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### Critlib Management: Leading and Inspiring Through a Social Justice Framework

Candise Branum

*Gonzaga University*, [branum@gonzaga.edu](mailto:branum@gonzaga.edu)

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## **Critlib Management: Leading and Inspiring Through a Social Justice Framework**

Critlib, or critical librarianship, is the discussion and application of social justice in the library field. Generally, the application of critlib has been focused on information literacy and pedagogy, as well as cataloging, but one important aspect of the discussion that is often overlooked is that of library management. Just like teaching, many librarians are not trained specifically to be library managers -- being a good manager is something we learn on the job, through lived experience and professional development. Critlib is based in both theory and practice, and we must make a conscious effort to teach ourselves about the ways in which social justice can be applied to library practices. Critlib praxis is something we continuously work on, both within ourselves and within our communities and libraries; library management is just one aspect of our work that can be reevaluated through a feminist lens.

Management, in general, is not glamorous. Critical pedagogy and radical cataloging are exciting to talk about because we choose to be instructional librarians and catalogers, but management is something many of us fall into. While there are definitely librarians who strive for high-level administrative positions, many of us came into this profession passionate about social justice issues, and ended up in leadership positions through the course of our careers. Management has been something learned on the job, over multiple careers, but never something I explicitly sought out or critically evaluated until recently. I've always viewed middle management as being a tool of the establishment, towing the line but not pushing too many boundaries. Even while being a library director myself, the images that came to mind when I thought about management in general were stereotypical: White. Male. Patriarchal. Conservative.

These ideas about management stemmed mostly from the media and not my own personal experience with management. I grew up working class, and my parents, extended family, and neighbors were solidly blue collar. While blue collar work had a history of union organizing and solidarity work, white collar work seemed apolitical and individualistic. In actuality, management is all about human interaction. With some level of

control over the operations of an organization, managers have the power to either maintain the status quo or to break down barriers that prevent inclusive and collaborative work. Thinking about management in this light has been extremely powerful for me; it allows me to reframe my contributions as integral to forwarding social justice work in librarianship. Also, it is absolutely vital to systemic change to be able to make changes within an organization, and create systems of support that redirect power imbalances. Library managers are fundamental to this work.

In this essay, I will discuss the power of acknowledging trauma and the ways library managers can explicitly address national issues of inequity. I will discuss the importance of librarians in advocating for social justice through basic diversity and inclusion projects, as well as through in-depth systemic changes. Finally, I will touch on campus activism, illustrating some of the ways that academic libraries can engage in social justice work by advocating for campus-wide policy changes, social justice-oriented trainings, and participating in national activist solidarity movements, such as Libraries 4 Black Lives.

## **Orlando**

On June 13th, 2016, I showed up for work and people on campus acted like it was just a normal Monday. For many people, it probably was. Mass shootings are frighteningly normal now, and though queer people have come to know and expect a level of violence (both from our history and our lived experiences), the massacre at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando felt anything but normal. Those in the queer community felt as if we had lost something enormous. Fifty magical lives were extinguished, and with them, any vestige of our sense of safety. In the aftermath, many of us isolated ourselves because we didn't want to have to explain to our straight friends and colleagues that one of the reasons we were feeling so shocked from this particular incident was that it was a wake-up call.

Even in the most progressive of cities, you still have to take stock of where you are at and who is around you before giving your partner a kiss or holding their hand. We've learned to do this unconsciously, but we still

do it. Physical safety is still the biggest issue for the queer community; the number of trans women, and specifically trans women of color, who are murdered each year is actually increasing (Human Rights Campaign, 2016). On the morning of June 13th, 2016, I tried to put on a smile and go about my regular work day. Then, one of my student workers, who is a gay man, came in. I asked him how he was holding up. “Not good,” he responded, as tears started to wedge through his barely held-together facade. I hugged him tightly, tighter than I’ve ever hugged an employee or student, and we cried in each other’s arms at the library circulation desk. We didn’t have to talk about what had happened or why it hurt, because we both knew it and felt it, both in our own lives and shared histories.

