

Critical Librarianship as an Academic Pursuit

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Introduction: Critical Librarianship and Academia

Toni Samek has defined critical librarianship as “an international movement of library and information workers that considers the human condition and human rights above other professional concerns.”¹ This is just one of many possible ways of framing the concept of critical librarianship, but it is particularly powerful because it broadly embraces all types of library workers and appeals to concerns greater than mere professional ones. It also avoids language that explicitly links the definition to any specific field of librarianship. This chapter embraces Samek’s definition while seeking to better understand why the set of discourses and practices called ‘critical librarianship’ are not easily reconciled. It is difficult for librarians and/or LIS scholars as a group to agree on what the primary or defining characteristics of critical librarianship are. This is in part the result of the fact that the theories informing critical librarianship are varied and sometimes conflicting in their assumptions and viewpoints. Nonetheless, some commonly referenced ideas, concepts, theorists, writers, and books appear more than others in these discourses.² Many are associated either directly or indirectly with academia,

1 “Critical Librarianship: An Interview with Toni Samek,” *the (unofficial) bcla intellectual freedom committee blog*, November 13, 2007, <https://bclaifc.wordpress.com/2007/11/13/critical-librarianship-an-interview-with-toni-samek/>.

2 See the analysis of Robert Schroeder and Christopher Hollister evaluating theorists who are most widely recognized and influence self-identified critical librarians or librarians committed to social justice work. Robert Schroeder and Christopher V. Hollister, “Librarians’ Views on Critical Theories and Critical Practices,” *Behavioral and Social Sciences Librarian* 33, 2 (2014), http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/ulib_fac/152/. See also the overview of a decade’s work on critical information literacy by Eamon Tewell. Eamon Tewell, “A Decade of Critical Information Literacy: A Review of the Literature,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 24–43, <http://eprints.rclis.org/28163/2/a-decade-of-critical-information-literacy.pdf>.

or they have had their greatest influence on people who work there. This has led to a strong association of critical librarianship with academia and academic librarianship, despite broader visions such as Samek's, and the fact that many public librarians, school librarians, special librarians, archivists, and others are equally engaged in the same issues and projects.

Another reason for the apparent academic bias of critical librarianship today has to do with the attention it has received within the academic library community.³ This relationship could be viewed as natural in some respects, since proximity to scholars and students exploring topics of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the academy may lead librarians to engage with these issues within the framework of scholarship or other written work. Other factors may play a role as well, such as academic librarians' engagement with and interest in topics and concerns shared by those in the academy more generally, as well as the fact that many academic librarians have Masters and Doctorate degrees in these areas and may have taught or are currently teaching in higher education (obviously many librarians outside of academia do as well). Also, because of the structure and professionalization of academic librarianship (which I will discuss in more detail below), academic librarians have been well positioned to capture much of the attention and space in articulating a critical librarianship.

If we are to remain true to Samek's broad definition, the association of critical librarianship with academia carries certain risks, especially the danger that it will exclude many if not all librarians and LIS scholars outside academia who consider themselves 'critical' or committed to social justice. While there has been a noticeably strong growth of interest in critical librarianship found on social media under the hashtag #critlib, which aims to embrace everyone in its conversations, there has also emerged there a distinct critique of critical librarianship as elitist. This is apparently due in part to the fact that discussions can often bear the distinctive hallmarks

3 See for example the short articles and blog posts by Kenny Garcia, "Keeping Up with...Critical Librarianship," *Keeping Up with...*, June 2015, http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/critlib; Sarah Clark, "Why Library Leaders Should Care about Critical Librarianship," *Better Library Leaders*, May 19, 2016, <http://betterlibraryleaders.com/2016/05/19/why-library-leaders-should-care-about-critical-librarianship/>; Jacob Berg, "Why Critical Librarianship? Or, The #whyicritlib Post," *Beerbrarian*, December 15, 2015, <http://beerbrarian.blogspot.com/2015/12/why-critical-librarianship-or.html>; conferences such as the Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, February 25–26, 2016, <http://claps2016.wixsite.com/home>; CritLib: Theory and Action, Delaware ACRL Chapter, Swarthmore, PA, November 11, 2016, <http://acrldvc.org/archives/events/>; and numerous panels at national conferences (see for example the panel "Critical Foundations: Intersections between Critical Librarianship and First-Year Experience," Library Instruction West, Salt Lake City, UT, June 9, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/liw16/Libraryinstructionwest2016/ThursdayJune9/17/>; a workshop, Critical Librarianship Workshop, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, December 3–4, 2016, <http://criticallibrarianshipworkshop.weebly.com/>. There is also a new journal devoted to it, the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, <http://libraryjuicepress.com/journals/index.php/jclis>.

of academic discourse and culture. Additionally, many of the most visible advocates and participants in critical librarianship, especially online, have been academic librarians.

