# QUESTIONING WHAT'S GIVEN, FOR A BETTER LIBRARIANSHIP

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VLACRL Spring Program  |  #VLACRLspring  |  12 April 2018  |  College of William & Mary

I'd like to thank the many people who made it possible for me to be here, especially Dorinne Banks for inviting me to speak today, Lisa Nickel for coordinating the library space, and the other VLACRL officers, Lucy Rush and Paige Flanagan, who helped organize and promote the event. It's really an honor, and having been a member of ACRL/NY's symposium planning committee for six years, I understand just how much effort and coordination goes into planning an event like this. I'd also like to thank the custodial workers who cleaned and maintain this library, Troy Davis, who facilitated the technology I'll be using, and the transportation workers who ensured my travels to Virginia by subway, bus, plane, and car were timely and safe.

I also want to thank you for attending today's program. It's an exciting and essential topic we'll be talking about, and I appreciate you taking the time to be here. I hope this presentation and this afternoon's affinity group discussions will spark some ideas for how to pursue library work that contributes to librarianship's grand ambitions of social responsibility, access to information, and the public good, however those values might look in your particular setting. If anyone would like to tweet from today's event I encourage you to use the hashtag #VLACRLspring, which I just came up with yesterday and forgot to tell anyone about until now.

> *Libraries and higher education can encourage people to question what's given and imagine what's possible.*

In this talk I want to emphasize one particular point. It may seem obvious, but I feel it is becoming increasingly aspirational day by day and year by year, and it's something we must constantly keep in mind and strive towards. Libraries and higher education should be places to encourage people to question what's given and to imagine what's possible. I really feel this is libraries and education at their best.

*Questioning is at the heart of critical librarianship.*

This process of questioning is also at the heart of critical librarianship. Questioning why we do what we do and the meager resources we're given to do it with, questioning the structures we uphold, and questioning the validity of power's claims to truth. Challenging the dominant forces that shape our lives is essential to imagining alternatives and to creating a better world. It's easy to make broad claims like this, about social justice and creating a better world, and a lot more difficult to figure out where we fit in that work and what we can do. Thankfully a lot of amazing library workers are pursuing critical practices, and in doing so they provide a lot of ideas for us to consider, implement, modify, and expand upon.

1. *About Me*

2. *Higher Education*

3. *Critical Librarianship*

4. *Critical Librarianship in Practice*

I have to say, I have a hard time telling people what to do. What you can do is dependent on so many factors, from your different identities, to your status in your institution, to what day of the week it is. Issuing directives just seems unreasonable and unhelpful. That said, there is no shortage of brilliant ideas for things we can do. What I'll be doing this morning is providing some context for our discussions, including a bit about myself and what brought me to critical librarianship, the state of higher education and how we find ourselves, a look at critical librarianship in higher education, and some of the many ways librarians aspire to put their values into practice and question the ways our libraries, universities, and world works.

*The personal is political.*

I don't love talking about myself, but the personal is political, and critical librarianship recognizes that everything is political and imbued with values. The older I get the more I see just how significant our environments are to who we are, and my upbringing absolutely impacted my approach to librarianship. As I talk about myself, I hope you'll think about what brought you to librarianship too, and where your upbringing and personal values might intersect with your work.

> *"One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution."*

Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political," 1969

I want to point out that the phrase "the personal is political" actually has a specific use and meaning, which in fact isn't centered on the individual. Carol Hanisch, who is still with us today and was a prominent member of the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 60's, wrote an essay on consciousness raising groups, but never actually used the phrase "the personal is political." She is adamant about not having coined the phrase, and that it is the result of many different people's conversations, ideas, writings, and exchanges. Which strikes me as a very critical librarianship thing to say.
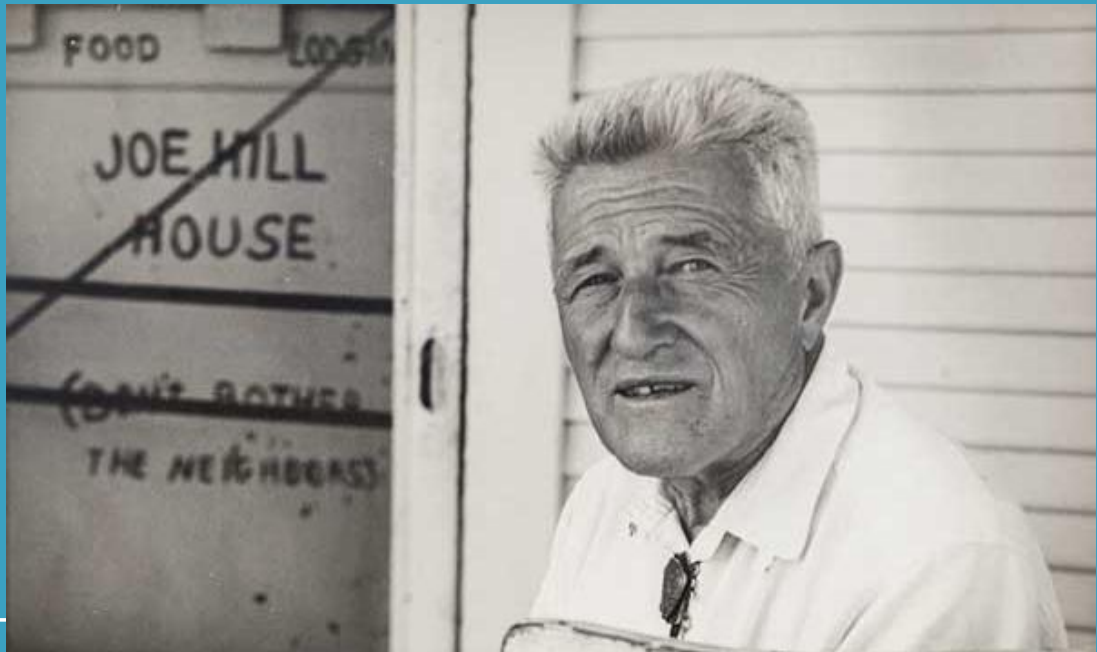
I was born in Louisville, Kentucky, and my family moved to Colorado after my brother was born the following year. I was named Eamon, after the Irish-American Catholic Anarchist, pacifist, and war resister [Ammon Hennacy](). He edited the *Catholic Worker Newspaper,* established a house in Salt Lake City that provided accommodations for dozens of homeless people every night, and once fasted for 40 days to protest nuclear weapons testing. So I have a little to live up to; no pressure or anything.

The town my family lived in for the first few years of my life was Colorado Springs, a city known for its extremely conservative politics and extremely beautiful location at the base of Pikes Peak. Focus on the Family's headquarters are there, as well as the US Air Force Academy and the North American Aerospace Defense Command Center, which is housed in a [complex built under Cheyenne Mountain](#) and 2,000 feet of granite to protect it from nuclear attacks.

I think a lot about how I understand the world began with living in Colorado Springs, looking at the gorgeous foothills covered in spruce and pine trees, dotted with striking sandstone formations, and thinking about the bustling military activity going on 2,000 feet below. The incongruency of this breathtaking nature hiding a multi-million dollar fortress containing hundreds of military personnel and 25 ton blast doors always came to mind as we drove by on the interstate. If these mountains were used to conceal US military operations, what else was going on beneath the surfaces of everyday life that was meant to be kept secret from everyone else?

