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Dr. Cooke is the author of Information Services to Diverse Populations (Libraries Unlimited, 2016), which received the 2017 American Library Association Equality Award, and Fake News and Alternative Facts: Information Literacy in a Post-Truth Era (ALA Editions, 2018). She has also edited collections including Foundations of Social Justice and The Critical Librarianship Reader, both of which have become essential readings in critical LIS discourse.

A highly sought-after speaker and consultant, Dr. Cooke has delivered keynote addresses and workshops nationally and internationally, working with libraries, schools, and professional organizations to advance equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. Her work has been recognized with numerous honors, including the Achievement in Library Diversity Research Award from ALA's Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services; the ALISE Excellence in Teaching Award; and recognition as a Library Journal "Mover & Shaker" for her leadership in EDI initiatives.

Through her publications, mentorship, and public scholarship, Dr. Cooke challenges LIS professionals and educators to cultivate critical awareness, disrupt inequities, and build more inclusive institutions. Her work continues to shape the profession, advancing both scholarship and practice toward a more just and liberatory future.

Dr. Aisha M. Johnson serves as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Outreach at the Georgia Institute of Technology Library, where she provides strategic leadership across academic engagement; archives, special collections, and digital curation; public programming; and assessment. She is nationally recognized for her work advancing equity, access, and the preservation of underrepresented and marginalizes communities.

Her professional identity is grounded in a philosophy that centers people as both catalysts and beneficiaries of sustainable organizational change. With over 15 years of experience as a practitioner, leader, and administrator, Dr. Johnson has dedicated her career to building inclusive academic and cultural infrastructures that elevate marginalized voices, preserve collective memory, and support lifelong learning. Her scholarship is an extension of this mission - rigorous, intentional, and deeply committed to transforming the field. Through research, teaching, and service, she works to prepare the next generation of professionals to be scholar-practitioners and change agents in their own right.

Dr. Johnson's acclaimed book, *The African American Struggle for Library Equality: The Untold Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund Library Program*, has reshaped conversations around literacy, philanthropy, and the Black library experience in the American South. Her work helped influence the American Library Association's efforts to include Rosenwald's library program legacy in the case for a national park designation. She was named the 2020 Distinguished Alumni of Florida State University's iSchool, received

the Freedom Scholar Award from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History in 2021, and was honored in 2024 as a *Library Journal* Mover & Shaker as a "Change Agent."

A thought leader, Dr. Johnson has been featured on *Good Morning America 3*, CNN's *First of All with Victor Blackwell*, and in the forthcoming documentary, *Are You A Librarian?*

Her advocacy, scholarship, and leadership are all in service to a singular vision: a more just and inclusive information future.

The Political Librarian

Special Issue, vol. 8.2 December 2025

CONTENTS

The Realities of the Orders

Defying the Orders

The Orders's Impact on Higher Education

Surviving The Orders

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—**emphaticly 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

The Political Librarian, Special Issue, vol. 8.2 (December 2025)
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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.

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Citation Please: Executive Orders, DEI, and the Fight for Intellectual Freedom

AISHA M. JOHNSON

ABSTRACT

This scholarship examines the ethical and professional implications of recent executive orders that directly affect the library and information science (LIS) field, particularly as they intersect with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, intellectual freedom, and cognitive liberty. While DEI training is intended to advance justice, representation, and accessibility, critics argue that mandates may infringe upon individual belief systems and privacy of thought. At the same time, federal restrictions on DEI and related cultural programs threaten the LIS profession's long-standing commitment to inclusivity, neutrality, and equitable access to information. Through the lens of Antelman's (2025) assertion on cognitive liberty and using legislative data on anti-DEI and anti-CRT measures, Johnson situates the LIS profession at a critical crossroads. Executive actions dismantling federal support for libraries, restricting cultural narratives, and curtailing public broadcasting create a chilling effect that undermines the library's role as a neutral space for democratic engagement. The cumulative impact represents a dual erosion: ideological conformity imposed through policy, and structural disempowerment through defunding and censorship. The article argues that LIS professionals must confront these challenges by reaffirming the profession's ethical commitments while advocating for approaches that safeguard both inclusivity and intellectual freedom. Rather than framing DEI and intellectual freedom as opposing principles, the article calls for a pluralistic stance that honors individual rights and collective responsibility. In doing so, libraries can continue to serve as resilient spaces of inquiry, access, and representation in an increasingly polarized sociopolitical landscape.

In a time of increasing political polarization, it is crucial for both students and professionals to engage with ideas they may not initially agree with. As I often tell students, no scholar turns away from challenging or opposing viewpoints. We do not consume information merely to argue against it, but to understand its foundations, test our assumptions, and refine our own positions. True scholarship requires intellectual humility, a willingness to "ingest" ideas and examine them critically through the lens of verified sources and peer-reviewed contributions. Moreover, it is equally important to consider the source and the citations it draws upon. Emotional reactions may be tempered, and thoughtful insight gained, when we pause to ask not just *what* is being said, but *who* is saying it, *why*, and *how* they are substantiating

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it. Let this piece serve as a reminder: Always check the source, not only to protect truth but also to strengthen the integrity of your own scholarship. You may find yourself less offended.

"Smart people don't like me."
– Donald J. Trump, US President 45 & 47

Let us examine the impact of executive orders on the library and information science (LIS) profession's values and morals as it relates to this statement:

> Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training, as it has been approached in recent years, impinges on privacy of thought and cog-nitive liberty . . . The right not to have one's belief interfered with without their consent is cognitive liberty. (Antelman 2025, 430)

This statement sums up her article and raises a beyond urgent ethical dilemma for the LIS profession, which historically champions both intellectual freedom and social justice—at least on the surface level, and boldly by various groups of professionals belonging to the field. The executive orders that have mandated or restricted certain types of DEI training create conflicting obligations for library workers, particularly when those mandates infringe upon personal belief systems or demand the disclosure of ideological positions. In such cases, the moral fabric of the LIS profession—again built on the pillars of neutrality, privacy, and intellectual freedom—can become compromised. For instance, if an executive order prohibits certain types of DEI content deemed divisive, it could curtail libraries' ability to provide inclusive services or educational programming, while also putting LIS professionals in a position where they must choose between compliance and their own ethical convictions. Conversely, if a DEI training mandate obligates individuals to disclose personal beliefs or undergo ideological "re-education," it can indeed infringe on the right to cognitive liberty and freedom of conscience, as Antelman (2025) suggests.

Let us be clear, the tension here is not between DEI and intellectual freedom per se, but in how policies (particularly those codified through executive action) affect the balance between professional ethics and personal autonomy. DEI initiatives are intended to cultivate a more just and equitable society, aligning with many LIS values such as accessibility, community engagement, and representation. However, when these initiatives are implemented through rigid, top-down (federal to local) mandates that disregard individual agency or suppress dissenting thought, they may undermine the very principles they aim to uphold. Antelman's (2025) critique invites a more nuanced discussion on how DEI training can coexist with the profession's enduring commitment to intellectual freedom. It is not about eliminating such training, but about ensuring that it remains voluntary, dialogic, and reflective of the diversity of thought within the profession itself.

Thus, in evaluating the effects of executive orders on LIS values, it is essential to distinguish between policy intent and implementation. LIS professionals must engage critically with the implications of these directives, whether they are perceived as supporting or hindering DEI goals, and advocate for approaches that safeguard both inclusivity and individual rights. The LIS profession must resist binary thinking that frames DEI and intellectual freedom as mutually exclusive. Instead, we must strive to uphold a pluralistic ethical stance that respects the varied identities, experiences, and belief systems of library workers and the communities

they serve (representation and inclusion). In doing so, LIS can successfully model a path forward that honors its mission and legacy of promoting access to information while adapting to the complexities of an evolving, highly sociopolitical landscape.

Using UCLA School of Law's *CRT Forward* for tracking anti-critical race theory legislation, Robinson (2025) highlights that as of April 2025, a growing number of states have implemented legislative and policy measures aimed at restricting or eliminating pedagogy and discussion of concepts related to critical race theory (CRT) and DEI. Specifically, twenty-nine states have adopted anti-CRT measures, with South Dakota (12), Texas (16), and Florida (27) leading the nation in the volume of such legislative actions. These measures often limit how race, history, and systemic inequality can be discussed in K–12 and higher education settings and have had a chilling effect on educators and cultural institutions across the country.

There has been an exponential hike in legislation aimed at curtailing DEI initiatives. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s DEI Legislation Tracker, as of early 2025, a total of 134 anti-DEI bills have been introduced across twenty-nine states and in Congress. Of these, a total of 26 have received final legislative approval, 23 have been enacted into law, and 86 have either failed, been tabled, or been vetoed (Chronicle Staff 2025). Such a legislative push reflects a coordinated movement to dismantle DEI programs in public universities, state agencies, and cultural institutions. In addition, the nation has seen a dramatic surge in book censorship efforts. The American Library Association's (ALA) Office of Intellectual Freedom tracked more than 800 attempts to censor library materials and services, with 2,452 unique book titles targeted for removal or restriction (American Library Association 2025). Often, these bans disproportionately affect books written by or about people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other historically marginalized groups, thereby undermining intellectual freedom and inclusive representation in public and school libraries (American Library Association 2023).

As noted by Chrastka (2025), cultural institutions serve as spaces of inquiry, refuge, and connection, and the Trump administration's 2025 executive orders seek to replace plurality with conformity. It is essential to assess how recent executive orders under the current administration intensify these challenges. Antelman's (2025) assertion that current DEI approaches may infringe on the cognitive liberty and privacy of thought of library workers must be understood within the broader socio-political context shaped by federal mandates that aim to redefine the ideological landscape of publicly funded institutions. Executive Orders 13985, 14238, 14253, and 14290 represent a coordinated shift away from pluralism and inclusivity in public discourse, directly affecting LIS core values: intellectual freedom, access, and equity.

Executive Order 13985, "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing," abolishes federal diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives under the guise of cost-cutting and anti-radicalism. This eliminates DEI funding, hiring, training, and outreach across federal agencies and partners. For libraries, this calls for reduced access to grants from entities like the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH); special funding for those serving marginalized communities. Examples could include programming such as bilingual literacy, multicultural events, and inclusive efforts in collection development. The order claims these efforts are "preferential" and thus should be defunded. Yet, libraries are meant to reduce information injustice. Without the support for such DEI practices, services, and training, libraries risk becoming homogenized institutions unable to meet the mission of service to all.

Executive Order 14238, "Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy," is aimed at dismantling the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the only federal agency solely dedicated to supporting libraries and museums. It funds a variety of programming in all types of libraries and LIS critical thinking initiatives, such as broadband expansion, digitization projects, accessibility initiatives, and staff development. This, perhaps, poses the most existential threat. Without this impactful agency, libraries of all economic scales will stall progress in access and could even revert to outdated, exclusionary service models. This isn't just about ideology or content control; it is about the survival of the public knowledge infrastructure. It represents yet another challenge to LIS values of neutrality, access to diverse perspectives, and truth-seeking. With consideration of Antelman's (2025) concerns about cognitive liberty, this is a mirror in institutional terms where libraries are being forced into ideological conformity, undermining their role as neutral spaces for information exchange.

Executive Order 14253, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," mandates federally funded cultural institutions—including the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Smithsonian Institution (museums, education, and research centers), the National Archives, and even the National Zoo—to revise or remove materials deemed "improper" or "politically motivated." While libraries are not directly named, the implications are a direct blow and severe. Libraries often partner with institutions like the Smithsonian and National Archives for exhibitions and educational content. If these institutions are policed and required to censor materials on the unfavorable legacy of America's history (systemic racism, gender inequality, or Indigenous rights), libraries lose access to vital resources that support a truthful, inclusive historical record. As Anderson (2024) argues, libraries must resist politically driven content suppression to maintain intellectual freedom. Yet, this executive order forces libraries into a moral dilemma: comply with government-censored narratives or risk funding and partnerships. Again, it compromises core LIS values like neutrality, access, and truth-seeking. Antelman (2025) describes this as an institutional erosion of "cognitive liberty," where libraries are pressured into ideological conformity.

Executive Order 14290, "Ending Taxpayer Subsidization of Biased Media," eliminates federal funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), cutting libraries off from PBS Kids, NPR historical content, and public documentaries. These resources are especially vital in underserved and rural areas where free, high-quality educational media supports early literacy and lifelong learning. Access to such educational resources could change lives, even generations, aiding in uprooting poverty. The loss of CPB-backed programming undermines equitable access and deepens cultural and digital divides, particularly among low-income families. Libraries cannot be truly "neutral" and must actively uphold intellectual freedom by resisting efforts to suppress or censor content based on political agendas. As Bertot et al. (2016) emphasize, avoiding difficult or controversial materials in the name of neutrality ultimately undermines the library's core mission to provide open access to diverse perspectives.

Conclusion

Cumulatively, the four executive orders briefed represent a forced convergence of ideological control and structural disempowerment. Together, the executive orders constitute a systemic effort to centralize ideological control while weakening the institutional independence of libraries. On the one hand, federal mandates dictate what historical and cultural narratives are permissible, and on the other, they strip the funding that enables libraries to serve diverse populations. As Antelman (2025) warns, freedom of thought must include the

right to form and express beliefs without coercion. In a library context, this extends not only to workers but to patrons. However, when executive policy dictates which beliefs are acceptable and restricts access to contested or diverse perspectives, the library ceases to be a sanctuary of intellectual freedom. Instead, it becomes an instrument of ideological gatekeeping. One cannot deny that this creates a chilling effect across our nation, calling for an actionable resolution for the LIS field.

WHEREAS libraries may preemptively self-censor or limit services to avoid scrutiny or punishment;

WHEREAS the erosion of both cognitive and institutional liberty places LIS professionals in ethically untenable positions;

WHEREAS the government calls for restoring trust in public institutions and promoting civic engagement, yet increased politicization and external pressures have compromised libraries' ability to serve as neutral, trusted spaces for democratic discourse;

WHEREAS emphasis is placed on expanding educational and economic opportunity, efforts to restrict access to information in libraries directly undermine these goals, disproportionately harming marginalized communities who rely most on free public access to knowledge and resources;

THEREFORE, the LIS profession must confront these executive actions with both ethical clarity and relentless advocacy, with the American Library Association (ALA) reaffirming its commitment to the Library Bill of Rights.

As federal backing recedes, informational and cultural institutions must employ ways to sustain inclusive services through community partnerships, philanthropic funding, and local government support. Antelman's (2025) insights compel LIS professionals to critically evaluate not just the content of DEI initiatives, but also the mechanisms by which they are implemented or suppressed. DEI is not an ideal, but rather a reality of the need to consider all of humanity. The question is not whether DEI or intellectual freedom should prevail, but more so how they can coexist in ways that honor both individual rights and collective responsibility. Unfortunately, these executive orders demonstrate that failing to protect one inevitably undermines the other.

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What Is Lost in "Restoring Truth and Sanity": Queer Approaches to Absence, Silence, and Erasure in Archival Description

EVAN M. ALLGOOD AND TRAVIS L. WAGNER

ABSTRACT

Since Trump's second inauguration, over a dozen executive orders have been established that aim to terminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and programs, deter the use of inclusive language, and strip away human rights. These executive orders have impelled memory workers to revise the historical record at vital institutions like the Stonewall National Monument and the Smithsonian Museums and to remove previously public data and history from government sites.

This is far from the first time forces outside of the archival profession have urged the rewriting, simplification, or erasure of complex histories, nor is it the first time archival practitioners have resisted. We combine findings from two projects—qualitative interviews with archival practitioners and an analysis of geographically-specific queer collections—to surface critical acts of resistance performed by archival practitioners that refuse the erasure of LGBTQIA+ history and reject the fallacy of archival neutrality. Further, our findings suggest that, even in an era of active archival erasure that uniquely impacts LGBTQIA+ communities, the roles of archival silence and invisibility are complex and hardly a binary of presence and absence.

Based on these findings, we call for a decentralized and depoliticized archival processing—one that does not bend to partisan whims, but instead prioritizes the voices of those whose materials they are collecting. While our research is specific to LGBTQIA+-related collections, our findings can direct us toward broader, everyday acts of resistance possible within the modern archival profession.

Introduction

Since Trump's second inauguration in January 2025, he has signed over 200 executive orders, touching everything from border security and tariffs to TikTok and paper straws (Trump 2025a, 2025c, 2025e, 2025g). A subset of these orders aims to codify definitions around certain identity- and history-related language, attempting to dictate a hyper-specific set of "truths." These "truths" create the foundation of the political discourses of the second

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Trump administration that state that sex and gender are "immutable" and binary, that race is a "biological reality," and that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs are "dangerous, demeaning, and immoral," among other ideas (Trump 2025b, 2025d, 2025f).

One executive order, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," goes so far as to retroactively apply these Trumpian "truths" to federal memory institutions and the histories they reflect. This order aims to "restore Federal sites dedicated to history," correcting the "historical revision" that describes the United States' legacy as "inherently racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably flawed" (Trump 2025f).

Following the "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History" executive order, a letter was sent from the White House to Secretary of the Smithsonian Lonnie G. Bunch III, stating that the White House would be performing a review of the Smithsonian's exhibitions and materials in advance of the 250th anniversary of the nation's founding. The White House letter makes clear that it expects the Smithsonian to comply with its requests, namely shifting its narrative across all the museums to align with "Americanism" (The White House 2025). The intended outcome is to have the Smithsonian "celebrate American exceptionalism, remove divisive or partisan narratives, and restore confidence in our shared cultural institutions" by running all its content by the Trump administration first.

Bunch responded with a pair of letters, one to the White House and one to his staff. While the letter to the White House has remained private thus far, it has been reported that the letter to his staff asserts that the Smithsonian's "independence is paramount," confirms his team's authority over the Smithsonian's programming, and shares that they will conduct their own internal review without the assistance of the White House (Pogrebin and Bowley 2025). Bunch's response highlights a critical misconception on the part of Trump and his cabinet: the belief that history can be rewritten by simply removing data, terminology, and collections from federal memory institutions. What surfaces here is a clear misunderstanding on the Trump administration's part of the practical, everyday work that memory institutions undertake.

We found Bunch's refusal to comply with the White House's requests reminiscent of themes that surfaced in a pair of projects we recently undertook—one that engaged with archival practitioners to better understand how they describe LGBTQIA+-related archival materials, and one that qualitatively reviewed LGBTQIA+ collections from the Deep South. By highlighting research from these projects, we argue that we can look to archivists of queer materials for guidance on how to resist this revisionist movement. Our findings show that queer archival resistance has always happened and will continue to happen regardless of government mandates. We will show that there have always been people working to fill in the intentional and unintentional gaps left by institutions, especially when it comes to LGBTQIA+ history, and that they have done so with a careful eye to the tensions between visibility and vulnerability.

Findings from these projects will provide context to the ways practitioners, archival objects, and even queer folks themselves participate in framing a version of American history that is counterinstitutional and thus more participatory and democratic. Through these findings, we offer theoretical and practical methods for extending and sustaining LGBTQIA+ history and its archival elements beyond a given administrative call and towards non-neutral and, perhaps more importantly, non-ambivalent forms of preservation. To do this, we must first situate the Trump administration's actions in archival contexts.

Literature Review

Archival Neutrality

Historians and archivists have come to reject the imagined neutrality of archives and archival work and instead contend that the impulse to archive is itself rooted in an urge to define truth and to enact (and combat) political ideology (Zinn 1977; Derrida 1995; Caswell 2021). While such ideological underpinnings destabilize notions of neutrality from a political vantage point, the work of enacting identity onto archives furthers tension around neutrality. The project of naming and identifying queerness within state records was, as Melissa Adler (2017) shows, an act of taxonomic oppression, used to demarcate the perverse as a means to control and institutionalize non-normative and non-productive bodies. In the context of the current discourses of the Trump administration, Adler's history of queerness as collocational to the paraphilic emerges through reimaginings of transgender identity as a psychological disorder whose threat to society warrants legal means to prevent transgender individuals from legal care (Mulvihill 2025).

Verne Harris (2002) further reveals, in his analysis of South Africa's own records of apartheid, both state-sanctioned erasure and the everyday routines of document removal produced profound absences in the records of the country's racialized violence. Within the contexts of the Trump administration's explicit anti-queer endeavors, we can understand how erasure is explicitly happening through the removal of entire records and data sets from government archives, queer or otherwise (Stobbe and Schneider 2025). Further, like Harris's own observations that not all archival erasure is enacted by the state, queerness itself often gets overlooked due to factors including but not limited to non-queer positionalities within appraising and describing queer archival materials (Cifor 2015), the shifting nature of queerness as a category of identity not explicit within a historical document (Lee 2020), and the way that systems of labeling and categorization flatten rather than nuance queerness (Christensen 2008).

Harrison Apple (2021) further notes the non-neutrality of archives by observing their capitalist underpinnings. Recalling the specific ways that other archivists negated the ethics of Apple's Pittsburgh Queer History Project and noting their intent to eventually access deaccessioned materials upon Apple's death, Apple suggests an often underconsidered value in archival refusal: the choice for archives not to produce material evidence. Pushing this concept further reminds archivists and scholars alike that even notions of collaboration elide the embodied realities of those who will eventually become the subjects of archival representation. Specifically, Apple states, "While a number of contemporary community archives scholars have advocated for a participatory ethos as a way to preclude alienation and refusal, it is also true that few donors wish to spend their time reminiscing, especially as it concerns heartbreak, loss, and personal violence" (130). Neutrality, when it comes to queer archival work, fails to acknowledge the persistent ways that historical discourses push queerness to the shadows and to spaces outside of normative gazes. Neutrality reifies an impetus to bring those stories and those materials into the visible lens of an archive, regardless of their cost to queer populations.

Archival Silence and Absence

Historically, calling upon ideas of archival silence served as a means to make visible and name institutional failures (Gilliland 2011). Archives as sites of discourse production work as a technology to enact and normalize particular identities and voices (Carter 2006). As noted, this silence can come from both state-sanctioned erasure and the everyday activities of archi-

val appraisal and curation, which toss aside materials that appear mundane, yet are potentially evidence-rich (Harris 2002). At an infrastructural level, both intentional and accidental erasure produce what Michelle Caswell (2014) defines as symbolic annihilation. Borrowing from feminist media scholarship, Caswell contends that institutional archives manifest descriptive, representational, and mediated absences that, when repeated, imply an absence of marginalized voices from archives. Caswell offers community archives as an inversion of this annihilation, as they provide evidentiary alternatives while giving communities agency in how they represent themselves. However, as Apple warns, even community archives cannot serve as a singular alternative, given that silence can, at times, be an intentional choice to exist outside of the cache-building drives of archives.

Archival silence also echoes broader questions of epistemicide within the library and information sciences, wherein the erasure and devaluing of knowledge, especially in digital settings, explain the systemic ways absence persists within the cultural record (Youngman and Patin 2024). As Youngman and Patin note, epistemicide exists across the cultural heritage produced on behalf of libraries, archives, and museums as the custodians of knowledge, and one such result of this is "documentary injustice" or the use of digital tools to reify and exploit marginalized populations (18). As persistent anti-queer acts flow down from the Trump administration, we can see documentary injustices unfolding through acts of explicit erasure from historical monuments under the banner of anti-trans ideologies (Kim 2025).

Remembering that visibility remains as much a threat as a possibility (Foucault 1978), rethinking archival silence and absence from a site of queerness reveals its own set of epistemicides. For example, in health-care settings, queer individuals often use a variety of protective and defensive information practices that ensure that individuals and their communities receive contextually relevant information while avoiding outing a person to anti-queer parents or making such knowledge known to employers who could leverage laws to fire a person based on their sexuality or gender identity (Kitzie et al. 2022). In digital spaces, this can mean the use of closed social media groups or anonymous message boards, allowing for one to obtain information without allowing outsiders to access that information (Kitzie 2018; Bowman 2025). While there are examples of technologies vital to queer information exchange becoming silent due to content moderation and the decay of digital infrastructure (Brewster and Ruberg 2020; Haimson et al. 2019), far less acknowledged are the ways that material histories of queerness purposefully remain non-archivable. While the political stakes of such visibility are becoming all too relevant, queer collections exist in institutional and community archives, and the increasingly digital nature of those access points produces concerns for how even the terms of queerness place materials, institutions, and, most importantly, queer individuals themselves into the crosshairs of erasure.

Methods

We combine two research projects that work to understand the ways US LGBTQIA+-related archival materials are described. While these projects diverge in methodology and specific focus population, we pair them to gain a fuller picture of the practices and products of knowledge workers who engage with LGBTQIA+ materials.

Allgood is a white, nonbinary, transmasculine, queer, doctoral student in information science at an R1 Midwestern university. Their experience in GLAMs has primarily been within a community-led, LGBTQIA+-focused library and through archival internships with community and institutional archives.

Wagner is a white, genderqueer, queer assistant professor in an information science school at an R1 Midwestern university. They have both studied and worked in archives and have engaged in queer-focused archival work within both community and institutional archives.

Project 1

The first project utilized findings from interviews with 29 US-based archival practitioners concerning their approaches to archival description for LGBTQIA+-related materials. Archives for this project included a broad range across academic, community-led, private, public, and digital institutions. Further, participants included both institutions with queer-specific collection mandates and archives that included queer collections as part of broader archival endeavors. Queer collection sizes ranged from a single collection to hundreds of unique collections.

Interviews occurred between October 2024 and January 2025. With participant permission, interviews were audio recorded, transcribed via manual and machine transcription, and anonymized. Interviews were qualitatively coded by the research team, and transcripts and initial findings were shared with participants for member checking. For more information on methods, see Wagner et al. 2025.

The identities of the participants, pulled from a voluntary demographic form, included practitioners' gender identities, which included men, women, trans men, trans, nonbinary, genderqueer, and agender. Sexualities disclosed by participants include heterosexual, straight, queer, bisexual, pansexual, gay, lesbian, androsexual, asexual, and questioning. In terms of race and ethnicity, participants identified as white, mixed race, Latinx, and Hispanic. For further details and specific percentages of demographics, see Wagner et al. 2025.

Project 2

The second project was a qualitative review of 312 archival finding aids related to Deep Southern LGBTQIA+ individuals and organizations. This work was done in partnership with Invisible Histories, a community-based archive that preserves queer history in the Deep South—then defined as Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and the Florida Panhandle. Invisible Histories had preselected a list of 42 institutions for review (see Allgood 2025, Appendix A). From this list, we created a database of relevant collections to provide a springboard for inexperienced researchers.

Collections met our inclusion metrics as long as the Southern regionality that surfaced in the finding aid was related to queerness in some capacity and the combination of queer and Southern identity came up with sufficient frequency. Only collections with online finding aids were reviewed.

Allgood performed light inductive coding on the abstracts, biographical/historical notes, and the subject terms and classified each institution based on its location, institutional style, and collecting focus. For further information, see Allgood 2025.

Findings

Enacting Queer Archival Description in Response to Threats of Erasure

The erasure of LGBTQIA+ histories, people, and materials is familiar to archivists. As Brak, a nonbinary, androsexual, white archival practitioner, succinctly noted in their interview, while "LGBTQ peoples are in every single walk of life . . . Unfortunately, because of

privilege, access, resources, and available time . . . [archival materials] have been predominantly, kind of, created or chosen or interpreted by cisgendered white men."

The reality that LGBTQIA+ materials have either not been collected or were collected but not made available pervaded the interviews. For example, Serena, a white, questioning female, shared that her institution's sole LGBTQIA+ collection was originally "just in a box labeled 'gay' with no finding aid, no nothing—it was just kind of in the back somewhere." The materials had been collected, but the lack of a finding aid made it impossible for researchers to encounter them, let alone engage with their contents.

Luckily, archival practitioners have been taking steps to make LGBTQIA+ collections like this one more visible and accessible. In Serena's case, her institution is revisiting the collection and practicing reparative description. She asserted that this allows them to "actually represent the full spectrum of LGBTQ individuals represented in the collection, and then also talk about it and publicly publish the finding aid." Similarly, Jennika, a white, heterosexual, cisgender female, noted that her institution is embracing their handful of "queer collections that would be considered artificial," and stated that she knew "there are archival purists who would disagree with them, but I think there are some realities we have to accept." She went on to say that "we can't let [institutional disinterest] stand in the way of creating visibility." Rather than feeling bound by traditional archival practice, practitioners like Serena and Jennika deploy artificial collections to highlight and make LGBTQIA+ history more accessible.

Even LGBTQIA+-specific institutions necessitated reparative work. For example, JD, a white, queer male, noted that, in his organization, "a concern that we have a lot is, like, who is not being represented, and how do we elevate that representation? Bi erasure is just like a constant problem, and trans erasure is a problem." JD further stated that "sometimes, in subjects, I will put 'bisexual' when I wouldn't put 'gay' or 'lesbian,' just because, for some reason, I feel like elevating bisexual collections seems like a course correction." JD's note shows how archivists of LGBTQIA+ materials may take care to adequately describe and make accessible individual identities alongside their umbrella identities.

Disentangling specific identities from an indelicate amalgamation like "LGBTQIA+" encourages us to also investigate what styles of erasure may appear when considering intersectional identities. For example, literature shows that the myth of the "impossible queer South"—the belief that there are no queer people in the South, whether intrinsically or because they inevitably migrate north and/or to urban centers—is both pervasive and false (Halberstam 2005; Gray 2009; Schweighofer 2016; Johansen 2021). In fact, many queer Southerners feel that their "Southernness" is inextricable from their queerness and vice versa (Johansen 2021).

Despite this literature, our review of LGBTQIA+ Southern collections shows that these identities are rarely discussed in conjunction. Throughout the 312 collections, only two finding aids referred to this intersection of identity explicitly: the Suzanne Pharr papers, which describe Pharr as "a Southern queer feminist," and the Southern Lesbian-Feminist Activist Herstory Project collection (Pharr 1958–2021; Southern Lesbian-Feminist Activist Herstory Project 2001–2020). The other collections treated the intersection of queerness and Southernness as happenstance, not as inextricably bound, which surfaces two points of interest: first, a reminder to emphasize intersectional identity when relevant; and second, a nod to the possibility of intentional obfuscation for the purposes of safety, which will be discussed shortly.

Reframing Donors, Community Knowledge, and Archival Practice

Participants also described a unique relationship between donors and archivists that arose around LGBTQIA+ materials. According to JD, the usual archival process is as follows: "Traditional archiving, the archiving that I was taught at library school, right . . . was, 'Hey, you have donors, and the donors come to you, and then you teach them how archives work, and then they go away.'" Nearly every interviewee, including JD, shared that they do not follow this process with LGBTQIA+ collections; instead, they invite donors to participate further.

In JD's case, he thinks of their donors as "part of the staff, like an extended part of the staff." He described the archival process as collaborative and his organization as "caretakers of community history" rather than "owners." For him, this included engaging with donors at "every step of the process," from early conversations through collection description.

While other interviewees did not necessarily engage with donors at every step, multiple practitioners said they asked donors to review their work whenever possible. For example, Jet, a nonbinary, queer, Hispanic person, said, "I usually explain it that way, like, 'This is still your collection. I'm the steward—or we're the stewards—of your materials, but this will be your collection. This is your legacy. It should be represented in the way that you want this to be represented.'" Instead of positioning archivists as the experts, Jet defers to donors as the "experts" of their own lives, asking them to read the finding aid and provide feedback. Similarly, Nebula, a straight, white female, described her process as "less hierarchical, more lateral," and said that there tends to be "a greater willingness to bring more people into the mix" at her institution, including both donors and other subject experts.

One unique practice undertaken by JD's institution is to provide donors with a biographical form so they can describe themselves in their own terms. The completed form, he noted, is not made available to the public. Instead, it is used so the archivists can refer to it when generating finding aids and use it to ask questions of the donors. He described the process as "working on [the finding aid] together." As Tenoh, a white, agender lesbian, said when describing her small team, "There's so many subgroups within the LGBTQ umbrella. . . . There's no way for us to, with only two people, have all of those represented."

Archivists tend to take these steps in private. In our review of Deep Southern LGBTQIA+ collections, it is not clear from any of the finding aids whether they have been reviewed by their donors or creators; it's not built into the visible metadata. Although their work exclusively engages with web archives, we nod here to the suggestions of Maemura et al. (2018) regarding the inclusion of process metadata in finding aids. Including a note, for example, that the creator of the materials has reviewed and approved a finding aid's biographical note helps contextualize institutional relationships and the ethical validity of the data as represented.

Grounding Archival Description in Embodied Knowledge

Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the importance of having creators, as the "experts," review their work. The idea of expertise and embodied knowledge also extended to practitioners themselves, particularly those who identified as queer. JD said that, as a queer man, when he goes "into the work with other queer and trans people, we already share a connectivity that we wouldn't otherwise." He went on to explain that he leveraged this "connectivity" in the way he described materials, noting his connection to the shifting language within the community. He then aims to use the terms individuals self-select rather than lumping people together or using outdated terms. "Who says 'homosexual' anymore?" he asked when

he encountered the term. "Is the person gay, lesbian, bi, trans, queer? We got all these words; no one's a fucking homosexual anymore." Similarly, Tenoh stated, "I've identified as a lesbian for a long, long time. It's always been, since as long as I can remember, something that has been a part of my identity and how I see materials. So it's been pretty inextricable from how I process materials, how I describe them."

Practitioners' lived experiences of queerness also primed them to see the tensions between visibility and vulnerability when describing LGBTQIA+ materials. Nicky, a white, ace woman, summed this up nicely:

> I think some archivists are just like . . . "Well, this is queer history. Just put it out there. Make it easy to find." Without necessarily being like, "Okay, but why did this person not out themselves in their lifetime? How do we respect that need for people to get to the collection without erasing it, but also respecting silence and where that silence might be intentional?" That's where I think having an archivist who is of the queer community helps inform those decisions and those practices is really important.

JD found himself weighing similar concerns, but adding on the fear that easy-to-find collections are easier to remove. He shared, "We're going to go through all of our [REGIONAL] states and look for existing queer collections. Once we find them, can we make those lists visible, or do we make targets?"

Practitioners also highlighted the embodied experience of having processed archival materials. We return here to JD's note that practitioners are taught the ideal processing procedure in school, but live that procedure very differently. Many practitioners noted that they were expected to create a perfect finding aid the first time. In reality, Joanna, a heterosexual, white female, said following the one-and-done processing style has caused her to end up "with a find aid that met DACS requirements, but was utterly useless to researchers." Similarly, Nebula noted that "a bad finding aid is one that's never been revisited. Like, if you are not somehow consistently looking back at older descriptions to say, 'Does this still suit the needs of how researchers would work now?' then I think that's no good." Many practitioners, like Jet, noted that finding aids "should not be considered as written in stone"—the work is never perfect and never truly "done," something that those who have never processed materials would rarely anticipate.

Implications

Archival Authority Built on Cultural Humility

We return now to Secretary of the Smithsonian Lonnie G. Bunch III's letter to his staff. We assert that Bunch and his staff align themselves strongly with the archival practitioners interviewed and the findings surfaced in our collections review.

Nearly all the interviewees' recommendations emphasize cultural humility and the embodied knowledge of creators and archival practitioners. Just as Bunch and his staff recognize that the White House cannot have the archival experience or cultural competence necessary to accurately review the Smithsonian's holdings in such a way that the multiplicity of US histories is reflected, practitioners like Tenoh, Jet, and Nebula recognize that they cannot

have the expertise to describe LGBTQIA+ experiences or identities that they do not share. These practitioners, Bunch and his staff included, reject the oversimplification of history and identity through these acts of cultural humility.

Broadly, these practitioners are practicing critical refusal on multiple levels: They reject the imposition of top-down, simplistic narratives; they reject the idea that there is one "correct" way to provide access to archival materials; they reject the notion that visibility is inherently desired by all parties; and they reject the idea that outsiders should dictate the stories materials tell. They provide memory workers with models of refusing to kowtow to the ever-changing political whims of whomever desires control—whether the government or other authorities—and, instead, choosing to prioritize the embodied knowledge of those whose stories the materials reflect.

Refusing Archival Neutrality and Reframing Absence

In most discussions of queer archives, the work of making visible documents and stories is to correct the false perception that queerness is a new phenomenon (Kunzel 2018). The machinations of political and social discourses bled into archives and often validated these misperceptions (Stoler 2002). Both malevolent and ambivalent sentiments meant that seeing and naming queerness proved difficult. In many cases, when such identities emerged, removing or recontextualizing their presence proved easier than nuancing and naming such complexity. In other instances, queerness existed in implicit ways or was obfuscated entirely. When looking at datasets that involve queerness or queer digital performances, acts of obfuscation and null values reveal how queerness is often absent or silent because the tools for marking queerness either refuse to see it or seek to destroy its presence upon discovery (Gaboury 2018; Kornstein 2019; Ungless et al. 2025). If contemporary uses of technology serve as insights into broader uses of materials to disclose one's queerness and that disclosure is always moving against its erasure, it is necessary to take realities of absence as suggestive of possibility and, perhaps more importantly, that queer data circulates differently. Archives need not approach these questions in a neutral way; instead of imagining their work as gathering for the sake of collecting, a non-neutral and still profoundly valuable approach to queer preservation would be to serve as a non-public repository, a place where materials can be held, but not made available. Closed collections are hardly a new phenomenon to archives, and in a moment when archiving queerness does stop actual erasure, *access* and *use* become contested terms. Taking in earnest Caswell's reminder of the realities of symbolic annihilation, archives can still serve a protective purpose: one that suggests the absence of materials to an uncritical eye but, through methods of description and implied collecting, can hold onto evidence of queerness's long and visible presence throughout history. As the individuals interviewed attested, and as the collections revealed, queerness is one component of larger community connections and not all forms of queer embodiment experience erasure the same way and to the same degree. Archivists, archives, and even the users of these materials can more actively engage in these stakes and choose not to make materials available or learn, as many queer historians already know to do (Wagner 2024), to ask different questions of data. In other words, while archives may have been trained to "wait for folks to die" to begin collecting, by looking to both the material and datafied ways queer folks make their presence known, yet not able to be regulated and controlled, could shift the politics of archiving radically and invite work that is hopeful of access in the future, while emphatic about the inaccessibility of such data in the present. Fortunately, such a shift emphasizes rather than delegitimizes the importance of archives in this historical moment.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the second Trump administration, there have been near-constant moves to sanitize US history, from legally dehistoricizing transgender identity to compelling the Smithsonian Museums to reflect the myth of American exceptionalism. In this paper, we reflect on the actions of archival practitioners who write finding aids for LGBTQIA+-related collections, the presence of Deep Southern LGBTQIA+-related collections themselves, and the letter written by Secretary of the Smithsonian Lonnie G. Bunch III to his staff to show small but significant acts of resistance to the simplification and homogenization of history. Our findings show that both archival practitioners and creators have crucial embodied knowledge that plays a consequential role in the creation of finding aids, which help shape the stories we are able to tell about history. This research also shows that simply making materials accessible and visible may not always be the answer. Instead, the resounding recommendation is to honor the creators by using the language they chose to describe themselves and their experiences and not to bend recklessly in the wind to whomever deems themselves in charge.

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"I Have Friends Everywhere":[1] A Field Guide for Community Archive Activists

JOSEPH SHERREN AND RONALD PADRÓN

Second Verse, Same As The First

On May 6, 1933, the Institute of Sex Research in Berlin was attacked by the Deutsche Studentenschaft, a general organization of student committees across all German universities that had become dominated by the National Socialist German Students' League. This was not a covert affair carried out in the middle of the night. The student mob was accompanied by a brass band, the leader of the group gave a public speech as the Institute was being looted, and students sang the "Horst-Wessel-Lied," an anthem of the Nazi party. They were joined later in the day by Hitler's own personal paramilitary group, the Sturmabteilung (SA). Following four days of ransacking, the Institute's library and archives were destroyed in a book burning at the Opernplatz. Tens of thousands of books, journals, and images were destroyed.

The institute was a marvel of the early twentieth-century movement for LGBTQ+ research and rights and a key cultural player in Weimar Germany. In the fourteen years it operated, it pioneered research and treatment for gender and sexual minorities (Tracey 2023). In addition to being a symbolic act meant to help eradicate deviance from Nazi-approved ideology around gender performance, the burning of its research was a monumental blow to the LGBTQ+ movement that would take decades to recover from.

Shortly after being sworn into office for his second term as president of the United States, Donald Trump began a similar campaign of information warfare and erasure in the federal government. While it lacked the accompaniment of a brass ensemble, this too was not a covert affair. This assault has been accompanied with social media posts, executive orders, and press conferences (Trump 2025). Research studies focused on the LGBTQ+ community have been scrubbed from government websites and archives (Jingnan 2025, Smith 2025). References to the transgender community have been erased from the Stonewall National Monument (Kim 2025). Grant funding for programs or studies that center the queer community have been clawed back, and the parameters to qualify for future funding have been restricted as to further cement the erasure of the queer and trans community (Pananjady 2025, Reberkenny 2025). Much ink has already been spilled comparing the actions of the MAGA regime to Nazi Germany, and rightly so. At the time of this writing, the authors see no reason to believe more comparisons will not be made.

A Rallying Cry for Community Archive Activists

The purpose of this paper is to highlight a key difference between the assault of the Institute of Sex Research and our current moment—namely, the ability for both information

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professionals and the general public to quickly access, distribute, and preserve information. With the internet at our fingertips, we can all become archive activists. We, the authors, understand that many readers will already be familiar with the tools and processes we lay out. While we hold information professionals with the highest respect, we also know the reality of the current moment is that many of them are drowning in a storm of book bans, loss of resourcing, increased public scrutiny, and surveilled speech. The main audience for this essay is our allies among the general public. We are in no way providing an exhaustive list of archival procedures, but this primer on best practices is a good place to start and, we hope, something that is easily shareable.

Traditional wisdom in archiving has been to assess your collecting capacity, make judgment calls about what objects (digital or otherwise) fit your organization's mission or vision, and save what fits those relatively narrow parameters. Cheap and/or plentiful storage does not mean indiscriminate storage. In physical collections, that means consolidating spaces to store as much relevant material as possible. Conventional wisdom also extends to digital collections—you have more space to play but still need to exercise discretion when appraising materials for long-term storage.

Part of this looks like assessing the overall value of the material. Consider the following scenario: if you have newspaper clippings in your physical collection, what is the value of keeping the clipping in your possession if there is a central repository from the publisher? What about access through the digital archives of your State Archives? A newspaper clipping, even stabilized and housed correctly in a museum's collections, quickly becomes brittle and, at some point, illegible due to the degradation of the media through inherent vice. What can everyday archive activists do in this scenario? Collections professionals short on resources can download a scanned copy from the archives for reference and note the rights requirements (for reference, publication, or exhibition later) and who to contact to receive permission.[2]

What do we do when central repositories begin falling to fascist oversight and erasure? As individual practitioners and small collectives, it's difficult to fully rely on institutions as we see collections disappear in front of us with "404 Not Found" and the call for revisionist history from the top. For many, we need to become our own custodians of information.

This paper provides some of the down-and-dirty practices of collecting digital materials. With these basic skills, you can rally your community to come together as memory collectives. Not to be alarmist, but work together to spread out the knowledge as far as possible so each can operate as an independent node with multiple redundancies, just in case.

A Crash Course in Archive Activism

One resource that is a good place to start on personal archiving is the Library of Congress' blog post "Your Personal Archiving Project: Where Do You Start?" by Mike Ashenfelder (Ashenfelder 2016). It's like a crash course in archival thinking, with examples for analog collections, but it can be distilled into a couple key points that are excellent to keep in mind.

First, when approaching any project, consider it as a big collection. That is more manageable, rather than feeling like you're facing a daunting number of individual records. Start deciding on categories of media to refine your collection that items will most likely fit into: data, articles, images, etc. There isn't a right or wrong answer, and the easiest thing to do is to identify groups that already exist. But the key at this point is going to be *consistency*. After this initial sorting scheme, use folders to refine a little further, perhaps by source—any other

ways to keep those files separated into their piles. Again, the key will be a decipherable internal logic and *consistency*.

With those key points for reflection, turn to digital preservation. If you don't want to invest in a physical hard drive, set up an extra Google Drive by creating a new Gmail account. This is a relatively safe option since it's mass market, fairly reliable, and stable so far. With one of these, get 15GB cloud storage, which is a good amount of storage to start. You can scan and store a couple hundred photos, articles, or tables on this amount of storage—even high-res images. If you're more interested in using a physical hard drive, there are plenty of good, high capacity options for external hard drives that are compatible with a variety of hardware and software combinations. An electronics store will be your best bet in finding a compatible device that works for your situation. If you can, you might want to get two or three to have multiple storage vessels to validate authentic files (a process described later in the paper).

Inventories and Cataloging

In whatever storage media you are using, establish folders that correspond to your categories, and create a Word document to be your recordkeeping document to save in the storage as your notes. You can use this running notes document as the basis for a finding aid. A finding aid is a technical archival document that acts like it sounds: written by archivists, its purpose is to describe a collection and provide some rationale around it. It describes the history of the collection and the arrangement of the materials, and it is intended to help an unfamiliar user navigate the contents of the collection and identify anything relevant to their interests.

