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## MOVING TOWARD TRANSFORMATIVE LIBRARIANSHIP

### Naming and Identifying Epistemic Supremacy

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As Chiu, Ferretti, and Ettarh explore in chapter 1, librarianship is not neutral. In fact, it is riddled with biases and oppressive acts that have gone unexamined by the profession. By extension, we argue in this chapter that information is not neutral. The biases we hold as human individuals affect every aspect of library work. They affect whom we allow to enter, whom we allow to stay on the premises, the programs and services we offer, the collections we organize, curate, and archive, and most importantly, they affect our colleagues and the people we choose to serve. It is not an accident that librarianship remains predominantly white and gender- and middle class–oppressed, or that its relevance is being questioned in this current moment. As the chapters in this book show, the profession has been undergoing an identity crisis for the past fifty years—using equity, diversity, and inclusion programs to fill the gaps of demographic disparity, as well as expanding the notion of librarianship to include data management and digital scholarship once the bricks-and-mortar model of libraries was perceived to be outdated.

Using Critical Race Theory, this chapter questions the biases that contribute to how scholarly communications work in the profession is executed and how information organization methodologies are weaponized against working-class and poor communities of color. As Matsuda and colleagues (1993) write, “Critical Race Theory is grounded in the particulars of a social reality that is defined by our experiences and the collective historical experience of our communities of origins” (3). CRT was a response to the conditions precipitated by neoliberalism, an economic school of

thought that seeks to erase the collective responsibility to the individual. CRT borrows from other frameworks such as Marxism and feminism, which is necessary because, to paraphrase black womanist writer and former librarian Audre Lorde, nothing is a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives. Though the term *intersectionality* was coined by law professor Kimberlé Williams-Crenshaw, the notion was explored as far back as 1919 in black feminist organizing spaces where race intersected with class, gender, and sexuality, with groups such as the US Communist Party, Chicago's Alpha Suffrage Club, and the Combahee River Collective (Matsuda et al. 1993; McDuffie 2011; Smith 1983).

A CRT scholar seeks to understand the truth of their condition, and through that journey to come to identify all the mechanisms, including *systems of knowledge*, that make systemic oppression function. It behooves us to understand that history is told from the “winning” side (in this case, all those who gain materially from White Supremacy); that forces us to challenge ahistoricism and examine the conditions that we live in thoroughly and unapologetically. Some who embraced a critical race framework for approaching librarianship, such as Lorde and Dorothy Porter (Nunes 2018), offer examples over time of social justice work that allows us to reimagine what librarianship could look like if we addressed the needs of those who are most impacted by the tyranny and fascist conditions of our times: working-class and poor communities of color.

Similarly, we, two class-straddling scholars of color—Black and Puerto Rican women, respectively—with strong ties to working-class communities, introduce to the library and information science profession the concept of epistemic supremacy: a political ideology that facilitates, enables, and upholds the conditions that lead to the destruction of communities of color, particularly working-class and poor Black and Indigenous communities. Utilizing CRT as an important intervention to combat epistemic supremacy, we will discuss ways that librarian methodologies have facilitated community destruction via a lack of the epistemological conversations and training that form librarians' foundational education. Two use cases that provide insight on how library science theories and methodologies are applied to the detriment and destruction of Black and Indigenous communities in the US involve former Federal Bureau of Investigation director J. Edgar Hoover and Mellon family heiress Cordelia Scaife May.

Hoover credited librarianship and its processes to his “success” as the director of the FBI in disrupting or dismantling civil rights organizations and leadership throughout the twentieth century. May used scholarly communication channels and content to facilitate epistemic supremacy by funding and supporting biased and racist research about immigrants. We will examine the ways that Hoover's repression of communities

of color mirrors the ways that librarianship reinforces White Supremacy—an output of epistemic supremacy that uses information to privilege whiteness, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. From there, we will examine the ways that May’s money has supported and sustained the far-right and white nationalist organizations that use epistemically privileged scholarship to manipulate the research life cycle and public opinion. We will close this chapter by defining *transformative librarianship* that can help combat epistemic supremacy.

