

Cultivating collective praxis for scholarly transformation and racial justice: The Critical Race Theory collective’s introduction to the special issue

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This special issue launches from the challenges of white supremacy within Library and Information Studies (LIS) and the demonizing of Critical Race Theory (CRT) within American and British societies. To address these challenges through a commitment to practice as well as theory, a special editorial team for this publication was formed to tackle head on how racialised knowledge justice issues can also manifest in scholarly publishing spheres. This team is the Critical Race Theory collective (CRTc): an international community of scholars, practitioners and activists working at the intersections of race, libraries, archives, information and education. This extended introduction is split into two parts that describe respectively the process and the product of the special issue. Part One charts the national contexts of CRTc praxis in the US and the UK, and outlines the community-building, restorative and pedagogical principles and lessons that have (in)formed the CRTc editorial and developmental process. Part Two outlines the papers that constitute the product of the special issue: contributions from American and British authors from interdisciplinary backgrounds who apply CRT frameworks to LIS discourse and practice. Together, these two parts demonstrate the scholar-activist underpinnings of CRTc to address, challenge, resist, interrupt, and ideally reverse the pushback against all forms of culturally conscious justice, especially racial justice.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Library and Information Studies, CRT praxis, racial justice, pedagogy, restorative practice

1. Introductory overview

This special issue launches from the challenges of white supremacy within Library and Information Studies (LIS) and the demonizing of Critical Race Theory (CRT)

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within American and British societies. To address these challenges through a commitment to practice as well as theory, a special editorial team for this publication was formed to tackle head on how racialised knowledge justice issues can also manifest in scholarly publishing spheres. This team is the Critical Race Theory collective (CRTc): an international community of scholars, practitioners and activists working at the intersections of race, libraries, archives, information, and education. Our collective was formed in September 2021 through a shared commitment to developing CRT learning, discourse and practice in our professions and communities, with the foundational primary goal of collectively editing this *Education for Information* special issue. Our mission is to advance a developmental model that disrupts traditional scholarly peer review practices, using a “design justice” approach that is collaboratively led by marginalized communities and hence “aims explicitly to challenge, rather than reproduce, structural inequalities” (Costanza-Chock, 2020). We are grateful to Dr. Fidelia Ibekwe, *Education for Information* Editor in Chief, for providing the latitude, patience and trust that has enabled this collective grassroots process.

CRTc is defined by and committed to *CRT praxis*: “a critical pragmatic analysis of racial realities and their intersections with other forms of oppression combined with educating for democracy and organizing for social justice and change” (García, 2015, citing Yamamoto, 1997). Our collective editorial introduction to the set of papers before you is hence longer than a traditional introduction to a special issue, as we want to demonstrate not only how CRT praxis is woven into the form and value of the publication itself, but also how we shaped and developed the community and values that collectively produced that publication. This extended introduction is therefore split into two parts that describe the process and the product of the special issue. Part One charts the national contexts of CRTc praxis in the US and the UK, and outlines the community-building, restorative and pedagogical principles and lessons that have (in)formed the CRTc editorial and developmental *process*. Part Two outlines the papers that constitute the *product* of the special issue: contributions from American and British authors from interdisciplinary backgrounds who apply CRT frameworks to LIS discourse and practice. Together, these two parts demonstrate the scholar-activist underpinnings of CRTc to address, challenge, resist, interrupt, and ideally reverse the pushback against all forms of culturally conscious justice, especially racial justice.

2. Introduction part one: the process

2.1. Contextualizing CRTc praxis

Our collective came together at a time when the dog whistles against CRT were sounding off on both sides of the Atlantic. There was a collective understanding among our group about the urgency and the importance of continuing the development of CRT-informed practice and theory in the library profession and Information Studies discipline (as well as society more broadly).

Since the US 45th President issued (a now revoked) Executive Order 13950 that halted federal diversity training on September 22, 2020, there has been an ever-increasing villainization of CRT as part of a larger conservative socio-political discourse to regress the global racial re-awakening triggered in the summer of 2020. Moreover, the activation of hostile discourses against anti-racism efforts is not only regressive, but also part of a bigger strategic effort of “racial retrenchment” (Crenshaw, 1988, 2021; Hamilton, 2021) and “memory policing” (Conway, 2022), which is distinct from other forms of retrenchment usually focused on class versus race. Racial retrenchment seeks to counter every moment of racial progress within the US and the UK. The relatively brief periods of racial and social justice reforms and progress in these nations is being strategically reversed, re-formed and indeed repossessed by political establishments to re-establish the enduring power of white supremacy. The power of (mis)information in this process should not be underestimated.

