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COUNTERSTORIED SPACES AND UNKNOWNNS

A Queer South Asian Librarian Dreaming

Vani Natarajan

The minimal attention to QOCs across a number of scholarly discourses in educational literature speaks to a politics of knowledge production which, intentionally or not, has reproduced QOC invisibility. Naming and disrupting that politics will be essential if educational researchers truly want to make room for QOC critique.

—Ed Brockenbrough

For library workers of color, and especially for those of us who are trans, nonbinary, queer, and/or gender nonconforming, finding ourselves in the literature and discourse of librarianship can feel like a fruitless process. Maybe it's also an endlessly exciting quest. What happens when we name our truths and theorize them? I imagine the most generative aspects of this journeying in the ways we might find, see, hear, and hold space for each other as QTPOC—queer and trans People of Color. Our words for our identities, experiences, and communities move far beyond the legibility of that acronym. What new language can we find, and make, to name both our lived experiences and what we dream about?

In this essay, I am trying to address what Critical Race Theorist Edward Brockenbrough provokes us to consider in the opening quote (Brockenbrough 2016, 291). How do interpretive and analytical lenses of Critical Race Theory help me narrate and make meaning from my experiences as a queer South Asian American librarian? How can we use CRT as praxis, to center the experiences, lives, and futures of queer and trans People of Color in libraries?

I write this essay for People of Color. At the heart of it, I am holding space for queer, trans, and gender nonconforming People of Color. Readers, I have an agenda, a QTPOC agenda. I want my agenda to be responsive to and shaped by other QTPOC, regardless of our relationships with or connections to libraries. I want to be in conversation about the strategies we have used, or could use, that are what Edward Brockenbrough describes as both “self-making and space navigating” (2015, 32).

How do I situate myself? I am a South Asian American with US citizenship privilege, with parents who migrated from India to the United States. I am both a non-Black Person of Color and a settler of color. I name these positionalities, recognizing that the violent and oppressive histories and continuation into the present of settler colonialism and enslavement of Black people are foundational to racial formation in the United States. I come from a Tamil Indian family that, as *savarna* (caste-privileged) Hindus, has for many generations in their home country, as well as in the United States, benefitted from access to resources and power, at the expense of Dalit and other caste-oppressed people. Having *savarna* heritage protects me from being subjected to the anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit violence to which much of the South Asian population (diasporic and in the region) is vulnerable. I am queer, femme, and nonbinary, and my pronouns are they/them. I move through the world as someone who often gets read as a cis Brown woman.

I ground my use of personal narrative in Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso’s method of counterstorytelling, defined by the authors as a practice of critical race methodology (2002). In order to practice counterstorytelling, we need to understand, and push back on, White Supremacist “master narratives” about People of Color. Among the forms these take are social scientific literature defining People of Color according to a set of perceived and presumed “deficits” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 30). Deficit narratives get used to justify inequality and forced assimilation of students of color into dominant, white, class-privileged culture. They keep us from accessing knowledge about our communities and histories in our schools—all in the name of “helping” People of Color, even “saving” us from ourselves.

What majoritarian stories about QTPOC circulate in film media, literature, and other forms? One is that we don’t exist, or that our gender and sexual identities eclipse our racialized ones (or vice versa), rather than being intimately intertwined. So often, LGBTQ+ people are assumed as white, or mostly white. I also see a “sidekick” trope applied to many QTPOC, that we exist solely to affirm and uplift the white, cis, and/or straight people around us. Rarely do we get to see depictions of QTPOC in relationship with one another. I notice prevailing narratives that characterize

QTPOC lives as defined by suffering and abjection. As I mention this, I don't want to erase the ways that structural impacts of racism, homophobia, and transphobia leave QTPOC vulnerable to so much oppression and violence. Yet, I wonder what it means that QTPOC joy, collective resistance, and world making can so often get overlooked, especially in academia.

