



Conversation with Litwin author, Ana Ndumu by Israt Abedin

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This interview was conducted as part of the Author Interview Series with Library Students, published on the Litwin Books blog, where prospective information professionals meet with authors to discuss the research process and engage in a deep dive on important topics of the field from concept to publication.

Ana Ndumu is an assistant professor at the University of Maryland. She received her PhD in Information and MLIS from Florida State University School of Information. Her work focuses on Information Justice and the Information behaviors of marginalized groups, specifically African, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latinx immigrants living in the U.S. She is the editor of the book, *Borders and Belonging: Critical Examinations of Library Approaches Toward Immigrants*.

Borders and Belonging: Critical Examinations of Library Approaches Toward Immigrants was edited by Ana Ndumu and published in 2021 by Litwin Books' Library Juice Press. It is a collection of essays from library professionals and thought scholars based in North America challenging the perceptions of immigrants and libraries and the role of librarians as rescue workers.

This interview was conducted by Israt Abedin, a dual degree student in Food Studies at New York University and Library & Information Science at Long Island University.

Israt Abedin: *Borders and Belonging* is a collection of essays from 20-plus librarians from the United States and Canada. How did this collaboration come about? Where did the idea for this book emerge?

Ana Ndumu: Prior to even pitching the book, there is critical librarianship but it has not really touched the area of library services to immigrants. The field is still very self-congratulatory and very comfortable when it comes to engaging with immigrants. There are a lot of reasons for that. The term immigrant automatically implies diversity and service and help to a critical-need community or population. It satisfies that complex among librarians to be frontline community agents. Because a lot of times the term immigrant is raceless, colorless, contextless. I've always felt that critical librarianship has not confronted immigrant services in librarianship. And so, I speak from being a librarian for a long time, going into library education, and training future librarians. I see how students write about immigrants and some of the assumptions they have, such as every immigrant is a non-English speaker or every immigrant comes from a background of displacement. And as an immigrant, I know I am always undoing a lot of assumptions about me. My last name is Ndumu, but I'm Afro-Latina. My first language is Spanish. I came

here when I was five. I'm bilingual. I grew up in Miami. I'm raising mixed-race children. It's so many, many, many nuances. In the last two months, I've had 4 relatives cross the border. I have family that is undocumented. I have family in the U.S. military that is very conservative and very American patriots. So, that is all part of the immigrant story.

Going back to your question on the idea for this book, there are hundreds of years of history of unequal treatment towards immigrants—in good ways and in bad ways. I think sometimes it has benefited immigrants. For example, as I wrote about in the first chapter, white-presenting immigrants were receiving benefits and receiving library services, when Indigenous groups and African Americans received virtually nothing. The way the book came together was seeing that there was no coverage of it among the Litwin Books and Library Juice Press canon in 2019 and 2020. There was a real need to start having a collective conversation. There were so many people who responded. It was important to capture different geographies, the North American perspective, including Mexico. We had a chapter at the U.S.-Mexico border and as you mentioned a chapter from a colleague from Canada. The people who were ultimately included in the book have unique layers. My goal as an editor was to break open the buck about what we define as immigration in libraries—that's by race, that's by class, that's by every single intersection. Even then I wasn't able to fully capture everything—disabilities and differently-abled populations, the LGBTQ community, and so many other areas of immigration that still need to be examined. I'm very thankful for the people that really leaned into the project. I can say earnestly, everyone who wrote a chapter just brought it and presented their best work.

Israt: This is the first of its kind— this collection. I don't think we can talk about library approaches toward immigrants without talking about immigrant librarians. The same structures that influence our approaches toward immigrants in libraries are the same structures that contribute to the lack of diversity among librarians. How crucial do you think it was that the essays in *Borders and Belonging* were written by immigrant librarians?

