

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

Todd Honma

“Racism is ordinary, not aberrational.” So state Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001) in what is now a canonical formulation that functions as one of the key tenets of Critical Race Theory. Throughout the chapters in this book, we see this phrase invoked in many contexts and iterations to highlight the ways in which racism, and whiteness in particular, has come to structure the field of library and information studies (LIS). However, I’d like to pause for a moment and think about how racism is not just ordinary, but *extraordinary*. Extraordinary in its durability, in its capacity to be continually reanimated and recomposed, and in its insistent materialization in various sectors of LIS so easily seen and felt, yet its existence is still questioned and denied. Racism is extraordinary in the way it so centrally, yet so often invisibly, occupies the very “political unconscious” (Jameson 1981) of our field.

The editors of this book, Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. López-McKnight, have strategically assembled this cluster of chapters under the heading “Destroy White Supremacy” to confront “the intersections of race, power, and domination” in LIS institutions and practices. Critical race theory serves as the methodological tool kit to expose and dismantle the way that the current system is set up to reproduce a particular set of social relations, relations that embody and enact the structures of racial domination. Central to this investigation is a critique of whiteness. As Sharon Luk (2018) reminds us, whiteness functions as both an ontological position and an epistemological project. In order for us to mobilize toward a liberatory LIS, we need

to confront how racial ontologies and epistemologies continue to (over)determine the shape and form of librarianship itself.

Each of the chapters in their own unique way gifts us with further insights into how these ontologies and epistemologies function. The chapter by Anastasia Chiu, Fobazi M. Ettarh, and Jennifer A. Ferretti, “Not the Shark, but the Water: How Neutrality and Vocational Awe Intertwine to Uphold White Supremacy,” focuses on how the naturalization of professional values upholds racial regimes, particularly within a white liberal multiculturalist logic that reinscribes societal conceptions of the library as an institution of public good (despite histories that prove otherwise). This form of counterstorytelling unearths the contradictions inherent within American liberal democracy as a racial onto-epistemological project that has worked as much to exclude as it has to include—that is, as Alexander Weheliye (2014) has pointed out, the liberal state’s strategic excising of alternative modes of being and knowing in reverence to what counts as the fully human (i.e., an onto-epistemology of whiteness). The authors here point out how “deep-seated fears of betraying the profession” mute the possibility of critical dialogue and function as a self-perpetuating disciplinary mechanism to maintain the status quo. If such is the case, then perhaps we, as a community dedicated to overthrowing this machinery, need to consider the possibility that betraying the profession is precisely the strategy that is necessary if we are serious about “destroying” White Supremacy.

Counterstorytelling again offers a productive method of critiquing the racial state’s investments in White Supremacy and the systematic destruction of communities of color, as highlighted in Myrna Morales and Stacie Williams’s chapter, “Moving toward Transformative Librarianship: Naming and Identifying Epistemic Supremacy.” By re-narrating and recontextualizing key moments and figures in the history of librarianship, the authors encourage a careful reexamination of the ways in which libraries have actively aided in and colluded with right-wing forces that promoted racial superiority, nativism, xenophobia, and anti-Communism. Learning from this history, the authors advance an alternative paradigm of transformative librarianship. Echoing Clara M. Chu’s (1999) seminal work on transformative information services, the authors call for a librarianship predicated on “collective knowledge building and organizing” and redirecting its attention to the most vulnerable in our communities. In this way, librarianship can combat “epistemic supremacy” and begin to undo the lasting effects of White Supremacy.