Solórzano and Yosso usefully outline three possible forms of counterstorytelling: personal stories or narratives; other people's stories or narratives; and composite stories. Their definition of personal stories resonates the most with what I hope to do: "Personal stories or narratives recount an individual's experiences with various forms of racism and sexism. Often, these personal counter-stories are autobiographical reflections of the author, juxtaposed with their critical race analysis of legal cases and within the context of a larger sociopolitical critique" (2002, 32). In the personal narrative counterstory that I share with you, I use my own memory and historical documents (from personal journal entries to official library policy text) as primary sources, to revisit my experiences as a queer Person of Color in higher education and academic libraries. In this counterstory, I employ several Critical Race Theory lenses to analyze my experiences in librarianship.

I organize my counterstory in two parts: first, an account of my experiences as an undergraduate student at a small liberal arts college library in the late 1990s; next, my experiences as an academic librarian decades later. I consider these "both sides," as someone who remembers navigating a college library as a student and later as a librarian. Following these narrative sections, I will move into interpretation, revisiting my own narrative using three CRT frameworks: community cultural wealth, intersectionality, and queer of color critique.

GETTING LOST IN SPACE: 1997–2001

In the fall of 1997, I begin attending Swarthmore College. At the Tri-College pre-orientation program for students of color, I spend days in the company of other students of color, developing language around identity, racism, whiteness, privilege, South Asianness. I can finally speak candidly about growing up Brown in majority-white schools. Once TriCo ends and the academic year at Swarthmore begins, I am thrown into dizzying and much less supportive terrain.

I don't have a map for navigating "coming out." No one in my family of origin, as far as I know yet, is queer. No one from the tight-knit Indian American community in Virginia where I have grown up, as far as I know, is queer. Thus far, only one book

I have read depicts a queer South Asian character: Karim Amir, the Pakistani British bisexual teenage narrator of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*. I reread the novel many times from the age of sixteen onward. It becomes an important imaginative space, but its London setting feels so far away from the small southern Virginia town where I grow up.

For many college students, the library is a workspace. But for me, it is a space to wander, procrastinate, and seek inspiration outside of what has been prescribed. Roaming the stacks, I feel as though I am making up for lost time. I'm anxious to see myself reflected. Anxious because the promise of that reflection feels at once joyful and scary. Will my reflection be just as excited to greet me?

On one of the few occasions where I seek out the support of a librarian at the Swarthmore library (because I am usually too intimidated), I ask for research help. I am writing a paper on the Asian American student movement, for my history of social movements class. I connect to this history; learning about the Asian American movement from a close friend of mine, who grew up in NYC's Chinatown, I know that Asian American student activists organized in solidarity with Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students to bring about ethnic studies in California. The white librarian with whom I speak seems skeptical that I'll find much. They set me up at a workstation with a database. I can't remember what I type in. Later, my friend Lena, the one who taught me about the Asian American movement, suggests a book. Among this text and its citation trails, I find a strong web of sources.

My white professor, a historian of feminism, is not happy with my paper. She writes in her comments that there isn't enough material on the Asian American movement for a whole paper, and I should have picked a different topic. I am disheartened and frustrated. I wonder how people come to know the things they know. Is my professor correct? (So much later evidence proves her wrong.)

How might my experience have differed if I had gotten to talk with a queer librarian of color? Maybe they would have expressed excitement about my research and shared a story about their interest in Asian American and/or other BIPOC- and LGBTQ-led movements of the era and their mutual connections. Even if we found a dearth of sources, we could analyze the silences. Maybe I could have challenged my professor's dismissive response to my research.

In second semester, I take an English class on Asian American theater and performance studies. I can't believe I get to take this elective my first year (there are otherwise no Asian American studies classes in the English department). My professor is queer, Filipinx, and brilliant. He doesn't lecture at us; he poses questions. He asks us

to split into groups and create questions for each other. We learn about racist tropes and stereotypes that Asian folks have navigated in the Americas for centuries. Asian American performance artists, filmmakers, and playwrights have counterappropriated dominant images to make a powerful statement and reclaim the gaze. We call out fetishization in art, and these conversations spill into dining hall talk. We go to the Asian Arts Initiative to watch Justin Chin perform spoken-word poetry. The rage, wit, and tenderness of Justin's voice and words stay with me long after the performance. I get my copy of *Bite Hard* signed.