We moved to Denver, Colorado after a few years, and that's where I spent my middle and high school years, skateboarding around parking lots and going to punk shows. I knew in high school that I wanted to work in libraries, and so I made that my goal. Where else was committed to facilitating access to information, and wasn't trying to sell people anything? Nowhere! It was a perfect fit. I worked at the Denver Public Library as a part-time shelver, volunteered at the Denver Zine Library, pictured here, as an amateur cataloger, and then as a part-time circulation assistant at my state university library, still the only academic library to serve three institutions, as far as I know. I got my degree in English, following the paths of many other librarians before me, but I would write papers on how librarians were resisting the PATRIOT Act.
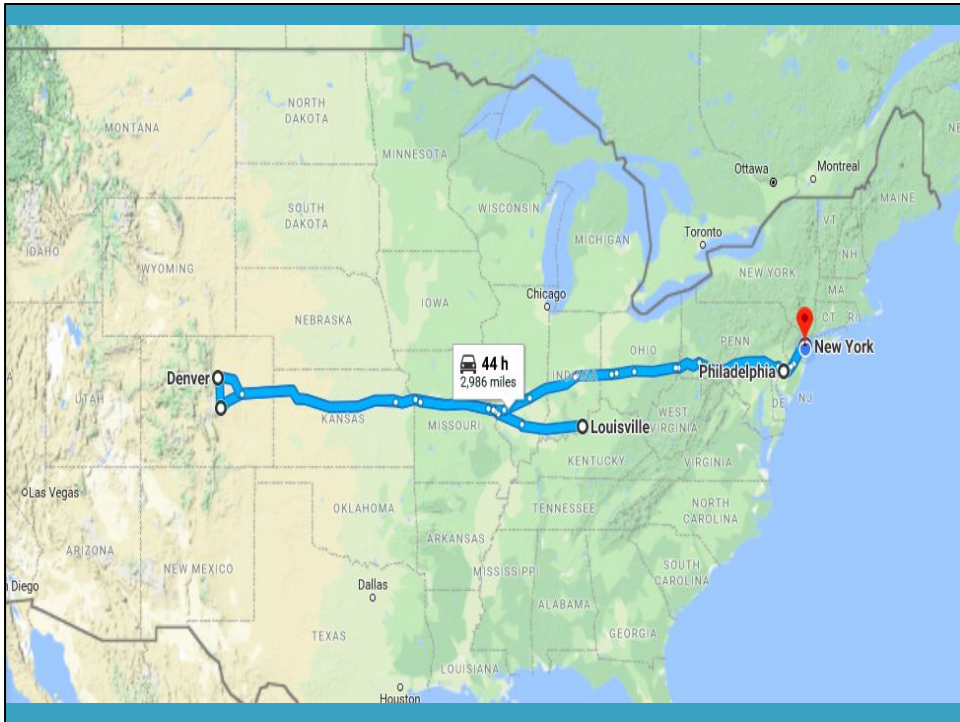
From Denver I headed to Philadelphia for library school, and a few paid internships and a lot of tuition dollars later, I was a credentialed librarian. Some people come to the profession after working in other fields and some start out in libraries and stay there. I'm one of the latter. And most of my work life has been spent in academic libraries and higher education, which have their own histories just as incongruous as Cheyenne Mountain and the missile defense headquarters hidden beneath it.

# *Higher Education*

Most of the talk between faculty at my university, and I don't think we're the only ones, is about the significant problems we face. We went through a round of especially contentious contract negotiations, which essentially started with the entire faculty being locked out from campus, with no pay, no healthcare, and no notice. Many staff who don't have the protections of a union have been fired, and the ones who remain have intolerable amounts of work to deal with. The course scheduling software Ad Astra has been put into use and is wreaking havoc on the teaching loads of faculty, with our adjuncts and English department hit especially hard. These decisions are nothing personal in one sense--it really comes down to business decisions made by the university president--but the effects are extremely personal, as people who have given the university years of service are told they no longer have a place there, no longer have a way to pay their bills and support their families.

If we look up from these problems, we see that they aren't limited to our university, our even our country. Faculty and staff at the University and College Union system in the UK were on strike for 14 days to save the pensions they were promised and worked hard for, and that struggle continues. Workers at York University in Toronto have been on strike for six weeks for a fair contract. And in the K-12 school system, the incredibly inspirational wildcat strike the West Virginia teachers led now spread to Oklahoma and Kentucky. Teachers are sick of the imposed austerity they're working under, and they're fighting back.

For every University of Wisconsin system that is being spectacularly and tragically dismantled, starved of funding, and having tenure abolished, there are dozens of colleges and universities fighting their own battles, to keep their ethnic studies or women's studies departments, to pay student workers a decent wage, to get a replacement for a position approved, or to maintain library services and space.
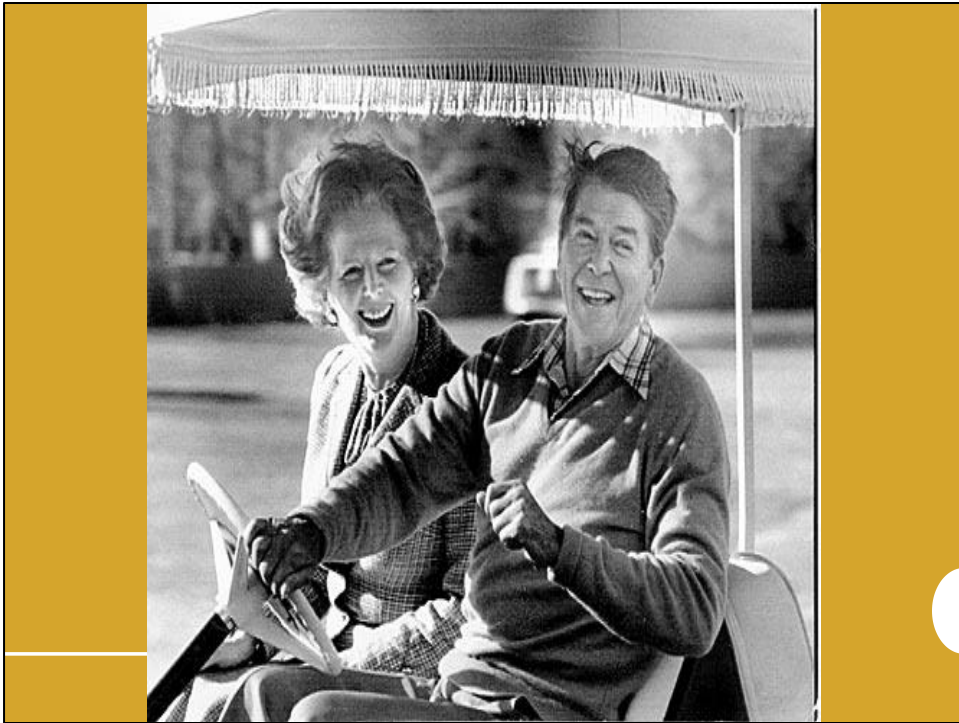
These issues are exacerbated with our current presidential administration and with late capitalism in overdrive, but they aren't that new. In fact, the beginning of these issues can be traced to the 1970s, and the rise of neoliberalism with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. This extension of the market to encompass all modes of life, obsessed with the privatization of public goods, deregulation for every industry, and austerity for everyone else, eventually found its way over to academe as well.

