

Truth-Telling in Library Land: In Defense of Emancipatory and Justice-Based Frameworks in Library and Information Science

AMBER MATTHEWS AND JAMILLAH R. GABRIEL

ABSTRACT

In recent years, library and information science (LIS) has increasingly demonstrated a professional commitment to anti-oppression and related concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Yet despite a growing body of literature underscoring their importance to the field and its communities, a substantial divide remains between the everyday workings of librarianship and the enactment of anti-oppression and DEI praxis. This paper addresses this gap by contextualizing justice-based approaches for LIS and argues that the field must move beyond performative DEI commitments toward structurally embedded praxis rooted in critical race theory and anti-oppression frameworks. It also examines white privilege in the workplace, its impact on DEI initiatives, and the harm experienced by library workers from equity-deserving groups. Drawing on lived experience and interdisciplinary scholarship, the paper offers practical entry points for dismantling systemic inequities and situates DEI within broader emancipatory movements.

To me, it just means telling the truth.

— Derrick Bell, cited in *Covenant Keeper: Derrick Bell's Enduring Education Legacy*

Over the last several decades, library and information science (LIS) has increasingly demonstrated a professional commitment to anti-oppression and related concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Black and Mehra 2023; Colón-Aguirre et al. 2025; EveryLibrary Institute 2022; Leung and López-McKnight 2021; Ossom-Williamson et al. 2020).¹ Heightened following the murder of George Floyd, the evolving interest in anti-oppression and DEI is reflected in emerging core values (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL] 2022; American Library Association [ALA] 2021) and professional frameworks (Canadian Federation of Library Associations 2017; EveryLibrary Institute 2022; ALA/ARL Task Force 2022) as well as past standards and competencies (ACRL 2012) that seek to address and disrupt the structures of oppression and discrimination in library work. DEI has also become an integral component of research and especially academia, with many external funders now requiring acknowledgment and consideration of how scholarly inquiry and professional practice deliberately and tacitly perpetuate discriminatory approaches (e.g., racism,

genderism, heterosexism, ableism, classism) (EveryLibrary Institute 2022; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council 2025; Spencer Foundation n.d.).

Nevertheless, despite this increased commitment to and growing body of literature demonstrating the professional and social-structural importance of anti-oppression and DEI to the field, a substantial divide remains between the everyday workings of librarianship and the practice of anti-oppression and DEI (EveryLibrary Institute 2022; Hudson 2017). This results in disjointed approaches to policy and governance that fail to reflect the breadth of laws and best practices found in equitizing and protective statutes (EveryLibrary Institute 2022). It has also led to limited understanding of the large body of legal, critical, and inter-sectional scholarship underpinning anti-oppression and DEI praxis in LIS (Antelman 2025).² This inclination to downplay or ignore investigations into the structural foundations of inequity and oppression has been widely critiqued by critical LIS scholars and practitioners (Black and Mehra 2023; Colón-Aguirre et al. 2025; Espinal 2001; Espinal et al. 2018; EveryLibrary Institute 2022; Gibson et al. 2017; Gibson et al. 2020; Hathcock 2015; Honma 2005; Hudson 2017; Leung and López-McKnight 2021; Mehra 2021; Mehra and Gray 2020; Overbey and Folk 2022; Ossom-Williamson et al. 2020; Schlesselman-Tarango 2017). These deeply informed perspectives create a strong need for emancipatory and justice-informed frameworks that both trouble disciplinary approaches and contest the structural inequities that anchor white supremacy as normative and neutral. However, as Isabel Espinal et al. (2018) strikingly reflect, “many seem unaware that the conversation is happening” after two decades of concerted efforts on multiple fronts to advance DEI in LIS (149).

This paper seeks to address this concerning gap and support the profession by contextualizing anti-oppression and DEI praxis for the field of library and information science. Drawing on the authors’ professional and lived experiences in librarianship and community-based research and education, this paper introduces viable points of entry to anti-oppression and DEI laws, scholarship, and approaches that address the complex and multifaceted nature of oppression in the field. It begins by tracing the emergence of anti-oppression and DEI approaches in and through critical race theory (CRT) and related emancipatory and justice-based frameworks. It also provides an overview of the relevant principles, values, and ethics of anti-oppression and DEI praxis that support the need to decenter and disrupt prevailing mindsets and approaches to library work. Finally, it contextualizes these approaches through a discussion of how white privilege (and fragility) impact library workers. Our aim is not to oversimplify the complexity of anti-oppression and DEI work nor present equity-deserving communities as a single entity impacted in similar ways. Instead, we seek to recognize and articulate our role in a discipline, geography, and history that is ever connected to the sociohistorical context of discrimination and oppression. Indeed, as James Baldwin astutely echoes, “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history” (2017). In acknowledging our role as agents and agitators of a disciplinary history and attendant practices that have been dominated by ahistorical (Honma 2005), acultural (Pawley 2006), and positivist approaches (Mehra and Gray 2020) that deny lived experiences of social-structural barriers experienced in and through librarianship, we also recognize our inbuilt responsibility to address disciplinary and systemic inequities that cause harm.

