

# Interrupting the Criminalization of Information in the Academic Library Classroom

Teresa Helena Moreno 

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## Article abstract

Libraries have long been involved in conversations around book banning and censorship. The American Library Association noted that librarians and information workers in 2022 witnessed the most documented attempts at banning books ever recorded. This is in lockstep with contemporary examples of legislative efforts to censor, ban, and by extension criminalize information. The criminalization of information is one that has a direct impact on library users as well as academic freedom. In an effort to best support scholars at all levels in the University, academic teaching librarians will need to develop strategies to approach the information classroom. Understanding that book bans and censorship are a form of criminalization allows us to be in conversation with scholarship that focus on how to combat criminalization such as abolitionist pedagogy. This article introduces core concepts of abolitionist pedagogy as a means to create new educational justice pathways and to interrupt information criminalization.

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# Interrupting the Criminalization of Information in the Academic Library Classroom

**Teresa Helena Moreno**

*University of Illinois Chicago*

## ABSTRACT

*Libraries have long been involved in conversations around book banning and censorship. The American Library Association noted that librarians and information workers in 2022 witnessed the most documented attempts at banning books ever recorded. This is in lockstep with contemporary examples of legislative efforts to censor, ban, and by extension criminalize information. The criminalization of information is one that has a direct impact on library users as well as academic freedom. In an effort to best support scholars at all levels in the University, academic teaching librarians will need to develop strategies to approach the information classroom. Understanding that book bans and censorship are a form of criminalization allows us to be in conversation with scholarship that focus on how to combat criminalization such as abolitionist pedagogy. This article introduces core concepts of abolitionist pedagogy as a means to create new educational justice pathways and to interrupt information criminalization.*

**Keywords:** *abolition pedagogy · criminalization of information · critical information literacy · library pedagogy*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Les bibliothèques sont depuis longtemps impliquées dans les discussions sur l'interdiction et la censure des livres. Selon l'American Library Association, en 2022, les bibliothécaires et les travailleurs de l'information ont été témoins d'un nombre record de tentatives d'interdire des livres. Ces tentatives vont de pair avec des exemples courants d'efforts législatifs visant à censurer, à interdire et, par extension, à criminaliser l'information. La criminalisation de l'information a un impact direct sur les utilisateurs des bibliothèques et sur la liberté académique. Afin de soutenir au mieux les chercheurs universitaires de tous niveaux, les bibliothécaires universitaires devront développer des stratégies pour aborder cette situation en classe. Comprendre que les interdictions de livres et la censure sont une forme de criminalisation nous permet de nous engager avec la recherche portant sur les moyens de combattre cette criminalisation, comme par exemple la pédagogie abolitionniste. Cet article présente les concepts fondamentaux de la pédagogie*

*abolitionniste en tant qu'outil pour créer de nouvelles voies de justice éducative et interrompre la criminalisation de l'information.*

**Mots-clés :** *criminalisation de l'information · littérature informationnelle critique · pédagogie abolitionniste · pédagogie en bibliothèques*

As academic librarians who serve as both scholars and practitioners in the field of library and information sciences, we are no strangers to information censorship. The spectacle of book burnings in Nazi Germany, for example, remains a powerful image of book bans and censorship and serves as a hallmark of the relationship between information and political agendas such as fascism. It serves as a tangible image of the act of obscuring, destroying, and falsifying the historical record. It illustrates how removal of information has enabled effective, though not comprehensive, or final, use of epistemicide measures, to maintain power for the dominant group. Book banning and censorship efforts are often understood as mechanisms to control narratives or to contribute to efforts of erasure (Jaeger, Kettlich, and Taylor 2023; *Holocaust Encyclopedia* n.d.). But what about a necessary component of book bans and censorship—the criminalization of information? Scholars in the field have begun to interrogate how our profession is criminalized (Jaeger et al. n.d.) but not necessarily our roles in the prevention of criminalizing information seekers. How do book bans gain control through outlawing and ultimately criminalizing specific types and forms of information? How does this change our relationship to understanding how book bans are utilized by the state not only to aid in epistemicide but also to criminalize the authors, educators, and information and library workers associated with the areas under the umbrella of a ban? How do we move forward knowing that book bans disproportionately impact stories of and authors from minoritized populations (Jaeger, Kettlich, and Taylor 2023; American Library Association 2023)?

Fighting book bans and censorship and upholding the freedom of information are fundamental to many librarians' librarianship practices (American Library Association 2017; Savage 2023). Some librarians rely on critical librarianship and critical information literacy to encourage deeper analysis among students, patrons, and colleagues about the motivations and effects of book bans. Others focus their efforts on censorship and freedom of speech, steered in their belief that all censorship is damaging for all people on an individual and societal level, especially censorship of work by and about Black and Indigenous people of colour (BIPOC) and other minoritized people with nondominant identities (e.g., on the basis of gender, ability, religion, housing status, and citizenship status). And other librarians work to activate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in their institutions in hopes to make

libraries more equitable spaces. These overlapping subsets of library practices are interlinked in their shared concerns of book bans and censorship.