This chapter will consider first the extent to which critical librarianship is in fact embedded in academic discourse and practices. It will then discuss the effects of academia's influence on debates around the supposed contradiction between theory and practice in librarianship, using David James Hudson's recent intervention as a point of departure.⁴ It will then suggest ways that academic discourse and theory can be used to make critical librarianship more self-critical and more able to curb some of its elitist and exclusionary tendencies and effects. It will conclude by suggesting that the tensions and conflicts produced by critical librarianship's embrace of academic theory have been and should continue to be made productive in realizing the broad vision of critical librarianship that Samek envisions in her definition.

Threads of Academic Discourse in Academic Librarianship

It is hard to envision a critical librarianship that doesn't rely to some degree on a theoretical basis, but the extent of theory's role within it is open to debate. Expertise in or facility with theory most often comes from some formal post-secondary education. Many librarians who identify with critical librarianship are explicit about the connection between their academic backgrounds in theory and their commitments in librarianship. For example, Kevin L. Smith, Dean of Libraries at the University of Kansas, provides a typical case of this:

My own academic training focused on critical theory—in a very ancient form. Critical literary theory still resonates in contemporary thought—so I approach questions of privilege and power from that lens, a lens that is strongly focused on language. Specifically, these critical theoretical underpinnings highlight language as a structure in which social power is enacted. Libraries are themselves deeply linguistic on many levels and, as such, are never neutral. They, therefore, often embedded ideological stories that empower some and disadvantages others [sic] and, in addition, libraries are socio-political institutions that often support, but have the potential to challenge, the status quo.⁵

4 David James Hudson, "The Whiteness of Practicality," in Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, ed., *Topographies of Whiteness*, 203–34, (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017).

5 Kevin Smith, "Personal Insights into Critical Librarianship," *Dean's Corner—Dean's Messages*, n.d, <https://lib.ku.edu/deans-message/personal-insights-critical-librarianship>.

But academia influences both the articulation and reception of critical librarianship in ways other than purely intellectual. The social facts of the North American (and European) academy cannot be ignored: the dominance of middle-class values (and people of upper middle class origins),⁶ the separation of especially tenure-track and tenured faculty from other workers in the institution through professional status markers, titles, privileges, etc., and the ‘lifestyle’ of academia (traveling to conferences around the country and the world, the availability of research grants and other funds to support research, etc.).⁷ In academic librarianship especially, the academy’s whiteness and eurocentrism are particularly pronounced.⁸ Could someone without academic training acquire the theoretical apparatus with which to critique libraries and librarianship? and if they could, what sorts of privilege would such an acquisition require/produce? If someone can speak in the language of theory or rely on theoretical concepts with fluency and ease, does that automatically reflect a level of privilege that marks a person as being from a certain class (or race)? Does speaking in this language, or using this discourse, disconnect them from those about whom they speak—even if they themselves come from the groups that they are describing? In other words, are social and cultural capital required to engage in critical librarianship, at least as a full-fledged participant?

These questions are not unique to librarianship. It has long been a seeming paradox of critical work in academia that those who practice

6 Many academic librarians not from middle class backgrounds have described the challenges of entering academia, as well as the prejudices and misconceptions about them that they have encountered as a result: see, for example, Lindsay O’Neill, “How to Become an Academic Librarian,” *ACRLLog*, February 25, 2015, <http://acrllog.org/2015/02/20/how-to-become-an-academic-librarian/>; Lindsay O’Neill, “Culture Shock! and Other Discoveries of a New Academic Librarian,” *ACRLLog*, June 20, 2015, <http://acrllog.org/2015/06/20/culture-shock-and-other-discoveries-of-a-new-academic-librarian/>; see also Karen Downing, “The Relationship between Social Identity and Role Performance among Academic Librarians,” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009).