It's more than just an inventory, however. It describes the top-level details, including the scope and contents, the dates, the creator, perhaps the language, the source of the materials, and the arrangement. All of this is organized into groupings—these can be material types (photos, documents, maps, etc.), dates you downloaded items, dates of creation, or other topics. The finding aid should function as a wayfinding document, so *consistency* is key to make it most useful. Combine the finding aid with an inventory document (such as an Excel spreadsheet), and you have the foundations of a solid recordkeeping practice.

The inventory document is where you're going to detail the individual objects: naming and labeling them, documenting how large they are, describing them, creating keywords or identifying people in photos or articles, adding dates, etc. You can change the title of a downloaded file to correspond to the inventory number you assign (applying an internal logic). While you're working on the object level, think about updating the running notes document; it's like the context or a narrative document to keep track of your thoughts, progress, and some additional things that might not fit into one of these technical documents.

One way to describe your records on this document is using a common vocabulary for each entry and some basic headers like Creator, Title, Date, Subject, Size. Alternatively, many to use an organizational schema called *Dublin Core* when thinking about what kind of information to describe (Dublin Core 2025). *Dublin Core* is also one of the archives field's standards and is also very approachable for somebody new to describing records. Using *Dublin Core* identifiers for reference will help you identify some of the key pieces to help describe your records; this is metadata. These metadata terms from *Dublin Core* can be thought of as buckets—the terms become the column headers in your inventory document, and you fill these buckets with information: the who, when, and what. If you're putting multiple things into the description, separate terms or phrases with commas. For instance, you can have multiple

"Subject" or "Creator" values and your "Description" can be a longer-form explanation. The "Description" can also hold lots of keywords, so you can put those in as well.

Voight-Kampff,[3] but For Digital Files

Another best practice is to make a column for a checksum. A checksum is a unique identifier assigned by an algorithm that each file has based on its digital DNA—it's basically a digital asset's fingerprint. So long as you use the same algorithm (MD5, sha1, or myriad others) this is a valuable piece of information to tell you the file you have saved and are describing is authentic and unchanged since the last time you checked it (or when you downloaded it). There are lots of free resources and industry standards for these algorithms, so they are resilient and reliable. A checksum validation process can look like:

- Pulling your digital file from its original source and uploading it into an online checker.[4] This first reading will give you your baseline checksum value.
- If you're feeling like a true preservationist, download a second copy of the data or record and store that in a completely different hard drive. That can be your preservation copy (just be sure to check that one every so often, too).
- Periodically upload a copy of these files from your storage devices into the same algorithm; if the checksum value has changed, it means your file has been altered (new text or data has been added or something has been deleted) or the file has become corrupted and it's no longer reliable.

If your checksum comes back incorrect, you no longer use that tested version of your file. Copy an authentic file from another of your other storage areas, like your preservation copy, and put it into storage. This is why best practice is to have multiple storage media like a cloud drive or multiple external hard drives. Check them against each other every so often to make sure they're all returning the same authenticated checksum that you saved in your inventory sheet when you downloaded the file initially. Doing this makes it less likely that something catastrophic will happen to the same file in separate storage media. And, if all of them have changed in one fell swoop, saving these files isn't going to be on your mind because we're in a societal collapse due to an EMP, solar flare, or something similar. There will be bigger things to worry about.

Archive Activism Quick Reference Guide

In the broadest terms, keep in mind these handful of points:

1. Back up additional copies of your records and files to one or two extra storage devices or cloud accounts.
    a. With external hardware, you could store them in different locations: a hard drive in your office, one at home, or just different closets in your house. But ensure all storage areas are secure and easily accessible.
2. Name and organize your files in a *consistent* and readily understandable manner.
    a. Use letters of the Latin alphabet when making alphanumeric IDs. Don't use spaces, punctuation, or symbols. Use hyphens or underscores instead of spaces where necessary.
    b. Don't overcomplicate your labeling system—you want somebody to be able to understand your system with no training, just in case.

3. Write basic metadata about your files and keep these in your inventory document: who, what, where, and when. Doing this when you download a file will help, but at the least jot down some information that you will be able to expand upon at a later date.
4. Save files in stable, non-proprietary formats like PDF, JPEG, or TIF.

Additional resources for community archiving, zine-making and archiving, and oral history preservation can be found in Appendix A.

Teach a Man to Fish

With some of those in-the-weeds details, one of the most important things to remember is a piece of timeless wisdom: keep it simple. Consider downloading webpages, articles, and data sets as stable PDFs and sheets with readily understandable identifiers, file names, tags, and consistent archival description. Do that rather than relying on third-party programs or overly technical tools. Often, home archivists and archive activists won't have all of the technical skills to fix technical issues from proprietary software. Support networks for a third-party software or program may also crumble in even a short period of time. That leaves the archivist with a legacy system and no means of supporting it.

Additionally, storage hardware has progressed to the point where we have massive, reliable external hard drives with a high degree of resiliency and compatibility. Massive storage capacity is cheaper than it has ever been. Good recordkeeping and massive storage capacity can outweigh finicky and unwieldy tech under most circumstances. Rely on that.

Digital preservation is about iteration: it is ongoing. So don't rest on thinking, "I made a backup copy. I'm done." Backing up data, images, and other electronic materials alone isn't digital preservation. Recordkeeping, description, and the regular checkup on it is also critical to the digital preservation process. There is also no universal strategy to save information. Everything depends on context and that can mean capacity, physical storage space, digital storage space, capabilities, goals, and aims. In most circumstances, these would be limiting factors. But in troubling times, with the indiscriminate erasure of data and their accompanying reports, it is necessary to be proactive and save. Sort out the duplicates later. Preservation is active. Nothing *has been* preserved, there are only objects *being* preserved. It is an ongoing, iterative process—never a one-and-done.

Conventional wisdom says you should be selective in your review and appraisal of materials, but in dire times, save the files that you have capacity for. Doing this while keeping in mind good archival practice requires description and management. On the other side of this particularly fraught moment in American history, we can come together to compare collections. We can then begin the process of offloading some redundant pieces or finding a more suitable home for the information. Until then, whenever that is, we have to keep as much material as we can as safe as possible.

Most importantly, we have to acknowledge that in the war of information, more is more: more copies, more collectives, more friends.

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Endnotes

1 *Andor* is one of the best *Star Wars* properties in recent memory. We will not be taking questions at this time.

2 That's how one of the authors of this essay worked within the archives of a small historic house museum that had limited physical space, little to no digital collection infrastructure at the start of his tenure, and limited capacity as a part-time employee managing a collection of over three thousand physical objects, a reference library over one thousand books, and tens of thousands of institutional and historical archival records in varying states of digital readiness and accessibility.

3 The Voight-Kampff machine is the fictional interrogation tool used to distinguish humans from replicants. We deeply regret that we can reference more than one sci-fi dystopia in this paper.

4 Despite there being an upload size limit, this is a good tool: https://defuse.ca/checksums.htm#checksums.

APPENDIX A. FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

For those interested in exploring additional resources, we recommend the following resources, toolkits, etc.

Community Archiving Toolkits

Sharing Community History - Community Archives Collaborative
UCLA Community Archives Lab Toolkit
Community Archives Digital Preservation Toolkit - Digital Preservation Coalition
Community Archives Toolkit

Zine-Making and Archiving Resources

Memorial Archiving Zine - Invisible Histories
zinelibraries.info
How to Make a Zine - Library of Congress

Oral History Preservation Guides

How to Do Oral History - Smithsonian Institution Archives
Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices - Oral History Association

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You Work for the Public; Your Thoughts Aren't Sacred: Responding to Antelman's False Crisis in the Privacy of Thought

JOHN MACK FREEMAN

ABSTRACT

This article responds to Kristin Antelman's "Respecting Privacy of Thought in DEI Training" by challenging the premise that public employees have an unqualified right to cognitive privacy (Antelman 2025). Drawing on legal precedent, professional ethics, and lived experience, this piece argues that DEI efforts in libraries are not coercive but necessary interventions in a field tasked with equitable public service. It critiques the uneven distribution of privacy in the workplace and refutes the idea that belief and behavior can be meaningfully separated, particularly in public institutions where accountability to the entire community is a professional obligation.

Introduction

In "Respecting Privacy of Thought in DEI Training," Kristin Antelman warns that diversity initiatives in libraries threaten a fundamental human right: the right to think freely (or as she terms it, "privacy of thought"). Framing DEI programming as an incursion into employees' cognitive liberty, she argues that training staff on concepts like unconscious bias, structural racism, or cultural competency amounts to ideological coercion. Antelman presents DEI as a threat to intellectual liberty, but public employment has never offered the kind of sweeping cognitive privacy she imagines. In libraries that operate as public institutions, personal beliefs are not above scrutiny, especially when they shape behavior that impacts service.

This response proceeds in three parts: first, it locates the concept of "privacy of thought" within the legal realities of public employment; second, it shows how privacy at work is unevenly distributed by identity; third, it argues from behavioral science that belief and behavior cannot be cleanly separated in public-serving institutions. Thus, while there may be individuals who desire a "privacy of thought" within the public workplace, an unlimited right to that concept is nearly impossible to square with the demands and realities of library work.

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The crisis Antelman identifies is not one of liberty but rather one of discomfort—specifically, the discomfort of dominant groups being asked to interrogate the assumptions that shape how they move through the world and serve others. But putting that aside, there is a larger problem at play here.

There is no legal or ethical basis for the idea that public employees have an absolute right to keep their beliefs, values, or biases beyond scrutiny. This is especially true in institutions tasked with equitable public service. Although librarianship is often framed as a unique field, it must also be understood, in most cases in the United States, through the lens of public employment as well. As public employees, library workers operate under fundamentally different privacy expectations than those in private-sector roles or in their capacity as private citizens. These lines are blurred when Antelman bizarrely refers to a "public sphere of the workplace" (432), a conflation of the public sphere of civic life and the much more contained and constricted domain of the public workplace.

Even if Antelman's arguments around privacy in the workplace were accurate, her argument further obscures the uneven distribution of privacy in the workplace. Marginalized employees (e.g., queer staff, immigrants, people of color, poor people) have always been expected to perform, explain, and justify their identities in professional settings. These individuals (and the author counts himself among them) had to do this not to advance ideology, but to survive. What Antelman describes as coercion reads, from the other side of the institutional power line, as the bare minimum of reflective practice.

This article responds to Antelman's framing by situating her claims within the legal realities of public employment, the structural power dynamics of institutional life, and the lived experiences of those whose labor has been made invisible. "Privacy of thought" is not a neutral, universal value; it is a shield selectively wielded by those most invested in preserving their comfort at the expense of others' safety and truly equitable service. And on a legal, ethical, and practical level, the concept presented in Antelman's article fails to pass muster.

To understand just how flimsy Antelman's argument is, analysis must begin by examining what privacy means in the context of public employment. Her argument hinges on rights that simply do not exist in the way she describes them for those employed by, and accountable to, the public.

Privacy and the Public Institution

Antelman's argument leans heavily on the idea that privacy of thought is a foundational right, even in the workplace. But this position ignores a basic reality: public employees do not enjoy the same workplace privacy protections as those in the private sector. In public institutions (like public universities and libraries), there is no impermeable barrier between personal belief and professional responsibility.

While I am not a legal scholar, the precedent is clear and well-established. In *Garcetti v. Ceballos* (2006), the Supreme Court ruled that when public employees speak as part of their official duties, their speech is not protected by the First Amendment. In other words, when people represent the organization, their ability to speak their own beliefs is subordinate to the institution's right to ensure that the speech aligns with its mission. Libraries often pursue noble goals that are ethically aligned with their employees (e.g., equitable access, intellectual freedom, belonging), but when the two are in conflict, the employer's needs hold sway.

Further, *O'Connor v. Ortega* (1987) and *City of Ontario v. Quon* (2010) establish that public employees have a very limited expectation of privacy in the workplace. Offices, devices, com-

munications, and more can be searched for legitimate administrative purposes. Privacy for public employees is and always has been contextual.

Were there to be issues with a DEI-related training, 2025 guidance by the EEOC and DOJ protect those objections under Title VII (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2025a, 2025b). However, court decisions have consistently found that being required to attend a DEI-related training does not rise to the level of creating a hostile work environment. They have also found that peer pressure is not enough for a training to go from being voluntary to mandatory (relevant case law includes *Vavra v. Honeywell International, Inc.* [2024], *Young v. Colorado Department of Corrections* [2024], *Norgren v. Minnesota Department of Human Services* [2024], *Diemert v. City of Seattle* [2025], *and De Piero v. Pennsylvania State University* [2025]). Additionally, the Eleventh Circuit found in *Honeyfund.com Inc v. Governor, State of Florida* (2024) that a law that banned mandatory workplace trainings that "espouse or promote a set of beliefs related to race, color, sex, or national origin deemed offensive by the state" was unconstitutionally vague and an unlawful content- and viewpoint-based speech restriction.

Antelman seems to misunderstand the legal framework around workplace training. Within the context of a public employee's role, employees do not have rights against compelled speech, and employers can regulate speech that is part of official duties or disrupts the workplace. Further, *Connick v. Myers* (1983) confirms that public employers can discipline internal speech that doesn't concern broader public issues but undermines workplace efficiency. It stands to reason that public institutions could further take steps to address potential issues of bias, silence, or exclusion that could arise in the workplace affecting either users or coworkers.

Antelman frames DEI as an overreach and a sign that library leadership has embraced a politicized mission that undermines individual freedom. But this reverses the actual accountability structure of public work. Public employees are not free agents. They are representatives of the state. When institutions fail to examine how the internal beliefs of employees shape external actions, they are at risk of reproducing the very inequities that they are tasked with addressing. Accountability to the public trumps personal discomfort about institutional values and evolving norms. These constraints on privacy and speech are not experienced evenly; who you are changes what "privacy at work" means.

The Unequal Burden of Identity at Work

Even if Antelman's legal assumptions held water, they would still obscure the more fundamental reality: that privacy in the workplace is unevenly distributed by identity. Antelman treats "privacy of thought" as a universal workplace value. But anyone who has spent time as a visibly marginalized person in a public institution knows that privacy has never been evenly distributed. For LGBTQ+ people, BIPOC, immigrants, and other marginalized folks, there is no "right" to opt out of identity work. These individuals do not get to leave their beliefs or needs unspoken. Instead, they are interrogated simply by existing. This is not a speculative quibble; it shows up in daily practice. The following brief examples illustrate how "privacy" is experienced asymmetrically by workers in public institutions.

My experience as a cisgender gay white man has been relatively light compared to many of my colleagues, but I hope that a few of my stories will be illustrative: Like the time a public library director asked me to meet with a county commissioner from a different district because he and I were both gay. Or the time a public library director told me that her community of over one hundred thousand just wasn't ready for "gay books." Or the time a tenured

professor looked at a rainbow bracelet I was wearing my first week of a new job and said, "You know, you'd have been fired for wearing that around here ten years ago." Or being the on-call person for anyone with a queer-related personnel or HR question for several organizations. While I've learned to laugh some of these off, anyone who believes that marginalized library workers don't carry similar stories is either willfully blind or staggeringly incurious. In many institutions, there is an assumption that the majority represents the normal, and that outliers most conform to their norms or serve as a representative of their uniqueness in these spaces (Hathcock 2015).

Library workers' experiences are not outliers; they reflect who holds numerical and cultural power in the field. Credentialed librarians are 88 percent White (Kendrick and Hulbert 2023) and 89 percent women (AFL-CIO 2025). Even where a group is comparatively over-represented—LGBTQ+ workers constitute up to 29 percent in one study (Siegel et al. 2020) versus 9 percent of the U.S. population (Yurcaba 2025)—they remain a workplace minority without default norm-setting authority. In settings like these, majority perspectives easily become the implicit baseline, and differences are treated as deviations to be managed. The result is predictable: uneven expectations for explanation and emotional labor, uneven exposure to bias, and a persistent illusion that "everyone has the same experience" when, in practice, they do not. This is not theoretical; it is structural. While some dominant-identity employees may rail against having to share their pronouns or attend a DEI session, marginalized workers have long been expected to explain their communities, defend their presence, and stay calm while doing it. It is the unspoken "other duties as assigned" that has a pernicious effect on the scope creep of library workers of all types (Ford et al. 2019). Antelman warns that DEI trainings might pressure someone to disclose their beliefs; she says nothing about what this means for minority library workers and users and their needs.

The claim that DEI programs are coercive collapses when measured against the quiet, uncredited labor marginalized workers do every day to navigate their own safety and support others'. Antelman casts herself as defending workers from ideological intrusion. But she erases the people who have never had the luxury of ideological neutrality to begin with.

I chaired a working group on LGBTQ+ services at a former employer. The only directive I was given for this project was that under no circumstances should I bring back a recommendation for drag storytimes. At the time, I thought this was a ridiculous request. The community had no strong presence of drag performers nor had there been any community demand for this; the odds that this would have wound up as a recommendation were close to zero. But with the benefit of hindsight, I wonder if the direction came from a place of wanting to support queer people, but not if it had been done loudly or publicly or in the face of community backlash. The majority often signals support for marginalized communities, but only if that support remains palatable to a wider audience, quiet and assimilationist. Institutions are often not willing to defend their support for marginalized communities if it becomes broadly known, leading to a breakdown between professed values and lived realities.

The Myth of Belief-Behavior Separation

There is still an argument to be made that privacy of thought, if not a legal reality, then at the very least is an ethical ideal to ascribe to. And yet, even on this level, the argument in this article fails basic scrutiny. Antelman's central move is to argue that beliefs and behavior can be cleanly separated; basically, as long as a library worker "does the job," their personal worldview is irrelevant. But this argument is both professionally irresponsible and intel-

lectually dishonest. In any public-serving institution, beliefs absolutely influence behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein 1972; Bandura, 1980; Fishbein and Ajzen 2011; Granados Samayoa and Albarracín 2025). Public employees are given wide latitude to decide what gets prioritized, who gets heard, what risks are taken, and who feels seen. And their own beliefs are often the driving forces behind these efforts.

Libraries, like all institutions, are staffed by human beings, and human beings do not operate from a blank slate. They create a worldview from their experience, values, assumptions: what some people might call "thoughts." While the belief in neutrality may be laudable, neutrality is not a prima facie good if it stops analysis on actions (Chiu et al. 2021). If someone believes certain communities are too sensitive, they are more likely to dismiss valid concerns. If they believe neutrality means saying nothing about injustice, they are more likely to uphold the status quo. If they believe pronouns are optional, they will misgender someone. This is outside of the structural and algorithmic biases that librarians must address when working with users that may be out of their direct control but still may require their intervention and explanation (Noble 2018). While individuals are free to hold their beliefs, they are not entitled to act on those beliefs in ways that undermine equity or violate professional expectations. The behavior must be held to account, and it is not unethical for an organization to seek to provide training that would forestall these negative outcomes.

DEI work doesn't exist to indoctrinate. It exists because unexamined thoughts become decisions. They become hiring biases, reference interactions, policy enforcement, and programming choices. Organizations are defined by the choices they make, and organizations with limited resources must decide what to include and what to leave out. It is in the interest of the public to make sure that those choices are made with everyone in mind. These choices will further have impacts on the employees inside these publicly funded libraries, becoming reasons not to speak up, not to apply, and not to stay.

A key piece of Antelman's argument depends on the false binary that thought is private and behavior is public. But in practice, they are hopelessly entangled. That's why public institutions invest in DEI: not to punish dissenting opinions, but to reduce the harm that unacknowledged biases inflict on the people libraries are supposed to serve—which brings us back to Antelman's central claim that DEI training constitutes coercion. However, that framing only works if readers accept a series of deeply flawed assumptions about the role of public employees, the nature of belief, and the meaning of professional accountability.

DEI Isn't the Thought Police

The idea that public employees have an unlimited right to "privacy of thought" misunderstands both the nature of public service and the stakes of equity work. In libraries, as in all public institutions, the obligation is not to protect individual comfort. Rather, libraries work to deliver just, accessible, and equitable service. That work requires reflection and grappling with how our beliefs shape actions, especially when those actions impact a library's users.

Antelman's article invites readers to imagine themselves under siege, facing forced reeducation at the hands of ideologues (going to so far as to make a specious comparison between the rationale for DEI training to that of "state-sponsored torture" [432]). But for many library workers, there has never been a version of professional life that did not require navigating others' biases, absorbing institutional harm, or performing endless labor to make others feel safe. What some may consider a violation is often nothing more than being asked to participate in the work of making the profession better than it has been.

I care deeply about privacy: my own and that of others. I believe in data minimization. I refuse smart home devices. I am deeply suspect of technological innovation. I think government surveillance powers are wildly overreaching. But there is a difference between protecting private life from authoritarian overreach and shielding public employees from accountability for how they wield institutional power. Privacy in public work is not absolute. Public institutions must be open, and the people who serve within them must be willing to examine how their private beliefs impact their public responsibilities.

Further, DEI work in libraries is not above reproach. Like any evolving field, its practices are imperfect, its delivery uneven, and its impact at times uncertain. Indeed, many of the sharpest critics of DEI are those doing the work that see the gap between current practice and desired outcomes (for a small list of examples, see Burress et al. 2024; Crilly 2023; Geiger et al. 2023; Leong 2023; Phillips 2025; Pittman et al. 2025; Poole et al. 2021). But the absence of a perfect framework does not relieve libraries of their responsibility to confront systemic inequities in the meantime. DEI will improve through iteration, but that work cannot wait until it's flawless. This is a field of practitioners, and as such, it learns through practice. If there are concerns about DEI trainings, there are a few things that can be immediately put into practice to clarify the goals to participants:

- **Start with job relevance:** Write a one-sentence statement that ties the training to a service or performance competency you already measure.
- **Define success up front:** List three observable behaviors the training should change; draft how you will check them in six weeks.
- **Pre/post lightly**: Add one practical pre/post check tied to behavior (mystery-shop interactions; form quality; response times), not attitudes alone.
- **Build opt-in depth:** Provide optional resources and coaching circles for those who want more; keep the core training concise and job-tied.

Privacy of thought may be a philosophical ideal. But in practice, it has never been equally distributed, and it cannot be used as a shield against the responsibility that comes with public employment. If someone is uncomfortable being asked to consider how their worldview affects others, that shows a rejection of openness to feedback that is a red flag in any employee.

The argument towards protecting "privacy of thought" is a straw man. In publicly funded libraries, the ethical imperative is to serve a diverse public, and that requires training, reflection, and accountability. Legally, public employees' on-duty speech and privacy are limited and contextual, not absolute. Ethically, public institutions owe a duty of equitable service that justifies reflective practice and training. Professionally, beliefs predict behavior in ways that shape service and workplace climate. For library leaders, the implication is to document the job-related aims of DEI training, align it to policy and service standards, and evaluate outcomes the way they would any other operational training.

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We Already Know (Better): Private Thoughts, C/overt Harm, and a Call to Center Beneficence in Librarianship

KAETRENA DAVIS KENDRICK

ABSTRACT

As direct actions and corresponding documentation of the brisk desertion of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) values and activities continue within the United States academic landscape, troubling ideas linking EDI efforts to invasions of privacy are attempting to be seeded in the LIS field. However, lived experiences of historically ignored and racialized library workers who have been harmed in library workplaces reveal that resistance to authentic acceptance and integration of EDI have long been made known by the dominant membership of the field through both unconscious and deliberate responses to EDI at all levels of development, and even during its absence—from the simple presence of BIPOC librarians to the funding of recruitment and retention programs. Recognizing that c/overt EDI resistance both intensifies harm and reveals a willingness to turn away from interrupting harm, I explore parallels between EDI and beneficence, posit EDI resistance and thought privacy rhetoric as proxy resistance to difficult knowledge, share narrative data revealing BIPOC library workers' observations of long-standing industrial ambivalence and resistance to EDI, and call for the practice of beneficence—already recognized by and intentionally practiced in professions centered on helping individuals not only survive, but thrive, by reducing known harms and recognizing and mitigating harms as they arise during research, inquiry, and practice.

We Already Know (Better): Private Thoughts, C/overt Harm, and a Call to Center Beneficence in Librarianship

"I can't believe what you say, because I see what you do."
– James Baldwin

In her article on asserting that DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) trainings violate *thought privacy*, Antelman broadly defines the term as "an instinctively understood concept because everyone experiences it every day . . ." and attempts to connect the idea to Boire's explanation of cognitive liberty, which includes that ". . . each person is free to direct one's own consciousness; one's own underlying mental processes, and one's beliefs, opinions, and worldviews" (Antelman 2025, Boire 2000/1999). I am struck both by the author's circuitous former definition, as well as the oversight that Boire's perspective in use as intended when it

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comes to EDI trainings. While EDI trainings are multi-faceted, they generally include cultivating liberative spaces for people to 1) explore and recognize their own experiences, beliefs, opinions, and worldviews while considering the same of others who have been systemically harmed through suppression and silence and 2) share experiences of challenge and pathways to reconciliation, belonging, and care. Antelman's surface discussions of cultural competence and humility inadvertently reveal that it is not privacy of thought encroachment that stymies deeper support and implementation of EDI—it is silent resistance to acknowledging harmful experiences faced by suppressed identities; ambivalence to interrupting harm done to colleagues who have been harmed by exclusion, abuse, and/or EDI pushback; and arrogance in the perception that EDI resistance is only observable through the (purportedly intrusive) request of one's thoughts on these matters.

My 2017 study on low-morale experiences in academic librarians revealed the experience as one resulting from repeated and protracted exposure to abuse and neglect at work, along with factors and systems that influence the experience (Kendrick 2017). Although pointedly not by design (but certainly a reflection of the LIS workforce), most of the participants were White, and this prompted me to conduct a second study for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) academic library workers. I wanted to know if and how the low-morale experience definition held for BIPOC, and if any differentials would surface. The qualitative data from interviews was analyzed using rigorous social science methodologies and ultimately revealed experiences of abuse and neglect along with additional impact factors that support and/or obfuscate the impacts of workplace harm (Kendrick & Damasco 2019).

Across deep interviews with BIPOC participants, 67 statements revealed the role of *diversity rhetoric* as an enabling system of low-morale experiences. These statements highlight and reify a truth that chills Antelman's assertion on DEI and thought privacy: unrequested or not, many library workers' private thoughts on EDI were always on display. The context of experiential harm in which these statements were shared also positions those who view EDI as an intrusion of private thought as unempathetic, intellectually unnuanced, and disingenuous by default ("Open Letter to CRL from the academic wing of #CripLib" 2025). Furthermore, the argument of thought privacy—and *diversity rhetoric* data—surfaces beneficence as an urgently needed value and practice at this critical time in the library and information science (LIS) profession.

Defining Beneficence

Beneficence is an established principle in practitioner-led health and science industries. Even though LIS is a promoted as a science and a practice, many LIS practitioners may not be aware of beneficence unless they are engaged in formal human subjects research. HSR projects require intensive training covering federal regulations and institutional policies and procedures for humane treatment of research participants. *The Belmont Report*, drafted in 1978 by the Office for Human Subject Research Protections and published in 1979 in response to war crimes, morally abject research studies, and/or associated inhumane treatment of targeted participants and people during World War II and after, highlights beneficence as one of three ethical principles, noting:

> Persons are treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being . . . Two general rules have been formulated as complementary expressions of beneficent actions in

> this sense: (1) do not harm and (2) maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harm.

These complementary rules move practitioners and researchers beyond their obligations of helpful service and research and into a responsibility to be generous with the full bounty of results that improve people's lives—and to be aware of *and* intervene when unanticipated harm that comes from associated actions and inquiries arise.

Beneficence and EDI

An overview of the goals of beneficence and EDI surface symbiotic aims focused on recognizing, reducing, or interrupting harm and reveals how the LIS industry has used EDI to focus on *ideas* about helping suppressed colleagues and communities instead of requiring *accountable actions* that interrupt historic and contemporary harms the industry has done to these groups.

Within the parameters of beneficence, there are clear alignments with the goals of EDI. Historically, EDI programs were created and refined to acknowledge, correct, and prevent long-standing race and gender-based inequities borne of *de jure* and *de facto* political, economic, and social exclusion. Affirmative action, which began before *The Belmont Report*, is the most recognized effort, which in turn ushered in other programs at municipal, government, industrial, and organizational levels.

As EDI initiatives expanded into areas of accessibility and social justice, the second rule of beneficence also took root. Through grassroots work, critical race theory, and other areas of inquiry, reflection, and practice, EDI was improved through an increased awareness of harm done while engaging in EDI work. White privilege, intersectionality, and microaggressions are a few concepts/events that are now formally or experientially acknowledged as harmful and shared as points of awareness for intervention and mitigation within improved EDI practices (McIntosh 1989, Crenshaw 1991, Sue et al. 2007).

The LIS field generally joined these efforts, particularly in areas of BIPOC recruitment and retention. In addition to creating affinity caucus and divisions, the American Library Association (ALA) commissioned EDI-focused committees, created offices, and funded scholarship programs to increase and track recruitment and retention of BIPOC workers to the LIS workforce. However, even these efforts reveal private-public thoughts of librarians who saw harm and still felt resistance to intervene. In a retrospective narrative of her role in creating the Spectrum Scholarship, former ALA Executive Director Elizabeth Martinez wrote:

> One of my personal concerns was how to increase the number of librarians of color in the profession. For over 20 years, it had been claimed that diversity was a priority of ALA, yet no major program addressed this responsibility. I had hoped that adding diversity as one of the principles of ALA Goal 2000 would ignite conversation and bring forth solutions, but that did not happen.

Martinez recognized how other professions were already making progress on this—with a nod to recognizing harms of *not* supporting EDI (it is not lost on the author that these same professions are already aware of the beneficence principle):

> Other professions, such as medicine, nursing, and teaching were already making visible strides in increasing the number of non-white professionals. These professions emphasized the potential for better service, including improving communications with diverse communities. They had progressed from talking about the problem to funding recruitment.

Martinez shared her recognition of librarian resistance through claims of lack of funding, repetitive requests for additional information, and general stalling. She described the increasingly caustic responses from ALA Council members and highlighted how Past ALA President Betty Turock summarily moved the group to approve the program:

> In my opinion, it was Past-President Betty Turock's speech that settled the issue after hours of debate. She shamed her colleagues and friends into approval, reminding them of their hypocritical statements. Because of long-standing respect for her, and her history at the organization's governance level, she was likely the only one who could have forced them to agree.

Martin's narrative also surfaces librarians' resistance to *difficult knowledge*—truths that threatened their perception of the field, its purported values, and the gap between their stated and applied desire to support EDI in LIS. Exposure to difficult knowledge can create a "war within" as people grapple with their original views and determine if/how to integrate validated information from expanded narratives of harmed people and groups (Britzman 1998). Difficult knowledge also reveals a privilege to ignore harm and determine whose experiences of harm and indignity matter as they are compared with originally held worldviews.

Through the lens of beneficence, how might those colleagues have responded to the idea, funding, and implementation of Spectrum? What responsibility and role could those colleagues have played if they were practicing beneficence? What message is sent to potential or current colleagues about LIS's commitment to and accountability for realizing belonging, representation, and advancement in the field? Since beneficence is predicated on promoting others' well-being, as well as benefit maximization and harm reduction, one area of increased certainty is the decentering of one's private thoughts, particularly in the realm of ethical librarianship practice.

Silent Screams, Superficial Support, and Singling Out

Since the founding of the Spectrum Scholarship and the development of other LIS recruitment and retention efforts, librarians' purportedly private thoughts about EDI continue to surface as a result of c/overt harm. Narratives of experiences are the primary revealer of harm and how it is exacted on those who face it. Sharing these experiences offers opportunities for people to cultivate empathy for suffering, to reflect on ways they can be aware of their role in harm, and to consider how they can reduce the creation of harm or intervene when they witness harm.

Following are statements supporting the Diversity Rhetoric enabling system, shared in 2019 during interviews conducted with BIPOC academic librarians while discussing their experiences of workplace abuse and neglect. These statements were connected to participant observations of their colleagues' responses to EDI efforts and implementation, associated labor and values work, and political ideologies and structures that have caused historic and ongoing harm.

EDI Pushback

"[A white woman] said that she felt that she was being ignored with all this talk about diversity. So, there's a resistance to it. Against having the discussion here." – Multi-racial study participant

"[The current structure] . . . keeps people of color out of certain positions. And that reminds me that when we have these initiatives like diversity and things like that, we have White people determining what diversity should look like." – African American study participant

"And [the diversity committee]—we feel like we have to be more careful now with our director as to what to bring up to her. Because she has gotten some pushback from some of our White colleagues about how much she listens to the librarians of color." – Asian American study participant

Superficiality

"These women are very liberal—as soon as 45 was elected, they're wearing their safety pins and I thought, 'that's hilarious, they're wearing their safety pins to show that they're safe people to talk to,' yet in their circles, they're all-White circles . . . I think they think that they're 'woke,' so-to-speak, but I don't think they really are." – Hispanic study participant

"Mostly—all of the leadership is White. And I think, on the surface, they put out statements that say they are about things like dismantling White supremacy. So, they know the vocabulary, but then I wonder if they fully understand what it means." – Asian American study participant

Tokenizing and Paternalism

"I felt like I was told by [an administrator] to help this person because I was perceived as a person of color, as Asian American—to help this person. Because I think there was probably some perception that Asian Americans are docile and subservient." – Asian American study participant

"They were just like, 'oh, there's these three Brown people. They're new, so we'll just shuffle them . . . and coach them through this process' without accounting for the fact that two of us had already been working in libraries, so I didn't need a crash course." – African American study participant

These statements of BIPOC librarian experience showcase library workers' roles in perpetuating practical cognitive dissonance and engaging in implicit and explicit harm surrounding their (lack of) involvement with EDI initiatives, through:

- eschewing or avoiding DEI labor and service by burdening vulnerable BIPOC colleagues with the work;
- insulting the intelligence of BIPOC colleagues by engaging in false promotion of DEI; and
- discounting DEI work through surface acts that impede or regress DEI efforts or that posit DEI research as academically unsound or less rigorous.

Impacts of Covert Harm

The cognitive dissonance of being harmed by colleagues and organizations that are superficially promoting EDI—of understanding implicitly that these superficialities reveal their colleagues' *private thoughts* during their daily work—intensify the impacts of emotional, verbal/written, and systemic abuse and neglect and cause real and long-lasting harm to BIPOC library workers. These impacts interrupt the realization of goals that the LIS field touts as priorities for a robust and relevant industry. Moreover, these interruptions invoke harm on non-BIPOC library workers through deteriorating communication styles, negative workplace behaviors, and dysfunctional organization and industry norms and expectations (Freedman 2012, Freedman and Vreven 2016, Kendrick 2017, Ettarh 2018, Berg, Galvan & Tewell 2018).

Physical and Mental Health

BIPOC library workers dealing with diversity rhetoric experience report decreased physical and mental health. Additionally, they deal with two significant factors of internally motivated emotional labor resulting from the external harm and c/overt workplace exclusion they encounter:

- Stereotype threat—feelings that motivate marginalized identities to feel like they must distance themselves from negative stereotypes connected to their race, ethnicity, or culture. Workaholism, vocational awe, and unhealthy resilience behaviors are connected to this state.
- Deauthentication—minimization of personality, natural emotions, self-image, language, or ethnic or cultural heritage to avoid interrogation, retaliation, and shaming in hostile or unwelcoming workplaces.

Depression and anxiety are other commonly reported mental health outcomes, along with decreased sleep quality, fatigue, and body aches (Kendrick & Damasco 2019).

Stagnant BIPOC Recruitment/Retention

Despite recruitment efforts, along with retention programs to support BIPOC librarian persistence in the field, the field remains overwhelmingly White (88%) (ALA 2012). Currently we are observing numerous academic institutions abjectly abandon their already tenuous EDI efforts only a few years after announcing diversity statements and sharing links to carefully crafted and curated LibGuides about Black Lives Matter. What do these acts of abandonment signal to BIPOC who were considering the field? And what of the intensified harm and moral injury exacted upon current BIPOC library workers? How will these wounds

impact others? How can beneficence help library workers and organizations ensure a sense of safety and belonging and aid in recovery from these very public impacts of supposedly private thoughts?

Beneficence as Value and Practice

Library workers often share that they joined the field to "help people," however, the beneficence principle reveals that this desire is not enough when it comes to engaging with or serving excluded or harmed individuals and groups. Vocational awe and burnout reveal that the nebulous desire to help negatively impacts library workers *and* library users as they grapple with workplace harm, persistent outdated stereotypes, collegial ambivalence from teaching faculty, swiftly evolving industrial disruptions, and an expanding erosion of public distrust in higher education.

Already Bound to Beneficence

While not specifically named in LIS ethics and values documents, there are hints that both eschew the centering of private thoughts and signal beneficence in library practice. ALA Code of Ethics Principles remind practitioners not to center private interests at the expense of co-workers and to be mindful of the line between personal convictions and professional duties—which often include working with a variety of populations and identities for collaborative scholarship and service, community outreach, student engagement, and student success. ALA's Core Value of Equity also implies both the goals of EDI *and* beneficence ("actively working to dismantle barriers and create spaces that are accessible, welcoming and beneficial for all" . . . "accomplished by recognizing and addressing systemic barriers and biases . . . where everyone can benefit from the library's offerings and services.") (2024)

Rejecting notions that unevenly leverage privacy of thought ideology to justify (the privilege of) turning away from others' experience of harm and exclusion, I call on library workers to stay in the morally courageous and empathetic space of bearing witness, sharing vulnerability, and responding to/intervening in harm when it presents as expected—or when it is revealed unexpectedly, as it is wont to do while engaging in the humane work of community-building, equity, social justice, and reconciliation.

Considerations for Intentional Beneficence Practice

At a time when empathy, compassion, and hope are being vilified and/or feel akin to toxic positivity, it holds that librarianship, when practiced authentically, is humane at its core. With that humanity comes fallibility, and through practice, librarians are obligated to acknowledge challenges and seek consistent improvement to benefit the most people—while minimizing harm. To that end, there are as many entry points to beneficence as there are people who can call forth their own experiences of harm. With reflection, one can begin anew to recognize, anticipate, and intervene to increase points of protection and benefits and/or deflect and reduce harm. General areas of beginning or renewed commitment include:

- Seeking HSR education to become acquainted with the role of beneficence in applied inquiry and practice. Many academic institutions offer HSR education and certification through their research compliance or grant coordination offices;
- Being transparent about the limits of library work, the harm those limits may present, and sharing information that could reduce this harm or advocating on

behalf of vulnerable populations to appropriate parties with the power to reduce harm;

- Considering both the hopeful and unintended outcomes of policies, programs, and services—including the impacts on library workers at all levels (not just primary or secondary library users);
- Acknowledging past dysfunctional behaviors and intervening in current dysfunctional behaviors that shape, expand, perpetuate, and hide trauma between library workers;
- Strengthening psychological safety and collective care strategies for library workers so they can maintain a sense of well-being that supports them through the challenges of industry disruption, organizational change, reduced workplace safety, understaffing, and burnout; and
- Making space for intentional reflection and responsive updating of policies, processes, and workflows that reveal (incremental) progress and ongoing learning, and which reduce or remove identified barriers revealed by lived experiences of harm.

Conclusion

Librarians will always be moored to the decisions of their broader institutions or municipalities; however, we are still called to consider the ethics of librarianship and people in the communities where we engage. These communities include library workers who have been harmed explicitly and implicitly by their co-workers via subversion of EDI efforts. Enabling systems of workplace harm reveal that when it comes to EDI, the claim of thought privacy disappears when met with the observed material and intangible devastating outcomes of its lack of integrative implementation in higher education landscapes. With or without formal EDI training programs, the internal thoughts of many colleagues have been revealed via actions of exclusion, c/overt resistance, superficial engagement, and swift values regression upon the slightest presence of de-centering, emotional discomfort, or bureaucratic pressure.

Beneficence is a core practice of trusted professions and is one that is implicitly acknowledged in LIS. Repositioning EDI as an affront to intellectual freedom and thought privacy is an attempt to reestablish libraries and librarianship as neutral sites of engagement, and this regressive positioning acts as a gateway, allowing harm and suffering to be ignored, persist, and expand. Moreover, this position asserts that library workers should remain in a state of playing pretend: some workers continuing to announce that they care but never doing so authentically, other workers signaling through c/overt actions their desire to distance themselves from bearing witness to or reconciling harm while thinking no one can see their lack of care, and harmed library workers must pretend they don't see or feel the lack of care while suffering from these inauthentic and c/overt acts and public-private thoughts. To be a truly helpful profession requires facing and naming what is true and honoring experiences that reveal where librarians can improve, rather than attempting to leverage professional values to hide our industrial shortcomings. Beneficence offers a way to face these truths and move us in action toward instilling and reinforcing a sense of safety; ensuring the dignity, belonging, and care found in people-centered workplaces and communities; and centering applied humaneness in the face of established, ongoing, and potential harm.

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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,

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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 intersectional 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. Dixson, 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 "transtheoretical" 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, multiplistic 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 Domasco'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.

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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.

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Halting the Digital Equity Act: Stop-Work Order on Bridge for Digital Divide

KARA MALENFANT

ABSTRACT

This opinion piece frames the Trump administration's attempt to abruptly cancel the Digital Equity Act (DEA) as one critical battle in a much larger war to restrict access to information and limit education. In seeking to halt the DEA's historic expenditures of $2.75 billion to ensure improved broadband adoption, inclusion, and digital skills, the administration aims to perpetuate the well-documented and long-recognized digital divide. Because greater availability does not necessarily translate to greater use, adoption requires support from the "human infrastructure of broadband" (Rhinesmith and Prasad 2025), with library and information science (LIS) workers playing valuable roles.

This piece maintains that access to information in all formats is both a human right and a core professional value and that the educational role of librarians in lifelong learning and information literacy (including digital literacy) constitutes a set of professional competencies and guiding principles. It contends that library workers should share our commitment to digital equity and inclusion whenever we rally around professional values and principles to advocate for our communities. As LIS workers unite to uphold information access, foster diversity and inclusion, promote lifelong learning, and improve literacy, we must assert the vital role of libraries as community anchor institutions and our own roles as educators in the digital world.

Overview: Digital Equity in Today's Climate

The Digital Equity Act (DEA)'s historic funding of $2.75 billion was carefully designed to ensure improved high-speed internet adoption and digital skills for a wide range of historically marginalized people in every state and territory. When President Donald Trump attempted to abruptly cancel the DEA on May 9, 2025, unilaterally declaring it unconstitutional and deriding the program's "woke handouts based on race," he stopped momentous work to bridge the digital divide. This piece argues that far from being an isolated incident, the attack on digital equity and inclusion is a critical battle in a much larger war against information access and education. This politically motivated action broadly undermines diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as library and information science (LIS) values.

As a former staff member at the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association, I developed deep knowledge of the need for and the promise of the DEA, having activated the academic library field and advocated for the

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profession and campus communities during rulemaking. Now, as an LIS educator, I endeavor for students and LIS workers to recognize that digital inclusion is not a distinct issue, but part of the larger "mosaic of interrelated issues" that constitute information policy, as exhorted by Jaeger and Taylor (2019).

Information Infrastructure in US Society

The desire for greater access to information extends back to the founding of this nation; one key reason for the American Revolution was the lack of information from the king's representatives to colonial governments and colonists (Jaeger and Taylor 2019). Historically, the federal government has taken a keen interest in shaping information infrastructure, starting with provisions in the US Constitution to establish a national post office service and postal roads, which Inouye notes are "the forerunner of today's conceptualization of universal access to information and technology" (2019, xv).

This connection between access to information and support for infrastructure was recognized in the early days of public internet service; for example, then-President Clinton and Vice President Gore prioritized funding and projects to advance the "information superhighway" (The White House n.d.). In a 1999 keynote address to the International Telecommunication Union, then-United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted, "People lack many things: jobs, shelter, food, health care, and drinkable water. Today, being cut off from basic telecommunications services is a hardship almost as acute as these other deprivations, and may indeed reduce the chances of finding remedies to them" (United Nations).

In the intervening decades, high-speed internet access has become increasingly necessary to participate in economic, social, cultural, and civic life. In her seminal work about information, policy, and power, Braman (2006) noted that

> conditions of access determine who can contribute information to our knowledge stores and what types of information become available to all, and they influence how informational systems are structured to minimize barriers between socioeconomic and informational classes within the social structure and to ensure that everyone can participate in public debate about public issues. (199–200)

Equitable information access, then, is about people of all classes creating information and participating in political life. While improved broadband access is often posited as a public good, there are also commercial interests at play that seek to increase consumption in our capitalist economy.

Likewise, the need for a skilled workforce is part of a neoliberal economic ideology. Braman critiqued the emphasis on information technologies rather than information literacy, noting this as one of the "failures of policy efforts to ensure a technologically literate workforce sufficient for contemporary needs has led to a reliance on immigration as a source of high-technology labor and the transfer of jobs offshore" (2006, 165). These themes of commercial interests and skilled workforce are not new and factored prominently in the "information superhighway" championed by then-Vice President Gore.

