Dreaming Revolutionary Futures: Critical Race's Centrality to Ending White Supremacy

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Abstract

Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods dangerously lacked a centering, and critique, of white supremacy, as a structure of domination; we see the continuation of that active avoidance, or a progress approach through liberal or multicultural frameworks that do not precisely identify roots of racialized oppression, in critical librarianship currently. In this essay, we reject progress narratives depicting the profession as having arrived, or even moved further, to a critical space, paying particular close attention to the absence of white supremacy, not only in the text *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* but in critical library instruction. We then explore our teaching and learning experiences against, and through, white supremacy—while interrogating, and responding to critical library instruction—by drawing on critical race theory, emergent strategy, and cultural and race-centered pedagogies that offer humanizing and sustaining ways of understanding and being. Finally, we close by moving towards an urgent confrontation with white supremacy, carrying radical hope and imagining liberatory futures for ourselves, communities, libraries, and world.

Keywords: critical race theory, racism, white supremacy, library instruction, identity, race-cultural radical pedagogy, *Critical Library Instruction*

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Transform yourself to transform the world.

- Grace Lee Boggs

Great teaching will always be about relationships[,] and programs do not build relationships, people do.

-Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 452

Land Acknowledgement

We wish to recognize and honor the unceded lands of the Wampanoag and the Tonkawa, Lipan Apache, and Comanche upon which we write these words. We ask that you, as we have tried and continue to do, support these tribes by doing your part to research the people whose land you have settled on/are guest on and find ways to act in solidarity with them.

Introduction

In 2010, when *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* arrived, the Obamas were in the White House; Camila Alire, the first Latinx president of the American Library Association (ALA), was finishing her term; the U.S. was climbing out of the great recession of 2008; and "colorblindness"[1] had been traded in for a post-racial mythology. In the dominant societal and professional imagination, (racial) progress had appeared. It had gotten better. We were moving in the right direction. But in our profession, and in the racialized social structure, there was still the "race problem," and it was still a dangerous time, as it might always be, for communities of Color, for *us.* As a Chinese American and a mixed race Mexican Black American settlers and guests, we know intimately that progress narratives are precarious and dependent on a specific time and linear understanding, which purposefully conceal power and domination.

Now, ten years later, a white extremist monster forcefully occupies this nation-states' highest office, continuing and escalating the devastation on Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities. It is purposeful, systemic, and relentless, and it extends to all parts of the social order. In our profession, violence against Black women in the upper levels

of ALA continue (Hathcock, 2019) as it does against Black undergraduates in libraries at prestigious colleges (Najman-Franks & Xia, 2019). *We see you, April Hathcock. We hear you, Alexander McNab.* The "race problem"—which, to be clear, is not us—is still a problem in the profession, and perhaps even more of *the* problem in teaching and learning communities.

There has been movement(s) to create space for critical teaching and learning approaches and understandings through various critical librarianship formations—online, unofficial and official conferencing. However, we argue that this movement has only made incremental steps towards the necessary, vital, structural change that would fulfill the promise of social justice that we see inherent in libraries. In that way, we reject progress narratives that depict our profession as having arrived, or even moved further, to a critical space, because to many practicing and non-practicing librarians, critical perspectives have no place in our field. What does progress even mean in this context? Who is actually progressing? What is progressing? And who gets to lead the progress and define its success? Whose interests is it serving?

We argue that current ideologies and formations of "progress" in librarianship are viewed through a White Supremacy lens and do not move us forward in an effective or urgent way. Progress in the profession is generally defined by a liberal marker of attainment that has no real, concrete impact in the lives of those most marginalized. In *Beyond Respectability*, Brittney C. Cooper (2017) illuminates Anna Julia Cooper's argument from *Voice from the South* that "racial accounts of progress remain connected to the material and embodied conditions of everyday Black people" (p. 5). While Cooper is describing the struggles of regular Black people, her insight rings true for all racially marginalized groups of people. If progress in librarianship does not center the specific, different, and nuanced "material and embodied conditions" of BIPOC in the profession nor those supported by the profession, then we do not consider it progress; we chalk it up as just another projection of the White Supremacy project. If we are going to think and converse about real movement toward change, that means switching from progress narratives to liberatory imaginaries, which then opens up room to ask different, deeper questions about teaching and learning and the architecture of libraries that are designed to uphold White Supremacy. Here, we want to interrogate and respond to critical library instruction, by centering frameworks, pedagogies, and theories that critique White Supremacy, which have informed our praxis, and moved us toward different spaces of being, knowledge, and becoming.