This is not to say that higher education has always been a place of unerring good and justice in the world. On the whole, North American universities have always been spaces that uphold whiteness and eurocentrism, that require students to conform according to its particular rules of academic rigor and knowledge production. They are subject to the same exploitative labor practices, racial discrimination, and gender inequalities as anywhere else. The values of higher education may be all about enlightenment on paper, but men are still constantly talking over women in meetings. For that problem I recommend checking out this timer, which can be found at arementalkingtoomuch.com.

"Academic" Salaries

Actual average and median salaries at U.S. Doctoral-granting Universities
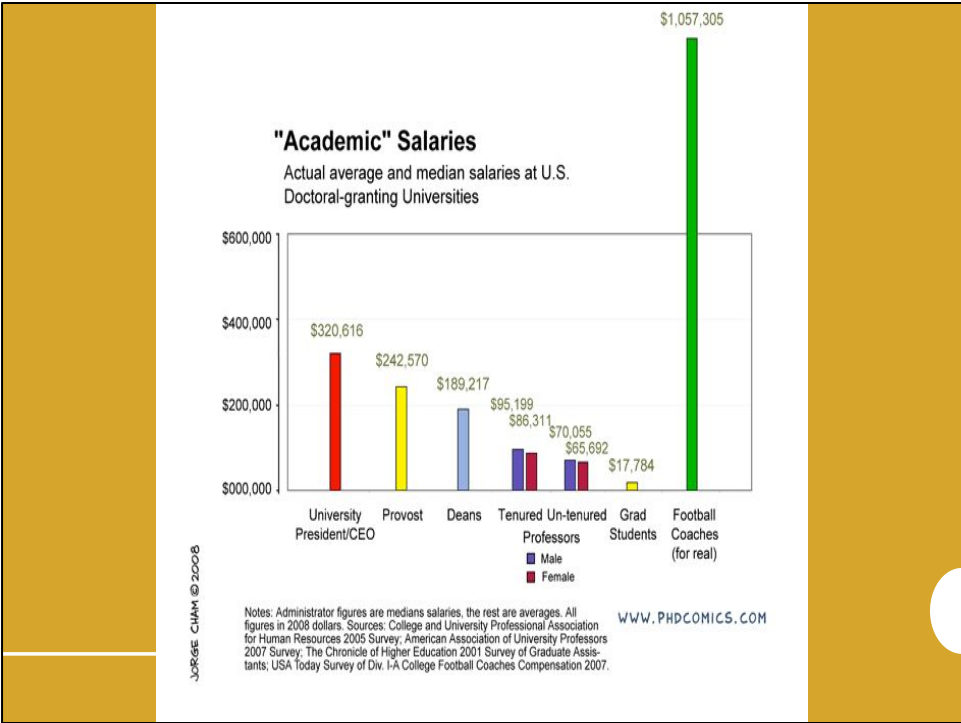
There is more pay for those at the upper echelons of university management, fewer full time faculty, and more adjuncts, all results of corporate approaches to efficiency and cost-saving, not to mention consolidating power at the top of the ladder instead of maintaining a model of shared governance and decision-making.
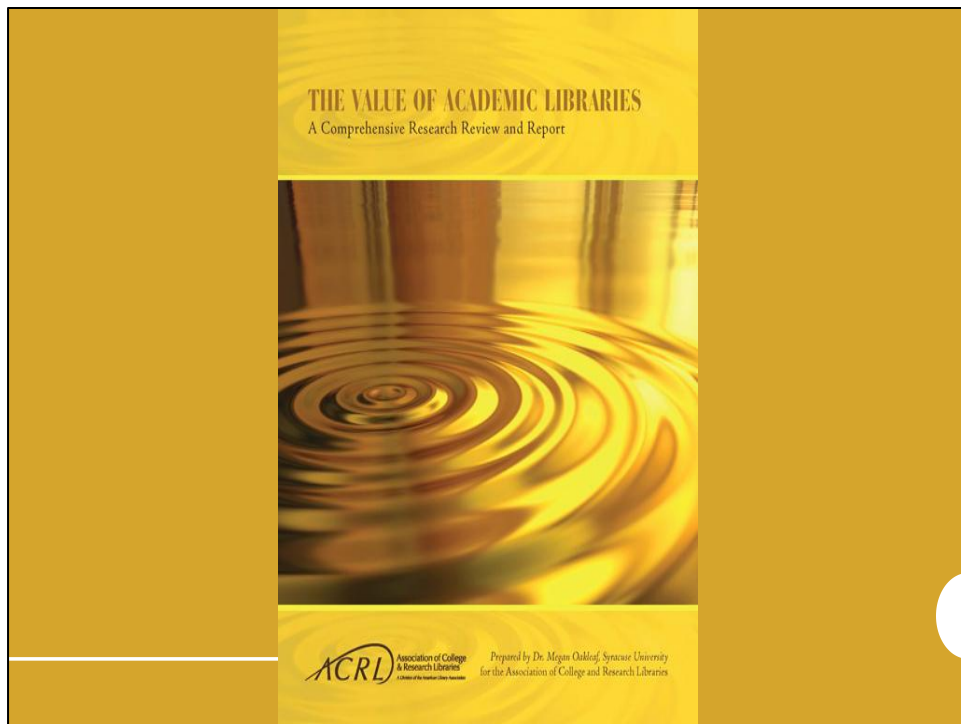
For libraries, the corporatization of universities and scholarly production has resulted in doing more with less. Our budgets remain flat as the prices for database subscriptions continue to climb. Our open positions go unfilled or are combined when people retire or move to a new job. We are asked to continually prove our value based on the logic of markets and money. As librarian Roxanne Shirazi observed in a recent presentation on the value of libraries, the cover of the *Value of Academic of Libraries Report* depicts liquid gold! What's a librarian who wants to do some actual good for students supposed to do?

Now that we've gone down this rabbit hole of despair, let's start to think of some solutions. How do we address this increasingly marketized form of higher education? How do we contend with such a politically polarized world? And how might we do such things through library work?

*The potential of higher education is that it:*

*The potential of libraries is that they:*

*The importance of my work is that I:*

We'll spend a good amount of time today talking about the problems that higher education and libraries represent and reinforce, and these issues are essential to confront. But it's also important to ask ourselves what's unique or consequential about them, and what we want them to look like. So in that spirit, these questions aren't assuming an inherent importance, they're asking what potential these things hold.

I'd like you to take a couple minutes to reflect on these questions. You can note down any ideas that come to you. Afterwards, I'll ask for a few volunteers to share their responses to these prompts, before we move on to discuss where critical librarianship fits into all of this.

# *Critical Librarianship*

First, let's talk about the term critical librarianship. Who has heard of critical librarianship before today's program? Where have you heard it?