At the policy level, the DEA is designed to address both conditions of access and digital literacy. It serves the public good and supports political engagement, while also meeting the

needs of a capitalist economy by advancing digital equity and inclusion for eight marginalized populations.

Origins of the DEA

The DEA was designed in response to challenges brought into high relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. Frequent news reports exposed the vast extent of the digital divide, with people traveling miles and sitting for hours outside libraries to connect to the internet for work and school. Students in a wide range of communities could not pivot rapidly to online schooling because they lacked devices and high-speed internet at home. Libraries scrambled to create programs to lend Wi-Fi hotspots and laptops, then maintain them.

Community members of all types struggled, not because they lacked access, but because they lacked skills. Again, libraries created tutorials, workshops, explainers, and tip sheets to support community needs. The DEA was designed in response to these pandemic-era challenges to promote digital inclusion, spur greater broadband adoption, and foster digital literacy among a wide range of populations and communities.

DEA funding, appropriated by Congress, arose from community and technology experts, like those in the LIS professions, who had worked for decades to advocate for policy changes to bridge the digital divide. Through an intentional design, DEA funds were planned for three sequential stages: $60 million for states and territories to develop digital equity plans, $1.44 billion capacity grants for states and territories to implement those plans, and $1.25 billion for a national competitive grant program.

This carefully designed program filled a specific, crucial gap in federal policy. While other programs target broadband availability and affordability, the DEA focuses on high-speed internet adoption (i.e., home internet and devices) and skill building. It was developed to complement the $42.45 billion Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program (BEAD), which primarily aims to fund partnerships to build high-speed internet infrastructure.

While BEAD primarily aims to build infrastructure, it includes a digital equity component to ensure the community has the skills and understands the benefits of its use. However, in June 2025, new program rules rescinded prior approval for "nondeployment activities" such as workforce development, telehealth, cybersecurity, and digital literacy that had been approved under the Biden administration (Quinlan 2025a). No new rules were issued to direct states about what qualifies as nondeployment activities prior to the September 4 deadline for states to submit their final BEAD proposals. Subsequently, with billions expected to be unspent, the Trump administration claims it's saving taxpayers money, although by law, this money belongs to states. (Quinlan 2025b).

The DEA recognizes that broadband deployment alone won't close the complex phenomenon that is the digital divide. Many people remain uninterested in broadband adoption, having found workarounds that feel "good enough" without an internet subscription at home. In fact, far more people reported they aren't online at home because they don't need/aren't interested in connecting than those who cited cost or lack of availability (National Telecommunications and Information Administration 2024). Thus, the DEA maximizes BEAD infrastructure investments to encourage adoption through devices, digital navigators, trainers, and more.

LIS Human Infrastructure of Broadband

The DEA acknowledges that it takes more than internet service and devices for communities to use broadband. It takes people, too. Crucially, this federal investment acknowledges the value of the labor involved—by people like library workers—as the essential "human infrastructure of broadband" to support three main services: helping people build digital skills, connecting people to broadband services, and providing access to devices and device maintenance (Rhinesmith and Prasad 2025).

Importantly, higher education institutions qualify for DEA funds, a recognition that they employ this valuable human infrastructure and that the communities they serve also need digital inclusion. Thus, academic libraries qualify for DEA funds to better serve their communities, whereas past federal programs focusing on the digital divide were targeted to K–12 and public libraries. Of note, among US academic libraries, while digital materials constitute 47 percent of collections, their use is 98.4 percent of the total, making digital inclusion and digital literacy skills essential for postsecondary students (Association of College and Research Libraries 2024).

LIS Values and Weaponization of Equity

The current attempt to cancel DEA funding seeks to perpetuate the digital divide by limiting access to information, a core professional value for the library field (American Library Association 2024), and preventing the acquisition of digital skills—related to a core competence for community lifelong learning (American Library Association 2023) and a professional principle of supporting information-literate learners (Association of College and Research Libraries 2018).

The administration's attack not only undermines professional values but also deliberately misrepresents the program's purpose. By narrowly focusing on race—although "race" or "racial" appear only twice in text of the law (Ortutay and Rush 2025)—Trump constricted the definition of equity and inclusion, thus ignoring the seven other covered populations who also need and want digital equity and inclusion: people with low incomes, language barriers, or disabilities; as well as those residing in rural areas, veterans, seniors, and incarcerated individuals. In condemning the termination, one group of elected representatives noted, "Nearly 80% of Illinois residents belong to at least one of the categories of individuals the law is designed to assist" (Office of Senator Tammy Duckworth 2025).

Halting DEA funds as "woke handouts" negates the role of experts and the voices of community members nationwide who want digital inclusion. A timeline for DEA implementation demonstrates that the years-long process has involved substantial effort and community consultation (National Digital Inclusion Alliance n.d.). This is true at the national level for the overall design of the DEA as well as for states in crafting their plans. For example, the State of Illinois's digital equity plan "was informed with the input of over 1,250 Illinoisans at more than 50 sessions across a statewide listening tour" (Office of Governor J. B. Pritzker 2025). Within LIS, associations and consortia engaged actively at national and local levels with practitioners, coalition partners, and rulemakers (Malenfant et al. 2025), and I advanced these efforts while on staff at ACRL.

The broad-based need for digital inclusion is well established, and high-speed internet access is increasingly seen as a public good and part of the universal right of information access inherent to all people as outlined in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights (U.N. General Assembly 1948). In denouncing the current administration's action, the President of the American Library Association noted, "Broadband is a human right, and broadband access is core to modern life and success for school, work, healthcare, civic participation and social connections" (American Library Association 2025).

Broader Political Agenda

The halting of DEA funds is part of long-standing efforts within the US to deny equitable access to services, information, and education. In fact, Valentin (2025) posits this denial as a "defining feature" of our country's history and that this current halting of the DEA is part of the Trump administration's attempt to "reshape U.S. institutions, distort historical truth, and reinforce racial and economic inequality." This attempt to halt DEA funds, then, can be seen as one piece in a broader political agenda to deliberately undo policy commitments to equity and inclusion writ large, although whether it is successful remains to be seen.

Recall that the DEA would improve high-speed internet adoption and skilled use in places with low connectivity (such as rural areas), help low-income families adopt broadband, and provide digital literacy and skills training to seniors, veterans, people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, and more. In benefiting a large proportion of the populace, it is not a niche program. A well-connected and skilled public damages the current administration's political agenda to narrow universal civic participation. By attempting to cancel DEA funds, the administration aims to perpetuate uneven broadband adoption and poor digital skills.

To illustrate this impact, work had already been well underway when DEA funding was halted, with many states moving forward on projects they had identified as priorities. For example, in Idaho, sub-grantees had already been selected for $2.3 million in awards for activities like cybersecurity classes, laptops and accessories, and tech repair support (Flandro 2025). If DEA funding is not restored, libraries will lose the capacity to run programs that include lending devices and offering training, resulting in worse community outcomes.

Whether Trump has the authority to end the program remains one of many unknowns, and twenty-two states have filed suit in opposition (Benton Institute for Broadband and Society 2025). When questioning Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, US Senator Patty Murray—the author of the DEA—called the suspension of congressional-appropriated DEA funds illegal, to which Lutnick equivocated, "It will go through the courts and the courts will decide" (US Senate Committee on Appropriations 2025).

Rallying Call for an Uncertain Future

Braman (2021) posits that while information policy has historically developed incrementally, there are punctuations where change is radical and outcomes are uncertain. She identified three such instances in US information policy in the twenty-first century, triggered by 9/11, Trump's first election, and COVID-19.

I believe we are living in another such time of radical, punctuated change with an uncertain outcome, and we should see the attempt to cancel the DEA as part of a broader agenda to restrict information and control what we learn. It goes hand in hand with efforts to ban books, freeze research funding, cease collecting data about food insecurity, erect roadblocks to basic services like Social Security, dismantle the US Department of Education,

remove information from National Park sites and Smithsonian institutions, and redirect the Institute of Museum and Library Services' library funding to the America250 project.

As a field facing many attacks, let us remember that when we fight *against* current attempts to restrict information and control education, what we are fighting *for* matters. The ability to freely access information is a human right that includes accessing and successfully using high-speed internet. When we rally around our professional values and principles to advocate for our communities, we must incorporate digital equity and inclusion into our messaging. As vital community anchors, we cannot uphold access to information without upholding access to online information. As trusted educators, we must assert our roles as promoters of lifelong learning in a digital world and experts in teaching digital skills.

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Between Compliance and Belonging: Navigating DEI in Restrictive Climates

ERIC GLENN

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the complexities of sustaining diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in a politicized higher education climate marked by anti-DEI legislation. Drawing from my experience as the inaugural Director of Organizational Development at Virginia Tech University Libraries, I explore how values of belonging and organizational well-being can be advanced even under restrictive conditions. The paper examines the tension between compliance and values, providing examples such as the transformation of the University Libraries Diversity Council into the Belonging and Wellness Council as a case study in adaptation. Regional insights from my role as Visiting Program Officer for the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL) further demonstrate how external pressures reshape professional spaces for BIPOC librarians in a field that remains predominantly white. Ultimately, the paper argues that while legislation may shrink the space for equity work, it cannot erase the human need for belonging. Libraries, as institutions of access and trust, hold a responsibility to ensure that promise endures.

Introduction

My academic library role was an inaugural position at a major R1 institution in a politically mixed ("purple") state, combining organizational development with diversity and inclusion. Over time, my focus naturally shifted toward institutional needs, but one goal always remained constant: to cultivate a welcoming, psychologically safe, and supportive environment where every employee could thrive. Navigating a politicized climate—with anti-CRT and anti-DEI rhetoric, shifting institutional compliance, administrative contradictions, and employee anxieties—made that mission both urgent and complex. Some staff felt personally attacked or unsupported by decisions they saw as capitulating too early, and they looked to me and others in administration for clarity, reassurance, or resistance.

At first glance, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education may seem like a collection of initiatives, such as retreats, workshops, and mission statements. But for those of us living this work, it is deeply personal. DEI is not a campaign or fad; it is about repeatedly shaping culture, creating belonging, and protecting safe spaces for every person, even when under attack.

That tension has become increasingly real in today's environment, particularly with the Dear Colleague letters from the Department of Education and Executive Order 14151. These directives have prompted institutions to adopt a more anticipatory compliance mindset, often

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driven by fear of losing federal funding. As a result, employees whose roles include a percentage of DEI responsibilities are directly affected. This shift has had a noticeable impact on aspects of my work and, more broadly, threatens to undermine the very values that libraries have long upheld.

As the inaugural Director of Organizational Development at Virginia Tech University Libraries, I have witnessed firsthand the clash between institutional values and political pressures. Libraries have traditionally been spaces of access, equity, and intellectual freedom. Yet external forces now pressure leaders to tread cautiously on race, gender, and identity topics. The risk is that once-visible communities can become overshadowed or forgotten behind safe, often vague language. Opportunities that once aimed to elevate underrepresented communities were suddenly in jeopardy, potentially facing suspension or elimination.

Balancing Values and Compliance

DEI work now demands creativity, resilience, and a strong foundation of education. Without proper training, practitioners in the field may unknowingly replicate harm or become vulnerable to critique. I have seen this firsthand when well-meaning but untrained facilitators attempted to lead white supremacy culture workshops, only to unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or alienate participants. Poorly executed DEI efforts are not only ineffective, but they also serve as ammunition for those eager to discredit the entire field.

Staff frequently ask me, "Can I even say diversity'?" or "Will this email be FOIA'd because I used a buzzword this administration dislikes?" These questions were rare years ago, but the landscape has shifted. For library leaders, the challenge is holding firm to access and inclusion while navigating institutional optics and compliance. It is emotionally taxing to exist in this middle ground, but it is essential for this work.

In response, I began framing belonging and equity through lenses that resonated across political divides: leadership development, organizational health, and employee well-being. For example, our Community Circles became platforms for connection and reflection. We described them as wellness spaces, but in practice, they cultivated cross-cultural dialogue, empathy, and mutual understanding—the very outcomes DEI work seeks. My Supervisors Group, which I lead, hosts monthly sessions on topics such as sustainable leadership, navigating difficult conversations, accountability, burnout, and supporting neurodivergent employees—all aimed at equipping our managers with the tools to better support their teams. By framing these sessions under the lens of organizational development, rather than explicitly labeling them as DEI initiatives, we've been able to continue fostering critical conversations that strengthen our workplace culture while also reducing the risk of external scrutiny. The emphasis is not about replacing DEI with organizational development, but about embedding equity, empathy, and belonging into everyday leadership practices in ways that feel both authentic and sustainable.

Adapting to Institutional Change

Anticipating Change

Even before policy shifts intensified, I anticipated challenges ahead. Though Virginia's governor initially expressed support for diversity and inclusion, his board appointments suggested a gradual pullback. By February 2025, when the "Dear Colleague" letter heightened

scrutiny of programs, we had already aligned our initiatives with compliance expectations a year and a half before.

One program I inherited was the Diversity Residency Program, designed to support early-career librarians—especially BIPOC professionals—in gaining experience across academic libraries. While the word "diversity" had become politically delicate, the mission remained intact: mentorship, exposure, and advancement. When institutional compliance began auditing programs, our framing and structure held strong, with the only change being the removal of the word "diversity."

Regional Ripple Effects

The ripple effects extended beyond Virginia Tech. In my role as Visiting Program Officer (VPO) with the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL), I saw how quickly fear of retaliation for perceived non-compliance reshaped initiatives. A group I provided programming for that had been intentionally curated for BIPOC librarians was restructured into broadly inclusive sessions shortly after the "Dear Colleague" letter, leaving fewer distinctly safe spaces. The situation was concerning in a field that remains overwhelmingly homogeneous: 86–88% of librarians identify as white, with projections showing only a modest drop to 83% by 2033 (Kendrick, 2023). Shrinking identity-centered spaces risks silencing the very voices most in need of visibility.

Transforming the Diversity Council

One of the clearest examples of adaptation within my institution was the transformation of the University Libraries Diversity Council (ULDC) into the University Libraries Belonging and Wellness Council (ULBWC). When I assumed leadership, the ULDC was struggling. Years of conflict, fatigue, and limited organizational support had left it stigmatized and ineffective. Some employees dismissed it as "performative" or a hollow funding outlet. Simultaneously, nationwide DEI councils faced scrutiny or dismantlement.

Rather than abandon the structure, I initiated a redesign. Through a historical review, interviews, and a SWOT analysis, I identified consistent themes: employees wanted clarity, trust, and meaningful contributions. With those insights, we reframed the council's identity to reduce political risk while staying true to our purpose and overall mission of the university. The new name—Belonging and Wellness Council—signaled a fresh start. "Belonging" underscored inclusivity, while "wellness" emphasized mental health and organizational care. The transformation was more than cosmetic. Membership was streamlined to reduce burnout, new leadership roles were introduced, and one-year terms encouraged fresh perspectives. Interest groups, such as Accessibility and Neurodivergence, allowed employees to engage without formal committee seats. Meetings were redesigned with intentional agendas tied to three drivers of success, while transparent processes were created for grant distribution.

The council soon regained credibility. It launched heritage month observances, wellness-centered programming, advocacy workshops, and food pantry initiatives for students. These efforts culminated in University Libraries receiving the 2025 Library Excellence in Access and Diversity (LEAD) Award. What began as a fractured, fatigued council evolved into a trusted and sustainable committee—evidence that meaningful adaptation is possible even in climates hostile to DEI.

The Human Side of Resistance

What grounds me most in this work are the human stories. I think often of the staff member who quietly said, "I finally feel seen here," after participating in a Community Circle. Or the resident who admitted after a session that they felt less isolated knowing others faced similar systemic barriers. These moments remind me why the work cannot stop, even if it has to adapt.

DEI fatigue is real, especially in climates where legislation feels hostile. I have learned that naming the fatigue itself—acknowledging the emotional toll—fosters solidarity. Employees feel validated when leaders admit the weight we are all carrying. That, too, is an act of resistance: refusing to pretend everything is fine when it is not.

Sometimes resistance looks bold and public, like a dean sending a message reaffirming our principles of community. Other times it is subtle, like embedding equity into hiring practices or leadership development. Both approaches matter. Both sustain the values we hold.

Reflection and Closing

Looking back, I see DEI work today as a dual practice: visible and invisible, bold and subtle. At times, we lead public-facing programs that openly celebrate inclusion. At other times, we embed equity into leadership training, recruitment, or wellness initiatives, knowing that language matters as much as intent in restrictive climates.

Sustaining DEI is not about choosing between compliance and values; it is about ensuring values endure, even when the packaging changes. That is where hope lives—in the quiet but steady work of making sure people feel they belong, regardless of what the headlines say.

Anti-DEI legislation may shrink the public space for equity work, but it cannot erase the human need for belonging. Libraries, as institutions of access, knowledge, and trust, have a unique responsibility to keep that need at the forefront. As professionals, we not only carry the burden of political climates but also the power to adapt, resist, and continue the work in new forms. DEI is not a trend; it is a promise. And even in restrictive environments, promises can be kept.

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Eric's career spans sales, research, and librarianship—reflecting his belief in the non-linear nature of success. He earned a B.S. in Neuroscience on an athletic scholarship at King University and began graduate studies in Counselor Education at Virginia Tech before transitioning to Louisiana State University,

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He holds multiple certifications and has completed training through Cornell, Virginia Tech, and the Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice, all focused on building inclusive, psychologically safe workplaces. Eric is passionate about cultivating strong communities, well-being, and human-centered leadership across higher education.

When Our Work Becomes Illegal: Navigating Anti-DEI Laws in Kentucky

ALEXANDRA HOWARD AND COURTNEY SHAREEF

ABSTRACT

In 2025, Kentucky passed a law outlawing DEI offices, resources, and programming in public colleges and universities. In this article, we—two academic librarians at an urban, public research university in Kentucky—reflect on how that anti-DEI law renders much of our collaborative and individual work illegal. We provide a chronology of DEI-related changes over a five-year period at our institution, highlighting the shift from the university's goal in 2020 of becoming a premier anti-racist research university to DEI now being outlawed at the university in 2025.

On Tuesday, January 21, 2025, we met with the University of Louisville's (UofL) Director of Foundation Relations to begin planning the third annual Business, Equity, Arts, Technology, and Science (BEATS) Week, which was the first of many initiatives that fostered collaboration between us as librarians, colleagues, and friends committed to championing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Since its inception in fall 2023, BEATS Week's purpose has been to connect underrepresented students and local entrepreneurs with the business, equity, arts, technology, and science skills they need to further their business and professional development. The first two iterations of the weeklong series succeeded in part due to the involvement of campus and community partners and sponsors. We sought to again achieve similar success for the third year by meeting with the Office of Corporate and Foundation Relations earlier in the planning process.

Though the first call occurred one day after Donald Trump's second inauguration and fourteen days into the Kentucky state legislative session, we left the call excited by the possibilities for the series. Ideas swirled. The director already had names of women, minority, and small business owners who were interested in the impact report from the second annual series and might want to be involved with this year's series. Could BEATS Week move beyond a week to be a semester- or yearlong series? Could we harness the success of the first two years to create corporate-branded engagements? What about incorporating an entrepreneurship-focused reading circle?

But by the time we met with our fellow co-conveners to update them just a week later, on January 29, some of the optimism had already begun to fade. In the interim between meetings, a series of executive orders had created confusion, uncertainty, and fear. For the first time, we began to ask ourselves not *what* we would do in the fall, but whether we even *could.*

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Any discussion of how we are navigating changes in the diversity, equity, and inclusion landscape requires a reflection on how we personally and professionally arrived at this moment at our institution. In this essay, we will provide a chronology of DEI-related changes at our institution and reflect on how those changes have impacted our work. We will first provide a quick introduction to who we are, to be transparent about our positionality and relationship to DEI in education.

Who We Are

Alexandra Howard is a white woman born and raised in the South. Diversity has been central to my education throughout my life. My first educational experience was attending a predominantly African American elementary school, which instilled in me at an early age the importance of diverse learning environments. I earned a bachelor of arts in Africana studies from Oberlin College. From there, my professional pursuits centered on uplifting voices and stories that have been historically marginalized. I managed a leadership and advocacy program at a nonprofit in San Francisco, empowering young adults experiencing homelessness to share their stories and advocate for policy change at the state and regional levels. I worked as a criminal defense investigator for the Metro Nashville Public Defender, locating information to defend the innocence of my clients and to tell their stories beyond the crimes they had been accused of committing. I became a librarian to help increase equitable access to information for marginalized communities because I had seen firsthand the power information has to transform lives and effect change. My purpose in becoming a librarian is now being directly challenged by anti-DEI legislation at the state and federal levels.

Courtney Shareef is an African American woman also born and raised in the South. I received a bachelor's in journalism with a minor in African American studies from Howard University and a master of fine arts in creative writing - fiction from Columbia College Chicago, before pursuing an MLIS. Much of my professional experience prior to librarianship focused on elevating and amplifying marginalized and missing voices, as evidenced through my roles with Howard University's student-run radio station WHBC and its sister station WHUR 96.3 FM; as freelancer for Baltimore's *The Afro* and other press in the DMV area; as social media coordinator for MetroTeenAIDS/Real Talk DC, a nonprofit focused on HIV healthcare and prevention for youth; as creative writing instructor for After School Matters, a summer program for high school youth; and with *The HistoryMakers,* the nation's largest African American video oral history archive. Part of what motivated me to become a librarian was a desire to learn how to effectively reach and teach the marginalized and the missing how to find and utilize the information and resources they need to advance and preserve their personal, academic, and professional endeavors.

As we will detail in this article, the ideals that led us to the library and information science profession and fueled our early career work are now in direct opposition to legislation in our state and across the country. We have felt the effects from all sides. Our successful BEATS Week series has been paused indefinitely. Cautious colleagues have advised us to be mindful in our journey toward tenure, encouraging us to seek scholarship and research interests that are not connected with identity, and to consider service to organizations that comply with our state's anti-DEI legislation.

Our Institution's Shifting DEI Landscape: 2020–2024

In July 2020, the University of Louisville's then-president, Dr. Neeli Bendapudi, announced to students, faculty, and staff her goal that the university become the "premier anti-racist metropolitan research university." This goal was announced alongside notice of the university's "Cardinal Anti-Racism Agenda," which would incorporate feedback from the UofL community into its development in order to "strengthen all of us personally, professionally, and collectively for years to come" (Chernoff 2020).

Neither of us was a member of the institution at the time. Alex would join the university three months later and, inspired by the commitments of both the university and the city in the wake of Breonna Taylor's murder and the summer of social justice, began almost immediately to infuse social justice, anti-racism, and equity into her approach to business librarianship. This was not only a reflection of Alex's personal values, but also an effort to align her work with the university's strategic goals. In 2021, Alex began an initiative to connect local Black-owned businesses with library and university resources. This outreach led to research consultations with local entrepreneurs in the library, which evolved to larger collaborations. Howard and Koenig (2024) detail a community-engaged student research project they cocreated with a business owner Alex met through her 2021 initiative. BEATS Week was cofounded by this business owner, Alex, and a marketing professor with the goal of extending entrepreneurship education beyond the business school and further expanding campus and community collaboration. Courtney quickly joined the BEATS Week leadership team through her initial position as the diversity resident at University Libraries.

By the time Alex agreed to serve on the search committee for a new diversity resident in 2022, Dr. Bendapudi had left the university, and there were signs the university might be shifting away from the former president's "premier anti-racist" institution goal. Despite diversity resident positions being explicitly intended to increase "the hiring pipeline of qualified and talented individuals from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups" (American Library Association 2016), the university would not allow language in the job posting for the diversity resident that reflected this intention. The final, approved position was titled "Strategic Initiatives Librarian (Diversity Residency Program)" and featured three experiences over the two-year term. Alex would serve as the mentor of the innovation and entrepreneurship experience. The goal of this experience was for the resident to help form partnerships on campus and in the community to promote equitable access to entrepreneurship resources.

Courtney began as an academic librarian in January 2023. Within the first weeks of her hire, institutions around the country, including her own, began to take notice of Florida, which proposed its House Bill 999. The bill intended to remove from public colleges and universities "any major or minor in Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies, or Intersectionality, or any derivative major or minor of these belief systems," as well as prohibit the ability for these public institutions to utilize funds that support DEI programming or activities on campus (Florida Legislature 2023). But the situation at our institution and within our state felt far removed from those states. Or so we thought then.

Throughout the spring and into the summer and fall semesters, Alex and Courtney worked closely together. They transformed the residency's innovation and entrepreneurship mentored experience into the programmatic series that eventually became the first annual BEATS Week. The collegial relationship fostered through the mentorship experience eventually prompted Alex to encourage Courtney to become involved in the University Libraries' Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Group (DIAG) and to apply to serve on the university-wide

Commission on Diversity and Racial Equity (CODRE), which advised the president. Another colleague also invited Courtney to serve as the "Diversity Dispatch" columnist for the *Kentucky Libraries* journal published by the Kentucky Library Association. Her first column, "By the Time You Read This," offered a reflection on the growing anti-DEI sentiment in higher education (Shareef 2023).

In retrospect, we started to suspect that Kentucky would soon experience what was happening in Florida and Texas during summer 2023, only a few months before our inaugural BEATS Week later that September. We noticed by happenstance that our institution's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion had quietly changed its name on the university's website to the Office of Institutional Equity. To our knowledge, this change was made preemptively and without transparency. At the time, there had not been any legislation proposed in the state that dictated the change.

Even though we had faint worries about where we might be headed in fall 2023, we were not consumed by them. We planned our first annual BEATS Week alongside fifteen campus and community partners. Our BEATS Week cofounding community partner was the CEO and founder of Black Complex, a local coworking and event space geared toward Black entrepreneurs, creatives, and professionals. In our promotion of the event, we highlighted statistics around underrepresented entrepreneurs and minority-owned businesses in Louisville. This focus on supporting these specific populations in our community is now unlawful in our state and prohibited at our institution. We partnered with the now-defunct Cultural Center's Black Male Initiative, which agreed to host its simultaneously occurring Wellness Week as part of BEATS Week's opening and closing events. Melanin Music Monday—the opening—featured student performers, and The Final Cut: BEATS & Basketball—the closing—included a student basketball tournament with business and library resources offered on the sidelines. We were intentional about ordering catering only from local minority-owned businesses for our events throughout the week, another consideration that is now illegal. Our first annual BEATS Week was a huge success. Our primary sponsor was world-famous rapper and local hometown hero Jack Harlow, through The Jack Harlow Foundation. We had over 465 attendees across our eight events. When BEATS Week concluded, students, along with campus and community partners, were all excited to be involved in the second iteration, which would occur in November 2024.

Between fall 2023 and fall 2024, new legislation was introduced at the state level that aimed to ban DEI programming at public colleges and universities. While there was serious concern among DEI practitioners and advocates at the university, our university administration assured us in late 2023 that there was no cause for concern or need for collective organizing and strategizing. The proposed bill did not pass during the April 2024 legislative session; however, the Kentucky Senate's Minority Floor Leader spoke at a university event hosted by the now-defunct Commission on Diversity and Racial Equity (CODRE), warning attendees that the legislation would be reintroduced and suggesting that preparing a strategic response was essential.

We learned in August 2024 that the University of Kentucky, Kentucky's flagship land-grant research university, had preemptively scrubbed its website of DEI-related content and closed its DEI offices. But to our knowledge, not much changed at our university during the summer and fall of 2024. While we found the proposed legislation incredibly concerning, we also believed it was increasingly important to promote equitable access to entrepreneurship education for underrepresented communities on campus and in our city through BEATS Week. Many on campus and within the community anticipated its return that November.

While we were successful in our first iteration of BEATS Week, we applied the lessons learned from that initial offering and saw enormous growth in our second annual event. We had a new community partner, a local nonprofit that operated a Black and Latinx business incubator. We narrowed our focus in our programming, hosting only five events, yet nearly doubled our attendance, with over 800 attendees across the week's events. We increased the number of campus and community partners involved in planning and executing the week from 15 to 26. We directly supported 12 minority-owned businesses through catering purchases and local business showcases. We also hosted our first BEATS Week pitch competition in partnership with the university's entrepreneurship center and were able to give out over $14,000 in scholarships and cash prizes. We engaged new audiences, resulting in an increase in community member participation, as well as participation from local high school students enrolled in an entrepreneurship and leadership program. BEATS Week began to gain recognition across campus and throughout the city as an initiative that people wanted to participate in and support for the long term. At the conclusion of the week, our partners were ready to start planning our third annual BEATS Week.

Unfortunately, as predicted, the anti-DEI bill targeting higher education was reintroduced during the 2025 state legislative session. This time, it passed.

2025: Where Are We Now?

House Bill 4 was officially passed on March 28, 2025, and went into effect as Kentucky Revised Statute (KRS) 164.2895 on June 27, 2025. The law prohibits "consideration of religion, race, sex, color, or national origin by public postsecondary education institutions" and bans the use of any resources for DEI offices, programming, or other efforts (Kentucky 2025). This came shortly after attacks on DEI and education at the federal level, including a slew of executive orders issued by Trump after taking office. It was hard to accept the dystopian nightmare of censorship and silencing that challenged the foundation of our work as librarians.

The university had until June 30 to comply with the new law. Some offices and positions were renamed, including the aforementioned Cultural and Equity Center. Some initiatives were paused, and some organizations were dissolved. While the institution aimed for greater transparency regarding some decisions, many uncertainties still exist about the changes and expectations for compliance.

While we had begun planning for our third annual BEATS Week, we were also having conversations around scaling down the weeklong event series to ensure its long-term sustainability. However, it quickly became clear that hosting BEATS Week would no longer be an option, as it was a DEI initiative that did not fall under the exemptions for classroom instruction and research. It would be possible to replace "equity" with "entrepreneurship" in the BEATS Week acronym; however, the heart and soul of BEATS Week was really its emphasis on equitable access to entrepreneurship education for diverse and underrepresented business owners. Despite the decision not to continue the program this year, we continue to hear from campus and community partners eager to support BEATS Week.

Institutional compliance with the new law had a significant impact on University Libraries beyond the cancellation of the third annual BEATS Week. Earlier this semester, specific service roles were removed from faculty librarian annual work plans. Faculty librarians were later asked to submit a revised workplan with the new law in mind. The future of fulfilling service obligations remains unclear, but the prevailing guidance so far has been to

take a conservative approach. The new law prohibits using university resources to participate in DEI activities in professional or community organizations. This means that any librarians participating in service to any identity- or DEI-based professional organization will not be able to include that work in their annual reviews or towards promotion and tenure. All libguides with a DEI focus outside of specific academic programs were removed from the library website, including a Celebrating Black History guide and DEI Toolkit for the College of Business that Alex had created. Library sponsorship and representation at certain campus events remains tenuous.

In the midst of the chaos and confusion caused by the impending law, Alex had to prepare and submit her tenure file a month before it went into effect. Reviewing her body of work over the last five years and recognizing how much of it may now be considered illegal was jarring. DEI was at the foundation of her university and professional service, research and scholarly activity, and approach to teaching and librarianship. While Alex did not shy away from this reality in her personal statement for tenure, colleagues cautioned her from explicitly mentioning the new anti-DEI legislation and reflecting on the need for academic freedom in light of it. The future of Alex's tenure case is unclear. Though Courtney still has a few years before submitting her tenure file, she has been encouraged to diversify her scholarly pursuits by exploring opportunities beyond the service and scholarship that have thus far been grounded in DEI.

Uncertainty continues. We write this mindful that Kentucky's 2026 legislative session begins in just a few short months. We anticipate additional legislation that may further impose upon our intellectual and academic freedom. Developments at the federal level have left us speechless, and we do not know what to expect next. What do intellectual and academic freedom mean now that exploring certain ideas, educating on certain topics, and serving in certain professional capacities are considered illegal? How do we, as academic librarians who have been committed to DEI throughout our academic and professional careers, balance upholding our personal and professional values while remaining compliant with a new law that directly contradicts them? We don't have the answers, but we are committed to staying in community with each other, our colleagues, and other librarians and educators to find paths forward together.

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Library Censorship As a Health and Safety Issue

BILL CROWLEY

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the connection of library diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) with the management obligation to safeguard the health and safety of library staff and users. It focuses on two primary audiences. The first consists of the faculty of library and information science (LIS) educating students for public libraries and other positions. The second includes the library directors, staff, and trustees responsible for public library service in progressive, mixed philosophy, or conservative municipalities, counties, and states. A rationale and processes for bridging local variations of the progressive-conservative divide are provided. Throughout, the maximum feasible level of DEI collections and services and the minimization of attacks on public libraries and library staff are emphasized.

Threats, Job Losses, and Strategies for Enhancing Library DEI In Conservative Contexts

In an extended practitioner career prior to teaching and researching, the author once had to deal with a staff member carrying a loaded gun who understandably frightened other staff. The incident caused much psychological harm but no physical injury. It resembled some of the serious threats described in Cooke's "How Book-Banning Campaigns Have Changed the Lives and Education of Librarians – They Now Need to Learn How to Plan for Safety and Legally Protect Themselves" (Cooke 2023).

As summarized by Cooke

> Neither policies nor book reviews nor professional expertise are keeping library workers from being called pedophiles, groomers, indoctrinators and pornographers. They are being harassed, receiving death threats and being fired. Libraries have been sued and library workers are so threatened and harassed that they are getting sick and leaving their careers. (Cooke 2023).

One might hope that such slurs and crimes are being appropriately investigated. Nonetheless, as stressed by Knox, "despite libraries' efforts to stay abreast of evolving societal trends, insufficient adaptation to safeguard both employees and visitors against emerging risks has been evident. Absent substantial reforms, the trajectory of this issue foretells a worsening scenario" (Knox 2024).

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Where funds are available, social workers are being employed in public libraries. These professionals handle many health and safety problems brought into the building by users as an alternative to calling the police (PLA 2021). However, sworn officers would still be necessary with active-shooters, bomb threats, and other dangers to life (Public 2024; Quinton 2024).

The American Public Library World

Public libraries come in all sizes with differential funding for collections and services, as well as staff and user health and safety. As related by Elizabeth Fox, her rural state has "some very, very small libraries. Many libraries are rooms in the county courthouse or somewhere else. They don't have their own buildings, so they don't have large collections" (Limbong 2025). They may also lack resources to address health and safety concerns.

Personal Identity, COVID, and Other Challenges

Personal identity issues seemingly lie at the heart of the current culture war. "Identity – including race, sexual orientation, gender – have become lightning rod subjects of hundreds of bills in state legislatures across the country as Americans across the political spectrum seek to define the nation's values" (Alfonseca 2023).

COVID-era video instruction made some parents angered at the progressive education their children were receiving (Robinson-Shah 2024). Whatever the cause or causes, disputes over diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have intensified, often making it more difficult for various local residents to work and live together. Jonathan Haidt has encapsulated the fundamental problems with such disconnection, "liberals and conservatives are bound around different sacred principles, and they absolutely cannot understand each other. They are forbidden from understanding each other, lest they be kicked out of their tribe" (Knowledge at Wharton Staff 2013). Attempting to live inclusively can be hard work and "it's easier to surround ourselves with people who always agree with us" (McWilliams 2022).

Physical and Other Attacks

Physical attacks on library staff are more common in the contemporary world (Urban Libraries Council n.d.). Moreover, even when attacks on DEI-influenced public library collections and services are verbal or online, the result can be traumatic. Library personnel suffering a traumatic episode at work have been advised,

> First and foremost: create a safety plan when you are not in the midst of a trauma response that lists where you feel safe. This can include places and people. It might offer ideas for what you can do if you're in a space where you feel unsafe—for example, if you're at the reference desk, your safety plan might involve asking another staff member to cover for you while you go to your car to sit and breathe for 15 minutes. If you're on social media, it might mean setting your account to private and logging out for a period of time. (Jensen 2024)

In these and other circumstances, the library director usually has the responsibility to ensure the greatest possible support for the health and safety of library personnel and users.

Directors Acting to Protect the Health and Safety of Staff and Users

For discussion purposes, a simplified definition of causes for many contemporary disputes over public library collections and programs can be useful. Burnett asserts, "traditional-values groups are demanding the removal or restriction of books with explicit sex education, and books that unflinchingly document LGBTQ realities and the Black American experience" (Burnett 2022). Moreover, the undocumented can be added to the list.

Cooke's (2023) recounting of the inventory of negative physical and mental realities that faculty need to convey to students in their teaching has already been highlighted. For these and other reasons, contemporary library managers should regularly "check in with staff on their well-being and stress levels" (PressReader Team 2024).

In public libraries, the library director often has the primary responsibility to "engage with the community to build a culture of respect and safety for the library environment" (PressReader 2024). This can be challenging for progressive Democratic library directors in Republican-dominated conservative locales. *Governing* has summarized the difficulties of seeking to reach across political boundaries, "the two parties at this point represent people of separate and distinct ideologies, economic and educational backgrounds, cultural and religious values, attitudes toward science and higher education, and ideas about gender, race and identity. Given all this, maybe it's not surprising that American politics have become polarized and toxic" (Greenblatt 2020).

Progressive public library directors often need strong political skills to advance DEI in conservative states, counties, and municipalities. Such skills necessitate an understanding of the perceptions of both opponents and supporters.

As Nancy Isenberg emphasizes,

> "Make America Great Again" .... tapped the anxieties of all who resented government for handing over the country to supposedly less deserving classes: new immigrants, protesting African-Americans, lazy welfare freeloaders, and Obamacare recipients asking for handouts. Angry Trump supporters were convinced .... government entitlement programs were allowing some to advance past more deserving (white, native-born) Americans. This is how many came to feel "disinherited." (Isenberg 2016, p. xxii).

In the author's view, both Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. and *The 1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones et. al 2021) should be required reading for contemporary library directors. It is particularly essential for those serving rural white populations or urban communities with rural migrants and underserved minorities as residents.

Building a Culture of Safety In a Library's Conservative Community

Legal Authority in a Public Library

Public library policies are legal actions with potential consequences. Accordingly, as stressed by the Indiana State Library, "it is suggested that your library attorney review your final policies before adoption. It is further suggested that policies be reviewed on a set cycle, as required by law, and as necessary to address current situations" (Indiana 2021). Such "current situations" can now include attacks on the library and staff for DEI efforts (Jensen 2024).

The author is not an attorney but was advised by several assistant attorneys general in conservative states that legal mandates impacting public libraries have a descending order of authority. It starts with U.S and state constitutions and moves downward through federal and state laws, municipal or county ordinances, board approved public library policies, and, finally, professional standards not otherwise incorporated into relevant library law or policy. Expert guidance from library associations that has not been so reinforced is simply advice and not a requirement.

The complicated process of making the library safer for library staff and users will first be addressed at the building level. There, the critically important charge of building "a culture of respect and safety" for library staff and users can be a significant challenge. It is particularly so for those unable or unwilling to interact with conservatives to achieve progressive ends.

Staff and User Safety at the Building Level

An Escaped Lawbreaker in the Library

Years ago, a lawbreaker serving an extended prison sentence escaped custody while being treated at a hospital located in the state capital. Seeking an initial form of identification, he went first to the state library to apply for a library card. He was informed that if he returned with some form of documentation the staff would be happy to do so. At that denial, he immediately left and was soon recaptured.

When the library staff who had interacted with the lawbreaker learned about his escape, they realized how easily they could be attacked at work. Quite upset, they demanded the state library be made safer. The library's administrators immediately contacted the police unit responsible for preventing and solving crimes in state owned or rented buildings. The author then walked with a lieutenant to identify areas where the state library, freely open to the public, could be made safer. It was similar to the process the author has occasionally recommended to public libraries in high crime communities.

The lieutenant's report to the state librarian included the recommendation that there be only one public entrance to the stacks. In addition, all users should be required to show identification before being allowed to enter the stack area. Since the state library then shared a multi-story building with other units of government, the security assigned to the structure as a whole was asked to provide a more regular presence.

The new restrictions on access did not result in professional librarians and other staff protesting over such limits on the public's access to information. Instead, there was general satisfaction that the state library had addressed a previously unforeseen cause of heightened anxiety.

The Culture War and Reducing Attacks on Public Libraries and Their Staff

A 2022 study by Comito and Zabriski found that urban library workers suffered "racist and sexist verbal abuse, harassment, physical assault including having guns and other weapons brandished, and drug and alcohol issues including overdoses" (Albanese 2022). Preferably, students seeking master's degrees accredited by the American Library Association should be taught these realities, even as they learn how to transform the public library into a more comprehensive DEI entity (Cooke 2023).

After graduation, new U.S. alums may encounter conservatives who perceive DEI changes as abandoning neutrality and the U.S. public library's originating purposes (Kurtz 2022). At times, the reactions of such protestors can be threatening (Gruver 2023). It is also an issue in Canada (Zoledziowski et. al. 2024).

Library staff are not the only public service personnel attacked by those with a grievance. A recent *Governing* article aimed at state and local employees stressed, "threats and harassment are on the rise, but strategies exist to bring down the temperature and reduce the likelihood of deadly outcomes" (Smith 2025). Advice for greater safety made in the article by Tina Barton of the Committee for Safe and Secure Elections includes

- "The most important thing is to have protocols and rules and follow them."
- "Wear required lanyards [visible identification].""
- "Don't prop open doors that require a key card."
- "Don't place screens or photos of family members where a member of the public can see them easily."
- "Don't work late alone; have a buddy who can escort you when you leave."
- Request greater police support. "Officers on the beat can take extra measures such as passing checks [on foot or from patrol cars]." (Smith 2025)

Library directors who have good relations with local police are able to work out a process for greater security with the officer assigned to community relations (Community Relations n.d.). Planning should be a priority and involve the local police department, members of the public, library staff and a pre-meeting reading of Albrecht's "Puzzled About the Police Response in Your Library? Perhaps a Better Understanding of Their Unique Culture Will Help" (2021).

Collaborating with police can be productive of greater staff and user safety. Unfortunately, a stronger police presence in the library can be problematic for those whose culture has suffered police abuse. It remains the unfortunate case that "accounts of violence against library workers and patrons have been accompanied by several stories of security and police overreach" (Robinson 2019).

As Zare reminds,

> In recent years, high-profile police use-of-force encounters with individuals of color (e.g., George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky; Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin) have increased the long-standing scrutiny of law enforcement actions and deepened the mistrust between communities and police when police behave inappropriately. (Zare 2024, 384)

One means of limiting negative perceptions would be for full or part-time security workers, including police, to be trained at library expense on public library realities. To minimize local concerns, such training could include a modernized, all-age adaptation of the "Officer Friendly" approach that once helped advance police-community relations in schools (Grear 2016). Ideally, such training could be developed at the state or local level with substantial input from underrepresented groups, the community at large, and law enforcement.

Attacks on the Public Library

A Divided Conservative Opposition

For the most part, a good many progressives are familiar with the detailed, erroneous, and harmful executive order issued against DEI in January 2025 by President Trump aimed at "terminating radical DEI preferencing in federal contracting and directing federal agencies to relentlessly combat private sector discrimination" (White House 2025). More thoughtful conservatives may oppose DEI for reasons their community may deem tolerable or even sensible. Writing in the conservative *Deseret News,* Eric Schulzke summarized various perceptions of DEI using explanatory language instead of the attack version so often found in other presidential and other conservative accounts. As perceptions, such assessments can be resistant to factual rebuttals (Taylor 2019).

> Depending on your perspective, the acronym DEI may sound personal and inviting, bureaucratic and statistical, or ideological and accusatory. It may be primarily about race and ethnicity — or it may be about much more: gender, gender orientation, gender identity and sometimes even disabilities. It can give confidence or breed resentment. (Schulzke 2025).

In this listing of the various perceptions of DEI, it is likely that progressives will select the positive assertions, such as "personal and inviting," and giving "confidence" while conservatives will chose "bureaucratic and statistical, or ideological and accusatory" and breeding "resentment" as more reflective of their views.

Easy Sociology, a component of the Sociology of Ideology, has offered the following explanation for conservative resistance to progressive pressures, "conservatives fear that abrupt changes, especially those imposed by the state or driven by ideology, risk eroding the foundational elements of society" (Easy Sociology 2024).

Conservative beliefs can vary. The Pew Research Center (2022) has identified four ring categories of U.S. conservatives. Mostly Republican oriented, these categories include Faith and Flag Conservatives, Committed Conservatives. Populist Right, and Ambivalent Right (Pew 2022). In this context, "it's important to remember that, on many issues, there is likely to be a spectrum of opinion – people will support or oppose the issue in varying degrees. It's helpful here to be aware of the full spectrum, to see the whole landscape of community opinion, to know who stands where" (Community 2025).

There are several benefits for advancing DEI through greater knowledge of your opponents. It can "force you to refine your arguments, your message, and your strategy in order to put yourself in the strongest possible position" (Community 2025.). It is an ongoing approach that can be termed "pragmatic progressive" (LeTourneau 2015).