### EPISTEMIC SUPREMACY MEETS CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. For librarians, epistemology is the *business of information gathering* that helps construct individual and shared knowledge. For example, what assumptions do librarians make about their primary audiences or users when determining programs and collections? How does that programming or collection development inform that community? For instance, if a public library is situated in a neighborhood with a large immigrant population, are there resources available specific to the needs of that community on citizenship processes or social service agencies? Are library staff having or facilitating honest conversations about the dangers that exist for undocumented immigrants in this country, including labor exploitation, physical assault, and state-sanctioned concentration camps for children and infants? Who makes decisions about programming or resources, and how transparent are those decision-making processes to library staff and users? Additionally, what *information* is used to make those decisions? In what ways do libraries facilitate either destruction or healing in communities through their information-as-business model?

These questions outline the concept of epistemic supremacy. For the purposes of this chapter, epistemic supremacy is defined as *societal systems, infrastructures, and knowledge pathways that facilitate and uphold the conditions for tyranny and fascism by destroying any system of knowledge (epistemicide) not controlled by the ruling class as a means of facilitating racial monopoly capitalism*. Epistemic supremacy obscures the best question to be asked in this current cultural moment, which is, “Can (or will) I trust your information?” When the pathways that lead to understanding information are severed, damaged, or corrupted via epistemic supremacy, it stops us from being able to fulfill a central tenet of librarianship: to provide access to accurate, relevant information that creates an informed citizenry to further uphold democratic ideals of freedom.

Epistemic supremacy is like a root, one planted in the base of phenomena such as “sundown towns” and events such as the Wounded Knee Massacre, the Trail of

Tears, and the Great Depression and Great Recession. Those events were triggered by information tainted by epistemic supremacy. Manifest Destiny, a Jacksonian concept and practice grounded in the notion of settler colonialism, destroyed communities of color because settlers' "right" to westward expansion was seen as an objective truth. Epistemic supremacy has roots in the current family separation crisis in the borderlands; the climate crisis; the gentrification and displacement crisis; the disproportionate killings and disappearances of Black and Indigenous people, especially women; and the assault on gender-oppressed bodies. Epistemic supremacy is facilitated through programs such as the US Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), started by Hoover, and more recently, TigerSwan, where Standing Rock water protectors were surveilled by the US government (Brown, Parrish, and Sperti 2017; Goodman 2017). Both of these programs have specifically surveilled Black and Indigenous people who have protested against state infringement on their collective rights. Surveillance programs employed by the government are not a new phenomenon, or even uncommon in the Black community (Browne 2015; Ford 2018; Maxwell 2015; Washington 2015). The harmful impact of these programs on communities of color is still being unraveled today.

The first step to solving a problem is to name it. In Critical Race Theory (CRT), the power to name a problem is essential to solving it. Naming it allows us to offer political analysis or perspective grounded in our experiences of this moment. CRT allows us to identify and isolate epistemic supremacy, because when we actively politicize the LIS field through a recontextualization of history, we see our complicity in enabling the conditions of our current moment.

Critical race theorists and some social scientists hold that racism is pervasive, systemic, and deeply ingrained. Indeed, one aspect of whiteness, according to some Critical Race Theorists, is its ability to seem perspectiveless, or transparent. White people do not see themselves as having a race, but as being, simply, human. They do not believe that they think and reason from a white viewpoint, but from a universally valid one—"the truth"—that everyone knows. We argue that that vantage point is what creates epistemic supremacy (ES), which historically bred and continues to breed pain, destruction, and disequilibrium in our society.

Naming and identifying epistemic supremacy pushes librarian theory and praxis into the spotlight for necessary interrogation across our areas of practice, including collection development, access policies, metadata and description, and physical and digital infrastructure. For instance, in 2015, technical services and metadata librarians, in collaboration with student activists at Dartmouth College, advocated for the

Library of Congress to change the subject heading “Illegal alien” to reflect people-first language that points to a lack of state documentation, replacing a phrase that questions the legitimacy of a human being’s existence. In that instance, college students were the ones interrogating the epistemic supremacy found in Library of Congress Subject Headings—our primary means of making collections discoverable—and worked on behalf of racialized working-class immigrants nationwide to advocate for making the changes that will eventually determine how librarians describe related items or collections. The Policy and Standards Division of the Library changed the heading to “Noncitizen”—a term that does nothing to make visible the humanity of the individual it describes—and changed the heading for the act of residing to “Undocumented immigration.”