Terminology

In this paper, we employ the language of equity-deserving communities and groups to describe the shared attitudinal, historical, social, and economic barriers that impact differ-

ently situated people based on a variety of biological and self-determined factors (Matthews 2025). The term *equity-deserving* is widely used in community-based contexts in Canada and elsewhere in place of more contested and/or dated terms (e.g., *marginalized*, *minorities*, *racialized*, *underserved*) (Queen's University Office of Human Rights n.d., 3). Equity-deserving groups and communities are simply defined as "communities that experience significant collective barriers participating in society" (Queen's University Office of Human Rights n.d.). By focusing on shared systemic barriers rather than social-cultural differences, the term "aims to highlight the collective decision to enact and perpetuate systemic practices of marginalization that exclude certain groups" (Matthews 2025, 4). However, we also recognize that there are deeply informed critiques of overarching terms that center on their use in and for communities most impacted (Ajele 2021; Plaid and MacDonald-Dennis 2021).

Anti-Oppression and DEI: A Very Brief Introduction

While the focus on anti-oppression and DEI has heightened in recent years, the impetus for contemporary emancipatory and justice-based approaches originates in the "Black Power Movement" through the teachings of Martin Luther King, Malcom X, and others (Rodney et al. 2023, 874). This early wisdom emphasized civil rights reform and measures to address economic and social disparities in the United States (US) (i.e., affirmative action) (Rodney et al. 2023). Particularly, these movements share an approach centered on justice-informed sociohistorical memory and contemporary race relations. They have also widely influenced generations who found collective inspiration and belonging in a scholar-activist tradition that endeavors to speak truth to power through the exploration of personal, community, and institutional experiences and machinations of racism (Crenshaw et al. 2018). Anti-oppression and DEI have continued to rise in popularity and social consciousness through the widespread use of tenets found in critical race theory, critical diversity studies, and other emerging approaches to social and racial justice (Rodney et al. 2023). In recent years, the evolving push for Indigenous sovereignty and the Black Lives Matter movement have also ignited attention on anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism as the founding pernicious forms of oppression and inequity in North America (Rodney et al. 2023).

Critical Race Theory

Founded in the tradition of scholar-activism pioneered by early Black freedom leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, CRT first emerged in US critical legal scholarship to challenge race neutrality in policy and laws in the post-Civil Rights era (Martinez and Smith 2025). Popular liberal responses at the time tended to adopt a "race neutral or color-blind" approach that purported race to be irrelevant following the eradication of judicial segregation and marginalization (Parker 2019, 1). Early CRT and critical diversity scholars drew on personal stories and experiences of racial oppression to challenge neutral approaches to show how policies and practices are constructed with racial meanings that maintain white supremacy by asserting legislative or "formal equality" in place of "substantive" equity (Ahmed 2012, 22; Martinez and Smith 2025). While there is no definitive author or text that defines the scholarly emergence of the CRT canon (Crenshaw et al. 2018), its early proponents include legal scholars and writers such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Cheryl Harris, and Patricia J. Williams. There is also a strong body of CRT-based research in education that includes scholars such as Adrienne D. Dixon, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and William F. Tate (Ladson-Billings 2021). Interestingly, CRT also has roots in LIS with the seminal CRT writer

Jean Stefancic beginning his academic career with early publications in LIS as an assistant librarian at the University of San Francisco School of Law (Leung and López-McKnight 2021; Martinez and Smith 2025). Founding scholars have described CRT as a “platform of ideas” and a “social network” that orchestrated an important “intervention” of “race-conscious scholarship” into what were then distinct discussions on racial equality and social justice (Crenshaw et al. 2018, 891). However, Delgado and Stefancic (2023) explain that while CRT is concerned with similar issues to “conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses,” the CRT scholarly-activist movement’s focus is on “transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” rather than incremental progress in the “foundations of the liberal order” (3).

In librarianship and other social services more broadly, the crux of CRT’s calls for substantive equity over formal equality can be seen through the disjointed and often conflicting approach to DEI policy and governance adopted by library and information organizations (Colón-Aguirre et al. 2025). For example, in the US, public librarianship is governed by a breadth of federal laws that require that they “follow and support anti-discrimination practices” and “are prohibited from engaging in discriminatory practices” (EveryLibrary Institute 2022, para. 3). Thus, federal anti-discrimination statutes have been widely implemented across hiring, procurement, and other areas of library fiscal and human resource operations (EveryLibrary Institute 2022). However, the field has been less inclined (and not required) to invoke state-level protections that would guarantee substantive equity across all areas of library work, including “collection development, display, programming, meeting room use, and materials” (EveryLibrary Institute 2022, para. 5). Rather, organizations more typically operationalize DEI from an aspirational (Ettarh 2018) or “voluntary ethical framework” (EveryLibrary Institute 2022, para. 2) that fails to interrogate how race, power, and systemic inequity shape structures and practices.

As a result, LIS often struggles with ideologically and politically laden commentary that centers on identity politics and cultural critiques at the expense of the wide body of anti-oppression and DEI laws, scholarship, and approaches underpinning this work. However, CRT principles, such as the centrality of race and racism, the challenge to dominant ideologies, and the valuing of experiential knowledge, translate directly into a range of LIS domains and attendant applied practices (Colón-Aguirre et al. 2025). To bridge the gap between equity-based theory and practice, this paper offers a sample mapping of foundational CRT principles to core domains of LIS to support educators, practitioners, and policymakers to envision and operationalize aspirations with field-specific applications. By aligning CRT’s race-conscious and power-aware tenets with everyday library work (Colón-Aguirre et al. 2025), this mapping demonstrates how LIS can move beyond performative narratives and symbolic gestures toward structurally embedded equity and collective liberation from oppression.