As I reflect on my own navigation of space as a queer South Asian American college student in the late nineties and early aughts, I am struck by a through-line of getting lost. Private liberal arts colleges were not, and still are not, designed with the well-being of queer and trans People of Color in mind. This lack of support frequently left me feeling bewildered, and searching for support. Getting lost could also be a site of agency, in wandering outside of prescribed paths to find community. It's telling that the unforgettable Justin Chin reading I attended was off campus—certain feelings, experiences, and connections become more possible when we leave the limits of academia.

TRANSFORMING SPACE: LIBRARY PROGRAMS

When I am hired at Barnard College Library in 2011, I become the only librarian of color in an otherwise all-white unit. From 2011 to 2018, I remain the only librarian of color in the Personal Librarians division of Barnard Library. In my first year, I mention to a white colleague that Barnard needs to address the whiteness of its hiring. She responds by telling me, "I don't think you should say that. According to HR, you're not allowed to state a hiring preference on the basis of race."

When, in 2014, I organize a reading for two amazing Asian Canadian trans writers, Vivek Shraya and Elisha Lim, I share copies of the flyer, with author-designed artwork, at a staff meeting. A white coworker scoffs in distaste at the intricately designed drawings and text—"Well, that's very loud!" No one counteracts this response with anything like an affirmation. I try to make up for the apathy by owning all of my enthusiasm for this event I am working so hard to plan. I feel absurd and alone in my excitement, as if I am cheering at a wall. Later, I close my office door and let the tears fall. I imagine an alternate universe, where I could share with coworkers, unapologetically, the joy I feel about the projects I am pursuing. Instead of needing to find a campus event space outside the mandated quiet of the library, we would be able to take up space *inside* of it.

I text my partner, my friends, calling on the networks of support that exist outside of my job. They help me reconstruct the narrative. Yes, my white coworker may have meant to diminish the event and my work in promoting it as “loud,” as clashing with the library and its appropriate tenor and atmosphere. Should I feel ashamed? I rejoice in the loudness—how powerful to take up space in these small but significant ways!

I wonder how I measure my “success” at centering QTPOC voices and lives in my work. If success could even be a measurable outcome. To whom am I accountable? Can this work truly be done if it’s just one person doing it?

In October of that year, I connect with queer and trans groups on Barnard and Columbia campus, among them Barnard/Columbia Proud Colors, a group for QTPOC students. I run across campuses, posting flyers for Vivek and Elisha’s reading wherever I can. The night of the event, October 21, 2014, I prepare a speech to introduce the authors. Those words later get published in a write-up on Lambda Literary’s site:

Vivek and Elisha’s new books make me want to do the impossible: go back in time so that they could have been a part of my life when I was a much younger queer South Asian girl dizzily searching the library stacks to find books that could tell me more, in images and words, about being queer and brown, histories of migration, myths passed down from generation to generation and communities: ones that are already so close to us, ones we wish for. (quoted in Kerr 2015)

The event is so much more than a reading: it features screenings of Elisha’s drawings, Vivek’s film, musical performance, and a table with books and artwork for sale. I recognize students, as well as other folks from beyond the colleges. Two queer South Asian youth show up right after the reading has ended, and Vivek gives them a personal mini-singing performance, a cappella, incorporating classical Indian and contemporary pop vocal styles in a gorgeous melody. The room bubbles with excitement as the night wraps up, with many lingering in conversation. Vivek and Elisha tell me that they have been invited to hang out with Proud Colors afterward. Hugging them, I say thanks for a beautiful night.

The audience did not fill all of the chairs. I estimate about twenty or so people attended. I reflect now that attendance numbers can’t measure success. I also struggle with a lack of “evidence” of that gathering and its impact on people, the absence of impressive figures. What I do know: these events live in us, and become spaces we return to—not necessarily even geographical ones, but ones we co-create. They allow us to value the power of more intimate acts of community building. This has, in turn, helped me carve out space to build connections with my QTPOC colleagues at the library, and with QTPOC working at other libraries. Whether we are collaborating on a task or bonding over coffee off campus, these connections sustain me.

