" indicating the arrival of a new article. Lefebvre writes that "with regard to intellectual concentration and the activities with which it is bound up (reading, writing, analysis) they also have their own rhythm, created by habit, which is to say a more or less harmonious compromise between the repetitive, the cyclical and that which supervenes on them" (2004, p. 75). Jeanette's account finds the repetitive bodily gesture of photocopying and the cycle of travelling, searching, photocopying, organising and studying to be routinised practices which bring harmony, even joy to her studies and her life. Where Jeanette found a lack of harmony in these intersecting rhythms – where she despaired at the "linear beats of bureaucracy" of the Brussels University library (Middleton, 2014, p. 137) – she studies elsewhere. But libraries of one kind or another rhythm Jeanette's studies at this time.

6. Miniature gaps

Some of the women describe using libraries to study at a time when their children were young. These women reflect on the intersection of multiple overlapping rhythms of the body and the library with the rhythms of family life. This takes a variety of forms but temporally, and to borrow the words of Janice, who studied for an A Level whilst her children were young, often takes place within "miniature gap[s]":

I got all my books for that either from the college library cus that was an FE college or from the public library – I used the public library quite a bit. And that was hard going working in the evenings – you just don't have – well you have a miniature gap to do anything.

Within the rhythms of employment and family life, study must take place in the miniature gaps – in the "weak time, the stops, silences, blanks" (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 78). Thus, for Janice, the library offered a space to work, but she emphasises through her account the way in which it also offered *time*.

Alison also identified some time to visit the library when her children were young.

And Balsall Heath Library. My daughters had swimming lessons next door so I used that library while they had their lessons. My youngest had swimming lessons at Sparkhill. I'm

sure I went to the library there as well. I associate swimming lessons with going to the library.

The length of a swimming lesson presented just enough time for Alison to go into the library, borrow books and to return to her children.

Shaheen meets with a women's group at her local library. Her children have now grown up. Salma, another woman in the group, translated Shaheen's words, so this appears in the third person.

This is her catching up time in her life after the busy time of bringing up children - being a grandmother and a mother she gets to go here. Like she can escape being a married woman and having kids. She can move away from all that - learn a bit of English, learn a bit more Urdu and like all the years that she's missed out - it's catching up time - she hasn't got much education. She doesn't have the time [to read at home], she takes books for the grandchildren, not for herself. She thinks she can read here, do everything here. The kids can study at home but her study time is here.

Time is, once again, foregrounded in the narrative and it has two relevances here. First, Shaheen is afforded "study time" in the library. Second, Shaheen's circumstances, with children grown, mean that it is now her "catching up time". Shaheen does not have very much formal education. Salma tells me that she "got married early and so is not well educated". In the 1980s, writers Mary Hughes and Mary Kennedy were concerned with women's educational life cycles. In the language of their model, Shaheen has had and continues to have *responsibilities* to her children and grandchildren and yet has particular *needs* of her own (1983, p. 20). These needs go some way to being addressed by the weekly meetings at the library.

In all of these accounts, women claim something for themselves by carving out space – parallels might be drawn between the public library and the private study associated with male withdrawal (Middleton, 2014, p. 93) – but also *time* for studying, reading or borrowing books. Here "multiple and contradictory" (Bastian, 2013, p. 216) temporalities exist simultaneously as women rhythm their library use with the rhythms of family life. Time is important; the library is the *when* as well as the *where* in these narratives.

7. Continuity in the library

If there exists a discernable rhythm in women's use of the library over a number of weeks or months then women also find continuity in their use of public libraries over longer stretches of time. Since the reflections gathered in this project span the time frame of living memory, women consider not only their recent lives but longer time periods too. In Lefebvrian terms (2004) they "grasp rhythms" over many years and over generations of women. Jeanette remembers:

But also, as the kids got a bit bigger, it would be a day out ... And I suppose really it might be harking back to what I used to do with my mum.

Ferhat recognises a similar continuity:

And it kind of carries on from one generation to the next so what my parents did with me I have tended to carry on and do with my children.

