

Introduction

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If theory and praxis are neither immediately one nor absolutely different, then their relation is one of discontinuity. No continuous path leads from praxis to theory—what has to be added is what is called the spontaneous moment. But theory is part of the nexus of society and at the same time is autonomous. Nevertheless praxis does not proceed independently of theory, not theory independently of praxis. Theodor Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 276¹

Praxis, in Marxist terms, refers to the process of applying theory through practice to develop more informed theory and practice, specifically as it relates to social change. ...The true discussion in library literature ought to be on the praxis of librarianship... This requires attention to both reflection and direct action, and their relationship to each other. John J. Doherty, “Towards Self-Reflection in Librarianship: What is Praxis?,” 11²

Critical librarianship is variously used to refer to a growing body of Library and Information Science (LIS) scholarship that draws on critical theory, progressive movements within librarianship, an online “community” that occasionally organizes in-person meetings, and an informal Twitter discussion space active since 2014 and identified by the #critlib hashtag.³ Of increasing interest to practitioners, critical librarianship seeks to bridge the gap between theory and

¹ Theodor Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia, 1998), 276.

² John J. Doherty, “Towards Self-Reflection in Librarianship: What is Praxis?” *Progressive Librarian* 26, (2005/2006): 11, <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL/PL26/011.pdf>.

³ For a discussion of some of the similarities and differences between critical librarianship and progressive librarianship, see Rory Litwin, “Interview with Elaine Harger, PLG Co-Founder,” *Library Juice: On the Intersections of Libraries, Politics, and Culture* (blog), July 21, 2016, <http://libraryjuicepress.com/blog/?p=5330>. Litwin is also the founder of Litwin Books, LLC, of which Library Juice Press, the publisher of this book, is an imprint.

practice in LIS.⁴ It uses a reflexive lens to expose and challenge the ways that libraries and the profession “consciously and unconsciously support systems of oppression,”⁵ thereby pursuing a socially just, theoretically informed praxis.

In spite of an avowedly activist and social justice-oriented agenda, critlib—as an online discussion space at least—has come under fire from some for being inaccessible, exclusionary, elitist, and disconnected from the practice of librarianship, empirical scholarship, and on-the-ground organizing for socioeconomic and political change.⁶ At the same time, critical librarianship may be becoming institutionalized, simultaneously legitimating its power to make change and foreclosing upon it. As Nora Almeida points out, “it is possibly this very tension—between complicity and resistance, between belonging and otherness—that best defines...#critlib.”⁷

The present volume explores the tensions between theory and practice in librarianship through a variety of lenses and formats (e.g. research essays, personal reflections, dialogue) and situates critical practice within the current social, political, and economic contexts of our profession.⁸

Progressive/Critical Practice

Although the phrase “critical librarianship” seems to have only recently become shorthand for myriad ways in which library workers and scholars bring critical perspectives to bear on their labor, reflective, progressive, and theoretically informed practice has a lengthy, though not always straightforward history within LIS. In North America, the American Library Association’s (ALA) Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT), founded in 1969, “works...to establish progressive priorities...for the Association [and the] profession,” notably “human and economic rights.”⁹ SRRT’s mission is explicit in its attention to social justice: “SRRT believes that libraries and librarians must recognize and help solve social problems and inequities in order to carry out their mandate to work for the

4 James Elmborg, “Critical Information Literacy: Implications For Instructional Practice,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (2006): 192–99, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2005.12.004>; James Elmborg, “Critical Information Literacy: Definitions and Challenges,” in *Transforming Information Literacy Programs: Intersecting Frontiers of Self, Library Culture, and Campus Community* eds. Carroll Wetzell Wilkinson and Courtney Bruch (Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2012), 75–80.

5 Kenny Garcia, “Keeping Up With... Critical Librarianship,” *Association of College & Research Libraries*, June 2015, http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/critlib.

6 For an analysis of this discussion, see Nora Almeida’s chapter “Interrogating the Collective: #Critlib and the Problem of Community,” in this volume. In “Critical Librarianship as an Academic Pursuit,” also in the present volume, Ian Beilin examines charges that critical librarianship is inaccessible and elitist.