As Crenshaw has recently highlighted in the US, the current “retrenchment frame is now taking place amidst a tremendous resurgence of anti-democratic, anti-inclusionary politics. And, in the context of a new distribution channel that is 24 hours, amplified by completely unaccountable information sources on the internet” (Ottosen, 2022). A similarly regressive trend is emergent in UK political and educational spheres. In October 2020 during a parliamentary Black History Month debate, Conservative Party Cabinet Minister for Equalities Kemi Badenoch stated that “this government stands unequivocally against Critical Race Theory” and warned that educators “teaching white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt” could be breaking the law (Hansard, 2020). Meanwhile, reported racist hate crime incidents in England and Wales rose by 73% between March 2020 and March 2021 and UK schools recorded over 60,000 racist incidents in the past five years (Batty & Parveen, 2021; Guina, 2021).

CRT was originally formed in the late twentieth-century US through the work of founding icons Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanic, among others, to address the lack of attention to race in the critical legal studies movement and demonstrate how race, racism and power underpins the foundations of the liberal nation state order. CRT in the US has since evolved beyond legal scholarship and made significant impact in education studies and a range of sociological and related disciplines (Annamma et al., 2013; Brayboy, 2005; Collins, 1989, 2015; Leung & López-McKnight, 2020; Smith et al., 2011; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano & Huber, 2020; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Valdes, 1999). Whilst CRT is increasingly well-known and controversial in US public discourse, its currency and circulation in other continents is arguably less developed and embedded.

CRT crossed the Atlantic and gained traction in UK social science scholarship in the early 2000s (Gillborn, 2005; Gillborn, 2006; Hylton, 2005) and over the past two decades has enriched British anti-racist education research and practice (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Warmington, 2020). Its influence in UK LIS scholarship is only recently beginning to emerge (Birdi et al., 2022; Clarke, 2021). There is still significant work to do to challenge white supremacy in the UK LIS

workforce, which at the last count was 97% White and predominantly female (ARA & CILIP, 2015), thereby marginalizing Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) library professionals (CILIP & Jolly, 2019; Ishaq & Hussain, 2019). Similarly, across the Atlantic, 83% of US librarians are White and also skewed heavily towards White females, and Black and African Americans remain marginalized and oppressed in libraries (Data USA, 2022; Overbey & Folk, 2022).

Whilst library and information professional associations in the US and UK are starting to wake up to and name the need for greater institutional accountability and investment in racial justice struggles (ALA, 2020; CILIP, 2020), there is a long way to go to translate words into deeds. The CRTc is one attempt to bridge this gulf and in the spirit of Audre Lorde, transform silence into language into action (Lorde, 1984; Smith-Cruz, 2018).

2.2. CRTc motivations and community-driven restorative approach

Given the high stakes surrounding racial retrenchment and backlash against CRT in our political, professional, and educational institutions, many CRTc members have taken a calculated risk by joining the editorial team. A motivating factor for some of us to participate was professional self-care. For those of us who desperately want to create change (change within ourselves, our institutions, our communities, our world), the work is often challenging and isolating. Sometimes it can feel like in trying to create even the smallest of changes with our shoulders to the wheel, we are pushing alone. Troublemaker. Rabble-rouser. Stick-in-the-mud. Killjoy. We are the ones who suffer from intersectional injustices, yet this suffering often means we find ourselves stepping up and speaking out, sometimes to our own professional detriment. In forming and forging CRTc, however, we break this isolation and learn that, as Sara Ahmed puts it, “killing joy¹ is a world making project. We make a world out of the shattered pieces even when we shatter the pieces or even when we are the shattered pieces” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 261).

