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Interrogating the Collective: #Critlib and the Problem of Community

Nora Almeida

Introduction

#critlib (“critical librarianship”) is an intellectual activist movement indebted to both postmodern educational theory and social protest movement culture. Like its predecessors, #critlib is represented in academic literature and in extra-institutional scholarly and social spaces. As a symbol, the #critlib hashtag evokes a dispersed collective of librarians who ascribe to certain shared values that inform their work in libraries. By embracing a “critical” stance against bureaucracy, social injustice, and homogeneous ideological identity, #critlib also functions as an oppositional rhetorical and performative strategy. And this strategy, as it is played out in literature, in classrooms, and in social spaces, informs the cultural perception of the #critlib symbol and the collective behind it.

Two of the most salient criticisms of #critlib are that the movement is exclusionary¹ and, despite its counter-hegemonic and transgressive underpinnings, in danger of becoming institutionalized.² On the surface, these charges—that #critlib is on the one hand pervasive and on the other

1 David James Hudson, “On Critical Librarianship & Pedagogies of the Practical” (keynote presentation, Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium, Tucson, AZ, February 25–26, 2016), <http://hdl.handle.net/10150/612654>.

2 Maura Seale, “Institutionalizing Critical Librarianship” (presentation, Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium, Tucson, AZ, February 25–26, 2016), <http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/handle/10150/609829>.

exclusive—are paradoxical. However, both rely on the assumption that #critlib constitutes a community and that the cultural values and ideas that #critlib has come to represent are grounded in that community. This idea of community has been embraced (perhaps rather uncritically) by self-identified critical librarians: “honestly a lot of #critlib for me is about community. Also ideas—practical & theoretical, but the enforcement / validation is *critical*,” “So important to be part of a like minded community that has similar goals and motivations;” “#critlib is a community that saves my life without having met me.”³

The invocation of community as a definitional and activist strategy is not unique to the #critlib movement. In a Spring 2016 discussion of the book *Keywords for Radicals*, a collaboratively written text that sets out to explore the “contested vocabulary of late-capitalist struggle” in the tradition of Raymond Williams, editors Clare O’Connor and AK Thompson described ‘community’ as the most contested and socio-historically fraught of all the terms examined in their keywords project. *Keywords* contributor Sarah Lambie singles out community “as the proper location from which activism should arise” and notes “organizing efforts perceived to lack a strong basis ‘in community’ are considered suspect[;] this lack is typically attributed to a disconnection from the people most directly affected by the issue at hand.”⁴ Communities are necessarily delimited spaces. They must begin and end somewhere, they must contain and exclude, and something must tie them together. However, the contested nature of the term community and its role as a throughline in #critlib conversations raise significant questions about who exactly constitutes the #critlib community and what values and practices define it. The idea of community in relation to #critlib is further problematic when we consider the fact that critical librarians have rejected any uniform ideology or “monolithic theory”⁵ and have argued that “#critlib means different things in different places, times, contexts.”⁶

Drawing from theoretical writing on community, technology, performance, activism, and place, and through an analysis of #critlib Twitter conversations, this chapter will address the status of #critlib as a community and role of the #critlib movement in confronting and transforming oppressive environments. While working towards a definition of the #critlib

3 Barnard Library (@barnlib), Twitter post, March 31, 2015, 9:19 p.m., <https://twitter.com/barnlib/>; Dinah Handel (@DinahHandel), Twitter post, March 31, 2015, 9:19 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DinahHandel/>; Kyle Shockey (@kshockey04), Twitter post, March 31, 2015, [no longer active user].

4 Sarah Lambie, “Community,” in *Keywords for Radicals*, eds. Kelly Fritsch, Clare O’Connor, and A.K. Thompson (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016), 106.

5 Nicole Pagowsky (@nope4evr), Twitter post, March 31, 2015, 9:19 p.m., <https://twitter.com/nope4evr/>.

6 Ian Beilin (@ibeilin), Twitter post, March 31, 2015, 9:18 p.m., <https://twitter.com/ibeilin/>.

community that can accommodate cultural difference, paradox, and the shifting contexts of critical practice, I will examine #critlib in direct relationship to the various sites of critical tension where #critlib operates which include institutional and scholarly spaces, socio-political spaces, virtual spaces, and the dialogic space of the #critlib community itself.

#Critlib, Theory, and *The Good Society*

The origins of #critlib can be traced back to the first Twitter chat which took place in April 2014. However, progressive and critical⁷ librarianship and the general “impulse to connect social justice with librarianship [are not] new phenomenon[a].”⁸ Progressive librarianship has long been “enmesh[ed] with the goal of the ‘good society’”⁹ and it would be difficult to ascribe all the values and practices¹⁰ that it—and more recently, critical librarianship—encompasses to a single community. Nevertheless, #critlib and progressive / critical librarianship are terms often used interchangeably and as a result, some criticism of the #critlib movement may represent resistance to the rhetorical conflation of these descriptors. A perceived subsumption of critical librarianship by #critlib may contribute to criticism that the movement is exclusionary since self-identified

7 See Kenny Garcia, “Keeping Up With...Critical Librarianship,” *Association of College & Research Libraries*, June 2015, http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/critlib.