Through acknowledging book bans as being both about the removal of information and the act of criminalizing information to ensure its erasure, we begin to see the relationship libraries and education have to the criminalization of information and the role we can have in identifying this as a carceral location within libraries. Librarianship is also challenged by acknowledging that we have the means to aid in the interruption of the criminalization of information.

In order to effectively and comprehensively grapple with this challenge, we must first determine how we understand the phenomenon of information criminalization and how librarianship challenges and aids in the process. To engage in the effort of divesting from criminalization of information, this paper proposes an abolitionist lens as a mechanism to engage in disrupting the patterns of the criminalization of information. A core concept in the work of theorist Michel Foucault (1995), panopticism is a way to describe societal policing that is often employed in ways that are unnoticed. In his work Foucault identifies hospitals and educational settings as locations of this phenomenon. Understanding that we can and do replicate carceral systems in society is paramount to understanding an abolitionist lens. Abolitionists articulate the replication of these systems as an implementation of carceral logic (Kaba 2021). An abolitionist lens provides the framework to understand how criminalization, imprisonment, and policing exist beyond literal walls and official figureheads. It allows us to extend outward and aids in the ability to identify the school-to-prison nexus, in which some scholars argue that physical buildings, uniforms, and behavioral expectations in school systems are akin to already being in prisons (Stovall 2018). It is also the same lens that helps us understand that possessing banned information can result in a felony conviction (Natanson 2023). It notes the reality that the information that is most likely to be criminalized is the knowledge, culture, and information of BIPOC and other minoritized populations. It illustrates how we construct criminals or criminal behavior in society and how we can engage in policing and invoking prison and police structures without necessarily using formal police officers or jails. In short, the purpose of carcerality—formal or not—is to ensure the maintenance and growth of the power of dominant culture, narratives, and systems over the narratives of the most likely to be criminalized.

Acknowledging the deep ways carcerality impacts practices of librarianship uncovers how teaching in the academic library is an area of growth and opportunity (as well as a mechanism for accountability) to address criminalization efforts. Examining book bans and censorship through an abolitionist lens, this paper will situate how criminality and policing occurs within information sharing practices

in systems we can readily acknowledge are carceral (such as police, jail, and legal systems) and those we may not clearly see as carceral in nature (such as carceral care and epistemicide). It will draw connections of abolitionist principles and practices that can be applied to understanding how we can identify criminalization efforts and the ways they have a direct impact on racialized and minoritized communities. The core tenets of abolitionist pedagogy and abolitionist information pedagogy will be mapped onto how we teach in direct relationship to criminalization efforts and how we work with our students who have experienced book bans to avoid further criminalizing them in our classrooms. Lastly, we discuss the need for solidarity and coalition building to aid in decriminalizing efforts.

## **The Criminalization of Information Today**

Since the implementation of Florida's Individual Freedom Act on July 1, 2022, educators and librarians in the United States have grappled with a new wave of censorship, book banning, and curricular revisions. Part of a nationalized strategy to buttress dominant white supremacist culture and suppress the impact of minoritized writers and scholars, the Florida law in 2022 coincides with a record 1,269 attempts (almost double the number of documented demands in 2021) to ban or censor a record 2,571 unique books and resources (a 38 percent increase from 2021) according to the American Library Association which represents the field of librarianship throughout Canada and the United States (American Library Association 2023).

Informally dubbed the Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (WOKE) Act, the law itself requires instruction and instructional materials to align with a set of "individual freedom" guidelines, most provocatively that "[a] person should not be instructed that he or she must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress for actions, in which he or she played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex" (Education and Employment Committee and Rep. Avila 2022). It has had devastating consequences for K–12 education, with signs pointing to further impact on 12–20 education in Florida (Anderson 2023; "Ron DeSantis Is Erasing Black History From Florida Schools | Teen Vogue" n.d.). K–12 librarians and educators face felony charges if they are found to distribute materials to minors that violate the law (Natanson 2023). News headlines covering this tension have suggested that grade school educators and staff are being told by administrators to simply hide all their books because they were unaware which books were in violation of the new policies (Natanson 2023). Scholars and educators in higher education who focus on areas under attack by the law find their livelihoods challenged (Golden 2023).

The law notably led to the manipulation of the College Board's proposed Advanced Placement (AP) African American Studies course. While largely developed and controlled within the United States, the College Board's AP program reaches more than 100 countries, including Canada where more than 700 secondary schools are enrolled (College Board n.d.). Florida Commissioner of Education Manny Diaz aired grievances with several topics listed in the proposed course, specifically directing ire toward several Black scholars including Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Roderick A. Ferguson, Leslie Kay Jones, bell hooks, and Robin D.G. Kelley (Manny Diaz Jr. [@SenMannyDiazJr] 2023). As a direct result of this state law, the College Board agreed to dilute its proposed curriculum, which is poised to affect the implementation of the course on an international level. On April 24, 2023, the College Board announced that it would change the curriculum for AP African American Studies courses to be in step with the recommendations of the Stop WOKE Act, openly acknowledging that it is “watering down” the content to be in lockstep with more conservative states in the US (Goldstein and Saul 2023). Most of the coverage of this topic has been under the headlines that African American and Black history classes are being erased from curricula (“DeSantis Says Florida Requires African American History, but Critics Argue It Isn’t Being Taught | CNN Politics” n.d.; “DeSantis Defends Blocking African American Studies Course in Florida Schools” 2023; Golden 2023; “Ron DeSantis Is Erasing Black History From Florida Schools | Teen Vogue” n.d.). While articulating this as Black history erasure is not incorrect, it is important to understand that the erasure of Black history is not the only thing that should concern academic teaching librarians, but also the ways in which information is being criminalized—that is to say, the ways this law is criminalizing very specific kinds of information, intellectual thought, and life.