I was in mourning, and it seemed like the straight people in my life didn’t understand that this was something that needed to be acknowledged. The college administration was noticeably silent on the issue, and I felt it. The lack of public statement, especially knowing that so many of our students identify as members of the LGBTQ community, was isolating. It created a gulf between those who felt the trauma in their bones, and those who saw this as just another shooting. I didn’t really know what, if anything, the college administration could do, but as one of my friends noted on Facebook, “The silence from straight people [was] deafening.”

So, I spoke up as an administrator; inside my institution, I have voice and power. I emailed the College President and our Director of Communications and Outreach, and plainly stated that the silence from the college administration was unacceptable. They were completely sympathetic, and moved quickly to rectify the situation by making a public statement and creating a space on campus where we could express our heartache. In addition, a grief counselor was invited to campus, and a wall in the main entrance was dedicated to allowing community members to post messages of love and anguish.

I think about my experience as a queer woman and the sorrow and trauma I felt over Orlando, and I can’t help but think about how racially motivated violence affects the African American community, both historically and currently, and how numb society seems to be over the violence perpetuated on black bodies. Lackluster excuses have been made justifying the assault on people of color since the birth of this nation, and

though the current cluster of police shootings of unarmed Black Americans is nothing new, it does not mean that we should not be outraged. Just because we recognize that we live in a nation governed by White Supremacy doesn't mean we shouldn't be heartbroken and outraged when we witness evidence of hatred and bigotry.

When college administrators say nothing about these shootings, it sends the message that they are normal. One administrator at OCOM, while acknowledging the need for the college to address the violence being perpetrated against people of color, wondered aloud how we could work to address the murders of African Americans by the police force when it happens so frequently. Do we send out a separate formal message for every new life destroyed? How do we show support in a powerful and ongoing way without our message becoming diluted? This is actually an important question -- it demonstrates both the numbing repetition of violence we are dealing with, along with the overwhelming feelings of not knowing how to best use one's power and privilege to elicit change.

### **Making Statements and Setting the Tone**

One thing I realized from my experience following the Orlando shootings was this: simply acknowledging the trauma that people may be feeling might seem like a small gesture, but it is an important step in supporting your staff and community members. Staff shouldn't have to ask for support, and by proactively addressing issues that affect our staff and community members, we are sending the message that we are allies. When Terence Crutcher became the fourth unarmed black man to be killed in the month of September, 2016, I brought it up to administrators at our college that we had yet to acknowledge the effect that police shootings of unarmed Black Americans had on our community.

After writing a passionate and carefully worded email to the President of our college, waiting to hear her response made me extremely nervous; I knew administrators at my institution felt strongly about social justice, but how far would this extend? Although there was nothing in the college's history to suggest this, I was scared that they wouldn't have my

back, and that they would not want to start a scary and messy discussion of racial politics on campus. As it turned out, I had nothing to fear; upper-level administration noted that social justice was a part of the college's values statement, and they agreed that it was important to address this and future social justice issues publicly.

While looking to see how other academic institutions were addressing racial violence in the United States, I found a few excellent examples of public statements put out by high-level administrators, including statements from the Chancellor of UNC and the President of MIT. The most successful of these statements blended not only compassion and a promise of support for the community, but also included plans for action, including programming that allows for campus-wide conversations about inclusion, diversity, and racial violence. MIT's President Reif (2016) spoke of the fear and helplessness that many feel, but advocated for the institution's community members to use their skills to work towards positive change:

*Injustice, racism, mistrust, suspicion, fear and violence corrode the foundations of a healthy society. We cannot stand as observers and accept a future of escalating violence and divisiveness. I believe our leading civic institutions have a responsibility to speak clearly against these corrosive forces and to act practically to inspire and create positive change. In this time of need, the MIT community has an opportunity to offer service of great value to our society, to our country and perhaps to the world by applying our unique strengths to the problem at hand. (Reif, 2016, para. 5)*

As library managers, we must be explicit and direct in demonstrating our fight against racism, sexism and homophobia. We do this by using our voices. We state specifically, emphatically, that we will not tolerate hate speech of any kind. We vocalize that we are working to ensure that our libraries are truly safe spaces, and that we are allies in the fight to end White Supremacy. Speaking out and using our voices is important to setting the tone of our libraries, and in fostering communities that work to end oppressions. Kim Bohyun (2016) wrote, "Sometimes, saying isn't much. But right now, saying it aloud can mean everything. If you support those who belong to minority groups but don't say it out loud, how would

they know it?” (para. 8).

