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But How Do We Do Critical Librarianship?

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Critical librarianship asks us to look more closely at the sociopolitical world both inside and out of our libraries. Indeed, a lot has happened in the world since I first saw the call for this special issue of *OLA Quarterly*. First, there was the exposure of an internal memo from a Google employee that denied that women were capable tech workers. Last week, there were escalating threats between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un about possible nuclear detonations. I finished writing in the wake of white supremacist demonstrations and violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, and as an unprecedented storm geared up to hit Houston. On Twitter and Facebook, I'm seeing fierce debate about whether to let Nazis use library space ... and how you would even be able to identify Nazis to kick them out.

In short, this is an urgent time to reflect on what critical librarianship is and what its aims are. As the #critlib chats on Twitter have gained interest over the past few years, I have seen the “critical” of critical librarianship interpreted in several overlapping and competing ways. First, critical librarianship is associated, for good reason, with critical theory, or what Kenny Garcia calls a “critical theorist framework that is epistemological, self-reflective, and activist in nature” (2016). Critical theory encompasses the work of many scholars who reflect on and critique social structures. The call for this issue noted that critical librarianship has been criticized for being overly philosophical or theory-heavy. In the case of the #critlib chats, we wanted a place for librarians to talk about how they use critical pedagogy in particular, inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and other scholars, as well as our own experiences as learners and teachers. Our emphasis, however, was on *doing* and how practice informed thinking, and in turn, how this new mode of thinking could influence new forms of practice. This spiraling transformative dialog between theory and practice can be described as *praxis*, and it requires an openness both to learning about new ideas and to try new things.



Second, “critical” can be understood as being critical of, or criticizing. This practice is often described with some amount of anxiety—as if critical librarians are out there waiting to attack their peers for their actions. In a recent interview with Jeffrey Beall, known for his now-defunct list of predatory Open Access publishers, he claims that many activist librarians seek relentlessly to shut down big academic publishers like Elsevier even to the detriment of library users (2017). By using the pejorative term “social justice warrior,” popularized by GamerGate trolls who used it against their foes, to describe these librarians, Beall suggests a sort of culture war within the profession: one side upholding the status quo and the other side trying to tear it down no matter what. This reactionary position fails to examine the flaws in things as they stand. If big academic publishing isn’t inherently bad, why should we believe it is inherently good? Deep critique of how things are and have been is rarely welcomed, but can provide a pathway to explore other alternatives for the future.

Of course, there are other meanings to “critical” as well. One in particular is relevant as we consider what critical librarianship is and how to do it: critical meaning decisive, pivotal, or urgent. Think of a critical medical condition, or maybe better still, of a critical hit in the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. In this sense, critical librarianship can help us get to the root of librarianship as a whole, and perhaps help us face the crises that libraries, library workers, and library users are dealing with. This particular socio-historical moment seems to ask us, more even than usual, to get on with our praxis. How do we *do* critical librarianship? What does that look like, and why does it matter?

In order to explore these questions, I want to share a bit of my own critical librarianship story. I started working as an on-call page at Multnomah County Library when I was a teenager, and I remember the emphasis made on core shared values, particularly intellectual freedom. During our new employee orientation, we discussed specific challenges and had time to debate them. These shared values—particularly the chance to learn and debate them—made me part of a bigger movement, even as a very part-time worker.

A few years later, as a college student, I got hired through my university library to work at the Southern California Library for Social Studies Research, an independent community archives and library in South Los Angeles. The SCL was founded by Emil Freed, a Jewish leftist who started collecting papers in his basement when his friends began tossing things out of fear of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1950s Hollywood. The librarians at SCL collected archives and books related to local organizing, worked with academic and independent researchers, hosted community events, and kept a box of toys for the neighborhood kids who occasionally wandered in. We all ate lunch together every day, sharing food and deep conversation, a practice that I now recognize as a form of radical self- and community care.

After graduating from college, I moved to Seattle where I spent a lot of my free time volunteering at the Zine Archive and Publishing Project (ZAPP), a totally DIY community archive, library, and zine-making space. I hadn’t been into zines—little self-published works, often about deeply personal and/or political topics—before I wandered into ZAPP one day and was welcomed with warmth by the open hours volunteers. The community, as much as the materials themselves, hooked me. ZAPP built a collection of stories that wouldn’t otherwise have been compiled, but it also offered the space, materials, and support for people to make their own zines.



I tell these stories for several reasons. From the start, my work in libraries has been in a thoughtful community of practice, with people welcoming me to reflect on our shared values and the necessity to take action. I want to honor the library workers who showed me what libraries could do with their communities.

And although there were absolutely complex ideas and theoretical approaches behind this work, I was a pretty low-level worker or volunteer, contributing in the hourly way that I could. I didn't have to have read Judith Butler in order to catalog queer zines at ZAPP. I didn't have to have a deep understanding of white supremacy or know the full history of segregation in public schools in order to help build a display about the Chicano student walkouts in 1970s Los Angeles. Later, when I learned more about gender theory and ethnic studies, of course it helped my understanding, which then continued to inform my practice. But there were so many places to get started in the thinking *through* the doing. So critical librarianship could look like the Jefferson County Library District Teen Book Club that welcomes young people to read and discuss books exploring social identities, and the work that youth librarian Lorene Forman does to support those young people as they explore what to do in their community. This book club, dedicated to "books, kindness, and inclusion," creates a space for youth to explore stories they hadn't found yet and to build the trust needed for rich discussion. Finally, it gives them the space to think about what their community needs, and what they themselves can do about it.

More than social awareness, critical librarianship seeks social justice. Part of the challenge in getting started is that there is no single way to do it. There is no checklist for praxis, no solution that works for every community. But my experience has taught me that this work happens in community. There are always people to learn from (and with) and work to be done, and there is room for all of us here. 🐘

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