CRT Principle	LIS Domain	Applied Practice
Centrality of Race and Racism	Collection Development	Collection audits for racial representation and the prioritization of materials by equity-deserving authors and communities in acquisition (Colón-Aguirre et al. 2025).
Challenge to Dominant Ideology	Governance and Policy	Revise mission statements and policies to explicitly name systemic racism, white supremacy, and other forms of structural oppression (ALA/ARL Task Force 2022).
Commitment to Social Justice	Curriculum and Pedagogy	Embed equity and justice-based frameworks in core LIS courses with required critical reflection on the impacts of race, power, and structural privilege (Gibson et al. 2018).
Valuing Experiential Knowledge	Community Engagement	Co-create programs with equity-deserving communities to center lived experience in program and collection design, assessment, and evaluation (Hughes-Hassell 2020).
Interdisciplinary Perspective	Research and Teaching	Integrate insights from Black studies, Indigenous studies, and critical legal studies into research agendas, scholarship, and curriculum (Cooke and Sweeney 2017).
Counter-Storytelling	DEI Advocacy and Funding	Leverage institutional priorities (e.g., accreditation, communications, policymaking) to advance initiatives that benefit equity-deserving groups (EveryLibrary Institute 2022).

While this mapping is not exhaustive, it is an inflection point that affirms justice-based transformation requires more than tacit awareness of how race, power, and systemic inequity shape our structures and practices. Rather, it underscores the importance of and strong need for equity-based structural intervention across all facets of library work and invites LIS professionals to move from passive recognition to active reimagination through a race-conscious and justice-centered lens (Colón-Aguirre et al. 2025).

Anti-Oppression Praxis

Similar to CRT, there is no founding text nor a “distinct or specific anti-oppressive methodology” (Rodney et al. 2023, 874). Rather, Canadian anti-oppression researchers Karen Potts and Leslie Brown (2015) explain that anti-oppressive praxis is “epistemologically distinctive” from other approaches to professional work and research with equity-deserving communities (38). Potts and Brown’s (2015) foundational premise that social justice research and practice—defined as collaborative work that aims to foster greater equity, access to power and resources, and participation—is not inherently anti-oppressive (Matthews 2021). Rather, it can often reconstitute oppression through the preservation of harmful forms of epistemic knowledge and inequitable power relationships. Thus, the crux of anti-oppression praxis is to call into question disciplinary approaches to identify inequitable power relationships as well as opportunities to create more equitable practices and systems (Potts and Brown 2015).

At the same time, Peters and Luke (2022a) note that anti-oppression and DEI-informed frameworks are still in “neophyte phases of development” in many professional and academic fields (336). Thus, there is also a strong need to conceptualize and articulate a “trans-theoretical” application to support the wider use of its equity and justice-informed tenets in LIS (Peters and Luke 2022, 2023). Defined as a simultaneous process of “deconstruction and reconstruction” (Peters and Luke 2022, 337), the shared crux with CRT is that oppressive processes and structures are inherent in contemporary social organization as opposed to nascent developments (Antelman 2025). Therefore, the first steps are to enable recognition of the “multiple lived realities” that are overshadowed in less structural and emancipatory approaches to dominant fields of practice and study (Rodney et al. 2023, 877). Peters and Luke (2023) have developed a ten-principle framework that elucidates the core perspectives and practices underpinning anti-oppressive and DEI-informed approaches. According to Peters and Luke (2022), these are:

1. *Developing Critical Consciousness Through Critical Reflexivity*: Anti-oppression represents dynamic, iterative, and dialogic processes wherein one examines their values, worldviews, multiplicitic social locations, positions, identity development, and biases concerning the interlocking forces, structures, and systems of power, resulting in increased anti-oppressive knowledge and complexity.
2. *Overcoming Comfort and Fragility Through Unlearning Privilege and Domination*: Anti-oppression requires an evolving personal and professional practice wherein one actively works to address, unlearn, and overcome issues of socialization and privilege grounded in domination and oppression meant to uphold oppressive forces, structures, and systems maintained and weaponized through discomfort, silence, objectivity, apathy, neutrality, bias, and fragility.
3. *Centering the Margins Through Empowerment and Liberation*: Anti-oppression prioritizes the voices, narratives, and experiences of minoritized populations and communities by counteracting the dominant and majoritarian forces, structures, and systems by repositioning to center historically excluded persons and perspectives while championing emancipation and liberation.
4. *Wellness and Self-Care Through Acts of Compassion and Vigilance*: Anti-oppression emphasizes the centrality of self-care, wellness, and somatic regulation as an act of resistance against the biopsychosocial impact of oppression and is essential in remaining vigilant and accountable in one’s anti-oppressive commitments and actions.
5. *Co-Constructing a Brave Space Through Relationships and Community*: Anti-oppression necessitates co-developing relationships and brave spaces to equitably meet the needs of all through a bottom-up approach to justice and equity while fostering difficult dialogs, courage, compassion, and owning the impact people have on one another.
6. *Developing Goals and Assessing Outcomes Through Stakeholder Investment*: Anti-oppression values the cyclical process of developing, overseeing, and evaluating short- and long-term anti-oppressive goals and objectives across personal and professional stakeholders.
7. *Challenging and Disrupting Oppression Through Broaching and Accountability*: Anti-oppression requires engaging in intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group systems

actions that name, address, and counter exploitation, erasure, interpersonal violence, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and subjugation, here as means to take responsibility for and redressing harm.