7 Almeida, “Interrogating the Collective,” present volume, 244.

8 It should be noted that “contexts” here refers to Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

9 “About SRRT,” *American Library Association Social Responsibilities Round Table*, accessed November 17, 2017, <http://www.ala.org/rt/srrt/about-srrt>.

common good and bolster democracy.”¹⁰ Outside of the ALA, the Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG), formed in 1990 and with chapters in the United States and Canada, has sought to counter the commodification of information, the “profession’s...dubious alliances with business and the information industry,” and the “anti-democratic” notion of librarianship as a neutral profession by making the “political value choices” inherent in library work explicit.¹¹ Similarly, scholars such as John Budd, John Buschman, Ronald Day, Archie Dick, Bernd Frohmann, Michael Harris, and Christine Pawley have used interdisciplinary, critical lenses to broaden the scope of inquiry within LIS since the late 1980s.¹² Although some of this work may have overlapped with, influenced, or drawn on that of SRRT and PLG—John Buschman’s work has frequently appeared in *Progressive Librarian*, for example—Rory Litwin and Elaine Harger¹³ suggest that SRRT and PLG tended to be more focused on political action and while their work drew on critical theory, critical theory was not necessarily central to their projects and goals.

The Politics of Practicality

While progressive movements within the profession may be longstanding, until recently, they have remained somewhat marginal; in the main, librarianship emphasizes practicality, efficiency, and service. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins argue that “the proliferation of libraries and the inception of library science as a field of study and as a profession correspond with the rise of corporate capitalism in the United States,” leading to the “replicat[ion] of libraries in the image and model of corporations.”¹⁴ Lisa Sloniowski contends

10 “About Us,” *Social Responsibilities Round Table*.

11 “History,” *Progressive Librarians Guild*, January 5, 2017, <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/content/history.shtml>. For more on the history of progressive librarianship see Al Kagan, *Progressive Library Organizations: A Worldwide History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), and Elaine Harger’s article, “Looking Backward, Imagining Forward: Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Librarian,” *Progressive Librarian* nos. 34–35 (2010): 58–71, http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL/PL34_35/058.pdf.

12 John M. Budd, “An Epistemological Foundation for Library and Information Science,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 65 (1995): 295–318, <https://doi.org/10.1086/602799>; Bernd Frohmann, “Discourse Analysis as a Research Method in Library and Information Science,” *Library and Information Science Research* 16 (1994): 119–38, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0740-8188\(94\)90004-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0740-8188(94)90004-3); John Buschman, *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy* (Greenwood, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003); Ronald E. Day, *The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History, and Power* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001); Archie Dick, “Epistemological Positions and Library and Information Science,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 69, no. 3 (1999): 305–24, <https://doi.org/10.1086/603091>; Michael H. Harris, “The Dialectic of Defeat: Antimonies in Research in Library and Information Science,” *Library Trends* 34, no. 3 (Winter 1986): 515–31; Christine Pawley, “Hegemony’s Handmaid? The Library and Information Studies Curriculum from a Class Perspective,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 68, no. 2 (1998): 123–44, <https://doi.org/10.1086/602955>.

13 Rory Litwin, “Interview with Elaine Harger, PLG Co-Founder.”

14 Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, “In Resistance to a Capitalist Past: Emerging Practices of Critical Librarianship,” present volume, 22.

that service and affective labor, particularly in “pink collar work” such as reference and information literacy instruction, are also embedded in neoliberal notions of practicality and efficiency.¹⁵ Much library scholarship is based in case studies describing projects or practices and how to implement them. Positivist epistemologies and “action-oriented” empirical methods tend to be seen as more valid,¹⁶ are valued highly by the most prestigious journals,¹⁷ and figure prominently in calls for conference presentations.¹⁸ In several Canadian academic libraries, research and publishing outside of LIS “doesn’t ‘count’ towards promotion and tenure or merit.”¹⁹ Today, academic libraries at least are preoccupied with the need to provide evidence of their worth; “articulate a research agenda that communicates the value of academic and research libraries” appears as the first objective of the Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) “Value of Academic Libraries” strategic “area.”²⁰ As we and others such as Melissa Adler, Joshua Beatty, John Budd, John Buschman, Jonathan Cope, and Jeff Lilburn have argued elsewhere,²¹ librarianship has adopted neoliberal ideologies and corporate practices that

15 Lisa Sloniowski, “Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian,” *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 646, doi:10.1353/lib.2016.0013.

16 Jonathan Cope, “Four Theses for Critical Library and Information Studies: A Manifesto,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* no. 1 (2017), <http://libraryjuicepress.com/journals/index.php/jclis/article/view/30>.

17 James Elmborg and Scott Walter, “Critical Thinking About ‘Getting Research Published’ in *College & Research Libraries*,” *College & Research Libraries* 76, no. 1 (2015): 2–5, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.76.1.2>.