The sociologist Michael Young wrote that “as soon as memory is in play the linear loses some of its predominance” (1988, p. 9). Here, cycles are not daily or weekly repetitions but patterns of activity taking place over a generation or more. This continuity is valued by the women. Young recognises this, stating that “modern grandparents are usually pleased at this realisation that life is repeating itself, that the events of their childhood are being reproduced again by their own kind” (1988, p. 7). He writes that “cycles build up their own momentum. The motion is carried over from one occasion to another” (1988, p. 8). He terms this process “renewal” which fittingly suggests a process of evolution rather than an exact replication of events. Shaheen’s description of her grandchildren using the library in the same way that her children once did echoes this position:

It’s a generational thing; it’s an ongoing process.

The continuity across generations or across time is a rhythm of a different time scale. These are important connections with the past and for the women, they represent cycles of activity beginning again, as rhythms that have been grasped from childhood are taken up once again.

8. Neha: libraries and the everyday

The library is important in rhythming women’s *everyday* lives. One woman that I spoke to actually visited the library *every day*.

Neha started going to Sparkhill Library regularly at 16, when she failed her GCSE examinations. Her intention was to study to retake them, but she has been unable to do this. She “joined the Job Centre” once she was 18 but has not found work and has had her income support stopped. When asked when she visits the library, Neha lists the days of the week. The library is important to Neha but she also sees its power to withhold. Neha values the access to the library computers and finds the limitations frustrating. She says:

They say our systems are down.

They don’t let you wait. You have to just pick up a book and read it.

You can’t have any more hours [on the computer] at any library cus they said it’s cheating the system.

Booking and using computers brings its own set of rules and “rhythms imposed by authority” (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 99). Evident in Neha’s comments are her understandings of class belonging; there is a classed subjectivity in Neha’s construction of others (Walkerline et al., 2001, p. 45). “They” in Neha’s comments above represent the powerful and the other. In *Uses of Literacy* Richard Hoggart suggested that for “the very poor the world is divided into ‘them’ and ‘us’. ‘They’ are ‘the people at the very top’, ‘the higher-ups’, ‘the people who give you your dole’... ‘Never tell yer owt’” (Hoggart, 1957, p. 72). Perhaps predictably, the Job Centre and her potential employers feature as the “them” in Neha’s narrative. They “can be quite hard”, are “a bit picky choosy” and “they’re sick of people”. Neha sees that there are structures which prevent her from achieving success and happiness.

These structures, in Neha’s life, are many. The geographer Katy Bennett has documented the many structural inequalities around women’s paid work. Neha is working, or trying

to find work, in an economy “shaped by low pay and insecurity” (Bennett, 2015). As a young, Muslim, working class, woman, she is “multiply marginalised” (Walby, 2009).

The Job Centre and the businesses which might offer work are powerful institutions. Neha sees the library as another powerful institution. Neha recalls her first visits to the library.

[I] looked at the books and I got to borrow them as well.

That Neha says she “got to borrow”, rather than perhaps “I would borrow” seems significant. The implication here is that the borrowing of books was a right or privilege which Neha was afforded. In the context of her wider experiences this privilege represents a contrast.

I asked Neha one morning what she had been using the library computers for. She told me that she had been looking at the cost of holidays.

The holidays, you know, are quite expensive, you know.

On another occasion, Neha was flicking through library newspapers. Even Neha’s rhythmic flicking through pages of newspaper seems to suggest a waiting or a marking of time. Embodied movement is seen as central to the experience of time (Conlon, 2010) and Neha passes the time by looking at each newspaper in turn. She turned to the Pakistani newspaper *The Daily Jang* and told me: “It’s all in Urdu. The people who can’t read Urdu look at the pictures”. Looking only at the pictures, then, she pieces together what is going on in the world. Next, in the *Birmingham Mail* she sees a picture of firefighters. “Probably not enough” she says, without looking at the story.