Changing (A Little) Perceptions of the Public Library by Talking with Conservatives

Health and Safety at the Building Level

In 2022 ALA called "on community leaders and elected officials" help safeguard libraries, staff, and users (ALA 2022). Prior to interacting with such "leaders and officials" library personnel and supporters should follow the sage advice of the Canadian Urban Libraries Council and "identify the big picture outcomes that are provoking you to reflect on safety and security – What are your goals and objectives? What outcomes are you aiming to achieve?" (Canadian 2025)

In an age of greater protest, often accompanied by threats, many sources advise public libraries to undertake variations of the following,

> Library staff require training on how to respond to protest situations professionally and legally. This includes understanding when to contact law enforcement, how to document incidents, and methods for de-escalating tensions while maintaining neutrality. Staff should be familiar with institutional policies regarding protesters, media representatives, and general public access during contentious periods. (Gardella 2025).

To an extent, small public libraries sharing a building with other municipal services have many decisions on matters of library security made for them by the agency controlling the structure. Additional protection for library personnel and users may require action by a city or town council.

Using Politically Acceptable Language with DEI

Form and Content of the Library DEI Message

Attacks on librarians over progressive efforts often involve negative responses to the acronym DEI and the words it represents It is thus helpful to consider an observation from communications, "many media scholars have claimed that form is just as important, if not more so, than content" (Myers 2019.). Should experience demonstrate that the form of the DEI message actually works against the message content, it is reasonable to change the language for progressive communication. According to the organization Spitfire, this is exactly the situation that currently exists with much of DEI (Spitfire n.d.).

In an effort to provide an alternative for reaching "persuadable" audiences, Spitfire developed a pamphlet entitled *Shift Terms, Not Values: Reaching Persuadable Audiences on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in Higher Education.* Mainly oriented towards the academic world, the work (a) presents the DEI message in non-DEI terminology and (b) is useful for public and other libraries. To this end, Spitfire stresses, "this messaging is designed to move persuadable audiences only. It will not work to move the strong opposition that we define as nonpersuadable" (Spitfire n.d. p.3).

The progressive advice provided by Spitfire ranges from identifying persuadable recipients of a rephrased DEI message to justifications for change, tested messages, and "dos and

don'ts." Public library staff and supporters who have discovered that their current DEI message is being perceived negatively, and even alienating those who might otherwise be sympathetic, are likely to find the Spitfire advice to be particularly useful.

According to Spitfire, there are a number of viable recipients of the message of *Shift Terms, Not Values* (below). The author has indicted which categories are of particular value to the public library community.

- State policymakers who are moderate or moderately conservative — not staunch opponents leading the weaponization of this work
- State policymakers in politically difficult climates who are facing attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in higher education [in public libraries] and who may be tempted to support legislation that limits diversity, equity and inclusion due to fear of political or legal retaliation or to protect other interests
- Administrators, faculty and staff in institutions of higher education [elected or appointed community leaders] who are moderate or moderately conservative — not staunch opponents leading the weaponization of this work
- Administrators, faculty and staff at institutions of higher education [public library boards, directors, and staff] who work in politically difficult climates that are facing consistent attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and need to make the case to maintain their work
- Business leaders and other potential supporters of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in higher education [local public libraries] who may withdraw prior support or remain on the sidelines due to fear of financial, political or legal retaliation or to protect other interests. (Spitfire n.d. p. 3)

When advancing DEI by not using diversity, equity, and inclusion terminology in community discussions of progressive public library services, it is an important to keep in mind "when you are communicating to persuadable audiences outside of the base, you shift your language but never your values" (Spitfire n.d. p.3)

When Minorities and Rural Whiles Came Together for Mutual Benefit

A Texas Story

While not a public library tale, the following is a reminder that the politically astute, even in a conservative state, can sometimes achieve a DEI-like benefit.

In 1997, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that that race could not be used when admitting students to public higher education in three states, which included Texas, over which it had jurisdiction. With minority enrollment set to plummet , a Latina Texas legislator led a coalition of minority and rural white legislators to narrowly secure a law that

> Required each public university in the state to automatically admit any students who graduated in the top 10% of their graduating classes. The policy exploited the existing racial and ethnic segregation of Texas public high schools, allowing universities to accept students from different areas of the state and a wider array of schools without explicitly considering students' race (McGee 2023).

Since bright students from poorly supported high schools could select any of the state-supported institutions, the more prestigious University of Texas at Austin became crowded with bright youngsters from poor minority and white communities. Students from wealthy suburbs were negatively affected. University administrators and the financially well-off saw this as a problem and the 10% level was reduced at Austin. Nonetheless, the basic ten percent plan otherwise remains in place to the benefit of smart minorities and rural whites graduating from poorly financed schools (McGee 2023).

The lesson of this Texas story is quite simple. In building support, DEI advocates should find areas of mutual benefit, build coalitions, and use language that appeals to coalition participants (Gross 2009).

What Is to Come?

MLIS Education, DEI, and Staff Health and Safety

As stressed by Cooke (2023), library and information students need instruction in surviving in the unfortunate new normal in conservative states and localities. In developing and teaching approaches to advancing DEI and staff and user health and safety, it has been argued that "LIS programs bear the largest responsibility for closing the gap between education and practice in public librarianship. Without innovation in higher education, the public librarian will always remain two steps behind in a world that is always three steps ahead. Solutions are within reach, and curricula developers must look beyond tradition to discover them" (Carmack 2019, p. 13).

Public Library Practice

Securing the health and safety of public library staff and users is absolutely essential in any efforts to expand services for previously underserved local populations. For many staff and users in Red or conservative communities, progress in diverse, equitable, and inclusive (however locally termed) staffing, collections, and services is likely to be a challenge for years to come. Reluctantly but pragmatically, it becomes essential to ponder the following from Zwerman and Schwartz's "How 'Good' Social Movements Can Triumph over 'Bad' Ones" (2021).

> Persistence—sustaining commitment, perhaps over the course of a lifetime; expanding networks while forming and reforming coalitions; assessing failures and devising new strategies; exploiting new political opportunities with fresh tactical repertoires; and integrating new generations into the life of the movement—is key to assuring further moments of success. (Zwerman & Schwartz 2021)

"Moments of success" can come where enough voters, and influencers, including persuadable conservatives, see a benefit for their own identity communities. For their part, library supporters will need to be committed to the often hard work involved.

Recently, the progressive lobbying group EveryLibrary reported on a growing recognition of the value of progressives collaborating with conservative groups.

> Recognizing a "Conservative Partner Gap" is crucial because, even with a strong civil rights or civil liberties coalition, it is important to engage legitimate conservative or libertarian organizations that can provide principled, values-based support rooted in civil society issues like local control and opposition to government overreach. This also includes faith-based coalition partners. This gap can render coalition efforts politically lopsided, which could undermine credibility with lawmakers who might otherwise be persuaded by arguments related to freedom of speech, small government, or parental autonomy. (EveryLibrary 2025 p. 22).

In 2020, the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute (AEI) published Michael J. Petrilli's "When It Comes to Education, Conservatives Should Stand for Excellence." While progressives are unlikely to subscribe to all conservative plans for education, the third key point in Petrilli's opinion piece should resonate with much that public libraries have been doing over recent decades—"Our responsibility as conservatives is to stand up for excellence and widen its availability to many more of America's children" (Petrilli 2020).

In the event that federal support lapses, it is well to remind both well-to do or middle class conservatives of the public library's fine past work in advancing education in local communities.

These include

a. securing funds, whether federal and/or local donations in money or fast-food for the meals that feed hungry underprivileged children lunch and/or breakfast, this allowing them to grow intellectually in summer reading or learning programs (Collaborative n.d.)
b. raising dollars to support Teacher in the Library programs to help kids whose families lack the money for private tutoring and need help making progress with their homework and learning (Chicago n.d.) or
c. providing support for home-schooled students and parents of varied races, backgrounds, and beliefs (Dankowski, 2024).

Many public librarians have made the case for addressing crucial educational needs of children as a benefit for all their community. Such efforts have generally followed the political rule of not attacking current and potential supporters for past sins of omission and commission. Those capable of being persuaded to help the public library respond positively to community needs ought to be encouraged and not attacked. Here, a rereading of Spitfire's *Shift Terms, Not Values* can be most beneficial for the public library community in the challenging work that lies ahead.

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Land of the Free, Home of the Brave: Maximizing Free Speech in Brave Spaces to Support Diversity

SARAH BETH NELSON AND JOHN WILLIAM NELSON

ABSTRACT

Responding to arguments that diversity and free speech are competing values, we recommend brave space practices to maximize both speech and diversity. This article first lays out what is actually required and allowed by law from public institutions regarding free speech. It then defines "brave space" and describes how brave space practices support diversity, highlighting the practice of "calling in," which also maximizes free speech. Going beyond the classroom or library program, we envision brave space encompassing an entire institution, concluding with an example and recommendations.

Introduction

John Palfrey, the head of school at Phillips Academy Andover, spoke at a gathering of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences about diversity and free speech. He highlighted the tendency many have to view these as competing, rather than complementary, values.

> This is where there is a tie between what we do in the educational setting and the academy and the polity. One of the reasons I am passionate about this is if we can't get it right for students in the context of an intentionally diverse environment that we create, where we can set some rules, then we are not going to succeed at the level of a democracy. It is crucial that we figure out how to do that. When we send people out as citizens, they need the skills to do this, both coping skills but also deliberative skills. They need to know how to work across difference. By the way, that is one of the reasons why we want to have a diverse set of people on campus[:] because you can get smarter. The conversation can be better. But too often, we pit diversity against free speech (Palfrey and Minow 2019, 34).

Does fostering more diversity have to mean less free speech, or vice versa? Or can we create spaces in which we maximize both?

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Free Speech

To understand how free speech interacts with diversity, equity, and inclusion practices, we must first understand how free speech rights and laws apply to any given organization. Specifically, government organizations have less ability to restrict speech than private organizations. That does not mean, however, that government organizations cannot restrict speech at all.

Government organizations like libraries, public schools, or universities lose much of their ability to restrict or limit speech when they create public forums. In *Widmar v. Vincent* (1981) the U.S. Supreme Court found that the University of Missouri–Kansas City had created a public forum by allowing its facilities to be used by student groups, and therefore imposed improper viewpoint restrictions by not allowing religious student groups to use the facilities. In the university context, think of the locations on campus where speakers are permitted to go and say whatever they wish—the proverbial soap-box platforms borrowed from our English forebears.

Broadly speaking, the only restrictions allowed in these public forums are time and place restrictions; viewpoint restrictions are prohibited (*Ward v. Rock Against Racism* 1989; *Widmar v. Vincent* 1981). Although most of us would likely prefer not to hear a Nazi regale us with the glories of the Third Reich, a university would be prohibited from barring the Nazi from speaking in a public forum because he is a Nazi or because he discusses topics that greatly offend many. If the public forum exists, the government entity cannot bar its use based on the views or beliefs of a speaker (*Widmar v. Vincent* 1981).

Public libraries sometimes create public forums, or forums that closely resemble public forums, when they allow community members to reserve space in the library for meetings. The U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi found that the Lafayette County and Oxford Public Library created a public forum by allowing non-library groups to use their space (*Concerned Women for America Education & Legal Defense Foundation* 1988). A public forum within a library can be in a dedicated room or even theater space, or it may just be in the library proper. Similar to the universities above, libraries cannot bar certain individuals or groups based on what they believe or what they wish to speak about. A library opening its facilities in this manner must allow the local evangelical church to use the space just as they would the local Girl Scout troop. The restrictions on speech could only be limited to the time and place, not the content or viewpoint.

However, this does not mean a library or university can have no restrictions on speech beyond time and place in their facilities or on their campuses. These restrictions would be limited to restrictions not impacting the speech itself. For example, permits for the use at the university may be required prior to a speaker using a staged area. Similarly, the library may require rental fees for their space, or a security deposit, and even have requirements regarding how and when an organization might use their equipment, furniture, or materials. These requirements must meet a three-prong test: (1) the requirement must be content-neutral, (2) it must be narrowly tailored to serve a significant government interest, and (3) it must leave open ample alternative channels for communicating a speaker's message (*Ward v. Rock Against Racism* 1989).

Meeting room policies have been a contentious topic for libraries. As described by Yorio and Peet (2018), a revision to the American Library Association's interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights regarding non-discrimination in library meeting room policies stated that a library could not deny a group use of a meeting room based on the content of their

speech, and specifically named hate speech as an example. This revision sparked "an ongoing emotional debate among library and ALA staff" that continued on social media after the ALA Annual Conference (para. 2). The current version of the interpretation uses slightly different language, stating that the library "cannot exclude groups based on the topics they discuss or the ideas they support" (ALA 2025, para. 4). ALA (2025) further states that "Libraries can enforce their behavior policies if a group disrupts or harasses others in the library" (para. 5). Both interpretations uphold free speech based on existing case law.

Nothing prohibits a university or a library from creating audience behavioral guidelines for their own programs. Classes and programs are a form of government speech, and the rights of a program audience are more limited within this context. In *Walker v. Texas Div., Sons of Confederate Veterans, Inc.* (2015) the U.S. Supreme Court determined that, "When the government speaks, it is not barred by the Free Speech Clause from determining the content of what it says." Further, a teacher has the ability to control their own classroom, and bar those who fail to meet that teacher's behavioral requirements. In *Morse v. Frederick* (2007) the U.S. Supreme Court stated that schools may suppress viewpoints supporting drug use. They upheld "*Tinker*'s [1969] 'general rule,' [that] the government may restrict school speech that threatens a specific and substantial disruption to the school environment or that 'inva[des] . . . the rights of others" (*Morse v. Frederick* 2007).

This is the framework under which a library can also set behavioral requirements for the library's programs. This ability not only arguably derives from government speech powers, but also the same protections teachers have in their classrooms to handle disruptions. Still, when a library is a government organization, those behavioral guidelines must not be arbitrary or capricious—they should be as clear as possible, whenever possible, to ensure folks understand the rules and are treated as fairly as possible.

There are spaces within schools and libraries where speech can be limited by time and place, but not viewpoint. Classes and library-run programs can have additional behavioral requirements that are clearly stated, equally applied, and meant to avoid disruption. This is the legal framework in which we consider how public institutions balance diversity and free speech.

DEI and Brave Space Practices

In his book, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces,* Palfrey (2017) describes diversity and free speech as clashing values: "Campus administrators are right to listen to the claims of current students, who make us aware that hateful speech still happens on our campuses and that the effects of this speech can be deleterious to a learning environment" (92). This is a good start: listening to students impacted by hate speech. He goes on to describe the clash with free speech, saying, "Often, these student activists argue that a particular conception of free speech is less important than the values of equity and inclusion on a campus" (92). Students harmed by hate speech, not getting the result they want from administrators, accuse the school of valuing free speech over equity and inclusion. "It is this clash of values that gives rise to the toughest moments: when a commitment to a genuinely diverse community comes up against an equally genuine commitment to a free and open environment for expression. The job of educators should be to ensure both values can thrive on campus to the greatest extent possible" (92). Has Palfrey described an equally genuine commitment to both issues? Is there some way forward other than tolerating "some degree of noxious expression" (93)?

Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces, and "The Real World"

Palfrey (2017) argues for brave spaces in education, something many educators and scholars agree upon. However, there is little agreement in the literature on the definition of "brave space." It is helpful here to consider "safe space," "brave space," and "the real world" alongside one another.

Palfrey (2017) uses the term "safe space" in the same way some others use the term "affinity space" (Johnson 2025). Palfrey (2017) says that safe spaces have ground rules for conversation, and then goes on to give the example: "a school or university might create a safe space for LGBTQ students in which students know they can discuss issues of sexual identity or gender and will not be made to feel marginalized for their perspective or exploration" (20). Although many types of spaces could have ground rules, Palfrey's example suggests a safe space is "for" a certain group. Johnson (2025) describes affinity spaces as "created for people to connect based on shared identities, ideologies, or interests" (para. 1).

There is some agreement that safe spaces are not conducive to learning and certain types of discussion. Palfrey (2017) argues that classrooms and other learning environments should be "brave spaces." These are spaces in which "the primary purpose of the interaction is a search for the truth, rather than support for a particular group of students, even insofar as some of the discussions will be uncomfortable for certain students" (21). Arao and Clemens (2013) also see safe spaces as barriers to challenging conversations. They "have found with increasing regularity that participants invoke in protest the common ground rules associated with the idea of safe space when the dialogue moves from polite to provocative" (135). When they asked students about this, they realized they were conflating safety with comfort (135). A safe space could be an affinity space, meant to help a particular group feel safe, or it could be an ill-advised learning space in which all participants expect to remain comfortable.

In the literature, the term "brave space" is used to describe a spectrum of spaces from those including few if any, to many, ground rules. Palfrey (2017) argues for brave spaces that "approximate the world outside academic life" (21). He suggests "the rules and social norms for expression might in fact follow the doctrine of the First Amendment or something close to it, as set by the school or university at large" (21). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Masunaga et al. (2023) write about a BIPOC-only (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) Library and Information Science professional conference as a "brave space" because "any event held on occupied white, capitalist lands could not be inherently 'safe' for BIPOC" (18). In addition to limiting attendance to an affinity group, the BIPOC LIS conference also utilized a code of conduct (24). Arao and Clemens's (2013) description of brave space falls somewhere in between, encouraging facilitators to "strive for protracted dialogue in defining brave space and setting ground rules" (142). We read in the legal literature above that classrooms *are* allowed to include some behavioral requirements, so ground rules in a brave space setting are not a violation of free speech. One element of Arao and Clemens's understanding of brave space we find especially useful is the assertion that everyone will have to be brave, although for different reasons. Pawlowski (2019), a higher education instructor, describes "white students" as feeling uncomfortable when they say "the wrong thing" and notes that for "students of color, there is no such thing as a safe space to begin with when they are in mixed company" (69).

We assert that in "the real world," some people are consistently called upon to be braver than others. Arao and Clemens (2013) point out that the "impulse to classify challenges to one's power and privilege as actions that detract from a sense of safety is, in itself,

a manifestation of dominance" (140). Those who hold more societal privilege are more able and more likely to object to challenges to their speech and views. Palfrey (and Minow 2019) illustrates how some students' safety is put above others when he discusses talking to someone who has accidentally committed a microaggression: "they may feel that they are being told they are misogynist because they said something based on gender that they did not intend" (30). He seems to hold the hurt feelings from the microaggression and the hurt feelings from the conversation about microaggressions as things we should equally seek to avoid when possible. Arao and Clemens (2013) would disagree, stating that "positive or neutral intentions do not trump negative impact" (146). In the real world, people who "didn't mean to" cause offense are privileged. They are not called out because it might hurt their feelings.

Everyone Will Be Brave

Understanding that in the real world, bravery unequally falls upon some groups more than others, we argue that intentional brave spaces are needed to fully include diverse individuals. Assuming that our schools and libraries serve individuals with many varying and intersectional identities, and that we *want* to serve all of these individuals well, we need to create and hold brave spaces.

The American Library Association (ALA 2023) addresses serving diverse populations across several of their core competences:

- "2C. Include emerging formats and genres of information resources and understand how these may intersect with and reflect the diverse and cultural needs of the information communities through the management of collections" (5).
- "3C. Employ multiple techniques to accommodate diverse learning preferences to promote lifelong learning" (5).
- "4D. Develop and support diverse and equitable partnerships, collaboration, networks, and other structures with all stakeholders, consortia, and within communities served" (6).
- "6A. Employ techniques used to discover, retrieve, evaluate, and synthesize information from diverse sources for use by varying user populations and information environments" (7).
- All of "Competency 8. Social Justice" (8–9).

Challenging, and sometimes uncomfortable, conversations will happen *more* in diverse groups. Arao and Clemens (2013) call it "particularly unavoidable" (139). Instead of avoiding these conversations, we can facilitate them.

As Masunaga et al. (2023) observe, in the United States, our institutions exist on "occupied white, capitalist lands" (18). Additionally, our public institutions have an obligation not to infringe upon free speech, in keeping with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. We can not promise that anyone will be completely safe from microaggressions or even hate speech in our spaces. We can also choose not to remain silent when these things happen. We can choose to facilitate conversations that acknowledge the discomfort felt by everyone involved. Arao and Clemens frame conflict "not as something to be avoided but as a natural outcome in a diverse group" (144). Furthermore, "continued engagement through conflict [. . .] strengthens rather than weakens diverse communities" (144). This is how we move forward and grow together.

It is true that when individuals are confronted with the impact of their statements, that may have a chilling effect. They may be less likely to use hate speech in the future. From the perspective of serving diverse populations and helping everyone to feel included, this is good. From the perspective of free speech, some may argue that this is bad. We are not sympathetic to this argument, as hate speech also has a chilling effect. As Brison (2021) describes, "if vulnerable minority members are targeted by hate speech, they may well become less, rather than more, likely to express their ideas, and even if they do speak, they may not be taken as seriously as they would be in an environment that did not tolerate hate speech" (112). Furthermore, the First Amendment protects from "governmental interference of a certain sort" (107) and does not protect speakers from the natural consequences of their words. The First Amendment does not shield you from being told you said something racist.

Regarding those who are not being intentionally hateful and make unintentional missteps, it is important for them to hear about the impact of their statements as well. Furthermore, we hope that they *will* continue to speak. As Pawlowski (2019) points out, "if we don't get them to say the 'wrong thing' and they continue to walk on eggshells, we'll never get to confront and intervene in the problematic views they secretly harbor" (69). The brave space approach truly goes hand in hand with maximizing speech.

There may be those who object to having brave space forced upon them (in their view) and being told they must accept that they will sometimes be uncomfortable. "There's no such thing as a safe space," as the opening lines of Beth Strano's poem proclaim (Joiner 2022). We see that some relatively safe spaces rely on the similarity of group members, in some aspects of their identities, to remove potential points of conflict. However, even affinity groups can not provide total safety. Additionally, although there is a place for affinity spaces, public schools and libraries, as institutions, can not cater to one group. What is the alternative to brave space when serving a diverse population? When we can not promise safety for all, it can only be safety for some.

Naming harm is not about dunking on people who are not "woke" enough (to paraphrase a student evaluation one author received). It is validation and acknowledgement for the person harmed and a potential learning experience for the person who (hopefully) inadvertently caused harm. As Pawlowski (2019) notes: "My students report to me that it is far more damaging to a class dynamic to see a classroom stay silent in the face of a student's racist comment, or hear that comment uncritically validated, than to hear that comment in the first place" (67). Simply speaking up does make a difference to the person who received the harmful comment. When addressing the person who made the harmful comment, we can choose to call them "in" rather than calling them "out."

Calling In

Calling out, according to Ross (2019), often involves "humiliation, shunning, scapegoating or gossip to dominate others" ("Guiding" para. 1). This is not the kind of discomfort we are asking individuals to tolerate in a brave space. Contrastingly, Ross says the key feature of a "call in" is that "it's done with love. Instead of shaming someone who's made a mistake, we can patiently ask questions to explore what was going on and why the speaker chose their harmful language" ("Guiding" para. 3). Calling in is an important tool for facilitating a brave space.

This seems to be what Palfrey (and Minow 2019) is missing as he discusses someone who committed an accidental microaggression feeling that they are being called a misogynist

(30). If a facilitator or administrator calls this person *in,* they can separate "you said something misogynist" from "you are a misogynist." This connects with growing research on guilt and shame. Brown (2013) believes guilt can be useful. It is "holding something we've done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort" (para. 1). Shame, on the other hand, is more threatening. "I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection" (para. 2). Humans are social creatures, and Kennedy (2022) points out that the "threat of abandonment" that accompanies shame "truly is an existential danger to survival" (p86). By calling someone in, we can minimize that jump from "I did something bad" to "I am a bad person."

Kennedy (2024) elaborates on how shame prevents someone from learning from their mistakes. We want to "preserve our good identity," so we "go into defense mode." We "have to almost ignore the behavior." She says "when we feel shame, we do shut down, we do feel unreachable." Ideally, when someone causes harm, and we call them in, they will learn that what they said was harmful and behave differently in the future. There is no learning with shame.

Teaching someone a lesson that they are not necessarily in our space to learn may sound patronizing. Antelman (2025) certainly argues against the ethics of trying to change beliefs (specifically the beliefs of library workers through required DEI trainings). However, Antelman acknowledges there is a difference between "morals or beliefs" and "behavior" (433). Ultimately, we are letting people know that some action they took caused harm. We may hope that our intervention results in a change of heart, but if it only changes their behavior that may be enough to keep our space brave. Ross (2025) says "we don't need full agreement on everything. I like to say that our larger goal when calling in is to persuade people to *be* with us, not to *agree* with us" (169). In line with calling in and reducing shame, focusing on behavior rather than beliefs will ultimately be more productive as well.

There will also be those who know exactly what they are doing. Ross (2019) says "Calling out may be the best response to those who refuse to accept responsibility for the harm they encourage or who pretend they are only innocently using their right to free speech" ("Guiding" para. 6). Calling in is often the best approach, and there are times when someone causing harm still needs to be called out.

Returning to Ross (2019), we wish to create "brave spaces in which everyone understands that people make mistakes, that people come from diverse cultures and languages that may use words differently, and that people should not be punished for not knowing the right words to say" ("Why Classrooms" para. 1).

Implications

Much of the literature about brave spaces envisions these spaces as pretty well-defined. For example, instructors may create a brave space in their classroom, as Pawlowski (2019) describes, or with a theater group (Austin and Vadiveloo 2023). Masunaga et al.'s (2023) community is a little larger, encompassing an entire LIS conference. Libraries serve smaller groups through programs. A class or workshop can open with a discussion of brave spaces and cocreate ground rules. Recall that the instruction in these settings can be considered government speech, which itself is not restricted by the First Amendment (*Walker v. Texas Div., Sons of Confederate Veterans, Inc.* 2015), and that classes may set behavior guidelines to avoid disruption (*Morse v. Frederick* 2007; *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* 1969).

We propose that the brave space concept can be broadened to encompass an entire public institution, such as a K–12 school, university, or library. We can create a culture in which, rather than keeping some people safe, we ask everyone to be brave. We have already discussed Palfrey's (and Minow 2019) microaggression example (30), explaining that an administrator *can* absolutely let a student know when they have said something racist or misogynist, while acknowledging that that may not have been their intent.

One example of calling out hateful speech is the way the University of Georgia community responds to the Tate Center preachers. As alumni of UGA, both authors can recall walking past these preachers between classes, hearing them shout that many of us were "fornicators damned to hell." Some students ignore the preachers. Others test their mettle as debaters by engaging them. The preachers from World Outreach Evangelistic Ministries and WALKabout Jesus, according to Tate (2021), hold signs with "derogatory messages about multiple groups of people, including LGBTQ+ people and women" (para. 2). Students reported hearing anti-LGBTQ+ slurs from the preachers (para. 5), and one young woman said a preacher told her she was "raping the crowd with my outfit" (para.12). This is not a misunderstanding. The speakers know their language is hurtful and force their message on "college campuses across the southeast" (para. 9). The Tate Plaza is a "designated free speech zone" on UGA's campus (para. 3). Even hate speech is allowed.

The Tate Center preachers' statements do not go unanswered. Students gather to protest and shout back. Garcia (2021) describes the preachers being drowned out by "chants ranging from the Atlanta Braves Tomahawk chop song to 'Get a job!' and 'How was prison?'" (para. 7). In an earlier article, Warui (2016) also describes bystanders interrupting "the lecture to express their anger with the religious organization's message" (para. 4). The opposition to the preachers ironically brings together non-religious community members and those who are deeply religious and disagree with the preachers' take on Christianity. One student said that "groups like The Campus Ministry give a misrepresentation of Christianity and Christians" (para. 8). The final line of the article is particularly uplifting: "'Nobody believes their message, but I really enjoy the community it creates,' said sophomore Anna-Murphy Martin. 'I've made so many friends combating this'" (para. 13). The community answers hate speech with more speech.

The UGA community seems comfortable with their approach to the Tate Center preachers, but there is room for growth. Tate (2021) briefly describes some security provided for the preachers during one of the days of their visit: "Several police officers, in addition to the dean of students, were present at the Tate Plaza to ensure the preachers' ability to deliver their message" (para. 3). Administrators could do more to ensure students know they are there to protect *their* ability to speak freely as well. The school could name the preachers' message as hate speech. They could publicize a schedule of speakers so that students can choose to avoid them or to constructively engage them. UGA actually includes misinformation about how students can respond to speakers in their Freedom of Expression FAQs. In response to the question "Can people who oppose a speaker's message use their own freedom of speech to drown out the offending words?" they answer "No, freedom of speech does not give someone the right to drown out the words and speech of others" (Tate Center 2025). This is simply untrue, and unsupportive of one possible student response. The presence of willing administrators and faculty alongside the protesting students would further emphasize their willingness to call out hate speech.

Administrators and leaders in the institution would need to take on the responsibility of upholding the brave space. Ross (2019) suggests, "This practice works especially well when

allies call one another in or when leaders, such as teachers, use it to model speaking up without losing the opportunity for learning" ("Guiding" para. 7). Although we would like everyone in the space to feel empowered to speak up, the person who has just experienced harm may not be in a position to do this work. "It's not fair, for example, to insist that people hurt by cruel or careless language or actions be responsible for the personal growth of those who have injured them; calling in should not demand involuntary emotional labor" ("Guiding" para. 5).

There will also be employees in any given institution, as exemplified by Antelman (2025), who will not personally agree with brave space practices and may view calling in or calling out as forced conformity rather than a reasonable duty supporting the institution's mission. Ross (2025) advises us to start with the self: "Before you or I seek to counsel or confront someone, we need to make sure that we're in the right place, mentally and emotionally, to do so" (142). For these reasons as well, actions will need to come from willing individuals at the top level of the institution. If the leadership is not on board, no amount of "shoulds" from literature or workshops is likely to create change.

Expanding brave space from a room to an institution will hopefully be an ongoing discussion. There is a need for additional research and ideas on how it will look in practice. We invite further conversation from academics, practitioners, and patrons of our public institutions.

To return to the opening quotation "if we can't get it right for students in the context of an intentionally diverse environment that we create, where we can set some rules, then we are not going to succeed at the level of a democracy" (Palfrey and Minow 2019, 34): Expanding bravery beyond the classroom, to the institution, may lead to further expansion. We can help create a brave country, and a brave world.

Conclusion

Rather than viewing diversity and free speech as competing values, we *can* uphold both commitments in a brave space. Instead of attempting to ban harmful speech, we can focus on answering it using more speech. We can call in those who did not intend harm and call out those who did. Much of this may feel uncomfortable for everyone involved and we will all be brave.

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"DEI is Unlawful": Examining Academic Libraries' Response as Institutional Isomorphism

REGINA GONG AND SILVIA VONG

ABSTRACT

Recent rollbacks of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in US academic libraries are not isolated decisions, but patterned responses to intensifying political and legal pressures. Drawing on DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) theory of institutional isomorphism, we analyze how coercive pressures (e.g., federal and state actions), mimetic pressures (e.g., copying perceived peer responses), and normative pressures (e.g., professional expectations) have driven three interconnected shifts: the renaming or elimination of DEI positions and offices, the scaling back of DEI programming and community outreach, and the depoliticization or narrowing of DEI-related professional development. We argue that the same isomorphic mechanisms that enabled libraries to rapidly adopt visible DEI structures after 2020 also produced standardized, symbolic reforms that were weakly rooted in structural change and thus easily dismantled in the face of backlash. Writing from our positionalities as Women of Color library practitioners and scholars, we show how these intertwined pressures expose the limits of isomorphic compliance and call for equity work that is locally grounded, community-accountable, and less vulnerable to rapid cycles of expansion and retrenchment.

Introduction

The challenges that librarians face in institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work are not new, and recent legislation has intensified these barriers. Libraries have a long history of invoking "neutrality" in spaces, collections, and policies (Gibson et al. 2017) to avoid responsibility to BIPOC communities. Even when libraries claim to care, BIPOC librarians are often tokenized and tasked with managing the institution's moral reputation through DEI work (Gibson et al. 2020). In the wake of the pandemic, as anti-DEI bills targeting higher education gained traction, academic libraries began to feel the ripple effects. The current administration's federal executive orders have recast DEI efforts as discriminatory and unlawful, generating legal uncertainty for colleges and universities. Since 2023, 136 anti-DEI bills have been introduced in thirty states, with twenty-nine signed into law (Gretzinger et al. 2025), leading many institutions to eliminate, rename, or restructure DEI positions, offices, and centers.

As institutions deeply embedded within higher education, academic libraries across the United States now face an unprecedented reversal. DEI initiatives that expanded rapidly

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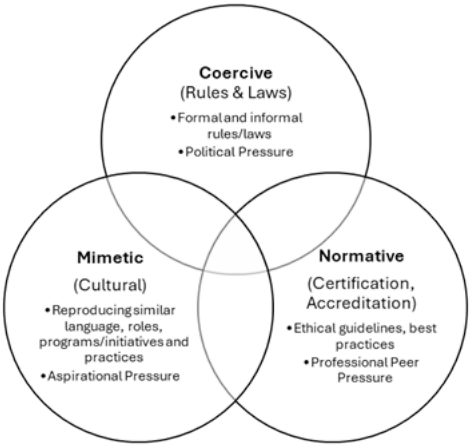
after the 2020 racial justice protests are being dismantled through federal executive orders, Dear Colleague letters, state legislation, and institutional reorganization (Phillips 2025; Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 created a legitimacy crisis for higher education and for academic libraries in particular. Within eighteen months, libraries across the country responded in strikingly similar ways: creating new DEI positions, launching parallel programs, and adopting nearly identical statements and frameworks (Coleman 2022; Hulbert 2023). Institutional isomorphism theory helps explain this convergence. When organizations confront public scrutiny and ambiguous expectations, they turn to what appears to work elsewhere: borrowing titles, structures, and language from peer institutions to signal alignment and legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Many academic library DEI efforts emerged through this patterned copying, making them visible but not necessarily deeply rooted in structural change.

The current systematic elimination of DEI programs exposes the fragility of reforms produced through these isomorphic responses rather than through sustained institutional transformation. Academic libraries that once moved quickly to establish DEI programs, positions, and statements now dismantle or rebrand them with equal speed. This symmetrical response reveals how libraries' embeddedness within higher education makes them particularly susceptible to coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures, ultimately constraining their capacity for long-term work on racial justice. This whiplash moment demands analysis: How did professional commitments to racial justice become institutionalized in ways that made them so easily reversible? Drawing on institutional isomorphism theory, we argue that the very mechanisms that enabled libraries to respond swiftly to demands for racial justice also produced standardized, superficial changes that were highly vulnerable to political winds and legal threats, making these DEI initiatives susceptible to rapid reversal.

A Conceptual Lens: Institutional Isomorphism

To examine this rapid cycle of expansion and dismantling, we draw explicitly on the concept of institutional isomorphism. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe institutional isomorphism as the process through which organizations in the same field grow more alike over time. Rather than reflecting purely local needs or deeply held values, organizational decisions are often shaped by pressures to appear legitimate, aligned, and compliant. They identify three mechanisms that drive this convergence: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Figure 1 illustrates how these three mechanisms overlap and interact, reinforcing one another rather than operating in isolation.

Figure 1. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) Three Mechanisms of Institutional Isomorphism



Coercive isomorphism arises from formal and informal pressures exerted by governments, funders, and other powerful authorities and is "felt as force, as persuasion, or as invitations to join in collusion" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 150). In the current context, federal executive orders, Dear Colleague letters, and state-level anti-DEI, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-CRT legislation signal that restricting or eliminating DEI work is expected, legitimate, and safer than maintaining it. It allows institutions both pressure and cover to redirect resources away from DEI positions, programs, and curricula. When funding, oversight, or legal risk are tied to compliance, academic libraries are pressed to follow suit through renaming roles, sunsetting units, and withdrawing public-facing commitments in ways that mirror state priorities.

Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations, facing uncertainty or political volatility, model themselves on peer institutions perceived as successful or safe (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In response to shifting federal guidance and heightened scrutiny, colleges and universities look horizontally: they watch how others restructure DEI offices, rebrand positions, or recast initiatives and then replicate those choices. This copying is not limited to states with formal anti-DEI legislation; institutions in other contexts also preemptively rename or suspend DEI work, citing risk management or budget cuts. For academic libraries, once a handful of institutions begin to redefine or roll back DEI, similar moves quickly become normalized across the field.

Normative isomorphism stems from professionalization, including expectations shaped by accrediting agencies, professional associations, and shared educational and career pathways. These networks define what constitutes responsible, innovative, or reputable practice and reward institutions that align with these norms. In the DEI arena, these pressures are uneven. Some library associations, such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), have maintained DEI language, committees, and initiatives. At the same time, other organizations and institutions have shifted emphasis to different priorities, including generative AI or "belonging" and "civility" discourses. Such mixed signals make it easier for institutions to reposition or dilute DEI commitments while still claiming professional legitimacy.

Taken together, coercive mandates, mimetic copying, and shifting normative expectations help explain both the rapid convergence around DEI initiatives after 2020 and their subsequent dismantling. We use institutional isomorphism not simply to name sameness, but to trace how these intertwined pressures shape what becomes possible, palatable, and expendable in academic library DEI work. These dynamics are not abstract for us: we have navigated them from within and alongside academic libraries, experiencing and enacting their consequences in our own roles. In the next section, we situate our positionalities to clarify how our lived experiences inform our reading of these isomorphic pressures and our critique of the institutionalization and dismantling of DEI.

Our Positionalities

We ground this study in our lived experiences and acknowledge the positionalities and privileges that shape how we write about DEI in academic libraries.

(Regina Gong, she/her) I am a Filipina American, cisgender, middle-class, bilingual, and able-bodied Woman of Color. I was born and raised in the Philippines and immigrated to the United States twenty-five years ago. In my current role in a private, Catholic institution, my portfolio includes DEI work, and I have experienced anti-DEI backlash firsthand, even though I work in the Democratic-led state of California. My job title was changed to replace the word "diversity" with "strategic initiatives." I was required to unpublish our DEI LibGuide, and our DEI committee was sunsetted, all framed as preemptive compliance. My service as chair of the ACRL's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (2024) and the Diversity Alliance (2025) has expanded my engagement with DEI work across academic libraries. These responsibilities exemplify my DEI praxis and align with my research, which centers and amplifies marginalized voices.

(Silvia Vong, she/her) I am a Chinese Canadian, cisgender woman from Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on Treaty 13 territory with the Mississaugas of the Credit. My location and positionality as a former librarian in Canada influence how I engage in DEI work, often without the same institutional or legal pressures faced by many of my US colleagues. I chaired ACRL's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (2023); served as past chair of the committee (2024); and currently serve as vice chair for ACRL's Diversity Alliance. My doctoral research examines antiracism work and institutional structures that perpetuate whiteness, while my professional research focuses on critical management studies and the racialized experiences of individuals in academic libraries.

As Women of Color and library practitioners who have witnessed and participated in the institutional dynamics we analyze, we have seen administrators ask, "What are peer institutions doing?" rather than "What does our community need?" These choices have resulted in DEI positions lacking structural power, nearly identical diversity statements, and standardized training programs that prioritize institutional image over accountability. This experiential knowledge, combined with our theoretical analysis, reveals patterns that neither detached critique nor defensive advocacy can capture. Our positions within and alongside these institutions enable us to examine how coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures shape DEI work. Our critique is not of DEI's necessity, but of how external forces and institutional isomorphism undermine meaningful and lasting commitments to racial and social justice.

Applying Institutional Isomorphism to DEI in Academic Libraries

Academic libraries are deeply embedded organizational fields within higher education institutions. Bolin (2018) characterized academic libraries as inherently isomorphic, exhibiting all three mechanisms outlined by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Coercive isomorphism occurs when libraries align their structure, strategic direction, and mission with their parent institutions to comply with performance standards and mandated metrics. Mimetic isomorphism manifests when libraries turn to peer institutions for solutions to common problems. Normative isomorphism appears when libraries respond to the core values, ethics, and professional standards set by the American Library Association (Bolin 2018; Joseph 2020).

In applying institutional isomorphism to DEI initiatives in academic libraries, we must consider the pressures their parent universities face, as these directly shape library responses. The three mechanisms—coercive, mimetic, and normative—often operate simultaneously and reinforce one another, making them difficult to separate analytically. Therefore, for each example that follows, we examine how multiple isomorphic mechanisms drive institutional and management responses.

Renaming of DEI Positions and Elimination of DEI Offices

Language and naming shape institutional power in DEI work. They can empower implementation or enable elimination. The current renaming and erasure of DEI positions and offices reflects what Hudson-Ward (2024) identifies as conservatives' zero-sum philosophy, where anti-DEI proponents "aim to eliminate jobs, destroy career trajectories, and damage professional reputations"(para. 9). This targeting seeks to instill fear across higher education and academic libraries, silencing dissent through removal.

Coercive isomorphism emerges through formal or informal pressures from entities or institutions that depend upon them, such as the federal government, state, or funding bodies. With DEI declared illegal and unlawful, higher education institutions in Ohio, Michigan, Texas, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Virginia, and other conservative-led states have eliminated DEI offices, including the chief diversity officers and staff, in response to mandates, executive actions, funding threats, and lawsuits (Birch et al. 2024; Confessore 2024; Quilantan and Alexander 2025; Spitalniak 2025). Some institutions have integrated DEI programs into less visible units, such as human resources and student affairs, effectively erasing their autonomy (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). Even in states without anti-DEI laws, institutions have renamed DEI positions and offices, demonstrating mimetic isomorphism, where organizations imitate their peers during times of uncertainty (Gretzinger et al. 2025; Joseph 2020). The vague wording in restrictive laws creates a chilling effect, driving preemptive compliance as institutions adopt "safe" moves, such as rebranding DEI with whitewashed language, including "belonging," "inclusive excellence," or "student success" (Birch et al. 2024; Gretzinger et al. 2025).

Academic libraries experienced these pressures before the current administration took office. In 2022, library directors expressed low confidence in DEI strategies due to waning institutional interest (Hulbert 2023). By 2024, Ithaka S+R found that library leaders believed collections and programming would remain unaffected by restrictive policies (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). Yet, this confidence has now been replaced by fear as workers feel the direct impacts (Birch et al. 2024). This mimetic behavior extends beyond individual institutions, with some proactively restructuring programs even where restric-

tive policies were unlikely (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). More concerningly, library associations are following suit with the Medical Library Association, renaming its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee to "Community Building and Belonging" at the committee's own request (MLA 2025).

Normative pressures emerge through professionalization and shared values that often conflict with coercive mandates. Despite political vulnerability, librarians sustain their DEI commitments by drawing on professional standards, such as the *ALA Code of Ethics*, which calls for dismantling systemic bias, and tools like the *DEI Scorecard for Library and Information Organizations*, providing accountability frameworks (Harper et al. 2021). While job postings briefly emphasized EDI competencies for senior roles after May 2020, the profession maintains that these competencies remain essential for fulfilling institutional missions. Librarians are embedding equity into their everyday practice, even when formal structures are dismantled, by using normative mechanisms to preserve DEI values within hostile environments (Joseph 2020; Matthews 2021).

Scaling Back DEI Programming and Community Outreach

The revocation of Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funds by President Trump eliminated programs supporting underrepresented groups, leaving libraries with existing grants uncertain about future programming (EveryLibrary Institute 2025). Programming and outreach are especially vulnerable under current conditions, and their visibility and direct engagement with social issues make them prime targets for coercive restrictions and self-censorship.

Coercive pressures manifest through legislative restrictions and funding threats. A proposed Kentucky bill would criminalize partnerships between universities and local Black-owned businesses, exposing academic librarians to personal legal liability (Birch et al. 2024). State funding becomes a compliance tool with the University of Florida's "anti-racism" website and multicultural inclusion center disappearing under state mandates (McClung 2024; McEvoy 2024). Anticipating controversy, some library leaders have withdrawn financial sponsorship from campus programming altogether, choosing risk avoidance over engagement (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024).

Mimetic pressures reinforce this scaling back as libraries adopt "staying off the radar" strategies, collectively avoiding high-profile programming (Birch et al. 2024). Institutions reframe initiatives in less politically charged terms, shifting banned book programs into "critical engagement" academic activities and borrowing these "safer" models from peers to avoid scrutiny (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024).

Normative pressures rooted in professional values create both tension and opportunities for resistance. Librarians embed DEI principles through small acts of resistance by integrating Universal Design for Learning into instruction, incorporating diverse perspectives, and ensuring collections reflect campus diversity (Birch et al. 2024). They invoke campus missions and professional codes as shields, justifying DEI-aligned programming through the language of intellectual freedom. Student activism intensifies these pressures, with students demanding that libraries honor public DEI commitments. Successful student-led events, such as the "Can't Ban Us" Black History Teach-In, demonstrate how student voices compel libraries to maintain visible social justice commitments despite restrictions (Birch et al. 2024).