Language is at the heart of epistemic supremacy. Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter argues that the language we use to describe ourselves as human has been inextricably linked to Western European notions of “self” as white bourgeois/affluent capitalist. “Self” is defined only in contrast to an existing “Other” who couldn’t possibly be human for lack of being able to express or perform Western bourgeois expectations of what it means to be human. If Self only exists in contrast to an Other, then language is what builds the walls between us before anyone even utters those words (Wynter 2003).

As a profession, we could have taken the opportunity from the LCSH example above to learn more about how librarians use language to support epistemic supremacy and build a workforce that is grounded in solving the political crises of capitalism and fascism. Instead, we are facing a professional endangerment in many ways, none more urgent than the ideas that objective facts are irrelevant; that proven science could be subject to “devil’s advocate” claims by op-ed broadcasters in our media platforms; and that people have learned how to create, use, and manipulate information using the same frameworks that we currently use to organize and free information.

We respectfully engage a redistribution analysis offered by critical race and education theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings, wherein without a redistribution of resources spread across public school systems, inequality will remain and reproduce (Ladson-Billings 1998). Without a commitment to design, or in some cases, redesign, or to redistribute physical and virtual spaces that facilitate epistemological discourse and training for librarians, workers in the GLAM sector (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) will continue to perpetuate the basic inequalities of society and virtually guarantee a white, heteropatriarchal, ableist, capitalist status quo, not just for our users, but for library staff as well.

Information isn't neutral; it is created and shared by human individuals who remain imperfect and hold both implicitly and explicitly biased viewpoints. As librarians, we need to ask how we can respond to our users, who are increasingly being faced with information that cannot be trusted at any point in the creation or dissemination life cycle. Librarians who operate with liberatory methodologies like the ones created by Critical Race Theorists have learned not to trust structures that maintain the status quo, and as a result, they interrogate the roles that librarians play in maintaining epistemic supremacy. If one is not a member of the ruling class, epistemic supremacy creates an ontological crisis that forces them to either assimilate and reproduce negative conditions in society or to go in search of liberatory frameworks found in CRT, to help co-construct their place in this society.

### **J. EDGAR HOOVER, KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION, PRODUCTION, AND APPLICATION**

J. Edgar Hoover was a librarian clerk who became one of the most powerful men in the history of the United States, having accumulated so much power through information gathering and surveillance that he was able to influence US presidents and foreign and domestic policy throughout much of the twentieth century. One of his first jobs, while attending George Washington School of Law, was an entry-level position at the Library of Congress. After college, he was hired at the Justice Department at age twenty-two. In 1919, at age twenty-four, he rose to the head of the FBI's new General Intelligence Division, also known as the "Radical Division," which sought to surveil and disrupt Black nationalist movements and leaders, self-described socialists and feminists, reproductive justice organizers, and anarchists. President Woodrow Wilson's 1919 to 1920 Palmer Raids were a direct result of the Radical Division's surveillance and destabilization measures, and part of a concerted effort to capture and deport Eastern European communists, anarchists, socialists, and leftist labor activists, to stop them from sharing with others concepts that did not align with ruling-class ideologies.

As part of this work, he immediately started building a working library that would be his personal ready reference collection on radicalism and radical movements. During his time at the Library of Congress, one of his first tasks was replacing handwritten catalogs with mechanically reproducible printed cards with the aforementioned Library of Congress Subject Headings. Hoover also borrowed from aspects of the Library of Congress cataloging system to create a filing system that he boasted was unparalleled by any other system of organizing. Features such as "multidirectional

cataloguing, ... each item receiving a unique code, a generic classification and all pertinent cross references” helped build an early, analog type of algorithm for systematic extraction of “radical texts” (Maxwell 2015). For Hoover, “literary language in and of itself performed political action,” and as a result, the Bureau needed tools for a working library and librarians (50).

LIS scholarship has yet to examine the impact of J. Edgar Hoover’s use of library and information classification skills on democracy in this country, though considerable evidence exists of the ways that he applied systems and cataloging knowledge to developing the FBI’s extensive surveillance operations and practice of civil rights and privacy violation. In a 1951 letter referencing his former position, Hoover wrote, “This job... trained me in the value of collating material. It gave me an excellent foundation for my work in the FBI where it has been necessary to collate information and evidence” (FBI 2012). Library science curriculum around the time that Hoover received it had just shifted emphasis from types of libraries (academic vs. public vs. government) to specific library services or tasks such as “abstracting and indexing... cataloging and classification” (Richardson 2010, 3). This would prove to be invaluable to Hoover’s job at the FBI, as he used this library science foundation to create filing and archiving systems designed to destroy and destabilize Black and Indigenous communities and all those deemed to be “radical”—those who are considered part of the revolutionary Left today (Maxwell 2015).