18 David James Hudson, “The Whiteness of Practicality,” in *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, ed. Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017), 203–34. For a discussion of critical empirical methods, see Selinda Berg’s essay, “Quantitative Researchers, Critical Librarians: Potential Allies in Pursuit of a Socially Just Praxis,” in the present volume.

19 Karen Nicholson, “Research and the ‘Value Agenda,’” *Open Shelf*, March 1, 2017, <http://www.open-shelf.ca/170301-research-and-the-value-agenda/>.

20 Association of College & Research Libraries, “ACRL Plan for Excellence,” approved April 11, 2011, revised October 2017, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/strategicplan/stratplan>.

21 Melissa A. Adler, “Broker of Information, the ‘Nation’s Most Important Commodity’: The Library of Congress in the Neoliberal Era,” *Information & Culture* 50, no. 1 (2015): 24–50; Joshua Beatty, “Locating Information Literacy within Institutional Oppression,” in *The Library With The Lead Pipe*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-information-literacy-within-institutional-oppression/>; John M. Budd, “A Critique of Customer and Commodity,” *College & Research Libraries* 58, no. 4 (1997): 309–20, <http://crl.acrl.org/content/58/4/309>; John Buschman, “Democracy, Market Solutions, and Educative Institutions: A Perspective on Neoliberalism,” *Progressive Librarian* no. 41 (2013): 5–17, <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL/PL41/005.pdf>; Jonathan Cope, “Neoliberalism and Library & Information Science: Using Karl Polanyi’s Fictitious Commodity as an Alternative to Neoliberal Conceptions of Information,” *Progressive Librarian* no. 43 (2014/2015): 67–80, <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL/PL43/067.pdf>; Jeff Lilburn, “Competing Narratives: The Impact of Neoliberal Rhetoric on Libraries’ Assessment Practices and Contributions to the Public Good,” *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of CAIS*, (2013), <http://www.cais-acsi.ca/ojs/index.php/cais/article/view/839/761>; Karen P. Nicholson, “The McDonaldisation of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change,” *College & Research Libraries* 76, no. 3 (2015): 328–38, <http://crl.acrl.org/content/76/3/328.full.pdf+html>; Maura Seale, “The Neoliberal Library,” in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, eds. Shana Higgins and Lua Gregory (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press), 36–61.

foreground practicality and efficiency with little reflection or critique. In his essay on intellectual freedom, Kyle Shockey points out that when, in the ALA *Code of Ethics*, “professional duties” are contrasted to “personal convictions,” it is the practical that wins out: “We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.”²²

One could go so far as to say that the dominant ideology in librarianship is practicality. David James Hudson argues that in its calls to “common sense” logics—“the exaltation of clarity, plain language, the everyday, the utilitarian”—practicality is inextricably entwined with our profession’s false claims to neutrality.²³ The “practicality imperative,” as he refers to it, “subtly police[s] the work we end up supporting and doing [and] ...our sense of what useful and appropriate political interventions look like from the standpoint of the profession.”²⁴ Hudson further advances that in invoking shared discursive and conceptual frameworks, the narrative of practicality perpetuates the violence of white supremacy within the profession:

Whiteness is thus the production of shared norms underwritten by physical and epistemological violence, a violence invisibilized as a condition of governance (even as it may well be hypervisible to those whose dignity it assaults). ...The exaltation of clarity is rooted in an assumption, then, that shared conceptual frameworks are politically neutral, an assumption that the languages and concepts that we’ve come to understand as ordinary and unremarkable are not part of the machinery of domination themselves.²⁵

In sum, the hegemony of practicality within librarianship acts to reproduce patriarchy, neoliberal ideology, neutrality, and white supremacy.

Theory and Professional Practice

In reaction to these gaps and failures, and in response to larger political, economic, and social issues, librarians have increasingly looked to critical theory as a means to critique, destabilize, and change normative practices and discourses within LIS, generally with the aim of enacting social justice—or, in the original Frankfurt School sense, as Sam Popowich notes,²⁶ to seek

22 Kyle Shockey, “Intellectual Freedom Is Not Social Justice,” *Progressive Librarian* no. 44 (2016): 101–10, <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL/PL44/101.pdf>; American Library Association, “Professional Ethics,” last revised January 22, 2008, <http://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>.