The Shift in DEI Professional Development and Training

Despite persistent issues with performativity and lack of follow-through in DEI training (Phillips 2025; Dali et al. 2021), recent library literature continues to focus on implementation while barely addressing the impact of anti-DEI legislation (Winn 2025; Leong 2023; Foy 2021). Professional development (PD) in academic libraries now sits at the intersection of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures, becoming both a site of contestation and resistance.

Coercive pressures manifest through legislative restrictions on mandatory DEI training, compelling institutions to reframe equity-related content (Birch et al. 2024). These bans exploit longstanding conservative critiques that such training makes staff feel "attacked," deepening workplace polarization (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). The resulting climate of fear erodes morale, disproportionately burdens marginalized staff, and forces institutions to address mental health and workplace well-being while navigating a politically charged environment.

Mimetic pressures drive a retreat to politically neutral or "safe" topics, such as artificial intelligence or misinformation, reflecting institutional risk aversion over professional priorities (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). Simultaneously, the suppression of formal DEI training has prompted library workers to pursue independent study in areas such as anti-racism and social justice. This demonstrates a bottom-up response to the collapse of top-down DEI infrastructure (Phillips 2025). These informal acts of self-education underscore how individuals strive to uphold their commitments to equity in the absence of institutional support.

Normative pressures remain rooted in librarianship's professional identity. Standards, such as the *ALA Policy Manual*, underscore a commitment to ongoing professional development that addresses power, privilege, and oppression, framing cultural competency as central to the profession's ethical mandate (ALA 2023). Library leaders recognize the need for political acumen, which is often underdeveloped in LIS training but is essential for navigating hostile politics (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). Tools like the *DEI Scorecard* further reinforce accountability, embedding expectations that libraries evaluate and fund DEI-related PD even when external conditions are hostile (Harper 2021). These normative commitments sustain professional development as both an ethical obligation and a resistance against coercive and mimetic narrowing. Together, these normative commitments sustain a vision of professional development as both an ethical obligation and a form of resistance that provides a counterpoint to the narrowing effects of coercive and mimetic pressures.

Concluding Thoughts

The immediate institutional responses to "unlawful" DEI in higher education and, in turn, academic libraries demonstrate how readily institutions adjust to coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures. The renaming or elimination of DEI roles and offices, the scaling back of outreach programs, and the sanitizing of DEI training exemplify how quickly visible commitments can be reshaped to align with shifting political expectations. The narrative that academic libraries and higher education inherently value fairness and equality functions to revise institutional histories and preserve a liberal self-image, even as racialized harms persist.

Henry and Tator's (1994) theory of democratic racism helps to name this contradiction: liberal commitments to equality coexist with attitudes and practices that sustain differential treatment of People of Color. Higher education is often imagined as central to democracy, yet

universities also reproduce oppression by excluding underrepresented communities and centering white and Western scholars. These patterns are reinforced both by professional norms and by macro-level forces such as state and federal legislation and policy projects like Project 2025 that seek to homogenize institutions and entrench racist and colonial logics.

Higher education as a field is further shaped by neoliberal policies that prioritize efficiency, risk management, and reputational protection. These dynamics intersect with the isomorphic mechanisms we have traced, producing rapid cycles in which DEI work is scaled up when politically advantageous and scaled back when framed as unlawful or undesirable. People working in libraries cannot afford to treat these shifts as neutral or inevitable. Institutional behavior is political. Taking action cannot be reduced to writing statements, drafting reports, or complying with whichever mandate comes next. It requires political engagement at the institutional, state, and federal levels, and moral courage from leaders and practitioners committed to social justice.

Derrick Bell (1991) reminds us that recognizing the permanence of racism is not an invitation to despair, but a call to sustained struggle. It is in that spirit that we end not with reassurances, but with questions that demand ongoing reflection:

- What if the ideological shift on DEI outlasts this current administration? How do we prepare for DEI's potential permanent transformation?
- What if the damage isn't something that can be undone through policy or legislative reversal alone? What forms of harm become institutionally embedded or generationally entrenched?
- What forms of resistance are already happening that don't depend on institutional permission?
- How can we build coalitions beyond libraries, including with faculty unions, student movements, and community organizations?
- What does accountability to affected communities look like when institutions abandon them?

These questions call us to hold uncertainty without resignation and to treat DEI not as a temporary initiative, but as a contested, ongoing political practice. We may not yet have definitive answers, but these are necessary questions to keep asking, especially as we envision futures in which DEI is neither outlawed nor reduced to mere compliance. Any rebuilding must move beyond rapidly adopted, easily reversed structures toward forms of equity and inclusion that are locally grounded, community-accountable, and less vulnerable to the pressures that made this rapid cycle of expansion and dismantling possible in the first place.

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From Archive to Action: Building a Black-Centered Information Ecology Through BGLAM

KYMBERLY KEETON

ABSTRACT

In the face of anti-DEI legislation and cultural backlash, this article introduces Black Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (BGLAM) as a liberatory framework for cultural sovereignty. Drawing from Black feminist thought (Collins 2000; hooks 1994) and archival justice, BGLAM redefines information work through three ecologies: framework, practice, and pedagogy. These ecologies emerge through cultural design (ART | library deco), community activism (The Black COVID-19 Index), and education (African American Community Archives as Theory [AACAT-1870]), establishing a Black-centered information ecology grounded in self-determination, creativity, and collective memory—transforming inclusion from a bureaucratic demand into an act of liberation.

Introduction

Across the United States, DEI initiatives face ideological retrenchment. Legislative restrictions on inclusive education and the arts seek to silence the complexity of Black cultural life. Within this political climate, BGLAM emerges as both a method and a manifesto: an approach to cultural stewardship that resists erasure by asserting that Black knowledge is not a supplement to the archive, but the archive itself.

Rooted in the continuum of Black feminist epistemology, BGLAM extends what Collins (2000) identifies as the politics of empowerment and what hooks (1994) calls "education as the practice of freedom." It frames information ecology as the dynamic system of people, values, and technologies that produce and preserve Black knowledge.

The term information ecology refers to the interconnected systems of people, practices, technologies, and values that shape how knowledge is created, shared, and sustained (Nardi and O'Day 1999). Within BGLAM, this ecology is explicitly Black-centered, privileging community epistemologies and collective agency (Collins 2000). Likewise, community co-curation describes participatory processes in which local communities collaborate to shape archival content, interpretation, and access, ensuring that representation and authorship remain in community hands (Flinn 2011).

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The Framework: Liberatory Information Ecology

BGLAM reimagines traditional GLAM institutions as Black-centered systems of memory and creativity. It challenges neutrality, recognizing that archives and museums are never apolitical; they are battlegrounds for narrative authority. This framework treats archives as spaces of care and repair, where ethical responsibility replaces institutional detachment.

The theoretical ground of BGLAM is nourished by scholars who center Black life as information praxis. Bailey (2021) frames digital resistance as an act of survival, and Gumbs (2020) envisions the archive as a ceremonial site of becoming. Together, they affirm that liberation is not an abstract ideal but an information strategy—one practiced through collective creation, curation, and memory.

Practice: Archival Action and Art as Memory

BGLAM's praxis materializes in projects such as The Black COVID-19 Index and ART | library deco. Created in partnership with the City of Austin's Cultural Affairs Department, The Black COVID-19 Index documents oral histories, photographs, and artworks that testify to how Black communities endured and reimagined daily life during the pandemic. These archives become instruments of healing rather than repositories of loss.

Likewise, ART | library deco operates as a digital art library, exhibition platform, and pedagogical archive—embodying BGLAM's aesthetic of freedom. As noted in a 2025 VoyageAustin feature, Keeton's curatorial practice merges librarianship, art, and community storytelling to sustain Black cultural memory as a living archive (VoyageAustin 2025). The project's manifesto declares:

"This is more than preservation. It is a declaration. ART | library deco is a living, evolving testament to Black creativity, intellect, and memory—pushing boundaries, redefining archives, and asserting that Black history is not only worth remembering, but worth building upon."

In both projects, archival work becomes a form of activism. Black digital memory insists on continuity in the face of algorithmic disappearance. BGLAM transforms that insistence into institutional design.

The Pedagogy: Teaching Ecology

The third ecology of BGLAM—pedagogy—emerges through African American Community Archives as Theory (AACAT-1870). The course functions as an independent learning environment where archival practice, theory, and community activism converge.

"As a librarian, archivist, and community historian, I developed this survey course in response to the ongoing erasure and politicization of African American history, archives, and cultural memory. This course is a radical assertion of community-based knowledge and archival sovereignty. Rather than wait for traditional institutions to validate my work, I have created an independent learning space rooted in Black archival theory, historical truth-telling, and cultural self-determination—designed to educate, empower, and preserve on our terms."

Through AACAT-1870, pedagogy becomes praxis. This teaching aligns with concepts in the Black Digital Humanities, where learning itself becomes an archive. In this environment, students do not consume knowledge—they build it.

Conclusion

BGLAM transforms the functions of the archive, the library, the gallery, and the museum into a living network of Black cultural sovereignty. Guided by Collins (2000) and hooks (1994), it understands knowledge-making as both a form of resistance and a means of restoration. Echoing Gumbs's (2020) vision of the archive as ceremony, BGLAM reframes DEI not as an institutional checklist but as a collective ethic of survival.

As Ruha Benjamin (2024) writes, "Imagination is a battlefield of ideas and possibilities; it's where we practice freedom before we live it." BGLAM, too, begins in the imagination, transforming ideas of inclusion into practices of liberation.

In a time when inclusion is contested and memory is politicized, BGLAM offers a model for sustainable equity—an information ecology that educates, empowers, and preserves on our terms.

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In My Mother's Compound: The Consequences of the Erasure of Igbo Women's Trauma During the Biafran War and Its Relation to the Nullification of African-American Womanist History in the United States

KIMBERLY CHIAMAKA OKEKE

ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the importance of incorporating Black womanist historiography into national public school systems, libraries, and cultural archives in light of the recent elimination of current diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. To emphasize this argument and explore potential harms of eliminating DEI, this paper draws on the historical connections, consequences, and controversies of the lack of education on gendered violence toward Igbo women in the Biafran War (or Nigerian Civil War).

Introduction

Contemporary US Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in American public education is currently under threat. In January 2025, President Donald J. Trump publicly signed off on various executive orders related to eliminating DEI initiatives, including Executive Order 14190, which eradicates "discriminatory equity ideology" in educational institutions (Trump 2025). The elimination of DEI contributes not only to the erasure of history for various communities of color but also to the loss of cultural memory for African-American women who continue to be impacted by the adverse effects of racism.

Historical Parallels Between Nigeria and the US

The suppression of marginalized history within educational systems is not unique to the United States. Just like the contemporary DEI rollbacks taking place in American academic institutions, Nigeria has also made significant efforts to eliminate the history and

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stories of gendered violence, specifically in the context of the Biafran War and educational reform in Nigeria.

The Biafran War was a significant event that not only highlighted issues of ethnic tensions and the mishandling of Nigeria post-independence, but also violence toward women who were pressured to stay strong by default. The events of mass murder, rape, and constant relocation, orchestrated by the Nigerian government, have led to historical wounds among these women. There is a plethora of knowledge that can contribute to the generational healing of Igbo[1] women by incorporating the content of this war in Nigerian school curricula. Nigerian school systems and US DEI notions both have the power to alleviate trauma and promote healing through education and access to repositories.

Gaps in History and Comparative Analysis

This paper uses a comparative analysis to depict how excluding educational and archival content in relation to gendered Black scholarship promotes the continuation of transgenerational suffering in Black communities. The comparative lens uses the erasure of Igbo women's history of trauma during the Biafran War and the eradication of African-American womanist history to portray the consequences of erasing gendered history. This paper then explores how incorporating these historical narratives positively contributes to education and healing for Black women and their communities everywhere.

In this context, Black historiography (with women as the subject) is a framework that centers the quality of life and the survival of Black women in their social, economic, and political conditions. Trauma, along with trauma-informed education, is a system that helps to underscore a shared collective experience not only among Black women living in the US, but globally as well. Together, these structures provide unity, historical clarity, and community restoration.

While the historical settings differ, the experiences of oppression faced by Igbo women during the Biafran War and African-American women throughout a multitude of different events in US history depict a range of unified historical consciousness for Black women globally. This reinforces the need for this content in education that honors these women and their diverse experiences of oppression.

Literature Review

Dominant Narratives of the Nigerian-Biafran War

Scholarship on the Nigerian-Biafran War focuses on gendered violence primarily initiated toward male victims and survivors. Many pieces of literature cover wartime casualties experienced by men, the inhumane conditions of camps that Igbo families were forced to endure, prevalent diseases such as kwashiokor[2] derived from hunger, and constant relocation. Well-known Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, in his work *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra,* emphasizes these conditions and the lasting effects they have had on Igbo societies even in contemporary times.

[1] The Igbos are a large ethnic group located in Southeastern Nigeria.

[2] Kwashiokor is a disease that causes the physical swelling of the stomach when there is a lack of protein in a diet. This was a very common disease in children throughout the events of the Biafran War and many third world countries today.

However, the majority of scholarship fails to address events of gendered violence toward Igbo women during the war, despite this population still being negatively impacted today. The limited scholarship that does exist to underscore these significant gendered narratives includes "Fighting on All Fronts: Gendered Spaces, Ethnic Boundaries, and the Nigerian Civil War" by Obioma Nnaemeka and "War and Stature: Growing up During the Nigerian Civil War" by Richard Akresh, Sonia Bhalotra, Marbella Leone, and Una Okonkwo Osili. These works depict the sexual abuse and exploitation that women had to endure to survive.

These authors also describe the consistent social and familial pressures to fulfill male-dominated roles during and after the war. Igbo women were forced to wear a veil of independence as vast populations of Igbo men were murdered on the frontlines. They took up male-dominated occupations such as agriculture or hunting to feed their children, most of whom were suffering from kwashiorkor due to the food blockade[3] enforced by the Nigerian government.

An increase in additional scholarship that directly addresses sexual violence committed in the Biafran War would give readers more profound insight into how this has affected Igbo women generationally. The lack of literature on Biafran sexual wartime violence is likely due to survivor's guilt, the shame associated with assault, a lack of legal protections, and the overall cultural values surrounding rape in Nigeria.

Scholarship on US Intersectional History

Just as documenting and learning about Igbo women's experiences during the Biafran War is crucial, incorporating intersectional history in the US helps to validate and heal collective Black experiences. Substantial evidence indicates that the teachings of African-American woman-centered historiography have led to positive academic outcomes. For example, Turea Michelle Hutson, in her 2022 piece, "By Any Means Necessary: A Brief Educational History of Black Women and Girls in the United States," discusses how learning about the experiences of Black women and girls helps to inform students about the severe impact of racial trauma, intersectional discrimination, and healing practices. Other academic works, such as Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist theorist work, *Black Sexual Politics,* provide readers with knowledge on how racial discrimination and sexism help shape the discourse of a Black woman's quality of life (2004). All in all, the histories of Black womanhood in school systems are necessary to help students understand the historical effects and dynamics of colonial trauma and American racism.

Introduction to the Biafran War

Origins of Biafra

The Biafran War was fought from July 6, 1967, to January 17, 1970. This war was a direct byproduct of the failures stemming from Nigerian independence[4] in 1960. During the transition to independence from Great Britain, many Nigerian ethnic groups struggled to find common ground and agreement on the way Nigeria would lead its country going forward.

[3] Food blockades were common war tactics initiated by the Nigerian government toward Igbo lands during Biafra. The Nigerian government would prevent food, medicine, and essential resources to Igbo people in order to encourage Igbos to resist war and ideas of succession.

[4] Nigerian Independence from British colonial rule took place on October 1, 1960.

The most prominent tensions arose between the Igbo, Hausa[5], and Fulani ethnic groups. These groups held different perspectives on the role of governmental power in Nigeria. The Igbo people believed in a system that respected secularism because they were concerned that the intersection of religion and politics would shape biases during the curation of public policy. They believed that secularism would prevent political violence toward other communities. They also held strong values in individual entrepreneurship and the equitable distribution of resources. In anticipation of decolonization, the Igbos looked forward to obtaining more economic autonomy and access to natural resource ports.

Alternatively, the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups valued the role of religion in the establishment of government, particularly Islam. They believed that Islamic values would form the foundation for Nigerian politics, as well as provide a basis for religiously affiliated leadership. They expressed a high demand for revenue-sharing formulas, as they believed that all resources in the new country belonged to the central government.

Military Coups, Pogroms, and Ideas of Secession

Ethnic tensions, significant political differences, and cultural rivalry eventually led to the first military coup on January 15, 1966. This coup was primarily led by a mix of Igbo and Yoruba leaders in the name of cleansing Nigeria from the state of corruption. During the coup, several northern Nigerian leaders were killed, including political figures such as Sir Abubakar Ifawa Balewa, who was the Prime Minister at the time.

In retaliation for the 1966 coup, the Nigerian government infiltrated the Igbo pogroms.[6] This included a host of violent events and interventions toward Igbo civilians in the north that included mass shootings, beheadings, machete attacks, and rape. Throughout the drastic events that took place in this period, between 30,000 and 50,000 Igbo people were murdered without any intervention from the government (Korieh 2013). The daily slaughtering and disregard for Igbo people residing in the north during the pogroms resulted in ideas of secession, the creation of Biafra, and the beginnings of the Nigerian Civil War (2013).

Gendered Violence Toward Igbo Women

Silenced Experiences of Biafran Women

Throughout the Nigerian Civil War, there were many acts of violence against Igbo women that continue to be understated. During the war, Igbo women and their children watched as male partners, siblings, and loved ones were gruesomely murdered. This is a war tactic used to instill fear in individuals who try to revolt against the Nigerian government. Furthermore, women and girls who were forced to witness the brutal deaths of their male family members were not given emotional support or space to grieve and process these rampant themes of death. The tumultuous nature of war and the potency of the government did not allow it. In a 2009 interview with Biafran War survivor Gertrude Chinwe Ogunkeye, she recalls moments of terror as she was forced to witness the death of individuals while being held captive by Nigerian soldiers. In this powerful interview, she discusses the death of a man from her grandfather's village, which occurred in front of his wife and newborn child.

[5] The Hausa and Fulani are two large ethnic groups located in Northern Nigeria.

[6] The Igbo pogroms were a violent event led by the Nigerian government in 1966. In this event, Nigerian soldiers invaded Igbo homes in the North, murdered Igbo families in large numbers, and seized their properties.

In the interview, she says,

> I did not have any perception of death because the only dead person I have seen in my life was my great-grandmother, and she was very old. Sitting where we were, there was a man with a baby. A Nigerian soldier came to him and said, "What are you doing here? Tell them bye-bye." He just took the baby and gave it to his wife. We heard a crack, pop, and they shot him. The wife did not say a word. She just sat there holding her newborn baby. She did not say a word. (2009)

Ogunkeye's recollection of this moment illustrates the beginnings of long-term trauma stemming from unprocessed grief among Igbo women during the war. Igbo women were consistently forced to move forward with their lives during wartime violence as they took on traditional male responsibilities in order to maintain the household and family lineage that male members left behind. The experiences of unprocessed grief and lingering trauma derived from the war underscore why teaching gendered realities of Biafra, particularly the experiences of Igbo women, is essential for challenging archival absence and advancing community healing.

Institutional Consequences of the Biafran War and Its Connections to the Erasure of African-American Womanist History

"No Victor, No Vanquished"

Despite the Nigerian government's prominent role in the mass murder and destruction that occurred during the war, the military head of state in Nigeria at the time, Yakubu Gowon, famously stated the phrase "no victor, no vanquished" to describe the outcome of the Biafran War. In other words, there were no identifiable winners or losers after the war, but rather a unified country (Gowon 1970). The perceived unification of Nigeria and the government's consistent promotion of the "no victor, no vanquished" principle contributed to the justification of eliminating Biafran history from Nigerian public education. It did not help that Nigeria's investment in public education dropped significantly due to the loss of infrastructure and the lack of adequately trained teachers after the war (Onyemelukwe-Waziri 2017). Lack of acknowledgement of war atrocities and demolished educational infrastructures has prevented Nigerian students from learning the full truth of how Igbo women were treated during and after the war.

Biafra and Educational Reform in Nigeria

In addition to this, the Nigerian government has initiated other projects and educational reforms aimed at African unification (Nwachukwu 2023). These initiatives include the 1969 National Curriculum Conference[7], the 1970 Public Education Edict[8], and the 1971

[7] This was a nationwide conference in Nigeria aimed at creating an educational curriculum that would benefit and uplift all ethnic groups and not just individuals.

[8] The 1970 Public Education Edict was a tool used by the Nigerian government to control and centralize authority over staffing, curriculum, and school administrations.

Introduction of Social Studies as a Compulsory Subject.[9] To further demolish the remains of history pertaining to the war, the Nigerian government has also removed public school infrastructure, including classrooms that hold historical significance. This includes the Research and Production Agency of Biafra[10] at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (formerly known as the University of Biafra).

The lack of transparency within the stories of Biafran women in Nigerian academic institutions has led to many adverse effects on Igbo women's quality of life and health. These impacts include reduced adult stature, an increased likelihood of being overweight, and, most importantly, lower educational attainment (Akresh et al. 2023).

The Significance of Intersectional History in the US and Nigeria

Intersectional history must be a high priority in educational curricula to correct historical omission, highlight intersectional oppression, and promote empathy. Most importantly, the inclusion of this history in schools enhances educational development and encourages ancestral healing (Parameswaran et al. 2024). The erasure of Biafran women's experiences through Nigerian institutions reflects the same consequences that may occur when DEI is entirely eliminated in US school systems.

Throughout American history, Black trauma passed down from woman to woman can be seen in different historical contexts that have promoted gendered violence. These events include sexual violence in American slavery, American lynch culture, and more. It is essential for students to be taught about the detrimental impacts of these historical events, as without this knowledge, schools are at risk of retraumatizing students instead of healing them (Parameswaran et al. 2024).

Healing Generations of Women Through Intersectional Education

The positive impacts of teaching Black women's history and past trauma can be seen in an independent study course created by organizer and educator Betsy Brinson at Open High School in Richmond, Virginia. Brinson's course, "Black Women in American History," focused on topics such as the sexual objectification of the Black body, Black women and racial prejudice, the complexities of Black womanhood, and more. At the end of the course, Brinson found that this class not only helped students engage with the past but also enabled them to create tangible connections and solutions based on their own experiences (1980). Most of the students who took this course were young women of African descent and were very appreciative of learning more about the origins of contemporary Black trauma in their own communities (1980). All in all, Brinson's class motivated these young women to apply knowledge from "Black Women in American History" to curate positive changes in their own neighborhoods and communities.

Additionally, a 2023 study found that to create a safe and trusting educational space for students in the classroom, it is essential for teachers to center the voices of marginalized students. Healing must be grounded in historical honesty and accountability that centers people who derive from groups that have been systemically oppressed (Krazinski and Flores

[9] The 1971 Introduction of Social Studies as a Compulsory Subject was a Nigerian public policy that made the subject of social studies a priority. Social studies focused on developing positive rapport between ethnic groups and nation-building.

[10] The Research and Production Agency was a department that created homemade wartime arms and militant strategies for Biafran Soldiers during the Nigerian Civil War.

2023). This notion provides tools for adopting more holistic and comprehensive approaches to trauma and for identifying historically situated perspectives that resist essentializing (2023).

This study helps to underscore the importance of continuing to center the voices, trauma, and past historical events of Black and African-American women in the US through the arts of education and historical archives. Cultural memory in pedagogical spaces provides students and educators with transparency and depth into how ignoble the culture of American racism is. This transparency, however, also helps to cultivate a culture of healing and shared cultural memory across different groups of women.

Black Womanist Education in Archival Practices

In this context, education includes access to historical archives and libraries. There is a wealth of evidence suggesting that educational archives that embrace intersectional Black history and trauma studies have led to positive outcomes. For example, Michelle Caswell, in her piece, "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," discusses the significant impact that access to local archives has had on community members and their engagement. When individuals gain greater access to resources that tell the real, authentic stories of marginalized groups, it has epistemological, ontological, and social impacts (2016). The epistemological impact (specifically for individuals from underrepresented backgrounds) includes learning new content about their own histories and cultural heritage. The ontological impact helps to confirm that their experiences are valid and relevant. Finally, the social impact makes these individuals and their communities feel more included in society (2016). In the context of gendered Black history and Black woman studies, access to these archives is pivotal in recognizing historical trauma and facilitating the healing process.

Academic scholar and librarian Kellee E. Warren takes this perspective even further in her piece "We Need These Bodies, But Not Their Knowledge: Black Women in the Archives of Enslaved Black Women in the French Antilles." In Warren's work, she discusses why the narratives of Black women are essential to contemporary historical archives. She uses the context of the underrepresentation of enslaved Black women from the French Caribbean Islands to articulate the consequences of ancestral erasure. She finds that the absence of this history creates a disconnect in Black cultural memory, which is crucial for understanding justice work and restoration practices. She also underscores how the inclusion of stories and detail-oriented accounts of these women turns their history from quantitative to qualitative data (2016). To add to this notion, a 2024 study concluded that representation in archival work provides pedagogical benefits and fosters community empowerment (Awa 2024).

Conclusion

This paper argues that the erasure of stories and ancestral harm toward Black women in academic settings can be very dangerous, as it prevents students from learning in depth about the history of discrimination, trauma, and racial violence that Black women continue to experience. By comparing the erasure of this history with the omission of Biafran gendered narratives in Nigeria, I demonstrate that the consequences of erased narratives, the eradication of cultural memory, and education are extremely intertwined. Within the field of Africana Studies and Black international politics, we hope to see more literature, historical narratives, and educational archives developed that depict the connections of the voices of Biafran women and African-Americans who share the same struggle of holding onto Black collective memory

in a world that continues to uphold the legacy of European colonialism and White supremacy. Black feminist history in education is a necessity as we continue to reveal a global struggle over whose stories are deemed worthy of remembrance.

In memory of my maternal grandmother, Virginia Ndilika Okoye (1952–2025). A mother, grandmother, cultural custodian, first daughter, and Biafran War survivor. You ran so that your children and grandchildren could walk.

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Coordinated DEI Political Attacks in President Trump's Executive Orders Through the Lens of Critical Theory: Libraries Deconstructing Dysfunctional Political Rhetoric to Further Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of President Trump's executive orders, selected and analyzed through a lens of critical theory, on the representation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. It calls for strategic intervention by libraries to deconstruct the underlying political rhetoric of these executive orders, enabling their publics to resist his dysfunctional acts of aggression in the dismantling of American democracy. The goal is to integrate critical theory application to promote social justice in libraries as resistance to actualize fairness, justice, equity, empowerment, change agency, and community building in response to the troublesome political times created via a conscious and/or unconscious coercion/manipulation of the American people and the democratic process. The critical discourse reveals a disturbing resemblance between the contemporary political populism in the United States and the Depression-era conditions in Weimar, Germany, during the prewar twentieth century. The explanatory discourse resonates with truth and signals possibly tragic consequences if it remains unheeded.

Introduction

The recent call for a special issue of *The Political Librarian* on "Defending DEI and the Politics of Inclusion" is most timely and urgent (Every Library Institute 2025). Donald J. Trump was ordained in his second coming as the forty-seventh president of the United States in January 2025, with a clear mandate dictated by the American public that also bestowed control over both chambers in Congress to the Republican Party (O'Donoghue 2024). Since then, President Trump has left no stone unturned in spearheading concerted and consistent attacks that target diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and dismantle the institution of libraries, among other actions, that are destroying the core of most democratic

* The second author decided to keep their name anonymous owing to fear of political retaliation in the current reality of American politics.

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norms and processes (Williams and Cooke 2025; Mehra 2025). President Trump has operationalized his agenda of white supremacy and authoritarianism through a surge of executive orders emerging from the highest office in the land, delivering unfair and unjust promises on his election mandate to his conservative votebank constituencies (De Genova n.d.; Driesen 2025). This includes use of executive orders as a political and legal arsenal to erase minority and marginalized histories, weaponize federal policies to eliminate social responsibility obligations, suppress intellectual freedom or dissent, and annihilate democracy—even in its watered-down neoliberal sellout form—to solely empower multinational corporations in unduly controlling state and federal jurisdictions, often at the expense of public interests, to name a few (Savage 2023; West 2022).

This article examines the impact of President Trump's executive orders—selected and analyzed through a lens of critical theory—on DEI representation, and identifies strategic interventions for libraries to deconstruct their underlying political rhetoric and resist his dysfunctional acts of political aggression in the dismantling of American democracy (Aptekar 2019; Newman 2007). The goal is to integrate critical theory application to promote social justice in libraries as resistance to actualize fairness, justice, equity, empowerment, change agency, and community building in response to the troublesome political times created via a conscious and/or unconscious coercion/manipulation of the American people and the democratic processes (Jaeger et al. 2016; Mehra 2022).

A Heed of Caution

The Frankfurt School proponents of critical theory in the early twentieth century were reacting, essentially, to failed problems in colonialism/imperialism that served as tools of capitalism and the resulting rise of fascism in a fraught prewar global setting (Geuss 1981). Applying critical theory criteria, dissected from academic scholarship in content analysis, to deconstruct President Trump's select executive orders makes it particularly effective in highlighting the underlying social foundations, power imbalances, and political rhetoric/abuses inherent in their orchestration, especially as targeted at DEI initiatives (Ingram 1998). The critical discourse reveals a disturbing resemblance between the contemporary political populism in the United States, illustrated in President Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign, and the Depression-era conditions in Weimar, Germany, during the prewar twentieth century (Mockaitis 2023). Further, examining the language of the executive orders through a critical theory lens draws attention to similarities in the positionality of President Trump's ascension to power, situated as an "outsider," and his resort to racism as a "fear-mongering demagogue" to stoke the passions of an uneducated, self-aggrandizing, white supremacist populace, threatened by their inadequacies in a changing economy and high-tech industry, with comparable circumstances that generated analogous language styles and rhetoric used by Adolf Hitler (Horne 2024).

Illustrated through the discursive evidence in this study, readers are encouraged to draw on the horrific parallels between the current political tendencies evidenced in President Trump's authoritarianism (e.g., DEI targeting) and prewar Germany (Tourish 2023). As Mark Twain and Charles Warner wrote in their 1874 novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (re-edition 2024), "History never repeats itself, but the Kaleidoscopic combinations of the pictured present often seem to be constructed out of the broken fragments of antique legends." President Trump's executive orders, selected for their representation of critical theory criteria and their targeting of DEI concerns, paint a picture of totalitarianism that is more

than mere "broken fragments" connecting the present political moment to the past. The tangible discursive evidence strongly ties threads that connect the dots in contemporary time with the past's political events that led to extreme misfortune and loss. The explanatory discourse resonates with truth and signals possibly tragic consequences if it remains unheeded. The narrative reminds us of the quote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (284), attributed to Spanish philosopher George Santayana (2017, 1905), from his book *The Life of Reason.* The tragedy is the seeming memory loss of the American public—its inability to recall similar conditions surrounding past mistakes of humanity that led to the loss of millions of human lives and the destruction wrought by the Great Wars of the last century, and the parallels with the contemporary political dysfunctions revealed in President Trump's executive orders.

Contextualizing the Stage

This section briefly threads select intersecting areas of study, namely, DEI in librarianship and executive orders as a political tool, to inform readers about relevant issues that help contextualize the stage (i.e., the conceptual setting) of this article. Further, a few methodological aspects are also noted. Recently, libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural memory institutions, as well as educators in these areas of work, have been challenged to acknowledge and address their white-entrenched histories and toxic work practices (Cooke and Colón-Aguirre 2021; Mehra and Gray 2020). As a result, over the past two decades, DEI has emerged as a set of foundational values, held highly and acknowledged within the library and information science (LIS) professions. For example, in 2012, the Racial and Ethnic Diversity Committee of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), based on the 2001 National Association of Social Workers' *Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*, developed its eleven standards to serve and advocate for racial and ethnically diverse constituencies in libraries. These were later rescinded by the ACRL Board of Directors in June 2022 following the approval of *Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity: A Framework*, a joint effort of the American Library Association (ALA) and the Association of Research Libraries. Further, on June 29, 2021, the ALA Council officially approved a ninth principle to be added to the ALA Code of Ethics, stating, "We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces." Such codifications and policies have helped us collectively recognize and affirm that these values are important to us, thereby aiming to integrate DEI throughout the collections, services, and programming that we offer in libraries. DEI values then also impact library staff, policies and procedures, collections, programming, community engagement, and outreach every day (Hodge and McAllister 2022). Providing DEI content in our communities seeks to celebrate and inform library users of the lived experiences and rich histories of marginalized groups, such as LGBTQIA+ people, individuals of minority race and ethnic backgrounds, or religious beliefs, among others (Burress et al. 2024). However, now that DEI is under attack within the current political regime, what happens when such diverse content is erased?

The president or a state governor is granted constitutional authority to issue executive orders and implement statutes that manage operations and guide the actions of federal or state agencies (Rudalevige 2021). Article II of the US Constitution grants the president

broad executive power, as do statutes passed by Congress (Congress.gov n.d.). Interestingly, the presidential authority and power to issue executive orders are derived from vague and indirect mandates to direct the executive branch and ensure that laws are faithfully executed, since the US Constitution does not specifically mention them (Chou 2019). Executive orders cannot override the Constitution or federal laws passed by Congress and are subject to judicial review to maintain checks and balances on executive power and uphold supremacy of constitutional authority (Newland 2015). Administrative actions should never be arbitrary or capricious—attributes recently assigned to the limits of President Trump's authority (and also of the judiciary) owing to his "frequent clashes with the courts, from his 'Muslim ban,' to the Commerce Department's directive (since rescinded) to include a citizenship question" on this year's Census Form and to the "Department of Homeland Security's rescinding of the Obama-era DACA program," to name a few (Mock 2024, 51). However, President Trump's strategy of issuing executive orders seems to reflect a trend that began under President Barack Obama (2008–2016), shaped "not only by congressional inaction, but also by strategic calculations about public opinion, partisan polarization, and media response," as modern presidents continue to rely on them "as both policy tools and political signals, reinforcing a broader trend toward unilateralism that challenges legislative processes and reshapes the balance of power in American government" (Senator 2025).

The Office of the Federal Register (2025) provides access to executive orders after the president of the United States signs the documents and they become available for public consumption. In the aftermath of the 2024 presidential election, Donald J. Trump signed approximately 176 executive orders during the period of January–July 2025 (the focus of this article), after his second nonconsecutive reckoning in the highest office of the land. These decisions ranged in content, with some explicitly targeting the erasure of DEI content in libraries and beyond. In an evidence-based critical review, we identified DEI themes in the select executive orders and examined them for potential interventions in LIS-related institutions. The problematic dimensions of the relevant executive orders were identified in terms of a named "political rhetoric," used to highlight seemingly contradictory aspects or deviations from democratic norms or publicly stated agendas (Paust 2012). The results of this content analysis speak to the beginnings of a ripple that seeks to erase these vibrant communities.

We adopted select features of evidence-based scoping review as a methodological mode of inquiry in this research. The New York Medical College (n.d.) recognizes evidence-based scoping review as a legitimate approach to map a given topic in a specific field or domain of activity. In our research, we utilized the method as a logical mechanism to broadly help in the selection of relevant executive orders to analyze with a direct reference to DEI content. The process involved selecting relevant executive orders that directly illustrated representation of key themes related to critical theory criteria (Arksey and O'Malley 2005; Munn et al. 2018).

Critical Theory Criteria to Deconstruct Executive Orders

Contemporary applications of critical theory bring together originations of German idealism from the Frankfurt School between the two twentieth-century wars (e.g., Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and others) and its second generation scholars from the 1960s (e.g., György Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, and Jürgen Habermas) with elements of American pragmatism (i.e., practical implications, inquiry, and importance of experience/context in shaping knowledge/truth) (Rioux and Mehra 2016; Spencer 2020). Critical theory is especially relevant as a tool for deconstructing

Donald J. Trump's executive orders that are targeted at DEI (in its broadest of meanings) since the beginning of his term as the forty-seventh president of the United States (i.e., January 20, 2025). Critical theory advocates recognizing perspectives of ALL stakeholders in each given context and always including the points of view of those on society's margins while furnishing a grounding for an appraisal of potentially divisive problems (Endres 1996; Gottesman 2016). For critical thinking and reflexivity (i.e., analysis of existing roles, biases, and assumptions) toward progressive action and social justice are foundational attributes in its use to challenge (traditional or nontraditional) political consciousness and inspect predominant values, biased practices, ideological structures, systemic institutions, and stunted processes (Froomkin 2003; Habermas 1994; Kellner 1989; Mehra 2021). The following are criteria dissected from scholarship on critical theory that make it particularly applicable to dismantle underlying social foundations and power imbalances inherent in the executive orders targeting DEI content:

- Forces and relations of production (Fuchs 2021; Marramao 1984)
- Employer-employee work conditions (Kurniawan 2025; Tilly 2025)
- Division of labor (Postone 1993)
- Property relations (Nichols 2019)
- Cultural institutions (Thompson 2001)
- Political power structures (Bossaller et al. 2010)
- Roles and rituals (Offutt 2020)
- Nature of state control (Jessop 2019)

Table 1 highlights the relevant content in the executive orders and their representation of salient dimensions associated with select critical theory criteria from authoritative scholarship. The problematic political rhetoric in each case is also highlighted.

Table 1. Relevant content in the executive orders, representing select critical theory criteria

Critical Theory Criteria	Executive Order	Relevant Content Illustrating Critical Theory Criteria
Forces and Relations of Production	14319 (Preventing Woke AI in the Federal Government)	(1) "DEI displaces the commitment to truth in favor of preferred outcomes and, as recent history illustrates, poses an existential threat to reliable AI." (2) "While the Federal Government should be hesitant to regulate the functionality of AI models in the private marketplace, in the context of Federal procurement, it has the obligation not to procure models that sacrifice truthfulness and accuracy to ideological agendas." (3) "Artificial intelligence (AI) will play a critical role in how Americans of all ages learn new skills, consume information, and navigate their daily lives." Political rhetoric: Targeting DEI as something contrary to "truth" and an impediment to future progress.
	14154 (Unleashing American Energy)	(1) "It is thus in the national interest to unleash America's affordable and reliable energy and natural resources." (2) "This will restore American prosperity—including for those men and women who have been forgotten by our economy in recent years. It will also rebuild our Nation's economic and military security, which will deliver peace through strength." Political rhetoric: Exploitation of natural resources to further American prosperity and build the nation's economic and military power base, while pretending to compensate low-income individuals (to get them on board).

Critical Theory Criteria	Executive Order	Relevant Content Illustrating Critical Theory Criteria
Employer-Employee Work Conditions	14173 (Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity)	(1) "Hardworking Americans who deserve a shot at the American Dream should not be stigmatized, demeaned, or shut out of opportunities because of their race or sex." (2) "In accordance with Executive Order 13279 of December 12, 2002 (Equal Protection of the Laws for Faith-Based and Community Organizations), the employment, procurement, and contracting practices of Federal contractors and subcontractors shall not consider race, color, sex, sexual preference, religion, or national origin in ways that violate the Nation's civil rights laws." (3) "Illegal DEI and DEIA policies not only violate the text and spirit of our longstanding Federal civil-rights laws, they also undermine our national unity, as they deny, discredit, and undermine the traditional American values of hard work, excellence, and individual achievement in favor of an unlawful, corrosive, and pernicious identity-based spoils system." Political rhetoric: Advocates that white male privilege should continue unchecked. A biased interpretation of the civil rights laws, not considering that the laws themselves were biased and problematic. Does not acknowledge that American values are built on colonialism/imperialism and slavery.
	14281 (Restoring Equality of Opportunity and Meritocracy)	(1) "On a practical level, disparate-impact liability has hindered businesses from making hiring and other employment decisions based on merit and skill, their needs, or the needs of their customers because of the specter that such a process might lead to disparate outcomes, and thus disparate-impact lawsuits."(2) "Under my Administration, citizens will be treated equally before the law and as individuals, not consigned to a certain fate based on their immutable characteristics." (3) "This has made it difficult, and in some cases impossible, for employers to use bona fide job-oriented evaluations when recruiting, which prevents job seekers from being paired with jobs to which their skills are most suited—in other words, it deprives them of opportunities for success. Because of disparate-impact liability, employers cannot act in the best interests of the job applicant, the employer, and the American public." Political rhetoric: Propounds that white male privilege should continue unchecked. A biased interpretation of the civil rights laws, not considering that the laws themselves were biased and problematic. Lacks accountability that American values are built on colonialism/imperialism and slavery.

Critical Theory Criteria	Executive Order	Relevant Content Illustrating Critical Theory Criteria
Division of Labor	14278 (Preparing Americans for High-Paying Skilled Trade Jobs of the Future)	(1) ". . . my Administration will fully equip the American worker to produce world-class products and implement world-leading technologies." (2) "My Administration will also consolidate and streamline fragmented Federal workforce development programs that are too disconnected from propelling workers into secure, well-paying, and high-need American jobs." Political rhetoric: The DOGE was unsuccessful in achieving its initially stated purpose toward this agenda.
	14158 (Establishing and Implementing the President's "Department of Government Efficiency")	(1) ". . . establishes the Department of Government Efficiency to implement the President's DOGE Agenda, by modernizing Federal technology and software to maximize governmental efficiency and productivity." (2) "Agency Heads shall ensure that DOGE Team Leads coordinate their work with USDS and advise their respective Agency Heads on implementing the President's DOGE Agenda." (3) "The United States Digital Service is hereby publicly renamed as the United States DOGE Service (USDS) and shall be established in the Executive Office of the President." Political rhetoric: The BBC reported that DOGE failed to reach its ambitious savings targets for the US government when tech entrepreneur Elon Musk, its unofficial head, left the initiative in May 2025 (Clarke 2025).
Property Relations	14206 (Protecting Second Amendment Rights)	(1) "Because it is foundational to maintaining all other rights held by Americans, the right to keep and bear arms must not be infringed." Political rhetoric: Unchecked gun ownership laws are a threat to safety and security and tantamount to internal terrorism.
	14165 (Securing Our Borders)	(1) "A nation without borders is not a nation, and the Federal Government must act with urgency and strength to end the threats posed by an unsecured border." (2) "My Administration will marshal all available resources and authorities to stop this unprecedented flood of illegal aliens into the United States." (3) "Over the last 4 years, the United States has endured a large-scale invasion at an unprecedented level." Political rhetoric: The illegal aliens in Central and Latin America are a result of the United States' imperialistic ambitions and policies of international tampering with democratic governments, resulting in conditions of poverty and drug trafficking. Also, Texas was annexed through war with Mexico; power is not always right.

Critical Theory Criteria	Executive Order	Relevant Content Illustrating Critical Theory Criteria
Cultural Institutions	14190 (Ending Radical Indoctrination in K–12 Schooling)	(1) "…parents have witnessed schools indoctrinate their children in radical, anti-American ideologies while deliberately blocking parental oversight. Such an environment operates as an echo chamber, in which students are forced to accept these ideologies without question or critical examination." (2) "Imprinting anti-American, subversive, harmful, and false ideologies on our Nation's children not only violates longstanding anti-discrimination civil rights law in many cases, but usurps basic parental authority." (3) "My Administration will enforce the law to ensure that recipients of Federal funds providing K–12 education comply with all applicable laws prohibiting discrimination in various contexts and protecting parental rights…" Political rhetoric: Factual history based on evidence is a must to create an educated citizenry, not one based on biased storytelling. Children are not property to justify unchecked parental rights.
	14291 (Establishment of the Religious Liberty Commission)	(1) "It shall be the policy of the executive branch to vigorously enforce the historic and robust protections for religious liberty enshrined in Federal law." (2) "Americans need to be reacquainted with our Nation's superb experiment in religious freedom in order to preserve it against emerging threats. Therefore, the Federal Government will promote citizens' pride in our foundational history, identify emerging threats to religious liberty, uphold Federal laws that protect all citizens' full participation in a pluralistic democracy, and protect the free exercise of religion." Political rhetoric: All minority religions should be given the same rights as the majority religion. For example, according to this dictum, the same privileges granted to Christianity should likewise be bestowed upon Islam or Judaism.
	14202 (Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias)	(1) ". . . the purpose of this order, to protect the religious freedoms of Americans and end the anti-Christian weaponization of government." (2) "My Administration will not tolerate anti-Christian weaponization of government or unlawful conduct targeting Christians." (3) "My Administration will ensure that any unlawful and improper conduct, policies, or practices that target Christians are identified, terminated, and rectified." Political rhetoric: Similarly, Christians should not be allowed to target other religions.
Political Power Structures	14248 (Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections)	(1) "Free, fair, and honest elections unmarred by fraud, errors, or suspicion are fundamental to maintaining our constitutional Republic." (2) "Above all, elections must be honest and worthy of the public trust." Political rhetoric: Both parties have created this distrust of elections and the electoral process.
	14151 (Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing)	(1) "Americans deserve a government committed to serving every person with equal dignity and respect, and to expending precious taxpayer resources only on making America great." (2) "Pursuant to Executive Order 13985 and follow-on orders, nearly every Federal agency and entity submitted 'Equity Action Plans' to detail the ways that they have furthered DEIs infiltration of the Federal Government. The public release of these plans demonstrated immense public waste and shameful discrimination." Political rhetoric: The United States has a strong history of discrimination toward racial/ethnic minorities and anyone who is not a white, able-bodied, heterosexual male. These biases exist in every fiber of the American experience and systemic institutions' policies and practices. How does President Trump plan to acknowledge and address these discriminatory practices that place people like him at the top of the totem pole of power and privilege?