Ana: To clarify, not everyone was an immigrant librarian, but a majority of them were. Some of them were, I don't like the term, but—second-generation immigrants, first-generation Americans, they are American by way of another culture or nation. Some of them are people who migrated from another U.S. territory. Some people are learning and are students of immigration. A majority of the writers gave first-hand accounts. That was important because with librarianship we know the demographics of the profession. We know they skew towards white mainstream monocultural heritage. So, I think what it's gonna take to reframe library service to immigrants is the account of immigrant librarians to correct the problematic assumptions. That speaks to the range of chapters and how we were able to include people who were of immigrant background and non-immigrant backgrounds and who are very compassionate about but also learning. It's one thing to be compassionate but not be in a posture of learning because that's when you try to create an assimilation program instead of a bilateral cultural exchange—which it should be.

What we ultimately created, which I can say even three years later with confidence, is something that does not pigeonhole immigrants and is still something that needs to be added to. Now, how immigrants are being dropped off at the Vice President's home, how DACA is being weaponized. Here in Prince George's County Maryland, we have a huge Afghan refugee community, a huge Ukrainian refugee community, a beautiful Ethiopian community, and the largest Salvadorian enclave across the street from the National Archives. So, when we think about who's included in our national record, whose stories are documented, who do we think of? We don't think about the people who live right across the street in Adelphi, Maryland, the Salvadoran community, they're erased from our imagery. That is why it was

important to have a project for us, by us. Immigrant-centered in every sense of the word because we've had in library literature white-male voices speaking of the immigrant experience—not to say that white males can't be immigrants. But, it's been a very white-male, English-speaking voice that has described the immigrant—John Foster Carr who I wrote about.

There is one chapter about the absence and the glorification of immigrants in special collection holdings but the lack of accessibility to immigrants themselves in those holdings. The fetishization of immigration at the expense of communities and whose bodies are laboring to take care of special collection archives and clean them. And whose cultures are being co-opted with no return to the community—or I suppose invitation. And there's another fine chapter by Dominique[Taylor]. He also wrote about all of this corporate speak, this entrepreneurial language around immigrants in libraries, and how to undo that. How to undo these corporate imperatives in our facilities that work to uphold injustice? They make us think of the library profession as part of an information machine. And it disrupts communities and it really poses harm—especially to immigrant communities. We see this with Lexus-Nexus now and being part of corporate surveillance and big information mining. This is what happens when we think of the information profession as a corporate giant. We have our vendors Thompson-Reuters getting in bed with basically the information profession. So, I think Dominique [Taylor's] chapter is still so timely.

Israt: Yes, I believe that essay was called “Rupturing Capitalist Alienation.”

Ana: Mhm, and I believe I got away from your question about it being by immigrant librarians but I think I spoke to the structures. Part of your question was also about the structures. So the way this happens is our localized library policy—lowercase p, policy starts to mirror the capital P, National Policy. And then we have this language that we use when we start calling our library members, which I prefer because these are community members, these are library members. Not patrons— but members because that means we are part of the same village. When we start calling them clients and using client-centered language, speaking in terms of return on investment and speaking in terms of proving our value. We start to mimic the structures that cannot explain libraries. Number one we know we're not-for-profit even if we are in for-profit institutions. We're public-facing, we're always funded, oftentimes soft money dependent, often fiduciary funded. We start to follow models that don't fit us, and then run into trouble because we're never going to have the same influence as corporate America. We have a different mission and it starts to confuse our mission and that is when our structures no longer work and are no longer in keeping with who we are.

Israt: I know you already spoke a little bit about the problematic paradigms in relation to service to immigrants in librarians and where these stem from. I know you spoke about that in terms of broader policy and approaches that librarians have towards immigrants, but can you summarize a few of those problematic paradigms for readers who may be unfamiliar?

Ana: For example, one of the things we emphasize so much, especially when it comes to immigrant services is personal capital, especially personal career capital. This is even academic libraries. I want to make a distinction that international students have the experience of immigrants but not quite. They are also a different category. They are considered visitors, not immigrants. So, I am still talking about academic libraries because they do serve immigrant communities. I'm still talking about K-12 libraries. It's not just public libraries, but I do place the onus on public libraries because so many of the services are embedded within them. So, English language courses, career development, career placement, and technology services. Those are often the suite of services to immigrants. Cultural programming too. Heritage Awareness Month. So, what the message is that your labor is valuable to the U.S. and your economic prowess is what really gets you to be a part of the U.S. community. And where we're really

valuing you is in your skills to produce and to work. And what that does is fulfill and satisfy the narrative that immigrants are labor—cheap labor and they're exploitable. And again, we are reducing the immigrant population down to workforce readiness. So, there's so much more.