One of Hoover’s first programs was hiring FBI “ghostreaders” to monitor the literature created in various Black communities for information about radical organizers (Maxwell 2015). Because Hoover saw the written word as equal to direct political action, he saw his responsibility as protecting the US from the radical Left. This system created and targeted Black literary, entertainment, and activist figures such as Marcus Garvey, Lorraine Hansberry, and Paul Robeson. Under Hoover, the FBI also targeted numerous rights- or identity-based organizations during the Civil Rights movement from the 1920s through the 1970s, infiltrating groups as varied as the US Communist Party, the American Indian Movement, the Black Panther Party, the Puerto Rican Young Lords, La Raza, and the Weathermen, in order to stop them from sharing radical and liberatory ideas with others. The disruption of the Panthers was especially damaging, because it disrupted an intergenerational exchange of liberatory theories and praxis via works such as the Panthers’ free breakfast program for children (Taylor 2017).

The ghostreaders were joined by ghostwriters in Hoover’s Crime Records and Communication Division, who were responsible for writing personal correspondence to US journalists throughout the 1940s and signing Hoover’s name, in hopes of swaying

the media toward favorable coverage of the Bureau and its practices. Hoover was so successful with this ruse that in 1950, the American Civil Liberties Union's own general counsel Morris Ernst defended the FBI in *Reader's Digest*, a widely read mainstream publication that went into homes across America. That a lawyer for the ACLU would write that the FBI has a "magnificent record of respect for individual freedom" (1950), based on what he believed to be a personal friendship with Hoover, and then document that conflict of interest in his article, would be shocking if we didn't understand as librarians how easily biased information can alter public opinion, which is the point of epistemic supremacy. It seeks to establish biased, racialized information as fact and gains legitimacy through widespread dissemination across all media platforms.

By the time Hoover enacted COINTELPRO in 1956, he had amassed more than thirty years of surveillance literature to target and abuse communities considered a threat to the capitalist status quo, including clergy who were civil rights organizers, as well as members of the LGBTQIA community. It wasn't just the existence of these organizations that made them dangerous to Hoover's FBI; they were producing their own knowledge, sharing it widely, and altering public opinion. Hoover also had his ghostwriters create and send surveillance literature or correspondence to undermine civil rights organizers and their interpersonal relationships, as with the anonymous letters and phone calls to Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King, detailing the former's extramarital affairs (Gage 2014; Maxwell 2015). Hoover also targeted Black independent bookstores across the country in order to identify Black "extremists." Librarians need to interrogate the fact that someone trained in their methodologies and processes used those same methodologies and processes to violate individuals' civil rights and destabilize marginalized communities through a surveillance and disruption program.

Hoover's actions are an example of the damage that can be wrought when individuals who are invested in epistemic supremacy have access to bureaucratic infrastructure, finances, and policies to scale up harm in a way that has been devastating to working-class and poor communities of color. For instance, Holy Week Uprisings immediately following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in places such as Chicago's West Side, Newark, Detroit, Memphis, Pittsburgh, and more than 100 other cities caused damages of nearly \$81 million (adjusted for 2015 inflation; Levy 2018). Over the past forty years those communities have lost billions of dollars in resources and development, which impacted property values and public schools, leading to population losses of People of Color when those blighted neighborhoods began gentrifying in the 1990s; this has continued through to the present (Levy 2018).



Critical race theorist Audre Lorde, who worked for a time as a librarian at Barnard College, described the concept of *vulnerability theory* in *The Cancer Journals* (1990), which identifies all people as “embodied creatures” who are susceptible to harm and notes that people with marginal identities are especially vulnerable to institutional harms. Much of her argument was situated in the context of the health-care system, but it is relevant across other US institutions. Harm is compounded in working-class and low-income communities of color because of our disproportionate involvement with institutions (legal, education, health care, social services, among others), all of which subject those communities to pervasive and long-term surveillance.

Surveillance and privacy pose unique threats to both library staff and users, and while the profession’s governing bodies have made statements or signed letters of support, our inconsistencies leave vulnerable populations at considerable risk of harm.