23 Hudson, “Whiteness of Practicality.”

24 Hudson, “Whiteness of Practicality,” 212.

25 Hudson, “Whiteness of Practicality,” 214–15.

26 Sam Popowich, “Ruthless Criticism of All that Exists: Marxism, Technology, and Library Work,” present volume.

human emancipation from domination and oppression. Building on the work of radical cataloger Sanford Berman,²⁷ Hope Olson and Emily Drabinski were among the first to use critical theory—specifically feminist and queer theories—to critique heteronormative, sexist, and colonialist politics of representation within controlled vocabulary and classification schemes.²⁸ Allan Luke, Cushla Kapitzke, Troy Swanson, and James Elmborg explored information literacy through the lenses of critical pedagogy and critical literacy theory;²⁹ this work has since been expanded on by the likes of Heidi L.M. Jacobs, Maria Accardi, Jessica Critten, Annie Downey, and Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy.³⁰

In our view, however, it is with the publication of *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*³¹ in 2010 that critical librarianship entered broader library discourse, perhaps because so many librarians, especially academic librarians, teach. With the advent of the Twitter #critlib hashtag and discussions in 2014, and the flurry of debate surrounding the theoretical underpinnings (and weaknesses) of the *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*, it has since become mainstream.³² In 2015, an editorial in

27 Sanford Berman, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1971).

28 Hope A. Olson, “The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs,” *Signs* 26, no. 3 (2001): 639–68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175535>; Emily Drabinski, “Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 83, no. 2 (2003): 94–111, doi:10.1086/669547.

29 Allan Luke and Cushla Kapitzke, “Literacies and Libraries: Archives and Cybaries,” *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 7, no. 3 (1999): 467–91, doi:10.1080/14681369900200066; Troy A. Swanson, “A Radical Step: Implementing a Critical Information Literacy Model,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 2 (2004): 259–73, doi:10.1353/pla.2004.0038; Elmborg, “Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice.”

30 Heidi L. M. Jacobs, “Posing the Wikipedia ‘Problem’: Information Literacy and the Praxis of Problem-Posing in Library Instruction,” in *Critical Library Instruction: Theory and Methods*, eds. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2010), 179–97, <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/leddylibrarypub/25>; Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013); Jessica Critten, “Ideology and Critical Self-reflection in Information Literacy Instruction,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 145–56, <http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=v9i2p145&path%5B%5D=217>; Annie Downey, *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016); Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy, eds., *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* (2 vols.) (Chicago: ACRL, 2016). Eamon Tewell provides an overview of the literature on critical information literacy in “A Decade of Critical Information Literacy: A Review of the Literature,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 24–43, <http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=v9i1p24&path%5B%5D=205>.

31 Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, eds., *Critical Library Instruction: Theory and Methods* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2010).

32 Emily Drabinski, “A Kairos of the Critical: Teaching Critically in a Time of Compliance,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (2017): 76–94, <http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=v11i1p76&path%5B%5D=255>.

College & Research Libraries specifically solicited articles informed by critical theory or humanistic approaches.³³ In a 2016 issue, Drabinski and Scott Walter argued that a focus on quantitative, positivist methods limits the sorts of research questions that can be explored to the pragmatic and instrumental, and affirmed that “theory and practice should be mutually informative in our field.”³⁴ Since 2015, there have been multiple critical librarianship workshops, symposia, and unconferences.³⁵ In publishing the two-volume *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* in 2016, the ACRL joined ranks with progressive and theory-friendly publishers such as Library Juice Press. Following in the steps of Todd Honma,³⁶ a growing number of librarians have used critical perspectives, notably postcolonial theory and critical race theory, to explore issues related to whiteness and diversity in LIS.³⁷ Stephen Bales, Jonathan Cope, Erik Estep, Nathaniel Enright, and Lisa Sloniewski have used Marxist theories and feminist critiques thereof to consider the intersections of gender, labor, capital, and class within librarianship.³⁸ Others have looked to theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Herbert Marcuse,

33 Elmborg and Walter, “Critical Thinking About ‘Getting Research Published.’”

34 Emily Drabinski and Scott Walter, “Asking Questions that Matter,” *College & Research Libraries* 77, no. 3 (2016): 264–68, <http://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/16508/17954>.

35 For example, the Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium, Tucson, AZ, February 25–26, 2016; Critical Librarianship Workshop, Toronto, ON, December 3–4, 2016; CritLib Unconference, Portland, OR, March 25, 2015; San Francisco, CA, June 26, 2015; Baltimore, MD, March 22, 2017; Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies Colloquium, Toronto, ON, October 18, 2014; Vancouver, BC, April 23, 2016.

36 Todd Honma, “Trippin’ Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies,” *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nj0w1mp>.