8 Shana Higgins and Lua Gregory, “Introduction,” in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2013), 6.

9 Mark Rosenzweig, “The Basis of a Humanist Librarianship in the Ideal of Human Autonomy,” *Progressive Librarian* 23 (2004): 40.

10 Progressive librarians (both inside and outside of the #critlib community) have fought against the false characterization of educators and educational institutions as neutral; have problematized issues of institutional marginalization through examinations of race, gender, sexuality, and queerness in our profession; have interrogated labor practices including contingency employment and the role of paraprofessionals in libraries; have importantly explored cultural insensitivity as it relates to naming conventions, professional discourse, and pedagogy; have railed against neoliberalism and exploitative consumption; have called into question how cultural perceptions and stereotypes of librarians affect library praxis; and have started explicit discussions about the institutional practices and structures that limit critical agency and intellectual freedom. See Annie Pho et al., “But We’re Neutral!” and Other Librarian Fictions Confronted by #critlib” (presentation, American Library Association Conference, San Francisco, CA, June 25–30, 2015); Katia Roberto and Jessamyn West, *Revolting Librarians Redux: Radical Librarians Speak out* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003); Jenny Bossaller et al., “Critical Theory, Libraries and Culture,” *Progressive Librarian* 34/35 (2010); Toni Samek, *Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in American Librarianship 1967–1974* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000); Melissa Morrone and Lia Friedman, “Radical Reference: Socially Responsible Librarianship Collaborating with Community,” *The Reference Librarian* 50, no. 4 (2009); Higgins and Gregory, “Introduction”; Stephen E. Bales and Lea Susan Engle, “The Counterhegemonic Academic Librarian: A Call to Action,” *Progressive Librarian* 40 (2012): 16–40; Nicole Pagowsky and Miriam E. Rigby, eds., *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions and Presentations of Information Work* (Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries); Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith, “The Library as ‘Stuck Place’: Critical Pedagogy in the Corporate University,” in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, eds. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2010), 305–18.

progressive / critical librarians who have long been social justice advocates may find themselves outside of the #critlib community if they don't participate in conversations happening on Twitter, at conferences, and in scholarly literature. On the other hand, some librarians buoyed by opportunities for dialogue and information sharing afforded by #critlib and the arguably egalitarian online spaces in which dialogue can occur have contended for the value of "a community of colleagues interested in critical librarianship."¹¹ Although rhetorically difficult, it may be important to maintain a distinction between #critlib, progressive librarianship, and critical librarianship in order to interrogate community boundaries and the politics of belonging as they relate explicitly to the #critlib movement. In the text that follows I have attempted to maintain these distinctions whenever possible.

It is similarly important to differentiate between #critlib, critical pedagogy, and critical information literacy as discrete (albeit related) intellectual movements. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that #critlib scholarship is influenced by critical pedagogy and critical information literacy in addition to other theoretical frameworks including political economic theory, postcolonial theory, and writing on race and intersectional feminism.¹² Much #critlib scholarship focuses on instructional contexts and is heavily influenced by literacy and critical pedagogical theorists including Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and bell hooks.¹³ Consequently, some charges that #critlib is exclusionary may stem from librarians who view the pervasive influence of critical pedagogy and critical information literacy on #critlib scholarship as evidence that #critlib disproportionately focuses on academic, instructional contexts without adequately addressing social injustice as in manifests in other library and institutional environments.¹⁴ If #critlib is becoming institutionalized and enmeshed with professional organizations, librarians may also worry that an emphasis on academic contexts and information literacy by the profession will result in the marginalization of information professionals who work in other institutional contexts. These potential readings of #critlib— as both distinct from and heavily dependent upon other theoretical frameworks

11 Eamon Tewell, "Putting Critical Information Literacy into Context: How and Why Librarians Adopt Critical Practices in their Teaching," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 12, 2016, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/putting-critical-information-literacy-into-context-how-and-why-librarians-adopt-critical-practices-in-their-teaching/>.

12 See "Critical Librarianship Workshop," accessed March 23, 2017, <http://criticallibrarianshipworkshop.weebly.com/>.

13 See Eamon Tewell, "A Decade of Critical Information Literacy: A Review of the Literature," *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 24–43, <http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=v9i1p24&path%5B%5D=205>.

14 Ian Beilin, "Critical Librarianship as an Academic Pursuit," present volume.

and narratives about the relationship between librarianship and the good society—complicate the question of what defines the #critlib community.

