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Disrupting Institutional Racism in the Public Library

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ABSTRACT

One of the last spaces in American society where people can freely commune without purchase or associated fee, the public library is in a period of transformation and serving evolving and emerging societal needs as it shifts from a repository of information to a place for community and justice. Applying concepts from Critical Race Theory (CRT), this paper examines the transformation of the public library under a critical lens. The implications of unacknowledged systemic racism from policies and values at the institutional level, particularly current equity, inclusion, and justice efforts are critiqued and discussed. Building on the work of researchers in the field of LIS and CRT, this paper concludes with suggestions for advancing the vision of accessible, useful, liberatory, and transformative public libraries of the future and invitation for further dialogue.

DISRUPTING INSTITUTIONAL RACISM IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

The public library is said to be entering a period of transformation. A crusader in the digital divide and trusted repository of information; one of the last spaces in American society where people can freely commune without purchase or associated fee, the public library is hailed as a place for community and social justice. “The work of libraries has changed more in the last decade than it did in the prior hundred years,” writes Reardon (2016, p. 276), illustrated by an evolution of purpose as public libraries are increasingly called upon to function as becoming “de facto social service agencies” (Whaler et al., 2019) and tasked with providing frontline support to populations in crisis. Indeed, myriad initiatives are in place to promote equity, inclusion, and justice within the public library, and the fields of social work, public policy, and LIS are intersecting in new ways to address the changing needs of American library goers in an era of rapid technology growth, wealth stratification, racial tension, and economic volatility. In this

essay I examine the transformation of the public library under a critical lens. Applying concepts from critical race theory (CRT), I describe the barriers the public library must overcome to truly achieve transformation. I consider the implications of unacknowledged systemic racism in current equity, inclusion, and justice efforts, and build on the work of researchers in the field to advance the vision of accessible, useful, liberatory, and transformative public libraries of the future.

Pew Research (2020) describes a “sharp and rising” wealth gap in the U.S., with constantly increasing income inequality and declining economic mobility for everyone but the wealthy. As middle-and-low-income Americans experience long term wage stagnation and increased barriers to wealth building activities in a nation with grossly deficient social welfare policies, it is reasonable to expect that many Americans are in need of support outside of traditional social services. The public library has long been a presumed place for civic life; positioned as a cornerstone of democracy, intellectual freedom, and access to information. With such a prolific reputation, it’s no surprise that a surge of need is driving the repurposing of space, programs, and services.

The racial wealth gap too has significantly deepened as wealth stratification increases, to a degree of which the severity cannot be understated: “The typical white American family has roughly 10 times as much wealth as the typical African American family and the typical Latino family. In other words, while the median white household has about \$100,000-\$200,000 net worth, Blacks and Latinos have \$10,000-\$20,000 net worth” (Mineo, 2021). The racial wealth gap is a grim reflection of the impacts of systemic, institutional racism and disenfranchisement. It follows that if the public library is being called upon (and intentionally evolving) to serve the socioeconomic needs of individuals and communities, it will need to address its roots in racism and its centering of white and European interests.

Todd Homna's 2005 article *Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies* details the centering of white European colonial values in the creation and evolution of information institutions, highlighting the LIS field's failure to acknowledge its foundations in whiteness and cultural assimilation. American public library systems were established as places for the assimilation of immigrants to the US, creating a narrative in which the values and culture of white and European citizens are the mainstream culture of the nation. This narrative inherently excludes non-citizens, Native Americans, Black people, and Asian immigrants (Homna, p. 7). In fact, it is within the past 100 years that Black people were legally barred from accessing American public libraries (Ossom-Williamson et al., 2020). With a profound history of exclusion and centering of whiteness, the LIS fields' aversion to talking about race or engaging in critical discourse threatens the ability of equity, inclusion, and justice initiatives to achieve their goals.

Modern diversity initiatives within the library have garnered well-deserved criticism. "Large library systems are acutely aware of the communities they serve and are committed to the values of equity, service, and social justice," writes Amber Matthews (2020, p. 3). Service models, frameworks, and programming are increasingly centered around equity, inclusion, and justice, however, with a focus on neutrality they are often superficial in affect. In a prolific 2015 blog post, April Hathcock points to the myriad initiatives to increase diversity in the LIS profession itself that have failed to deliver meaningful results, calling them "white librarianship in blackface". Though public libraries and their offerings may begin to look different and change in messaging, conversations about diversity in the LIS profession and, thus, within the public library, frequently fail to intentionally discuss race, and so also fail to decenter the norms and values of the dominating (white, European) narrative, falling short of mitigating inequity, exclusion, and issues of justice.

This issue has gained attention and action from the Public Library Association (PLA) in recent years. The PLA's Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Framework Task Force, formed

in 2018, presented a framework to the association's members in 2022 that begins with "Addressing and interrogating how white supremacy, white privilege and racism show up in libraries" (ACRL, 2022). Though positive in its motives to talk about race and goal of formally inviting antiracism into the library, it is important to note that the task force acknowledges that this framework is not a liberatory practice (American Library Association, 2022) but a series of frames to change thought and behavior of library professionals in pursuit of achieving greater equity and justice outcomes.