37 nina de jesus, “Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-the-library-in-institutional-oppression/>; Angela Galvan, “Soliciting Performance, Hiding Bias: Whiteness and Librarianship,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/soliciting-performance-hiding-bias-whiteness-and-librarianship/>; April Hathcock, “White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 7, 2016, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity/>; Freeda Brook, Dave Ellenwood, and Althea Eannace Lazzaro, “In Pursuit of Antiracist Social Justice: Denaturalizing Whiteness in the Academic Library,” *Library Trends* 64, no. 2 (2015): 246–84, doi:10.1353/lib.2015.0048; Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, ed., *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017); Rebecca Hankins and Miguel Juárez, eds., *Where are all the Librarians of Color? The Experiences of People of Color in Academia* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2015); Fobazi Ettarh, “Making a New Table: Intersectional Librarianship,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, July 2, 2014, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/making-a-new-table-intersectional-librarianship-3/>; Rose L. Chou and Annie Phó, eds., *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, forthcoming); David James Hudson, “On ‘Diversity’ as Anti-Racism in Library and Information Studies: A Critique,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.6..>

38 Cope, “Neoliberalism and Library and Information Science”; Erik Estep and Nathaniel Enright, *Class and Librarianship: Essays at the Intersection of Information, Labor and Capital* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016).

and John Rawls.³⁹ While these authors use critical theory to problematize the practice of librarianship, whether they identify as “critical librarians,” as part of the “critical librarianship” community, or consider their work to be “critical librarianship” is not the focus of this book, however. As Nora Almeida articulates in her chapter “Interrogating the Collective: Critlib and the Question of Community” in the present volume, understandings of community and identity are complex, as is the claiming or rejection of them.

In addition to scholarship, critical librarianship also refers to social justice-oriented activism within the profession. While Shana Higgins and Lua Gregory’s 2013 edited collection *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* focused on information literacy, others such as Melissa Morrone, Bharat Mehra and Kevin Rioux, and Selinda Berg and Heidi L. M. Jacobs have taken up the question of social justice in librarianship more broadly.⁴⁰ Some have sought to make social justice an explicit element of the *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* or LIS education.⁴¹

As critical librarianship has moved to more mainstream channels of library discourse and practice, particularly through the adoption of the *Framework* and the “sunsetting” of the *Standards*, there has also been pushback against it. Some argue it is inaccessible, exclusionary, elitist, and disconnected from their practice; in June 2015, the subject of the 36th CritLib chat was “Critiquing CritLib,” wherein some of these observations were made. The following comment, offered as part of a survey on the

39 See the work of Gary and Marie Radford, for example “Power, Knowledge, and Fear: Feminism, Foucault, and the Stereotype of the Female Librarian,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Communication, Policy* 67, no. 3 (1997): 250–67, <https://doi.org/10.1086/603283>; Kay Mathiesen, “Toward a Political Philosophy of Information,” *Library Trends* 63, no. 3 (2015): 427–47; Alain Ross and Mike Chiasson, “Habermas and Information Systems Research: New Directions,” *Information & Organization* 21, no. 3 (2011): 123–41; Ajit K. Piyati, “Critical Theory and Information Studies: A Marcusean Infusion,” *Policy Futures in Education* 4, no. 1 (2006): 83–9, doi:10.2304/pfie.2006.4.1.83; Gloria J. Leckie, Lisa M. Given, and John Buschman, eds., *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social From Across the Disciplines* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2013).

40 Shana Higgins and Lua Gregory, eds. *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013); Melissa Morrone, ed., *Informed Agitation: Library and Information Skills in Social Justice Movements and Beyond* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2014); Bharat Mehra and Kevin Rioux, *Progressive Community Action: Critical Theory and Social Justice in Library and Information Science* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016); Heidi L.M. Jacobs and Selinda Berg, “Reconnecting Information Literacy Policy with the Core Values of Librarianship,” *Library Trends* 60, no. 2 (2011): 383–94, doi:10.1353/lib.2011.0043.