Neha seems to watch the world from the sidelines. She can look up holidays on the computer but that is as far as she can take that, given the expense. She can look at the pictures in *The Jang* but cannot read the words. And when she sees the firefighters, against a backdrop of cuts to public services, she assumes more of the same. Through the library, Neha has the means to glimpse the world outside, even if not to fully take part. “I like the star signs”, she said. Lefebvre writes that “boredom is pregnant with desires, frustrated frenzied, unrealised possibilities. A magnificent life is waiting just around the corner, and far, far away” (Lefebvre, 1995, p. 124 in Moran, 2005, p. 117).

Neha identifies with others who she sees as sharing her circumstances. On one occasion Neha and I were talking in Sparkhill Library and a man who was sitting near us slumped down onto the table and put his head on his arms. This is an extract from the transcript from that morning.

(we both look up at the man who has slumped down onto the table with his head on his arms. I must look concerned because Neha says:)

S: He’s alright he’s just a bit tired – we all get like that

K: Yeah. You know a lot of people that come in then?

S: Yeah but I don’t know their names though – he’s probably just bored because he can’t get a computer

When Neha tells me “we all get like that”, she is referring to those who spend their days in the library for the same reason which she does – because they are not in education or

employment. Richard Hoggart writes about “an acceptance of life as hard”, a feeling among some groups “that life is always like that for people like us” (1957, p. 92). Feminist researchers have found Hoggart’s representation of women as passive subjects to be problematic (Steedman, 1986). Nevertheless, his description of individuals who feel their situation not as “despair or disappointment but as a fact of life” (1957, p. 92) is relevant here. Whether Neha is correct or not in assuming that the man is bored because he cannot get access to a computer, it demonstrates something of the way she views the library and the use of the library by people which she sees as being like her. Neha enters into shared rhythms with others in the library. She identifies marginalised individuals who might rely on the library in various ways. She does not know him personally but can identify with him and speak for him. “He’s ok”, she says.

The boredom which Neha saw in the man sitting near us that day reflects her own feelings of boredom – the “slow rhythms” she experiences (Conlon, 2010). Boredom has its own rhythm. There is a syncopated rhythm to Neha’s day which is underpinned by the prescribed, rational rhythms of the institutions with which she interacts.

Neha, like all of us, experiences the perpetual interaction of diverse rhythms, but in applying for jobs and waiting for things and marking time, she experiences the brutal repetition of the linear particularly harshly. Even in the library, a place which she values, she experiences monotony and was, when I last saw her, awaiting the result of the consultation on Birmingham’s public libraries.

And yet the library brings cyclic rhythms. As Lefebvre writes

in present daily life, the rhythmical is overwhelmed, suppressed by the linear. But the rhythmical cannot disappear; the repetitive cannot be reduced to the results of a combinatory, a prefabricated, imposed linearity. (2005, p. 12)

The routines around Neha’s library visits, her weekly visit to the Library of Birmingham in the city centre and her meetings with the women’s group punctuate the week. If women occupy a space on the margin (hooks, 1990), then engagements around libraries and groups such as the women’s group, might be conceived of as hidden counter publics (Fraser, 1990); ignored and marginal but offering important places for women to spend their time; for some women to spend much of their time. Indeed, bell hooks re-frames women’s marginal position, calling for a reclaiming of the margins from traditional use as a marker of exclusion and instead seeing it as a “central location for the production of counter hegemonic discourse” (1990, p. 149). Margins become sub-altern space (McDowell, 1999, p. 151); spaces for resistance and sites of challenge to dominant discourses. They are politically counter hegemonic or “subcultural” (Segal, 2017). And in rhythm analytical terms, arrhythmia, as a marginal state, could offer certain potentials. Whilst assertions that “literally being out of step with the dominant regime, may offer a spacetime of resistance” (Davies, 2018 in Lyon, 2019, p. 103) seem too hopeful in Neha’s case, it seems reasonable to say that the margins might become a site for women “intent on changing the possibilities of and circumstances of their lives” (Thompson, 2000, p. 8).