7 These privileges are very unevenly enjoyed across academic librarianship, even among those who have faculty status and/or union membership. As in every other respect, these differences tend to be elided when the terms “academic librarian” and “academic librarianship” are used. The same issues exist among the teaching faculty of academia, of course. For a detailed analysis and critique of this problem, see Lester K. Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*, Brooklyn, NY: punctum books, 2015.

8 See April Hathcock, “White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 7, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity/>; 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/>; Jennifer Vinopal, “The Quest for Diversity in Library Staffing: From Awareness to Action,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 13, 2016, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/quest-for-diversity/>.

it appear to be or are alleged to be the most privileged in the intellectual world.⁹ The functioning of this privilege (or the appearance of it) can constrain the work that critical librarianship is supposed to be doing. It can prevent solidarity not only with others who work in the same institutions (including within the library itself), but also with other librarians who do not share the same privileges and professional distinctions and/or titles.¹⁰

In fact, there is less privilege in academic positions than people outside of academia might imagine. Due to the neoliberal erosion of higher education in North America and Europe, the kinds of privilege long associated with academic employment—job security (tenure), middle-class income, decent benefits, time off for research, etc., are becoming the exception rather than the rule. An ever-shrinking minority among academic workers, including librarians, are permitted to be employed with the full array of traditional advantages. An impressive institutional affiliation may be only a façade behind which a contingent worker struggles in conditions very similar to their colleagues in public, school, and special libraries.¹¹ In this new context, critical theory more naturally takes its place in the struggle for justice and survival, locally and globally, just as it is (or might be) for librarians outside of higher education.

While examples of library scholarship inspired by critical theory are numerous,¹² it is not mainstream or widespread. In fact, there is both an unfamiliarity with and hesitancy towards theoretical work in LIS in general. Robert

9 The reality is often much different than what appears on the surface, and pseudo-democratic and populist attacks on academia *en masse* deliberately seek to portray everyone working in higher education as unfairly protected and privileged.

10 The debate around professionalization in librarianship continues unabated. One part focuses on the status and role of the MLIS in librarianship, and another one specific to academic librarianship revolves around the issue of faculty status and tenure. See Rory Litwin, “The Library Paraprofessional Movement and the De-Professionalization of Librarianship,” *Progressive Librarian* no. 33 (Summer/Fall 2009): 43–60 (revised version of January 27, 2010), <http://www.libraryjuicepress.com/docs/deprofessionalization.pdf>.

11 Again, Spence, *Knocking the Hustle* provides evidence for this fact.

12 Many examples of LIS research directly influenced or inspired by critical theory of one kind or another exist. Eamon Tewell recently provided an excellent survey of the last ten years of research in critical information literacy, much of which has been informed by critical theory. See Tewell, “A Decade of Critical Information Literacy: A Review of the Literature.” Among much LIS scholarship influenced by critical theories, some notable recent examples include Eamon Tewell, “Toward the Resistant Reading of Information: Google, Resistant Spectatorship, and Critical Information Literacy,” *portal: Libraries & The Academy* 16, no. 2 (April 2016): 289–310; Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, “Cyborgs in the Academic Library: A Cyberfeminist Approach to Information Literacy Instruction,” *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian* 33, no. 1 (January 2014): 29–46; Jonathan Cope, “Neoliberalism and Library and Information Science: Using Karl Polanyi’s Fictitious Commodity as an Alternative to Neoliberal Conceptions of Information,” *Progressive Librarian* 43 (Winter 2014/2015): 67–80; Lisa Sloniowski, “Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian,” *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 645–66; Jessica Critten, “Ideology and Critical Self-Reflection in Information Literacy Instruction,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 2 (September 2015): 145–56; Emily Drabinski, “Toward a Kairos of Library Instruction,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 5, (September 2014), 480–85, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.06.002>.

Schroeder and Christopher Hollister have surveyed 369 academic librarians' attitudes to and backgrounds in critical theory specifically. They found that more librarians were familiar with ideas of social justice than with critical theories. Very few of the surveyed librarians had been exposed to critical theories of any kind in library school; they had become acquainted them at the undergraduate level, in non-LIS graduate programs, or simply on their own.¹³ This relative weakness in terms of educational background implies that most librarians, after formal training for their careers, would have to go back to school once again. For some, such a requirement means too much work, time, and/or money. Others may be made to feel inadequate in a field for which they have been led to believe they'd been thoroughly prepared. Furthermore, librarianship, academic or otherwise, is a profession with a decidedly practical bias, and sets highest value on practicality in its research,¹⁴ as will be discussed in the next section.