41 Andrew Battista, Dave Ellenwood, Lua Gregory, Shana Higgins, Jeff Lilburn, Yasmin Sokkar Harker, and Christopher Sweet, “Seeking Social Justice in the ACRL *Framework*,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 2 (2015): 111–25, <http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&top=view&path%5B%5D=v9i2p111&path%5B%5D=214>; Nicole A. Cooke and Miriam E. Sweeney, *Teaching for Justice: Implementing Social Justice in the LIS Classroom* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017).

value of critical information literacy, suggests critical librarianship is unprofessional, even unconscionable:

It's not our role to promote social change or empower learners to identify and act upon oppressive power structures...In our roles as academic librarians in publicly funded institutions we are not to direct [students] to any specific ends except to learn information literacy concepts and how to apply those concepts to their tasks at university...We are not paid to subscribe to some abstraction about oppressive power structures or to apply our skill sets to an ambiguous and amorphous idea of "social change."⁴²

Were we to do so, the respondent claims, "We [would] risk burning down the objective stance we have built up over at least the last century."⁴³

Contradictions, Negotiations, *Kairos*

Emily Drabinski's use of the Greek concept of *kairos*—a kind of qualitative time "married to action and context"⁴⁴—as an analytical lens allows us to understand that this professional ambiguity towards critical librarianship is a foreseeable outcome of the broader circumstances within which we carry out our work. At present, she explains, academic librarianship is characterized by two competing ideologies, "a *kairos* of compliance" and a "kairos of the critical," both of which not only determine our course of action but also our ability to imagine alternatives.⁴⁵ In the former, the logics of "competition, privatization, and efficiency"⁴⁶ prevail. Intellectual work is seen as unproductive: "theorizing—even reflection—is seen as a frill."⁴⁷ Sarah Coysh, William Denton, and Lisa Sloniowski describe this "as a failure to imagine that [academic] libraries can do more than serve the quotidian needs of neoliberal higher education priorities."⁴⁸ This is echoed by respondents to a survey conducted by librarian Eamon Tewell who need to be shown the "value" and "efficacy" of critical information literacy before considering

42 Eamon Tewell, "The Practice and Promise of Critical Information Literacy: Academic Librarians' Involvement in Critical Library Instruction," *College & Research Libraries* (preprint) (2017), <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.0.0.16616>.

43 Tewell, "The Practice and Promise."

44 Drabinski, "Kairos of the Critical," 77.

45 Drabinski, "A Kairos of the Critical."

46 Yvonne Hartman and Sandy Darab, "A Call for Slow Scholarship: A Case Study on the Intensification of Academic Life and Its Implications for Pedagogy," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 34, nos. 1–2 (2012): 46–60, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2012.643740>.

47 Sarah Coysh, William Denton, and Lisa Sloniowski, "Ordering Things," present volume, 130.

48 Coysh, Denton, and Sloniowski, "Ordering Things," 130.

whether to incorporate it into their teaching.⁴⁹ Because the *Framework* is designed to be less prescriptive than the *Standards* and requires librarians to do the work of adapting it to fit their local contexts, it has been criticized by some librarians as “elitist” and geared towards “intellectual” “philosopher librarians” rather than “pragmatic” “practical librarians.”⁵⁰ In the latter ideology—Drabinski’s *kairos* of the critical—“theories and practices which contest notions of power and authority”⁵¹ and “critical perspectives on the work of the library suffuse the mainstream of LIS work and thought.”⁵² It is not simply that these two kairotic moments coexist, however, but rather that compliance and critical engagement are dialectical:⁵³ “If we understand action and discourse as both produced by and productive of the present, the coincidence of critical and compliance perspectives makes analytic sense. The *kairos* of contemporary critical approaches...emerges from and alongside of compliance that it contests and resists.”⁵⁴ In this manner, the mainstreaming of critical librarianship and subsequent attempts to relegate it once again to a more liminal space within the profession are more easily understood and even predictable.

The institutionalization of critical librarianship echoes this oscillation between compliance and criticality. Maura Seale⁵⁵ draws on Rod Ferguson’s work on the institutionalization of the minority interdisciplines⁵⁶ to analyze the movement of critical librarianship to mainstream library discourse. To Ferguson, the institution is a framework for interpretation, and the process of institutionalizing is a process of translation in which that which is institutionalized becomes legible within and legible to that framework. Because this is a process of translation and a sort of reification, there are aspects of that which is institutionalized that are left out or foreclosed on because they cannot be understood or absorbed. Institutionalization is appealing because it legitimates critical movements so that they can be used in the service of institutional change, but it also makes possible their

49 Tewell, “The Practice and Promise.”

50 Christine Bombaro, “The Framework is Elitist,” *Reference Services Review* 44, no. 4 (2016): 552–63, <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-08-2016-0052>.

51 Drabinski, “A Kairos of the Critical,” 78.

52 Drabinski, “A Kairos of the Critical,” 82.

53 Drabinski, “A Kairos of the Critical,” 84.

54 Drabinski, “A Kairos of the Critical,” 83.

55 Maura Seale, “Institutionalizing Critical Librarianship,” (presentation, Critical Librarianship & Pedagogy Symposium, Tucson, AZ, February 25–26, 2016), <http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/handle/10150/609829>.