In many ways, this law and this moment are nothing new as librarians and information workers have seen the criminalization of information happen throughout world history. Twentieth-century European fascism, anti-socialist McCarthyism, and the Tea Party movement of the late 2000s all involved the criminalization of anti-hegemonic content and the people who study, distribute, and teach it (Hofstadter 1963; Shearer 2022; Connors and Trites 2022). Librarians and library workers were aware of many of these as can be seen in historical records that these issues were discussed through organizations such as the American Library Association (American Library Association 1970).

In addition, there are historical and contemporary examples of the ways the state criminalizes activities to establish power over specific minoritized populations. The criminalization of languages, knowledge, and cultural traditions has long been a means of the state to attempt to eradicate or subjugate minoritized populations,



prime examples of which are the residential schools of Canada and the United States in which Indigenous children were kidnapped from their families to attend residential schools, a phenomenon people still contend with today (Newland 2022). In the United States, it was not until 1990 that Indigenous people were permitted to speak Indigenous languages without criminalization, with the state's changed outlook on the preservation of language through public law 101-477 (101st Congress 1990). Similarly in Canada, it was not until the Indigenous Languages Act of 2019 that the state acknowledged its role in the killing of language traditions, supported by older legislation to attempt to stop Indigenous knowledge traditions through criminalizing language traditions (Legislative Services Branch 2019). Understanding how criminalizing information, knowledge, and cultural traditions is used to kill these branches of knowledge, information, and by extension their people is key to understanding what is happening in the current moment. It is also important to draw attention to the forms of information practices that are outside of the scope of tangible text that are common in non-western forms of information practices. The inability to engage in cultural ceremonies, oral storytelling, and passing down of language are all the result of information criminalization.

But how might we as librarians interpret the impact of this law developed in Florida in the context of the contemporary moment with an acute understanding of how libraries have worked to both support intellectual freedom while also aiding in censorship and assimilation measures? Certainly, an important facet of the fallout from this legislation is the suppression of Black history, particularly in the context of enslavement and colonialism. But more than just denying the history of oppression and power, the implementation of the law serves to deny the very existence of Black intellectual thought, Black cultural production, and the Black experience. The insidious structure of the Stop WOKE Act is such that it is easy to focus on the erasure of Black history without acknowledging its intrinsic connection to the erasure of Black thought and knowledge traditions, which serve as the fundamental basis of a vast array of scholarship in the academy today (Shearer 2022). In short, through the criminalization of information of not just Black history but Black intellectual thought and life of the mind, the law enforces nothing less than attempts at epistemicide, defined by Beth Patin et al. (2021) as the “killing, silencing, annihilation, or devaluing of a knowledge system” (1307).

History shows us the endurance of these cyclical anti-intellectual movements with educators and librarians caught in the crossfire (Hofstadter 1963). Historically, libraries and library workers have had mixed results with how it is they work within these banning conditions and their role in epistemicide. On one hand, major library organizations in Canada and the US commit to intellectual freedom through

initiatives such as Freedom to Read Week and Banned Book Week respectively. Started in 1982, the creation of Banned Book Week was a response to a surge in attempts to censor and ban books (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom n.d.). Before these awareness campaigns were created in the 1980s, the American Library Association created a subdivision of the organization called the Office for Intellectual Freedom to carry out the core components of the Library Bill of Rights. Adopted in 1939, the Library Bill of Rights is a guideline for how libraries should provide services to their communities, centring access to all types of information and challenging censorship (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom 2008).

On the other hand, libraries have engaged in not only forms of gatekeeping information but also the production of ostensibly good citizens through assimilation tactics to enforce white ideals and norms (Honma 2005). The tension of white assimilation alongside the fight for intellectual freedom is one within which North American libraries consistently find themselves. Key elements in this tension are directly tied to the criminalization of information and epistemicide through outlawing or banning various titles, redirecting patrons to materials that reinforce white citizen ideals and diminishing the works of others through exclusionary collection guides, obscuring the findability of various histories and intellectual traditions, and understanding the need for diversity and inclusion goes beyond identity politics or white-sanctioned material and authors.

When access to specific types of information is highly criminalized, when engaging in the core responsibilities of our profession through teaching and collection development has the ability to be criminalized due to censorship laws, the profession needs to consider engaging in discourse that will help educators and teaching librarians understand how criminalization works, with specific regard to understanding how information is criminalized and how that criminalization, like most criminalization efforts, will mostly impact BIPOC communities and aid in the construction of the prison nation (Alexander 2012; Davis et al. 2022).