CRTc has provided a space for us, who are often siloed from one another and laboring in obscurity within our own institutions, to meet others in the field who share our passions and convictions. We are an affinity group who learn, create and grow in community. This is restorative and reparative, an act of collective self-care – in the form of professional service – so that we may return to our regularly scheduled day jobs and have the fortitude to put our shoulders once again to the wheels of change. Library and information professionals traditionally work in service to their users. CRT-based library and information activists do this and more: we are also embedded in the praxes of working in service for the benefit of communities of resistance and aspire to follow long counter-traditions of Black and indigenous liberation struggles

¹“joy” here signifying the normative comfort, privileges or pleasures of those who benefit most from white supremacy and cishet ableist patriarchy.

and intellectual legacies (Davis, 2016; Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2021; Rodney et al., 2019; Sivanandan, 1990; Taylor, 2017; Wong, 2021). As Dunbar puts it (2021, p. 131), this requires “courage of character and commitment” in the face of the “cowardliness of comfortable contentment” that dominates the majority of discourse and practice in the LIS field.

CRTc also seeks to follow in legacies and movements of restorative and transformative theory and practice (O’Reilly, 2019; Winn, 2018). This is particularly inspired by Wong’s (2021) endarkened conception of pedagogical collectivity, theorized through Franz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter and a range of CRT and abolitionist scholars, which is about “conducting research and (re)constructing educational structures that protect the most vulnerable from suffering, damage, trauma, and pain [. . .] in ongoing dialogue with our land/place and relations; and mindfully moving ourselves closer to the socially just worlds and collective liberation ” (Wong, 2021, p. 30). In this way, it could be argued that what brought us together and drives us as a collective is a restorative way of mobilizing *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980)² for transformative justice ends. Our shared vision was founded through forms of mutual recognition despite our differences; recognition that we shared the same values and determination to challenge and change the injustices in our respective knowledge domains.

2.3. CRTc pedagogy: learning and teaching community

Our editorial and organizational developmental processes have galvanized us as a collective and extended the mission and activities of CRTc far beyond the single tangible output of the present special issue, into an evolving landscape of CRT-led commitments, including developing Open Education Resources, participating in justice-based activism, and creating justice-based media. This is part of our “organic intellectual” (Oha-Jua, 2013) process as a collective committed to building communities through equity of access following Black scholar-activist traditions. Engaging, building, learning, and evolving community is a process that works both within and beyond our organization, hence it is a form of ‘inreach’ (Germain, 2006) as well as outreach, and depends crucially on individual and collective self-reflexive learning for continued development and best practice.

With the exception of Dr. Dunbar, none of the CRTc founding members were experts in CRT when we set out on our collective journey, and we each had varying levels of knowledge and experience in this field. Joining the editorial team was hence a valuable learning opportunity for us all to immerse and develop ourselves in CRT library and information praxis. In developing and promoting the call for papers, we

²The three sets of ‘interests’ converging here are: (i) interests of all those who (either actively or complicitly) uphold, defend or support racial inequity and white supremacy in educational and LIS sectors; (ii) of those who are seeking to oppose racism and oppression and improve our sectors through diversity, equity and inclusion theory and practice; and (iii) of those (like us) who seek to actively transform or abolish racism and intersecting injustices in our sectors through liberatory praxis.

deliberately sought out early career scholar-practitioners and community activists as well as appealing to more senior academics and sector leaders, which generated a nurturing and intergenerational space for peer review and mutual support. Underpinning this is a principle of radical reciprocity: in creating space and dialogue around the submission and reviews processes, we also developed ourselves as reviewers, mentors, co-producers and accomplices in our shared knowledge justice missions. Through this process, we have learnt that walking this tightrope of developing others whilst developing ourselves takes time, labor, patience, difficult dialogue, trust, and tenacity. Our learning journey is bound up with a commitment to practicing accountability through our relationality. This follows Leung and Lopez-McKnight's (2020, p. 22) injunction to "hold one another accountable to what we say we want to do, rather than allow institutions and organizations steeped in that legacy – that are reliant on exploitative relations and dehumanization to function – to continue functioning that way."

3. Introduction part two: the product

3.1. Intentions and commitments

When we first embarked on this journey the CRTc had the most authentic intentions for this special issue to include first, scholarly submissions from Australia, thus, culminating in content spanning three continents; and secondly, in the most optimistic sense, we were hopeful of receiving enough publishable submissions to offer a CRT double issue. While falling a little short of our initial intentions, we still hold tight to those lofty goals towards our next CRTc scholarly journey. On the other hand, we were able to fulfil two of our core values of access and activism.