8. *Identifying and Addressing Barriers Through Resistance and Opposition*: Anti-oppression acknowledges the multifaceted barriers that disempower and disarm community, collective, and systemic change, asserting the need to anticipate and resist compliance and counteract these obstacles.
9. *Socioecological Advocacy and Activism Through Collective Action*: Anti-oppression catalyzes transformation through deliberate community engagement and collaborative actions aiming to decenter, dismantle, and ameliorate oppressive and inequitable forces, structures, relationships, and policies across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.
10. *Redistributing Social, Cultural, and Political Capital Through Access and Opportunity*: Anti-oppression seeks to identify and address historic inequities in the distribution of capital, resources, access, and opportunity and repair the adverse effects, harm, and consequences through redistribution and/or reparations (85–86).

While anti-oppression praxis has gained traction through critical scholarship and community-based advocacy in LIS, the translation of these values into institutional policy and governance remains uneven across the field (Poole et al., 2021). Certainly, the potential impact of racial and ethnic bias and complacency in librarianship is profound, with an estimated 85% of the workforce identifying as white or white passing (Hulbert & Kendrick, 2023). This creates a strong need for emancipatory and justice-informed approaches that emphasize relational accountability and systemic repair (Espinal, 2001; Espinal et al., 2018; Espinal et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2017; Gibson et al., 2020; Hands, 2022; Ossom-Williamson et al., 2020). Professional tools such as ALA's *DEI Scorecard for Library and Information Organizations* (2021) and the joint *Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity* (CPRE) framework (ALA/ARL Task Force, 2022) offer promising LIS-envisioned approaches to operationalizing anti-oppression and justice-based commitments across library and information organizations. Developed by the ALA Committee on Diversity, the Scorecard (2021) provides a structured, evaluative tool that enables libraries to assess and improve their DEI efforts across five key dimensions: Embeddedness in Culture and Climate, Training and Education, Recruitment, Hiring, Retention and Promotion, Budget Prioritization, and Data Practices. The Scorecard (2021) is particularly useful when paired with "a foundational resource" like the CPRE framework that endeavors to "build inclusive cultures, within libraries and their broader communities, through guidelines on the development and implementation of organizational policies and professional practices that support diverse libraries" (ACRL, 2025, para. 3). Unlike current aspirational (Ettarh, 2018) and disjointed (EveryLibrary Institute, 2022) approaches that treat DEI as an ancillary or symbolic gesture, the Scorecard (2021) and CPRE framework (2023) both emphasize measurable outcomes and insist that anti-oppression and equity be embedded in the policy and governance structures of LIS organizations. Moreover, the Scorecard's specific focus on data transparency and disaggregated reporting makes visible the structural inequities that persist in contemporary LIS approaches. As Kendrick (2020) and others (Bourg, 2014; Hulbert & Kendrick, 2023; Poole et al., 2021; Schonfeld & Sweeney, 2017) have shown, the absence of race-specific data often obscures the lived experiences of equity-deserving library workers and groups in ways that enable institutions to avoid accountability and meet commitments to staff and communities. By contrast, the Scorecard (2021)

and CPRE framework (2023) encourage libraries to collect and analyze historic and contemporary demographic, community, and environmental data to inform policy decisions and track progress over time. Thus, tools like the DEI Scorecard (2021) and CPRE framework (2023) not only support the development of more equitable workplace environments but also reinforces the field's ethical obligation to serve as a site of anti-oppressive social justice.

White Privilege and the Workplace Environment

By choosing to ignore the calls for the examination of systemic oppression in LIS and instead, embracing ideas that obscure the real issues, some LIS scholars and practitioners are blatantly signaling what could reasonably be interpreted as disinterest in creating workplaces that are diverse, equitable, and inclusive for all. This is a privilege that not all possess, according to Jennifer Ferretti, who notes “the marginalized library worker is *subject* to inequities while the white/heteronormative worker has the luxury of choosing whether or not to engage or interrogate inequities” (2020, 142). To be clear, this privilege can be defined more specifically as “white privilege,” the concept first formulated by Peggy McIntosh (1989) and affirmed by many scholars that essentially refers to the cultural practices of whiteness that “create systemic advantages for whites while disadvantaging non-whites” (Wolgast and Wolgast 2024, 1). Some of these advantages or privileges include “self-worth, visibility, positive expectations, psychological freedom, freedom of movement, a sense of belonging, and a sense of entitlement” (Ciesielski 2024, 20; DiAngelo and Dyson 2018), which are deployed in efforts to reaffirm whiteness as the cultural norm. DEI initiatives are often perceived as a threat to these privileges primarily because DEI “programs seek to implement changes that will disrupt the balance and certainty White people experience” (Ciesielski 2024, 6).