### ***Criminalization of Information in the University Library Classroom***

Abolitionist educators and scholars have provided helpful framings to consider when examining the relationships among literacy, teaching, and creating change. David Stovall (2020) articulates the political nature of literacy, writing that “learning to understand your conditions coupled with the ability to articulate your concerns across multiple mediums (literacy) is political because it is imbued in a set of power relationships that have often determined power for some and servitude for others” (3). Dylan Rodríguez (2010) identifies teaching as having the potential to be used to interrupt state violence and everyday forms of suffering. Ruth Wilson Gilmore



(2014) discusses the need to address harm with the understanding that reformist ideologies do not serve us because to address harm requires holistic change. Using these core concepts in application to the political underpinnings of literacy, teaching and change, how does this shift the lens of how academic teaching librarians see their roles in defining and aiding in supporting the literacy of their students?

As academic teaching librarians, many questions and concerns arise. What is our role in response to censorship and government-sanctioned attempts at epistemicide, and how will our teaching shift in the wake of this knowledge? What considerations will we make for how students are entering our classrooms having experienced K–12 education through censorship? Do we know how to develop curricula and information literacy to address those needs? And lastly, what kind of coalition-building and support can we lend our K–12 librarian colleagues, some of whom are already facing choices around the criminalization of how they practise their librarianship?

### **Abolition Theory, Pedagogy, and Praxis: A Way to Understand Criminalizing Information**

In order to find the answers to these questions and identify the breadth of tools available to librarians, we must work as a collective field to combat the criminalization of information by learning how criminalization functions generally and exploring how criminalization affects minoritized communities at disproportional rates (Alexander 2012; Davis et al. 2022). This requires engagement with educators, scholars, and organizers who engage in unpacking how criminalization occurs. The very word *abolition* carries many different connotations; beyond the historical reference to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, for some the term elicits visions of destroying order, inciting chaos, and eschewing accountability, while for others the concept seems overly optimistic, an oversimplified ideal because of the enduring belief that carceral policing structures are fundamentally necessary for the maintenance of a safe society. To combat the apprehension with which many of us approach contemporary abolitionism, scholar Sharon Stein (2021) invites us “to ‘pause’ (Patel 2014) long enough to open ourselves to be surprised and unsettled by what these critiques might teach us” (College Board n.d.). Stein (2021) also discusses the idea of the “field-imaginary” (387); rather than referring to fundamental or canonical knowledge, the field-imaginary refers to a collective unspoken understanding of things, such as assumptions, priorities, and rejections. As with any other field, library practitioners of all kinds from all institutions also fall prey to an unconscious buy-in to the field-imaginary of the library and information sciences. While this offers a continual challenge for us, a key tool available to us is to explore

literature outside of our field. By engaging other disciplines, librarians can begin to identify missed connections, which is possible only if we are able to engage Patel's and Stein's "pause."

### *Introducing Abolition and Abolition Pedagogy: Core Concepts and Practices*

Abolitionism is multi-definitional with many practices. Within the context of this conversation, we can establish abolitionism as a practice that seeks to dismantle systemic forms of violence and systems that are rooted in anti-Blackness while simultaneously dreaming and building toward a future of liberation. Abolitionist practice comes out of Black organizing and intellectual traditions, but like many inclusionary practices, every minoritized person can benefit.

Before librarians address specific applications for abolitionism in the library setting, it is necessary to provide some baseline definitional contours for the concept itself. First and foremost, these theories, methods, and pedagogical efforts are rooted in Black intellectual thought, theory, and organizing efforts. The abolitionist lens centres the goals of freedom of Black people. Abolitionist practices are found in fields such as Black studies but also incorporate "on the ground" methods such as organizing and community building. Important voices in abolitionism include Angela Davis, Robin D.G. Kelley, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Michelle Alexander, Harriet Tubman, and many more (Davis 2003; Kelley 2002; Truth et al. 2020; Wells-Barnett et al. 2020; Douglass and Smith 2003; Alexander 2012). Understanding and acknowledging the roots of abolition is one of the first steps in abolition information praxis. Because of the wide array of definitions, for the purposes of this article, I will use contemporary working definitions of abolition.