The profession's ideas, actions, and discourses of progress are specifically not focused on the totality and force of White Supremacy as a structure of domination. In fact, the profession's ideas of progress avoid the notion that White Supremacy dominate our systems. In the aftermath of that absence, race, racism, and power are not centered, and if interrogated, are done so through liberal or multicultural frameworks that do not precisely identify roots of racialized oppression. The advancement of critical librarianship (critlib) has, on some levels, been institutionalized in official, professional documents like the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.* More recently, ACRL's Information Literacy Immersion Program has signaled a willingness to further the critical librarianship project by bringing in a new cohort of almost entirely critical educators of Color.

Yet, even when critical positions are permitted space, White Supremacy, which is built into the foundations of this country, often goes unacknowledged, unaddressed, unanalyzed: a complete absence of this destructive force. We have seen that when institutions focus their efforts solely on "diversifying the profession" (e.g., diversity residencies) or make motions towards "diversity" (e.g., diversity statements, diversity initiatives, etc.), without making structural change in response to White Supremacy, they only succeed in reifying White Supremacy in their institutional systems. Nothing has actually evolved within the institution; these are superficial changes that continue to serve the oppressive systems we live under (Ahmed, 2012). White Supremacy, as the scholar-activist David Stovall defines it, is "the understood views and values of Western European-descended, able-bodied, heterosexual, Christian, men as normal, right and good. Everyone else is deserving of gratuitous punishment until they acquiesce to those purported views and values" (Talks at Google, 2016, 29:49). This equals gratuitous punishment for April, for Alexander, for us, unless we acquiesce to its authority. When we understand all that to be true, how then does a critical library instruction that does not unapologetically center race account for them, for us?

This brings us back to, *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, which was one of the first texts we encountered that began to question the "way we do things" and provided important, transformative frameworks and strategies for instruction. But largely absent from the book was an engagement with race, power, and White Supremacy—how it functions and can be challenged within an instruction context (as well as within the larger structure of libraries and our profession). A few chapters in the text addressed issues of race

and power, specifically: "Making a home: critical pedagogy in a library internship program for high school students" by Graves, McGowan, and Sweet; "Preparing critically conscious, information literate special educators for Alaska's schools" by Duke, Ward, and Burkert; and "Critical approach to Asia through library collections and instructions in North America: selection of culture and counter-hegemonic library practices" by Inokuchi and Nozaki. However, White Supremacy, let alone race or racism, was not reckoned with. What that *taught* in a very direct, measured way is that critical library instruction was not specifically concerned with the force of White Supremacy. What that *accomplished* was to further strengthen that structure within the field and preserve the profession's inability to have a critical discourse with White Supremacy foregrounded.

This continues to be the case for our profession overall and, we argue, with the movement of critical librarianship for which *Critical Library Instruction* is an essential text (Brown, Ferretti, Leung, & Méndez-Brady, 2018). This book provided a condition of critical possibility, while opening up a critical space for us, but because it dangerously lacked a critique of White Supremacy, it is not the text we turn to in order to shape and move our teaching; it is, for us, inadequate. This lack of (any) attention to White Supremacy is troubling, yet predictable of critical pedagogy—arguably the driving force of this foundational text—with its origins focused on capitalism as the dominant system of oppression. In the field of education, Allen (2006) argues that critical pedagogy has had its own race issues, both demographically and conceptually, and has struggled to extend beyond its traditional class-dominant approach to make room for an analysis of White Supremacy. By ignoring White Supremacy, the book, and critlib, mirror the false promises of diversity and inclusion initiatives and advance the reification of White Supremacy.

We offer a White Supremacy and racialized critique of critical library instruction as a way to extend and refute critical pedagogy and carve out space for race-radical instruction. We draw on critical race theory, emergent strategy, and cultural and race-centered pedagogies that have, and continue to, influence our teaching and learning imagination, practices, and identity. Our classrooms have and seek to be sites of humanization and liberation, and we believe the approaches and understandings offered by these various frameworks make that condition possible and can also transcend that space and reach deeper into the structures of libraries and our profession.