In addition to direct and indirect discrimination that can occur in workplaces, a wide range of factors contribute to negating DEI while sustaining racial inequities in an organization, including but not limited to defensive reactions from white employees that often arise when racial privileges are threatened (Wolgast and Wolgast 2024), for instance, when DEI trainings are implemented within an organization. Such reactions are characterized as counterreactions and/or resistance that may present as “argumentation, rationalization, avoidance (such as silence or withdrawal), and displays of sadness,” all of which ultimately prevent conversations about racial injustice from taking place (DiAngelo 2018) and hinder true progress within the DEI space. In an article on the resistance and counterreactions against organizational DEI trainings, authors Roger Gans and Mengqi Monica Zhan (2023) point to a variety of reasons employees might be reluctant to engage in DEI trainings: These reasons range from potential discomfort, fear of confrontations, and apprehension of discussing sensitive topics, to resentment for mandatory participation in DEI programs, skepticism towards the effectiveness of DEI trainings, or simply possessing the belief that DEI work is unnecessary or irrelevant (Gans and Zhan 2023). Often, these reasons result in resistance that has the ultimate effect of completely undermining and derailing DEI efforts within organizations because of the perception of some that changes to employees' workplace attitudes and behaviors are mandatory. While the current political climate is targeting DEI across all types of institutions and calling for its complete and total dismantlement, it only serves to reinforce why such initiatives are vital for creating environments and antiracist spaces in LIS (and beyond) that are diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

As has always been the case and even more so now, LIS workers from equity-deserving communities are having to navigate environments that are unwelcoming and intolerant in

a variety of ways, including policing, microaggressions, hostility, and other racist, sexist, and discriminatory behavior (Gibson 2019; Ossom-Williamson et al. 2021). In fact, many LIS scholars advocating for investigations into oppressive practices in LIS write about how library workers in these types of environments are often negatively impacted. Additionally, employees' refusal to engage with DEI is a significant factor for why many LIS workplace environments have been deemed uninviting and at times harmful to library workers belonging to marginalized groups. As Honma explains, this is a symptom of white racial projects within LIS which, regardless of intentionality, result in the upholding of white supremacist ideologies via the exclusion of diverse voices alongside "complicity with dominant oppressive social structures and the failure to recognize the material effects of histories of racism and white supremacy" (2005, 14) demonstrated by white-centered thinking information workers.

While there may be some differences between the experiences of library workers in libraries and other institutions, and faculty in LIS schools, reports from those who have had to navigate these work environments reveal universal experiences regardless of the work setting. For instance, faculty of color in LIS schools have written about navigating issues such as microaggressions, othering, various structural inequities, tokenism, lack of support, exclusionary tactics, racial battle fatigue, and even workplace violence (Ceja Alcalá et al. 2017; Chancellor 2019; Cooke 2019; Cooke and Sanchez 2019; Gibson 2019; Mehra 2019). Likewise, scholars writing about the experiences of librarians of color and other library workers also have addressed many of the same or similar issues including burnout, isolation, othering, hostility, physical and emotional abuse, and stereotyping, among other experiences (Caragher and Bryant 2023; Espinal et al. 2023; Kendrick 2020; Kendrick and Damasco 2019). Kaetrena Davis Kendrick's research on low morale speaks directly to the effects of these oppressive behaviors on librarians of color in both academic and public library settings. In Kendrick's and Damasco's 2019 study, "minority academic librarians" (as they are referred to in the study) expressed that because of the overwhelming whiteness that dominates the LIS field, they possessed "the tacit understanding that White female librarians are likely to use established ideologies and systems of White privilege and White supremacy to exact abuse and neglect on minority colleagues," which in turn "caused an increase in feelings of skepticism, anger, and powerlessness" (207).

Kendrick's 2020 study on public librarians found that respondents who identified as racial or ethnic minorities "revealed gaps in their formal leaders' cultural competency skills and their White colleagues' inability or reluctance to recognize their White privilege or dismantle the systems that protect and promote such privilege." The study also found that as participants in the enabling systems of library workplace culture, these librarians resultantly experienced feelings of isolation, "helplessness, disappointment, anger, and confusion" (27). Although their respective experiences may not be identical, academic and public librarians are left with similar feelings and emotions that signal the negative impact that LIS workplace culture has had on library workers from equity-deserving groups.

Toward Structural Transformation: Concluding Thoughts

So what is the way forward? While there is no easy answer to this question, one solution may lie in what Gans and Zhan (2023) describe as an inoculation strategy, or inoculative priming, that exposes employees to DEI in small doses in the form of "pro-DEI-training messages" that precede subsequent "assignment-to-DEI-training notifications." The idea here is that employing inoculative priming can lead to a change in attitude towards DEI and/or increased

positive feelings that would then likely lower reluctance towards participation in future DEI trainings. Gans and Zhan found that using narrative-based messaging in communications about DEI trainings was effective in mitigating the responses to such trainings. Possibly the most obvious solution is the continued adoption of DEI initiatives and holistic approaches to inclusive librarianship, such as what Espinal et. al (2023) describe where their organization implemented a JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) framework towards creating a counterspace that was supportive of BIPOC employees. Their initiative placed emphasis on justice and equity as a vehicle for transforming their organization and eliminating barriers around access, success, and engagement. Despite and in spite of the current political climate, initiatives such as these are more vital than ever before and require an increased commitment to implementing the aforementioned values in LIS workplaces.