Organizer and activist Rachel Herzing and librarian, educator, and organizer Mariame Kaba have defined three core principles to abolitionism as it relates to the abolition of the prison-industrial complex. Though these scholar-activists focus on language specific to the prison-industrial complex, it is possible to apply the ways in which this framework reverberates throughout the institution of libraries. The three core principles are as follows:

1. Prison-industrial complex (PIC) abolition calls for the elimination of policing, imprisonment, and surveillance;
2. PIC abolition rejects the expansion in breadth or scope or legitimization of all aspects of the prison-industrial complex—surveillance, policing, sentencing, and imprisonment of all sorts; and
3. PIC abolition refuses premature death and organized abandonment, the state's modes of reprisal and punishment. (Kaba 2021)

## *Application to Libraries and Information Criminalization*

### *1. Prison-industrial Complex (PIC) Abolition Calls for the Elimination of Policing, Imprisonment, and Surveillance*

Librarians and library workers have long valued privacy and free access to information and have grappled with the ethics of surveillance, including rejecting it (Jaeger et al. 2004). One of the most prominent ways we can think of removing policing and imprisonment is to evaluate the use of police or security officers in our library spaces. Particularly after the 2020 uprisings sparked by the murder of George Floyd, many libraries have begun to examine their relationship to relying on police and security, but abolitionists understand that the lack of police does not inherently mean the removal of policing and imprisoning structures. The concept of carceral care examines the ways in which carceral infrastructure is reinforced through locations of care, i.e., locations that provide types of social services including libraries and educational structures (Nguyen n.d.).

In addition, we bring the police into our space simply by virtue of the types of vendors with whom we work. For example, LexisNexis, a popular legal and journalism database to which many libraries subscribe, has met a growing wave of criticism for providing users' data to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents as part of a government contract to aid in surveillance and crime prediction efforts, violating users' rights to view information privately (Biddle 2021). In March 2023 a coalition of individuals and organizations filed a lawsuit against LexisNexis, claiming that the company aided ICE in more than 1.2 million unlawful warrantless searches for individuals' information based on a database of more than 276 million people living in the US; to give a sense of scale, the 2020 US Census counted just 258.3 million adults aged 18 or older living in the country (Verstegen n.d.). A lead attorney for the plaintiffs said about the case, "We should more broadly look at this through the lens of not just immigration, but also racial justice and surveillance capitalism and topics that are bigger than just the immigrant rights context" (Verstegen n.d.).

### *2. PIC Abolition Rejects the Expansion in Breadth or Scope or Legitimation of All Aspects of the Prison-industrial Complex—Surveillance, Policing, Sentencing, and Imprisonment of All Sorts*

While many librarians uphold information privacy, libraries and their organizing theories and methods have also long been active in the expansion of the prison-industrial complex. One of the most striking examples is the story of J. Edgar Hoover, whose training in the library and information sciences, specifically the field of knowledge organization, gave him the tools he needed to dramatically expand the US surveillance and punishment apparatus during his tenure as director of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). During his tenure Hoover engaged in

direct actions to criminalize information created by racialized and minoritized communities with a focus on the Black community. Through creating “ghost readers” to monitor the literature coming from leftist individuals, he was able to specifically target various creatives, activists, and community organizers and infiltrate a number of social movements (Morales and Williams 2021).

The FBI has had a longstanding relationship with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police since 1919 in which techniques developed in the United States were shared (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2019). Understanding our role in the development of harm in this area allows us to examine how librarians might choose to disengage from criminalization inclusive of how we choose to work with vendors that sell information to government agencies (Lamdan 2019).

### *3. PIC Abolition Refuses Premature Death and Organized Abandonment, the State's Modes of Reprisal and Punishment*

The criminalization of information by the state equates to the criminalization of people who write, read, and engage with it, thus forcing people into the criminal justice system. Libraries and schools are considered a primary location for information, which makes them locations that must contend with the choice to follow mandates that criminalize or punish access to information or to refuse to follow them, thus putting their livelihoods and institutional funding in jeopardy. Reductive conversations of privatization of services for the public good as existing only in the K–12 education or public library arena obscure how academic libraries and universities are also implicated in the process of organized abandonment; however, we can see this mirrored already in university academic structures in which public and state universities require economic investment from the learner. Requiring personal economic investment in university education means that people will inevitably be excluded. For abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore this is emblematic of organized abandonment. She writes, “Prison is not just a response to a ‘free-floating thing called crime’—it’s a response to ‘surplus’ populations. Which is to say that prisons are designed to absorb people: those people who have been abandoned by the state” (quoted in Abraham 2023).

## **Addressing Information Criminalization: Abolition Pedagogy and Its Place in Libraries**

Through an abolitionist lens, we can see illustrations of how information criminalization operates within practices that work to criminalize access as much as the type of information itself. In working to address forms of criminalization in the classroom, abolitionist pedagogy can assist library educators in developing better

practices around information criminalization. Abolitionist scholar Bettina L. Love (2019) describes abolitionist teaching as “the practice of working in solidarity with communities of colour while drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of abolitionists to eradicate injustice in and outside of schools” (5). A fundamental principle of abolitionist pedagogy is that one must embody an active commitment to educational justice, a choice to disrupt criminalization by working toward the achievable goal of creating an equitable, holistic community of learners and teachers modelled after the ways in which Black schools and Black neighbourhoods, towns, and cities have worked together. To that end, Love offers five tenets to which educators must commit in order to bring this vision to fruition. These tenets are outlined below with a description of their application in the library setting.