> *"Critical librarianship is an international movement of library and information workers that consider[s] the human condition and human rights above other professional concerns."*
>
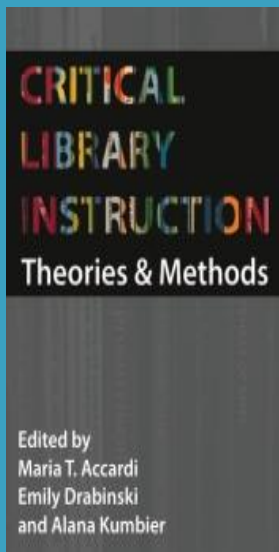> Toni Samek, "Critical Librarianship: An interview with Toni Samek, "2007

Critical librarianship is a relatively new term that first emerged about ten years ago, with as far as I could find, Toni Samek first [describing it](#). Samek takes a necessarily broad approach to defining critical librarianship, which is useful. It's also important to point out that progressive and unequivocally political librarianship has a much longer history in the profession. There are individual librarians who rallied against injustice and changed what we knew librarianship to be: intellectual freedom fighters like Zoia Horn and Judith Krug, those who worked tirelessly to support marginalized and oppressed communities, like Regina Andrews, Clara Breed, and Miriam Braverman, alternative publishers like Celeste West, and radical catalogers like Sandy Berman.

PROGRESSIVE LIBRARIAN

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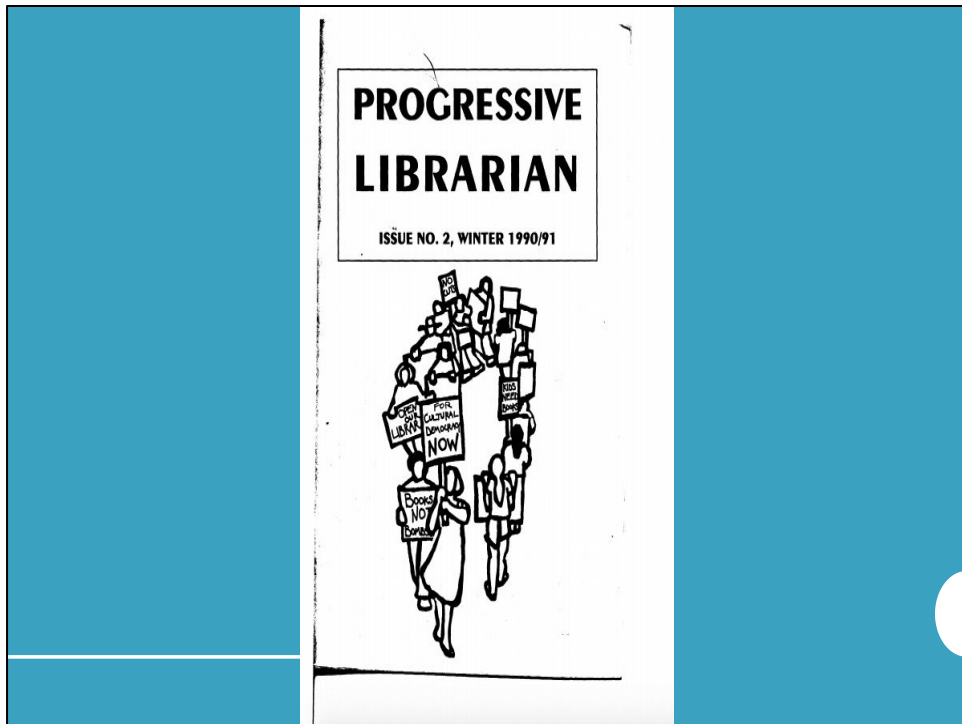
There are organizations with long histories, some of them founded by these same people. The ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table was founded in 1969, and has provided a means for librarians to engage with social issues. The Progressive Librarians Guild is an independent organization that seeks to align librarianship's actions with its stated values of supporting democracy and countering the commodification of information.
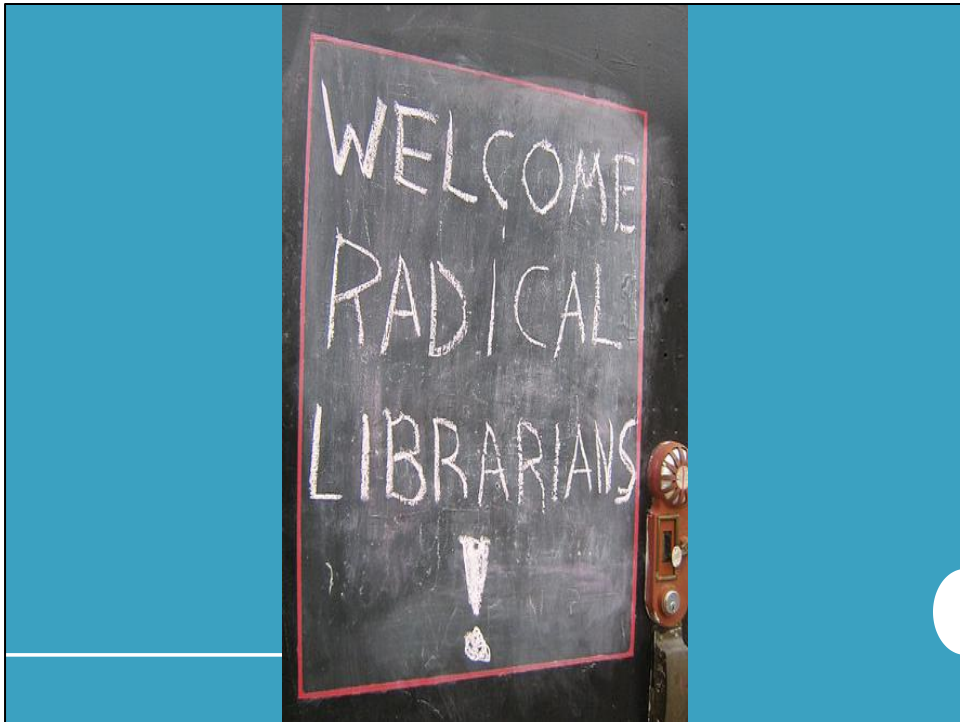
[Radical Reference](#) has been operating chapters since 2004, taking a grassroots approach to the intersection of information workers and activism. These are all great groups that have been doing excellent work that often overlaps with or is part of critical librarianship. They take approaches that range from activism to working within professional associations, and each have played a major role in continuing the streak of progressivism in librarianship.

## CRITICAL LIBRARY INSTRUCTION
### Theories & Methods

Edited by
Maria T. Accardi
Emily Drabinski
and Alana Kumbier

*"Ours is a profession that often splits working and thinking in two...Would ideas that didn't always lead to outcomes find a home in our profession?"*

Maria Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, 2010

What's been happening in recent years is an increased interest in parts of the profession that have historically been less hospitable to these ideas--essentially a sort of mainstreaming of critical perspectives. With critical librarianship, librarians have looked to critical theory and social justice movements to inform and change the profession. The scholarship in this area has majorly increased in the past decade, with the publication of a cornerstone title *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* in 2010.

