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Beginning and Extending the Conversation

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Abstract

The co-editors of this special issue of *Communications in Information Literacy* describe the origins and context for this issue and provide an overview of the ideas and perspectives of the contributors.

Keywords: critical information literacy, critical pedagogy, *Critical Library Instruction*

Special issue edited by Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier

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Beginning and Extending the Conversation

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We (Maria, Emily, and Alana) began this introduction in conversation, just as we began our work on *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, over ten years ago. *Critical Library Instruction* gathered the work of librarians who brought critical pedagogical approaches to their instruction. Then, we were heartened by the chapters that the volume's contributors—almost all strangers to us, then—wrote about the ideas, theories, politics, and desires that informed our teaching. Now, we are grateful to read some of those contributors' reflections on their teaching and thinking, as we mark the tenth anniversary of the book. We are also grateful to feature perspectives from authors who weren't included in the original text, whose thinking transforms our approach to teaching and theorizing, helps us make sense of where we are now and where we have been, and envisions futures we hope to enact.

As we talked about what the introduction to this issue would look like, we reflected on our personal and professional experiences and our responses to the articles we were editing. We discussed the questions that feel most pressing to us as we move into our next decades in the field, and we each chose one of those questions to respond to. Our reflections speak to the limits of our original volume, and to how our thinking has shifted in tandem with changes in the field, and in our lives. Some limits of our earlier thinking are apparent in the ways we, as the editors of *Critical Library Instruction*, failed to adequately address matters of race and racism in the collection. We would have benefited from a richer analysis of the political and economic forces shaping higher education more generally. These are the questions Alana and Emily consider, respectively. Maria shares stories to think about and revisits what it means to work on/from the institutional margins, ten years on.

We see this collection of essays as a way of extending the conversation beyond the limits of the original volume we edited, our email inboxes, and video chats. The conversations we present here in this introduction and in the essays contained in this issue are challenges, critiques, meditations, both insightful and incite-ful. We hope you will join this conversation with us.

Alana: Let's state this clearly: as editors and authors, Emily, Maria, and I did not address questions of race and racism in our editorial work for *Critical Library Instruction*. As Sofia Leung and Jorge López-McKnight rightly point out in their contribution to this journal issue, we contributed to and sustained white supremacy culture in librarianship when we published the book. This was not our intent, but it was our impact. In our framing introduction, we did not name our positionality as white women and didn't reflect upon the ways in which our whiteness informed our perspectives, our editorial work, or the professional networks we built as we worked on the volume. We were aware of the absence of librarians and staff of color in our workplaces, but we did not yet understand how we, as individuals and as a group, contributed to a larger professional culture of white supremacy. We had not (yet) come to terms with the ways white supremacy shows up at work, in those times when our white colleagues foreclosed race-related conversations, minimized structural critiques as individual complaints, or coded our colleagues of color's critiques as rude and ungrateful. We had witnessed these things but hadn't recognized them as manifestations of white supremacy culture. We were hired, served on hiring committees, and were promoted into management positions in a profession without practical, shared expectations around equity, inclusion, and justice. With the exception of the hiring process for my current position, we were not expected to speak to our own positionality, to have engaged in work for racial justice in LIS, to practice cultural humility, or to have engaged scholarship around the intersections of social identities and literacies.

And, with *Critical Library Instruction*, we published a volume that colleagues celebrated as "foundational," without having to account for the lack of a sustained attention to whiteness, race, or critical race pedagogy. Our engagement with the predominantly white, male tradition of critical pedagogy, with its analyses of neoliberalism and global capitalism, was considered enough. In the decade since we edited *Critical Library Instruction*, colleagues theorizing racism and envisioning racially-just futures in librarianship have informed how we now situate our collection and its mattering. While the arrival of our collection was an event in the history of critical librarianship, it was not a "first"—though it felt that way to us, as younger, white librarians. As Jennifer Brown, Jennifer A. Ferretti, Sofia Leung, and Marisa Méndez-Brady (2018) remind us, the work of "critical librarianship" is work librarians of color have done for decades, though we did not recognize their work in our volume.