Critical Theory Criteria	Executive Order	Relevant Content Illustrating Critical Theory Criteria
Roles and Rituals	14148 (Initial Rescissions of Harmful Executive Orders and Actions)	(1) "The injection of 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' (DEI) into our institutions has corrupted them by replacing hard work, merit, and equality with a divisive and dangerous preferential hierarchy." (2) "To commence the policies that will make our Nation united, fair, safe, and prosperous again, it is the policy of the United States to restore common sense to the Federal Government . . ." Political rhetoric: DEI should be erased only when whiteness (Anglo/Eurocentrality) and white superiority are eradicated.
	14168 (Defending Women from Gender Ideological Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government)	(1) "Ideologues who deny the biological reality of sex have increasingly used legal and other socially coercive means to permit men to self-identify as women and gain access to intimate single sex spaces and activities designed for women, from women's domestic abuse shelters to women's workplace showers. This is wrong." (2) "My Administration will defend women's rights and protect freedom of conscience by using clear and accurate language and policies that recognize women are biologically female, and men are biologically male." (3) "It is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female. These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality." Political rhetoric: Check scientific research. We must develop an understanding of gender that is not confined to "biological truth."
Nature of State Control	14253 (Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History)	(1) "Americans have witnessed a concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation's history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth. This revisionist movement seeks to undermine the remarkable achievements of the United States by casting its founding principles and historical milestones in a negative light." (2) "This shift has promoted narratives that portray American and Western values as inherently harmful and oppressive." (3) "Museums in our Nation's capital should be places where individuals go to learn—not to be subjected to ideological indoctrination or divisive narratives that distort our shared history." Political rhetoric: Might and power do not give anyone the right to dictate what is revisionist history or not.
	14224 (Designating English as the Official Language of the United States)	(1) "In welcoming new Americans, a policy of encouraging the learning and adoption of our national language will make the United States a shared home and empower new citizens to achieve the American dream." (2) "Establishing English as the official language will not only streamline communication but also reinforce shared national values, and create a more cohesive and efficient society." Political rhetoric: Maintaining English as the official language dictates Anglo/Eurocentrality, which goes against the President's vision of staying impartial and treating everyone equally.
	Note: Details of the content made available in this table can be found via the Office of the Federal Register (2025) at URL: https://www.federalregister.gov/presidential-documents/executive-orders/donald-trump/2025#:~:text=In%202025%2C%20Donald%20J.%20Trump,the%20business%20day%20before%20publication.	

The following is a discussion of each criterion of critical theory and illustrative content in the executive orders under study that represent problematic political rhetoric. Based on our ability to see relevant connections between executive orders and critical theory, the authors selected seventeen executive orders that reflect the eight key criteria of critical theory.

1. Forces and Relations of Production: Executive Order 14319 ("Preventing Woke AI in the Federal Government") and Executive Order 14154 ("Unleashing American Energy") align with the critical theory criterion of forces and relations of production. This criterion considers the means and capacity that make production possible, while also noting the power dynamics that organize it. Executive Order 14319 relates to this, as illustrated in this statement: "While the Federal Government should be hesitant to regulate the functionality of AI models in the private marketplace, in the context of Federal procurement, it has the obligation not to procure models that sacrifice truthfulness and accuracy to ideological agendas." A political rhetoric conveyed in this executive order is the targeting of DEI as something contrary to "truth" and an impediment to future progress. Similarly, in Executive Order 14154, the current administration asserts that "this will restore American prosperity—including for those men and women who have been forgotten by our economy in recent years. It will also rebuild our Nation's economic and military security, which will deliver peace through strength." Here, the political rhetoric of the exploitation of natural resources is justified to further American prosperity and build the nation's economic and military power base, while compensating low-income individuals (to get them on board), while actually serving the opposite purpose and only helping the multinational corporations and the military industrial complex.
2. Employer-Employee Work Conditions: The Frankfurt School also recognized employer-employee work conditions in critical theory conversations. This criterion acknowledges work conditions as expressions of power, in which workers are dehumanized into mere instruments or resources. Executive Order 14173 ("Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity") and Executive Order 14281 ("Restoring Equality of Opportunity and Meritocracy") align with this key point. Executive Order 14173 says, "Illegal DEI and DEIA policies not only violate the text and spirit of our longstanding Federal civil-rights laws, they also undermine our national unity, as they deny, discredit, and undermine the traditional American values of hard work, excellence, and individual achievement in favor of an unlawful, corrosive, and pernicious identity-based spoils system." In the same tone, Executive Order 14281 says, "On a practical level, disparate-impact liability has hindered businesses from making hiring and other employment decisions based on merit and skill, their needs, or the needs of their customers because of the specter that such a process might lead to disparate outcomes, and thus disparate-impact lawsuits." Both imply that white male privilege should continue unchecked. They provide a biased interpretation of the civil rights laws, failing to consider that the laws themselves were biased and problematic. They do not acknowledge that American values are built on colonialism/imperialism and slavery, and they avoid the issue of accountability for horrific acts that have contributed to the contemporary power status of American nationhood.
3. Division of Labor: Critical theory views the criterion of the division of labor in relation to production. It considers how hierarchies like management and ownership are entitled to the advantage of those in power. Executive Order 14278 ("Preparing Americans for High-Paying Skilled Trade Jobs of the Future") and Executive Order 14158 ("Establishing and Implementing the President's

'Department of Government Efficiency'") reflect this criterion. Statement of the Executive Order 14278 illustrates the following: "My Administration will also consolidate and streamline fragmented Federal workforce development programs that are too disconnected from propelling workers into secure, well-paying, and high-need American jobs." The very creation of the Department of Government Efficiency and its mission to "implement the President's DOGE Agenda, by modernizing Federal technology and software to maximize governmental efficiency and productivity" shares in the same ideals. It is noteworthy that owing to differences between Elon Musk and President Trump, the DOGE failed to achieve its publicly indicative purpose, indicating a conflicting reality in its conceptualization and implementation that resulted in its internal self-combustion.

4. Property Relations: Executive Order 14206 ("Protecting Second Amendment Rights") and Executive Order 14165 ("Securing Our Borders") complement the property relations criterion of critical theory. Theorists discuss this, considering the power dynamics associated with who owns and controls property. Executive Order 14206 echoes this: "Because it is foundational to maintaining all other rights held by Americans, the right to keep and bear arms must not be infringed." Catering to gun lobbyists, which has led to unchecked gun ownership and violence, has resulted in millions of deaths over the past decade (if not earlier), including shootings in K–12 schools and the deaths of children and teens. The government's job is to stop internal terrorism, not pass executive orders to further terrorists' cause. This idea is again made apparent in Executive Order 14165 through this statement: "Over the last 4 years, the United States has endured a large-scale invasion at an unprecedented level." This is all to prove that property relations indeed provide power and domination over others. The surge in illegal immigrants in Central and Latin America is a result of the imperialist ambitions and colonizing economic policies of the United States. The current government must take accountability for its own role (and that of the CIA) in creating the current situation of illegal migration.
5. Cultural Institutions: Critical theorists recognize cultural institutions as those in which ideology and power are correlated. That which is taught or shared is enforced as a narrative of truth. There are three executive orders that illustrate this issue: 14190, 14291, and 14202. Executive Order 14190 ("Ending Radical Indoctrination in K–12 Schooling") includes this statement: "Imprinting anti-American, subversive, harmful, and false ideologies on our Nation's children not only violates longstanding anti-discrimination civil rights law in many cases, but usurps basic parental authority." Factual history is based on evidence. This is key to creating an educated and informed citizenry. Biased storytelling and forcing something to be considered as real are not right, especially when someone is using their position of power to make it happen. Further, children should not be considered as property to justify unchecked parental rights. This often leads to an abuse of power at a cost to the child's mental, physical, emotional, and psychological health. Additionally, in Executive Order 14291 ("Establishment of the Religious Liberty Commission"), the current administration states, "Americans need to be reacquainted with our Nation's superb experiment in religious freedom in order to preserve it against emerging threats. Therefore, the Federal

Government will promote citizens' pride in our foundational history, identify emerging threats to religious liberty, uphold Federal laws that protect all citizens' full participation in a pluralistic democracy, and protect the free exercise of religion." In an evidence-based history, this nation's experiment with religious freedom has been far from "superb." The wiping out of Indigenous people's entire existence (including their notions of spiritual and religious beliefs) is a prime example of dysfunctional practices within the country. The numerous wars that the United States has supported in the Middle East against Muslim nations (e.g., the Israel-Gaza War) are a prime example of the biased application of so-called American religious freedom around the world. Another example of this is voiced in Executive Order 14202 ("Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias"), which states: "My Administration will ensure that any unlawful and improper conduct, policies, or practices that target Christians are identified, terminated, and rectified." If the above executive order about "religious freedom" is to be honored, identifying people of one religion (i.e., Christians) gives them an undue advantage and privilege; all others should also be identified and treated equally as such. Moreover, they should also be named so as not to be "targeted" by Christians.

6. Political Power Structures: Power, superiority, and dominance are addressed in conversations surrounding critical theory and political and power structures. Executive Order 14248 and Executive Order 14151 touch on these same ideas. Executive Order 14248 ("Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections") says, "Free, fair, and honest elections unmarred by fraud, errors, or suspicion are fundamental to maintaining our constitutional Republic." An important point to consider is that both parties have made unfounded accusations about the tampering of the election process and created public distrust, thanks to the muddying of facts by news channels. Executive Order 14151 ("Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing") aligns with this statement: "Americans deserve a government committed to serving every person with equal dignity and respect, and to expending precious taxpayer resources only on making America great." This calls into question what "great" means and who that benefits. The history of the United States has been far from "great" with discrimination at every corner toward racial/ethnic minorities and anyone who is not a white, able-bodied, heterosexual male. Even today, these biases exist in every fiber of the American experience and systemic institutions' policies and practices. How does President Trump plan to acknowledge and address these discriminatory practices that place people like him at the top of the totem pole of power and privilege?
7. Roles and Rituals: Recognized as tools of hierarchy, social order, and ways to promote ideology, roles and rituals are another criterion of critical theory. Executive Order 14148 ("Initial Rescissions of Harmful Executive Orders and Actions") and Executive Order 14168 ("Defending Women from Gender Ideological Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government") are like pieces of the puzzle. As Executive Order 14148 declares, "The injection of 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' (DEI) into our institutions has corrupted them by replacing hard work, merit, and equality with a divisive and dangerous preferential hierarchy." DEI should be erased only when whiteness (Anglo/Eurocentrality)/white privi-

lege and white superiority are eradicated. In this same theme, Executive Order 14168 states, "It is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female. These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality." It is important to validate one's own claims with scientific research. We must develop an understanding of gender that is not confined to "biological truth."

8. Nature of State Control: In the nature of state control criterion, critical theorists claim that the state presents itself as neutral in being for the people, but is, in fact, quite the opposite. Critical theory looks at the nature of state control as authoritarianism. Illustrating this thought, Executive Order 14253 and Executive Order 14224 may be used as representatives of the issue. Executive Order 14253 ("Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History") promotes that "Americans have witnessed a concerned and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation's history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth. This revisionist movement seeks to undermine the remarkable achievements of the United States by casting its founding principles and historical milestones in a negative light." The same claims can be made about this executive order itself. Might and power do not give anyone the right to dictate what is revisionist history or not. Executive Order 14224 ("Designating English as the Official Language of the United States") evidenced this too in the following statement: "Establishing English as the official language will not only streamline communication but also reinforce shared national values, and create a more cohesive and efficient society." Maintaining English as the official language dictates Anglo/Eurocentrality, which goes against the president's vision of staying impartial and treating all equally.

Conclusion: Library Intervention

In the face of a multitude of executive orders sanctioned by President Trump, the most important strategy that library and information professionals can implement is to stand up firmly and assertively at forums and levels of authority against the dysfunctional political rhetoric that many of the executive orders are largely built upon. The construct of "political rhetoric" is closely aligned with the art of deception using persuasive language in political contexts to influence public perception, shape prevalent opinions, and inspire actions (Pancer et al. 1992; Turnbull 2016). Some would argue that political rhetoric is intrinsic and part and parcel of politics and political communications (Bitzer 1998). Many of President Trump's executive orders are built on selling a particular point of view with half-truths (if not complete lies), incomplete data, a lack of responsibility/accountability for one's own actions, biased, twisted arguments, and the like. Hence, my choice of the term "dysfunctional" in connection with his political rhetoric is represented in the select executive orders presented in this article. In today's age and in the problematic Trump era, the role of librarians must be to deconstruct the subversive and/or explicit political rhetoric in the executive orders and make visible the politically motivated falsehood embedded in their construction. Their role should go beyond providing fact-checking sources. Revealing the unhealthy falsehood should be part and parcel of the librarian's task. That is the only way to clean the dirtiness that has emerged in American politics, thanks to President Trump's executive orders and their attacks on DEI

and many aspects of the democratic processes. The use of critical theory criteria and their representation in President Trump's executive orders highlights the parallels with the times of the rise of fascism in prewar Germany. This wake-up call must not be ignored. Otherwise, looking back at the possibility of a tragic time to emerge, none but the American public will be to blame.

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Biographical Sketch

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Inclusive Collection Development Doesn't Stop at the Statement: Access and Reference Services at Schlesinger Library as Case Study

MIMOSA SHAH AND MADELEINE MURPHY

Introduction

It's arguable that the heart of a university is its libraries. They acquire, preserve, organize, restore, and make accessible its vital information resources for the university's students, faculty, staff, visiting scholars, and community partners, and optimally, create space for new knowledge to emerge. The Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America sits at the core of one of Harvard University's nodes, the Harvard Radcliffe Institute. Opened under the auspices of Radcliffe College in 1943, the Schlesinger Library is a research library with a curatorial focus on collections related to the history of women and gender diverse[1] people. Unlike other libraries on campus, the Schlesinger Library holds archives collected with the recognition that without intentional efforts, there would be no space to recognize, name, and study the breadth and scope of women's histories. The library's first collection was a gift of manuscript material from suffragist Maud Wood Park, and over time, this has grown to include over three thousand archival collections and thousands of books, pamphlets, zines, journals, and other materials.[2]

In 2025, amidst a flurry of Executive Orders from the federal government; the attempted defunding of governmental agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences; and the concomitant widespread interruption of services, programming, and integral grant awards, many libraries, archives, and museums are facing existential threats (K. Jensen 2025). Within this landscape, the Schlesinger Library's revised collection development strategy and its express commitment to reparative archival practice[3] remain true to the library's roots and stand as models for navigating the challenges of regressive policies and anticipatory compliance. This article provides an overview of how putting the revised strategy in practice within the realm of access and reference services holds us grounded in the concept of access with accountability. In the context of digital humanities work, Roopika Risam explains that access without accountability creates a situation in which "archives are opened but not contextualized, where stories are extracted from communities but not returned to them, where knowledge circulates but the people who shaped it are left behind. It is access that takes, not access that gives back" (Risam 2025). Collection strategies have historically only reflected society's dominant structures. Therefore, to practice access

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with accountability, it's important for people using collections to see themselves and their stories reflected in cultural institutions, even with the recognition that archival silences will prevent us from fully recovering the breadth of historical context (Dempsey 2018).

We remain in solidarity with the communities we not only serve but are active members of. Therefore, we believe it is important to note our own identities as library workers who are also recent transplants to New England and to working in academia. One of us is a white, nonbinary person who grew up in rural Pennsylvania, and one of us is a first-generation, South Asian American cisgender woman who most recently called the Upper Midwest a home. Our positionality is notable because our experiences with being marginalized inform our work in access and reference services at the Schlesinger Library and further underscore how important the library's mission is to our collective well-being. Our positionality is relevant to our work as research services professionals. According to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) guidelines, a special collections professional "[p]ossesses cultural and linguistic competencies appropriate for their collections and user communities" (ACRL 2017). Subject matter expertise, professional training, and our lived experiences contribute to how we engage researchers with collections.

Collection development is an integral tool for inclusion in libraries and archives. Inclusion is a core value articulated in library and archival sciences today, encoded both at the curricular level for incoming information professionals as well as in diverse professional guidelines. We argue that inclusive collecting strategies are not a new outcome of contemporary DEI policies, but rather the result of a long struggle in the profession. Such strategies are inherently political, because they are grounded in remaining accountable to the communities from which materials are being collected. By providing equitable access and reference support, we bring these collections to the attention of researchers. In working with the public, we provide critical context, demonstrate care for these materials, and tell the stories of so many who were historically and intentionally silenced.

We argue that anti-DEI backlash incorrectly labels the work of increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in library spaces as a contemporary project originating in the post-2020 era, overlooking decades of work by library professionals and institutions committed to reparative collection development practices. This article was written during a period of immense instability for both the United States and other countries throughout the western hemisphere, with lasting repercussions for countries categorized under the umbrella term "Global South." Ongoing attacks on intellectual freedom are often veiled as accusations against DEI training and labeled as exclusively affiliated with one major political party. These accusations are coupled with demands to remove historical content regarding marginalized populations, including Indigenous, Black, Latine, Asian, Pacific Islander, and disabled communities, as well as individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+, from major cultural heritage sites.

Case Study: Access and Research Services and Inclusive Collection Development

Questions regarding who gets to read what, when, where, and how undergird our respective roles as access services coordinator (Madeleine) and reference librarian (Mimosa) at a storied special collections library. While the Schlesinger Library does not have an official direct reporting line to Harvard Library, it houses the archival records for Radcliffe College, a women's college that was later fully incorporated into Harvard University in 1999 (Maiorana 2025, 207). We support access to analog and digital archival materials alongside printed and

published items, as well as the discovery and use of items found in subscription databases and other online resources made possible through the university library's central administration and other partner repositories. Conducting research with archival materials within the context of a non-circulating collection complicates access and use for researchers new to working with these types of materials. Therefore, collaborating with Schlesinger Library colleagues across departments is key to the success of how we can uphold equitable access for hundreds of researchers each year. While we do not participate directly in the curatorial work of acquisitions and donor relations, practicing inclusive collection development cross-departmentally holds us accountable to the individuals whose lives are represented by the materials held at our library.

Connecting our collections and subject matter expertise to researchers' daily lives is part and parcel of our efforts to create connections to resources, either through their time spent in our reading room or via remote research options. Unlike some sister libraries on campus, the Schlesinger Library is open to all members of the public and does not require one to have a specific research project in order to use collection materials. Such boundaries, perceived and real, are particularly difficult to navigate when one is new to doing research with primary sources, and those boundaries can be exacerbated by the long practice of both actual exclusion and de facto segregation that has taken place at such institutions (Malkiel 2013, 33; Moseley 1973, 216; Cooke 2017, 47–48).

Concurrent with the library's desire to be welcoming to all researchers is a dedicated effort to increase the depth of collection materials representing communities that have been historically, intentionally, and traditionally marginalized. Rather than reify identities and the study of them as fixed practices, particularly for materials related to the study of and/or by women and gender diverse people, collection development is flexible and expansive. Delivering a paper at the Society of American Archivists conference in 1972, Schlesinger Library Curator and historian Eva Moseley described how the first donation of papers by Radcliffe alumna and suffragist Maud Wood Park led to a concerted push by other historians to expand the collection more broadly. Moseley's later efforts focused upon acquiring items attesting to the many facets of women's lives (Moseley, 216–217). In 1981, Curator of Printed Books Barbara Haber spoke to a reporter from the *Wilson Library Quarterly* about her desire to thoroughly document the social history of American women: "Before, women's history was suffrage or other social reform . . . [and now] the fun for me in developing this collection has been to expand the definition of what women's history is" (Gold, 755). Within the same article, the author notes the paucity of primary source materials documenting the lives of ordinary women. Researchers resorted to scouring diaries of upper-class women for trace mentions of servants or factory workers. Attempts to read between and beneath the lines of the written record could only go so far without active intervention by library staff to intentionally expand and diversify their holdings.

Over decades, curators at the Schlesinger Library have steadily adapted its collection development strategy, recognizing that "the passage of the 19th amendment did not ensure voting rights for all American women" and that collections held "have not adequately reflected the lives, experiences, and concerns of all women in America" (Harvard Radcliffe Institute, "Collection Development Strategy," 2025). One of the authors of this article began her work at the Schlesinger Library as an associate curator and alongside the current Curatorial Team, studied the variations of language used in diverse collection development statements across peer institutions with significant holdings of materials of, by, or about women and gender diverse people. Shadowing colleagues, observing how relationships gradually grew between

donors and the library, and noting examples of reparative archival work conducted elsewhere revealed the necessity of directly contending with the silences and gaps evinced by collection materials. Only through intentional collection development practices would we be able to address the omissions of those considered less than human.

The work of redress and reconciliation never was and never will be neutral. Jarrett M. Drake notes that the nation's original archives, once assembled in the United States, were not in support of a new nation with records that would be accessible to all. Rather, they consisted of "collected family papers of the wealthy merchants, enslavers, and politicians who funded these operations" (Drake 2019). The formation of publicly available archives in the United States dates back to the end of Reconstruction during the nineteenth century. Southern states needed a readily accessible method for accessing material documenting and commemorating lineages of Confederate soldiers who had died (Drake). Noticeably absent from the nascent records of publicly available archives in these Southern states are the names and lives of enslaved and later freed Black women, for whom authority records would not be created (Drake).

The examples Drake raises resonate with the history of Harvard University and of Schlesinger Library's collections. The institutional frame that surrounds the Schlesinger Library is shot through with the legacy of slavery. Wealthy plantation owners, shipbuilders, industrialists, and their respective descendants fueled the growth of Harvard University through profits earned either directly or indirectly through the forced removal of Native people and the enslavement of African men, women, and children (The Presidential Committee on the Legacy of Slavery 2022, 7–8). Despite being a repository focused upon women and gender diverse people, the Schlesinger Library invariably collected materials in its earliest decades that originated with white, cisgender, and upper-class women of the American northeast.

Creating and acting upon a more inclusive collection development strategy meant redefining inclusive processes. Through conversations with various library departmental heads, and further reflection and drafting, the Schlesinger Curatorial Team (comprising three full-time curators, including a curator for Gender and Society, a curator for Collections on Ethnicity and Migration, and a curator of African American and African Diasporic Collections) used their unique expertise to articulate a statement that includes an "Areas for Growth" section. This section of the collection development strategy illustrates *how* the work to more effectively incorporate voices and experiences that have been historically struck out of the archival record would be accomplished. The penultimate section of the document is titled "Topics of Interest" and identifies people, groups, associations, and subjects such as Latine lives, transnational feminism, working class women and families' lives, and disability rights and justice, among other topics noted as areas of growth (Harvard Radcliffe Institute, "Collection Development Strategy"). The generous, careful approach that infuses the Curatorial Team's words was crafted through ongoing consultations with library staff to better address what might be missing.

Actionable steps towards reparative archival work include the normalization of acquisitions that genuinely engage with marginalized communities (Hughes-Watkins 2018, 5). This renewed, collective commitment to justice requires a dedicated collection development strategy. An effective strategy will offer pathways for broadly acquiring materials while cross-departmentally reckoning with the ongoing access and outreach mechanisms needed to correct our incomplete record.

Defining Political Work: The Long Struggle for DEI in Libraries and Archives

In the article "Respecting Privacy of Thought in DEI Training," author Kristin Antelman (2025) argues that contemporary DEI trainings serve political ends, but does not clearly define what is meant by the term political as it is used in the article. Being "political" could refer to taking actions or voicing ideas that are arguably attributable to the contested categories of "right" or "left." If this is the case, it is hard to imagine what would fall inarguably outside of the loose bounds of either category and become sufficiently depoliticized for discussion in the library as a workplace. Being "political" could also refer more narrowly to taking actions or voicing ideas that are in alignment with historically contingent party platforms. Under this definition, problems grow exponentially as one increases the time period under study. Even when examining one moment in time, this is intensely contested territory. For example, Antelman's argument was presented on the assumption that she was taking a depoliticized stance, but the authors of the "Open Letter to CRL from the academic wing of #CripLib" posit that Antelman's argument contains "recent far-right talking points to argue against DEI initiatives in libraries without an honest acknowledgement of the political stance the author is taking" (2025, para. 4).

Through the lens of the above definitions, it is debatable to what degree projects to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in libraries have or have not been political. The time and context under examination would critically influence the debate. However, if being "political" refers to a relationship with power and its wielding in U.S. society (Oxford English Dictionary[4]), then it has always been a political project to create library spaces that value diversity, foreground inclusivity, and are equitably accessible to people of all races, ethnicities, classes, abilities, and genders. Importantly, this definition of political contextualizes the library profession's impulse towards claims of neutrality[5] as a political project as well (Schlesselman-Tarango 2016; Cifor and Wood 2017). These political projects have not exclusively existed in conflict (Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferretti 2021); however, overall, the former project is engaged with a critical examination of power while the latter predominantly serves as a cloaking device for the same (Schlesselman-Tarango 2017; Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferretti). Some librarians and archivists in certain contexts may feel comfortable denying or not engaging with the political nature of the profession. Those of us working in libraries with long-standing, often foundational, commitments to collecting from communities that have strategically been denied access to power are left with no such choice.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (capital DEI) work has been codified in corporate and institutional contexts over the last five years, and this form of DEI work was criticized early on in its development in the library profession.[6] The criticism was not about the focus on identity but rather the inclination of institutionalized DEI work to prioritize speed and performativity over substance (Berry 2021). While this contemporary codification of DEI is somewhat new, efforts to expand the bounds of who is welcome in the library and stretch library collections to encompass a wider epistemological breadth and depth has been the iterative work of librarians throughout U.S. history. The combined efforts of library workers, advocates of libraries in government, and community activists have transformed the American library into an enterprise committed to egalitarian principles (Graham 2002, 1–5). Diversity, equity, and inclusion have not always been values central to the profession (Graham, 1–5; Schlesselman-Tarango 2016), and we cannot take for granted that these ideals will always be valued by the profession in the future.

In the context of higher education, college and university libraries and special collections specifically have not always been inclusive spaces. The authors of this piece work at Harvard University where women students were prohibited from entering the Lamont Library until 1967 (Malkiel).[7] Prior to the construction of the Lamont Library, a section of Radcliffe College's *Handbook of the Library* from 1925 provided instructions for how Radcliffe students could use various parts of the Harvard Library and noted that one particular area of the library called "The Stack" "is not open to women after 6 P.M." (Records of the Radcliffe College Library, 18–19). In the late nineteenth century, women were able to apply for limited-term borrowing privileges at Harvard Library. At that time, a man could authorize that other individuals could check out books under his personal account. In some cases, they did so for a sister, a cousin, a secretary, and one individual's mother, as well as other women whose relation to them was not disclosed (Harvard College Library 1879–1899).

Historically, women's access to resources were *intentionally* circumscribed at Harvard and other educational institutions (Malkiel), and women's scholarship and intellectual outputs were deemed unworthy additions to archives and history books (Moseley; Zangrando 1973). Another example of intentional exclusion is what historian Margaret Rossiter called "the Matilda effect," "named for the 19th-century suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage, to describe the age-old practice of attributing scientific achievements of women to their male colleagues" (Green 2025, para. 1). Women's eventual inclusion in the historical record was neither a matter of inevitability nor the natural course of mystical progress (Ulrich 2004, 10). It required *intentional* and direct confrontation with societal power via *political* intervention on behalf of women's rights activists, women's studies scholars, and their allies (Zangrando; Moseley).

According to Antelman, "It is not ethical to ask library workers to sit through training on topics that are politically charged, and that are not concretely related either to the work of the library or rules for workplace behavior" (435). At the Schlesinger Library, avoiding politically charged topics is an ontological impossibility. Staff must regularly describe, process, and make discoverable politically charged manuscript and published materials, particularly related to women and gender diverse individuals' confrontation with what Patricia Hill Collins terms the matrix of domination[8] in U.S. society (2009). Given the library's own history, contemporary discussions among Schlesinger Library staff regarding how to respectfully include and describe the records of nonbinary and transmasculine individuals and communities, for example, cannot be written off as newly activated theories inappropriately transplanted into the library context by post-2020 DEI initiatives. Rather, these discussions, held in the context of the curatorial department's work on the library's collection development strategy, are extensions of the Schlesinger Library's foundational efforts to expand the available corpus of archival resources to include gender identities traditionally excluded from the historical record.

Antelman argues, "Identity-centric trainings are politically partisan, and therefore inappropriate for the library" (435). Nuanced evaluations and critiques of what is termed "identity politics" exist and could be examined when considering how to appropriately implement DEI training in libraries.[9] However, in this instance, it seems Antelman is potentially implying that all DEI trainings should be banned because of the direct association with the Democratic party in the U.S., although the substance of this association is not clearly articulated. As Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferretti note, "[t]he methods by which to work neutrally in collection development are unclear" (62), and conducting informational training sessions for

staff related to the Schlesinger Library's collection development strategy becomes impossible if identity-centric trainings are entirely forbidden.

In May 2025, one of the authors of this essay collaborated with colleagues to create an informational session about the Schlesinger Library's history of collecting from trans* communities and individuals. This informational session, for which attendance was optional, was developed in support of the "Lesbian, queer, nonbinary, and trans* lives" area for growth in the Schlesinger Library's Collection Development Strategy. This event was not engaged with electoral politics in the way it seems Antelman concludes all DEI trainings must be. However, according to the definition of "political" used in this essay (referring to a relationship with power and its wielding in U.S. society), this learning opportunity was political. Importantly, it was just as political as a training would be if it was used as an opportunity to either actively deny gender diverse individuals' existence or to passively ignore these communities by presenting the library as a repository that only includes the records of cisgender women. At reparative archives, it is impossible for staff to not engage with the political role that identity plays in *everyone's* history.

Because the university serves as a legitimacy-granting apparatus in U.S. society, inclusion can be fraught for historically excluded (or historically present but de facto unrecognized) communities (Ulrich, 1–14; Berry).[10] Reparative archives housed at universities with a history of exclusivity perpetually exist between a rock and a hard place. This has been true throughout Radcliffe College's existence. As Malkiel explains in an account of the merger between Radcliffe College and Harvard,

> There was serious resistance to merger at Radcliffe, and it was not simply a function of institutional chauvinism. Skepticism of Harvard was well grounded in the reality of Harvard's history. Since 1948 Harvard had had one tenured position for a woman faculty member . . . Although there were a handful of women assistant professors, faculty members who were not tenured held little influence in the university, and there was no path to tenure from the assistant professor rank. Harvard had no women administrators. And the number of male undergraduates at Harvard was four times the number of Radcliffe women. There was reasonable cause to worry about submerging Radcliffe into a less-than-hospitable male university (199).

In *Yards and Gates: Gender in Harvard and Radcliffe History*, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich relays the results of the eventual submergence—confusion and a generalized misunderstanding of Radcliffe's history (1–14).

A parallel discordance is evident directly in the library work reparative archives undertake. For example, content that cannot be precisely described presents problems for inclusion in information organization infrastructures that seek to make university-owned or -licensed material discoverable through precise metadata interventions (Peimer 2015; Rawson 2018). For libraries with intentionally inclusive collection development strategies, these politically charged challenges that are inextricably related to identity must be constantly acknowledged in order for the work to be done at all.

Therefore, anti-DEI arguments that advocate for the implementation of a blanket ban on discussions of identity would effectively shut down all such reparative archival work. Such

a ban would prohibit the functioning of archives operating from a legacy of intentional inclusion of historically excluded communities. The threats to intellectual freedom cannot be understated. In effect, entire archival repositories would be censored and the range of what is deemed material of historical significance would narrow once again.

Blanket bans on discussion of identity are promoted in theory as a means of placing all individuals under the umbrella of a common humanity. However, it is essential to note that in practice, anti-DEI actions that attempt to censor content at cultural heritage and educational institutions are as focused on identity as any DEI action implemented by these institutions in recent years. The list of items the current presidential administration has labeled as inappropriate for inclusion in the Smithsonian's collections directly targets specific identity groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, descendants of enslaved individuals, people with disabilities, Latine community members, and immigrants (The White House 2025). Similarly, attempts at the school level to curtail the purchase and use of materials deemed as advancing critical race theory effectively prohibit books that even mention race, with the federal government threatening to cut funding to schools that incorporate "inappropriate" racial, sexual, or political content (Schwartz 2025).

Implementing Political Work: Supporting Inclusive Collection Development in Access and Research Services

The ACRL guideline that a special collections professional "[p]ossesses cultural and linguistic competencies appropriate for their collections and user communities" requires access services staff members to build a bridge between a repository's collection and all the diverse user communities who may be interested in accessing them (2017). This includes considerations regarding environmental accessibility, which Rawson (2009) states "is determined by 'the feel' of a space and the way a person is treated in that space" (127). This can include actions such as creating a social narrative[11] guide for visitors to review in advance of their visit (Hoyer and Pelaez 2024), making information available for locating single-user or gender-neutral bathrooms (Rawson 2009), maintaining a stock of tools to enhance physical accessibility in the reading room, and making researchers aware of the use of video surveillance (ACRL/RBMS Guidelines Regarding the Security of Special Collections Materials 2023).

Ideally, these are tactics to improve access that all archives should consider implementing in alignment with the ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians' guideline to "constantly strive to improve collections access for all users" (2020, Statement of Values para. 1). However, archives with a collection development strategy to acquire materials from specific communities have a particular responsibility to make their reading rooms comfortable spaces for individuals in those communities as a component of non-extractive collection development practice (Murphy 2025). Libraries can maintain a focus on providing access for all while also utilizing DEI training as a tool for gaining a better understanding of how to make targeted improvements to access for particular communities.

A multi-pronged approach that emphasizes not only acquisitions, but also effective advocacy, promotion, and rich, variable use of collections is necessary when it comes to reparative archival work (Hughes-Watkins, 10–11). One-on-one research consultations, small group demonstrations, and ongoing relational work with an array of campus and community partners are strategies employed by the library's Research Services staff as their efforts go beyond responding to standard reference questions. Advising researchers on how to locate, evaluate, use, and potentially re-use materials for original research is part of the circle of

reparative archival work that welcomes and includes diverse individuals into conversation with primary source materials.

Therefore, collection development strategy is not a matter of selection alone. Our practices extend beyond acquisitions to relational work with students, faculty, staff, donors, visiting researchers, and community partners, creating a foundation for sustainable collection development. In the recently released *Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians* from the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), staff are encouraged to adequately assess the needs of researchers. Section B.1.3 states the necessity for staff to be "cognizant of their own cultural background and assumptions, and the racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of the community" (n.d.).

In addition, the *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*, published by RUSA in 2023, re-affirms the value of equity, diversity, and inclusion as intrinsic to librarianship. Practitioners in the field recognize the power differential that arises between library workers and researchers and how it's incumbent upon the former to cultivate trust, build relationships, and move past the transactional nature of our workspaces for the sake of the latter (RUSA 2–3). Section 1's discussion about how to be inclusive emphasizes that library workers should advocate for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility by crucially reflecting upon one's own implicit biases and how they impact reference interactions. What information professionals choose to share with researchers is as critical as the rhetorical power exerted by the process of archival description, which shapes how materials are made visible (or invisible); how one is welcomed (or not) into conversation with these materials; and most importantly, how naming of these materials, a practice contingent upon legacies privy to slippages of language, shapes perception of the histories they represent (Rawson 2018, 347).

The impact of naming, particularly with regard to who is seen and called by archival materials and the spaces that house them, is worth interrogating. Antelman writes about how the deputization of library staff to perform climate surveys, equity audits, and assessment of impact shifts organizational cultures from academic to bureaucratic, a need that is seemingly counter to the aims professed by industry standards (Antelman, 441). Such self-imposed censure allegedly prohibits one from sincerely engaging with their workplace for fear of their private thoughts negatively implicating them. Yet the self-surveillance Antelman writes about is far more intrinsic to the library profession and stretches back farther than the advent of contemporary DEI training. Scholar Jaime Ding's analysis of the service mentality and religious calling often adopted by library practitioners finds that the field lends itself to a form of self-surveillance, in which aspirations towards professionalization incorporate appeals to uphold whiteness (2024, 74). The hierarchy associated with "race and gender (with, in this case, white men at the pinnacle)" was mirrored in librarianship and placed stress upon library students to fulfill their role with the vigor of a religious calling while maintaining its mythical (and implicitly white) ethos (Ding, 71).

Peeling back the layers, we see that this history of how library professionals have upheld accreditation and standards as naturally occurring rather than socially constructed frameworks is a legacy we must wrestle with now. Holding ourselves accountable to the archival records created by staff, however imperfectly, would also mean permitting ourselves to interrupt the self-surveillance that accompanies professionalism, including the (false) equivocation of professionalism with depoliticized neutrality (R. Jensen 2006). An insistence upon privacy of thought does not contend with the context in which knowledge is created.

Ding explains that the concept of vocational awe that Fobazi Ettarh coined in her piece "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," plus the self-surveillance

that accompanies it, was not the accidental result of centuries-old patterns of behavior in libraries. Rather, it was an intentionally developed project enforced by academic library administrators, both at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Library Service and throughout other institutions as a means of validating a field at risk of being over-feminized (Ding, 64, 75). Ettarh explains that vocational awe "refuses to acknowledge the library as a flawed institution," and that "when people of color and other marginalized librarians speak out, their accounts are often discounted or erased" (Ettarh 2018). Together, Ding and Ettarh's arguments situating self-surveillance as part and parcel of predominantly white organizations like libraries shatter the suggestion that privacy of thought is impacted through learning about inclusive practice. Self-censorship has been evident in library cultures for decades, but Antelman overlooks this history and places the blame on failed DEI initiatives and the power of peer pressure in training spaces (Antelman, 441). The antecedents of nominally held neutrality in libraries historically made such environmental stressors a common facet of the workplace.

Conclusion

Historian K.T. Ewing asks us to dream differently when it comes to libraries and archives. In her 2022 article "Fugitive Archives: Black Women, Domestic Repositories, and Hoarding as Informal Archival Practice," Ewing movingly describes her gradual understanding of and deep admiration for the seemingly idiosyncratic ways her grandmother and aunt have stored a lifetime's worth of memories. Such precious items are "buried in a tomb" of grief by the living who remain and "the perpetual mandate that Black women push through their emotions to face another day in a world that never stops for them" (Ewing, 49). The lack of time to process grief or care for oneself parallels a similar insufficiency for properly memorializing the people and places that made them who they are. This lack of records that fully describe, let alone name, the range of experiences of various marginalized communities is effectively a form of "blanking." As Sara Ahmed writes, "Blanking is how feminism became 'white feminism.' The word blank comes from white. Feminism became white not because Black and brown women were not there, speaking, knowing, creating, as feminists, but because we were blanked, not recorded being there" (Ahmed 2025).

Ahmed's comments are a response to "gender critical" feminists who have chosen to restrict the definition of woman based on sex assigned at birth rather than engaging with the long history of trans* and queer people who have historically been part of feminist spaces. Linking Ahmed and Ewing's writings, we see the possibility for imagining other ways to critique systemic oppression and refuse to ascribe importance based on dominant narratives (Zangrando 209–210). These disordered, unnamed records that remain after a lifetime of fragmented memory can easily become buried or inadequately reconciled when we do not intentionally consider the systems that organize them—and the systems that have failed them. Inclusive collection development is a means of naming and fulfilling the connections evinced by underrepresented histories. Recognizing that intentional descriptive work alone cannot fully contend with the silences and gaps inherent within institutional archives, it is thus even more incumbent upon library workers to continue incorporating inclusion and equity as core values throughout our practice. Incisive critique of past practices, mingled with stunning examples of incorrigible lives of those who cannot, could not, and will not fit neatly into depoliticized categories of what is deemed worthy of the historical record, is not only a matter

of justice. It points to a way forward, one that asks us to respond to the communities represented in our institution's collections while reckoning with the biases of imperfect tools.

Upholding reparative archival work is a means for addressing and correcting the exclusions found in the historical record. By promoting a more inclusive collection development strategy, we are also emphasizing the importance of maintaining access with accountability to the many individuals whose stories we are privileged to care for. In holding ourselves accountable, our jobs also become inherently political, contradicting narratives of neutrality within libraries and archives. Resorting to selective remembrances of a past that never actually existed for the sake of avoiding politically charged topics neglects the broader need for reckoning with difficult truths. We acknowledge that our institutions, however flawed, must be open to the crucial task of reorienting the stance of the collector and breaking apart their curio to build a sturdier vessel that honors the unassimilable.

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Endnotes

1 Gender diverse is "an umbrella term for those whose gender identity does not fully align with the sex they were assigned at birth" (Kidd 2023, 112).

2 Collection by the numbers as listed on the library website is only part of the picture.

3 As defined by the Society for American Archivists, "reparative archives" are "a collecting repository that intentionally focuses on historically underrepresented people."

4 As one *Oxford English Dictionary* definition for "political" states, "Relating to or concerned with public life and affairs as involving questions of authority and government."

5 "*Neutrality* is not always the specific term that is used to invoke this framework; the terms *objective* and *unbiased* are also used interchangeably in the library context to describe a lack of bias" (Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferretti 2021, 56).

6 See for example, Dorothy Berry's "The House Archives Built."

7 The Lamont Library was built in 1949 and specializes in serving Harvard's undergraduate students (Harvard Library Communications Office 2025).

8 "[M]atrix of domination: the overall organization of hierarchical power relations for any society" (Collins 2009, 320).

9 See, for example, "In the Ether: Neoliberalism and Entrepreneurial Woman" in Imani Perry's text *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (2018) or Marquis Bey's *Black Trans Feminism* (2022)

10 In the introduction to *Yards and Gates: Gender in Harvard and Radcliffe History*, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich states, "[t]here have always been women at Harvard" (9), and in the zine "The House Archives Built," Berry "explore[s] how foundational concepts in special collections can serve as core elements in the continued ignorance and avoidance of Black history in our midst" (3).

11 "A social narrative is a document that explains what will happen when students visit a new place: it describes with words and pictures what will happen when students arrive, how many steps it is from the bus stop to the main entrance, who will welcome them to the building, what kinds of activities they will do, where they can eat, what the bathrooms look like, and more" (Hoyer and Pelaez, "It's So Liberating to Do the Work: Education in Archives Creates Space for People with Disabilities," 2024, 192–193).

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Universities as Sites of Class Conflict

NICHOLAS CUMMINS

Introduction

The freedoms of speech, expression, assembly, and inquiry that we take for granted at academic institutions are under threat. Students, faculty, and others exercising their First Amendment rights—native-born citizens and legal residents alike—have been slandered, harassed, suspended, fired, expelled, arrested, held without charge, and threatened with deportation (American Association of University Professors 2025; Bromwich 2025; Misra 2025). At my institution, pro-Palestinian activists were violently dispersed in May 2024; in March 2025, our Board of Visitors voluntarily dissolved the central Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. In June 2025, our university president resigned under pressure from the Department of Justice; the circumstances, as of this writing, have not yet been fully explained (Mould and Sawaya 2025; Schmidt and Bender 2025). Naturally, such assaults from administrative, state, and federal bodies have galvanized resistance across this and other universities: We are right to oppose any attempt to control, defund, or censor us. As each week brings new developments regarding the impact of federal interference at my institution and others, it is imperative that we, as librarians and academics, engage in organized resistance against repression (Bender et al. 2025; Blake 2025; Blinder 2025; Moody 2025; Otterman and Hartocollis 2025).

However, it is equally incumbent upon us to never confuse institutional identity with our class interests as workers. The truly insidious threat to academic freedom comes not from external pressure but from university structures and systems that replicate and magnify preexisting inequalities. The academy has always been a site of class struggle, and in this time of overt repression, academic librarians can lead the charge to identify and counter systems of power and exploitation. By collaborating with allies inside and outside of the university, we can advance explicitly class-conscious policies that will directly address the material needs of university workers.

To better understand the situation and task at hand, I will first contextualize a specific right-wing criticism of higher education that can be leveraged to form a better, more materialist critique of universities. I will then conclude by suggesting at least three tools and methods that workers can use to mount effective resistance against both internal and external adversaries.

Analyzing Right-Wing "Anti-Elitism"

Reactionary movements like MAGA and its ideological allies view higher education as a bastion of so-called liberal progressivism. They seek to either end the cultural influence of universities—especially the Ivy League and other elite institutions—or remake them along

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the lines of Florida's state university system under Governor Ron DeSantis (Atterbury 2025). The Heritage Foundation's manifesto, Project 2025, explicitly specifies reactionary opposition to higher education, referring to universities as "woke-dominated system[s]" packed full of "Marxist academics" (Dans and Groves 2023). A discussion of the legacy of the right's anti-intellectualism and obsession with the real or imagined excesses of progressivism on campus is beyond the scope of this article (e.g., Robin 2017). However, the reactionary critique of universities as elitist and exclusionary is persuasive *precisely* because it contains truth.