The collective is firmly committed to active social justice activism as an expression of both our vision and scholarly work. Through the generosity of IOS press, the publishers of Education for Information (EFI), and the unwavering support of the managing editor, Dr. Fidelia Ibekwe, we can provide free downloadable access to the content of this critical race theory special issue.

In the bigger picture, the free access to this issue reinforces the international value of library and information professionals and scholars to connect information across a breadth of communities, most notably those who live their lives well outside the boundaries of academic privilege and access to scholarly content. Extending the point further, providing free access to CRT scholarly content also "calls in" community members to not only read and consume the content but more importantly to also be creators of content. As a group looking to move beyond changing the scholarly communication model, with more of a resolve to radically transform it, we call for all those offering (administrating – or serving as editors for) extensive scholarly CRT endeavors to stand in solidarity with those who believe access is activism to request and if necessary *demand* from publishers and academic institutions that the

CRT content they edit and/or author be freely accessible regardless as to where the scholarly practice occurs across the globe.³ The CRTc was inspired by the lead established with the (2021) *Knowledge Justice* project, edited by Sofia Leung and Jorge Lopez-McKnight, in conjunction with MIT Press and Arcadia.⁴

3.2. *Special issue content overview*

Our commitment to access, activism, community contribution as well as the pedagogical practices mentioned in Part One of this introduction yielded immediate fruit from the labor of the CRTc *process*. This special issue offers a scholarly community commentary: “CRT, information, and disability: A commentary” by Mondrea (Mondo) Vaden. This unique perspective is grounded in Vaden’s experience as a deaf, Black, and trans librarian. The commentary addresses what they frame as a serious gap in scholarship and practice around the erasure of disability from both Black history and LIS theory and practice. To bridge this gulf, Vaden follows in the CRT traditions of Crenshaw’s intersectionality (1991) and counter-storytelling pedagogy offered by Solórzano and Yosso in their (2002) CRT in education classic “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research”.

This second edition of *Education for Information’s* special issue series focusing on race also delivers scholarly content from both the United Kingdom and the United States. The British authors certainly hold the line for the evolving legacy of CRT in the UK (discussed above in Part One) with three insightful articles offering us a critical race perspective through a British health sciences lens.⁵ In “critically appraising for anti-racism”, Ramona Naicker draws from the CRT tenets that racism is ubiquitous along with race being a social construct. Utilizing CRT, this paper divides concerns regarding racism in research into two categories for critical appraisers to assess: the underrepresentation of minoritized ethnic groups in health studies, and the use of racial/ethnicity data to understand disparities in outcomes. Naicker offers a powerful intervention into the grossly unequal power relations in health information science research methodologies and clinical outcomes, demonstrating how this is a pressing Black Lives Matter issue.

³To further clarify the call for solidarity, it is in offering the CRT scholarship more broadly where access truly becomes activism and community engagement versus unavoidable and inevitable intellectual appropriation. Thus, extensive scholarly efforts such as edited books offering multiple points of view or special issues of professional and/or peer-reviewed publications grounded in CRT engagement also lends opportunity for publishers to offer social justice contributions to the advancement of critical race theory.

⁴A charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin preserving endangered culture and promoting open access.

⁵CRTc welcomes this health information science focus due to the integral pluralize to roles that health literacy and (or lack thereof) and bias play in the racial retrenchment trends that plague both sides of the Atlantic and violently impact the lives of Black and racially minoritized people.

The discussion within “The 3% action for positive change,” Hong-Anh Nguyen focuses on the King’s Fund Library Service graduate traineeship’s aim at addressing and perhaps correcting the lack of ethnic diversity within the library and information profession in the United Kingdom. Using the CRT counter-story framework and with a vividly engaging narrative style, Nguyen provides critical insight into how white supremacy presents itself in the implementation of anti-racist recruitment practices and makes a strong rhetorical case for moving beyond tokenistic diversity initiatives for racially oppressed and minoritized library professionals.

Grace O’Driscoll and David Bawden illustrate in their paper “Health information equity: Rebalancing healthcare collections for racial diversity in UK public service contexts” the health disparities experienced by racially minoritized people, with heightened risks faced by Black and South Asian communities lending the issue transparency and urgency. This study investigates the potential for healthcare information services to contribute to health equity through their collections. Before concluding, the authors synthesize their findings to illustrate the relevance and utility of CRT as an important tool for pursuing race equity in information practice, scholarship, and education.