CLAIMING SPACE: COLLECTIONS

Along with dynamic and memorable spaces created through programs and events, I engage with library space every day through the development of collections. The responsibility entrusted to librarians, to select books that students and other library visitors will turn to for research and inquiry, shapes and reshapes library space in pronounced ways. Decades and decades of collection development preceded me as I entered my role as primary selector for humanities and global studies at the Barnard College Library. The legacy of those decisions still leaves traces in rows of book stacks, organized within the framework of the Library of Congress Classification system. That system, itself in service to the US government, bolsters a nation-state founded in the ongoing theft of Indigenous land, violence against Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color, xenophobia, and imperialism. In 2011, my first year of work at the Barnard College Library, the library's general statement on its collections, then reflected on the website, began:

The approximate 300,000 volume circulating book collection is intended to serve the Barnard College curriculum. With strength in women's studies, dance, art, and literature, the collections are built and actively managed in collaboration with the Barnard faculty. Books are arranged according to the Library of Congress classification system and are located on the second and third floors of the library. (Barnard Library 2011)

This language set the tone for the collection, and it obscured a lot. A close read of these sentences uncovers some telling patterns.

First, there is a glaring absence of the active voice. The statement lists many verbs (serve, managed, built, arranged) without subjects. Who is building and maintaining the collection? On one hand, librarians select titles for the collection. But theirs is just one part of the labor that goes into building and maintaining it. Circulation and operations workers—among them, access specialists, reserves coordinators, and student circulation desk workers—do essential, daily collections work. Most of Barnard Library's staff of color have worked in these areas. They also get no recognition in the above statement for their work. The statement names library faculty as collaborators, but it leaves out the library staff, who field requests, respond to student needs, and improvise solutions for challenges to access. Solórzano and Yosso's framework of community cultural wealth illuminates an erasure of the knowledges, skills, and agency of library workers of color in manifesting what we come to know as the collection. The concept of navigational capital can illuminate what is unwritten in the collections policy—namely, “skills of maneuvering through social institutions.

Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 80).

The statement also opens by expressing an intent to “serve the Barnard College curriculum.” This doesn’t tell us how collections uphold dominant knowledges. That the receiver of the service is defined as a curriculum and not *people* should truly give us pause. By privileging the curriculum of the college over people’s needs, especially the needs of People of Color, including QTPOC, the library upholds the college’s White Supremacist structures. The library makes plain its priorities by refusing to name and challenge racism.

We may ask what constitutes a “strength” in “women’s studies, dance, art, and literature.” What materials make a collection “strong”? The canonical history of an academic library collection that historically centered white, cis, heteronormative, patriarchal knowledge is not accounted for. The statement does not identify the lingering persistence of these hegemonic ways of knowing. By quantifying “strength” in numbers of volumes and lists of disciplines, the library boasts its riches without telling much about their content. This solidifies the academic library’s investment in whiteness as property, which Cheryl Harris defines as characterized by the “unconstrained right to exclude” (1993, 1780). What might happen if we could read a shadow statement that drew out the negative space of the collection? What if we could learn about the voices and knowledges that did not make their way to the collection, or even to print, that were passed up in favor of the “needs of the curriculum”?

In my role as a librarian at Barnard, I have found myself in the unique space of being tasked with both collecting books to “support” the Barnard College curriculum, and being able to make space to collect books that challenge it. Within the past year, I have been able to make clear to a new director of collections strategy that my assigned task of collecting young adult fiction with LGBTQ protagonists has limited me, when I want to amplify and carve out space in the collection for work by QTPOC writing for a range of audience ages. So far, this has meant being able to access a specific allocation of funds for selecting QTPOC work, and drawing from other subject area funds to select more QTPOC work (for instance, in Africana studies or in Palestine studies). We are also in the early stages of discussing what it would take to create and apply a cataloging term to work in our library’s collection that is by and about QTPOC.