### ***1. Rejecting the School-To-Prison Pipeline***

A growing body of scholarship establishes the ways in which schools replicate carceral systems and illustrates evidence of the school-to-prison nexus in which educational systems disproportionately criminalize students—BIPOC students in particular—thereby creating a pathway for students to move from school to an explicitly carceral system (Stovall 2018; Meiners 2011). Carcerality extends to sites of carceral care, i.e., work that centres community-oriented caregiving but relies on carceral and by extension punitive frameworks and power structures for the recipient to be granted care (Nguyen n.d.). Recent scholarship has articulated libraries as having the means to be a location of carceral care (Moreno 2022).

This is compounded by the criminalization of information as established through growing censorship and book banning initiatives, as well as the example from Florida that may lay the groundwork for future norms in North America which lead to multiple concurrent challenges for academic libraries. As incoming students are more likely to come from educational experiences in which certain information has been criminalized and rendered invisible or inaccessible to them, students may not know how to find, explore, or grapple with these materials; they may view these materials as stigmatized (to the point that they may view these materials as unlawful, criminalized, and forbidden for fear of legal consequences); or they may not even be aware of their existence. For example, if a student is critically examining pieces of information for revisionist narratives and they challenge their teacher about what is in the textbook, it is possible that the altercation ends with the student being sent to the principal’s office or in severe cases expelled for questioning authority. On the other end, some students may push back on educators who are teaching banned

information because they were taught revisionist history or did not have access to information that showed a variety of narratives.

Abolitionist approaches require us to acknowledge how we can criminalize or engage in punitive interactions with students who are unlearning censored curricula. For example, in Canada a textbook was recalled after a revisionist retelling of the Trail of Tears. Under the subject heading “Moving Out,” the textbook framed the Trail of Tears as follows: “When the European settlers arrived, they needed land to live on. The First Nations peoples agreed to move to different areas to make room for the new settlements” (Kassam 2017). This rearticulation of the forced migration of Indigenous people to reservations across the country—to the point that Indigenous people are described as having given up their land freely or that they are simply migrating for alternative reasons—remove the settler’s role in the event entirely. Our students are not to be blamed for not knowing the truth of this history because the system of criminalizing information actively attempts works to obfuscate these truths.

## ***2. Disavowing Rigid Policies That Serve To Maintain White Supremacy and Militarize Educational Spaces***

The number of rigid policies that have inundated educational spaces are myriad. Using standardized testing reinforces a very rigid set of skills and studies have shown are not accurate measurements of intelligence or educational success (Epstein n.d.). Furthermore, because of standardized testing metrics, teachers are often held accountable through the scores that students receive, which requires teachers to have a very specific curriculum that is centralized on principles of schooling—a mechanism to maintain the societal power landscape, rather than education—the sharing of knowledge (Stovall 2018). Methods developed to replicate schooling efforts rather than educational ones are often utilized to maintain the work of dominant culture and often move to perpetuate this as the singular way of looking at and evaluating educational practices.

One example in academic libraries is the authority of the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (hereinafter referred to as the *Framework*) (ACRL, 2016) as the guiding document providing a shared curriculum for academic librarians’ instruction. Through interrogating the *Framework* as a tool and pedagogical method, scholars have pointed to the its elitism (Bombaro 2016), the ways in which it privileges white, cisgender, Protestant ways of knowing, most recently illustrated through examinations the ways in which the framework relies on habits of white language (HOWL) supremacy (Tobiason 2022), which must lead us to ask *whose* information literacy we are meaning when we say that we are charged with teaching information literacy in the library classroom. If we understand that the *Framework* is



prioritizing particular knowledge bases, we can begin to critically consider how it can be enabled to enact epistemicide or, perhaps, lend itself to a kind of criminalization through articulations of what types of sources are allowed in a research context. Are we being reflective when we evaluate what we are deeming scholarly and unscholarly? Do these biases privilege one type of knowledge tradition? Are we in effect criminalizing information or knowledge traditions when we deem some sources as credible and others as uncredible based on a notion that information can exist without bias—this is to say, that “biased” information is viewed as uncredible? Often the metric of what constitutes a bias can be based upon the normative dominant culture, making anything representing difference in *de facto* opposition.

### ***3. Acknowledging the Colonial Foundations and the Contemporary Hegemony of Countries such as Canada and the US***

The concept of bias and objectivity often plays a central role in scholarly and practical conversations among librarians and information workers, yet an examination of the ways in which the state is engaged in our profession is essential, especially to understand how we are still very much connected to empire (Adler 2017). The US Library of Congress Subject Headings comprise a system of organizing information that is the basis and foundation of how the US government itself organizes information (Chan 1999). The ways we store, collect, house, and describe information are heavily influenced by the US government, and the Library of Congress system is used widely in academic libraries globally. Canada uses a similar system with the Canadian History FC system and schedule introduced in 1972. This system was always intended to work in tandem with the Library of Congress classification system within other fields as well as use the same schedules (National Library of Canada 1994). Understanding the ways our organizing systems function allows us to better comprehend how articulations of particular people or events may have parallels with governmental notions of criminalized forms of information. Teaching students the lens in which their information is being organized and how it impacts their research assists students in navigating questions not only about bias generally but also how to work within the bias.