The scholarship offered by the US authors takes on the topics of archival collection development, designing a Black MLIS student organization, an approach to LIS professional development, and an expansion of the CRT framework of interest convergence.

In “CRT in praxis: Library and archival collections at San José State University [SJSU],” the authors present the ongoing efforts of a working group formed in 2020 in response to an Anti-Racism Action Plan developed in SJSU’s Dr. Martin Luther King Library to revise, review, and revisit the King Library’s collecting practices in relation to the history of SJSU’s African American Studies program, the Africana Center, and other relevant community history. The four authors who are all librarians at the King Library examined their work through a multifaceted CRT framework consisting of intersectionality, counter-storytelling along with deconstructing color blindness and combating white supremacy.

“Space, story, and solidarity: Designing a Black MLIS student organization amidst crisis and tumult”, is the work of five critical race womanist scholars. Ndumu et. al, take on the ever-present issue of why Black people remain on the margins of the LIS profession. This article chronicles a three-year effort of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA) to elevate Black culture in the LIS profession by using Black-centered pedagogical traditions, data on Black MLIS students’ needs, and the CRT concept of counterstorytelling to scaffold a national online Black MLIS student organization.

Vanessa Irvin offers a view of public librarian professional development through a lens that uses intersectional and interest convergence CRT tenets to filter the research. In “Questions learned: Considering geo cultural context within public librarian professional development” Irvin’s CRT lens requires librarians to be accountable for the profession’s problematic history and heritage, and their investment in such a toxic

paradigm, in which white power, identity, and privilege are disruptive intersectional values. Ultimately this research paper illustrates ways that LINQ: The Librarians' Inquiry Forum, presents itself as a viable CRT-based model for public librarian professional development with the potential to become a sustainable, low-to-no-cost standard for ongoing librarian learning and development in large public library systems.

Finally, *Speaking of Books* . . . is a section in this special issue that offers commentary and reviews on LIS, interdisciplinary and CRT-related bibliographic discourse and practice.

Firstly, CRTc's Stephanie Birch provides a commentary on Abolitionist Librarianship with her reflective piece titled "A new prohibition era: Book banning, prison abolition and librarians", highlighting counterproductive conflicts of interest within librarianship which uphold systems of racial injustice. Next, CRTc's Anthony Dunbar and Alice Corble provide a review of Jennifer Esposito and Venus Evans-Winters' 2021 textbook *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research*, evaluating its contribution to a burgeoning field of methodological scholarship and applications of the founding CRT principle of intersectionality. The third contribution to *Speaking of Books* . . . adds to this focus in providing a (retro) review by Liz Grauel of the neo classic, *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online* (2016), edited by Sofia Noble and Brendesha Tynes. Grauel highlights the timely importance of this text for the pressing need to apply CRT-led intersectional approaches to studying and transforming the systemic racism that undergirds information infrastructures and digitally mediatized forms of global economic, political, and social systems of control.

4. Conclusion

We hope that readers of this special issue find the original and interdisciplinary scholarship contained within not only *educational* and *informative*, to use the keywords that constitute this journal's title, but also inspiring and igniting; provoking readers to engender restorative and transformative actions in their places of work, study, and community. We would like to end this extended introduction on a note of radical pedagogical hope. As the late great bell hooks (2003) reminds us, where there is "the will to learn", there is hope. Within and against the divisive and dehumanizing conditions of racial retrenchment and intersectional injustices through which we continue to survive and strive, our collective learning, teaching, activist scholarship generates hopefulness against the odds and "empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time [. . .] As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know" (hooks, 2003, p. xiv). The next stage of our collective learning journey is to expand and extend this hopeful will to learn beyond the US and the UK for more global knowledge

justice collaborations, whilst also applying our learning to our own local contexts and lobbying for a necessary investment in integrating CRT into LIS curricula, policy and professional practice.

Acknowledgements and contributors – the CRTcollective

We are grateful to all members of the CRTcollective as well as the external reviewers who informed and facilitated the production of this special issue. The full complement of founding CRTc members are listed as contributors below.

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