

Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory, edited by Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. López-McKnight

Desmond Wong

Volume 8, 2022

Special Focus on Labour in Canadian Academic Libraries

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088174ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjalrcbu.v8.37830>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians / Association
canadienne des Bibliothécaires en Enseignement Supérieur

ISSN

2369-937X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Wong, D. (2022). Review of [Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory, edited by Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. López-McKnight]. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship / Revue canadienne de bibliothéconomie universitaire*, 8, 1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/cjalrcbu.v8.37830>

© Desmond Wong, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>



Book Review: *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory*

Leung, Sofia Y., and Jorge R. López-McKnight, eds. *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory*. The MIT Press, 2021, 348 pp, \$46.53.

Desmond Wong

University of Toronto

Keywords: *archival studies · critical race theory*

Librarianship finds itself in an important moment of reckoning with racism and racialized users and staff. *Knowledge Justice* offers a path forward; a bold vision for the emancipatory and liberatory possibilities for the library as an institution. In its three sections comprised of thirteen chapters, this collection addresses the urgent need for Critical Race Theory (CRT) to address the pressing inequities maintained and enforced by librarianship. Starting with a helpful genealogy of Critical Race Theory as a field, this book is written with an ethic of care that imagines a future for racialized library practitioners while refusing white supremacy. As the editors state: “[t]his book testifies to the fact that we do not need, seek, or desire white validation. We are the scholars of our own liberation” (26).

Knowledge Justice is especially prescient for academic library staff, whose work maintains and upholds white supremacy and gatekeeps knowledge production. This book seeks to identify, address, and dismantle the epistemological and infrastructural barriers created by library practices for a more just model of knowledge care and dissemination. The authors assess current practices, discuss lived impact, and reach into library history for examples of justice-oriented library praxis. Underpinning all this work is, of course, Critical Race Theory. In the Introduction, the editors lay out critical concepts that present sites of critique, such as intersectionality, whiteness as property, critique of dominant ideologies, focus on historical contexts, counterstorytelling and voice, and interest convergence (14-15). These critiques form the basis for which CRT is used to critique dominant structures and narratives within librarianship. All the authors of the chapters are racialized, and their writing in

Wong, Desmond. 2022. Review of *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory*, edited by Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. López-McKnight. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 8: 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjalrcbu.v8.37830> © Desmond Wong, CC BY-NC 4.0.

this book offers a rare space within librarianship, one of a truly racialized critique of library hegemony. This book reflects the fact that the needs and futurities of racialized library workers are crucial to the success of any “diversifying” initiatives and presents it as axiomatic. So often, “diverse” library work is divorced from the realities of racialized staff, for whom there are material consequences for the failures of librarianship to reckon with white supremacy and violence. This volume is a reminder that any precarity to racialized library staff is an undermining of the success of library work as a whole.

The book is split into three parts, with each part pursuing a different space for critique and introduced by a prominent CRT scholar or practitioner. The first section is the aptly titled *Destroy White Supremacy*. This section offers an important critique of the codification of whiteness into librarianship and how these values are a continuing site of oppression that serve to maintain white supremacy and privilege within the library profession. From a debate on neutrality in the first chapter to its introduction of the concept of epistemic supremacy¹ in the second, then through to how this labour is wrought onto racialized library staff in the third chapter, this section is an important call to the kinds of labour needed to identify and disrupt white supremacy. The tenets of CRT counter the default placement of whiteness within society, and librarianship must be critiqued as part of that system. The work of recognizing the roots of white supremacy in vocational awe, the positioning of Euro-Western epistemology as ascendant and the work to dismantle this system often falls to the very people who are most vulnerable and harmed within this profession. This is especially prescient in the third chapter, as the authors interrogate the asymmetrical relationships of power and labour that manifest in DEI committees. The lived labour of BIPOC workers are simultaneously an additional source of labour and an unrecognized form of expertise. Yet, this section ends each chapter with what can only be described as a hopeful note. Each chapter enlivens the emancipatory potential of librarians and in turn library work. This is not done, however, through a rescuing of a library future that holds its white supremacist views and practices, but instead calls on all library workers to participate in disruption and a massive paradigmatic shift. To illuminate that path, the fourth chapter represents the future of CRT in librarianship, with an application of library work that supports Zuni Pueblo resurgence, Language and Knowledge. Using transformed library practices as anti-colonial praxis, the authors present Tribal Critical Race Theory to foreground Indigenous ways of Knowledge gathering, care and dissemination. This chapter provides concrete examples of epistemic labour that supports self-determination and