The Ivy League pads the ranks of corporations, the military, and government—five of the last six American presidents received degrees from the Ivy League: Trump (UPenn), Obama (Columbia), Clinton (Yale), and both Bushes (Yale). The elite capture of American institutions by the wealthy and well connected, connections inculcated and laundered through exclusive universities, hinders a functional democracy. As of 2023, less than 40 percent of American adults have a bachelor's degree (US Census Bureau 2023), and although the cultural and economic benefits of attending college are self-evident for some, the cost of a college degree has become prohibitively expensive for most people (Mowreader 2024). The cost-benefit of student debt and the capital that stems from the achievement of a college degree no longer makes sense to everyone: "To the majority of non-college-educated people, the [professional managerial class] increasingly appear as pedantic, hypocritical, and punishing" (Liu 2021, 74).

In their manifesto, the authors of Project 2025 are right to espouse trade schools and alternative forms of education that do not force people into enormous debt (setting aside the irony of numerous Project 2025 contributors having graduated from the same institutions they denounce—by my count, there are three Yale graduates, two Harvard graduates, and one graduate each from Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, and MIT among the thirty-four named authors and two editors of Project 2025). However, jobs that require a college degree and jobs in the trades need not be placed in opposition to one another. It is possible to simultaneously value the trades while also supporting those who wish to pursue degrees in literature, philosophy, and the arts: "Give us Bread, but give us Roses" (Oppenheim 1911, 214). Finally, the importance and dignity of trade jobs stem not from some inherent goodness found only in manual labor, but from the protections and benefits won through the historic struggles of organized labor that resulted in better working conditions, livable wages, and the opportunity to retire comfortably (Menaker and Biederman 2025).

So, while the right-wing assessment that universities perpetuate inequality is correct, their remedies would only lead to greater inequalities. The fundamental flaw with the "anti-elitism" of reactionaries stems from the fact that their critique is grounded in culture, not class. For those behind Project 2025, "elite" stands not for economic or political capital, but for culturally popular and "cosmopolitan" beliefs. Only in this equation could the ruling class be considered oppressed while workers, people of color, women, and other marginalized groups be considered "elite". For reactionaries, cultural signifiers replace class distinction.

The (Real) Problems with Universities

Just as a broken clock is right twice a day, reactionary accusations of elitism are right for the wrong reasons. In fact, universities are propagators of systematic inequality because of their institutional role in society and their ability to wield economic, political, and social capital. In practice, universities function as bourgeoisie replicator machines. Recent research indicates that those with college degrees tend to be more liberal, vote for Democrats, and

make more money than those without college degrees (Zingher 2022). In her 2021 book *Virtue Hoarders: The Case Against the Professional Managerial Class,* Catherine Liu observes that "academic research [. . .] is being subtly shaped by the agendas of the ruling class—sometimes directly by mega-wealthy individuals and their liberal-minded employees in para-academic positions in the media" (2021, 28). One need look no further than Bill Ackman's personal crusade against Harvard to understand the influence of billionaires on an institution, even one as wealthy as Ackman's alma mater (Wiedeman 2024).

In laundering the interests of their wealthy donors and alumni, universities perpetuate systematic inequality through at least three avenues: first, conducting research that supports unethical practices; second, collaborating with data brokers, tech firms, and technologies that undermine the ethos of scholarship; and third, claiming the mantle of authority and neutrality while perpetuating oppressive hierarchies and class conflict. In the typically incisive wit of Irish comedian and social commentator Frankie McNamara, the problem with academics is the fact that ". . . deep down, [they] don't want to change the world—[they] just want to theorize its decline and get cited for it" (2025).

Funding Unethical Research

As a function of their societal role, universities work with both private and public interests to launder research, intellectual property, and scholarly labor for use in unethical practices. Since at least the end of World War II, the academy has functioned as part of a threefold system (along with the state and businesses) that together develop, market, and sanction violence, repression, and surveillance (Packard 2023). For example, universities contract with the Department of War (or, until recently, "Defense") to develop lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs) (Williamson 2022; see also Beck et al. 2022) and thus provide time, labor, and resources in support of the American military-industrial complex. Furthermore, universities around the world collaborate with Israeli military and government agencies to develop technologies that have direct consequences for Palestinian lives (United Nations Human Rights Council 2025, cf. #83). In her book *Towers of Ivory and Steel,* Maya Wind explores how universities can be weaponized to promote the cultural and historical legacy of one group while simultaneously disparaging, negating, and literally destroying the legacy of another. Although writing specifically about universities in the UK, Elliot Murphy neatly summarizes the push-pull relationship between neoliberal policies and the West's military-industrial complex:

> All of this has occurred alongside the imposition of neoliberal policies on universities, resulting in reduced levels of funding, increased student debt and insecurity, the appearance of various market mechanisms on campus, and the deterioration of faculty self-determination. In this neoliberal environment, the arms trade is most welcome. After all, what could be more "marketable," and "impactful," and "business-friendly" than military research? (2021, 102)

In her book *Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information*, Sarah Lamdan persuasively argues for the regulation of data brokers and tech companies as a solution to problems of privacy, accessibility, and fairness. Academics already know that corporations like RELX, Thomson Reuters, and EBSCO charge exorbitant fees to access and use academic

publications, scholarly materials, and databases. Through monopolization and other unfair business tactics, these companies retain ownership of materials through digital rights management (DRM), essentially rent-seeking the materials they already force subscribers to pay (cf. Lamdan 2022, 67). Additionally, anyone familiar with the landscape of scholarly publishing—necessary for promotion and tenure—knows that this system relies on uncompensated labor from faculty and grad students to write, edit, and review materials for publication. These same publishing conglomerates then require institutions to purchase expensive subscriptions so professors and students can read and access their *own* research. Moreover, significant economic and business-related research is based on free, publicly available data. The flow of these materials (including gray literature, white papers, census demographics, public company filings, etc.) is particularly susceptible to privatization. Since March 2025, we have witnessed firsthand the defunding, deletion, and disincentivizing of publicly available data as part of the larger attempt to dismantle the administrative state.

Relatedly, emerging technologies like generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) pose unique, even existential threats to the foundation of scholarship. The environmental impact of the infrastructure needed to support data centers is not without consequence, but the existential threat presented by GenAI is not necessarily that of human existence. Rather, AI threatens the quality and meaning of human life and intellectual inquiry. Often lost in official discussions of AI are the deeper issues at play. The right questions are not so much *whether we should* adopt AI or *what kind of* AI tools we should incorporate into our lives, but fundamentally, how do we view the role of technology in society? What do we believe about the relationship between humans and tools? How do humans adapt and change according to their material circumstances? Librarians have previously contended with seismic shifts in the world of technology and incorporated new tools (the internet, ebooks, smartphones) into our work. However, it is precisely the *speed* at which AI has been promulgated and adopted that makes it a fundamentally different kind of technology (with gratitude to my colleague T. B. for this observation).

Naturally, our enthusiasm and embrace of any new technology should never outweigh our ethical concerns. Recall how the initial excitement around social media and its promise to better connect us fell away to reveal how toxic the medium can be to human connection and how companies like Facebook (now Meta) exploit the personal data of millions of users. Similarly, we may soon see a time when the hype surrounding AI will give way to a more sober assessment of both its relative usefulness and its unforeseen consequences.

In the meantime, we must prepare for universities to pursue the profit motive to the detriment of other concerns. The most extreme example might be that of Western Illinois University, whose administration fired many or even all their academic librarians, ostensibly to cut costs—a decision likely driven by the misguided belief that AI could do the same job for less (Palmer 2024). With a "race to the bottom" for wages, librarians and other academics will struggle to "prove" their usefulness to administrators and demonstrate why humans are necessary in the age of ChatGPT.

Techno-optimism is vaporous precisely because wealth distribution and labor exploitation will continue *until* dramatic action is taken. We have arrived at a historical crossroads, and it is our collective action that can influence how we view and apply emerging technologies. As information professionals, librarians stand in a unique position to leverage our professional skills to instruct, shape, and guide us down a path that benefits the many, not the few.

Reading Lamdan's 2022 book in 2025 already feels like reading about a foreign country: only three years hence, we have already seen the elimination of whatever guardrails,

regulations, and restrictions were in place, and we face both a dramatic increase in price and exclusivity, alongside a rapid narrowing of access. Even if universities may not be primarily to blame for the creation and proliferation of predatory subscriptions or technologies developed by companies like OpenAI, Meta, and Google, higher education's fatalistic embrace of Silicon Valley's effluent betrays the mandates of academic freedom, intellectual curiosity, and scholarly integrity.

Without succumbing to utopian hype on one hand or hyperbolic doomerism on the other, the rapid implementation and simultaneous lack of consistent policies regarding the use or misuse of AI in higher education have already shaken the foundations of what constitutes the university experience. The knowledge of *how* to use a technology cannot be used as an excuse for uncritically embracing and condoning the use of GenAI in ways that undermine critical thinking, reading, and writing—ostensibly, the very reasons for pursuing a university education. As Walter Benjamin observed ninety years ago, humanity's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (1969, 20).

Questions of Authority and Neutrality

Academia also faces a crisis of authority, but it is not alone; other traditional sources of information, such as mainstream media and government entities, are likewise experiencing low levels of public trust (Brenan 2024). This skepticism and distrust, even if taken too far or done for the wrong reasons, should be taken seriously and treated as a legitimate reaction against the excesses of both popular and academic sources. The failures of institutions and the normalization of corruption in business and government lead to the uncomfortable conclusion that some so-called "conspiracies" are at least understandable theoretically, if not factually correct; as Wayne Bivens-Tatum writes, ". . . perhaps the self-interested bias of too many traditional sources of expertise has just become too obvious to too many" (2022, 220).

This is not to dismiss the importance of a shared scholarly ecosystem in which sources, citation, and expertise are respected. Together, these form the foundation for our collective understanding of the world around us. Legitimate skepticism, left unchecked, could lead to a wholesale rejection of rational inquiry and of shared reality, a problem that directly impacts us as librarians. Some of this crisis comes from GenAI and the slop it disseminates in both scholarly circles and in the general populace. But much of the blame also stems from the elite capture of institutions and how so-called "facts" and "common sense" are manipulated or redefined to serve the interests of the ruling class. For example, corporate media entities like the *New York Times* have shamefully covered the genocide in Gaza by parroting IDF *hasbara* and equivocating on obvious instances of war crimes. Additionally, mainstream media sources and "respectable" politicians refused to acknowledge former President Biden's declining mental acuity until it was too late. As librarians, we will find ourselves caught between conspiratorial thinking and official disinformation, a tension that will require from us a level of intellectual bravery that will be difficult.

At the institutional level, official narratives have clearly failed to account for emerging circumstances. With mixed success, universities have endeavored to reckon with their legacies of slavery, eugenics, racism, and sexism because, as we are told, the entire project of liberal democracy depends on the ability to shape a better future by learning from the past. Academia ostensibly promotes the message that the civic duty of all informed citizens is to exercise freedom in service of democracy and to resist tyranny in all its forms. In the

legitimate alarm in response to recent, ongoing government intervention, we should remember that the institutions in which we work are already sites of oppressive neoliberal policies. Systemic, institutional violence is always inflicted on others by those in power, and the chickens have now come home to roost.

The aspiration of liberal democracy to promote freedom, justice, and equality runs aground on the legacy of institutional repression. We are told that the American way of life rests on robust civic institutions and inalienable rights of free speech and free inquiry. Public discourse generally agrees that we are right to honor and emulate the legacies of abolitionists, suffragettes, the civil rights movement, antiwar protests, queer and Indigenous liberation movements, and anti-Apartheid groups. In all instances, these movements were only approved retroactively and rarely supported institutionally at the time they occurred. It is only later that these movements are absorbed and metabolized by the very institutions and systems these movements sought to reform or overthrow. Sanitized, ahistoric narratives paint universities as peerless forces of good that have always been on the right side of history. But for librarian and philosopher Sam Popowich, this dichotomy is not so simple, and our presence in these institutions presents us with a choice: ". . . not between the liberal illusions of pure, individual freedom against tyranny, [but] the choice [. . .] between both corporate and state tyranny on the one hand and a collective commitment to concrete social justice on the other" (2019, 294).

We must no longer fear the appearance of partisanship. As Liu writes,

> . . . in academia, [the professional managerial class] has achieved a great deal in establishing the rigors of peer review consensus and research autonomy, but we can no longer afford to defend its cherished principle of epistemological neutrality as a secret weapon against 'extremism.' We live in a political, environmental, and social emergency: class war over distribution of resources is the critical battle of our times. (2021, 13)

Class war is already raging, and we leave ourselves at a disadvantage by not fully and clearly embracing this fact. Writing about the right to read, Bivens-Tatum states that "the implication of [his] argument is that librarians cannot be, and should not be, neutral at all. Intellectual freedom should not mean the freedom to believe nonsense, but only to read it" (2012, 187).

Tools of Resistance

So, what is to be done? As Kathryn Lofton, a scholar of religion, states, "The academic is an economic subject. Either they get aware of what comprises their material functioning, or they consign themselves (to borrow from Trotsky) to the dustbin of history. . . ." (2019, 656). In other words, no scholarly discipline, institution of higher education, or form of academic labor exists outside the demands and constraints of political economy. Once that is established, we can then turn to the implementation of at least three tools or methods that can be used by university workers to enact material change.

The first tool in our toolbox is labor organizing. Only through building class consciousness, unionization, and collective action can we advocate for systemic change while also providing cover and security for workers risking their jobs to demand material improvements.

It is imperative that anyone worried by recent events and employed at a college or university join, form, or otherwise participate in a union that organizes, directs, and supports university workers. Recent reporting by *The New York Times* suggests that greater numbers of college students in the US come from more precarious economic circumstances than the "traditional" student stereotype. With greater numbers of students enrolled at community colleges (free, as it were, from the fog of institutional mythos shrouding more "prestigious" schools), the identification of students as workers instead of soon-to-be-minted members of the ruling class could greatly aid the transformation of classrooms from sites of class conflict to sites of class solidarity (Blinder and Rich 2025).

The second tool at our disposal is to implement broad Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns that target not only states like Israel, but also our own government and corporations that use our research and scholarship to develop and field weapons of war and surveillance. Beck, Kayser, and Beenes (2022, 227–42) suggest implementing methods like open letters, protests, boycotts, awareness campaigns, and ethics committees to combat the use of institutional resources for antihuman purposes, whether foreign or domestic.

The third tool is to implement critical and antiauthoritarian pedagogy in our research and teaching. In stark contrast to the logic of the market, the beauty of librarianship is that, at best, our relationships with students and faculty are not primarily transactional. Central to our work as librarians is a collaborative, creative, and comradely disposition that seeks to aid research, teaching, and learning. Although the designation of librarians as faculty, staff, or a hybrid differs from institution to institution, this liminal status can be leveraged for revolutionary purposes. Librarians interact with all kinds of university workers, and in some cases, have formed strong connections that transcend traditional departmental lines. As purveyors of connection and natural organizers by disposition, librarians are uniquely situated to foster interpersonal and interdepartmental solidarity that otherwise siloed departments or programs cannot. Among others, Rob Garnett's research on the production of academic labor can help ground librarian advocacy in class-based analysis: "To defend the core educational purpose of colleges and universities—namely, the production of learners and learning—we need a coherent vision of higher education that places faculty and students at the center, as coproducers of academic knowledge" (2024, 362).

Conclusion

I conclude with a question: Are we prepared to resist repression *regardless* of its origin? It is hard to resist external pressure, but it is harder still to adhere to our ideals when university administrations treat us as internal opposition. We are fighting a two-front war, but a united front of librarians, faculty, students, and staff can advocate for change. Together *we* form our best hope for the expansion and preservation of public goods and services in the face of austerity, privatization, and overt fascism. This will not be an easy task and requires personal and professional risk: "A socialist intellectual should refuse to wear the cloaks of virtue, erudition, and detachment: she should be prepared to enter the field of class struggle on the side of workers and the exploited" (Liu 2021, 77). How, then, do we advocate for the public good within the confines of an institution? That is, how do we strive for our ideals while simultaneously serving an institution when the two prove mutually incompatible? Although the path is long and arduous, it must begin with building class consciousness and solidarity. Armed with both radical theory and radical practice, we can empower ourselves and groups

within our institutions. Only *together* can we resist the forces of reaction and enact revolution in ways that isolated individuals cannot.

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Goliath Lost

TENEKA WILLIAMS

This land is first and foremost
his handiwork.
It was he who brought order
Out of primeval wilderness . . .
Wherever one looks in this land,
whatever one sees that is the work of man,
was erected by the toiling
straining bodies of blacks.
(Cohn 1935)

The Presidential Action of Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History (Exec. Order No.14563 2025) emphasizes presenting American history accurately and with pride, highlighting the nation's progress and ingenuity. The White House states that the goal is to revitalize cultural institutions and reverse the spread of divisive ideology. This initiative aims to ensure alignment with the president's directive to celebrate American exceptionalism and remove divisive or partisan narratives. The basis of this movement is rooted in Christian nationalism and detailed in Project 2025. The advocates of this doctrine seek to align American culture with a brand of Christianity steeped in adulation of the white man.

However, the current state of America and the world show us that the world is held up by Black and Brown bodies. France's economy is on the verge of collapse without the gold collateral housed in Burkina Faso. Our leading technologies are sustained by minerals forcefully removed from Africa. The violence and constant war between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda is financed by foreign entities that depend on its natural resources for their wealth. Cacao beans do not grow in Belgium or Switzerland. American farmers are on the verge of bankruptcy with no migrant labor to harvest their crops and no foreign markets to buy them. Make no mistake that what is happening in America is representative of an effort to uplift and maintain whiteness as the global standard.

Our museums and cultural institutions are not exempt. In fact, they are invaluable in the quest to establish a new narrative—one that absolves accountability through erasure and omission. Be mindful that European museums would be empty were it not for the remnants of African culture that fill their galleries. Similarly, without the inclusion of Black and Brown contributions and perspectives, America's history falls short of exceptional.

Someone once said to me that the people in general cannot bear
very much reality. He meant by this that they prefer fantasy to a
truthful re-creation of their experience.
(Baldwin 2017)

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This Executive Order (Exec. Order No.14563 2025) posits that differing perspectives prevent unity and present the story of America in a negative light. This attempt to sanitize American history seeks to satiate opponents of acknowledgment and truth. They claim it burdens the current generation with an unnecessary debt of conscience. In a multicultural society, all perspectives should be encouraged. It is the removal of alternate views that challenge and contradict that is divisive and perpetuates a narrative that cannot be substantiated by the historical record. The directives for the Smithsonian and other museums to focus less on "ideological indoctrination or divisive narratives that distort our shared history" (Exec. Order No.14563, 2025) and seek to amplify the sanitized voice of an ethical, moral, white Christian society. As much as the ordinance seeks to minimize contributions of Black and Brown people, it also seeks to remove references to white cruelty, attempting to purport white benevolence through revision and nationalistic rhetoric.

Deemed to be representative of corrosive ideology, an order of removal of "The Scourged Back," a portrait of an enslaved man whose back was significantly scarred from whippings he endured on a Louisiana plantation, was given to all national parks (Groetzinger et al., 2025). Meanwhile, PBS (Sy & Fritz, 2025) recently aired a cartoon by PraegerU, a nonprofit conservative media organization that produces "pro-American" content, in which Christopher Columbus admonishes that being taken as a slave is better than being killed. *For whom?* This new version of history omits the perspective of the enslaved. Historical negationism is harmful and benefits those who seek to create a narrative that fits an existing ideology. To put forth a narrative that the enslaved and the slaver share the same story will exacerbate the cognitive dissonance that ails white Americans. Undoubtedly, the rise of alt right and white nationalist groups are the result of internalized cognitive dissonance. The participants have been sold an idea of greatness and are disillusioned in a world that shows others attaining what that has been promised to them.

So go ahead and revise history, tell a story in which America is great only through ingenuity and superiority of white men. Tell a story that does not show the world the way it is, that it is different from what our eyes can see. To attempt to tell the story of America through one lens only harms us as it denies an opportunity to reconcile our shared history. The story of America did not begin when English peasants determined to escape religious persecution risked life and limb crossing the Atlantic Ocean. The first winter in the colonies of Jamestown and Plymouth is not the origin stories of heroes.

For had it not been for the Native Americans sharing food and shelter, the tale of the white immigrants would have ended less than a year after it began. In return, the Native Americans received diseased blankets and murderous raids and were ultimately removed from the land on which they had lived. It was the labor of chattel slaves picking cotton that afforded the philosophical texts read by John Quincy Adams, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and others in their quest to craft a document of inalienable rights. The forefathers worked on a constitution that would exclude those whose bodies and labor were forced to build that White House that sits at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

As we navigate an environment that is threatened by efforts to be diverse and inclusive due to the Executive Orders set forth by this current administration, Black and Brown people are told that our contributions are so minimal, they can be removed. This current administration is bothered by the racial chasms illustrated by the Trail of Tears, slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Black Codes, redlining, and countless other examples that show the sin of skin in America. The current political and social environment is the result of an insidious current of dishonesty and hypocrisy. An elevation of these actions to infiltrate our cultural institutions

and museums will only harm future generations. Those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it. Alas, one would think this was the plot of a Shakespearean comedy if it were not being witnessed in real time.

> That the Negro American has survived at all is extraordinary—a lesser people might have simply died out, as indeed others have.
> (Moynihan 1965)

Quite simply, we do not need to ask for a seat at the table our ancestors built.

Black history is American history, for there is no story more unequivocally American than that of Black Americans. Arriving in this country as enslaved property. Learning to read and write in a language that is not your own. Being told you were lazy while working the land sunrise to sunset. Cooking and cleaning for those who say you are an animal. Responsible for nursing and raising the children of those who call you uncivilized. Surviving for four hundred years in bondage and attaining our physical freedom and civic rights through primarily non-violent protests and persistence.

For as long as we have been in this land, we have fought to exist. Perhaps it is time for us to stop fighting to be recognized, stop asking to be included. We are more than capable of creating community with tables long enough for all to be seated. History reveals that thriving communities were created in Tulsa, Oscarville, Rosewood, and many more settlements for us by us—only to be dragged back by murderous raids, land theft, and political savagery by those who claim we have no impact.

The inclination to blur the past of America juxtaposed with what is presently happening encapsulates the supremacy in leadership. Our military members are housed on installations named after treasonous men who lost in battle, yet are expected to exhibit a warrior ethos. Yesterday's injustices are happening today. The authoritarian policies that are designed to elicit conformity and compliance by erasure and deletion have been used to silence us before. They do not want a story for all but a myth for some.

President Trump recently made a speech championing his theme of America First. He talked about the invention of the light bulb, telegram, television, telephone, computer chip, smartphone, GPS, the integrated circuit, and even the Internet. Each one of the innovations was the product of Black labor and thought. Good luck trying to opine American exceptionalism without Black excellence.

> Remember, remember always, that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists.
> (Roosevelt 1938)

Our great grandfathers were hung from trees because they believed they were men who deserved the right to vote. Our great grandmothers bore and raised children sired from legalized rape. We carry the instincts of those who could chart a map to freedom through braided cornrows. Humanity survives without acknowledgment. We know these stories not because they are written but because they are us. Our voices cannot be silenced, because our presence screams resistance and survival. We are the descendants of those who made a home in a place that was not a home to them.

For all the archivists, curators, librarians, and any ally who is moved by the story of the oppressed: If you are humbled by the pain written in the scars of "The Scourged Back" and

understand the value of its voice, continue to work within professional boundaries. Changes to exhibits, additions, and removals, as well as tracking of historical artifacts, should be documented. Take as many photographs as possible and write daily about the activities that are happening in your workspaces. As guardians of history, these are the times when the love of the culture will preserve the culture. Our culture is based in the art of storytelling, from the traditions of African griots to today's top hip hop artists. Our profession dictates the amalgamation of memory and heart. Be vigilant in observation and teach preservation to everyone around you. We are now all responsible for our stories, and your ethos is needed as guidance in and beyond the walls of your institutions.

We are here and the revolution begins now.

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Author

Teneka Williams' 15 years of service in Accessibility is a key component inclusive librarianship. As a professional Librarian, the years spent, working with marginalized communities has given her keen insight for what many organizations miss. The goal of encouraging, elevating and celebrating the diverse voices has to be valued by organizations. Currently, Ms. Williams works for Fulton County Library Systems and operates a boutique flower shop, Royal Petals ATL.

Defending DEI and the Politics of Inclusion by Engaging Them: Postcards from the Edge of Someone Else's Dream

JOSEPH WINBERRY

ABSTRACT

This article posits that the most important endeavor library and information science (LIS) community members can undertake to defend DEI and the politics of inclusion is to continue to engage them. I use autoethnographic reflection and analysis to conceptualize strategies for how library stakeholders can grow collective DEI engagement. The result of these processes is the development of five snapshots, or "postcards," from my identity as a gay man and my work as a pre-tenure faculty member to illustrate the DEI engagement opportunities in the field. These opportunities include: 1) considering the positionality from which we do our work, 2) imagining how our unique combinations of identities, perspectives, and experiences can contribute to DEI efforts, 3) undertaking the various activities which support these efforts, 4) empathetically and authentically growing the coalition of DEI supporters, and 5) recognizing that outcomes of success or failure do not represent the end but the continuation of the journey toward social justice for all in society. Taken together, these strategies represent one model for how DEI engagement can continue to expand in the LIS field. I hope my examples will encourage others to consider a new or reinforced commitment to DEI in the LIS field and beyond, in part by examining their own journeys, sharing their own postcards, and developing their own strategies for supporting the politics of inclusion that every supporter can use and build on.

Introduction

When I first read the call for this special issue of *The Political Librarian*, my idea engine went into overdrive. There are many directions one could go in the name of "defending DEI and the politics of inclusion" in this moment (EveryLibrary Institute 2025). I thought about contextualizing social justice into the broader economic justice (see Williams 2017; 2025) or doing a literature review on how mentions of "Trump" in library and information science (LIS) research might illuminate a librarianship-informed framework that complements other anti-autocracy academic resources (Lewandowsky et al. 2025). The possibilities seemed endless.

But when it came time to write on these or other ideas, I just could not. I initially assigned blame to the to-do list, but there was something more fundamental to my writer's block than just the organization of tasks and finding the time to do them. I think there is a

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different message I am supposed to give instead. While maybe not as profound or innovative as some other ideas, there is power in the simplicity of my argument in this article: The best way for us to defend DEI and the politics of inclusion is by engaging them.

Conceptual Framing

This section elaborates on my argument by describing and contextualizing each of its components within the context of social justice.

Defining Social Justice

What is DEI? This question alludes to both a strength and a vulnerability in the quest for organizing around, implementing steps toward, and achieving the interrelated but distinct concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion: the ability to define and describe them in various ways. My purpose here is not to provide every possible definition and description of the acronym. If you are not already well versed in some of these combinations, there are many good faith resources—such as the NAACP (2025) website—which provide definitions and examples as well as reasons for DEI. Instead, I will define DEI in relation to the politics of inclusion.

What are the politics of inclusion? Much like DEI, politics is a term that can be defined and described in innumerable ways. When I refer to politics here, I do not limit it to the formal political process of campaigns, elections, and governance—though that is certainly part of it. I recognize politics here more broadly as "the set of activities that are associated with making decisions in groups, or other forms of power relations among individuals, such as the distribution of status or resources" (Wikipedia 2025). If we are thinking about "politics of inclusion" in relation to DEI, it would make sense that decisions being made about the distribution of resources and power in society should consider the diversity of that society and inequities brought on by marginalization of certain groups in society in comparison to others, as well as the value of being inclusive in that process.

Said another way, I would describe DEI and the politics of inclusion as being part of the larger vision of social justice. I define social justice as both a process through which people must educate themselves and others to identify and understand the varied nature or *diversity* of the human experience and take actions toward increasing fairness or *equity* between broader society and groups who have historically been marginalized because of their differences in order to ensure that there is the *inclusion* of everyone in the *politics* of power and resource distribution, and the positive outcomes which can come to historically marginalized groups and society by pursuing this process (Cooke et al. 2016; Mehra et al. 2009; Winberry 2023).

Defending Social Justice

Having defined DEI and the politics of inclusion as part of social justice, now it is time—per the paper's stated argument—to defend it. This begs the question: Why does social justice need defending?

Again, my purpose here is not to define and describe every area of contention around social justice; readers who have yet to read and think deeply on these topics can make up their own mind after reading this article, as well as the sources cited throughout or elsewhere (your local public librarian would be happy to help you in your search). But the reality is that no process of distributing power and resources occurs without friction and challenges. History can attest that the quest for social justice has been no exception to this rule in the United States

(Heumann and Joiner 2020; Hirshman 2012; Williams 2013) or around the world (Gandhi 2008; Klein 2025; Polanco 1997).

DEI, the politics of inclusion, and their historical equivalents have been derided for various reasons such as theism, which is believing that certain religious views should dictate social freedom (Frame 2021; Hitchens 2008; Plantinga 1987), or majoritarianism, which is the belief that majority groups should not have to acknowledge or address disparities that social minorities experience (Abizadeh 2021; Abrams 2022; Rufo et al. 2023). Indeed, the controversy is often less about whether social injustices toward disadvantaged groups occur but rather what they say about society and what—if anything—should be done about them (Klinenberg and Sherman 2021; Ravecca et al. 2024; Serwer 2019). Similarly, while public polling indicates splits on the focus or effectiveness of DEI initiatives, there is general recognition that certain groups have been marginalized and that bringing attention to and ending social disparities is a good thing (Bowman 2025; Rice et al. 2025).

In taking up this special issue's mandate, it should be no surprise that I argue in favor of attempting social justice by taking actions to minimize disparities between groups advantaged and disadvantaged by the system in which we all live. But this statement is admittedly broad and requires focusing for the purposes of this paper.

Engaging Social Justice

This is where the last part of my argument comes into service: defending DEI and the politics of inclusion by engaging them. I do not mean for that to sound as flip or glib as it understandably could. The truth is, the dark times that many of us have been working to combat for nearly a decade have fallen upon us (Jennings-Roche and Jaeger 2025; Mehra and Winberry 2021).

With a Supreme Court stacked in defiance of the people (Suk Gersen 2022; Wheeler 2020) and a gerrymandered Congress (Wolfe 2025) who has ceded its responsibilities to the executive (Cropf 2025), we are left with a president-in-name-only who has vowed to autocratically use the full weight of the unrestrained federal government to crush individuals, groups, and institutions who champion DEI and cherished American values like free speech and intellectual freedom (Collins and Hamlin 2025; Finnegan 2025; Sentner and Johansen 2025). Unsurprisingly, given their community and cultural importance, funding and directives for museum and library research and practice—including previously awarded funding for some of my work (Patel 2025; Winberry et al. 2025)—have not been spared in his assertion of control and revisionism (American Library Association 2025; Italie 2025).

In the face of this unprecedented weaponization of our government against us—its citizens, residents, and taxpayers—many people are understandably scared (Khardori 2025). Now, when circumstances call on powerful individuals and institutions to flex their strengths and double down on their long-stated lip service to DEI, too many voices are silent. They are self-censoring and capitulating, often without any clear legal reason to do so. While as the saying goes, silence can be deafening, we must not be cowed by the absence of supportive noise. We must continue to make our own with one another—a cacophony for an unapologetically better world.

Now is not the time to give up. No, in this moment when the political system is dominated by a figure and movement hostile to recognizing, celebrating, and building on the fullness of the human experience responsible for making and keeping America (and the world)

great, we must exercise the politics of inclusion the only way we can: by "voting" for them every day with our feet, wallets, voices, actions, and engagements.

But what does it mean to "engage" them, particularly within LIS? The library is, ironically enough, an apt metaphor. The health and future availability of library collections, programming, and spaces are often dependent on them being "checked out" or used. The same is true, I argue, for the future of DEI. Rather than accept words without the backing of law or the strength of conscience, we must exercise the levers at our disposal. In other words, and to tap into something I often hear in my other professional identity as a gerontologist, "Use it or lose it!"

We must hold (and attend) more events. We must write and get the word out to venues and audiences who might not otherwise know about or seek us out. We must contact our legislators and organize campaigns that prevent them from ignoring us. We must organize and peacefully protest like civil rights leaders before us. Whether you read this article as a library practitioner, scholar, or supporter, there are steps that we all can take (and may already be taking) to fully engage DEI and the politics of inclusion in our daily activities, larger life, and professional journeys.

Research Question

Beyond just saying this broadly, we need to think more specifically about what we can do to give those so inclined the maximized possibility of making change with the generous donation of their increasingly shrinking time/attention (circumstances worthy of their own lamenting elsewhere). Toward this end, I ask the research question: What strategies can be taken to increase engagement with social justice in the LIS context? To answer this question, each of us must start by examining ourselves.

Methodology

All of us who support DEI and libraries have identities, perspectives, and experiences that are valuable in developing strategies for how we and others can best engage with the politics of inclusion in our current moment. The research methodology most useful for this endeavor is autoethnography.

A Google AI-generated synthesis (accessed October 31, 2025) states that autoethnography "is a research method that combines autobiography with ethnographic research, where the researcher analyzes their own personal experiences and emotions to understand a social, cultural, or psychological phenomenon. It differs from simple autobiography by critically examining personal experiences as a form of data analysis, connecting individual stories to broader cultural and theoretical concepts." Autoethnography has a rich methodological history with roots in anthropology, qualitative paradigms, and ethnographic research prior to being conceptualized in ways relevant to the above synthesis in the 1970s (Hayano 1979; Heider 1975).

The methodology was developed across multiple decades and appeared in other fields such as LIS, albeit often discussed as underutilized in our field (Lawal and Bitso 2020; Guzik 2013; Michels 2010). In more recent years, autoethnography has been used by various LIS scholars as a way of challenging exclusive structures and institutions within the discipline from a particular positionality (Cooke 2019; Cooke and Sánchez 2019; Mehra 2019; Winberry and Gray 2022). While social justice is increasingly viewed as an important value of LIS education, research, and practice in recent years, its historic exclusion of certain groups and stubborn

homogeneity seen in the library workforce despite efforts to diversify demonstrate the continued value of exploring the politics of inclusion from various perspectives (Cooke 2016; Winberry and Bishop 2021).

In response to its purpose and value, autoethnography can be conceptualized in various forms. In attempting to identify strategies for championing social justice in the LIS field, I have considered what I have learned from my own journey so far. Several studies have talked about postcards as an allegorical or literal tool for subjective personal introspection or autoethnography (Bouvier 2024; Creagh 2011; Holbrook 2005). Postcards are often seen as representing a particular moment in time, forever contextualized by the restful vacation, invigorating adventure, or personal reflection that enabled their writing, mailing, reading, and responding (Bonarou 2021; Ferguson 2005; Rogan and Brown 2005).

In keeping with the journey metaphor, I have organized my analysis into five postcards, each of which provides a snapshot of my narrative analysis, followed by the specific strategy I identified for engaging social justice as a process with outcomes.

Findings

Postcard # 1: Live a Dream Daily Rather than Wait for Vacation!

For many of us, DEI is not a bumper sticker, a snappy slogan, or a way to pad the stock price. Its promise is one made for our very lives. As a gay man, I am reminded every day when I come home to a loving husband with whom I have built a home over thirteen years, that I am living a life I never would have thought possible as a teenager. It often feels like something out of a dream.

But this dream I live every day is not my own. It is the dream of a gay man who was more like me than I will ever know. A gay man who, for all our similarities, was unlike me in the sense that he lacked the random twist of fate which saw me born in 1990 rather than 1940 or 1890—a twist of fate that saw me as the beneficiary of his sacrifices rather than the one who had to make them. I do my best never to take that for granted. Thankfully, there are always people ready to remind me how fragile freedom is.

I know many others across the diversity of human experience understand what it feels like to be living someone else's dream. We live our lives for ourselves and for our loved ones. And for the dreamers as well.

Strategy # 1: Identifying You

While conducting my introspection on this topic and preparing to share the results with you, I have had to consider how my positionality and full identity engage with the topic as well. As a PhD-holding white male and as a gay, first-generation, pre-tenure professor, my full identity includes privileges and disadvantages within the LIS field, academia, and broader society. My hope is that my examples might encourage others to brainstorm and share their own strategies for how we, as a field, can fully, deliberately, and continually engage DEI and the politics of inclusion to share and demonstrate their value and essentialness to others for the betterment of society for everyone.

Brainstorm who you are so that you can consider how you can best contribute. This might involve writing out a list, talking it through with a friend, or drawing a mind map. Doing these and more may help you consider all the possibilities.

Postcard #2: Hello from Unique Combinations!

I never intended to be a Critical iGerontologist (my self-description, given that my scholarly interests lie at the intersection of library and information science, gerontology, and social justice). It happened by accident. As a history and political science graduate, my time as an administrative assistant at a nonprofit, and a flurry of rejected history PhD applications, concentrated my mind on what I might do next.

Seemingly still wed to history, I decided to go to "library school" to become an archivist and leave nonprofit work behind. But just as I achieved the golden ticket that was library school admission in 2016, I learned that nonprofit work was not ready to leave me. I got a job offer to lead Knoxville, Tennessee's inaugural elder abuse response program.

Prior to the chance interview, I had never even heard of or considered elder abuse—physical, emotional, sexual, financial, and/or neglect forms of harm perpetuated against someone because of real or perceived vulnerabilities of aging. But when faced with the choice to follow my newish dream into library school or fight elder abuse, I thought about how I owed so much to the person I was because of the love of my grandparents and their friends, whom I spent considerable time with growing up. I took a risk and delayed graduate school matriculation by a year. It proved to be one of the most impactful decisions of my life to date.

Once I was concurrently seeking my LIS degree and managing the elder abuse response program, I began seeing many connections between the two. For instance, many of the concepts I learned from scholars like Elfreda Chatman, Lynn Westbrook, and Nicole Cooke, such as information access, behavior, and justice, helped me to think about how the Office on Aging I worked at could better meet the often-linked information and service needs of older adults. These and other "aha" moments, such as an unexpected conversation with older gay men about their aging-related information needs, led me down the path of pursuing my doctorate.

It is clear now that my time spent in the LIS scholar-elder abuse responder duality is what set the stage for my Critical iGerontologist identity. But I did not realize how my work was focusing on the intersection of LIS, gerontology, and social justice until my mentor Bharat Mehra pointed it out. Afterward, I decided to formally claim this area as the one I hoped to spend my career contributing to and name it. It has been my focus ever since and likely always will be.

Strategy # 2: Looking Through Your Unique Lens

It may be a cliché, but it remains the truth: No two people are the same. The first step toward defending DEI and the politics of inclusion is to brainstorm—individually and collectively—how your experiences, goals, identities, perspectives, and strengths can best be used to help pursue social justice. While I had long found myself working on issues relevant to older adults in LIS, the initial conversation I had with gay men led to my dissertation because the discussion helped me realize that as a gay man myself who understood aging services and information theory, I was well positioned to meet the aging-related information and service needs of them and other members of the LGBT+ community in East Tennessee. Once you have considered how you can best contribute, you will be well prepared for the next step.

Postcard #3: Wishing You Were (Everyw)Here!

Work in nearly every field—including LIS—will be greatly impacted by the historic and rapid societal aging currently underway. I worry that, rather than making the necessary

investments to ensure older people age with dignity, there will be an emphasis on managing rather than partnering with this population. In considering how I could use my unique combination to make the greatest positive impact, the areas of research, education, and practice came to mind.

As a member of academe, my colleagues and I conduct research, which is a core component of educating future LIS professionals. That education, in turn, informs the practice undertaken by those students-turned-professionals (and vice versa). I pursued a project that sought to serve older adults across these three areas.

After surveying students at many of the American Library Association (ALA)-accredited master's programs, it became clear that while many stated they were open to considering how they might best serve older adults, they received little to no exposure to older adults in their degree programs. However, there are many reasons why elders are underrepresented, and realistically, getting every ALA-accredited program to provide a class on them is as difficult a process as it is unlikely to be an outcome. In response, I have been overseeing a team of LIS students who interview older adults to determine what they would like public library students and professionals to know about serving them. This—and a forthcoming survey with professionals—will help me develop a free, online training series for students and professionals that centers on the perspectives of older adults and contributes toward ensuring, rather than merely wishing, that my work can have influence across several elements of the field.

Strategy # 3: Activities for Change

Having brainstormed how you can take action, the next step is to organize and implement your plan for doing so. My unique combination has helped me imagine how I might have the greatest impact on older adults through LIS scholarship. While it is still too early to know what the actual results will be, I hope that my plan for developing a free and openly available online training series for those serving older patrons in their library, based on what older adults request, will help you think about how you could center the perspectives of whatever population you seek to work with. While the *what* of your work will be highly individualized, the ultimate goal of social justice remains the same across all our differences.

My activities often focus on my research because it is part of who I am and how I see the world. One social justice-minded activity is writing more on marginalized or underrepresented populations in the field, such as older adults or intersectional groups like LGBT+ older adults. Another activity might be seeking out opportunities to cite authors from underrepresented groups who may not get cited because of the topic of their work, rather than concerns about the considerable strength of their writing and arguments. Others in the field work toward programs that give funding to library students who are underrepresented in the field (such as the LIS Spectrum Program) or to create courses and books that expand social justice understanding within an LIS context. You may think of your activities around your daily library work, teaching, talking up the value of libraries to your friends and neighbors, or something different entirely. We each have our own set of actions we can take to support social justice.

Postcard # 4: Glad to Be Back Home!

Everyone enjoys a good vacation. But when it's over, people often look forward to going back home. For me, the concept of home represents safety, support, and comfort. One reason I think DEI has become an easy target is that the term is not intuitive or comfortable for

everyone. In response, I have begun speaking about the importance of diversity and inclusion as dignity and respect in some of my work.

For instance, when presenting as part of a training team on the need for service providers to meet the aging-related information and service needs of LGBT+ older adults in East Tennessee, we talked about how, as service providers, it is not their job to judge or even necessarily agree with every aspect of a person's life and perspective. You are there to serve, and everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter who they are. There were some folks who came into those trainings having shared in an anonymous survey that they were not supportive of the LGBT+ community, only to report feeling differently by the end.

This does not work for every circumstance, nor do I offer this one example as representative of every possible outcome. However, you make it clear that DEI is not about giving anyone "special" rights, as some have claimed, but rather about allowing everyone a chance to live the life of their (or their ancestors') dreams.

Strategy # 4: Building Coalitions with Communities

As we continually consider how to defend DEI and the politics of inclusion, the fourth step is to recognize the importance of bringing people into the movement. What are the various groups you engage with as part of your library work? This could include fellow researchers and teachers, students, other colleagues, patrons, external partners, and more.

There is also a chance to bring in new people if we are open-minded about what common ground looks and even sounds like. While rights-based and justice-laden phraseology is useful, sometimes simpler language and values-based arguments can bring others into a coalition that broadly supports the intentions of DEI. This does not mean that we must work in partnership with those who wish us harm. Instead, it is about making it easier to engage with people who wish us well, even if they do not quite know how to say or embody it without our support.

Postcard #5: Can't Wait to Go Back Again!

Like many believers in social justice, it has been a difficult year for me in more ways than are interesting to read (or write) about. But when I have felt at my lowest, it has not been my own voice that lifted me up. It has been the voices of others.

Community offers a powerful escape from the challenges of life. It is also represented in different ways. One of the most impactful community moments of the past year was attending and listening to the perspectives of members of the ALA Black Caucus at the 2025 annual conference. I am not a member of that community, but in the larger, shared quest for social justice across society, I try to do what I can to be an ally.

In other situations, there is an ability to build community around issues or identity factors more representative of who you are. Recognizing the importance of DEI across the lifespan, several researchers, library practitioners, and community supporters came together to form the ALA's Elder Justice Task Force. Together—as a community of aging services providers working in concert with people sixty-five years and older—we have sought to challenge ageism in our profession and provide pro-older adult support by offering trainings and showcasing resources for serving older adults in libraries. Engaging with all our members and pursuing social justice has given me the strength to keep moving forward when I could not do so alone.

Strategy # 5: Outcomes as Beginnings, Not Ends

Having brainstormed how you could possibly contribute, planned and implemented that plan, and sought to bring inactive people into the work, the final step I recommend for defending DEI and the politics of inclusion is to recognize that outcomes are beginnings rather than ends. Sometimes we will achieve what we hoped to. Sometimes, we do not get everything accomplished, or worse, even when we do it all, the results are not what we hoped for. Either way, regardless of the result, we must learn from the outcomes and move forward as appropriate.