LIS stands at a critical juncture in which it must begin to confront the troubled socio-political histories and experiences that anti-oppression and DEI-informed analyses bring to light or accept further harm to equity-deserving colleagues and communities. While the field has begun to adopt the language of emancipatory and justice-based frameworks, it has yet to reckon fully with the structural realities of white supremacy, racialized power, and systemic exclusion that critical and anti-oppressive analyses bring to light. Instead, LIS institutions often cling to sanitized narratives of neutrality and belonging that obscure the lived realities of equity-deserving workers and communities (Ettarh, 2018). At the same time, truth-telling remains the first act of discernable equity and justice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016). This paper has argued that LIS must move beyond performative gestures and incremental reforms to embrace a justice-based, emancipatory praxis that acknowledges and confronts the roots of oppression to redistribute power, voice, and opportunity. Race and ethnicity do play a vitally important role in librarianship. If not because it is a significant aspect of the lives of people whom librarianship touches, then because the “LIS field is a site in and through which racialized difference is produced,” as Caidi, Ghaddar, and Allard convincingly argue (2017, p. 394). To move from symbolic gestures to structural transformation, LIS must embrace equity and justice-based frameworks that center race, power, and lived experience. By operationalizing Critical Race Theory and anti-oppression praxis across pedagogy, policy, and practice, the field can begin to dismantle systemic inequities and build liberatory infrastructures in which truth-telling becomes the norm and justice the measure of our service to communities. This work is not ancillary or discretionary. Rather, it is foundational to the ethical and professional integrity of our field.

References

- Ahmed, S. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press.
- Ajele, T. 2021. Here's Why 'BIPOC' Doesn't Do It for Me. *CBC News*, June 17. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/road-ahead-why-bipoc-doesn-t-do-it-for-me-tomi-ajele-1.6067753>.
- American Library Association. 2021. ALA Adopts New Code of Ethics Principle on Racial and Social Justice [Press Release] , July 28. <https://www.ala.org/news/2021/07/ala-adopts-new-code-ethics-principle-racial-and-social-justice>.
- American Library Association (ALA), Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), Association of Research Libraries (ARL), Public Library Association (PLA). 2022. Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity: A Framework. <https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/>

- advocacy/content/diversity/ALA%20ARL%20Cultural%20Proficiencies%20for%20Racial%20Equity%20Framework.pdf.
- Anderson, E. 2022. *Black in White Space: The Enduring Impact of Color in Everyday Life*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Antelman, K. 2025. Respecting Privacy of Thought in DEI Training. *College & Research Libraries* 86 (3): 430. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.86.3.430>.
- Association of College and Research Libraries. 2022. ACRL Plan for Excellence. Retrieved on October 1, 2025, from <https://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/strategicplan/stratplan>.
- Baldwin, James. 2017. *I Am Not your Negro* [Film]. Magnolia Pictures. Amazon Studios.
- Black, K., and B. Mehra. eds. 2023. *Antiracist Library and Information Science: Racial Justice and Community*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Bourg, C. 2014. "The Unbearable Whiteness of Librarianship." *Feral Librarian*, March 3. <https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2014/03/03/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-librarianship>.
- Caidi, N., J.J. Ghaddar, and D. Allard. 2017. Negotiating Borders: Librarianship and Twenty-First-Century Politics. *The Library Quarterly* 87 (4): 391–409. <https://doi.org/10.1086/693493>.
- Canadian Federation of Library Associations. 2017. *CFLA-FCAB Truth and Reconciliation Report*. Canadian Federation of Library Associations.
- Caragher, K., and T. Bryant. 2023. "Black and Non-Black Library Workers' Perceptions of Hiring, Retention, and Promotion Racial Equity Practices." *Journal of Library Administration* 63 (2): 173–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2022.2159239>.
- Ceja Alcalá, J., M. Colón-Aguirre, N. Cooke. 2017. "A Critical Dialogue: Faculty of Color in Library and Information Science." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 13 (2). <https://doi.org/10.5070/D4132034399>.
- Chancellor, R. L. 2019. "Racial Battle Fatigue." *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 60 (3): 182–9. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26754755>.
- Ciesielski, S. 2024. System Barriers That Inhibit White People From Engaging in Conversations About Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.
- Cooke, N. A., and J. O. Sánchez. 2019. "Getting It on Record." *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 60 (3): 169–81. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26754754>.
- Cooke, N. A. 2019. "Impolite Hostilities and Vague Sympathies." *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 60 (3): 223–30. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26754760>.
- Craven, C. 2021. "Teaching Antiracist Citational Politics as a Project of Transformation: Lessons from the Cite Black Women Movement for White Feminist Anthropologists." *Feminist Anthropology* 2: 120–9. <https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12036>.
- Crenshaw, K. W., N. Gotanda, G. Peller, and K. Thomas. 2018. *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*. The New Press.
- Delgado, R., and J. Stefancic. 2023. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (4th edition). New York University Press.
- Espinal, I. 2001. "A New Vocabulary for Inclusive Librarianship: Applying Whiteness Theory to Our Profession." In *The Power of Language/ El Poder de La Palabra; Selected Papers from the Second REFORMA National Conference*, edited by L. Castillo-Speed. Libraries Unlimited.
- Espinal, I., Graham, A., Rios, M., and Freedman, K. 2023. "Counterspace Support for BIPOC Employees Within a Holistic JEDI Library Framework." In *Perspectives on Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Libraries*, edited by N. S. Mani, M. A. Cawley, and E. P. Jones. IGI Global Scientific Publishing.