The Library of Congress articulates its mission as one that “serves Congress with the highest quality of research, analysis, information, and confidential consultation to support the exercise of its legislative representational and oversight duties in its role as a co-equal branch of government” (Library of Congress n.d.). Despite its ubiquity, the classification system was not originally intended to serve any entity other than the US government (Chan 1999). In its 2019–2023 strategic plan, the Library of Congress plainly articulates that its service to Congress is its primary responsibility and mission (Library of Congress n.d.).

A recent example of this is the ongoing battle to change subject headings for undocumented peoples. Established in the 1980s by the Library of Congress, “aliens, illegal” was the subject heading created to describe undocumented people; in 1993, the subject heading was revised to “Illegal aliens.” In the year 2010, a campaign called “Drop the ‘I’ Word” asked media outlets to no longer use the term “illegal” because the use of the word was not only racialized and legally inaccurate but also fundamentally dehumanizing toward undocumented people and by extension specific groups of racialized people (Race Forward n.d.). The “Drop the ‘I’ Word” campaign successfully moved major media outlets such as the Associated Press to change their guidelines to using the term *undocumented*. Despite that campaign, the subject heading remained unchanged until 2014 when students at Dartmouth College organized to submit a proposal to the Library of Congress for a change from “Illegal aliens” to “Undocumented immigrants” (Baron 2019).

Examining what happened during the 2014 request reveals much about the political ways in which the Library of Congress is used. Petitions to change words in the classification system are not a new process, and there are many reasons why changing language is required, particularly as common usage changes with culture over time. Typically, there is little involvement from politicians or the public over changes to the Library of Congress’s subject headings. However, the request to replace the “Illegal aliens” subject heading resulted in Ted Cruz, Republican US Senator from Texas, penning a letter to Carla Hayden, the current Librarian of Congress. In his letter, Cruz articulates his concerns around changing the subject heading and the implications that it has for Congress, namely that removing “Illegal aliens” politicizes the term. He writes, “We strongly urge the Library of Congress not to make politically motivated changes to the neutral indexing language and search functions that are so vital to accessing the information held in the Library and the Library’s reputation as a non-political institution” (Cruz 2021).

In this letter Cruz perpetuates the myth that libraries are inherently neutral spaces even though the Library of Congress is a governmental agency and by extension a political institution. His investment, along with others, in maintaining the language in this way is also a way to control the discourse in Congress. In his letter he speaks about the relationship between language and the Library of Congress’s subject headings. He draws the connection to federal law, noting that using a different term would be out of lockstep with language used at the federal level. His astute connection between these two begins to shed light on why there is such a deep desire to maintain language used in state-based discourse; changing the language of government in one capacity opens the door to change it throughout the whole of government. There have been subsequent attempts to change the wording, ultimately

landing on the term “noncitizens” in 2021 (Peet n.d.). Understanding the link to our governmental agencies and teaching this to our students helps them to witness how the state controls not only the ebb and flow of information to suit governmental needs but also their own attitudes and views on the subject matter.

#### ***4. Accepting Responsibility For Our Participation in Injustice Through Reflexive Practices***

What this tenet asks of us is to remember that, while we can accept that we will make mistakes, we must also take responsibility for our actions with the intention to cause no additional harm. To do this effectively requires active, reflexive engagement on an individual level and with the understanding that it grows upward into the institutional level. Reflexivity is a practice of reflection that is a self-guided critique in which there is an openness to evaluating oneself and one’s practices in order to engage in a meaningful recalibration of approaches (Bleakley 1999). For academic librarians this may look like examining what our role is in education and information and unpacking the earlier mentioned notion of the field-imaginary. As part of the institution, it will be hard for us to see what we have normalized as part of the field.

#### ***5. Emphasizing Love And Black Joy in Resistance***

Black joy as articulated by Bettina Love is multi-faceted and complex.

I am talking about joy that originates in resistance, joy that is discovered in making a way out of no way, joy that is uncovered when you know how to love yourself and others, joy that comes from releasing pain, joy that is generated in music and art that puts words and/or images to your life’s greatest challenges and pleasures, and joy in teaching from a place of resistance, agitation, purpose, justice, love, and mattering. (Love 2019, 18)

Looking at the vastness of this definition through the lens of information, knowledge, and culture, we begin to see how Black joy articulates the knowledge traditions of Black and other racialized and minoritized peoples—the joy of creativity, culture, knowledge, intellectual traditions, and pieces of information and knowledge that survived and that resisted to be snuffed out and remain for those who seek them. In addition to this, locations of critical engagement with information can be seen as locations of resistance and by extension Black joy. Resisting revisionist narratives that work to criminalize types of information as well as resisting locations of epistemicide are ways to embrace Black joy within information practices (Moreno 2023). As librarians and educators, we can foster Black joy in our instruction through celebrating these works and simultaneously being clear about how these knowledge traditions have resisted throughout time. This requires us to be clear about epistemicidal attempts in our education while uplifting brilliance and joy.