Community, Identity, and Belonging

It is difficult to get at the root of community because the term “seems to imply a false circumscription and coherence.”¹⁵ Communities are complex and intricately tied up with who we are and who others perceive us to be. While #critlib has impacted conceptions of librarianship including how some librarians define themselves, most librarians also define their professional identity in relation to their position, institution, and the geographic communities in which their libraries are situated.¹⁶ A librarian’s professional identity may be negotiated in relation to peer groups—both in discrete institutions or dispersed professional networks and in relation to scholarly discourse communities in their field. Sometimes librarians struggle to reconcile their roles in these intersecting communities and to address themselves to shifting contexts, modes of socialization, and power dynamics. Reconciling struggles between identity and community is complex as “performances of the self are indicative of the shapes individuals take on as they claim agency and negotiate power within social structures and imaginaries.”¹⁷ #critlib participants have positioned struggles over ideology, belonging, and professional obligation as objects of critical analysis that are continually evolving and being re-negotiated. Perhaps communities, like individual identities, are unstable, emergent, and difficult to categorize. However, because communities are entangled with imaginaries and ideals of social transformation, we also want them to be explicable and politically useful. In this contradiction the problem of the #critlib community—and of community in general—emerges.

Typically conceptualized as either a natural demographic category or as a stable, constructed, self-selected container, the principle feature of community is the *authentic* manifestation of the feature that binds its members together.¹⁸

15 Samuel M. Wilson and Leighton C. Peterson, “The Anthropology of Online Communities,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* (2002): 455.

16 See Bossaller et al., “Critical Theory, Libraries and Culture”; Morrone and Friedman, “Radical Reference: Socially Responsible Librarianship”; Shawn(ta) D. Smith, “Queer Housing Nacional Google Group: A Librarian’s Documentation of a Community Specific Resource,” in *Informed Agitation: Library and Information Skills in Social Justice Movements and Beyond*, ed. Melissa Morrone (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2014): 193–210.

17 Zizi Papacharissi, “Without You, I’m Nothing: Performances of the Self on Twitter,” *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 1990.

18 Brian Alleyne, “An Idea of Community and its Discontents: Towards a More Reflexive Sense of Belonging in Multicultural Britain,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25, no. 4 (2002): 607–27.

The tendency to idealize community as an essentialist “authentic” counterpoint to an “inauthentic” society has been critiqued by many theorists who argue that the cultural assumption that “it is good ‘to have community’” ignores the fact that communities are social constructs that can be reductive, totalizing, and confining.¹⁹ Feminist theorist Miranda Joseph argues “fetishizing community only makes us blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination.”²⁰ Fetishizing community can also detract from questions about the goals of emancipatory community movements and the politics of belonging: “What does the good society toward which ‘we’ are working look like? and what is the nature of the ‘we’ who undertakes that work? Who is included in the project? How do ‘we’ relate to each other in the work?”²¹

The perceived value of belonging to an activist or intellectual community like #critlib is based on the belief that dialogue is part of how people organize themselves and how oppressive systems are changed. However, feminist and political theorist Iris Young points out “social relations are full of domination and exploitation” and we too often conceive of “the elimination of these conditions in terms of an impossible ideal of shared subjectivity” — a process that can ultimately detract from a critical focus on oppressive systems.²² Ideal conceptualizations of communities routinely ignore the fact that dialogue can’t be readily divorced from “sociolinguistic history” and that individual “social roles associated with gender, race, and class, as well as those involved in professional, family, and social circles are performed” and intricately co-mingled.²³ In short, many idealistic conceptualizations of community propagate the false premise that individual identities can be wholly subsumed in a unified collective and that individuals in a community can be liberated from oppressive systems that otherwise constrain their capacity to communicate or behave authentically as themselves. However, communities are not exempt from social power dynamics or struggles over identity, nor can communities realistically situate themselves entirely outside of institutions or socio-political systems. Some theorists have even argued that without social “conditions that are beyond

19 Iris Marion Young, “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” *Social Theory and Practice* 12, no. 1 (1986): 17; Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), quoted in Lamble, “Community,” 105.

20 Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2002), ix.

21 Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*, xxiv.

22 Young, “The Ideal of Community,” 12.

23 Wilson and Peterson, “The Anthropology of Online Communities,” 459; Papacharissi, “Without You, I’m Nothing,” 1990.

the present historical horizon,” collectives can never transcend repressive systems since social reality “positions criticism and solidarity at odds.”²⁴

Some scholars have pointed to the unique potential of online communities to “disrupt knowledge hierarchies,” “advance efforts for social justice,” and “increase the potential for dialogue among educators.”²⁵ Perhaps the possibility of dialogue that exists outside of institutional, societal, or sanctioned scholarly spaces but that also exists in a virtual public that permeates all of these spaces does introduce the possibility for critique and disruption. However, platform-specific social dynamics and “community norms,” the “context collapse” resulting from “blending the public with the private,” the technocratic underpinnings of social media environments, and the prerequisite that community participants have “facility and experience” with technology and particular modes of discourse all challenge conceptions of virtual communities as essentially egalitarian or empowering.²⁶ Some scholars have even debated whether virtual communities “are real or imagined” — a distinction that is “not a useful one”²⁷ for determining probable dialogic or socio-political outcomes. Real or not, virtual communities, like their face-to-face counterparts, are compromised by entanglement with external socio-political, bureaucratic, rhetorical, and corporate systems.²⁸

Beyond critiques of community dynamics is the premise that community organizing, dialogue, and collective action can expose and disrupt oppressive forces in our institutions and society. Many progressive educators, librarians, theorists, and activists have argued for the power of community organizing and resistance to enact social change.²⁹ For their part, #critlib participants have mostly avoided the theoretical pitfalls that accompany an idealization of

24 Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, “Toward a Nonrepressive Critical Pedagogy,” *Educational Theory* 48, no. 4 (1998): 486.