- Espinal, I., A. Hathcock, and M. Rios. 2021. "Dewhiting Librarianship: A Policy Proposal." In *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies Through Critical Race Theory*, edited by Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. López-McKnight. MIT Press.
- Espinal, I., T. Sutherland, and C. Roh. 2018. "A Holistic Approach for Inclusive Librarianship: Decentering Whiteness in Our Profession." *Library Trends* 67(1): 147–62. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0030>.
- Ettarh, F. 2018. "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 10. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe>.
- EveryLibrary Institute. 2022. *Model "Libraries for All" Act*. https://www.everylibraryinstitute.org/model_libraries_for_all_act.
- Ferretti, J. A. 2020. "Building a Critical Culture: How Critical Librarianship Falls Short in the Workplace." *Communications in Information Literacy* 14 (1): 134–52.
- Gans, R., and M. M. Zhan, M. M. 2023. "Let's Influence That Attitude Before It's Formed: Inoculation Against Reactance to Promote DEI training." *International Journal of Business Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884231216952>.
- Gibson, A. N. 2019. "Civility and Structural Precarity for Faculty of Color in LIS." *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 60 (3): 215–22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26754759>.
- Gibson, A. N., R. L. Chancellor, N. A. Cooke, S. P. Dahlen, S. A. Lee, and Y. L. Shorish. 2017. "Libraries on the Frontlines: Neutrality and Social Justice." *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion* 36 (8): 751–66. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-11-2016-0100>.
- Gibson, A. N., R. L. Chancellor, N. A. Cooke, S. P. Dahlen, B. Patin, and Y. Shorish. 2021. "Struggling to Breathe: COVID-19, Protest and the LIS Response." *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion* 40(10): 74–82. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.2019-0005>.
- Gibson, A. N., and S. Hughes-Hassell. 2017. "We Will Not Be Silent." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 87 (4): 317–29. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26561748>.
- Gibson, A., S. Hughes-Hassell, and M. Threats. 2018. "Critical Race Theory in the LIS Curriculum. In *Re-envisioning the MLS: Perspectives on the future of Library and Information Science education*, edited by Jo. Percell; L. C. Sarin; P. T. Jaeger; and J. C. Bertot. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Hands, A. 2022. "Toward Belonging and Mutual Hospitality: Decentering Whiteness in the 'New Normal.'" *Reference Services Review* 50 (1): 51–63. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-07-2021-0035>.
- Hathcock, A. 2015. "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 7. <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity>.
- Honma, T. 2005. "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1(2).
- Hudson, D. J. 2017. "On "Diversity" as Anti-Racism in Library and Information Studies: A Critique." *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1 (1). <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.6>.
- Hughes-Hassell, S. 2020. *Collection Management for Youth: Equity, Inclusion, and Learning* (2nd Edition). ALA Editions.
- Hulbert, I.G., and C. Kendrick. 2023. "By Any Measure: The Racial Demographics of Librarians." *Ithaka S+R*, April 18. <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/by-any-measure>.

- Kendrick, K. D. 2020. "The Public Librarian Low-Morale Experience: A Qualitative Study." *Partnership* 15 (2): 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i2.5932>.
- Kendrick, K. D., and I. T. Damasco. 2019. "Low Morale in Ethnic and Racial Minority Academic Librarians: An Experiential Study." *Library Trends* 68 (2): 174–212.
- Kumasi, Kafi. D. 2019. "'The Library is Like Her House': Reimagining Youth of Color in LIS Discourses." In *Transforming Young Adult Services*, edited by Anthony Bernier, 2nd edition, 103–13. ALA Neal-Schuman.
- Ladson-Billings, G. 2021. *Critical Race Theory in Education: A Scholar's Journey*. Teachers College Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G., and W. F. Tate, eds. 2016. "Covenant Keeper": Derrick Bell's Enduring Education Legacy. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Leung, S. Y., and J. R. López-McKnight, eds. 2021. *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies Through Critical Race Theory*. The MIT Press.
- Martinez, A. Y., and R. O. Smith. 2025. *The Origins of Critical Race Theory: The People and Ideas That Created a Movement*. New York University Press.
- Matthews, A. 2021. "Reading the Silence: Canadian Library Responses to Racial Injustice." *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 44 (1): 82–104. <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjilsrscib.v44i1.11008>.
- Matthews, A. 2025. "Anti-Black Racism in Library and Information Science Curriculum: A Canadian-Centric Learning Model." *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 20 (1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v20i1.8188>.
- McIntosh, P. 1989. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." *Peace and Freedom*, 10–12.
- Mehra, B. 2019. "The Non-White Man's Burden in LIS Education." *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 60 (3): 198–207. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26754757>.
- Mehra, B. 2021. "Enough Crocodile Tears! Libraries Moving Beyond Performative Antiracist Politics." *The Library Quarterly*, 91(2), 137–49. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713046>.
- Mehra, B., and L. Gray. 2020. "An 'Owning Up' of White-IST Trends in LIS to Further Real Transformations." *The Library Quarterly* 90 (2): 189–239. <https://doi.org/10.1086/70767>.
- Nataraj, L., H. Hampton, T. R. Matlin, and Y. N. Meulemans. 2020. Nice White Meetings: Unpacking Absurd Library Bureaucracy Through a Critical Race Theory Lens. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 6: 1–15.
- Ossom-Williamson, P., J. Williams, X. Goodman, C. I. J. Minter, and A. Logan. 2020. "Starting with I: Combating Anti-Blackness in Libraries." *Journal Articles: Leon S. McGoogan Health Sciences Library* 9.
- Peters, H. C., and M. Luke. 2022. "Principles of Anti-Oppression: A Critical Analysis Synthesis." *Counselor Education and Supervision* 61: 335–48. <https://doi.org/10.1003/ceas.12251>.
- Peters, H. C., and M. Luke. 2023. "Application of Anti-Oppression with Group Work." *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work* 48 (2): 84–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2023.2170508>.
- Potts, K. L. and L. Brown. 2015. "Becoming an Anti-Oppressive Researcher." In *Research as Resistance: Revisiting Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* (2nd edition), edited by S. Strega and L. Brown. Canadian Scholars' Press.