Along with a number of other publications, this was followed by the beginning of #critlib Twitter discussions in 2014. The #critlib chats, along with discussions about the place of critical perspectives in the ACRL *Framework*, resulted in more attention to this area. There have been probably a dozen symposia, unconferences, and workshops on critical librarianship topics since 2015. In the literature, postcolonial, critical race, and queer theories are increasingly applied to LIS.

*Critique:* A method that allows us to reveal conditions and seek change

To foreground critical librarianship's aims, it's worth looking a bit closer at what we mean by critique. In short, critique is a method that allows us to reveal conditions and seek change. It can take many forms, including the application of theory, the practice of making complaints, and taking the time and space for reflection to inform action, but it always allows us to question the status quo, the norms of our work and our lives, and how that status quo shapes what's possible or imaginable.

Critique doesn't mean condescension, or disdain. It comes from a love for libraries and the potential they hold. Critique means to care. It means to analyze the most ingrained issues we face, in our libraries and in society, and to consider these issues unflinchingly, but this analysis can and should be done with care and empathy. To me, this is what critical librarianship is about--taking a look at libraries not through the common lens of vocational awe, to use librarian Fobazi Ettarh's term describing the way we tend to treat librarianship as a noble, saintly calling that can only do good, and to instead identify how libraries are complicit in systems of oppression, and how to leverage our power to create change.

*Critical Librarianship*

Centers a commitment to social justice

Questions the myth of neutrality

Asks who benefits, and why

What does critical librarianship actually stand for? What claims does it make? The wonderful thing about it is critical librarianship has as many definitions as there are people practicing it. It changes depending on time, place, and person. There are, however, some core tenets and interests of critical librarianship that help give some form to what can feel like an amorphous thing.

Critical librarianship centers a commitment to social justice. The ALA [Core Values of Librarianship](#) are a decent start--they describe the profession's commitment to things that sound good, like social responsibility and diversity, and things that sound less inherently good and with the potential for exclusion and subservience, like professionalism and service. In any case, these values are not at all clear cut when we think about them, and things get messy when we consider what these topics look like in practice. Where does privacy fit in when we collect granular data on student library use and GPA to try and prove our contributions to administration? Where does diversity fit in with a profession that not only remains extremely white because of recruitment problems, but fails to support the library workers of color that *are* here?

All I want for Christmas is the abolition of imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy

When we talk about social justice, it's worth naming what's being fought against. That's why I love the term from bell hooks that names oppression for what it is: the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. These interlocking systems of domination are what must be struggled against. And their abolition makes for a great Christmas present.
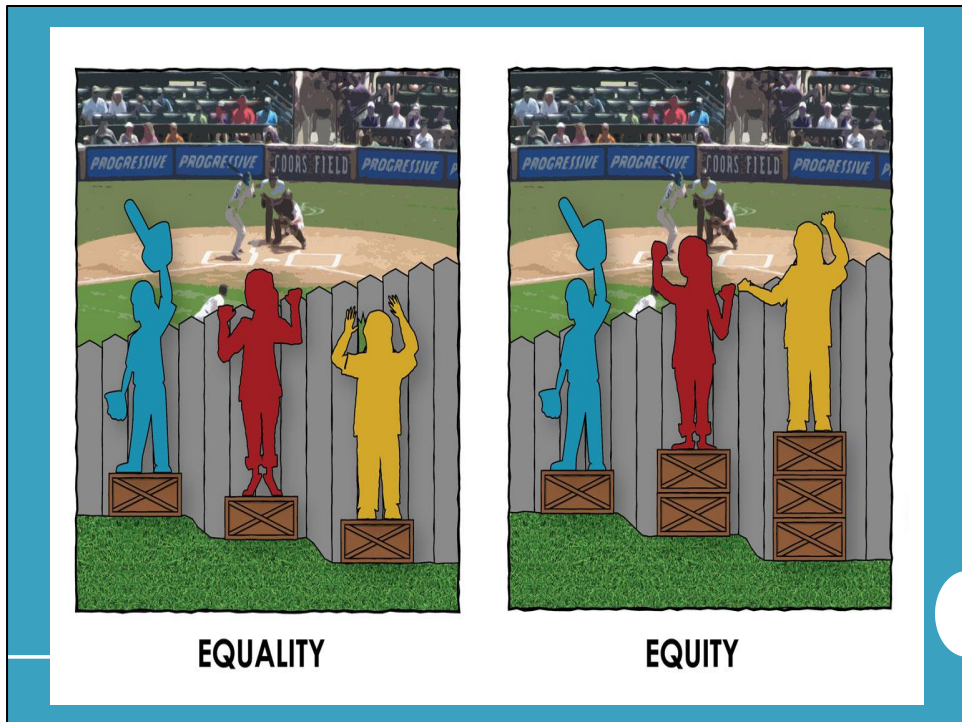
EQUALITY                    EQUITY

There's a popular image that's used to demonstrate the difference between equality and equity. Three people are trying to watch a baseball game, and apparently there aren't enough boxes to go around. It's probably a better metaphor for capitalism and the distribution of resources than what it claims to be about. It's a worthwhile distinction--equality doesn't mean justice, sure, but neither does equity. That's why I was happy to see this addition to the image.

**JUSTICE**

Justice means destroying the fence. It means dismantling the system, rethinking what's there in the first place, and why it's there. The problem isn't the boxes--it's the whole ballgame. It's the new multi-billion dollar stadium that displaced residents and was funded with taxpayer dollars for private benefit, it's the team owners, leagues, and history of racism that penalizes athletes for drawing attention to police brutality by taking a knee, and while we're at it, it's even reducing complex issues like equality and justice to simple visual metaphors. But let's move on.