This has expanded the possibilities for my own work, but I wonder: What could it mean to ask *my colleagues* to try to center a QTPOC agenda in their collection work, too? Why have I hesitated to make this ask, given that to do this work and to do it well would require more than one person? As I write this, I am forced to confront

that I have perhaps too easily accepted the politics of knowledge production that Brockenbrough calls out, and this is because I have so often been made to feel that I have no other choice. The radio silence that too frequently greeted me at work when I talked about projects that advanced a QTPOC agenda had led me to believe that I was on my own.

INTERPRETING MY COUNTERSTORY WITH CRT FRAMEWORKS

Through Critical Race Theorizing, I hope to extend my conversation. Using counter-story, I have tried to make sense of my experiences as a queer librarian of color. In Critical Race Theory, I find not only methodological tools like counterstory, but also theoretical tools that bridge gaps between lived experience and broader, institutional dimensions of power. How could CRT prise loose the tightly interlocked structures of racist oppression that I don't yet have language for, so that I can better see them? How can CRT help to unlock strategies of resistance and transformation?

I will focus here on three frameworks of CRT: community cultural wealth, intersectionality, and Queer of Color Critique. I look to these frameworks to interpret my experience and open up strategies for resistance. I start with community cultural wealth, which teaches me to look for the spaces and strategies QTPOC have already been creating, or are on the verge of creating, that can foster abundance for ourselves. Intersectionality helps me to locate myself with greater attention so that I can develop better practices of solidarity. The work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and subsequent readings and practices of her theory of intersectionality teach me to pay attention to differences in positionality and the different contextual workings of oppression, always—this even includes moments when I am considering a more specific intersection of identity like QTPOC. Queer of Color Critique reminds me that the interplay between naming oppression and resisting it is a perpetual dance queer and trans People of Color do, in libraries and all the other spaces we move through, and that resistance involves imagining and building new possibilities for how we share and take up space.

COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH

As cultural work, librarianship deeply intertwines questions of power and value. Community cultural wealth, a Critical Race Theory framework developed by Tara Yosso, challenges the deficit view of culture. The deficit view, a lens through which social scientists and other researchers on communities of color have examined their

“subjects,” reproduces itself ad nauseum—researchers find the deficits they search for and perpetuate deficit master narratives. In contrast, community cultural wealth gives us the tools to recognize what Yosso outlines as at least six forms of “capital” developed and sustained by communities of color. Briefly, these include aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, resistant, and familial capital (Yosso 2005). For the purposes of my analysis, I am going to replace the word *capital* with *abundance*; for me, these qualities challenge capitalism’s logics of scarcity and competition. I see queer and trans People of Color accessing and sharing all six of these forms of community cultural abundance. Two feel especially salient to me in the academic library context that I engage: familial abundance and resistant abundance.

On familial capital, Yosso writes about “those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (2005, 79). Yosso explicitly acknowledges that *familia* can extend beyond “racialized, classed and heterosexualized inferences that comprise traditional understandings of ‘family’” (2005, 79). This capacious understanding of the familial resonates with how I have experienced myself as a queer person of color and how I’ve learned from other QTPOC. The idea of chosen family means a lot to many queer and trans folks of color, as the intersecting forces of racism, homophobia, and transphobia can make certain connections with families of origin difficult, or prompt us to redefine family by gifting us family not solely determined by genetic or marriage ties.

QTPOC sustain familial abundance in many social spaces I nurture and am nurtured by, including library spaces. This nurturing unfolds in myriad ways, such as how we speak up in support of each other at meetings (often when no one else does), the times we share experiences and advice over tea, the uniquely delightful ways we affirm each other’s sense of style and fashion, the sense of relief we can sometimes feel opening up about our relationships and families, the ease of not having to do so much explaining and contextualizing to be mutually understood. These networks are intergenerational. How we navigate social forces, our own identities, and language changes over time. I have found that I learn so much from younger QTPOC that I don’t see myself as the older provider of “wisdom,” but rather as part of an exchange of knowledges and strategies for survival.