The last major initiative advocating for patron privacy and antisurveillance measures was updated on September 30, 2004, when the American Library Association (ALA) took a position against the Patriot Act and any related policies that explicitly or implicitly placed libraries in a position to violate patron privacy. However, the organization, which purports to represent the largest number of information professionals in the country, did not take a hard position on bills such as the Anti-Terrorism Intelligence Tools Improvement Act, which would have allowed secret surveillance and searches of individuals without any evidence of connection to a foreign government or terrorist group; and the Civil Liberties Restoration Act of 2004, which would have mandated reports of data-mining activities conducted by the government, ensured due process for detained individuals, and ended secret deportation hearings.

In this example, we see how librarians and our professional organizations or governing/legislative bodies can make decisions that uphold frameworks of White Supremacy instead of facilitating healing for those being harmed. And to the world outside of librarianship or other GLAM spaces, our governing or professional association bodies purport to speak on our behalf or express our collective values. Our words—that we value privacy, intellectual freedom, and individual and collective civil rights—are frequently inconsistent with our actions (Yousefi 2017). Our professional organizations across GLAM spaces encourage diversity and inclusion, yet continue to hold space for groups who perpetuate harm, such as transphobic lecturers or white nationalists who wish to use public library space for organizing. We purport to care deeply about special collections, rare books, and archives, yet we have buttressed archives/rare book/special collections professions with internships, term jobs, and soft money. We build spaces where some of our users and staff can’t even access

collections because stacks in our legacy buildings do not accommodate wheelchairs or lack ADA-compliant doors and doorways.

In what ways does our silence uplift the whiteness of information? In what ways does our silence facilitate White Supremacy in word and deed?

### **CORDELIA SCAIFE MAY: MANIPULATING THE RESEARCH LIFE CYCLE**

Cordelia Scaife May was a private individual who initially had few solid connections in government but who also understood how to use scholarly publishing to create and share incredibly harmful information about immigrant communities of color. That information has had a direct and catastrophic impact on current immigration and deportation policies. In our second case study, we bear witness to her work and understand that how we legitimize information as librarians and information management professionals is in large part responsible for the wide dissemination of the research she funded.

May was a member of the Mellon family—the same philanthropic family that built public libraries all over the country and which continues to fund libraries, archives, and other cultural heritage programs across the country. May utilized her enormous wealth—estimated at around \$800 million during the mid-twentieth century—to fund scholarly research that supported anti-immigration, eugenics, racism, xenophobia, forced sterilization, and white nativism in the form of white papers, funded studies, and op-eds in both scholarly and mainstream media publications. An August 2019 article by the *New York Times* detailed how the incredibly secretive heiress identified organizations that supported her positions, drawing clear links between that financial support and the work those organizations continue to do to create research that overwhelmingly supports a white-only America (Kulish and McIntire 2019).

May was originally a supporter of Planned Parenthood and Margaret Sanger, specifically Sanger's goal of helping women prevent unwanted pregnancies. By 1973, her interest in abortion access had turned toward using abortion as immigrant "population control," to which she felt incoming immigrants should be subjected to help keep immigration numbers down. According to Kulish and McIntire, May resigned from the Planned Parenthood board at the end of that year, surprising her fellow board members and Planned Parenthood leadership. Her obsession with immigration numbers revealed more xenophobic roots. "The U.S. should seal its border" with Mexico, she had her top aide write to the head of the US Population Council that same year (Kulich and MacIntire 2019).

With her fortune hidden behind her philanthropic arm, Colcom Foundation, May bankrolled three organizations that later became central to current anti-immigration

platforms and policies: the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), NumbersUSA, and the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS). According to Kulish and McIntire, FAIR alone received \$56.7 million between 2005 and 2017. A data visualization that accompanied the *Times* article showed that Trump administration advisor Stephen Miller and former Trump administration attorney general Jeff Sessions (2017–2018) are longtime FAIR supporters. From the investigation:

Restrictionist groups she financed have blocked attempts at amnesties and immigration reform bills in Congress over the years. They fought for Proposition 187 in California to deny education, routine health care and other public services to undocumented immigrants; they argued against in-state tuition for the children of undocumented workers in Utah. They supported “show me your papers” laws in Arizona and Georgia and draconian local ordinances in Hazleton, Pa., and Farmers Branch, Tex. (Kulish and McIntire 2019)

Each of these organizations—FAIR, CIS, and NumbersUSA—is listed as being a legitimate source of information in numerous academic library LibGuides found on the library websites of public universities, private universities, Ivy League schools, R1 schools, small liberal arts colleges, universities with a focus on STEM, schools that are part of the Big Ten Academic Alliance (which shares collections and resources), and community colleges. A cursory web search using the DuckDuckGo search engine and the terms *FAIR + immigration + LibGuide* returned hundreds of results of LibGuides identifying these organizations as “independent” or “nonpartisan” sources of information.