## Critical Librarianship

Centers a commitment to social justice

Questions the myth of neutrality

Asks who benefits, and why

Critical librarianship maintains that libraries are not and cannot be neutral. They never have been, and they never will be. Libraries are made up of people, and every decision and action reflects what we know, believe, or value. When I buy a book for our business subject area, I make that decision based on lots of factors: what I think is most appropriate for our classes, our student body, and what's within our budget, and I choose a handful of books instead of thousands of other possible choices. Those books become part of our collection, and they are a visible, tangible manifestation of what knowledge the library values and prizes over others. There are countless other examples--decisions that we make while cataloging items, while enforcing policies, while making hiring choices--and if it involves a choice, it's not neutral.
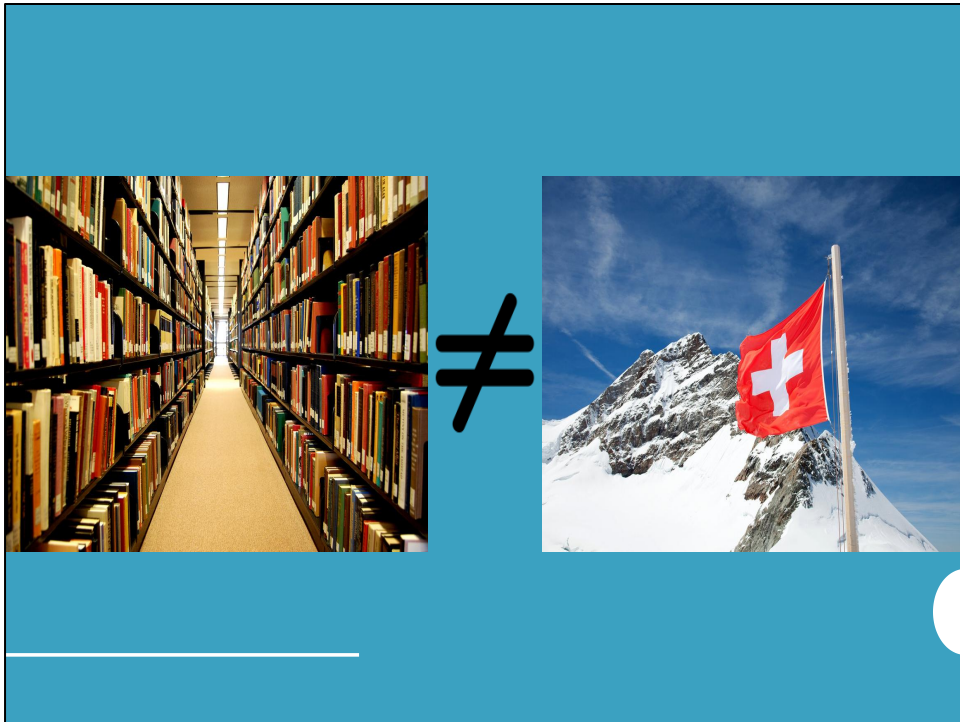
Has anyone heard someone compare libraries to Switzerland? I've always found them to be pretty different--for example, one is a library, and one is a country. The neutrality debate has been going on for some time--since the 80s and continuing into the present. A recent notable example is the ALA President's Program at Midwinter that presented the question of library neutrality as a topic in a debate-style session. Neutrality is literally still up for debate, which is just flabbergasting.

> *"Neutrality is a privilege afforded to those who do not live in fear, have not experienced genocide and war, do not have to daily face the effects of institutionalized racism."*

Candise Branum, "The Myth of Library Neutrality," 2008

I think this [quote from librarian Candise Branum](#) really gets at what's important when we consider neutrality. Neutrality is usually presented in abstract, what-if terms, when there are real consequences to pretending like we can be fair and unbiased in the decisions we make. Critical librarianship recognizes that we live in a world of inequality, struggle, and change, and to act as if we're not part of that same world puts us on the sidelines, unable to advocate for others or ourselves.

Critical Librarianship

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Asks who benefits, and why

One question that I find useful time and time again is "who benefits?" When we ask who benefits, what we also need to consider is who benefits structurally. These sorts of questions are central to critical library practice, and I find them really useful in library instruction as well. What topics are represented in search results, and why? Who's represented among authors of academic works? Why is that, and what does it tell us? Why do some search terms work and not others, and who decides that?

Tuxedo Mask
@TheLoveBel0w

Follow

When you're a "Men's Rights Activist" and you finally get your "rights":

10:13 PM - 4 Apr 2018

I saw this image on Twitter last week while I was at the reference desk and had one of those moments when you can't stop laughing. Some people, especially white cisgender men such as myself, are swimming in privilege. We're surrounded by it, and have trouble comprehending what it's like to not have it. So here we have someone benefiting from that complete immersion in their rights, and they're luxuriating in a few more drops of it.

Along these same lines, benefiting from inequities doesn't happen uniformly, or because we want to benefit. All white people benefit in some way from being in a society that centers whiteness. Librarianship is a predominantly white, women-majority (but not woman-dominated, if you look at the gender distribution of library deans and directors), middle-class profession. This means there is little space for librarians of color, and the space that *is* there tends to be filled with hostility and microaggressions. In its attention to power dynamics and oppressive structures, critical librarianship considers how libraries uphold whiteness. There is important work being done to diversify the profession, including ALA's Spectrum Scholarship Program and the Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians, but one development I find really encouraging is the We Here group, which is an informal network and supportive space for library and archive workers of color. We Here was started by librarians Jenny Ferretti and Sofia Leung, and to me it's a shining example of librarians organizing to provide essential support and amplification that can't be done through more formal channels like professional associations.

> *What we do is important.*
> *Through conversation, reading,*
> *reflection, and taking action,*
> *critical librarianship is a*
> *promising framework for*
> *examining what we do and how to*
> *build and exercise our power.*

Social justice and changing the world are lofty goals, but working towards them is done through small steps. It can mean recognizing when to speak up and when to listen. Self-educating on how identities such as race, gender, class, and abledness affect your positionality. Advocating for a pay increase for your student workers. Getting your library a gender neutral bathroom. Buying books by underrepresented authors. Trying something new in your instruction sessions, like asking students to think about why so many scholarly articles are paywalled.

We don't simply want students to pass their classes, as important as that is. We hope to achieve something greater in our work. And through dialogue, reading, reflecting, and taking action, critical librarianship is a promising framework for doing just that.

*What might critical librarianship look like in your job?*

*Which students at your institution need the most support?*

*How does the culture at your workplace align or not align with critical librarianship?*

Before we get into the details of what critical librarianship in higher education can look like, I want to pose these reflective questions to get you thinking about your own library, institution, and students. There is no right or wrong way to do critical librarianship, and what we're able to accomplish is very much dependent on our circumstances, institutionally and personally. So take a couple minutes to think about these questions, and write down any thoughts that come to you. Then we'll move onto some examples of critical librarianship in practice.

# *Critical Librarianship in Practice*

Since critical librarianship usually takes place within, but isn't limited to, libraries and librarianship, I thought the most useful way of discussing some examples would be to look at different job areas. This will help to set the stage for this afternoon's affinity group discussions, where we'll break off to talk about critical librarianship and then share out to everyone else.

*Critical Librarianship in Practice*

Info Lit and Instruction

Cataloging and Classification

Collection Development

Hiring and Management

Information literacy and instruction is one of the most well-explored areas of critical librarianship. I think part of this is because teaching is one area where we have a good deal of latitude in deciding what we do and what our work looks like. Critical librarianship isn't interested in just instruction though. Critical information literacy, which is a pretty established area of information literacy research and practice, is a way of thinking about information literacy as a whole, from libraries' educational activities to professional documents like the ACRL *Standards* and the *Framework*.

A couple years ago I did a study on critical information literacy, where I did a survey and interviewed some academic librarians on how and why they take critical approaches to their instruction. It was all very fascinating. The participants in the study were really generous with their time and examples of critical info lit in their practice, so I want to share just a couple ideas here.

> *"I've had students look at LC and Dewey as 'anthropologists from the year 2815' and they try to hypothesize values the cultures that produced these ways of looking at information had - thereby opening up the idea that knowledge is conditional on time, place, and power."*

There are all sorts of ways to bring more challenging and important ideas into the library classroom. Some of the themes my study found were using classification systems as ways to think about the ideologies these tools reflect, as we see here, as well as using search examples that draw attention to social issues, examining how access to academic information is limited by vendors, and discussing corporate advertising platforms like Google and Facebook, or alternative media like zines and small press publishers. I especially like this example here for its creative take on classification, which is the single most useful and illustrative text we have on libraries and the types of knowledge they're organized to prioritize.