- Overbey, T. and A. L. Folk. 2022. *Narratives of (Dis)Enfranchisement: Reckoning with the History of Libraries and the Black and African American Experience*. ALA Editions.
- Pawley, C. 2006. Unequal Legacies: Race and Multiculturalism in the LIS Curriculum. *The Library Quarterly* 76 (2): 149–68. <https://doi.org/10.1086/506955>.
- Plaid, A., and C. MacDonald-Dennis. 2021. “‘BIPOC’ Isn’t Doing What You Think It’s Doing.” *Newsweek*, April 9. <https://www.newsweek.com/bipoc-isnt-doing-what-you-think-its-doing-opinion-1582494>.
- Poole, A. H., Agosto, D. E., Greenberg, J., Lin, X., and Yan, E. 2021. “Where Do We Stand? Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice in North American Library and Information Science Education.” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 62 (3): 258–86. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis-62-3-2020-0055>.
- Queens University Human Rights and Equity Office. n.d. *Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Indigenization: Key Terms*. Retrieved on October 1, 2025, from https://www.queensu.ca/hreo/sites/hreowww/files/uploaded_files/20201210KeyEDITerms.pdf.
- Rodney, R., M. Hinds, J. Bonilla-Dampney, D. Boissoneau, A. Khan, and A. Forde. 2023. “Anti-Oppression as Praxis in the Research Field: Implementing Emancipatory Approaches for Researchers and Community Partners.” *Qualitative Research* 24 (4): 872–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941231196382>.
- Schlesselman-Tarango, G., ed. 2017. *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*. Library Juice Press.
- Schonfeld, R. C., and L. Sweeney. 2017. “Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity: Members of the Association of Research Libraries.” *Ithaka S+R*, August 30. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.304524>.
- Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. 2025. *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Research Practice and Research Design*. <https://sshrcc-crsh.canada.ca/en/about-sshrcc/programs-priorities-initiatives/equity-diversity-inclusion-research-enterprise/research-practice-and-research-design.aspx>.
- Spencer Foundation. n.d. *Field-Initiated Research Grant Programs*. Retrieved on October 1, 2025, from <https://www.spencer.org/research-grants>.
- Wolgast, S. N., and M. Wolgast. 2024. “Preserving White Privileges in Organizations: White Fragility, White Counterreactions, and Institutional Resistance.” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 25 (1): e12433. <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12433>.

Endnotes

- ¹ Citational justice is a practice that has emerged in recent years in anti-oppression and DEI-related scholarship. According to Craven (2021), citational justice is the practice of intentionally citing as many relevant Black and other equity-deserving scholars as possible to correct historical imbalances that have severely under-credited their contributions to the scholarly record. On reading, paragraphs may appear longer or disrupted due to the number of citations, but this is a deliberate strategy to center equity-deserving voices and scholarship.
- ² While this paper is a critical response to Antelman (2025), the authors have made an intentional decision not to elevate the harmful and decremental ideas espoused nor center the author throughout. Instead, the authors have elected to respond by endeavoring to better support the field with equity and justice-based reforms and commitments that dismantle and deconstruct repressive politics and ideas.

Authors

Jamillah R. Gabriel is the Critical Pedagogy Research Librarian in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University and a PhD student in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She holds a Master of Arts in Museum Studies from Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, Master of Library and Information Science from San Jose State University, Bachelor of Arts in Black Studies and Journalism from California State University, Long Beach, and an Associate in Arts in English from Cerritos College. Her professional experience includes 25 years in public and academic libraries as a librarian, archivist, and library paraprofessional. Her research focuses on issues at the nexus of information and race via a critical theorist lens and interrogates how hegemonic information systems and cultural heritage institutions impact Black people and communities. Additionally, Jamillah's work promotes the exploration of criticality in information science and education through the implementation of critical theory, critical pedagogy, and critical action in research, teaching, and practice, respectively. Other research interests include her dissertation study in information behavior where she examines the information needs and behaviors of Black people within traditional knowledge centers. Her published works can be found in the edited volume *Deciding Where to Live: Information Studies on Where to Live*, and in peer-reviewed journals *Information Research*, *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, and *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*. Jamillah is also the former co-host of *LibVoices*, a podcast that interviewed BIPOC librarians and information professionals about their experiences in LIS.

Amber Matthews is an Assistant Professor of Library & Information Studies in the Darden College of Education and Professional Studies at Old Dominion University. She holds an MLIS and a PhD from Western University and has worked in community-based development for ten years in Canada, Tanzania, and Belize. Her doctoral research was conducted in consultation with the *Where We Are Now Black Community Centre & Public Library* in London, Ontario. Her scholarship has received awards from the Library Research Roundtable of the American Library Association, the Canadian Association for Information Science, and the Association for Library & Information Science Education, as well as funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Ontario Library Association.