9. Moments

Punctuating the everyday rhythms of routine library use are individual stories of rupture; times of great significance in the women’s lives. Moments are Lefebvrian. They intervene

in the “hinterland of everyday dullness” (Lefebvre, 1959, p. 356). For the cultural theorist Ben Highmore, moments are:

an instance of intense experience in everyday life ... ; [and] although fleeting, provide a promise of the possibility of a different daily life, while at the same time puncturing the continuum of the present (2002, p. 116)

Jeanette’s encounter in a library in Japan represents just such a moment. Jeanette was teaching English in Sheiki, a suburb of Tokyo, when she came across a library.

I remember being out for a walk in Sheiki and there was a building there and for some reason – it must have had a sign on it saying library in English and I remember walking into this library and it was quite a strange experience. There weren’t any books in English out on the shelves but there was sort of an older man and he had this huge box and he said ‘oh you can help me’ and he had this box of a huge box of books and he said ‘I want you tell me which are the ‘dame’ books and which are the ‘not dame’ books’. Dame in Japanese means kind of forbidden, the no-no books – so in other words he was worried about which books to put on the shelves because he didn’t know which were the rude books.

And we had this really strange surreal experience where he said ‘dame?’ and I said no! (laughing)

And one of the books was Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and on the front of it had a nude woman or a statue of a woman – and he was saying ‘dame?’ and I was saying ‘no’ and he was saying ‘yes dame! dame!’

But what was good about that was that he wouldn’t accept that that wasn’t dame and so in the end he said ‘well I’ll give it to you’.

And so I read it and that was a book that was influential, massively influential. I took it to Thailand to read it on the beach and I was thinking this is going to be nice and it was the most depressing book (laughs). That was the book that made me see – it was a bit sad really – because that was the book that made me see life really differently.

This account differs from Jeanette’s other accounts of library visits; visits which are part of her usual routine – visiting to study or, later in her life, a visit with her children. As a memorable encounter, it is in Filipa Wunderlich’s (2010) terms an “experience event”. Where elsewhere Jeanette might refer to her library use using the habitual “we’d go”: “we’d go and choose [books]” and “we’d spend ages there reading in the library”, here, Jeanette tells of a particular memory. In rhythm-analytical terms (Lefebvre, 2004), this encounter, as contrasted with the routine and the habitual, represents a moment of rupture, a break from existing rhythms. But rhythms do not alter here to be returned to undisturbed following this surreal encounter. Rather, the experience is a transformative one. Jeanette recalls:

I started to see life through a different lens. She really points out so lucidly how the whole of society is shaped or was shaped – maybe not quite so much now – by men and for men seen through the eyes of men and organised for men and women are very much the kind of second sex and ‘the other’ and I started to see that everywhere.

Jeanette sees the book as her feminist awakening.

It really did have a really strong effect – because I’d never read feminist literature before.

The moment of change in Jeanette's life is lasting rather than temporary. The cultural Geographer Tim Edensor suggests "there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive" (2010, p. 14). Jeanette's encounter with "dame man" is just such an unforeseen something. Fittingly, Edensor describes Lefebvrian moments as moments of "surprise, insight, revelation and sharp self awareness" (2010, p. 14). For Jeanette this is a moment of revelation and new insight. Yet if Lefebvrian moments are also seen as "opportunities to escape everyday alienation" (Edensor, 2010, p. 14) then Jeanette has actually experienced a new kind of alienation as a result of this experience; "part of me wishes I hadn't read it" she reflects.

The library in this moment is not, then, a comfortable space of escape or retreat as it has been for Jeanette at other times in her life and yet it is heterotopic all the same (Foucault, 1986). Jeanette, a young woman in an unfamiliar place, describes feeling "trapped" by the older male librarian and yet, fittingly, the book she came away with gave her a new way to look at this and other experiences, thus reflecting a heterotopia's capacity to "mirror and yet unsettle the world outside" (Johnson & Browning, 2017).