Theory vs. Activism

There has long been a tension in the field of librarianship between theory and practice, and it has been of particular relevance to debates around critical librarianship (prompting the volume in which this chapter appears). David James Hudson recently has provided a compelling analysis of this tension, particularly with respect to critical librarianship. He affirms that critical theory is a "necessary part of critical librarianship" just as it is a necessary part of critical pedagogy, even though most of librarianship rejects theory in favor of practice ('practicality') on the assumption that there is a necessary contradiction between the two.¹⁵ Hudson describes practicality as a hegemonic 'structuring narrative' of LIS and notes that "the vast majority of the intellectual output in our field, whether through presentations or writing, takes the form of reflective case studies, positivist social science-y research, standards, best practices, how-to guides, recipe books, and the like."¹⁶ He highlights in particular the emphasis that is often made, both in the broader library community and the narrower critical library community, on the use of plain, straightforward language. He rightly reminds us that such language

13 Schroeder and Hollister, "Librarians' Views on Critical Theories and Critical Practices."

14 For a sense of how deep-seated and widespread the practicality bias is, see Hudson, "The Whiteness of Practicality," specifically the section "On Practicality Imperatives in Libraryland."

15 David James Hudson, "On Critical Librarianship & Pedagogies of the Practical," (keynote presentation, Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, February 25, 2016), <http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/handle/10150/612654>. Much of this talk was incorporated into the chapter cited above, but not all of the citations in the present discussion are found there.

16 Hudson, "Whiteness of Practicality."

is far from being neutral, progressive, or even straightforward, but often can serve, and has served, as a means of naturalizing and preserving existing power relations. In other words, the rejection of theory or of ‘jargon’ in LIS research and practice is not necessarily a move that favors marginalized or oppressed voices, as is often claimed. He also points to a colonialist assumption implied by the association of theory with elite, academic institutions and people—that oppressed people outside of the academy don’t or can’t speak the language (and ideas) of theory, that they are driven by practical, real, immediate concerns, and not by ideas.

The bi-weekly #critlib discussions on Twitter, which are designed to allow a wide range of voices within the critical librarian community speak out, have sometimes highlighted the tension between theory and practice within a critical context¹⁷. The direct communication between academic librarians and others dedicated to social justice work in libraries there brings out the tensions in sometimes sharp ways.¹⁸ Yet librarians can and often do speak the languages of both theory and practicality, and even though speaking in an academic mode may enable them to function within an academic context, it may not be the best way to engage with communities outside of academia. And speaking in a different mode, key or language, does not imply or necessitate an abandonment or rejection of theory, just as speaking to different communities does not necessarily mean speaking in ‘plain’ or ‘clear’ language. Librarian Fobazi Ettarh provides an example of this from her experience attending the Allied Media Conference (AMC)¹⁹ in Detroit in 2016:

17 For a discussion of #critlib and community, see Nora Almeida’s chapter, “Interrogating the Collective: #Critlib and the Problem of Community,” in this volume.

18 #critlib refers to the open group chats on twitter that have taken place regularly (approximately bi-weekly) since April 1, 2014. For transcripts of most of these chats as well as other materials connected to the chats and critical librarianship, see *critlib: in real life and on the twitters*, <http://critlib.org/>. A June 2015 with the theme “critiquing #critlib” raised many of the points cited here. Some claimed that academic discourse, usually in the form of “jargon,” is used as a status marker to demarcate “professionals” from other library workers, while others stated that a lack of background in theory made them reticent to participate. Some wrote that their imposter syndrome makes it difficult for them to enter in upon discussions that involve academic discourses or theory in general, but some observed that many in the critlib community don’t have strong backgrounds in academic theory. The question of privilege came up often, but #critlib was seen as having emphasized the voices of the less privileged: “. . .historically, a lot of academic discourse about anything has been written by straight-passing white men. The voices of #critlib. . . emphasize other voices and perspectives. Those voices need to be heard in all spheres.” Some of the remedies suggested for these problems involve making #critlib and similar spaces more welcoming: “We need ways to make it safe to not know, be wrong, ask questions.” Contributions from Aimee S. Goodson @asgoodson, Stacy Konkiel @skonkiel, Emperor Ruthlessa @ruthbrarian, ellie @elliehearts, Emperor Ruthlessa @ruthbrarian, and Emily Drabinski @edrabinski, #critlib chat #36, “critiquing #critlib,” June 30, 2015.