1. The authors define epistemic supremacy as “societal systems, infrastructures, and knowledge pathways that facilitate and uphold the conditions for tyranny and fascism by destroying any system of knowledge (epistemicide) not controlled by the ruling class as a means of facilitating racial monopoly capitalism” (75).

supports the resurgence of Zuni Pueblo epistemology. In doing so, the authors provide an important glimpse at the liberatory present of librarianship engaged with CRT.

The second section, *Illuminate Erasure*, challenges library workers to examine library practices and revisits histories of library resistance. It calls on librarians to re-story histories and examples that have been wilfully forgotten or unreviewed, bookended by contemporary re-storying work. The chapters call on all library workers to challenge the narratives that have been given to us, such as scarcity and competition, and instead provides us with examples of transformative justice work innovated by Black librarians throughout the history of American librarianship. In the fifth chapter, Natarajan encourages librarians to challenge the competitive nature that capitalism brings through enforced scarcity and instead proposes community building as antithetical to epistemic supremacy and uses counterstorytelling as a method of resistance to dominant library practices. Examples of that abundance is brought to readers through the stories of Black librarianship. These librarians include Ann Allen-Shockley, who innovated practices in Black Special Collections in order to counter racist narratives of Black ephemerality, and in chapter seven the contributions of important librarians such as Augusta Braxton Baker, Pura T. Belpré and Effie Lee Morris. Taken together these chapters present the possibilities of a transformative, justice-centred, library practice, especially in their formation of Black identity and significant contribution to Black intellectual tradition. To finish the section, chapter eight brings us a contemporary interrogation of the normative racism in academic knowledge production, challenging its inherently violent structures with library interventions, especially in the realm of scholarly communications.

Finally, the third section, *Radical Collective Imaginations Toward Liberation*, invites us to dream revolutionary futures. Centering care, community, and love as liberatory practices within the profession, the authors challenge library practices and move towards healing practices instead. With its focus on current practices and the movement necessary for the transformative, emancipatory futures active in the first two sections, this section can be read as a call to action for librarians to critically counter every aspect of their work. It begins by challenging librarianship to decentre white supremacy in library praxis in chapter nine and instead move towards new models of practice, an example of which is then offered in chapter ten in a pedagogical practice predicated on relationality and community, anchored in Latinx Critical Theory (LatCrit). LatCrit offers fertile space for the same practices of abundance called for in the previous section, but in a culturally responsive way in its introduction of the concepts of cultural wealth and validation theory to librarianship. The section is also a reminder that anything short of true engagement with this work, and a deep

understanding of the consequences of violence on library staff and users represents a continuous major failing of librarianship. In chapter 11, Cong-Huyen and Patel remind us that much of the work of diversifying the library profession and practices is contingent on precarious, racialized labour. In its abstract conceptualization, the labour of change and decentering whiteness is so often the responsibility of those who are most harmed and most vulnerable to the reactionary impulses to maintain systemic injustice. This cannot be the mechanism of change, the system of precarious labour in librarianship is unsustainable and brings true harm to the workers who work within it. The section then shows a model of true engagement, in the representation of Critical Race Praxis in archives, through Chapter 12. The last chapter takes us out of the mode of academic writing and into a fictional story, and reads as an account of counterstorytelling and many of the concepts interwoven in the previous chapters. This format engages readers in a fictional world but also in the very real ways that Black communities gather, disseminate, and organize.

This book should be received as a gift. *Knowledge Justice* is not only a labour of love from its editors and contributors, it is also a revelation and an illuminated path towards library futures. While this volume may be difficult and challenging, especially for readers who are engaging in these conversations so deeply for the first time, it is timely and necessary. Library staff have a great deal of accountability that must be addressed and *Knowledge Justice* offers the transformative critiques and practices that will begin those conversations.