56 Rod Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

incorporation into global capitalism and other dominant power structures. Critical librarianship, like the minority interdisciplines described by Ferguson, is a site of contradiction, that both agrees with and contests institutionalization, that channels power but also critiques it.

The “two competing and co-productive”⁵⁷ kairotic narratives that mark the present moment in professional librarianship, the promise and peril of critical librarianship’s institutional success, lie “at the heart of the theory/practice, researcher/practitioner, scholar/activist binary which continues to hold sway in many areas of LIS.”⁵⁸ They are, in essence, the subject of this book.

About This Book

The book is organized into four sections, each of which takes up a different theme or aspect of theory and practice in critical librarianship. The first section, “Librarianship and the Practicality Imperative,” explores the issue of librarianship as a practical profession. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins’s essay, “In Resistance to a Capitalist Past,” situates the origins of the practicality imperative within librarianship, tracing Melvil Dewey’s emphasis on practicality and connecting it to contemporary ideologies of the industrial economy. Sam Popowich also seeks to historicize the tension between theory and practice by looking at debates around the introduction of information technology to libraries in the 1960s and 1970s in his essay, “Ruthless Criticism of All That Exists,” and thinks through the nexus of libraries and information technology using theoretical works by Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt.

Other essays use theory to problematize a variety of professional practices in Section Two, “Theory at Work: Rethinking our Practice.” In “Making the Case for a Sociocultural Perspective on Information Literacy,” Alison Hicks argues that information literacy should be understood as sociocultural practice and embedded in students’ lived experiences. Simon Barron and Andrew Preater, who have experience with systems librarianship, take up the role of information technology and the emphasis on practicality inherent in keeping systems running, in conjunction with questions of power, privacy, openness, and autonomy to develop what they call the theory and practice of “critical systems librarianship.” Jessica Schomberg looks to critical disability studies and her own experiences to consider how libraries as workplaces might better engage workers and patrons with disabilities. In “Ordering Things,” Sarah Coysh, William Denton, and Lisa Sloniowski use

57 Drabinski, “A Kairos of the Critical,” 85.

58 Karen P. Nicholson, “Taking Back? Information Literacy: Time and the One-Shot in the Neoliberal University,” in *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook. Vol. 1: Essays and Workbook Activities*, eds. Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy (Chicago: ACRL, 2016), 33, <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fimspub/41/>.

Foucault's work as the ground of a resistant reading practice in the face of neoliberal imperatives in higher education. In her essay, "Indigenous Information Literacy: nêhiyaw Kinship Enabling Self-Care in Research," Jessie Loyer centers indigeneity in information literacy theory and practice and suggests that both should draw on Cree-Métis understandings of relationship and reciprocity in order to engage the whole student.

In the third section, "Theory and the iSchool," several authors consider the spaces of academia and the ways in which theory and practicality play out within them. Michelle Caswell, an LIS faculty member and educator, describes how she connects critical theory and social justice to archival education to achieve a new mode of archival praxis in "Envisioning a Critical Archival Pedagogy." In contrast, Nicola Andrews, a recent LIS graduate, assesses her education and experiences in library school in light of her lived experiences as an indigenous, queer, immigrant woman-of-color and indigenous writings on trauma. In "Reflections on Running a CritLIS Reading Group," Penny Andrews, Elizabeth L. Chapman (Liz), Jessica Elmore, Dan Grace, Emily Nunn, and Sheila Webber conduct an autoethnography of their "CritLIS" reading group that seeks to create space for critical theory and practice within their iSchool.

Finally, the last section, "Critical Librarianship and Community," takes on the critical librarianship, "critlib," or #critlib phenomenon, exploring assumptions about critical librarianship as a community and whom the community includes and excludes. In "Critical Librarianship as an Academic Pursuit," Ian Beilin examines the implicit and frequently criticized associations of academia and critical librarianship and suggests ways that scholarly discourse and theory can be used to make critical librarianship more self-critical, accessible, and inclusive. In "Each According to Their Ability: Zine Librarians Talking About Their Community," Violet Fox, Kelly McElroy, Jude Vachon, and Kelly Wooten describe how lived experience and queer/feminist theory inform professional practice to bring together members of the zine community. Selinda Berg considers the place of empiricism and quantitative methods within critical librarianship. Finally, Nora Almeida unpacks the notion of critical librarianship as community in "Interrogating the Collective: #Critlib and the Question of Community" to argue that the value of #critlib as "an emancipatory theoretical project," lies in its promise to "remake our institutions and our communities."⁵⁹