At the center of any investigation into whiteness that uses the methodological tools of Critical Race Theory is Cheryl I. Harris’s (1995) foundational work on whiteness as property and the “conscious selections regarding the structuring of social

relations” (280). Harris’s profound insights into the workings of whiteness compel us to recognize that the construction of racial meaning has historically emerged—and continuously reemerges—as a structural formation co-constitutive with US nation building, the territorial expansion of American empire, and racial capitalist development. The goal of destroying White Supremacy, then, routes us on a path to destroying the property relation itself—that is, destroying the system of ownership and control that reproduces relations of domination. In this vein, Jennifer Brown, Nicholae Cline, and Marisa Méndez-Brady’s chapter, “Leaning on Our Labor: Whiteness and Hierarchies of Power in LIS Work,” asks us to think carefully about the political economy of library services—in particular, how the commodification of information, the bureaucratization of diversity efforts, and inequitable distribution of labor seamlessly function to enact changes that don’t actually change anything at all. This “stubborn resistance,” as they call it, is, indeed, both ordinary and extraordinary, impeding the actual work of dismantling systems of oppression. Such a recognition forces us to consider whether a liberatory LIS is even possible within the very system of racial capitalism.

We are living in a particular historical moment in which it is becoming increasingly clear that our current system is failing. And so this is an opportune time to creatively (re)imagine other modes of embodying and enacting our collective ways of being in the world. In other words, we cannot be content with simply “destroying white supremacy.” We must simultaneously be advancing alternative infrastructures and new ways of organizing information, an embrace of various ontologies and epistemologies within what Sandra Harding (2006) might call “a world of information sciences.” Such a move would challenge and destabilize the Euro-American/Western hegemony that has discredited other ways of practicing information services. Miranda Belarde-Lewis and Sarah R. Kostelecky’s chapter, “Tribal Critical Race Theory in Zuni Pueblo: Information Access in a Cautious Community,” provides a glimpse of what this reinvention could look like, as they guide us along a path to understanding specific Indigenous ways of knowing and practicing information services. As the authors make clear, prioritizing the ethics of Zuni information, particularly in regard to the curation and protection of Indigenous knowledge, can run counter to foundational principles of LIS, namely its insistence on access and discoverability. This paradigmatic shift in our understanding of information enacts a particular type of refusal—not simply a refusal to abide by white Western norms, but also a refusal to forget histories of colonial violence, displacement, and genocide that operate under the very logic of discoverability and access: the so-called discovery of

Indigenous lands and imperial access to land, people, and resources that have fueled white settler colonialism and racial capitalism.

Marx likes to remind us that capitalism forges the weapons of its own demise. It is within this context that we must understand racism as being both ordinary and extraordinary, normal and abnormal. Racism's creative capacities in service to systems of capitalism and White Supremacy should instigate those of us fighting for their mutual destruction to be equally creative, if not more so. Cedric Robinson (1996) opens up other vistas of our collective existence when he states, "We are not the subjects or the subject formations of the capitalist world-system. It is merely one condition of our being" (122). Insofar as capitalism and White Supremacy function as a conjoined system to dismantle and eviscerate other onto-epistemological possibilities, the work of critical LIS scholarship is to recover, illuminate, theorize, reenvision, and enact alternative possibilities for a liberatory librarianship, holding on to a utopian promise that the future is always already here in the present.

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This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/11969.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11969.001.0001)

Knowledge Justice

Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory

Edited by: Sofia Y. Leung, Jorge R. López-McKnight

Citation:

Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory

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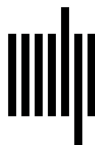
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/11969.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262363204

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2021

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from Arcadia – a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin



The MIT Press

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The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding from Arcadia—a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin.



This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Leung, Sofia Y., editor. | López-McKnight, Jorge R., editor.

Title: Knowledge justice : disrupting library and information studies through critical race theory
/ edited by Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. López-McKnight.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references
and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020028167 | ISBN 9780262043502 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Minorities in library science--United States. | Critical pedagogy--United
States. | Social justice--United States. | Library science--Moral and ethical aspects--United
States. | Information science--Moral and ethical aspects--United States. | United States--Race
relations--Philosophy.

Classification: LCC Z682.4.M56 K58 2021 | DDC 020.89--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020028167>