For Yosso, resistant capital “refers to those knowledges and behaviors fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (2005, 80). I believe that QTPOC always already practice forms of resistant abundance by being who we are. QTPOC resistant abundance can emerge from the resistance we must practice at multiple levels, including when we find ourselves in largely white queer spaces, or

among other folks of color perpetuating homophobia and transphobia against us, or when navigating the host of brutal systems that render QTPOC life vulnerable. This resistant abundance has allowed me to sustain myself through projects like developing QTPOC-created collections—this work has also, in turn, been supported by the familial abundance I feel from friendships with QTPOC in and outside the library, many of them writers and artists themselves. The strategies to navigate those layers of oppression and to push back on them are often subtle, often bold.

I have also had to call on my own resistant abundance to help remind my white colleagues of connections between axes of oppression that they may imagine as separate. I learn from my QTPOC colleagues here, as they are constantly doing this work, too. As an example, in the past few years, I have been working with a small but growing group of coworkers to push for more gender-inclusive bathrooms in the newly opened (as of fall 2019) Barnard Library building. I have noticed that while it's promising that many agree on the importance of access to gender-inclusive bathrooms, it is very hard for white people to acknowledge why this is *especially* important for People of Color. Maybe the mental images white coworkers have of trans and gender nonconforming people default to white. Or maybe they imagine racism and transphobia as discrete issues, never connecting.

For People of Color in academia, who are all too familiar with the violences of exclusion and the way that colleges inflict surveillance on People of Color, the resonance is not a stretch. Access to gender-inclusive bathrooms is always already a racial justice issue. Perhaps a vital sign of our community cultural abundance is when we can recognize that struggles for justice are never isolated—and that we don't need to operate on a model of scarcity in imagining a more just world. How might QTPOC community cultural abundance allow us to make more space for each other? How might we find more ways to care for ourselves and each other as we enact resistance?

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality theory extends my thinking about my work as a queer South Asian American librarian by forcing me to be mindful of my positionality in relation to larger structures of power. It is the desire not to flatten or oversimplify QTPOC identity that leads me here, even as I have intersectionality theory to thank for the acronym QTPOC. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced intersectionality in her writing and has, over the years, developed the term in her work as a lawyer, legal scholar, and activist. In her 1991 piece "Mapping the Margins," she calls out the limits of identity

politics, not to get rid of it, but to demand better from the ways we politicize identity: “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. . . . Contemporary feminist and anti-racist discourses have failed to consider intersectional identities such as women of color” (1991, 1242). Crenshaw outlines three categories of intersectionality: structural, political, and representational. Structural intersectionality considers lived experience at the intersection of social structures that are oppressive. In other words, how does a person’s specific social location with regard to class, gender, sexuality, race, and religion, among other categories by which power is distributed, structure their experiences differently (1991, 1245)? Crenshaw uses these categories to think through multiple dimensions of violence against women of color. Since the early years of CRT, Crenshaw’s influence has meant that intersectionality—as a term, a theory, a method, and sometimes a misapplied catchphrase—has traveled far and wide. The gift of Crenshaw’s thinking has been that intersectionality theory deepens both analysis of and action against racist oppression. Crenshaw has attentively followed the circuits her own theorizing has taken, and she continues to share that reflection, writing in 2015: “Intersectionality was a lived reality before it became a term. Today, nearly three decades after I first put a name to the concept, the term seems to be everywhere. But if women and girls of color continue to be left in the shadows, something vital to the understanding of intersectionality has been lost.”

As I read those words, I reflect on the moment at which I write. June 2019 is Pride Month and the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall uprisings, a historic moment, among many, of resistance led by Black and Latinx trans and queer people in opposition to police violence against their communities. As we witness and participate in the joy of some Pride celebrations, my friends and I notice corporations and the police capitalizing on Pride to present a false rainbow-painted image of themselves as LGBTQ-friendly. While these images and events unfold, there is yet another layer: the ongoing and horrific violence perpetuated against trans People of Color, and in particular against Black trans women, that continues unabated. More recently, the first weekend of June 2019 saw the death of Layleen Cubilette-Polanco Xtravaganza, a 27-year-old Afro-Latina trans woman held in solitary confinement in Rikers Island jail (Willis 2019)—I remember that news of Layleen’s death at the hands of a violent carceral system emerged the same day as Brooklyn Pride.