59 Almeida, "Interrogating the Collective," 253, 254.

Although the book is divided into these sections, there are themes that cut across them; as any good librarian knows, categories are never exclusive. While not all authors draw on the work of particular theorists or theoretical schools, many do use what might be broadly termed critical theory to understand, critique, and situate practices or experiences... or consider how practice and experience allow us to identify what is missing from current theorizations. Barron and Preater draw on Foucault, Arendt, and hooks to work through issues in systems librarianship. Loyer's use of Cree-Métis notions of reciprocity and relationships and Hicks's discussion of sociocultural theory identify gaps in recent discussions of information literacy practices. Schomberg looks to critical disability studies, and, in talking about the whiteness of librarianship, also considers the role of race in LIS. Andrews interrogates the whiteness of LIS education and its erasure of indigenous perspectives through an engagement with Historical Trauma Theory. Almeida looks outside of LIS and grounds her discussion of community in theories of identity, performance, and place.

The ways in which notions of community include and exclude, empower and constrain, is also addressed in multiple essays. The idea of "community" is unpacked by Fox, McElroy, Vachon, and Wooten, and Almeida respectively, while both essays on reading groups seek to understand how inclusion and exclusion factor into both the internal functioning and external perception of the groups. In his take on academia, Beilin also assesses perceptions of belonging/not-belonging within "critical librarianship" and the complicated reality that perception often obscures. To both Hicks and Loyer, it is difficult to think about information literacy without considering the community in which it takes place. Caswell looks to her classroom as the site for the development of a critical community of practice with archives. Andrews identifies the academic community as a site of conditional hospitality that ultimately must address marginalized communities' trauma. Gregory and Higgins's discussion of practicality is rooted in debates about library education at the turn of the twentieth century; ultimately the community of practice that developed around libraries centered on practicality, although this was neither preordained nor uncontested.

Information technology plays a central role in librarianship, particularly in discussions of the future of the profession. Popowich assesses the profession's conflicted relationship with and under-theorization of technology and automation. Barron and Preater interrogate emerging issues with systems librarianship within the context of neoliberal economies and ideologies. Both essays point to the human agency and choices that are often erased in discussions of libraries and information technology. Similarly, in

her discussion of empirical and quantitative methods, Berg argues that empirical methods can be used to critical ends; there is agency and choice in how and why they are used.

This volume is not the first to consider the tension between theory and practice within librarianship.⁶⁰ Nor is it the definitive word on the subject, although it is perhaps the first book length exploration of it. In selecting from the proposals we received, we sought to include a diversity of critical perspectives applied to a variety of professional practice sites. Given the subject matter, we also felt it important to include texts in a variety of formats, including scholarly essays, personal narratives, and dialogues, although finding a balance between the conventions of academic writing and these more conversational formats proved trickier than we anticipated. We encouraged authors to explore how theoretical or academic discourse played out in their professional and personal experiences. Throughout the process of soliciting, selecting, and editing submissions, we have also been conscious of questions and themes that remain to be explored. These include, but are not limited to, the negotiations between theory and practice in public, special, and school libraries; the perspectives and practices of non-Western librarians; deeper engagement with critical race, postcolonial, feminist, queer, and other theories; and the relationship between theory and other aspects of library professional practice such as cataloging and reference.

We believe this book illustrates that debates about theory and practice are more than disagreements about what constitutes critical theory and what value it brings to LIS and librarianship; they are part of larger professional discussions about neutrality, anti-intellectualism, social justice, and the public good. As Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins remind us, “critical” variously describes “a specific—often oppositional—mode of engaging with social facts,” “a clinical mode of speculating rigorously about the incipient directions of society,”⁶¹ and “a turning point.”⁶² At this moment, we find ourselves at a critical juncture within the profession, asking ourselves “about what librarianship is and does and should do.”⁶³ It is our hope the reader of this volume will gain an appreciation for the many ways theory can help identify possible means to negotiate this moment and seek answers to these questions.

60 Harris, “The Dialectic of Defeat”; Piyati, “Critical Theory and Information.”

61 Gregory and Higgins, “In Resistance to a Capitalist Past,” 32.

62 Gregory and Higgins, “In Resistance to a Capitalist Past,” 32.

63 Almeida, “Interrogating the Collective,” present volume, 254.

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