

INTRODUCTION TO PART III: FREEDOM STORIES

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My first awareness of a substantive articulation in library and information studies that I understood as a critique of race and racism in the profession was through a chance encounter with the words of E. J. Josey, the second Black American to earn a master's degree in librarianship and also the second Black president of the American Library Association (the first, Clara Jones, held the office in 1976). I earned my own master's in library and information sciences (MLIS) at the University of Pittsburgh, where Josey had long served as a member of the LIS faculty. Wandering the halls one afternoon before I began my graduate program, I found a tiny exhibit dedicated to a Black man who had worked at the Free Library of Philadelphia, just miles from where I worked in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. In the corner of the exhibit, barely visible and written on a sticky note—a postscript left by another wanderer—was the quote: “Support the humanity of Black people.”

I would later learn to attribute this sticky note quote to Josey, and I would also learn why this note had been left as a passerby's plea. With those six words, Josey had articulated a need, and that need told me more about my future positionality within the LIS profession than any syllabus, lecture, or assignment I would encounter. With those six words, Josey had named the conditions of possibility for liberation, he had told a six-word freedom story. So, too, was his edited volume, *The Black Librarian in America*, a freedom story: in it, Josey offered the field a groundbreaking collection of essays—and the first book focused entirely on the Black American experience in the library profession. Josey's very existence in the profession as a Black man and

scholar and even more so as an activist devoted to human and civil rights showed us what was possible. His own story solidified for me—and for many Black library and archives professionals of my generation—that liberatory and emancipatory practices can be cornerstones of our professional work. Today, for many Black, Indigenous, and other librarians and archivists of color, working toward liberation remains at the core of our approach to both professional practice and theoretical discourse.

Research on “diversity and inclusion” in the LIS professional literature (and here I am speaking of diversity and inclusion research *not* conducted by Black, Indigenous, and other LIS professionals of color) has too often attended to the rhetorics of diversity and inclusion, and practical recommendations from the literature for diversity and inclusion initiatives are frequently anemic and ineffective. Rather than challenge the actual practices of privilege, whiteness, racism, and colonialism in libraries and archives and among librarians and archivists, the research historically undertaken and questions posed around diversity and inclusion have remained largely the same: they have centered on “pipeline” concerns, the purported benefits of meritocracies, individual successes, and notions of diversity so broadly conceived as to be deleterious acts of erasure for Black, Indigenous, and other librarians and archivists of color. Moreover, the unique ways Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) actually approach the *practice* of librarianship and archivy are too often rendered invisible: centering communities and their unique voices, needs, and practices; expanding how information professionals understand context to challenge the idea that context is always bounded and easily knowable; challenging the limits of our roles as librarians and archivists to make visible the possibilities inherent in our practical and theoretical interventions; developing practices with an intentional eye toward harm reduction; and, perhaps most importantly, intentionally crafting of freedom stories.

Critical race theory (CRT) has many tenets and can be employed in many ways. One of the most compelling aspects of CRT is its dedication to narrative and counternarrative as liberatory frames. Using storytelling to animate CRT often serves to illuminate and explore experiences of racialized oppression while also envisioning more liberatory and emancipatory futures. Each of the chapters in this section takes storytelling, narrative, and counternarrative as starting places, engaging the very heart of Critical Race Theory’s ability to light the way toward liberation, toward freedom. In “Dewhitening Librarianship: A Policy Proposal for Libraries,” Isabel Espinal, April M. Hathcock, and Maria Rios examine how historical racial stratification and economic oppression are keeping People of Color from choosing professions such as librarianship, further deepening disparities in financial circumstances between

BIPOC librarians and their non-BIPOC counterparts. Beginning and ending with narrative possibility and interweaving their own stories throughout, the authors examine the intersections of race, gender, and class and call for an acknowledgement that systemic change does not happen in isolation. This carefully crafted piece makes tangible and actionable suggestions for bringing more BIPOC into the library and archives professions. Through sharing their own stories, these three authors issue a call to action, one that encourages us to challenge existing institutional narratives—particularly those that are weaponized against BIPOC such as pipeline shortages and resource scarcity—where questions of equity and inclusion as steps toward liberation are concerned.

Authors Torie Quiñonez, Lalitha Nataraj, and Antonia Olivas challenge claims of objectivity, meritocracy, and neutrality in their chapter, “The Praxis of Relation, Validation, and Motivation: Articulating LIS Collegiality through a CRT Lens.” Informed by their own experiences of—and active resistance to—racism and other forms of oppression, these authors work to privilege experiential knowledge and the lived experiences of those who have been marginalized, often through storytelling and counternarrative. This work brings with it an explicit act of refusal, one powerful way to imagine a more liberatory future. Quiñonez, Nataraj, and Olivas refuse a deficit framework, choosing instead to put validation theory in conversation with Critical Race Theory (and Black and Indigenous feminist epistemologies of refusal). From this work, we can envision a liberatory future in which librarians and archivists use, as Quiñonez, Nataraj, and Olivas suggest, validation and community cultural wealth as frameworks for relational mentoring.

Authors Anne Cong-Huyen and Kush Patel further our thinking around precarity and feminist ethics of care in their thoughtful piece, “Precarious Labor and Radical Care in Libraries and Digital Humanities.” This chapter speaks to how libraries have come to depend on workflows that have created conditions ideal for exploiting emerging professionals. The authors argue that such conditions have relied on the perception of library work as feminine and predominantly white, and, echoing the discussion above, they note that diversity and inclusion work is often thought of as belonging to People of Color. From narratives crafted from their own experiences as immigrant and migrant librarians of color, Cong-Huyen and Patel push us to challenge expectations that normalize invisible labor, precarious lives, and undercompensated labor as a rite of passage in librarianship, and they argue that the profession must undertake this work in a more just and equitable manner as a step toward more liberatory praxis.

In presenting an argument for critical race praxis in archival work, Rachel E. Winton asserts that Critical Race Theory offers one way to begin systematically addressing White Supremacy and the colonial thumbprint in archival repositories. In “Praxis for the People: Critical Race Theory and Archival Practice,” Winton argues that for a more liberatory future, we must engage voices that have previously been pushed to the margins and allow them to lead, noting that a feminist ethic of care challenges us to refashion the role of archivist to that of a caregiver, honoring webs of responsibility to the records themselves and the communities documented within them. Winton challenges us to be disruptive and responsive, our plans to be actionable, our praxis to be informed and caring. Bringing together aspects present in each of the other chapters, Winton offers narrative, counternarrative, and an action plan as a roadmap and a guide—a gift to archivists and librarians looking for concrete ways to effect change in their everyday practice.

I close this introduction with remarks on Kafi Kumasi’s “‘Getting InFLomation’: A Critical Race Theory Tale from the School Library,” in large part because Kumasi’s piece is LIS storytelling at its finest. Although it is tempting to retell the tale here, I will not ruin the joy of it for you, reader. I will only say that this brightly woven story shines light on the places where diversity and inclusion initiatives fail, where unchecked privilege and whiteness do harm to everyone touched by them, where inequality ruins lives, and where libraries might be spaces of hope and possibility. Kumasi’s Critical Race Theory tale is rhythm, rhyme, and remix. It is the best kind of story—a story we might follow all the way to freedom.

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>