

Talking Back in Defense of Defending DEI and the Politics of Inclusion

NICOLE A. COOKE

“Talking back,” as scholar bell hooks reminds us, is never just about oral, verbal, and written speech—it is an act of resistance, a transformation of silence into language and action. It is how marginalized communities reclaim and reprioritize their right to think, to speak, to define the world on their own terms. Similarly, activist, writer, and librarian Audre Lorde’s *“The Uses of Anger”* teaches us that anger—particularly the righteous anger born of injustice and inequity—is not destructive, but can be clarifying and transformative. Lorde said that anger is “loaded with information and energy,” it is a dynamic force that can illuminate generational systems of oppression and domination, and fuel the collective work of liberation.

This special issue of *The Political Librarian*, **Defending DEI and the Politics of Inclusion**, stands firmly on this foundation of righteous anger and talking back. The call for proposals recognized the urgency of this political moment: *“Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are facing coordinated political attacks at every level of government,”* while “neutrality” and “privacy” are being weaponized to suppress equity work and dismantle progress. With this tense and tenuous political and societal climate in mind, the articles and short essays gathered here rebuke silence. **They talk back, they bear witness, and they build.**

This issue also serves as a critical response to Kristin Antelman’s (2025) *“Privacy of Thought and the Ethics of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Discourse”* (*College & Research Libraries*, 86[1]). Antelman contends that DEI initiatives infringe upon an individual’s “privacy of thought,” framing such programs as potential threats to intellectual freedom. We—along with the contributors to this issue—**emphatically reject that framing as both privileged, dangerous, and inequitable.** To treat DEI as a violation of mental autonomy (and acuity) is to misunderstand the very nature of justice and equity, and to privilege comfort over accountability. It (re)centers whiteness, Western norms, and the feelings of the powerful rather than addressing the harm experienced by the marginalized.

I radically imagine that bell hooks would call this a **retreat into privacy as protection of power.** For hooks, the very act of “talking back” exposes how claims of “objectivity,” “neutrality,” or “autonomy” serve as veils for domination. We see and hear this often when people assert conversation avoiders like: “all lives matter,” “libraries are neutral,” “free speech for all,” “data-driven decision-making,” “there are good people on both sides,” and “I don’t see color.” These are all statements and strategies of avoidance and status quo maintenance.

To this, I think hooks would ask: *Whose thought is being protected? Whose discomfort is being avoided?* She would suggest that thought is never private—it is created and structured by culture, race, gender, and history. To invoke “privacy of thought” as a defense is, in her view, to

deny relational reality, to reinforce the systems that keep power unexamined, and avoid the discomfort of the majority.

My radical imagining also positions Audre Lorde as recognizing the “privacy of thought” argument as a familiar pattern of dismissing anger and critique as violations of civility. In *“The Uses of Anger,”* Lorde posits anger as a vital response to racism and injustice, not as a breach of ethical conduct, but a site of ferocious knowledge. She would argue that calls for privacy or emotional safety in the face of DEI work function as **mechanisms of avoidance**—attempts to neutralize discomfort rather than engage with it honestly and productively. For Lorde, anger does not impinge upon freedom of thought, rather, it is a pathway to deeper understanding. True liberation requires confrontation and sustained effort, not retreat and cowardice.

Together, hooks and Lorde would see this offensively and flawed “privacy of thought” framework as an extension of liberal individualism—a refusal to acknowledge the social and structural dimensions of oppression. They would insist that freedom of thought is meaningless without freedom from domination, and that the physical and emotional labor of working towards equity and justice always requires engagement, not isolation. Following in their footsteps requires us to exclaim that “defending DEI” is not about policing minds but expanding them, making space for voices, perspectives, truths, and ways of knowing long denied entry.

The essays in this issue stand on the shoulders of hooks and Lorde. They interrogate the myths of neutrality, expose the racialized and gendered contours of “objectivity,” and illuminate the implicit, explicit, and structural violence hidden in claims of professional detachment. They offer frameworks of accountability and care, narratives of resistance and survival, and visions of institutions remade in the image of justice.