19 The Allied Media Conference is an annual gathering in Detroit that “brings together a vibrant and diverse community of people using media to incite change: filmmakers, radio producers, technologists, youth organizers, writers, entrepreneurs, musicians, dancers, and artists.” Librarians can and should be added to this list, as every year there are at least a few participating there. See <https://www.alliedmedia.org/amc>.

Being at AMC really drove home just how academic the twitter chats are (so not just critlib but others as well). When I reflect on the vast gulf between the casual language spoken by the librarians at the AMC panels and the “casual” language of the librarians on twitter it blows my mind. Like to the point where multiple times during the conference I had distinct moments of just marveling on the true accessibility of language being used by the session organizers.²⁰

Ettarh is describing the freedom afforded by the more open discourses happening among scholars, artists, and activists at the AMC; they may be using language less laden with theoretical or academic jargon, and more directly engaged with social and political issues, but it isn't necessarily one that is simplistic or unsophisticated. She highlights the importance of being aware of context in theoretical discussions, but she also brings our attention to the fact that people are often unaware or unsensitive to context. Her comments challenge academic librarians to justify the use of theory-laden language, and force us to consider more carefully critical theory's influence on LIS scholarship and practice. They should not imply an either-or decision, but rather allow us to better appreciate the varieties of discourse and communities with whom we should try to keep engaged.

Among academic librarians, but also across academia generally, the most often rejected or pilloried theoretical tradition is poststructuralist or postmodern theory. It is sometimes dismissed or even mocked for being obscurantist and jargon-ridden. Poststructuralist theory continues to be reviled for much the same reasons as it has been since the 1980s: on the one hand, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Butler, Spivak, etc. (who have at least as many differences between them as similarities) are accused of sophistry, moral relativism, nihilism, elitism, and even reactionary tendencies. On the other hand, these same thinkers have had a decidedly strong impact on many librarians. Less often criticized in this regard are the thinkers of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas, etc.), who are sometimes enlisted in the struggle against poststructuralist influence.²¹ Along these lines, some try to suggest alternative theoretical sources as a way

20 Fobazi Ettarh, “AMC Reflections,” *The Token Two*, June 30, 2016, <https://thetokentwo.wordpress.com/2016/06/>.

21 More than anyone else, Foucault has been singled out for his negative impact on critical librarianship by LIS scholars who prefer other critical traditions, especially Frankfurt School and other Marxist (or quasi-Marxist) thinkers. See for example John Buschman, “Transgression or Stasis?: Challenging Foucault in LIS Theory,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Communication, Policy* 77, no. 1 (January 2007): 21–44, http://scholarship.shu.edu/lib_pub/66. In contrast, there are also some who claim that he hasn't been properly used *enough*, but only paid lip service. See Scott Hamilton Dewey, “(Non-)use of Foucault's Archaeology of Knowledge and Order of Things in LIS journal literature, 1990–2015.” *Journal of Documentation* 72, no. 3 (May 2016): 454–89, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-08-2015-0096>.

of putting critical librarianship on a firmer epistemological ground. One such tendency looks to philosophical traditions more within the Anglo-American, analytical tradition of philosophy.²² The longstanding desire to locate LIS firmly within the social sciences has led some scholars to apply social science theories and methods, most often from anthropology.²³ These suggestions or pleas may solve critical librarianship's association with post-structuralism (if there really is one), but they wouldn't solve the problem of its associations with the academy.