The causes May supported created media and communication that exemplify epistemic supremacy—that is, the work and organizations support a vision of our world where white people have the only lives that matter. The policies enacted under that specific vision mean that epistemic supremacy can be directly linked to ICE raids in immigrant communities that separate children from parents, or borderland concentration camps housing weeks-old babies. These are policies borne of epistemic supremacy as it appeared in administration policy briefings, comprised of information gathered from conspiracy theory racists’ websites like Alex Jones’s *InfoWars* and *Breitbart News*, and prepared for the current presidential administration to bolster many of its immigration policies.

## ES AND SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING

The scholarly communication channels May exploited have been a part of academic librarianship nearly from the beginning, when the first peer-reviewed journal was published in 1731 by the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Over the decades, as services evolved, academic libraries have created full-time positions whose sole job is to address

scholarly communication topics such as open access, journal publishing, copyright, dissertation work, and research dissemination. Librarians create programming that introduces faculty and students to institutional repositories where their published journal articles can live free outside of vendor paywalls. This work is usually grounded in both a university's and a library's respective missions to provide access to scholarly research and pedagogy that will help create informed citizens of the future. But librarians should interrogate a model of creation and dissemination of scholarly output that can be so easily co-opted by someone with an agenda that runs on the marginalization, sterilization, and displacement of working-class Black and Brown immigrants.

May's continued support of organizations that held particularly noxious views on immigration absolutely created institutional harms for vulnerable populations. FAIR, CIS, and NumbersUSA have had staff over the years whose scholarly work (e.g., white papers, data collection and analysis, peer-reviewed journal articles) has led lawmakers to create policies that determine how immigrants are received, where they can work, live, send their children to school, receive further education, and receive government funding for food and housing. These organizations are not subtle about how they feel about immigrants, especially those from countries and continents in the Global South. The rhetoric against them has been cited as inspirational by people who have committed violent acts against People of Color, people experiencing homelessness, and people who may simply share an ethnic group, religion, or sexual identity with those identified through ES as an Other, a not-human.

At the time of this writing, the most recent mass shooting tied to White Supremacy or White Supremacist rhetoric involved a gunman who killed twenty-two people and wounded twenty-six others at a Walmart in August 2019. His manifesto declared that he was "targeting Mexicans." Trump and his administration used language that was degrading and racially charged from the start of his candidacy, likely emboldened by public support for his bigotry. And in 2018, while reconsidering countries that could retain temporary protected status, Trump referred to Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries as "shitholes," and then asked why the US doesn't have more immigrants coming from Norway. The language is the wall. The language that *others* immigrants of color and other marginalized communities is the same language found in white papers produced by FAIR and NumbersUSA. It's the same language that likely helped draw May to her conclusions that the US would be a better place if there were fewer immigrants, or that the ones who were here should be forcibly sterilized.

May also funded book publishing that espoused epistemic supremacy. A second philanthropic arm that she administered funded the Institute for Western Values to translate a French novel, *The Camp of the Saints* by Jean Raspail. The novel about

European immigration is used by white nationalists as a key foundational text for their views, and it was frequently cited by Trump's former advisor Steve Bannon as the seed for many of the policies that came out of the Trump administration in 2017, such as the travel ban and trade tariffs (Kulich and MacIntire 2019).

Bannon himself was formerly the executive director of *Breitbart News*, a website featuring far-right or openly racist views, which frequently published misleading or inaccurate stories, or conspiracy theories that paint working-class and poor People of Color as inherently criminal and undeserving of civil rights or policies that affirm their humanity and dignity. An October 5, 2017, *Buzzfeed* investigation revealed a cache of emails between Bannon and one of his most influential employees, Milo Yiannopoulos, who worked to intentionally thread White Supremacist rhetoric and ideals into *Breitbart*.