25 Andrew Battista, “From a ‘Crusade against Ignorance’ to a ‘Crisis of Authenticity’: Cultivating Information Literacy for a 21st Century Democracy” in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, eds. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2013), 82; Wilson and Peterson, “The Anthropology of Online Communities,” 460; Vincent Cho et al., “What Twitter Will and Will Not Do: Theorizing about Teachers’ Online Professional Communities,” *Learning Landscapes* 6, no. 2 (2013): 45, <http://www.learninglandscapes.ca/index.php/learnland/article/view/604>.

26 Cho, “What Twitter Will,” 55; Papacharissi, “Without You,” 1992; Wilson and Peterson, “The Anthropology of Online Communities,” 460.

27 Wilson and Peterson, “The Anthropology of Online Communities,” 455–6.

28 Morrone and Friedman, “Radical Reference,” 372.

29 See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000); Henry A. Giroux, “Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Resistance: Notes on a Critical Theory of Educational Struggle,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 1 (2003): 5–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-5812.00002>; Gregory Martin, “You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Bus: Critical Pedagogy as Community Praxis,” *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 3, no. 2 (2005): 1–25; Rebecca Tarlau, “From a Language to a Theory of Resistance: Critical Pedagogy, the Limits of ‘Framing,’ and Social Change,” *Educational Theory* 64, no. 4 (2014): 369–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12067>; Morrone and Friedman, “Radical Reference.”

either communities or individuals, in part because of their tendency to scrutinize the #critlib community ethos including barriers to entry, and in part because the theoretical values underpinning the movement do not constitute a stable theory of #critlib. Just as #critlib participants “consider the historical, cultural, social, economic, and political forces that interact with information in order to critique, disrupt, and interrogate these forces,” they also reject the idea of a “pure” community ideology “that can be set apart from [history or] from social formations like the state, capitalism, and the individual.”³⁰ The recognition of #critlib as simultaneously enmeshed within “social formations” and heavily reliant upon history situates it within existing theoretical frameworks and social and institutional structures. Consequently, #critlib participants must acknowledge the degree to which they are complicit with forms of oppression that manifest within these frameworks and structures.

Simultaneously, the critical position that #critlib participants maintain and the allegiances they have fostered with those who are “othered” within institutional, scholarly, social, and digital environments situates them against these oppressive structures and frameworks. It is possibly this very tension—between complicity and resistance, between belonging and otherness—that best defines the #critlib community. Alternatively, we could argue that this tension weakens #critlib’s claim to be a community. However, the fact that communities are intimately tied with conceptions of identity, “conceived as the place[s] (literal or metaphoric) where political aspiration emerge and get channeled,” and are “symbolically and pragmatically linked to ... concepts, including solidarity, self-determination, collective action, and empowerment” means that community “is not easily replaced” and may, in fact, be irreplaceable.³¹ In more than one sense then, community becomes a “stuck place”³²—a place freighted with contradiction and also, a place we cannot dispense with. This necessitates a broadening of the central question at the heart of this inquiry: when we consider *what* constitutes the #critlib community we must also ask, *where* can the #critlib community negotiate a foothold given its simultaneous position within and against?

The Place of #critlib

In the absence of other “natural” categories or a uniform ideology, place has long served as both a community boundary and the battlefield upon which community struggles are fought. The occupation of space is the mark

30 Garcia, “Keeping Up With... Critical Librarianship”; Lamble, “Community,” 108.

31 Lamble, “Community,” 108.

32 Eisenhower and Smith, “The Library as ‘Stuck Place,’” 306.

of both colonialism and resistance. Struggles over space are struggles over who gets to author community narratives and in what terms. Historically associated with the “commons” and ideas of “collectivism,” community is about mutual publics, those spaces where we live and work. Rhetorical calls for “community-building” position community as “an antidote to the alienation of modern life”³³ and often to capitalist entrenchment or exploitation of the local. Place is often presented as a counterpoint to ideal communities that replicate oppressive systems, because places can accommodate difference and interaction within and between communities.³⁴ In her work on community, Young introduces an “unoppressive city” as the optimal political environment that allows for the kind of “temporal and spatial distancing and differentiation that ... the ideal of community seeks to collapse.”³⁵ The rise of online communities, #critlib among them, have problematized the assumption that communities are local and that discourse within communities should be unencumbered by power dynamics, which, as I’ve already argued, is impossible in any context. Anthropologists Wilson and Peterson question whether online communities are “too ephemeral to investigate as communities per se” and ultimately draw parallels between online communities and speech communities which don’t rely on geographic proximity but share “communicative competence and repertoires.”³⁶