Our library work is committed to justice and challenging white racial domination, and in our essay, we explore our journeys through white spaces, the frameworks that influence us

currently, and imagine liberatory possibilities. We begin each section with questions that guided our writing and thought processes.

Journeying in White Supremacy Spaces

What if we started from a shared understanding and acceptance that the history and structures of libraries are racist—that it was built into them—and in their current iterations, continue to uphold White Supremacy?

Most LIS programs and library instruction programs do not center race or gender in their pedagogical approach to teaching. This was certainly our experience and it resulted in a destructive separation of our identities and positionalities from our teaching selves. For one of us, colleagues and supervisors helped to mitigate this. In particular, Carrie Donovan, Alison Hicks, Lori Townsend (Shoshone-Paiute), Sarah Kostelecky (Zuni Pueblo) and Caroline Sinkinson, one of the original contributors to *Critical Library Instruction*, provided support and encouragement towards becoming a critical educator. Though they did not articulate the same exact understanding of White Supremacy or justice projects and carried different focuses on which structures of domination to confront, their efforts and knowledge signaled something very important--that we, as critical educators of Color, and our praxis were desperately needed for BIPOC communities. For the other, the absence of mentor-colleagues meant it was up to her to determine what worked or didn't, and find the right readings, tools, and methods to create her own pedagogical approach.

It is difficult for us to forget who we are and what we look like, especially when entering a classroom of new students, working with certain faculty members, or just attending a meeting of our library colleagues. If we forget, there is always someone to remind us through microaggressions or micro-violence. If we forget, the world reminds us. We do not have the privilege to forget. People who look like us are often seen in more ignored, undervalued, or invisible roles, such as facilities workers, even though that labor is equally important and must happen in order for others to do their work. To place ourselves directly in the spotlight, to be at the front of a classroom, for a roomful of people to sit and listen to us is both speculative fiction and an act of defiance, refusal, and resistance. Having rarely seen anyone who looked like us in front of a college/university classroom or who was a librarian meant we had to envision ourselves there and bring it into reality. In systems,

structured and upheld by White Supremacy, not built for us, we were able to become something no one in our families had ever imagined for us.

To know this, to feel it, and to be in these teaching roles is to understand both our responsibility and our sensitivity to how our students of Color must feel in academic teaching environments. It is up to us to demonstrate that these things can be done, because we have done it. It is up to us to demonstrate that there are other ways of doing things, different pathways to knowledge, different ways to teach. Because we have experienced it, we know there can be other ways to do everything. This is what we bring to the classroom or any teaching space every time we enter it.

Pivoting to Pedagogies of Critical Race, Emergent, and Culturally Sustaining

What does it mean if we are encouraging students to resist White Supremacy and oppressive structures when we ourselves have to operate within those very same confines? What is our responsibility to develop critical consciousness amongst our peers, not just our students? What kinds of radical changes could be imagined and accomplished when the fact that libraries continue to uphold White Supremacy becomes the basic foundation to all our work?

We come into pedagogical spaces continually questioning how things have been done, including how we have done things, to ask, how can this be more authentic, liberatory, and imaginative? As the work towards social justice and equity is never done, we have to challenge what we know to be true. For us, critical library instruction, critical information literacy, and critical pedagogy do not engage with all our questions and do not explore the margins of where we exist. How can we share authority we never had? What does it mean for us to share power we had to fight for with students? What do we do when we're mistaken for the student rather than the librarian there to teach a library workshop? What does it mean for a librarian of Color, rather than a white librarian, to be "authentic" in the classroom, when we aren't allowed to be anywhere else? How does the colonizer-colonized dichotomy shift when we are the colonized teaching the colonizers? What do we do when our own colleagues or our faculty interrupt us and devalue our work when teaching in front of others? When this happens to us, what do you think then happens to our learners? Freire (1970/1993) does not cover this and neither does *Critical Library Instruction*. We have had to look elsewhere for frameworks that affirmed, held, and lifted up ourselves and communities of Color, so that we then could hold, affirm, and create space for others.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), originated in the legal studies field by BIPOC lawyers, law professors, and law students, gives us the language and a theoretical and practical framework to approach our work as instruction librarians. In this intellectual movement, we have found a project that confronts White Supremacy, and its foundational tenets help us to understand the world in which we exist and operate. Some of them are:

- Racism is ordinary and embedded in our everyday systems and structures;

- Race is socially and legally constructed;

- Everything must be understood within its historical, social, political, economic context;

- An intersectional understanding is required to find equitable solutions;

- The experiential knowledge of BIPOC and their/our communities is valid, vital and legitimate;

- A commitment to social justice results in the eradication of racial oppression and all forms of oppression. (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998)

Extending to the field of education, CRT has been a necessary intervention that has centered race in its analysis of educational inequities. Pedagogically, critical race theorists have utilized the elements of the theory to outline a critical race pedagogy, which has shaped their own instruction and research on K-12 educators of Color. By foregrounding the embeddedness and normalcy of racism and its interactions with other forces of oppression in educational spaces, insisting on a contextual and historical understanding(s) of race and power, and centering the lived experiences—knowledge, ways of being—of communities of Color through expressions that challenge dominant narratives, critical race scholars have (re)positioned race-radical liberatory pedagogical strategies to challenge White Supremacy (Lynn, 1999, 2005; Lynn & Jennings, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000).

Though not explicitly growing out of CRT, culturally relevant pedagogy, developed by the esteemed educational scholar, Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1995, has been a transformative teaching and learning theory and practice that embodies elements of CRT. From her landmark work emerged culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP), which has been advanced by (mostly) educators of Color. It offers emancipatory pedagogical approaches that push us

to reframe our understanding of the very foundations and purpose of teaching and learning. It invites us to ask important relational questions of ourselves, our learners, our communities, and our instruction because one of its aims is to "perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation" (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). This movement is powerful and does not concern itself with or appeal to the white gaze that holds white, middle-class norms of educational achievement as the standard and moves the focus of critique to structures of oppression that enforce that norm. In the dominant critical librarianship discourse, especially in relation to pedagogies, Freire and bell hooks seem to regularly occupy much of the theoretical and intellectual imagination and inspiration. Though their teachings and writings have been a gift and continue to be, the reliance on them—and only them—has created a destructive epistemological vacancy. But rather than compare or position them against the frameworks we're making space for here, we-you might consider new ways to engage them relationally to fight White Supremacy.

Another framework that we have found to be inspirational is adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* (2017), which uses a set of core principles to guide folx through their work. Out of those principles, we highlight a few that we find particularly relevant to our teaching and learning:

- "Small is good, small is all. (The large is a reflection of the small.) ….
- There is always enough time for the right work. ….
- Trust the People. ….
- Less prep, more presence.
- What you pay attention to grows." (p. 41-42)

In an applied sense, using these frameworks means providing affirmation to what students say and bring to the space, particularly students of Color, to validate their experience and knowledge. Take the time for small interactions that humanize your students by being present with them. Understand the racialization and power of learning spaces and literally reconfigure them. Redirect institutional capital to the needs of the community based on community input. In one of our projects, this redirection materialized by the institution providing food, transportation, access to teaching and learning spaces, and educational supplies for a community-engaged justice effort that connected university libraries and a local high school. "Institutional capital" must also be recognized as the time and energy

committed by employees of that institution. As people at these institutions, we have the ~~agency~~ responsibility to employ pedagogies that are deeply shaped by knowing the histories, realities, and truths of the community. Center racialized examples and topics in your teaching and extend those further to disrupt ideas of what's appropriate or what counts, and what's valued, as legitimized knowledge. Challenge dominant information and knowledge-production processes that intentionally exclude BIPOC, showing its connectivity to White Supremacy's structural, historical, and contemporary realities. Recognize that even moments that may seem small and trivial are vitally important to the big picture, to the process that gets you to that larger impact. Trust the students to be worthwhile. Trust them to open our minds. Trust them to teach us. If this work is important to you, as it is vital to us, take the time to do the work. *That* is the work of social justice.