As Leung and López-McKnight argue in their contribution to this issue, those of us responsible for the first iteration of “critical library instruction” (with a few exceptions) did not account for the ways in which our “critical” classrooms also function as sites for the reproduction of racist norms, as those of us with the privilege *not* to notice or address race and racism enact that power. We performed that privilege in the 2010 volume by not entering into conversation with existing work on whiteness and racism in the field. We should have, for example, engaged Isabel Espinal’s (2001) call to study whiteness in librarianship or Todd Honma’s (2005) work on whiteness and epistemological racism in LIS scholarship and librarianship. If we had heeded Espinal’s call, we could have made our predominantly-white classrooms sites of ethnographic study, in order to better understand how whiteness functions in our pedagogy. Following Honma’s work, we would have been able to explicitly call for critical pedagogies that challenge and provide alternatives to “white Eurocentric knowledge” (“Epistemologies of Racism,” para. 4). Espinal and Honma’s analyses would have guided us to a level of cultural and structural analyses beyond the classroom, would have led us to think of our classes, and our teaching, as enmeshed in our libraries, our institutions, and our profession.

We recognize, now, that our whiteness has informed our professional trajectories, and has shaped how we teach, make arguments, and perceive the field of library instruction. Our status as white people allowed us to advocate for sharing power with students, a move that may not be accessible to our colleagues of color, as Leung and López-McKnight observe. Our whiteness has offered us the protection to take risks as we experiment with new pedagogical approaches; our failures or mistakes are not associated with our racial identity.

In the past decade, I have witnessed how critical pedagogical dreams can be constrained by white cultural expectations for the library. Several years ago, I was the co-manager for a cohort of library staff who identified as Black and people of color. Members of the cohort, with my and their other white managers’ support, developed and advertised identity-based programs open to Black students and students who identified as coming from colonized communities. Cohort members wanted these programs to create opportunities for students to explore library resources with staff and peers who shared their social identities. The staff had planned their identity-based programs during a six-week critical pedagogy training and had applied the popular education principles they learned in the workshop to their program design. Soon after they posted fliers promoting the programs around campus, the College administration issued a directive that, because the library is a resource for all students, library staff should not offer programs that are closed to anyone. It was clear that the library

was not a space that could center students of color in ways that would exclude other students' participation (though I posit the library was always, already centering white students, given the values of "normative whiteness" that operate in many of our libraries; Brook, Ellenwood, & Lazzaro, 2015, p. 260). My colleagues and I learned we could not smoothly incorporate pedagogical strategies from social justice movements in our work to make the library a more inclusive and equitable space; we needed to develop other, institutionally-aligned methods for building relationships with Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students who didn't study or gather in the library. I understood, in a new way, how administrators, through institutional prerogatives and directives, create conditions and parameters for the library's pedagogical work, and set the terms for our work with and around race. The campus library is, politically, economically, and logistically, *of* the university, not just conveniently located *in* it (Harney & Moten, 2013).

As I try to make sense of what strategies are available to me as a critical teacher now and in the future, I want to take a cue from our colleagues in the We Here community, by learning who came before me, who was already doing race-critical work in the twentieth century, whose stories from radical and critical library history I haven't sought out. Calling me, and others, into a better future, Leung and López-McKnight offer a praxis of critical library instruction that centers critical race, emergent, and sustaining pedagogies. As we, the larger collective professional *we*, look at our past, present, and future as librarians who work within institutions, cultural contexts, and conditions shaped by white supremacy, it is clear this is the work we need to do. For teaching librarians, and especially white teaching librarians, this means not only shifting our pedagogy, but also working outside the classroom to support BIPOC students' self-determination as scholars and creators; developing our capacity to support decolonizing, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive research methodologies and creative praxes; pursuing structural, relational, and long-haul diversity, equity, and inclusion work in our libraries and beyond; supporting and practicing accountability to and with our BIPOC colleagues; and celebrating work that imagines, shows, and guides us toward the future we want to inhabit (to name just a few things on our collective agenda).

Emily: Our efforts failed to reckon with the role we played in reproducing white supremacy in the field, and we were naïve about broader political pressures on higher education institutions, including the library. We were young(er) when we edited the 2010 volume,

our experiences relatively shallow. We were, all of us, in the process of shaping our professional selves.