Many of those who are most eager and active (and prominent) in applying theoretical (academic) approaches have advanced degrees beyond the MLS. There is therefore an undeniably close link between academic pedigree and an approach to (critical) librarianship influenced by theory. Any reorientation toward a different theoretical grounding will not remove the association of critical librarianship with academic theorizing or academia more generally. Returning to Hudson's discussion, it's important to note that if any critical agenda is to succeed, it must have a strong theoretical grounding, but it must be a theory that commits all librarianship to critical practice as well. It needs to reach far beyond the boundaries of the academy and be able to locate academia within the larger structures of domination and oppression that characterize the contemporary world. Theory, in its many variants—feminist, critical race, queer, Marxist, to name just a few—provides invaluable tools with which to do this. But to use these tools well, critical librarianship needs to maintain a high degree of self-awareness and self-criticality.

Making Critical Librarianship More Self-critical

Academia is often caricatured as engaging in navel-gazing and pursuing arguments and issues relevant only to its own members. Academics are presented as being removed from the concerns and struggles of the majority of people. It is alleged that its most safe and secure (tenured full-time faculty, often including librarians) have not been conditioned or forced to consider themselves as belonging to the larger collectives with which the majority of

22 See the many suggestions of Lane Wilkinson on his blog *Sense and Reference: A Philosophical Library Blog*, <https://senseandreference.wordpress.com/>.

23 Library and Information Science itself is most often presented and viewed as a social science. Whether it has or can develop its own body of theory is still debated. See Archie L. Dick, "Library and Information Science as a Social Science: Neutral and Normative Conceptions," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 65, no. 2 (Apr. 1995): 216–35. For examples of anthropological work in LIS, see the work of Maura Smale, <https://maurasmale.com/>; Donna Lanclos, *The Anthropologist in the Stacks*, <http://www.donnalanclos.com/>; Andrew Asher, *Andrew Asher: Ethnographer of Libraries, Information & Central Europe*, <http://www.andrewasher.net/>; and Matt Thompson, *Savage Minds: Notes and Queries in Anthropology*, <http://savageminds.org/2013/09/25/an-anthropologist-among-the-librarians/>.

people outside of academia identify, whether professionally or otherwise (this is particularly true if the academics in question are cis het middle class white men, who are disproportionately represented in academia, especially in its higher ranks). Many who experience hostility, elitism, and exclusion because of their class, race, gender, national, ethnic, regional, and/or other identities can be made to feel unwelcome or apart from mainstream academic culture, and feel like outsiders, even if they have a secure position there (i.e. tenure). So the view of academia may be a caricature, but it is one with a degree of truth, at least when applied to certain dominant groups within it.

In academic librarianship, some of these fissures are more pronounced than in other academic professions, partly because becoming an academic librarian requires a shorter period of preparation or apprenticeship. While the PhD is the traditional means through which people are acculturated into academia, the MLS (and often a second subject Masters) does not demand that the holder fully acculturate to the myriad ways of academe²⁴ in order to succeed and thrive. As Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith have argued, academic librarians occupy a unique, liminal space between academia proper and the outside world, or other worlds, beyond. They may not be as invested in protecting their status as academics and are less likely to adopt the blinkered attitudes of academia or feel like they have to jealously protect their privileges.²⁵ This status could partially be a result of their relative lack of training or acculturation compared most other academics, but even librarians with PhDs can feel marginalized by their primary status as librarians. Eisenhower and Smith suggest the value of occupying a marginal position for critical work in librarianship and academia more broadly because it makes it easier for librarians to establish solidarities with students and marginalized populations both in and out of the institution. While I think this view of academic librarians' position is useful and accurate, it is nonetheless important to keep in mind that a wide range of privilege exists within and among academic librarians, even those who do not enjoy the status and protections of tenure or union membership. Furthermore, many academic librarians seek to bolster their status by drawing distinctions between themselves and 'staff' library workers as well as non-academic librarians. Eisenhower and Smith's position correctly implies that such status protection is both regressive and pointless.

24 The most obvious of these being the requirement to publish as much as possible, in the most prestigious venues. But also, and perhaps equally importantly, to master or at least become adept at the negotiation of interpersonal relations with colleagues and administrators.

25 Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith, "The Library as 'Stuck Place': Critical Pedagogy in the Corporate University," in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, eds. (Duluth, MN; Library Juice Press, 2010), 305–18.