> *"Instead of simply demo-ing a database, I facilitated a role-playing activity in which [students] assumed the roles of scholars, and we then had a discussion about who gets to be a scholar and thus who has a voice in the literature.*
>
> *"This was all new to them, and I think they were able to both understand what 'the literature' is and problematize academia in ways they hadn't before."*

Participant in the study "The Practice and Promise of Critical Information Literacy," 2018

Beyond the content that's taught, there are many different ways to teach. Critical information literacy tends to prioritize discussion and dialogue among students and the teacher, to use group work as a way to decenter the typical classroom hierarchy and spark ideas, to skip the usual database demonstration, and to find ways to incorporate reflection into the session. This example talks about one way to move past database demonstrations, and actually have students involve themselves in a setting that too often sees them as passive receptacles waiting for knowledge. Critical librarianship asks us to consider the ways that education in libraries reinforces and leaves unquestioned dominant systems, while seeking opportunities to make library instruction meaningful to our students and to us, whatever that may look like in our own contexts.

*Critical Librarianship in Practice*

Info Lit and Instruction

Cataloging and Classification

Collection Development

Hiring and Management

Critical cataloging is another robust area. There's a long history of radical and activist catalogers, and in particular resistance to dehumanizing and insulting subject headings used by the Library of Congress.
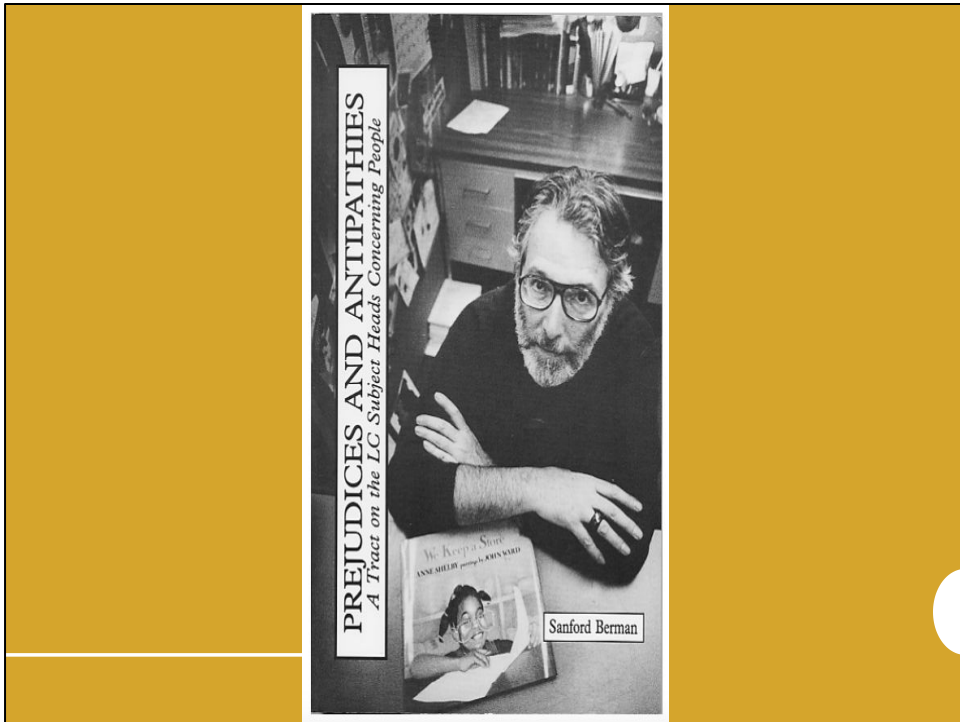
Sandy Berman began a lot of this work in 1971 with the publication of "[Prejudices and Antipathies](#)," and continues to petition the Library of Congress for changes today, alongside other catalogers working to have the system reflect more accurate and appropriate, or at least not hateful, terminology. The efforts of these librarians are admirable, particularly because they bring attention to a system that, like other aspects of library work, tends to be framed as neutral, and is anything but. Like our other practices, naming, categorizing, and cataloging is a political act.

**Scheme Membership(s)**
> Library of Congress Subject Headings

**Collection Membership(s)**
> LCSH Collection - Authorized Headings
> LCSH Collection - General Collection
> LCSH Collection - May Subdivide Geographically

**Variants**
> Aliens--Legal status, laws, etc
> Illegal aliens--Legal status, laws, etc
> Illegal immigrants
> Illegal immigration
> Undocumented aliens

**Broader Terms**
> Aliens

**Narrower Terms**
> Children of illegal aliens
> Women illegal aliens

**Related Terms**
> Alien detention centers
> Human smuggling

As one example of this, in 2016 there was a push by students and librarians at Dartmouth, and later a larger group of librarians and the ALA, to have the Library of Congress eliminate the "Illegal Aliens" subject heading, a dehumanizing subject heading if there ever was one. The replacement term being advocated for was "Undocumented Immigrants." An alternative was selected, but it was replaced by the Library of Congress with the also terrible and confusing "Noncitizens" subject head. Once the change was announced, Diane Black of Tennessee sponsored the "Stopping Partisan Policy at the Library of Congress Act" to direct the Library of Congress to keep "Illegal Immigrants," citing the "whims of left-wing special interests" and, bizarrely, the cost that taxpayers would shoulder to make the change. In summer 2016 the House voted to have Library of Congress retain the subject heading, on the basis that the term is used in federal laws. What this battle, and the work of critical cataloging more generally, shows us, is that the language we use to describe and represent knowledge truly matters.

*Critical Librarianship in Practice*

Info Lit and Instruction

Cataloging and Classification

Collection Development

Hiring and Management

The collections we build are not neutral. Each book that's acquired, each vendor contract that's renewed, represents many decisions that are all ideologically loaded. These materials are presented as what's deemed important by the library, implicitly and explicitly, and clearly demonstrates how our budgets are in some ways reflective of our priorities. There's a lot of room to improve, whether that's in diversifying our collections, making displays that bring attention to and show support for social justice causes, saying no to big deals and exploitative contracts with vendors, or pursuing open educational resources.

Diversifying our collections means to collect underrepresented author's works, and not just collect them, but make them visible through displays and bringing them into the classroom. Moving beyond the usual academic monograph or article is one way to do this. Like a number of other libraries, my library recently established a small zine collection. We chose to focus the collection on health issues and life in New York City, to reflect the interests of the large number of health sciences and nursing students at our campus, as well as our setting. The zine collection has been used in some information literacy and social work classes. In one class where students are asked to make a zine as their final project, they have the option of adding their zine to the collection. Our hope is that the zines not only tell students that alternative voices outside of academic publishing matter, but that their voices matter too, and they have something important to add to the conversation.

University of North Texas Manifesto: Expectations for Vendors of Library Collections

**Description**

Manifesto describing expectations for library collection vendors.

**Physical Description**

7 p.

**Creation Information**

Crawford, Laurel & Rodriguez, Allyson February 2, 2018.