I look back at the version of me that pulled this together with Alana and Maria, from registering for the Google Group we used to share drafts and revisions at Sarah Lawrence College to signing off on page proofs in what I called my cloffice, a tiny overheated mouse-ridden pocket at the edge of the decrepit reference room at Long Island University, Brooklyn. In the ten years since, I have edited a lot of things—it turned out that I really liked that part—but this first project meant discovering new ways of thinking and doing. I learned about the infinite value of spreadsheets and calendar reminders, the importance of saying “no” early even if saying “no” is hard, and the ways that ideas are built in conversation with chapter authors and co-editors, and with myself: writing, revising, writing again.

I still remember how scrappy it all felt, how much we felt like outsiders. We were on Rory Litwin’s alternative press, not an ALA Edition. We tried and failed to get ourselves on the ACRL national conference program. We tried and failed again two years later. We nominated ourselves for the Rockman Award. We did not win. And yet, the book resonated. Other books followed—Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins’s *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, Annie Downey’s *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas*. Conference presentations started to get accepted, ours included, followed by unconferences, and then entire conferences, entire journals. Our book didn’t start this flourishing, but it was a fervent part of it.

Ours was not the only text published in 2010 that has shaped the present. That year also saw the arrival of the ACRL *Value of Academic Libraries* (VAL) report, a document that shaped the field’s preoccupation with measurement, calculation, reporting, and analytics. Some of us have argued that critical perspectives have been institutionalized in the last decade, a process that has weakened their potential power to challenge and transform (Drabinski, 2017; see Seale in this issue). Critical pedagogy arguably contributed to shaping the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. VAL became a juggernaut, steering immense resources to the project of quantifying the ways libraries contribute to the project of student retention and graduation, less about student learning than the maintenance of student tuition dollars and the production of a workforce for capital that demands none of its investment.

Our volume might have grappled more directly with the forces that shape our context: limited access to classrooms, laptops, and projectors, the crushing debt facing students in

our classrooms, and an adjunctified teaching faculty too often paid poverty wages. The last ten years has also been an education in just how challenging it can be to believe in the transformative power of teaching and learning in the face of market logics that dominate higher education and do much to determine what we can do in the library.

Any future of critical library instruction must include a commitment to organizing and acting against forces that see higher education as just another under-capitalized asset that can be stripped and sold for parts. If our vision is limited to the four walls of our classrooms or the two chairs and a computer that make a reference desk, we are likely to find ourselves guide-on-the-side-ing in the rubble of what's left after capital turns education into a business, and then craters it for profit. We cannot limit our concerns to what difference it could make to have tables and chairs that can be reconfigured to facilitate pairing and sharing when the value of learning as an end in itself is under attack. We have problems much larger than an impulse to demo and lecture to contend with.

Maria: As I'm sitting here trying to write this, there's a story that keeps coming to mind, and I keep telling it to shut up and go away so I can write something else, but it won't go away, so here it is. Five years ago, I taught a semester-long course on feminist pedagogy in the master's in interdisciplinary studies program on my campus. Together, we examined what feminist pedagogy is and isn't, what it looks like, how it works, how to enact it. Learners were asked to lead discussions of assigned articles and to deliver a mini teaching demonstration. They were also invited to develop their own criteria for my assessment of their research papers. Overall, I endeavored to use feminist pedagogy to teach feminist pedagogy.

A frequent discussion topic that repeatedly emerged was how the ways in which feminist pedagogy can be applied in the classroom could also be used in other contexts and settings. "It leaks into other stuff," one student shared. Students shared that they found themselves using feminist pedagogical examples in interpersonal relationships and in their workplaces. One such example of using feminist pedagogy in non-classroom contexts is something I'll never ever forget. One of my students experienced a death in the family during the semester, and later, she shared with me that she intentionally used principles for feminist pedagogy to plan the funeral. She explained how: it was a collaborative, egalitarian approach. Everyone's voices and input were heard, taken seriously, and valued. The wishes of the deceased family member were prioritized in their planning. They chose readings and music that were outside of the mainstream of typical funeral fare.

I think about this feminist pedagogy funeral a lot. I think about this “it leaks into other stuff” assertion a lot. And I can see where the writers in this issue are thinking about this, too. Critical approaches in the library are not just for the classroom. Critical pedagogy is a kind of lens or filter through which we can approach and re-envision library work, even in settings that do not appear to have overt, literal classroom teaching moments. We can use this lens to re-see all kinds of library work, and not just library work either, but maybe even higher ed, or maybe even the world. What if the same ideas and strategies we employ in the classroom could be employed in staff meetings? Strategic planning? Staff training? Library school curricula?