For us, these are not merely theoretical or intellectual projects that advance our understanding of the structural nature of racial domination and the rotten foundations of social institutions. These justice projects are intimately connected to fundamentally transforming institutions and society. What is critically significant to understand is not only is it important to engage these knowledges and ways of being, but—read closely—to also understand that we are **not** seeking or desiring access, recognition, and participation in the current figurations of information institutions that are rooted in White Supremacy, coloniality, and heteropatriarchy (Grande, 2018; Kelley, 2016; Paris, 2019).

As critical educators of Color, these approaches and frameworks direct us in ways that critical pedagogy and *Critical Library Instruction* have not and deepen our understanding and commitment to liberatory teaching and learning and racial justice. Even though we have actualized some of these ideas and strategies, we're also still very much reaching and evolving towards them. In the educational spaces we move in and against, these efforts take on multiple forms and meanings. One of the challenges for us is to transition these pedagogical practices and theories to our particular areas in university and college libraries. That takes time, energy, labor, both emotional and physical, and, perhaps most importantly, community. However, we recognize that if we do not question how we have been taught and how we teach, we risk recreating the cycle of oppression that purposefully tried to keep us out because it did not allow for different types of knowledge, expertise, or ways of being. We understand, on a fundamental level, libraries as learning spaces and as reproducing White Supremacy, and so we see them as critically important sites of radical possibility that can disrupt that reproduction.

This also means knowing who we are, and who *we with*; whose land we are on and what we're up against. Never neutral, never vocational awe(ing), that's non-negotiable. This is serious talk. And the work is right here in front of us and everything we need we already have, inside of us. This work will challenge (y)our very existence and cannot be done alone because thinking, acting, and being together is what's important. It is the only way we can move in on the system, and we must.

Dreaming Revolutionary Futures of Race-Radical Library Instruction

Instead of performing "diversity and inclusion" or just regulating our critical consciousness to just one part of our praxis, how do we break down the illusory barriers between what we do in the classroom and every other part of our work as library workers?

One of the purposes of *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* was to begin an important conversation. Our purpose is to push it even further, in a particular race-radical direction that confronts racism, white domination, and is focused on abolishing White Supremacy. We cannot wait and will not make the same mistake by ignoring the always-already there condition of White Supremacy; our lives, and those who are continuously subjugated, are too critically important not to. It is critical to understand that the communities that are most attacked by this structure of oppression are the ones who urgently understand the necessity to redirect critical librarianship towards this confrontation and relentlessly lead the struggle for liberation on our terms.

Break it down and reflect. What is instruction? What has been the history of the library? What is the relationship of the library to its community? Real, impactful change cannot happen only in library instructional spaces if we truly believe in critical library instruction and social justice. The way forward means we cannot forget the racist, misogynistic, capitalist, colonialist history and legacy of libraries and how that impacts our instruction, day-to-day work, relationships with students, faculty, staff, and each other. We have to hold one another accountable to what we say we want to do, rather than allow institutions and organizations steeped in that legacy—that are reliant on exploitative relations and dehumanization to function—to continue functioning that way. In fact, we question whether impactful change can happen at all in long-established institutions or organizations, including ALA and the libraries where we work and have worked.

White Supremacy wants us to forget its insidious nature and divide us and our work. It wants us to believe that there is only one way to teach, to be in relation to others, to do library work. We must be in community with one another to dismantle White Supremacy in our classrooms, in our libraries, and in our communities. We need to see each other and our students as humans and not allow ourselves to dehumanize the other. We must destroy the hold White Supremacy has on our brains, behaviors, and beliefs.

Actually, we're going deeper. We want this to burn bright, to incinerate these pages. Turn up the volume. Better yet, open the window and turn the speakers out to the world because this needs to reach everything—air, water, land, you. Because there is nothing left. We want (y)our instruction to be frightening—too beautiful, too heavy with love; travelling through landscapes and time, listening and speaking, seeing and remembering, witnessing as everything is falling apart, disintegrating. We must set it off and remake critical library instruction, critical information literacy, shit, *libraries* as we understand them because there is nothing left. And because there is nothing left, it means this is the beginning.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

[1]This term is ableist, and we place quotations around it to draw attention to that reality. Going further, we recognize the term's popularity, relevance, and importance in critical race scholarship, yet we depart from this description of a racial ideology towards, "an expanded and more nuanced understanding of the racial ideology of refusing to address race, color-evasiveness" (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017, p. 158).

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