## **Abolition Pedagogy in Library Educational Justice**

Love (2019) speaks about educational justice as rooted in community solidarity efforts that essentially create community-centred educational environments on equitable access. Because libraries are part of the educational process (formally and informally), one of the most direct connections is how intellectual freedom and methods of censorship impact how we enact educational justice. While we care about educational justice generally, we have our own particular sliver of it through our profession and how it is we teach; this is to say, libraries must find their fit within the greater fabric of the education framework, and they must be flexible to meet their own needs while helping others with whom they are in solidarity also meet theirs. Educational justice encompasses the breadth and depth of participants in the process, and it is a long list: formal educators, parents and guardians and families, school counsellors, after-school programs, access to professionals who can diagnose learning disabilities, jobs available locally, local government, community organizers, churches, neighbors, nurses, food delivery programs, cooks and sanitation workers and administrators and assistants, internet and technology access, and of course libraries.

Abolitionist library instruction requires libraries and library workers to understand that they are a part of the constellation of educational actors and by extension have specific responsibilities to educational justice in their roles while acknowledging on a professional and personal level in how it is we might criminalize or devalue information (Moreno 2023). Specifically how we devalue information by and/or about minoritized peoples such as BIPOC, queer, disabled, and gender-nonconforming people can have an impact when we make such considerations (e.g., whether we refer to information as rigorous or superfluous, how we frame historical understandings of events, and even how we answer questions at a reference desk about information that might be deemed criminal).

## **Abolition Requires Dreaming and Solidarity: What Can K–20 Library Educators Dream Up?**

Educational justice requires us to be in solidarity with our communities, and while a central component of this must include our students and their greater communities, we must also embrace solidarity with those who share our own struggles as educators, specifically K–12 educators and librarians, public librarians, and other information workers outside the academic world.

Oftentimes there are conversations within our field around the delineations of K-12 school librarians, public librarians, and academic librarians with a focus on the ways in which we perform our work differently. In focusing on this, it is possible to lose sight of our commonalities. Solidarity on this front is particularly crucial for

academic librarians because we share much in common already with K–12 educators and librarians. Take for instance the one-shot model for academic librarians. Scholars have articulated that the one-shot model requires a predetermined structure and a lack of agency in the material covered in the classroom, and the model itself has been used to view academic librarians as less valuable than faculty in other areas of the university. Academic librarians have made a point to rely on an information literacy curriculum to assert our relevance, yet we are also bound by the needs and requirements of instructors of record, which can in the worst cases amount to babysitting an instructor's students (Pho et al. 2022). Many of the items described here match closely with that which K–12 educators have long contended—tensions of autonomy around curricula, testing frequency, and acknowledgement that their expertise can be a guiding force (Lundström 2015; Sparks and Ralph n.d.). Add to this the neoliberal metrics for success often required of academic libraries (e.g., the number of one-shots we teach per semester or determining how we contribute to improving GPAs or graduation rates) and K–12 educators (e.g., testing scores, limited resources, and devalued labor), and the illustration of how academic librarians and K–12 educators and librarians can learn from and collaborate with each other becomes clear. Some may question the idea of academic librarians working in institutions of higher education aligning with K–12 librarians, but the fact of the matter is, despite the academic conversations and depth of topics being different in both institutions, academic librarians and K–12 educators and librarians ultimately are handled administratively in very similar ways and could directly benefit from each other's organizing strategies.

In the university landscape, academic freedom is a location for more solidarity building. While academic libraries continue to struggle with poor funding and regular calls for cuts, academic departments that are constantly on the chopping block such as Black studies, gender studies, Latino studies, etc. are continually working through censorship and epistemicidal practices through the cutting and ultimate removal of educational programs that focus on much of the literature that is banned through various state policies (Rhodes n.d.; Rojas 2007). Collaboration allows insight into how we might support each other as we navigate curricular changes and the criminalization of our individual professions.

As we work to understand the goals of criminalization and its relationship to state control—i.e., the removal of specific kinds of information and the proliferation of information that could be articulated as propaganda—we can acknowledge the ways information criminalization plays a vital role in indoctrination. Abolitionist approaches allow us to name these phenomena, but perhaps even more importantly, abolitionist pedagogy also calls us to dream beyond the current moment toward a

world without criminalization. It would be a future where information by racialized and minoritized people were not criminalized, in which we could draw our students to the widest range of sources imaginable. Maybe it is a world of so many types of libraries, all of which follow various knowledge traditions, because we see each of them just as valid as the next. Dreaming of new ways is ultimately about new growth, and it asks us to shift our thinking that abolition inherently means to destroy acknowledging that it is in fact centred on the hope of building something new. Abolitionist Mariame Kaba (2021) articulates that the desire to change society requires us to transform ourselves, too. What would happen if we dreamt together and challenged ourselves to change ourselves and society? What kind of world of information could we build? Let's find out.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Teresa Helena Moreno is an Assistant Professor and the Librarian for Black Studies and the College of Architecture, Design, and the Arts at the University of Illinois Chicago. Her research and scholarship critically interrogate library practices and the role of libraries as cultural institutions. Through application of methodologies and theories found in feminist studies and critical race and ethnic studies, her research decenters whiteness to offer critical analysis that centers experiences and realities of the global majority.

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