The relationship between marginality or liminality (which is always relative), on the one hand, and criticality on the other, is thus an open one. Some influences, such as the fact that academic librarians, especially those on the tenure-track, are more likely to be required to publish, may inspire an engagement with critical theory. This imperative may make them identify as *academic* librarians more than anything else, in terms of recognizing a common calling with their non-librarian colleagues on the faculty. It will inevitably predispose librarians who are already interested in social justice issues, radical politics, and critical pedagogy to explore and incorporate critical theories into their work on libraries and librarianship. Some exposure and use of theory may even be *required* in the sense that such work will be more recognizable as legitimate scholarship by faculty in the humanities and social sciences. But perhaps more importantly than these considerations is the *time* that tenure-track academic librarians are granted to study, research, and write (although very often it is not as much time as their colleagues outside of the library). This, above all else, enables them to devote more attention than other librarians to absorbing theory into their own scholarship and library practice. Yet, as indicated above, most librarians' training does not dispose them to an engagement with theory, and their profession's own research agenda is one squarely focused on practical or social science-oriented empirical concerns and ones that are most in harmony with social science methods and theories.²⁶ In the end, this requirement drives most research among academic librarians. Yet for the subset who engage with critical librarianship, theory is much more likely to play a decisive role.

In the context of the neoliberal academy with its increasing reduction of faculty rights and privileges, including those related to tenure, the boundary between academia and the 'outside world' is perhaps more porous than ever before. Increasing reliance on outside funding sources such as grants, gifts, and public/private partnerships have both helped to initiate and accelerate this trend. With these changes, academic librarians may have more opportunity (or be forced) to stand in solidarity with workers everywhere. Organizing and resisting the corporatizing and austerity measures of university administrations is a very concrete way to put theory into practice. The struggles for fair contracts and against lockouts and other actions against workers²⁷ can mobilize critical librarianship into direct action for

26 Such research is often motivated to fulfill the demand that libraries demonstrate their "value" to both their institutions, and each other. See Karen Nicholson, "Research and the 'Value' Agenda," *Open Shelf*, March 1, 2017, <http://www.open-shelf.ca/170301-research-and-the-value-agenda/>.

27 The LIU lockout of faculty, including librarians, in September 2015, dramatically illustrated the need for greater labor militancy and solidarity among academic librarians. See Emily Drabinski, "LIU Brooklyn Lockout," September 1, 2016, and other posts at <http://www.emilydrabinski.com/>.

justice and democracy. It is worthy of note that some of the theory most relevant to labor issues, such as Marxist and other approaches to political economy and neoliberalism, continue to be appealing to a small but significant subset of critical librarians.²⁸ What many in the critical library community find reassuring in this case, I think, is that the language in these discussions largely eschews the concepts and terminology associated with poststructuralist theory, and therefore is perceived as more democratic and accessible. This sentiment is memorably expressed in the slogan “Remember: if it’s not accessible, it’s not radical...”²⁹ The intention is to resist academic jargon and theoretical discussions, and to call attention to the ways that academic language practices can serve to intimidate or exclude newcomers.³⁰ But accessibility is always relative, and to exclude everything that is not immediately understandable to everyone would be to include very little, and would have to leave aside most of the radical traditions of modern and contemporary thought and theory. In other words, if Marx is going to be considered ‘accessible,’ then why not any number of more modern or contemporary theorists, including the infamous French poststructuralists? But if Marx (for example) is included among the *inaccessible* (and therefore not authentically radical), then radicalism is left with little basis for theoretical work. Is it possible to engage theory that might be difficult to access because of its language, length, or density, in a way that makes it more immediately ‘of use’ for activist work? An example of such an approach might be Rius’s *Marx for Beginners*, which presents the core ideas of Marx and Engels in a comic-book format. This work is an acknowledgement that Marxism, as an intellectual pursuit, might not be best suited for spreading the ideas of Marx in the widest possible circles,³¹ but is not a rejection of Marxist theory and instead an invitation and gateway to

28 See for example the work of John Buschman, https://works.bepress.com/john_buschman/; see also the work of Jonathan Cope, most recently his “The Labor of Informational Democracy: A Library and Information Science Framework for Evaluating the Democratic Potential in Socially Generated Information,” in Bharat Mehra and Kevin Rioux, eds., *Progressive Community Action: Critical Theory and Social Justice in Library and Information Science* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016), 75–121; also the following recent Library Juice Press volumes: Erik Estep and Nathaniel Enright, eds., *Class and Librarianship: Essays at the Intersection of Information, Labor and Capital* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016); and Stephen Bales, *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship: A Critical Approach* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2015).