In spite of the fact that the #critlib community is dispersed (and possibly ephemeral), #critlib has been referred to as “a gathering place.”³⁷ The inability for #critlib to rhetorically dispense entirely with place is not unique—references to place can be found all over the internet from chat rooms to Facebook walls. However, designating place as the defining feature of the #critlib community may have something to do with the privileging of local and situated communication by both activists and critical pedagogy scholars. In his seminal text, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire discusses the importance of “situationality” in teaching and emphasizes, “the contextual, geographical conditions that shape people and the actions people take to shape these conditions.”³⁸ Of course, critical library praxis does occur in situated, local contexts and in this way, #critlib and other online communities (and perhaps even speech communities) may be viewed as meta-critical spaces (if

33 Lamble, “Community,” 105.

34 Young, “The Ideal of Community,” 20.

35 Young, “The Ideal of Community,” 20.

36 Wilson and Peterson, “The Anthropology of Online Communities,” 456, 459.

37 Kelly McElroy @kellymce Twitter post, March 31, 2015, 9:20 p.m., <https://twitter.com/kellymce/>

38 Freire, *Pedagogy*, 109; David A. Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place,” *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 4 (2003): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3700002>.

not physical places) whose local, institutional practices can be analyzed. Additionally, both speech communities and virtual communities have the capacity to “spill over” into local contexts and shape individual and collective action—a phenomenon that can be observed in prominent political and social justice campaigns like the #occupy and #blacklivesmatter movements.³⁹

Place and displacement also play key roles in library scholarship, particularly in terms of defining the shifting role and future of libraries in the context of broader geographic communities. Borrowing a concept from post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhaba, LIS scholar James Elmborg posits that in between the “conceived spaces” that characterize the traditional library and the “representational ... directly lived spaces, created in the imaginations of people in their immediate contact with the world” there is a ‘third space’ that exists at the ‘borderland’ between spaces conceived and imagined.⁴⁰ While I’m fairly certain that Twitter isn’t the “third space” that Elmborg refers to, the space of #critlib may be similarly conceived as a “borderland” that can accommodate conflict, cultural difference, the real, and the imaginary.⁴¹

#critlib at the Borderland

Like Elmborg’s borderland, #critlib is produced by the clash and comingling of institutional realities, dialogic traditions, and imaginaries. In his exploration of race and “practicality” in librarianship, David James Hudson makes the instability and precariousness of “craft[ing] alternate spaces of anti-racist critical practice in our field” plain when he compels us to “interrogat[e] the assumptions about the location of intellectual life and critical analysis” and to engage in critical work that “hinges on translation across contexts of critical practice.”⁴² Hudson reminds us here that theory is a form of practice, that criticism is itself a site of contestation, and that critique—if it can actually disrupt entrenched oppression—must seek new forms of expression and be carried “across contexts.”⁴³

There is ample evidence #critlib participants view #critlib itself as a site of critical tension and metacriticism as a cornerstone of #critlib discourse.

39 Cho et al., “What Twitter Will and Will Not Do,” 56.

40 James K. Elmborg, “Libraries as the Spaces between Us: Recognizing and Valuing the Third Space,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (2011): 344, <https://journals.ala.org/index.php/rusq/article/view/3297/3497>.

41 Elmborg, “Libraries as the Space between Us,” 345.

42 David James Hudson, “The Whiteness of Practicality,” in *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, ed. Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017), 206.

43 Hudson, “Whiteness of Practicality,” 206.

In a June 2015 Twitter chat on the topic of “critiquing critlib” several librarians who are regular participants in social media #critlib conversations took on the problems of exclusion. The following exchange took place in response to the question “Is the terminology used by #critlib a barrier to entry?”:

@edrabinski:

#critlib I actually also see very few names dropped in this space, either people or theories.

@AprilHathcock:

@edrabinski That’s true. But frm the convo it’s clear every1 has done common reading/studying byond Gdoc. Even if names not named. #critlib

@edrabinski:

@AprilHathcock I don’t know if that’s even true, actually. Could be the nature of framed questions, maybe? #critlib

@AprilHathcock:

@edrabinski Hm, that’s been my exp. I’ve had noprob findng the common thread & readng up but it’s def there. Hard 2 see frm inside. #critlib

@edrabinski:

@AprilHathcock and from which inside. I think there are multiple insides. I don’t feel inside all of #critlib at all.

@papersquared:

@AprilHathcock @edrabinski There’s an inside?
#stillstandingoutside #critlib⁴⁴

There are several ways to read this exchange. The ‘multiple insides’ referenced here may be an implicit rejection of “community as ... normative ideal” and an attempt to define community through an embrace of what Young and other feminist theorists have called “a politics of difference.”⁴⁵ This exchange could be read as an example of the kind of “critical relationship to a community” that is “an important mode of participation” and an “ethical practice” that can lead to a continual re-negotiation of boundaries, infrastructure, and

44 Emily Drabinski @edrabinski Twitter post, June 30, 2015, 9:20 p.m.- 9:28 p.m., <https://twitter.com/edrabinski/>; Fearless Black Woman @AprilHathcock Twitter post, June 30, 2015, 9:22 p.m.- 9:25 p.m., <https://twitter.com/AprilHathcock/>; Carolyn Ciesla @papersquared Twitter post, [private user account].