At first glance, it may seem that my last paragraph has a tangential relationship to academic libraries. Festivals in street spaces and bars, commemorating uprisings in

streets and bars, cops encroaching on all of it, and then the violence of incarceration—what do these have to do with the academic library? With intersectionality in mind, everything.

Using Crenshaw's framework, I want to look particularly at the structural. That is to say, the locations of queer and trans People of Color at the intersections of race, gender, and sexual oppressions would make our experiences of academic libraries different from that of white people (including LGBTQ+ white people), and also *different among ourselves*. The library functions in ways that are parallel to other social institutions, like the educational system, like prisons, like systems that administer (and fail to administer) health care. Crenshaw crucially confronts how even institutions that have a stated purpose of "helping," that are designed to offset harm, can compound injustice, focusing on the example of shelters for immigrant women surviving abuse. She writes, "Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment" (1991, 1249). So what might seem like support and affirmation for a group might actually harm people in the group living at the intersections, because of an unrecognized dimension of their social location. What might be positioned as "safety for women" might engage tactics that have historically targeted People of Color, thereby being unsafe for POC and specifically women of color.

Like so many higher education institutions in the United States, Barnard College, and the Library building, have historically functioned as sites of racist surveillance, violence, and exclusion. Founded in 1889 as a private women's college in New York City, Barnard, like Columbia University (with which it's affiliated), occupies the land of the Lenape people, and it was built with the labor of enslaved Black people. With a current student body of less than 3,000, Barnard defines itself through its mission statement: "As a college for women, Barnard embraces its responsibility to address issues of gender in all of their complexity and urgency and to help students achieve the personal strength that will enable them to meet the challenges they will encounter throughout their lives" (Barnard College n.d.-a).

Barnard's carefully curated image as a college that supports, broadly, "women," contradicts the realities students of color face. An assault by security guards on a Black Columbia student in the spring of 2019 spurred a campus dialogue on what many Barnard students of color, especially Black students, have known and experienced frequently: racist harassment, surveillance, and violence (Saharan 2019). The surveillance of gender operates in intersection with racist surveillance. Barnard College

has failed to put forth an admissions policy truly inclusive of trans students—a 2015 policy update that some have claimed as more trans-inclusive still requires applicants to “consistently live and identify as women” (Barnard College n.d.-b), a clause that disrespects gender self-determination. Restrooms that are designated gender-inclusive remain few and far between, with only one per floor in the new library building, despite advocacy efforts from students and staff.

What does this mean for me as a queer South Asian American librarian? In my QTPOC agenda, I need to take Crenshaw’s cue of paying attention to the differences in positionality inherent in a coalitional term like QTPOC. We must work toward not just centering experiences and identities that mirror our own, but asking who even gets to be in the room. How might my privileges of class and caste status, from being a non-Black settler of color with US citizenship, from being read as a cis woman, make it easier for me to be “out” as queer at work and somewhat outspoken in my politics? How are my QTPOC colleagues, and other QTPOC working in the school, navigating different hurdles? How do QTPOC I am connected to in other parts of my life (friendship, creative worlds, and activism) experience the space of the library? How do social structures like incarceration create barriers and limit the possibilities of connection between QTPOC?

Listening and acting in solidarity with POC and especially QTPOC students, staff, and faculty, especially those most directly impacted by forces of anti-Blackness, colonialism, homophobia, ableism, and transphobia, is vital. We must think beyond what we see in front of us, imagine what we can’t see, and imagine possibilities. Working toward ending harm against QTPOC in the library, how could we reach further, beyond those walls? Our lives extend into so many spaces. How could we, as QTPOC library workers, work toward a world without prisons, a world where education is free and not a commodity, a world where accessibility is centered and not seen as optional?