As an editor, Yiannopoulos published pieces such as “Birth Control Makes Women Unattractive and Crazy” and breaking news such as “Satanic Temple Joins Planned Parenthood in Pro-Abortion Crusade.” He leveraged deep connections between online alt-right and white nationalist writers to keep *Breitbart* trending, making money and also headlines in mainstream media for their incendiary content. *Buzzfeed's* investigation revealed that Yiannopoulos had allies in more traditional and even left-leaning media such as *Broadly*—a Vice Media vertical that promised a feminist exploration of news items relevant to and inclusive of all women—and *Slate.com* (owned by the Washington Post Company). Digital media thrives on content; Yiannopoulos's *Breitbart* stories would get picked up by mainstream publications that reported them as jokes or carnival curiosities, which distributed those stories even further via the “clickbait” articles that *Breitbart* sought to legitimize.

These connections illuminate a broken research life cycle with horrific implications—one that begins with the policy papers supported by May's philanthropy and that continues to flourish, assisted by media outlets that tend to cover such ideas and individuals with a mix of fascination and subtle allegiance, or that choose to repeat or reprint inaccuracies or biases without challenging them. Librarians then must wade through even more bad information in order to best serve patrons, as these ideas become amplified across digital platforms.

## LIMITATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY LIBRARIANSHIP

Critical Race Theory is not needed to decode the work of openly racist or nativist anti-immigration groups, but it provides useful solutions to figuring out how to keep it out of mainstream discourse. Lorde, in one of her most often quoted speeches,

published in *Sister Outsider*, said that using “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984). The spirit of intellectual rigor in academia, and in academic libraries, encourages the idea that *everything* is subject to debate, even people’s humanity, civil rights, and freedom.

Librarians committed to interrogating epistemic supremacy or mitigating its presence in our collections, services, and staff can’t look to academia as the place where those biases will be debunked. If anything, because higher education is an institution with its own set of generally conservative values, working-class BIPOC information professionals are at risk of great institutional harm for speaking out about racist or offensive materials. *The Scholarly Kitchen*, a peer-moderated blog for people involved in scholarly publishing, published in 2018 a series of comments by People of Color in scholarly publishing. Employees who work in book or journal publishing spoke of low morale, targeted workplace bullying, microaggressions, and racialized disrespect.

Considering the ways that these two persons, J. Edgar Hoover and Cordelia Scaife May, were able to affect the lives of millions of working-class and poor communities of color, sexual minorities, clergy, and radical activists who supported movements of equality, we understand that readers may be ready to throw their hands up at the possibility of confronting institutions where epistemic supremacy is embedded in the very fabric of its work and policies. Both use cases also offer instructive observations for how we have created or reproduced oppressive conditions for our users in both public and academic libraries. Librarians are grappling with pervasive surveillance, not just from our government but also from our vendors—those who wish to extract our data and those who want to sell to us based on our data, our lived experiences. Increased use of technology in our profession in turn increases the privacy risks for staff and patrons, as people who design technology seek to capture more of our offline worlds for profit. Users may experience institutional harm, sometimes through interaction with a vendor’s profit-seeking paywall, which denies users access to important scientific information. Our information-seeking processes mean that we as staff may have to submit to those potential harms while interrogating the provenance of our data; for instance, archivists have to process collections that include or document details of traumatic harm to marginalized individuals or communities in order to simply conduct the basic functions of their jobs (Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas 2019). Librarians have to submit to the harms of epistemic supremacy in the form of literature reviews to determine if we indeed can or will trust the information being given to us.

To librarians who wish to counteract the propaganda that undergirds our culture and democratic institutions, we offer the solution of transformative librarianship,

with examples that explore how we can create the conditions for political resistance to epistemic supremacy across the profession.

## TRANSFORMATIVE LIBRARIANSHIP AS PRACTICE

We have named our problem. Epistemic supremacy, as expressed across our staff, services, and collections, serves to uphold the white ruling class and White Supremacy as status quo. While we can use CRT as a tool to identify this content or the channels through which the information flows, the next step to making meaningful change must be aligning our LIS methodology with working-class or poor Black or Indigenous communities of color—knowing that in centering that group, we could create the conditions for radical change.

Critical race theorists encourage education and communication with each other. The Combahee River Collective coalesced as a study group that together explored feminist, communist, and other radical texts, challenging ideas found inside and then coming to a collective understanding of politics that centered around Black working-class and poor women, or women in the Global South. However, that collective understanding was not a fixed, static notion of justice. Combahee's statement committed the group to a "collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice" (Smith 1983).