By default, administrators carry some amount of power, and the ability to use our voices in a public way is a privilege. The fears I had around making waves at our institution were complicated. I grew up white, queer and working class in rural Oregon; education was a saving grace for me, but I’ve also had to work hard to feel like I belong in academia. Using my position as a leader to speak out about oppression, and making sure changes supporting social justice were enacted at our institution have been particularly empowering acts, especially because I am the first person in my family to graduate from college. But, I also know that my experience is very different from the experiences of academic librarians of color. When our colleagues of color speak up, are they met with support, or with resistance? Is there hesitation, that they might just be over-reacting?

When our colleagues of color speak up, are they met with defensiveness from White librarians, who feel like any kind of criticism means we aren’t being good enough colleagues? Tone policing is very real; those in places of privilege often don’t know how to react to the pain, fear and anger expressed by marginalized people, and instead of acknowledging that those feelings are hard and asking how they can help, people often become defensive and attempt to minimize emotions. Regardless of whether emotions are “valid” or not, by creating a safe space for staff to vocalize their concerns, and by truly hearing both the emotions and the “facts,” we can work on making changes to create a supportive environment for our staff.

As library managers, we must work to ensure that risks are not just taken on by those with the most to lose, those whose feelings are most often dismissed. As Jessica Anne Bratt, one of the *Library Journal* 2016 Movers & Shakers noted, “It can be daunting and you sometimes feel, ‘if I take a stand, who will defend me?’” (Peet, 2016). White librarians must ensure that systems are in place that give space and power for the voices of librarians of color to be heard. Straight and gender-conforming librarians must speak up about injustices towards the LGBTQ community, so their queer librarian friends don’t have to “out” themselves. Being good allies requires us to make sure diverse voices are present, but also step up and not expect minority voices to do all the work.

## Digging Deeper than Diversity Initiatives

Attempts to promote diversity in the academic library setting come from a good place, but often serve to centralize the white experience as normal and true. The very concept of “diversity” is troubling as it focuses on editing, not dismantling, the white dominant paradigm; bringing in other voices is immensely important, but framing those voices in relation to a white, educated, middle-class voice is inherently problematic. In particular, the concept of diversity focuses attention on “othered” groups, and allows dominant groups to simply exist without attracting attention. Hussey (2010, p. 7) notes that, “When past issues of racial discrimination and ethnic oppression are minimized to underrepresentation of certain groups and the inclusion of librarians of color, the roles of white culture and white privilege are not addressed.” Discussions about diversity can feel hollow because they frequently are – we often use safe language to dance around the difficult and messy truth of race relations in the United States.

When we think about how libraries in particular promote diversity, the strategies used are often simple and effective, such as creating displays that promote <fill in the blank> Pride Month. If acknowledging trauma is the first step in demonstrating commitment to allied social justice work, developing and supporting programming and collections that back up these words are the crucial next steps for library management. There are myriad fast, easy, and non-threatening projects that incorporate what we are already doing in libraries: displays, resource guides and focused programming. These projects are not only important for education and visibility, but they also work as a reminder that libraries are safe spaces. But, they can also be simplistic, and generally are not credited with creating long-lasting change.

However, the assurance that individuals from a marginalized group obtain from seeing themselves represented in programming and collection development is powerful and supports the inclusion of diverse voices. What I am suggesting is for library leaders to continue promoting these kinds of small-scale projects that advance the ideas of diversity and inclusion, but also investigate how these ideas can be embedded into the very structure of our library work. Mathuews (2016) proposes “intentionally incorporating



social justice frameworks into common library functions such as information literacy education, research services, access to scholarly material, and physical spaces for scholarly activity and engagement” (p. 6), which would allow continuous, ongoing work towards racial justice and equity. Rather than having an initiative or project with a beginning and end date, actually embedding social justice frameworks into our everyday work is vital to creating lasting change.