45 Young, “The Ideal of Community,” 2.

membership.⁴⁶ This exchange could just as easily be read as an attempt by members of a “community” who value difference and critique to negotiate their own place within it or align themselves with the invoked “others” experiencing “barriers to entry.” Finally, if #critlib is a community that doesn’t just embrace alterity but fetishizes it, then asserting one’s status as outsider might be read as a performative effort to be perceived as an authentic participant in the community. The multiple potential readings of this exchange demonstrates both the generative possibility of critique and the possibility for translation across contexts—in this case, from Twitter into the realm of scholarship. This exchange also begins to illustrate how community interactions, particularly those conducted in “multisited situations” that are “flui[d]” and “transloca[l],”⁴⁷ might begin to produce new communicative strategies that implicitly challenge the prevailing “critical norms”⁴⁸ that leave us with “no vocabulary for political or social transformation.”⁴⁹

We can observe a more explicitly performative meta-critical exchange in #critlibconfessions, which was a short-lived forum for addressing and confessing “a buncha stuff I don’t know/don’t understand” about critical theory, the #critlib community, and the methods / mediums for exchange.⁵⁰ Critical librarians used #critlibconfessions to highlight their own subjectivity—particularly in instances where it diverged from perceived community expectations in terms of participation (“I’m just a lurker #critlibconfessions”), theoretical background (“i still don’t really know what neoliberalism means #critlibconfessions”), and cultural stereotypes (“critlibconfessions I don’t really like cats that much”).⁵¹ These testimonials are less a mode of dialogic exchange—“pls note I’m not looking for explanation. Just gonna sit in my ignorance bc IT’S OKAY. #critlibconfessions”—and more a mechanism for expression.⁵² Most of the #critlibconfessions are intentionally affective, embodying the paradox

46 Joseph, *Against the Romance*, ix.

47 Wilson and Peterson, “The Anthropology of Online Communities,” 455–6.

48 Dustin Bradley Goltz, “The Critical-Norm: The Performativity of Critique and the Potentials of Performance,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2013): 38.

49 Giroux, “Public Pedagogy,” 8.

50 Fearless Black Woman @AprilHathcock Twitter post, May 24, 2016, 9:58 a.m., <https://twitter.com/AprilHathcock/>.

51 Elizabeth Joan Kelly @ElizabethJelly Twitter post, May 24, 2016, 9:36 p.m., <https://twitter.com/ElizabethJelly/>; christmas ape @brinepond Twitter post, May 24, 2016, 10:09 a.m., <https://twitter.com/brinepond/>; Violet Fox @violetbfox Twitter post, May 24, 2016, 11:18 a.m., <https://twitter.com/violetbfox/>.

52 Fearless Black Woman @AprilHathcock Twitter post, May 24, 2016, 9:59 a.m., <https://twitter.com/AprilHathcock/>.

that is a public confessional, capitalizing on the power of play to call out some of the more utopian aims projected upon the #critlib community (“#critlibconfessions I am skeptical that librarians will be able to make pos. social changes bc being an establishment apologist pays more”) and the Twitter platform (“Twitter chats as a medium feel like drinking from AND showering in a firehose as I watch video of firehoses on my phone. #critlibconfessions.”)⁵³ Even in performative social contexts where discourses are shaped by technocratic constraints and social power dynamics, it is clear that virtual community interactions can be generative and critically useful. These metacritical exchanges also illustrate that the #critlib community is one “constantly in a state of flow and flux” and one that is produced through (rather than diminished by) “the tensions, conflicts and challenges that arise.”⁵⁴ These features of #critlib affirm that it is possible to conceive of the dialogic space of the community as a kind of borderland where “spaces conceived and imagined”⁵⁵ modulate and intersect.

#critlib, Performance, and Praxis

The dialogic and theoretical work of #critlib participants can be characterized as a kind of “performance to stage arguments, to embody knowledge and politics, to open a community to itself and the world in ways that are dangerous, visceral, compelling, and moving.”⁵⁶ It remains unclear whether participation in #critlib Twitter conversations can constitute embodiment, which by definition requires corporeality. It is also unclear whether performative interaction in virtual, ephemeral contexts where audiences are both real and imagined constitutes praxis, which Freire defines as a combination of “*reflection* and *action* directed at the structures to be transformed” [emphasis mine].⁵⁷ To understand the role of #critlib in effecting social change, we must investigate what exactly characterizes #critlib praxis. An October 2016 #critlib Twitter chat on the history of critical librarianship considered whether or not participation in #critlib is a form of action:

53 Neil Breen Librarian Twitter post, May 24, 2016, 10:12 a.m., https://twitter.com/glam_librarian/;

MARCinaColdClimate @marccold Twitter post, May 24, 2016, 11:25 a.m., <https://twitter.com/marccold/>.