The works collected in this special issue traverse the shifting terrain of censorship, erasure, and resistance that defines the current political moment. **Allgood and Wagner** examine the ethical and professional tensions produced by recent federal actions targeting DEI and intellectual freedom, urging a pluralistic approach that balances individual rights with collective responsibility. **Johnson, and Sherren and Padrón**, trace the devastating effects of these policies on archives and cultural memory, documenting both state-sanctioned erasure of LGBTQIA+ histories and the everyday acts of resistance that defy such silencing. **Mack** directly challenges the rhetoric of “privacy of thought” as an evasion of accountability, while **Davis Kendrick** exposes how resistance to DEI within the profession masks a deeper refusal to confront harm. **Matthews and Gabriel** address the ongoing divide between professional statements that support anti oppression, performative DEI, and the limited action visible in daily library work. **Malenfant’s** case study on the defunding of the Digital Equity Act illustrates the material consequences of anti-DEI legislation on information access and community well-being.

Essays by **Glenn, Howard and Shareef, and Crowley** ground these national policies in institutional realities, revealing how compliance pressures, anti-DEI laws, and managerial silence reshape the labor and safety of library workers. **Nelson and Nelson’s** contribution reframes the false opposition between diversity and free speech, offering “brave space” practices as a framework that deepens dialogue, protects expression, and sustains institutional equity through practices of calling in rather than calling out. Similarly, **Gong and Vong** use institutional isomorphism theory in their piece to explain the rapid adoption and reversal of DEI initiatives in academic libraries. They examine how coercive pressures from legislation, mimetic pressures shaped by social forces, and normative pressures from professional standards influenced the renaming or elimination of DEI offices, the reduction of programming, and the retreat from professional development; these pressures produced standardized

changes that looked responsive but lacked depth. As a result, DEI initiatives became vulnerable to political shifts and were dismantled with speed once federal and state restrictions intensified.

Keeton's articulation of the Black Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (BGLAM) framework, along with **Okeke's** call for Black womanist historiography, reclaims cultural heritage as a site of liberation and epistemic justice. **Mehra** and an anonymous co-author employ critical theory to map the authoritarian logic underlying executive assaults on democracy and diversity, while **Shah and Murphy** highlight how institutions like Harvard's Schlesinger Library enact reparative practice even under duress. **Cummings**, and **Williams**, both situate these struggles within the larger crises of academic freedom and white Christian nationalism, insisting that cultural institutions must resist becoming instruments of erasure. **Winberry, Dziedzic-Elliott, and Stearns, Garcia, DuVernay**, remind us that survival itself—through voting, storytelling, genealogical recovery, and documentation of lost labor—is an act of defiance.

Across these pieces, common themes emerge: the politicization of memory, the ongoing assault on truth, the refusal of neutrality, and the insistence on imagination as a tool of survival. Together, they testify that librarianship and cultural work are not passive professions but **radical practices of care, courage, and creation**—work that dares to name injustice and to build futures grounded in equity, accountability, and love.

Like hooks and Lorde, our contributors remind us that refusal is generative, anger illuminates, and voices can transform. To defend DEI is not to defend a woke or bureaucratic initiative—it is to claim librarianship, information science, education, and cultural memory work as fields of reclamation and liberation.

Defending DEI and the Politics of Inclusion is thus both critique and a new creation: a collective act of talking back and calling forward. It rejects the faux safety of “privacy of thought” and insists upon a shared, courageous practice of truth-telling, accountability, and imagination. In doing so, it honors the intellectual traditions of hooks, Lorde, and all those who continue to believe that justice is not merely an aspiration, but our professional and moral responsibility.

References

Antelman, K. (2025). *Privacy of thought and the ethics of diversity, equity, and inclusion discourse. College & Research Libraries*, 86(1). <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.86.1.26764>

hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black*. South End Press.

Lorde, A. (1981). *The uses of anger: Women responding to racism*. In C. Morrell (Ed.), *The Anger of Angels: Women Responding to Racism* (pp. 124–133). Crossing Press. (Original work published 1981).