### **Aligning Values with Language**

Librarians often see ourselves as radical, but when it comes to pushing the boundaries of our profession, we tend to play it safe. We often think of our roles and our mission as pertaining to the learning needs of our community, but we narrowly define this as how it directly relates to the curriculum, rather than looking at our student body in a holistic way. Even though we may feel strongly about an issue, we were told in library school to be impartial, and approach all queries with a neutral stance. On this point, I vehemently disagree. Neutrality is by default a political statement; it indicates that you have the privilege to stay silent, that your body and mental health and safety are not at stake. Rabbi Prinz once noted that, “Bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problems. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and most tragic problem is silence” (Cone, 2004, p. 150). The act of neutrality is the act of siding with the status quo and refusing to be an ally. For librarians of conscience, neutrality is not an option.

Even worse, some dispassionate librarians may argue that if the issue doesn’t seem to directly affect our students or our mission statement, then it is not our place to address it. I would argue that all social justice issues affect our communities. Just because our campus hasn’t reported any sexual assaults in the past year doesn’t mean our students don’t think about it, or that they haven’t been personally affected by sexual violence. A recent editorial by Monnica Williams (2016) published on PBS spoke to the trauma inflicted upon people of color by continually witnessing racial violence, and how videos showing police shootings of Black Americans

reinforces the trauma of racism. The traumatic effects of witnessing violence that targets individuals based on sexual preference, race, religion or gender affects not just members of those groups, but our entire society. While we can't purport to make assumptions about what specific issues will trigger our students, what we do know is that students have come to expect discussions about social justice issues, "In a study of the classroom climate in higher education, Boysen (2012) found that students expect faculty to confront social justice issues in the classroom" (Mathuews, 2016, p. 9).

Social justice and inequality affect our learning communities; our mission statements should address this, and if they don't, library managers must advocate for changes. Kim Moreland of the Portland Development Commission suggested that organizations explicitly state that they are anti-racist in their mission statements (Moreland, Nguyen, & Sadruddin, 2016). Incorporating clear anti-racist language into mission statements and other documentation will hold organizations accountable, and make sure that diversity initiatives are not viewed as side-projects, but as an integral part of the organization. Integrating social justice work as a part of an organization's mission allows it to prevent diversity and inclusion initiatives from being the first on the chopping block when budget cuts arise.

Library directors who have the power to make changes at a departmental level can use this opportunity to work with their staff in creating mission statements that are inclusive and reflective of the organization's social justice goals, but the next step should be advocating for adopting an explicitly anti-racist position in the larger institutional mission statement. "Education's role is to challenge inequality and dominant myths rather than socialize students in the status quo. Learning is directed toward social change and transforming the world, and 'true' learning empowers students to challenge oppression in their lives" (Stage, Muller, Kinzie, & Simmons, 1998, p. 57); if this is true, then the framework for our work must be documented with anti-racist, inclusive language.

## Implementing Social Justice Library Work

In a recent “Conversation About Diversity” held at OCOM, staff was encouraged to take some of the ideas discussed at the panel presentation and run with them. We had a great, open conversation about practical ways that the college could make changes, but the lingering question that was vocalized over and over throughout the wrap-up was, “What’s my part? What comes next?” College administration can say that they support diversity initiatives, but if structures are not in place to facilitate the transformation of those ideas into actionable items, then staff may not prioritize social justice work over the everyday work that they are expected to do. This issue with many diversity initiatives is that they are viewed as side-projects.

I like to think that we all come from good places; we want to think the best of one another, but as Waleed Sadruddin (Moreland, Nguyen, & Sadruddin, 2016) noted, you can’t expect niceness to fix the issue. We must understand that the act of caring doesn’t actually solve issues as complex as discrimination and lack of inclusiveness, and that we must use metrics and actually push the envelope to create change. In order to create institutional changes that actually last, library leaders must facilitate the creation of organizational programs that ensure that diversity, inclusion and social justice goals are met. Library managers have to make sure social justice and diversity workshops and trainings are built into professional development budgets, and that our staff have the opportunity to work on not only their technical skills but on being a better, more compassionate workforce.