The antiracist motives of equity, inclusion, and justice initiatives like the PLA's recent framework are certainly not without merit, but they lack the critical focus necessary to be truly transformative. Transformation requires liberatory practices which demand explicit accountability and acknowledgement of the dominance of white and European narratives and values. For the public library to embrace transformation, and in doing so address the social determinants of equity, inclusion, and justice, race must be brought to the forefront of research, of changes to space, of collections policies, service models, programs, and reference services in the public library.

Critical theories provide frameworks for acknowledging and addressing hierarchies of power that maintain oppression. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a common topic in today's news cycles and often portrayed as an anti-white political ideology, but it is in reality simply a tool for inquiry and action. Though developed as a legal theory, CRT has cross-disciplinary applications and is gaining traction in LIS. Its value for LIS institutions is stated well by Porchia Moore in her 2021 article discussing racism and anti-Blackness in museums:

CRT is a liberatory framework for providing the language tools, theoretical frameworks, history, and legal contexts to organize our thinking so that we can address access, diversity, inclusion, and equity in museums. In addition, it augments our commitment to sharing the full depth and breadth of information that material culture affords us.

Furthermore, it allows us to use research, rubrics, and other tools to eradicate systemic

racism in our practices as we continue to adhere to standards of excellence, thereby redefining and transforming our field by committing to anti-racism and combating anti-blackness.

Applying CRT frameworks in LIS spaces challenges knowledge institutions and professionals to talk about race, and to unpack and dismantle the concept of neutrality. In the context of public libraries, a CRT framework embraces subjectivity in examining all the attributes of the library: its geographic location, services, programs, collections, literacy programs, marketing and outreach, partnerships, and staffing. It examines what the guiding narrative is for each of those elements; that is, whose values are the library's offerings promoting and protecting? Whose goals and outcomes are prioritized? What institutional rules and norms govern the forms of information the library houses?

CRT is based in the tenet that racism is endemic to society and is embedded in our laws, rules, social norms, and economy. Employing the CRT framework in research and practice in public libraries will certainly bring uncomfortable truths to bear, however, it promotes an ongoing and in-depth critique of the historical underpinnings of public library traditions and confronts diversity initiatives that have a band-aid effect rather than addressing systemic issues. CRT challenges the notions of mainstream and colorblind policies and introduces counternarrative, and so can push libraries to center the stories and experiences of their patrons. On the macro level, a CRT approach would evoke consideration and adoption of liberatory practices in the PLA's framework for racial equity. In the mezzo, public libraries, branch by branch, will be pushed to become not just community-responsive but community-driven, prioritizing real, local interests over tradition and professional norms. At the micro level, anti-racism work remains, as does participation in civic discourse that shapes the future of the library. This approach is disruptive, but destructive only to the hierarchies that perpetuate the inequity, exclusion, and injustice that is so clearly demonstrated by wealth stratification. Emerging research and

discussion provide key strategies and recommendations for action, some of which are listed here:

- Prioritize critical theories in scholarly and professional public library research;
- Examine the institution's 'core audience' in marketing and development of offerings;
- Explicitly account for race, class, and urbanism in research and the development of all library programs and services;
- Identify policies and practices that perpetuate racism and change them;
- Create space and opportunities for counternarrative initiatives;
- Challenge the definition of information and invite migration from the western-dominant view of information, giving space and value to different methods of creating and sharing knowledge such as spoken word, storytelling, and music;
- Partner with community organizations in the planning and development of library spaces, services, and offerings;
- Remove financial barriers and fees, including late or lost book penalties;
- Include critical theories in LIS curriculum;
- Start now.

(Brayboy, 2005; Horowitz et al., 2009; Matthews, 2020; Moore, 2021; Ossom-Williamson et al., 2020)

Today's public libraries are tasked with continuing to serve the needs of their visitors through educational support, information literacy, assistance locating social and crisis services, and provision of skills and resources that advance patrons' ability to survive in a nation with crumbling social supports and hierarchical barriers to economic mobility. They are on the front lines of societal shift and are in an incredible position to shape a future state which challenges the power structures that maintain and perpetuate inequity and injustice; structures which further social and economic exclusion and disenfranchisement in the US. Elevating the public library's role in preserving democracy, in protecting intellectual freedom, and in serving as a public good is directly supported by transformative approach rooted in the framework of CRT.

To claim transformation, and to be truly community-focused and justice-oriented, public libraries of tomorrow must be locally relevant, equitable in accessibility and utility, and inclusive of local knowledge and experience. Achieving true and sustainable equity, inclusivity, and justice in public libraries demands not simply reform of practices and institutional norms but future-focused, liberation-bound, barrier-disrupting transformative action that is nested in the choice to invite radical change. Public libraries can make the choice now to lead the disruption of institutional racism and forge a path to equity, inclusion, and justice for all.

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