QUEER OF COLOR CRITIQUE

Building off of intersectionality theory, I take up the work of Queer of Color Critique because of what it offers to the specific intersectional locations of queer and trans People of Color in libraries. It analyzes how things are and strategizes how we could make them different. While Roderick Ferguson introduced the phrase “queer of color critique” in his book *Aberrations in Black*, Edward Brockenbrough’s writing has applied Queer of Color Critique to the constellation of Critical Race Theory with

a focus on education. Brockenbrough writes, “A ‘QOC critique’ indexes an interdisciplinary corpus of scholarship on the dialectics between hegemony and resistance that shape the lives of queer People of Color across local, national, and transnational contexts” (2016, 286). Brockenbrough offers a working model of what queer of color analysis entails: giving language and context to marginalization, and developing strategies of resistance. Brockenbrough writes about the complex ways that QTPOC navigate identity, including invisibility as a strategy.

I see a beautiful and inspiring practice of the Queer of Color Critique in the collectively authored piece “Queer of Color Space-Making in and beyond the Academic Industrial Complex.” Here, the authors use “we” to refer to a specific collective gathering of QTPOC and to gesture more broadly to QTPOC as a larger group. They write, “But beyond studying oppressed peoples’ spatial, political, and historic interventions, we were deeply committed to finding better ways of making and sharing space with each other. Our experiences and how we make and share space together are indexes of power and viable categories of theoretical analysis” (Bacchetta et al. 2018, 44). This intentional, collective, resistant making of space together as QTPOC strikes me as a praxis that takes Queer of Color Critique into the everyday. Critique is just as much about generating and making new ways of being together as it is about necessarily breaking down oppressive structures. How might this transport into libraries?

To start to engage this question, I turn to the work of queer librarians and archivists of color. Though not an archivist myself, I see my work as adjacent to, and frequently overlapping with, archival practice. In “Queering the Archive: Transforming the Archival Process,” Lizeth Zepeda (2018) takes up Queer of Color Critique as a lens to employ in the processing of archival collections, with the specific example of the Sarah Valencia Collection at the Arizona Historical Society. Zepeda’s writing challenges us to consider the word *queer* itself as a verb and a theoretical framework, and reminds us that “queerness is complex and is often not expressed explicitly in communities of color or in general” (94). Zepeda’s work in interpreting, imagining, and describing photographs dwells in spaces of potentiality, rather than the need to label and fix identity. Zepeda pursues a fluid and dynamic reading of the photographs of Sarah Valencia, writing, “The possibility that Valencia may very well have been a lesbian is not necessarily important in this sense. Rather, what is important here is reading her life as open to the possibility of queerness without presuming an identity” (98). Zepeda later speaks of the strategy of adding access points in description, to open it to interpretation.

In gratitude to Zepeda’s archival theorizing, I want to open up my understanding of QTPOC space in libraries. If we were to use the lenses of Queer of Color Critique,

we might hold open a space of unknowing, of “the *possibility* of queerness without presuming an identity” (Zepeda 2018, 98; emphasis mine), as we think about *all* People of Color. I know, of course, that there are limits to this—I am not particularly invested in convincing People of Color who don’t self-identify at this moment as queer, that they somehow must. However, what would it mean to hold open the possibility that for all of us, as People of Color, the ways we live, feel, and name our genders and sexualities might change, might grow, might dismantle normative structures? What languages (beyond the categories we are used to) would feel important to us in recognizing this? How could we be more generous with each other, by each admitting what we don’t know?

CONCLUSION

The generative unknowingness that Queer of Color Critique brings to my analysis of my counterstory as a queer South Asian American librarian suggests new places where I hope to extend my thinking. In what directions could it go? I reflect on what remains undertheorized and untheorized in my writing here. The categories I rely on, so US-ian in context, don’t reflect a much larger world of people whose identities exist outside the dominant. How would my counterstory look different if I analyzed it in terms of caste and a commitment to dismantling caste? How would QTPOC librarianship that foregrounded decolonization be practiced? What would it mean to sustain library spaces that are inclusive of sex workers? What if the very institutions that we rely on for the infrastructure of the library, like academia, did not exist (or at least not as the privatized spaces that they now are)? I can’t help but think of the opening lines of José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, where he wrote, “We are not yet queer. we may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (2009, 1). These words take me beyond the present and into pasts and futures that always keep me moving, searching. I hope we can meet each other then and there.

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Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory

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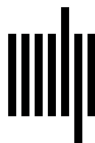
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