We spend unbelievable sums of money renting access to journal articles. Scholarly knowledge is important, but we can't keep going like this. Some libraries, including maybe some of your own, have reached their breaking points, and are canceling contracts that simply aren't tenable. I would argue that libraries have an ethical obligation to not accept every vendor contract, and to truly negotiate with them and be willing to walk away, in order to reach a deal that represents the library's interests and needs. This University of North Texas Manifesto describes the library's terms and conditions for vendors, and talks about expectations for privacy, accessibility, vendor communication, and pricing, in an effort to increase transparency in their decision making and to communicate that to their campus.

More and more libraries are saying no to big deals. If you're ever feeling down, I recommend checking out the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, better known as SPARC, and their Big Deal Cancellation Tracker. It's full of libraries that cancelled big journal packages, which for me is a surefire way to brighten my day. Oftentimes these cancellations are for dire financial reasons, but the encouraging thing here is that libraries said no more to the most egregious publishers in a system that relies on the volunteer labor of academics to sell that work back to them and reap massive profits.

One other giant area with a lot of support is that of open educational resources. OER is absolutely a social justice issue. It's very likely that there are students at your campus who are facing housing or food insecurity, and textbooks are one cost that either can't be afforded or are chosen in lieu of other essentials. I can't tell you how many students ask for a textbook at the reference desk, and if the library doesn't have it, they say, "well, guess I'm not using that book this semester" or just leave with a look if disappointment on their face, knowing their grades will suffer.

Asking students, or even our libraries, to shoulder the costs of these extremely expensive books isn't a viable option, and OER offers one way to address this that many people can get behind. The "textbookbroke" hashtag is one effective advocacy campaign, pictured here, and with the funding that a number of states have budgeted for OER recently, it's an essential area for academic librarians to continue or begin their involvement in.

*Critical Librarianship in Practice*

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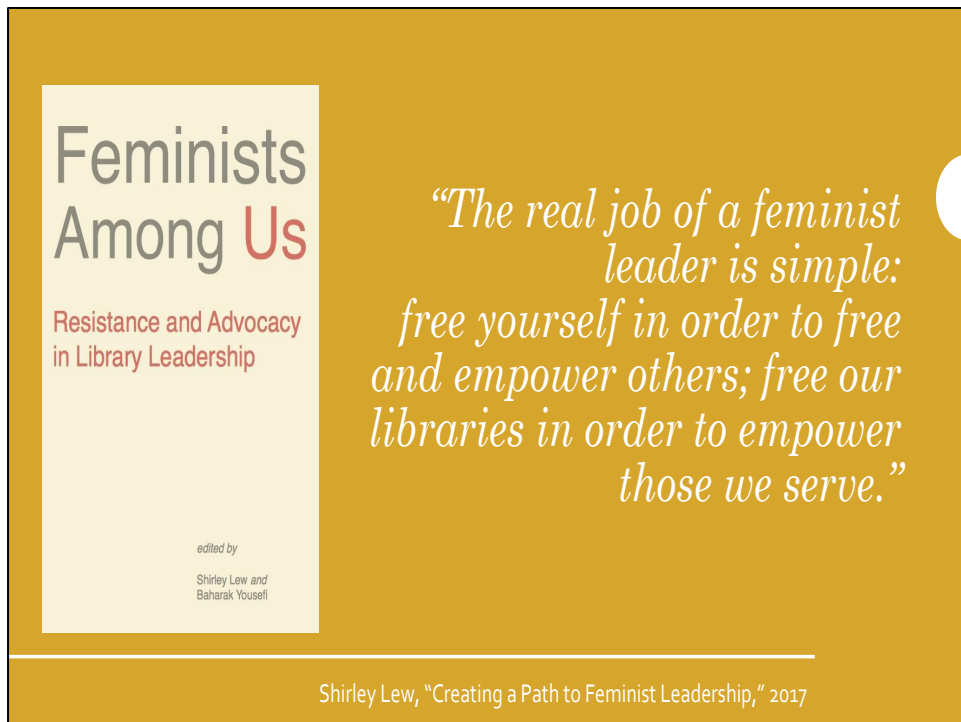Cataloging and Classification

Collection Development

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Hiring and management are essential areas to question and analyze, because that's where gatekeeping in the profession is most present, and that's where power is more concentrated. Critical librarianship is concerned with who is and isn't represented in libraries, absolutely, but also with their working conditions, the racism that many librarians of color experience in a very white field, and how hiring processes are infused with organizational and individual assumptions, including that the best candidate is the one who "fits" the library's culture, which often means that person looks and thinks like the existing staff.

April H.
@AprilHathcock

Following

If in libraridom, we're increasingly willing to accept a PhD as a proxy for the MLIS AND experience, then we should be even more willing to accept yrs of experience as a lib paraprof as a proxy for the MLIS.

3:43 PM - 6 Apr 2018

Lately there's been a lot of debate about whether the Executive Director of ALA should be required to have an MLS. We don't need to get into that debate, but I did appreciate librarian April Hathcock's tweet, which reminds us that as long as we're arguing about degree requirements, we should have in mind the cumulative effect of requiring one or more degrees, years of experience, and certain skills that can only be gained on the job. Requirements like these are part of the reason why librarianship remains so white.

There are endless barriers in the hiring process, often for both a job seeker and a search committee. There are just as many small but significant steps we can take to make hiring better, by including salary ranges on job ads, by not requiring candidates to include prior salaries, by providing interviewees with the interview questions in advance so that candidates, including autistic and neurodiverse candidates, can better prepare their responses, and reimbursing people up front for their travel expenses. It's really hard out there for job seekers, and we owe it to them and ourselves to improve the process.

"The real job of a feminist leader is simple: free yourself in order to free and empower others; free our libraries in order to empower those we serve."

Shirley Lew, "Creating a Path to Feminist Leadership," 2017

Another area that has seen a lot of interest is feminist and critical leadership in libraries. Feminist leadership in this sense doesn't mean "lean in." It means being attentive to the distributions of power within libraries and library labor, knowing when to seek transparency, when to stand up for an employee on their behalf, and letting your values lead you while allowing yourself to be wrong and learn how to do better. The collection Feminists Among Us, edited by Shirley Lew and Baharak Yousefi and published by Library Juice Press, is a great place to start for anyone interested in critical management, and the tensions between leading others and remaining critical of the system.

> *Questioning is at the heart of critical librarianship.*

We live in a country and an era that is extremely violent to marginalized people. Our laws, governments, corporations, and institutions are designed that way. This violence towards the marginalized has remained constant throughout history, but it has intensified and expanded with the current administration. There's so much work to be done. Critical librarianship encourages us to question what appears to be given, unchangeable, incontestable. It reminds us that our libraries face major challenges at the same time they perpetuate dominant ideologies. It lets us imagine a different world, and to work towards it, however imperfect those efforts may be.

*Hope is at the heart of
critical librarianship.*

Questioning is essential, absolutely, and that is a crucial part of libraries and higher education that we must seek to maintain and foster. Equally important, especially in challenging times, is hope. One thing that gives me hope is knowing that I'm not alone, that others are struggling towards creating change and trying to bring care and justice into the world. Our libraries reflect societal inequities and injustices, but they also reflect us. Our actions make up our libraries, and determine what they look like, what they do, and who they serve. Let's take this opportunity to determine what we want that to be, with intent, strength, and hope.

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