54 Lamble, “Community,” 109.

55 Elmborg, “Libraries as the Spaces Between Us,” 344.

56 Jill Dolan, *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 64.

57 Freire, *Pedagogy*, 126.

@kennygarciamlis:

a lot of folks are active in their own way, don't think #critlib needs to be action-oriented.

@aboutness:

@kennygarciamlis Agreed! Plus, I've seen it be very effective in bringing people together to undertake actions. #critlib.⁵⁸

This exchange raises questions about whether organizing—“the effort to build individual capacity, civic engagement, and a level of group consciousness and a sense of efficacy that will enable a collectivity to mobilize for action”—is not itself a form of action.⁵⁹ Freire makes a distinction between ‘objectification’ as a mode of critical understanding and ‘transformation’ that occurs through ‘labor’ which suggests that critique and forms of scholarship labor are potentially distinct from other forms of embodied action like teaching or protest.⁶⁰ In an interview about intersections of social justice and art, playwright Tony Kushner differentiates political theater from the “arena of political engagement” which he argues can be transformed by “organizing, resisting, doing what one can to advance liberationist, progressive, multiculturalist, egalitarian agendas.”⁶¹ Perhaps in theory like theater, the important difference between action and reflection is not embodiment but the arena (or the contested site) in (or through) which intervention occurs

Within the various sites where #critlib operates the “critical-norms” of institutional, community, and digital arenas can “undercut the potentials of performance” and performative intervention.⁶² We see this most explicitly at work in professional and institutional spaces where these “critical norms” become the mechanisms that disparage radicalism, neutralize critique, and obfuscate difference. While Maura Seale describes the institutionalization of critical librarianship as potentially “productive” in that “it leads to recognition, legitimacy, and can help enact institutional change,” she also cautions that institutionalization “forecloses other possibilities and

58 Kenny Garcia @kennygarciamlis Twitter post, October 11, 2016, 9:00 p.m., <https://twitter.com/kennygarciamlis/>; Tina Gross @aboutness Twitter post, October 11, 2016, 9:02 p.m., <https://twitter.com/aboutness/>.

59 Tarlau, “From a Language to a Theory,” 378–9.

60 Freire, *Pedagogy*, 125.

61 Tony Kushner et al., “How Do You Make Social Change?,” *Theater* 31, no. 3 (2001): 63, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/34175/31.3artists_state.pdf.

62 Goltz, “The Critical-Norm: The Performativity of Critique,” 38.

manages into nonexistence opposition it cannot absorb.”⁶³ In her work on institutionalization and diversity, Sara Ahmed echoes this warning when she equates the “institutional” with the invisible and suggests that to engage in processes of institutional change, we must first “attend to how institutional realities become given” and “consider the work of creating institutions as part of institutional work.”⁶⁴ If institutional spaces are contested sites then #critlib participants must reckon with the fact that the work of dismantling institutions from within is also the work that creates the institution. If dismantling is also a kind of creation, how then can our critical work confront injustice and in what ways are critical efforts to remake institutional and professional cultures subsumed by or rendered invisible within institutional and professional environments?

To get around the limits of “critical norms” performance theorist Dustin Goltz argues we must imbue “our theory [with] a little more embodiment, relationality, contextualization, and chaos” and ultimately consider “how can ... theory put its body on the line?”⁶⁵ The answer, Hudson quietly contends, is that it already does:

Somewhere a Frantz Fanon scholar is spending grant money on addressing the built-in obsolescence of their laptop, the rare earth in the guts of which have been plundered from the ground in the new scramble for Africa; [...] somewhere a theorist of settler colonial economic formations is falling asleep on the train en route to a precarious adjunct gig an hour and a half from home, the text of the conference proposal in their lap blurring like the landscape outside.⁶⁶

Theory, with its “complex far-reaching physical entanglements,” is always already the kind of embodied labor that can create institutions and reshape institutional culture.⁶⁷ Once we recognize that institutional production is dialogic, we might begin by resisting discursive modes that are easily subsumed and embark on a search for new “forms of expression that elude easy classification” including storytelling, performance, and protest.⁶⁸ We also might engage in critical labor that involves the collective production and dissemination of new “forms of expression” that can lead to systemic institutional change.

63 Seale, “Institutionalizing Critical Librarianship.”

64 Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 21.