Even more, what implications does this “leaking into other stuff” have for the “rubble of what’s left after capital turns education into a business, and then craters it for profit” that Emily describes above? What about the institutional, administrative pressure that dictates the conditions in which radical educational practices can be enacted, as Alana describes above? Does it even matter if we integrate critical pedagogy into library school curricula when we feel crushed and erased and voiceless by power dynamics that govern higher education?

In the essay I contributed to the 2010 volume, I argued that there can be freedom in the margins. Academic librarians often occupy a marginal position that even tenure-track-faculty-status cannot alleviate. Perceived as mere service providers instead of actual legit teachers or active participants in and contributors to scholarly conversations, academic librarians can find it demoralizing and depressing to be not taken seriously. It was my contention that flying off the radar can confer some amount of autonomy that perhaps other academics might find more difficult to employ. If no one is paying attention to me or expecting me to produce things they care about, then I can do cool stuff that I might otherwise be prevented from doing.

I still think this is true. I still think that occupying an in-between, not-quite-legit status means that you might be able to experiment some more, try new things, and not worry too much about being micromanaged or controlled. But I also think that this claim has early-career optimism written all over it. I didn’t know then that the cumulative effect of marginal status would have a detrimental impact on me, my work, how I feel about my work, and my professional identity. Sure, I have freedom to try new things, but aside from me and maybe two or three other people, no one cares about the cool, innovative, and meaningful stuff I’m doing.

So why am I doing this? Do I still think that critical pedagogy can change lives and change the world? I feel somewhat uncomfortable admitting that I still think this is true, at least a little bit, and the semi-embarrassed discomfort is because I know how naïvely optimistic this sounds. But my thinking has evolved to accept that changes happen incrementally and cumulatively rather than spectacularly, like being stricken blind and falling off a horse on the way to Damascus.

Speaking of early career optimism, I feel so young and naïve when I recall the conception of *Critical Library Instruction*. I remember being Emily's roomie at ALA Annual in Anaheim in 2008, and while one of the highlights of this shared experience was sitting in the Holiday Inn hot tub with fellow hotel guests in town for the Tall People Convention, I do also remember with fondness talking over the beginnings of *Critical Library Instruction* with Emily over bottomless French fries at Red Robin. I had left Sarah Lawrence by then and was a year into my position as coordinator of library instruction at IU Southeast. I had tenure-track-faculty-status-itis, a starry-eyed frantic fever that had me chasing after accomplishments. Already a lifelong achievement addict, my new job intensified my hunger to do things and get recognition. I was invested in my profession and I wanted to do work that mattered, but I had not yet discerned the difference between doing lots of stuff in order to get recognized and doing meaningful and satisfying stuff in order to contribute to my field. I had churned out a dozen proposals for this conference and that conference and was shocked to have almost everything accepted.

Another thing I recall from Annual in 2008 is getting a match.com message from a woman who lived in Virginia, and I was trying to decide whether to reactivate my lapsed membership in order to access the message. Sitting on a Gale shuttle with Emily, I explained my conundrum, and she advised me to renew my membership. I *had* to do it, she said. So I did, and reader, I married this match.com suitor. I bring this up not to insert gratuitous guts-spilling into this essay, although that has sort of become my brand, but to point out that for me, the origins of *Critical Library Instruction* are parallel to both the formation of my professional identity, as well as the foundation of my relationship with my life partner. It is hard to separate these three strands; they form an inextricable braid that threads the needle stitching together who I am, who I care about, and what I care about.

In short, I care about the work of critical library instruction. I care about it deeply. It has shaped me, my work, and my perspective on the profession. But the conception and birthing of our book, and then ten years that have followed, have not necessarily led to a

more certain understanding of it. Instead, I question it more than ever. I confess to being tired of trying to see the benefits of being on the margins, but I am invigorated by the voices and perspectives presented in this issue. I look to them for direction. I have hope for what comes next.

Conclusion

As we have reflected on throughout this introduction, we acknowledge the failures, missed opportunities, and challenges presented by our book in 2010. Now, ten years later, we hope that the conversations we present here in this issue are one way of conceptualizing and contending with the problems we grappled with then and now, as well as providing visions for moving forward. Let's keep continuing these conversations.

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