And then, there is the lack of reciprocity. What can we learn from immigrants? In addition to those services—that's not to say they're not valuable—what else can we have? Can we have human libraries? Can we have World cafes? Can we have purely immigrant-created programming? Can we allow immigrant groups to hold space in our libraries free of cost? Or even for librarians to take part in more external or non-librarian-based initiatives? Can we sit on boards? Our work is so vast and I know we may not have the capacity to do all of this. But, how can we move beyond our library universe to more realistically represent immigrants as more than just labor? And when we just focus on language skills, workforce readiness, and upward mobility as the locus of control we start to then see the humanity behind and the humanity that represents the immigrant population.

And there are great models. Huma Nafasi who runs the New Americans Project at the Hartford Connecticut Public Library. They're the only library in the nation that has USCIS

Certified librarians who can represent immigrants in court and advocate for immigrants in immigration court. They receive those certifications to legally represent immigrants. That's so transformative and progressive. Huma also has a grant from USCIS to create innovation around immigrant inclusion. It's more than those services. How can we invest in immigrant communities? How can we represent them? How can we advocate for them? How can we learn about the policies that are impacting immigrants? Another example is the Denver Public Library. Every month, they send a briefing to their staff on current policy, current U.S. policy. Understanding the immigration law and how it's impacting your local community. As I said very early on, we operate in contextless, removed, comfortable ways of doing things. But, that is context that is so important for anyone who works with immigrant communities. That is another example of librarians changing how they do things and having a realistic understanding of the things impacting immigrant communities.

Israt: It's so wonderful to hear all of these solutions that are being applied throughout the country to kind of unpack some of these problematic paradigms like the context-lessness of how we interact with immigrants in libraries. I wasn't aware of those [solutions], so thank you. You kind of touched on this when talking about financial capital in libraries and how they're funded. I think a point of contention is that libraries and librarians are doing the best they can with the money they have. How do we reconcile with the fact that library budgets are often the first to be cut, but libraries are expected to have the resources and structures to support immigrants?

Ana: You know that's a good question and I'll be brief. I think we can use standards and tools. For example, "Welcome in America" has a welcoming standard that a lot of cities are trying to get certified. Myself and a few other people advocated for libraries to be included in that certified standard. If you want your city to be a model standard for immigrant inclusion, you need to have libraries included in this benchmark and standard. When library services are included as a metric in other municipal guidelines then we can advocate for the funding that we need. So we have these different benchmarks for different fields. If you want your city to be environmentally sound, well libraries should be included in those standards. For certified welcoming cities, there are specific indicators that include libraries. We can use that and say, "Hey mayor, we need this amount of money because our community has this percentage of immigrants and we want to be known as a certified welcome city." So there are other ways to advocate for libraries and get the resources we need. So many expectations are placed upon libraries and librarians and we have to say, "If we're gonna do that, then you need to give us this." So, there are a lot of things not

original to me that we can use to fight for what we need.

Israt: Can you just give a little more context for the Welcome in America program for people who may not know?

Ana: Yeah, it's a weeklong celebration of immigrants called, "Welcoming Week" where long-standing residents welcome people who are newcomers. This is refugees, asylees, [and] migrants. What Welcome in America has done is created a whole toolkit on how we can create welcoming communities. One of these is the welcoming standard 2.0 to define what an immigrant-friendly city does and looks like. It is very robust. What is important now is there are so many public institutions—these institutions are so fraught and low trust. Law enforcement, education, institutions of faith. But, the one institution that holds high public trust is libraries. So we were like why don't you have libraries in this[toolkit]? We are more trusted and believed than this group and that group. So, that is something we can do to demonstrate what we do to communities for low cost or no cost.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE FIELD