We often think of this type of work as a sidebar to the regular work that we do, but it is completely connected to the way we interact with one another, and even the services we provide. As managers, it is our responsibility to ensure our staff obtain training that goes beyond basic introductions, and incorporates concepts of tolerance and diversity. Smaller libraries could even partner with other libraries outside of their institution, which would allow them to share expenses, and broaden the expanse of their professional development offerings.

In addition to staff training and development, it is important

to create a system that holds library management accountable. Having a system in place that has institutional buy-in will allow us to track the work library management does to ensure that our diversity and inclusion goals are being met. One method that library leaders can adopt to aid in this process is Multicultural Organizational Development (MCOB). MCOB is a six-stage process of best practices that aids organizations in progressing towards “socially just, inclusive campus communities” (Wall & Obeir, 2008, p. 1) in an intentional and proactive way. One aspect that MCOB speaks to is that “systems, not just individuals, must be the focus of change” (Obeir & Kerr, 2015, p. 138); this is exactly the kind of work a library manager can accomplish – systems-level work to help create a truly inclusive community.

In addition to utilizing this process in our libraries, we should also be pushing administration to adopt an institution-wide MCOB process. It is great if the library is doing its part, but we have to look at college campuses in a holistic way as well: if one part is resistant or hostile, this will have a negative effect on all of the other departments. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) SPEC Kit 319 (Maxey-Harris & Anaya, 2010) is another great tool that specifically addresses academic library diversity plans and programs. This toolkit includes examples of diversity plans from academic libraries to aid those who are interested in developing programs of their own. This is maybe the most important work that we can do as library managers: create a supportive framework so that we can ensure that social justice work is integrated into our everyday work, thus normalizing it.

## Taking Action

Libraries 4 Black Lives is a Movement for Black Lives affinity group comprised of library workers, activists and archivists committed to racial equity. This recently formed group is calling on librarians across the country to publicly show support and join the cause: “We publicly affirm our support for the Movement for Black Lives and we commit to deepening racial equity work in our institutions and communities” (Libraries 4 Black Lives, 2016b, para. 5) In addition to confirming the importance of the work that libraries already do in striving towards inclusion, the group is interested in investigating how libraries can “address systemic racial injustice and implicit personal bias” (Libraries 4 Black Lives, 2016a, para. 4). I am extremely excited for L4BL’s potential, alongside other progressive librarian groups, to begin the formalized process of supporting each other in our work concerning social equity.

The rise in reported violence against communities of color and LGBTQ folk is directly related to the recent election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States. The need for librarians to commit to working towards social justice has only increased. Library staff can work towards these goals, but management must ensure that frameworks are in place to support staff in this work. In discussing how the public library in Ferguson, MO opted to stay open during city-wide protests in order to support the needs of the community, Carla Hayden stated that library administrators must act as the “anchor” in times of crisis: “It’s critical to have your administrators ready to go to the sites to be the backup for the regular staff. You may not be fighting, but you’re in the fight” (Cottrell, 2015). We are all in the fight.

The bullying tactics of White Supremacists have been reported at college campuses across the United States (Dickerson & Saul, 2016), making students who are Black, Muslim, Jewish, queer, and/or female-identified fearful for their physical safety. Racism and sexism have always been pervasive issues on college campuses, but the change in presidency has invoked a rising culture of intimidation and fear that permeates our communities, even in the supposedly progressive academic environment. It is not possible to create inclusive, positive learning environments when

students fear for their physical safety. This is what we have to contend with. This is what is at stake.

As library administrators, we have power to make changes – to create and promote diverse collections and communities – to vocalize the library’s role as a safe space, and to create organizational frameworks that support our staff in social justice work. Being a library manager means using our voices and our power to be leaders in the fight, and to provide supportive platforms. It means providing leadership during stressful periods, but also being able to take a step back and allow other voices to take center stage.