For Filipa Wunderlich, "experience events" – akin to Lefebvrian moments – are "aesthetically significant" (Wunderlich, 2010, p. 48). Aesthetic significance, here, refers to the affective component of experience and memory. In these narratives, libraries too figure as sites of great emotional significance. Kate Rousmaniere writes that schools are "more than physical structures, in part because of the emotional depth of the experiences that take place in them" (Grosvenor et al., 2004, p. 326). These narratives suggest that the same is true of libraries.

The moment recounted here might not be one of the grand moments, the "significant times when existing orthodoxies are open to challenge when things have the potential to be over turned" (Elden, 2004, p. x). And yet if a little of this sense "rubs off" on to the moments of women's accounts then that is fitting since women report the library as having similar potentials in their own lives. But perhaps more importantly, it is also fitting if we consider that these moments, rendered so singular and so personal, find a connection with particular historical and cultural moments.

Jeanette's encounter in the Sheiki library connects her to feminism and feminist writing and a reappraisal of her past experiences of popular culture. That the library might be a site for this sort of reckoning is not so surprising. For the literary theorist Lynn Pearce (1997) readers are linked, through the texts they read, to historic and cultural moments. Jeanette, here, uses the materials of one cultural moment – early second wave feminist literature – to help her reflect on another – the popular culture of her childhood. In such subjective experiences, Pearce identifies a mediating "structure of feeling" which links the personal to specific historical and cultural moments.

The structure of feeling here, although different to Raymond Williams' (1977) conception, carries the same interest with shared experience over private revolution. In this way, Lefebvre's conception of the moment as potentially "mutually experienced" (2004) is realised. These moments of rupture seem to suspend everyday rhythms as personal histories are linked to social histories.

10. Conclusion

Acting here as rhythm analyst, the “eyes, ears, head, heart and memory” (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 36) are mine, but they are also the women’s whose narratives I collected. The women perform rhythm analysis too – paying attention to various natural and social rhythms in their narratives; the seasons, the times of day, meetings, and gatherings.

For these women, the library takes its place around routines of study, work, childcare and everyday life and, in Neha’s stretched out time, the library brings cycles of activity. The library performs a mediating role between the linear rhythms of the everyday and the cyclical rhythms of women’s lives. The continuity in women’s practice reveals the library’s role in offering connections across time, as grasped rhythms are taken up once again. Against the routine of the everyday, the library is also a site for moments of rupture, for women’s personal histories to be linked to broader social histories.

The library, then, offers an important public space but it also offers public time. Through it, women are linked to particular histories and they enter into shared rhythms. This happens synchronically – so that women see and value others using the library in the same way – and it also happens diachronically – so that women see continuity in practice. They identify shared rhythms with the past.

In the *Production of Space*, Lefebvre writes that “the past leaves its traces” (1991, p. 37). He is thinking here about things being inscribed on space – in homes, in landscapes, in schools and so on. The women’s narratives suggest that traces might also be inscribed upon people so that threads might be picked up and grasped rhythms taken up once again.

Since the closure of public libraries affects some groups disproportionately, public policy decisions regarding library funding are seen here to be gendered, classed and racialised in important ways. At the time that I was speaking to the women in Hall Green, Birmingham City Council were making significant cuts to their library budget. What then, is the significance of such decisions in rhythm analytical terms? In “The Right to the City” (1996, p. 151), Lefebvre asks “what are and what would be the most successful places? What are the times and rhythms of daily life which are inscribed and prescribed in these ‘successful’ spaces favourable to happiness?” Libraries, are drawn here as sites of favourable rhythms, as “successful places”. And yet when libraries are forced to reduce their provision, they themselves can be the cause of disruption and arrhythmia (2004, p. 68). Lefebvre writes, “disruptions and crises always have origins in and effects on rhythms” (2004, p. 44). He draws on the example of rhythmic changes which follow revolutions. I think for the women whose stories I have shared, although not seismic social shifts, changes in the patterns of library opening cause disruption and crises of their own kind. In the words of Neha, noticing the time in her local library one morning, “The time’s gone so fast. They’ll kick us out soon.”

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ORCID

Kate Spencer-Bennett  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8594-768X>

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