65 Goltz, “The Critical-Norm: The Performativity of Critique,” 38, 39.

66 Hudson, “The Whiteness of Practicality,” 225.

67 Hudson, “The Whiteness of Practicality,” 225.

68 Hudson, “The Whiteness of Practicality,” 225.

#critlib and Activism

While I've established theory as a form of practice and dialogue as performative, I haven't yet addressed whether theory might also constitute a kind of activism. #critlib has arguably influenced the practice of librarianship and has gained traction in professional spaces, but there is less evidence of the kind of cross-community organizing that characterizes other forms of social activism. Unlike #critlib—which has largely focused on transforming professional spaces, redefining library scholarship, and sharing ideas—other progressive library projects like the Radical Reference collective have engaged in public activism beyond libraries by “forming partnerships [with alternative media outlets, local organizations, and activists] that embrace the places where we share ideals, needs, and solutions.”⁶⁹ In a similar vein, the Interference Archive collective provides a forum for organizing, access to the “repertoires of contention” that have worked in the past, and evidence that alternative institutional models work. Like libraries, such projects often begin by defining the community they intend to serve, which might be as specific as “progressive activists and independent journalists” at the 2004 Republican National Convention or as nebulous as “the community that believes in what we're doing.”⁷⁰ Projects like Radical Reference and the Interference Archive also serve to “prove by example that the prevailing mechanistic, atomized and positivist model of society is untrue and that ‘the market’ which supposedly is the sole possible framework for human endeavor is not the necessary mediator for organized and effective human interaction, progress and development.”⁷¹ The now defunct People's Library of Occupy Wall Street represented a similar prefigurative attempt to not only provide information to a specific community of activists but also to confirm the cultural importance of “access to an information commons” and the “right to such access” in the face of corporate corruption and neoliberal governance.⁷² Perhaps these kinds of activist projects are beyond the scope of the #critlib community or perhaps #critlib is too dispersed, too institutionally rooted, or not quite real enough.

69 Morrone and Friedman, “Radical Reference,” 394.

70 Morrone and Friedman, “Radical Reference,” 372; “Our Mission,” *Interference Archive*, accessed December 9, 2016, <http://interferencearchive.org/>

71 Rosenzweig, “The Basis of a Humanist,” 41.

72 Jaime Taylor and Zachary Loeb, “Librarian Is My Occupation: A History of the People's Library of Occupy Wall Street,” in *Informed Agitation: Library and Information Skills in Social Justice Movements and Beyond*, ed. Melissa Morrone (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2014), 274–5.

Or perhaps #critlib conceives of its project as a means to share information and develop new discursive practices (and models for translation across contexts) that empower librarians to reshape professional practice within their institutions, not as a direct vehicle for collective action. However, within the scope of the #critlib project, critical explorations of “academic fields of knowledge and their origins in and connections to social movements might actually reshape cultural meanings” and transform cultural practices by extension.⁷³ Education scholar Rebecca Tarlau argues for the necessity of “organizational thinking in order to build a framework for understanding how dispersed educational projects might lead to social change” and pinpoints several tools that critical pedagogues might adopt from the realm of social movement theory including: “the concept of *indigenous networks*,” “the *political opportunity structures* at any given historical moment,” “the *repertoires of contention* that have been historically successful,” and “the *framing* perspective.”⁷⁴ By adopting elements of social movement theory and studying the structures that underlie cross-community activism #critlib participants could generate new discursive strategies to get around the “critical norms” that limit possibilities for institutional transformation. The theoretical frameworks that inform #critlib scholarship and the meta-critical conversations occurring within the #critlib community on Twitter produce important dialogic tools that #critlib participants can carry into other contested sites. At the very least, Twitter—in spite of (or perhaps because of) its rhetorical constraints and commercial entanglements—might be a medium that teaches #critlib participants how to “shap[e] new political subjectivities” and “diffuse new dynamics of activism” from within a conflicted environment.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Instead of trying to pin #critlib to reality or interrogate the boundaries of the #critlib community, we might argue that this emancipatory theoretical project must ultimately strive to spill over, engage, connect, organize, and critically equip community members and institutional allies. In a discussion of critical pedagogy and utopianism, theorist Ilan Gur-Ze’ev calls critique “a prayer that cannot change the world, but allows transcendence from it.”⁷⁶

⁷³ Dolan, *Geographies of Learning*, 3.

⁷⁴ Tarlau, “From a Language to a Theory,” 382, 390. Italicized emphasis in original.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey S. Juris, “Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation,” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 2 (2012): 260.

⁷⁶ Gur-Ze’ev, “Toward a Nonrepressive,” 486.

In the face of social injustice this might seem like a cop-out because it fails to illuminate a clear path forward. However, action-oriented, utopian projects that “try to leave behind the parts that don’t work”⁷⁷ often fail to adequately address or confront the social conditions that cause injustice or to present a realistic method for transforming oppressive systems. Our work, if it is effective, must be critically informed, dialogically inventive, and messily entrenched within the systems we are working to change. Thus, our work will also be flawed and scrutinized, will perennially (and paradoxically) exist both within and against shifting socio-political forces and power dynamics, and will, likely, never be finished.

But today, in libraries and universities, critical librarians are pushing back against institutional and cultural oppression in the small strategic ways they can. Some of them will get on Twitter to share their experiences or to organize and some of them will contribute to the growing body of scholarship about critical librarianship. Some of them will introduce a new idea at a library conference or start a conversation with a colleague in the stacks of their own library. Collectively, these librarians will develop new ways to think and talk about what librarianship is and does and should do. Many of these librarians will change the way they approach their work because, as a dialogic community and a site of contestation, #critlib reminds us that our work makes (and has the capacity to remake) our institutions and our communities.

⁷⁷ Taylor and Zachary Loeb, “Librarian Is My Occupation,” 274.

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