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From the Guest Editor



ELSA LOFTIS

Elsa is the Director of Library Services at the Oregon College of Art and Craft and serves as the past president of the Oregon Library Association. She earned her MLIS from the Pratt Institute, and her B.A. from the University of Oregon. She has worked in public libraries, academic libraries, and a museum archive. Among the many things she loves about library work is serving students and collaborating with the amazing people who work in the library world.

Libraries and archives are community spaces that acquire, organize, preserve, and make available resources for our patrons. Library workers connect people to these resources in various ways (technical services, reference, instruction, and more). It is noble and wonderful work, and it begs some interesting questions: is acquisition, organization, preservation, or dissemination a series of passive acts? Are libraries impartial spaces that give the real estate on their shelves to the words and ideas of others without judgment or context?

I would certainly argue that the judgment and context pieces are part of the library's mission. Judgment plays a part in how we strive to provide our patrons with the best possible information we can find for them in terms of scholarly merit or other comparative value (which evolves). We exercise professional judgment when deciding whose voices are represented in our collection when we make purchases and acquisitions. But whose voices aren't represented? Whose voices are endangered or silenced when material in our collections is challenged? Even our subject headings and classification terminology include pejorative language, so how do we organize our materials in a thoughtful and usable way? Providing context for the information on our shelves is part of our shared mission as educators as well. I might not have the ability to take advantage of every possible teachable moment and facilitate conversations each time a patron comes across challenging content in my collection, but I help provide an environment where they can dig deeper and ask questions.

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Above, I've only discussed the *stuff* we have, not even the things we do: how do we welcome the members of our communities? How are our spaces set up and used? What kind of programming and displays are we offering? How do we support critical thinking and depth of inquiry? Libraries are amazing places that give people the opportunity to learn, grow, and enjoy themselves, which is why we love them and work so hard to ensure that all are welcome.

We are at another point in history where our country is looking at how we treat one another, who has power, and who is being marginalized. The social dynamic in this country is constantly being tested, even at the best of times. As I write, it seems that those who subscribe to racist and oppressive beliefs are emboldened and are highly visible, perhaps more so than normal, due to our present political situation. This is causing a great deal of legitimate fear in our communities. Lately, many people in our nation are waking up to the ongoing reality of white supremacy and the attendant miseries it causes. There are aggressive debates about immigration and human rights going on in our communities and in the government. I know that many people who work in libraries think about how world events and social injustice impact the communities we serve, and in connection with these issues, I have been hearing about and reading more and more about critical librarianship.

So, what does critical librarianship mean, exactly, and how is it practiced? To think about this, we look at librarianship through a lens of critical theory and understand that there is a certain amount of activism implied. To embrace critical librarianship means that you believe that libraries should work for social justice (and figure out ways to actually do that work). Critical librarianship also invites library workers to consider how our institutions and our roles have enforced or at least complied with systems of oppression, both in the past and now.

I have noticed a great deal of conversation about these ideas going on both online in social media, in journals, at conferences, and in conversation. It's not always defined as "critical librarianship," but it's in ongoing threads about issues such as whether libraries should let Nazi groups meet in library public meeting rooms, differences between "free speech" and "hate speech," whether scholarly contributions matter as much when it's from a lived experience versus someone with a PhD ("authority is constructed and contextual" [ACRL, 2015] anyone?). These conversations are going on in our libraries and in our profession, and we all deal with them as real people with real beliefs, but also as professionals who are at our core motivated by a call to serve our communities.

I was curious about these ideas and these questions, so I asked you, the Oregon library community, to tell us about how you see critical librarianship and if it plays a role in your work. I was delighted to get responses from incredible, inspiring librarians who were willing to share their stories. Kelly McElroy from Oregon State University—who has been at the forefront of the critical librarianship discussions from the start, monitored the first #critlib chat on Twitter and co-edited *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbooks* (with N. Pagowsky)—contributed an article about how we "do" critical librarianship. Annie Downey, from Reed College and author of *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas*, submitted a piece about Myles Horton and the Highlander Folk School, famous for its role in the Civil Rights Movement and community education and how that's shaped her work. Robert Schroeder, Education and Art Librarian at Portland State University, wrote



about relationship building with non-traditional students who tend to be underserved and underrepresented in academe, and how that informed his instruction experiences. David Woken, Coordinator of Library Graduate Instruction and History and Latin American Studies Librarian at the University of Oregon, discussed a unique and groundbreaking program that he coordinates with the Spanish Heritage Learners at the U of O to make use of primary source material to better understand the contributions of the Latinx communities in Oregon history. Youth Librarian at Multnomah County Library, Natasha Forrester Campbell, who currently serves as chair of the Children's Services Division of the Oregon Library Association, described the role that social justice can play in storytime at the public library. Candise Branum, the Director of Library Services at the Oriental College of Medicine and Turner Masland, Access Services Assistant Manager at Portland State University, collaborated on an article that grew out of an OLA conference session about critical library management.

These librarians describe some of the many ways that we can oppose injustice and inequality in our libraries, serve as advocates for our patrons, and make a positive social impact. I am immensely grateful to these writers for sharing their stories and their thoughts. You might see yourself reflected here, in the work you do, or ideas that you have considered. To you, I say, thank you, and keep up the work!

References

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