29 Tweet by Ellen MacInnis @ecmacinnis, June 30, 2015. Radical and critical are not synonymous, I would argue. While it is implied that ‘critical’ theory and ‘critical’ librarianship are interested in understanding how structures of oppression operate in society and libraries, they are not necessarily explicitly committed to a radical transformation of society.

30 Sarah Crissinger, “Still Lost in the Academy: The Importance of #L1S and Other First Generation Initiatives,” *ACRLlog*, August 10, 2015, <http://acrlog.org/2015/08/10/still-lost-in-the-academy/>.

31 Rius, *Marx for Beginners* (New York: Two Continents Pub. Group, 1976).

it. This example shows that perhaps any theory can be presented in a way that can ensure it will retain its radical potential by being accessible to the broadest possible audience.

Productive Tensions

The left (however understood) has always had fissures and conflicts, largely generated by the systems of capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy against which it has struggled (and not, as its enemies claim, by its own corruption or weaknesses). Recognition of these differences and the large areas of common concern should enable greater communication, if not always understanding, within the critical library community. The distrust and sometimes bitter acrimony that can erupt between people in the #critlib community over the role of theory and academic discourses more generally can be tempered through a mutual engagement with issues that are of common concern. In the present political circumstances, in which the governments of the United States and other states are ruled by not only neoliberal and plutocratic interests, but also by white supremacist and antifeminist authoritarians or neofascists, it is especially obvious and important that this coming together should happen. But any community must be built upon mutual recognition, and it cannot take place on the terms of the privileged. Rather, it is the responsibility of the privileged to work towards those who are excluded and marginalized; to learn, in short, how to build a community for struggle and resistance on the terms of the *oppressed*. Differences should not be forgotten or repressed for the sake of unity, as the underlying reasons for our divisions are real. They are manifestations of the very problems that we seek to address. For this reason, academic librarians steeped in the theory and language of critical theory don't need to discard those tools, but rather find ways to use them, not for the purposes of self-aggrandizement or status marking, but for building solidarities across the many divides that separate us.

Librarians have already suggested ways to remain self-critical, to keep academic librarianship opened to the rest of the world, to avoid elitist assumptions and practices, and to establish solidarities with both librarians committed to social justice and with other people and groups more generally. Nisha Mody, writing from the perspective of an early career academic librarian, wonders whether joining the academy will remove her from the struggles for justice that she wants her library career to focus on: "Will being an academic librarian make it difficult for me to effect change in the 'real world' because I am so entrenched in academic lingo? Will lengthening my CV remove myself from applying the principles I promote? I often question

if being a part of the academy will distance myself from those that are marginalized.” Affirming the choice to become an academic librarian contains the hope, but not necessarily the certainty of being able to accomplish these goals:

As the more research-oriented and elitist bubble within librarianship, academic libraries have a responsibility to community. We can be that bridge. But we cannot even start building this bridge without a contextual basis, without feminist, anti-racist, non-binary, inclusive, and overall non-oppressive ideologies. And this is HARD. So, this will take time. It will take many, many dialogues, trial and error, and critical reflection so that we can draft a blueprint for this bridge. There is no end game here—this engagement emerges from curiosity and is process-oriented rather than deliberate and goal-based.³²

While she focuses here more on what librarians do, and the relationships they cultivate, it is likely that much of the feminist, anti-racist, non-binary, inclusive, and non-oppressive ideologies (theories) come from academia and academic discourse. In other words, the work of solidarity goes hand in hand with a grounding in theory that lives (at least in part) in the world of academia, yet nonetheless strives to transform both academia itself and the world at large.

This chapter concludes with an affirmation of both academic theory and activist engagement with the world beyond academia, believing that the seeming contradiction between the two is caused more by institutional and professional barriers than by the intrinsic elitism of theory. Critical librarianship can and should embrace academic theory, in all its variety, while at the same time remain true to the vision articulated by Samek cited at the start of this chapter, one that places the human condition and human rights above professional concerns. This is precisely what a theoretically informed critical librarianship is capable of doing.

32 Nisha Mody, “Grounding Academic Librarianship and Elitism,” *Hack Library School*, April 19, 2016, <https://hacklibraryschool.com/2016/04/19/grounding-academic-librarianship-and-elitism/>.

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