Library workers, especially those in academia, have to embrace collective knowledge building and organizing in order to change their conditions and create the conditions for those they work with to organize around information and concepts that are accurate and relevant and that challenge or negate epistemic supremacy. Beyond group chats, social media platforms have become organizing and information-sharing spaces among librarians of color. The Libraries We Here group, for example, started by Jennifer Ferretti, Jennifer Brown, and Charlotte Rock, notably offers specific job support around best practices for library résumés and interviews, and answers questions around professional development and technical skilling up. This is critical assistance because "the current librarian job market solicits performance" of whiteness "and creates barriers to entry in three ways: cultural negotiation, conspicuous leisure, and access to wealth" (Galvan 2015).

Labor and union organizing in library and other cultural heritage spaces reflects an acknowledgement that the field excludes far more people than it includes by

structuring employment around modes of privilege and mobility: unreimbursed travel to distant cities for interviews; unpaid internships; jobs where the entry-level salaries rarely cover the nearly six-figure price tag of obtaining a master's degree in library and information science. By supporting GLAM sector unions, we create the conditions that allow more low-income and working-class People of Color to participate in those fields. Jobs that allow everyone equal opportunities for professional development and continuing education and that might center the material needs of working-class or poor BIPOC help create a workforce that can respond forcefully to epistemic supremacy. For example, could we create alternatives to the invoice/reimbursement model of most professional development opportunities, where workers are shouldering the burdens of costs that their institutions can usually cover upfront? These are ways that librarians can transform the work of librarianship and the business of information toward one that is centered in equitable labor practices and services and away from one that centers privilege and precarity.

Seeding those individuals in jobs all over the library, such as in cataloging or technical services, digital infrastructure, and collection development—not just in an ethnic studies collecting area or on a temporary grant project focused on “hidden collections” of underrepresented materials—means that there are more people bringing different ways of knowing to our interactions with vendors who don't understand or respect privacy; to our physical spaces, where we can interrogate the unique institutional harms we perpetuate on underrepresented or unaffiliated researchers when they access our spaces and electronic collections, especially, while also asking, open access, but for whom?; and to our service models, where we can create programming that is inclusive of humanity but that does not further harm, erase, or diminish working-class communities of color. And to be clear, there are some initiatives that do center our most vulnerable communities. Large public library systems in Chicago, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Cleveland, and Washington, DC, to name a few, have gone fine-free or created automatic renewals to remove barriers to access that would have disproportionately hit working-class or poor communities of color harder, but now the *entire* community of library users benefits.

Access to information is a basic human right. The role of library workers has been to help patrons access the information they desire. While technology has altered how that is accomplished, the basic function of a librarian remains the same, and understanding that role is critical in this era of mis/disinformation, no matter if you are working in technical services, facilitating instructional workshops, or providing reference assistance. But we still do not show collective solidarity for those who are



most affected by epistemic supremacy: working-class and poor communities of color. The profession makes little room to learn with and from those communities in ways that are actually meaningful and useful to them. Professional library workers who understand what is happening in this current moment may be protecting themselves from racism, sexism, or other oppression in the workplace, or they may show apathy derived from exhaustion or privilege toward their colleagues. As a result, our profession is slow to rise to the challenge that our country has always faced, which is to *acknowledge* the true pain and destruction of colonialism and White Supremacy.

Transformative librarianship seeks to understand how information fosters our self-awareness while at the same time holding an awareness of the community to which we belong. These librarians lean into discomfort, sometimes running toward it, because they see pain and know that within their grasp lies information that may be able to help alleviate it. These librarians go where the problems are and serve the people who are most affected by the harms created by cisheteropatriarchy, White Supremacy, xenophobia, ableism, and capitalism. They go there because that's where real information and real solutions can be unearthed. These librarians understand that democracy is praxis. These librarians are political actors. They work every day to engage with truth and facilitate trust.

Transformative librarianship is a pathway that could allow us to fully lean into our purpose of transforming and upholding libraries as the cornerstone of democracy. But it can only be achieved by recognizing epistemic supremacy as a framework being used to dismantle working-class and poor communities of color. We need a commitment to dismantling that epistemic supremacy, and to challenging it and ourselves at every turn.

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# Knowledge Justice

## Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory

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