The cyclical nature of the work is an important reminder of personal and community care. Keep doing what you can, and encourage others doing the work to do the same. This can be as simple as showing up to events and providing a smile and an affirmative response to the presenters. The speaker and the audience both benefit in such a scenario. We all have so much to learn about the beautiful mosaic that is the human experience. Sometimes, we get to be the student, as in my visit with the ALA Black Caucus; other times, like when we helped start the Elder Justice Task Force, we get to be the teacher. Either way, the education is ongoing and never finished. Rather than discouraging us, that should help us move forward. Fighting for social justice is always worth it. At least when working in community, we never have to do the work alone.

Discussion

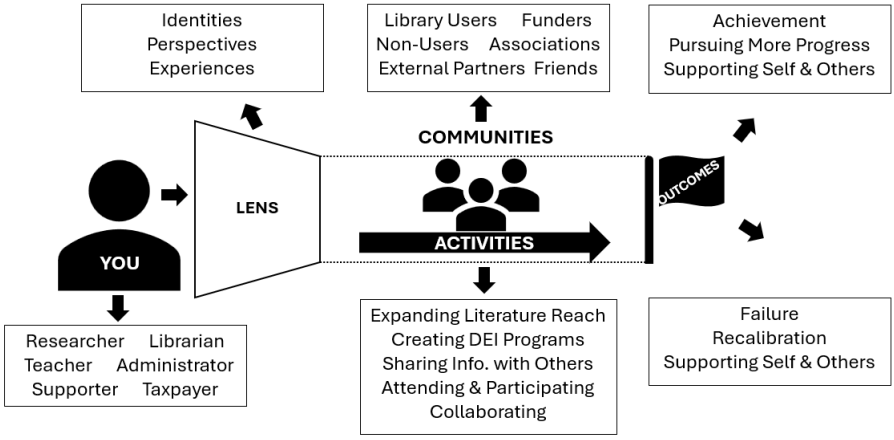

Figure 1. Modeling social justice engagement as LIS process.

While each postcard individually provides a snapshot, together they can tell a story. The strategies emerging from the postcards of my autoethnographic reflection are organized as a story in figure 1. Inspired by Brenda Dervin's (2008) visualization of the sense-making process, the figure includes elements of the meta-story of engaging social justice within the LIS context.

Everyone in the LIS profession has a stake in social justice, regardless of their individual mosaic, because intellectual freedom is such a foundational concept in the field (Boll 1953;

Krug 2017). While social justice and intellectual freedom are distinct concepts, it is impossible to achieve information justice without allowing everyone the opportunity to access, use, and share ideas that are of interest to them and their identity groups, as they define them (Knox 2020). This should be a point that can win support across the broadest coalition of field members (Antelman 2025; Shockey 2016).

While Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality often receives criticism from right-wing figures for what they perceive as variations of *trying to out-victim others* (Ravecca et al. 2024; Roth 2020), the recognition of intersecting forms of marginalized identities has as a precursor—the recognition that all people have full identities shaped by who you are, what you believe, and what you have experienced. There is growing recognition in the field that intersectionality informs library practice, from the perspectives of both the librarian and the patron, including what their specific information needs are (Chou and Pho 2018; Cooke 2016; Murphy 2019; Winberry 2025). More focus on intersectionality is needed to recognize and champion the true diversity of society, which shapes information and community building.

There are numerous activities that can be undertaken to support social justice, depending upon a person's role. Some of these activities are rather traditional within academic scholarship, such as curriculum development (Cooke et al. 2016), community-minded research (Winberry and Gray 2022), and diversity-minded library practice (Chou and Pho 2018). But these activities might also be less traditional, such as reaching out to personal networks—which may contain untapped, vocal supporters of social justice in librarianship—with the right amount and type of engagement.

Communities within the LIS field range from the traditional to the expected, such as library users and library board members. But communities such as Friends groups can be valuable allies in the fight against book bans, for instance, which are often considered a classic intellectual freedom—and perhaps social justice—intersection in the field (Winberry and O'Donnell forthcoming). Community is essential to completing and sustaining the work, so there is always a need for additional focus on community dynamics and social justice within LIS scholarship.

Outcomes take various forms in social justice work, especially in the current moment. Victories, when reached, should be celebrated; the results of the November 2025 elections, for instance, as well as the (at least temporary) reinstatement of my IMLS grant just as this paper was going to "print"' suggests a growing backlash electorally as well as judicially to the president's policies (EveryLibrary Institute 2025b, Yilek and Walsh 2025). But when an outright victory cannot be achieved, there may be value in considering whether a partial victory can be negotiated (Crowley 2025). As social justice becomes increasingly challenged in parts of the country and the world, more research should explore what constitutes an acceptable—if not preferred—result in DEI and political inclusion work, so that we may set a foundation on which to build.

The work of electoral politics is something each of us may choose to engage with (or not) individually or in association with others. But the work of the LIS field, in many ways, takes place outside the voting booth. We must work to build the broadest coalition possible in support of common values like dignity, the freedom to read, and public access for all. The implementation of this model represents one possible contribution toward building such a coalition. My hope in sharing it with others is that they will reflect on it and extend it through their own introspection.

Conclusion

None of us knows what the future has in store. Indeed, looking across the current landscape, there are reasons to suspect that things will get worse before they get better. There may come a time—not all that long from now—when we each will stand at a crossroads and must decide whether we can be our true selves and still properly serve the full public without detouring from the library sphere, for a time or permanently.

But regardless of what lies ahead, we must never forget the dreams that brought us here or, more importantly, the people who dreamed them first. I stand with all the dreamers. I hope that you do too. We each have our own unique contributions to make in the quest for a world where—whether you call it diversity and equity, dignity and respect, or the politics of inclusion—everyone can be fully, consequentially present in our lives, our libraries, our communities, our country, and our world.

My hope in sending you the social justice postcards about brainstorming, planning and implementing, expanding the coalition, and supporting others doing the work throughout all possible outcomes is that they might inspire you to keep going, to keep working, and to keep believing in the dreams that brought us here and that will—in due time—carry us to new heights yet.

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Haunted by the Past

EWA DZIEDZIC-ELLIOTT

If you are like me, a careful student of the past and a reflective observer of the present, you cannot help but notice some parallels between the two. Hearing about the recent deportations, imprisonments, loss of contact with loved ones, and people vanishing off the streets made me ponder upon my own troubled family history and inspired me to dig through genealogy to learn more about my ancestry.

My American-born husband makes it seem so easy: go online, find the baptism/marriage/ death records of your loved ones, and plug the new information into a genealogical tree. I was following his recommendations, but I quickly ran into unforeseen issues. In the part of Poland where I grew up, the family records were written in languages other than Polish—some were in Latin, others in Russian, and even German. Latin was used for all things church-related before 1800; Russian was for church records between 1800 and 1900; German was used during the same period but for official state and legal records; and Polish was used after 1900. And none of this was consistent, as each town, each parish, had its own unpredictable rules. One town might have baptism records in Polish, another one down the street would have them in Russian. Differences between the proper written language and phonetic/spoken versions make reading the records very difficult, even for those who consider those languages their mother tongue. And, if this was not enough, the geopolitical borders in my region have changed periodically in the past, making things even more difficult.

Growing up I kept hearing that we, on my dad's side of the family, didn't know where we came from. My dad always said that his dad, my grandpa, was very young when his father died, and therefore we have no knowledge of how, when, or from whom we acquired the land that we own.

Was it a part of the national partition of the country after World War I? Or did they buy the land and move there? And the most puzzling question of them all: why, in the beginning of the twentieth century, did my dad's family not speak our local dialect, but proper Polish? Why did they have a reputation to be well-off and respected?

I checked the records in parishes that are geographically the closest to my dad's hometown and—as far as I know—the residence of his father's family and found nothing. No records on my grandfather's baptism or those of his many siblings. I wasn't even able to verify the name of his father, my great-grandfather. It was as if they had never existed. To this day, all the records I find are contradictory and lead me nowhere. Consider this a part of growing up in a country where records, recordkeeping, and access to information has been inconsistent to say the least.

Current events made me wonder recently about the past from a new perspective. As a librarian I used to teach that, in some countries, it is safe to use .gov websites as reliable source

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of information. As you can imagine, I no longer do that. Nowadays I pull up governmental websites to test my students' critical thinking skills. A great example is a press release on the US Department of Education's website from January 24, 2025, titled *U.S. Department of Education Ends Biden's Book Ban Hoax.*[1] I ask my students to analyze the document through the lens of appropriateness of the language, bias, merit. Does this read like a governmental publication? Can you use it as a reliable source of information in an academic setting?

On February 6, 2025, I came across a note on National Institute of Justice website:

> The Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs is currently reviewing its website and materials in accordance with recent Executive Orders and related guidance. During this review, some pages and publications will be unavailable. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.[2]

The information I was looking for was for a student who was working on a paper on immigrants as criminals. I don't know if the student requesting help in this matter was trying to prove or disprove the statement. As you all remember, similar messages were displayed across all federal websites. I remember thinking to myself: what will happen with uncomfortable pieces of information that don't align with the Executive Orders? And if this isn't censorship of information, what is?

Growing up, I knew which towns nearby were considered old Jewish towns. We, the kids, were always told that if there is a main square in town without a church, that most likely it used to be a Jewish town. Often the main part of the town was a square made up of local merchants or taverns. I remember my grandparents' stories about how if you wanted to buy shoes, you would go to this town; if you wanted to buy a horse, you went to that town; but to see a doctor, you would have to go to the big city. And when I say go, I mean walk—six, eight, fifteen kilometers. After I combed through the records of local parishes, I also checked the state capital city's archives, and I accidentally came across documents that present records of non- Roman-Catholic registry. Since our family has suspected that we might actually be Jewish, I had a glimmer of hope that some mention of our family might appear there. I still found nothing.

Both of my parents worked very long hours, so my mother's parents helped to raise my siblings and me. We had the most wonderful childhood filled with my grandmother's racuszki (Polish form of a pancake), homemade pasta and bread, but above all, their unconditional love and wisdom—and my grandfather's love for our land, his farm animals, and his rule not to allow himself breakfast until all of them were fed first.

My grandma, who taught me everything I know about cooking, never had a cookbook. She never had a "proper" cup designated for measuring dry or wet ingredients, because growing up, she never had all of the ingredients to make her food. She cooked with what she had, substituting what was not available with what she could grow or make. She made her own butter, baked her bread, and taught me how to make different kinds of noodles, crepes, and pickled vegetables. Because of her, I know when my pierogi dough is done, when it feels just right under my fingers, and not because I used the exact ratio of flour to water.

My grandparents were eight and five when World War II started. I remember them telling us stories that this or that house in town was occupied by Jewish families before WWII and that during the war they "disappeared," and nobody ever knew what happened to them. I still remember seeing those empty wooden cottages, dark, leaning towards the ground. I

honestly don't know how many of those families used to live in our town. I remember the curiosity and a level of discomfort that I felt walking by them.

Even with the passing of many decades after WWII, my grandparents were still traumatized by their childhood experiences, sharing their stories about hiding from the invaders, looking for forgotten frozen potatoes in the field so they could bring them home and cook. But they also told stories about foreign soldiers showing them the pictures of their kids, because they were seeing similarities in the faces in front of them and the ones they left home. And there were other not-so-wonderful stories, like the one my grandmother told us about saving an older cousin from sexual assault from a soldier. To this day my brother finds random objects in the family's yard: a button from a soldier's uniform, an old bullet from either a Russian or a German weapon. My grandparents didn't remember how many times the war's frontline was the immediate vicinity of our home. They just remembered the fear, the hunger, the cold.

Why am I writing about all of that? Jumping from stories on genealogy, to missing families and vacant homes, to wonderful childhood memories of home-cooked meals, to stories of horrors of a war?

I am the third post-WWII generation still reliving my grandparents' trauma, experiencing and dealing with my own post-communist generational trauma of censorship and Orwellian "walls have ears" fears, and, unfortunately, I am passing them to my children. Recently my childhood stories, my grandparents' stories, became more than just stories. They became our reality.

Every time I hear the news, I get flashbacks that bring me back to those emotional exchanges between adults I overheard as a little kid or direct stories told by my grandparents or other elders in my town. I can analyze any current event and draw a parallel to my family's past, my town's past.

Will our children and grandchildren have the same stories to tell their younger generations? Stories of neighbors who lived next door and suddenly disappeared without any trace? Stories about our own families whose records are nowhere to be found? I don't want my children to witness of any brutality against another human being. I am doing my very best to raise well-rounded, educated, kind people who will contribute to their communities and hopefully make them better. I am sharing with them my grandparents' stories so they can learn from our past without a need to experience these atrocities in their lifetimes.

The genocide in Poland was done by the hands of foreign decision-makers who wiped about 20 percent of the country's population in just six years. I know that my comparison is extreme as, technically speaking, the US immigrants are detained and deported, not exterminated. But they do vanish, disappearing from the fabric of our communities.

There are some very tragic similarities between my mother country's past and my family's past and the current state of things, like the mass propaganda campaign against specific groups of people, their vilification and mischaracterization, and the persistent dehumanization.

Believe me when I tell you from a personal experience: nobody leaves their loved ones, their homes, their language, their food, their traditions, their customs, and the places where the bones of their ancestors were laid to rest without leaving a piece of themselves behind. Those who came here, like myself, did not make their decisions to move, and stay, lightly.

Endnotes

1 US Department of Education. 2025. "U.S. Department of Education Ends Biden's Book Ban Hoax." https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-ends-bidens-book-ban-hoax.

2 National Institute of Justice, https://nij.ojp.gov/. Retrieved from February 6, 2025

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What Could Have Been: Surveying the Labor Impact of the 2025 Executive Orders on GLAM Workers

RAEGAN C. STEARNS, ALPHIE GARCIA, AND JINA DUVERNAY

ABSTRACT

What Could Have Been? is a collaborative project designed to document the labor lost as a result of federal cuts and grant terminations, especially within GLAM institutions. This survey was inspired by a sub-group of members of the 2025 Archives Leadership Institute (ALI) Cohort who came together to collect evidence of the personal and professional losses resulting from the current sociopolitical landscape. While the project seeks to document the effects on the GLAM communities, *What Could Have Been?* also acknowledges the loss of personal livelihoods and vilification of public servants in addition to amplifying the impact of the erasure of their labor. Affected GLAM workers are invited to document their experiences at **https://bit.ly/wchb_survey**.

Introduction

The Archives Leadership Institute (ALI), hosted by the University of Virginia (2024–2026) and supported by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), brings together mid-career archivists and other professionals engaged in archival work to reflect on leadership and the future of the profession. The twenty-five archivists, librarians, and memory workers of the 2025 ALI cohort engaged in a week-long intensive in Charlottesville that included in-person workshops, lectures, and contemplative reflection (*ALI Cohort 2025 – ALI@Virginia* 2025). After the June 8–14, 2025 in-person gathering, the entire cohort has continued to exchange ideas virtually over the remainder of the year.

As part of the program, participants will also undertake a group project to explore an issue of interest in the archival field. After brainstorming several potential topics, the cohort members self-organized into working groups and began strategizing the best way to work on the chosen project.

The working groups meet virtually on a consistent basis to produce meaningful work that allows them to couple their new professional and personal growth with contributions to the wider archival community. Our working group's eight members are Tracy S. Drake, Jina DuVernay, Alphie Garcia, Courtney Hicks, Stephanie Luke, Caitlin Rizzo, Raegan C. Stearns, and Gregory Wiedeman who represent a variety of types of information organizations. The working group rallied around its concern about the vilification of federal workers and the effects of federal funding cuts on principal investigators of grants, particularly in the

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education, arts, and culture sectors. The group resolved to design a survey to document "what could have been" had grant projects not been interrupted.

This topic was top of mind due to the immediate consequences of the federal cuts to one of the group member's institution. Two colleagues, just one and two years into their archival careers, were informed via an April 16 email that their National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Preservation Assistance Grant for Smaller Institutions (PAG) proposal would not be funded. In fact, the PAG program would not be offered at all in 2025 as the agency "assess[es] our programs in preparation for the celebration of the nation's semi-quincentennial . . ." (NEH 2025).

This disappointing notification came just five days after the group member learned that her own NEH project had been terminated as it entered its third and final year. Awarded in 2023 under the agency's Humanities Collections and Reference Resources, the processing and mold remediation of a large collection documenting Black Southern politics and education was abruptly halted; $181,000 of the $312,000 award was rescinded.

Also under consideration was an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) proposal submitted in late 2024 to the Museum Grants for African American History and Culture program. This proposal requested funds for disaster planning and recovery training. At the time of the ALI convening, Executive Order 14238 had been in effect for three months, terminating active grants and contracts (Federal Register 2025a). The staff of the IMLS was reduced in April, and it was assumed that no new awards would be funded (Navarro 2025).

These examples, along with other shared experiences from the ALI group members and their home institutions, emphasized that these were not isolated grant decisions but a coordinated policy project. The 2025 executive orders that affected federal workforce reductions and targeted "discretionary" cultural funding did not just limit program budgets but intentionally reshaped the labor conditions of GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) workers. The section below places these individual losses within the context of a broader policy agenda before introducing *What Could Have Been?* as a tool to document that lost labor and potential.

Timeline of Federal Actions Impacts IMLS and GLAM Institutions

Since its creation, IMLS has provided important infrastructure for GLAM institutions through its grant programs, subsidizing term-limited projects.

History of IMLS

- *October 1, 1996* – IMLS is founded as "an independent federal agency that fosters leadership, innovation, and lifetime learning by supporting the nation's museums and libraries" ("Resources: Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMSL)," n.d.)
- *September 25, 2003:* President George Bush signs the Museum and Library Services Act of 2003 into law, reauthorizing IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services n.d.).
- *December 22, 2010:* President Obama signs into law the Museum and Library Services Act of 2010, again reauthorizing IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services n.d.).

- *December 31, 2018:* President Trump signs into law the Museum and Library Services Act of 2018, reauthorizing IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services n.d.).

Precedent for the Elimination of IMLS (2017–2020)

In President Trump's first term, repeated proposals to eliminate IMLS signaled that support for GLAM labor was expendable and set the stage for the normalization of uncertainty for these grant-funded projects.

- *May 2017–February 2020* (annually): The first Trump administration's budget proposals to Congress seeks to eliminate IMLS, but Congress rejects those proposals and continues to appropriate funds (Bullard 2017; EveryLibrary 2020).

The executive orders from this period marked a shift from rhetorical threats to actual implementation. The orders framed cultural education and research labor as discretionary (and therefore disposable), meaning entire projects and the people whose jobs depended on them could be terminated with little notice.

- *January 20, 2025* – EO 14158: The second Trump Administration creates the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) as a governmental office to consolidate cost-cutting oversight (Federal Register 2025b).
- *February 11, 2025* – EO 14210: The administration issues an order aimed broadly at reducing the federal workforce and coordinating with DOGE (Federal Register 2025d; Diamond and Davies 2025).
- *February 26, 2025* – EO 14222: This order gives agencies the mandate to flag and cut contracts, grants, and loans for discretionary items (Federal Register 2025c; Bakies and Kanzawa 2025).
- *March 14, 2025* – EO 14238: This order directs that IMLS and other agencies non-statutory components and functions "shall be eliminated to the maximum extent of the law." Since IMLS is funded almost entirely through discretionary appropriations, this effectively ends the agency (Federal Register 2025a; The White House 2025; American Library Association 2025a).

Trump Administrative Actions That Affect IMLS

Leadership and staffing changes at IMLS translated the threat of the previous executive orders into reality. The appointment of agency leadership without GLAM expertise and the placement of staff on administrative leave resulted in unclear guidance, delayed payments, and work stoppages for workers on the ground.

- *March 20, 2025:* Keith E. Sonderling is sworn in as the acting director of IMLS. He is the first director since the founding of IMLS to have no library- or museum-related leadership experience. He states after being appointed that he is "committed to steering this organization in lockstep with this Administration to enhance efficiency and foster innovation" ("Keith E. Sonderling Sworn In" 2025; EveryLibrary 2025).
- *March 31–April 1, 2025:* Nearly all IMLS staff are placed on administrative leave, disrupting grant administration and causing mass confusion (Navarro 2025; Aton 2025).

Court Challenges and Injunctions

Legal challenges from professional associations, labor unions, and states arose to provide a buffer against the most extreme downsizing efforts but only arrived after the layoffs had begun and grants had been halted, demonstrating that these remedies can only apply once the harm has been done. With an administration willing to break norms and push the boundaries with the separation of powers, political maneuvering came at a real human cost to GLAM workers.

- *April 7, 2025:* The American Library Association (ALA) files a lawsuit against the Trump administration (*ALA v. Sonderling* n.d.; American Library Association 2025b).
- *April 30, 2025:* A federal court in Washington DC issues a temporary restraining order (TRO), restricting the Trump administration's IMLS actions after the ALA files a motion for a preliminary injunction (Fisher 2025; American Library Association 2025c).
- *May–July 2025:* Multiple lawsuits from labor unions and states challenge the DOGE downsizing efforts. A federal judge presiding over one of the cases in California grants a TRO that pauses the wider workforce reduction efforts; later, on July 8, 2025, the Supreme Court allows parts of the mass layoff plan to resume (Har 2025; Palma and Chazan 2025).
- *June 16, 2025:* The Government Accountability Office (GAO) issues a decision that references EO 14238, stating that the "IMLS violated the ICA [Impoundment Control Act of 1974] when it withheld funds from obligation and expenditure" (US Government Accountability Office 2025).

Reporting on the impact to grants

Policy reports quickly showed who these cuts would affect: small, rural, Tribal, and low-income communities that rely on GLAM institutions for access to collections, exhibitions, local employment, youth programming, and other community-based projects.

- *July 7, 2025:* The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities issues a report warning that the IMLS program cuts jeopardized the statutory functions of the agency and would harm libraries, museums, and non-profits; it also notes that the cuts would disproportionately affect services to small, rural, and low-income communities (Dorgelo 2025).

Congressional Budget and the Fate of IMLS

The Executive Branch's push to eliminate IMLS and Congress's ongoing appropriations deliberations created a whiplash effect for GLAM workers. Even as the House and Senate budget proposals signaled funding support, the failure to pass a continuing resolution resulted in the longest shutdown in US history, effectively fulfilling the Executive Branch's intent.

- *May 2, 2025*: The Trump administration issues a FY2026 budget request that again calls for eliminating funding from IMLS entirely (Vought 2025).
- *June 26, 2025:* IMLS, under the stewardship of acting director Keith E. Sonderling, issues a three-page request for $5,500,000 to "properly" sunset the agency. In

the previous year, IMLS issued a forty-eight-page request of $280,000,000 (*IMLS Congressional Budget Justification* 2025; Kemper 2023).

- *August to July 2025*: The Republican-controlled House and Senate Appropriations Committees release their FY2026 budget, which includes $291,800,000 in funds for IMLS (Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies 2025; US Senate Committee on Appropriations 2025).
- *October 1, 2025*: The US enters the 2026 federal fiscal year without an agreement between Congress and the Executive Branch, triggering a government shutdown. Following the guidance of the Office of Personal Management, IMLS is closed, with the agency stating it will not engage in any "grant-making or other agency activities" and that "no payments will be made to by IMLS until the agency is reopened" ("Special Instructions for Agencies" n.d.; "Institute of Museum and Library Services" 2025).
- *November 12, 2025:* President Trump signs a compromise deal to end the forty-three-day shutdown, the longest shutdown in US history. The deal guarantees funding of the federal government until January 30, 2026 (Morgan et al. 2025).

Although the shutdown has ended, the long-term fate of IMLS remains in question. Congress will still need to determine whether the institution receives full appropriations, be reduced to the $5.5 million as requested by Acting Director Sonderling, or be eliminated altogether. Any outcome that falls short of a full restoration effectively dismantles the institution, and the consequences as outlined by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities will devastate libraries, museums, and non-profits around the country and the communities they serve.

Designing *What Could Have Been?*

The impulse to document the new sociopolitical environment's effect on the GLAM fields was shared by several professional organizations and advocacy groups that quickly circulated surveys to their communities. A non-exhaustive list includes the American Alliance of Museums (n.d.); the Association of African American Museums (n.d.); the American Association for State and Local History (n.d.); the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (2025); and the American Library Association. Some common information collected by the surveys include the type of GLAM institution affected, the amount of the funds rescinded, and how the services it provides will be impacted. Some surveys offer additional direction on how to advocate to members of Congress and local policymakers on behalf of the endangered federal agency. Others indicate that the data gathered could be used to support litigation efforts.

Some surveys also worked to document the personal experiences of impacted individuals. For example, the Archival Workers Collective launched a storytelling initiative on May 5 meant to "gather and amplify the stories of archives and archival workers on our blog to spread the word on how these actions are impacting our field" (2025). Similarly, the Organization of American Historians is developing the "Federal Employees and Oral History Project" with the Oral History Association to "serve as a vital resource for historians and the public, offering insight into the lives and contributions of our nation's federal workers, and documenting these stories for future generations" (Organization of American Historians 2025).

The ALI working group did not want to duplicate these efforts and felt compelled to create a resource that could instead supplement them. The *What Could Have Been?* survey aims to expound on the labor represented in the projects disrupted by the recent federal actions. Using the NEH cancelled project described previously as an example, while $181,000 has been withheld, the true cost in terms of expended time and labor is much more. The hours spent planning and writing the proposal, the time reviewers spent appraising the project's potential for success, and the amount of time that project partners and workers contributed for two years has a value as well.

The *What Could Have Been?* project posits that grant writing is an example of the invisible labor that GLAM workers often undertake. Arlene Kaplan Daniels defined invisible labor as the devalued activities characterized as "nurturing, comforting, encouraging, or facilitating" that women provided both in the home and in the workplace (1987). This concept has evolved to be associated with service-oriented professions with majority female workers, such as librarianship. As described by Fobazi Ettarh, it is often expected that services must be provided and public needs met "through the labor of librarians who only reap the immaterial benefits of having 'done good work'" (2018). Faced with ever-decreasing institutional budgets, GLAM workers are tasked with obtaining external funds, which is often an unpaid added responsibility. The *What Could Have Been?* survey attempts to provide an opportunity for impacted GLAM workers to quantify the time invested in their projects in terms of both hours and dollars.

In 2021, a team of Syracuse University School of Information Studies researchers launched the "True Value Calculator," an interactive website based on their August 2020 survey (Syracuse University 2025). The site is meant to "surface the previously invisible yet important work of librarians by quantifying the cost of expert labor and including it in these value calculations in a highly visible way." The calculator quantifies the invisible labor of library workers for such services as using a meeting room, reading a magazine, or downloading an audiobook. The "True Value" survey did not explicitly include a question about the number of hours library workers spent writing proposals or administering grant projects. The two broader categories that these activities may have fallen under were advancement, which included "fundraising," or professional development, which included "research" (Clarke et al. 2022). By asking respondents how many hours they spent on disrupted grant projects, including their planning, researching, and writing, the *What Might Have Been?* survey presents an opportunity to add to the conversation of librarian's invisible labor.

In her 2016 article "Implications of Archival Labor," Stacie Williams lists several instances of archival work of which users may be unaware of the time and financial resources invested, such as the processing of collections or digitizing of material. They most likely are also unaware of the invisible labor of drafting proposals that make these activities possible. She challenges archives workers to make visible the labor of all who contribute to projects. Williams also challenges archives workers to ". . . build more equitable salaries into our grant proposals that bridge gender, racial and living wage gaps" (2016). The archivist-grant writer is at once the laborer whose efforts are vulnerable to erasure and someone with the ability to prevent additional labor precarity in the profession.

The design of the *What Could Have Been?* survey was inspired by the "SAA19 Archivist Salary Transparency Spreadsheet," which was developed during the 2019 Society of American Archivists Conference held in Austin, Texas (2021). Like the "Salary Transparency" survey, *What Could Have Been?* respondents are invited to anonymously submit information via a Google form (https://bit.ly/wchb_survey) that will then populate a publicly shared Google sheet.

GLAM Labor, Equity, and the Cost of Disruption

This survey of GLAM workers is essential for gaining a truer and clearer picture of the current conditions shaping labor and equity in these fields. GLAM institutions often speak publicly about their commitments to diversity, inclusion, and community service. Thomas F.R. Clareson notes that federal grants, provided through institutions like IMLS, form a crucial safety net for these very same cultural organizations, sheltering them during times of "social and economic upheaval" (2021). Those projections, however, considered relatively ordinary cycles of disruption and not a wholesale dismantling of federal support.

Even in the best of times, research has shown how tenuous GLAM labor and DEI commitments can be. The *Collective Responsibility Project* found that grant-funded projects can "create and reproduce" the issue of precarity, particularly for workers in marginalized communities (Rodriguez et al. 2019). A recent *American Archivist* article entitled "The Career Does Not Love You Back" summarized the results of the 2021 New England Archivists Contingent Employment Survey. Although many respondents identified some benefits of temporary, project-based archival employment such as gaining practical experience and networking opportunities, sobering statistics were also reported. Many contingent archival colleagues divulged having experienced financial and professional instability, feeling less valued at work, and 35 percent of respondents had been contingently employed for over five years (Bredbenner et al. 2024). Understanding how these pressures are experienced by the workers themselves is important. Using this survey to collect insights from workers provides meaningful data that can inform more highlighted labor practices and support DEI frameworks that are grounded in actualities and realities rather than institutional expression.

Call to Action

The *What Could Have Been?* survey (**https://bit.ly/wchb_survey**) is open-ended, and the resulting data is meant to document in real time the impact that the federal actions have had on GLAM projects. It is an avenue for commiseration and combines aspects of information-gathering and storytelling. The created dataset will be freely available for use and interpretation. This survey attempts to account for the planning, collaboration, and intellectual labor involved in the disrupted projects, with the goal of lifting up the voices of those whose work sits unfinished. We believe that documenting this lost labor and lost potential is itself an act of resistance.

Appendix

Respondents are invited to answer the following questions:

Q1. Within the broader GLAM (Galleries/Libraries/Archives/Museums) community, how would you identify your institution?

- Gallery
- Library
- Archives
- Museum
- Other:

Q2. What types of institutions collaborated on this grant? Choose all that apply.

- Academic Institution (e.g., public, private, or for-profit college or university)
- Community Archive
- For-profit Organization (e.g., corporate or business, excluding academic institutions)
- Government Agency (e.g., local, state, federal, or Tribal organization)
- Nonprofit Organization (e.g., 501[c][3] or other nonprofit/not-for profit tax designation, excluding academic institutions)
- Religious
- Self-employed
- Don't know/Unsure
- Other:

Q3. My role in the grant is/was:

- Applicant/Principal Investigator
- Contributor
- Reviewer
- Contractor
- Other:

Q4. To correlate this data with local voting information, can you provide the congressional district where your institution and/or main body of constituents are located?

Q5. Which federal agency or department(s) have had funding cuts that impacted your project?

- Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
- Economic Development Administration (EDA)
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)
- National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)
- National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)
- National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)
- National Park Service Historic Preservation Fund (HPF)
- Small Business Administration (SBA)
- US Department of Agriculture (USDA)
- US Department of Commerce
- US Department of Education
- US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- US Department of the Interior
- US Department of Transportation
- Other:

Q6. What stage of the process was interrupted? Choose all that apply.

Stages are listed in approximate order of project planning.

- Considering an application
- Building connections/relationships
- Planning
- Drafting an application
- Submitted a preliminary application
- Passed preliminary review
- Revising application
- Submitted an application
- Awarded, project not started
- Awarded, project started
- Awarded, project completed
- Other:

Q7. What was the full dollar amount of the grant that was lost? (e.g., 18520 for $18,520)

Q8. Approximately how much time did you or your team spend on this effort? (e.g., research, writing, etc.)

Q9. Please quantify an approximate dollar amount for that labor. (e.g., 18520 for $18,520)

Q10. What outcomes or deliverables were not realized as a result of federal cuts?

Q11. Approximately how many hours have you spent either modifying your project due to the federal actions or bringing your project to a close?

Q12. Have you been able to secure funds from another source to complete your project?

- Yes
- No
- Other – My federal grant/project has been reinstated.

Q13. As a result of your experience, do you plan to pursue federal funding for future projects?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Q14. Are there any more details that you would like to tell us about what work was disrupted or how it was disrupted?

Q15. Do you consent to this information being shared publicly without any identifying information via Google Sheet?

- Yes, you can share my submission within the field.
- No, please do not share any part of my submission. I only want to inform the cohort.

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We Will Not Be Erased: A Militant Manifesto for Libraries

NICOLE A. COOKE, PHD

ABSTRACT

This essay expands on the Jean E. Coleman Library Outreach Lecture, delivered by the author at the 2025 American Library Association (ALA) Conference. It is a declaration of survival, resistance, and liberation for library and information science professionals. Born of historical and ongoing assaults on archives, knowledge, and marginalized communities, this manifesto argues that neutrality is complicity, survival is sacred, abolition is necessary, imagination is a weapon, information is power, care is not optional, strategy is essential, and erasure is intolerable. Drawing on the works of Octavia Butler, Robin D. G. Kelley, Ruha Benjamin, adrienne maree brown, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Ella Baker, this essay situates the manifesto within a broader lineage of Black, queer, feminist, and abolitionist traditions. It outlines the implications for library and information science (LIS), offering pathways for librarians, archivists, educators, and cultural workers to resist erasure and reclaim their role as agents of liberation.

Introduction: Born of Fire

This manifesto—our manifesto—is born of fire. Not metaphorical fire, but literal fire: the Tulsa Race Massacre that destroyed Black-owned archives and libraries in 1921; the flames of the Stonewall Inn that ignited the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement; the burning of libraries in Iraq and Afghanistan during war; the books set aflame in effigy to enforce censorship and exclusion.

It is also born of subtler violences: a child denied access to a book deemed "inappropriate"; a library worker admonished to remain "neutral"; a patron insisting that equity is "political"; a colleague silenced by casual racism. These moments accumulate, creating exhaustion—but also resolve.

Against all odds, we are still here. We are organizing. We are dreaming. We are planting seeds with every drag story hour, every zine workshop, every critical information literacy session, every refusal to comply with surveillance requests.

This essay expands the militant manifesto, developing its eight principles into a radical framework for LIS practice. Each principle is examined through scholarly analysis, connected to liberationist traditions, and grounded in real-world examples.

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Table 1: Cooke's Radical Lenses Framework for LIS

Butler (Survival)	Kelley (Imagination)	Benjamin (Abolition Tech)	brown (Emergent Strategy)	hooks (Love Praxis)	Lorde (Marginal Power)	Baker (Democratic Organizing)	LIS Application
Adaptability & change	Imagination as liberation	Reimagining systems	Change is constant; iterative	Love as praxis	Change through survival	Bottom-up transformation	Ethically adapt with justice in mind
Building community	Collective struggle	Relational justice	Move at speed of trust	Care-centered solidarity	Interdependency from margins	Grassroots people-led power	Co-create trust-based spaces
Self-sufficiency	Autonomous structures	Tech sovereignty	Small is all	Truth-telling autonomy	Self-definition as resistance	Collective local leadership	Use open tools; resist corporate dependency
Stealth & caution	Strategic resistance	Surveillance resistance	Critical connections	Loving resistance	Anger as clarity	Quiet organizing from within	Resist surveillance & protect privacy
Education & knowledge	Critical consciousness	Power in knowledge	Intentional learning	Transgressive pedagogy	Voice as liberation	Grounded liberatory learning	Teach community-rooted radical literacy
Emotional resilience	Radical hope	Care as praxis	Healing-centered design	Healing as labor	Emotional survival	Community care as infrastructure	Trauma-informed programming
Resourcefulness	Grounded practice	Values-based innovation	Move through uncertainty	Love transforms reality	Tools from the margins	Mutual aid & shared resistance	Turn scarcity into strategic resilience
Spreading vision	Freedom dreams	Abolitionist futures	Fractal change; future now	Visionary love	Erotic as world-making power	Deep democratic participation	Inspire liberatory programming & archives

1. Neutrality Is Complicity

The idea that libraries can remain neutral in a world structured by inequity is a myth that serves those already in power. Neutrality has long been enshrined as a professional standard in LIS, but in practice, neutrality has always been a form of compliance with existing hierarchies. When librarians refuse to take a stand against censorship, systemic racism, or homophobia, they are not remaining neutral; they are tacitly affirming the status quo (Cooke 2016).

Consider the moments when trans youth are denied access to affirming resources, when abolitionist literature is stripped from prison collections, when Indigenous knowledge is omitted from subject headings, or when colleagues and patrons are demeaned because of their religion, orientation, or race. Silence in these situations is not professionalism—it is complicity. As actor and activist Whoopi Goldberg has stated, "Every time you don't say no, it's a soft yes" (2017). In other words, neutrality is not the absence of choice but the active reinforcement of harm.

For LIS, this means dismantling neutrality as a guiding value. Instead, the field must adopt equity, justice, and care as professional commitments. LIS programs must train students to interrogate the politics of classification, metadata, and access, and institutions must revise policies that silence library workers in the name of "objectivity." Neutrality has failed us; only justice will move us forward.

2. Survival Is Sacred

In oppressive systems, survival is not passive—it is an act of resistance. Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* reminds us that "God is change" (1993, 3), but survival amid that change requires resilience, adaptation, and care. Capitalism thrives on exhaustion, white supremacy thrives on silence, and the state thrives on surveillance. Yet every time a librarian protects a patron's privacy, resists disinformation, or creates a safe space for a marginalized reader, survival itself becomes revolutionary.

bell hooks (1994) frames survival as a conscious choice to "choose life" against systems that would prefer our disappearance. For librarians of color, queer workers, disabled staff, and others at the margins, surviving hostile institutions is itself political work. Survival is not just about continuing to exist; it is about preserving knowledge, memory, and community for future generations.

To honor survival in LIS, institutions must recognize survival as professional labor. Trauma-informed workplace policies should become the norm, not the exception. Professional organizations should invest in peer support and affinity groups for marginalized staff, creating networks of care and solidarity. By affirming survival as sacred, we reposition resilience not as individual endurance but as collective resistance.

3. We Are Abolitionists

To be an abolitionist is to reject the idea that harm can be solved by punishment or control. Within libraries, abolition means refusing to replicate carceral logics. It means saying no to surveillance technologies that monitor students' movements or track their online activities (Benjamin 2019). It means rejecting partnerships with police or security forces that criminalize unhoused people and youth of color. It means standing against partnerships with groups like Moms for Liberty, who seek to weaponize libraries against marginalized communities.

Instead, abolitionist librarianship asks us to build systems rooted in healing and care. This might take the form of abolishing library fines (Drabinski 2019), which disproportionately punish low-income patrons, and refusing collaborations with police that criminalize unhoused people (Balestreri 2020). It might involve adopting restorative justice practices to address conflict within library spaces. It certainly requires developing coalitions with abolitionist organizers, mutual aid networks, and grassroots movements.

As Ruha Benjamin (2022) reminds us, abolition is not just about tearing down harmful systems—it is about imagining and building alternatives. For LIS, this means investing in community resources, creating non-carceral safety strategies, and centering the dignity of all patrons. Abolition is not an option; it is a necessity if libraries are to resist becoming agents of state violence.

4. Imagination Is Our Weapon

Imagination is not a luxury in the fight for justice—it is a weapon. Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) reminds us in *Freedom Dreams* that radical imagination is the foundation of liberation. Without imagination, there can be no vision of a future beyond oppression.

Libraries are uniquely positioned to nurture this imagination. A zine-making workshop is not just craft—it is a mode of resistance. A community archive is not just a collection—it is a revolutionary act of memory (Caswell 2014). A queer teen book club is not just programming—it is a spell cast into the future.

Octavia Butler's speculative fiction demonstrates how imagination can serve as rehearsal for liberation, while adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* shows us that small, fractal acts of imagination ripple outward into systemic change. Libraries that embrace imagination as strategy create space for new ways of being, knowing, and relating.

In practice, this might mean incorporating Afrofuturist design into programming, funding community storytelling initiatives, or embedding speculative projects into LIS curricula. By positioning imagination as a professional competency, LIS acknowledges that dreaming is not frivolous but essential to survival.

5. Information Is Power

The cliché that "information is power" takes on new urgency when we recognize how information can be weaponized to uphold systems of oppression. Librarians are educators, culture workers, and digital freedom fighters. Our work dismantles disinformation, teaches critical media literacy, and unearths whitewashed histories that institutions would prefer to forget.

Audre Lorde (1984, 110) warned us that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." For LIS, this means rejecting the shallow approaches to "information literacy" that teach students to evaluate sources without interrogating the power structures behind them. Instead, libraries must teach critical cultural literacy—an approach that situates information within histories of race, politics, design, and emotion (Cooke 2021).

This shift has profound implications. Instead of simply asking students to "fact-check," we can ask them: Whose voices are missing? Whose stories are silenced? Who benefits from this narrative? In doing so, we empower students not just to consume information, but to resist, question, and create.

Information is power, but only when wielded critically, contextually, and collectively.

6. Care Is Not Optional

Care is often dismissed as "soft" or "secondary" labor in LIS, but in reality, care is a disruptive force. It refutes the neoliberal obsession with productivity. adrienne maree brown (2017) calls care infrastructure—a foundation upon which liberation is built.

Within LIS, care is both urgent and strategic. Library workers face burnout, racial battle fatigue, and hostile workplaces. Patrons face surveillance, disinformation, and exclusion. To prioritize care in this context is to resist. Within LIS, care challenges toxic hierarchies, interrupts burnout, and becomes an organizing principle (Accardi 2013).

Embedding care as a core institutional value means redesigning workflows to prevent burnout, developing healing-centered programming for staff and patrons, and rejecting

managerial practices that punish vulnerability. Care also requires recognizing that emotional labor is professional labor—and compensating it accordingly.

Care is not optional because without it, neither library workers nor patrons can thrive. In the fight for liberation, care becomes our armor, our fuel, and our map.

7. We Move with Strategy

Change does not happen by accident. Ella Baker's organizing principles remind us that sustainable transformation requires collective power, bottom-up leadership, and movement at the speed of trust. For libraries, this means adopting strategy as a guiding principle.

Strategic action might involve transforming staff meetings into spaces of organizing and resistance, embedding political education into programming, or reimagining metadata work as truth-telling. It also involves slowing down, resisting the pressure to produce rapid but shallow change. As adrienne maree brown (2017) reminds us, "Small is all." The small, intentional actions we take ripple outward into systemic transformation.

In LIS, this means resisting authoritarian decision-making, centering grassroots staff input, and moving at the speed of trust (brown 2017). It can mean adopting participatory governance structures that redistribute power within institutions. It can mean training library workers in organizing skills, empowering them to resist harmful policies and demand better working conditions. It can mean fostering intergenerational mentorship and solidarity, ensuring that wisdom is passed across cohorts.

Strategy ensures that our resistance is not scattered but cumulative, not reactive but transformative.

8. We Will Not Be Erased

At the heart of this manifesto is a refusal: the refusal to be erased. We will not be erased from collections, from hiring committees, from unions, from conference stages, or from the leadership of our profession. Our labor, our histories, and our dreams belong to the future of LIS.

This refusal is rooted in the survival of those who were never meant to endure. As Audre Lorde (1997, 31) insisted, "We were never meant to survive." Yet we have, and we will continue to. The erasure of marginalized communities—whether through book bans, silenced voices, or institutional exclusion—is not inevitable. It is a battle we are prepared to fight.

For LIS, refusing erasure means protecting collections under attack, ensuring that queer, Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and other marginalized voices remain accessible. It means demanding representation at every level of leadership. It means publicly resisting censorship and refusing to comply with systems that would diminish us.

Our presence is resistance. Our work is testimony. Our future is inevitable. We will not be erased.

Case Studies of Resistance

The principles of this manifesto are not theoretical—they are already being enacted across LIS and adjacent spaces.

The Free Black Women's Library in Brooklyn, for example, creates a mobile library dedicated to the works of Black women authors, turning literature into community survival. Abolitionist library workers across the United States resist prison censorship, ensuring that incarcerated people have access to abolitionist literature. Indigenous librarianship challenges the colonial foundations of archives, restoring sovereignty over knowledge and cultural memory. Communities organizing around drag story hours have resisted far-right attacks, reframing children's programming as a site of radical affirmation.

Each of these examples demonstrates how the manifesto's principles are already alive in practice. They serve as evidence that militant librarianship is not only possible but already thriving.

Conclusion: Toward a Militant LIS

This manifesto is not abstract. It is practical, urgent, and necessary. Libraries are frontline spaces in the struggle against fascism, white supremacy, and censorship. The eight principles articulated here—neutrality is complicity, survival is sacred, we are abolitionists, imagination is our weapon, information is power, care is not optional, we move with strategy, and we will not be erased—together form a militant framework for LIS.

Our stance must be refusal. A refusal to teach or perpetuate neutrality. A refusal to replicate harm. A refusal to let students believe that knowledge is objective or apolitical. But it is also an invitation: to imagine otherwise, to dream wildly, and to learn together in service of a freer world.

The work ahead is not easy. It requires courage, vision, and solidarity. But librarians, archivists, and cultural workers have long been keepers of memory and dreamers of new worlds. Our profession is not neutral; it is a site of struggle. And in this struggle, we declare with force and with love: We will not be erased.

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