

Interview

Dialogue: Shorish and Nowviskie

Yasmeen Shorish and Bethany Nowviskie

ABSTRACT

This dialogue offers perspectives from two differently-positioned library leaders on their collaborative work to advance equity and racial justice in the context of a predominantly white academic library and educational technology organization. Topics covered include issues of scale and temporality in reckoning with structural racism; developing a workplace culture that supports growth and learning while mitigating harm; building and sustaining community both within and beyond formal institutions; developing personal and organizational accountability; and challenges in the use of data for assessing progress and working authentically toward change.

Shorish, Yasmeen and Bethany Nowviskie. "Dialogue: Shorish and Nowviskie," in "Library and Information Studies and the Mattering of Black Lives," eds. Tonia Sutherland, Michelle Caswell, Safiya Umoja Noble, and Sarah T. Roberts. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 4, no. 1 (2022). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v4i1.167>.

ISSN: 2572-1364

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Bethany Nowviskie became dean of the James Madison University (JMU) Libraries and Senior Academic Technology Officer for JMU—a large, predominantly white, public institution in Virginia. In 2020, Yasmeen Shorish, a longtime faculty member in the JMU Libraries, took on the dual roles of Head of Scholarly Communications Strategies and Special Advisor to the Dean for Equity Initiatives. Shorish is an Afghan American cis-hetero woman. The foundation of her identity—her family—includes expatriates, Black Americans, US veterans, refugees, and casualties of war. Nowviskie is a white, cis-hetero woman from a working-class Appalachian and Eastern European immigrant family background. Working closely together, they map out paths to a more equitable future for their organization and the communities it strives to benefit.

THE INTERVIEW

Yasmeen Shorish: You’ve been writing about and doing the work of challenging established, harmful power relationships for some time. How much recalibration of that work did you need to do when you became a Dean of Libraries? I have often found it almost easier to do this work in an association or a group rather than at my home institution, and I don’t think that is a unique experience for many of us in libraries and archives who are trying to effect change.

Bethany Nowviskie: And now your home institution is mine, too! That’s a really interesting question, and I like your term “recalibration” because it pushes us out of a mode in which I might tell you how this transition back into a university setting has *felt* to me. (We’ve spent enough time centering the feelings of white women in LIS.) “Recalibration” speaks in a more instrumental way, to the *mechanisms that work best* and the *impact of the adjustments* so many of us are perpetually having to make as we turn our attention back and forth between our own organizations and the broader communities of practice they’re a part of, which function at different scales.

There’s a particular valence to disruptive and reparative work that happens on the local rather than a field-wide scale—in my experience, anyway, as someone who has had various roles in university libraries and also brought a transformation agenda to a digital humanities professional association and then a digital library coalition. There’s no doubt that the work takes on a *different kind of affect* at your home institution. I think that’s partly because of the closeness of the interpersonal and professional relationships all around you: the degree to which you and your colleagues come to know each other as people, which brings very localized kinds of empathy or frustration into play. It also has to do with the *immediacy* of the power relations in all directions—how they can lock into place around you, *personally and positionally* in the local organization (rather than

around the set of ideas you're trying to advance in the broader field), especially when you find you need to push for something out of the ordinary to happen, to push for change.

I often see people who are deeply appreciated in the field being punished at home—for saying the *exact same thing!* It can be hard to come to terms with the fact that your own ideological consistency might be working against your local goals, and to figure out how to adjust the mechanics of your message without losing its essential character and betraying its truth.

YS: “Adjust the mechanics of your message...” I could probably have used some work there in the past. Can you expand on that?

BN: There's a rhetorical dimension, for sure. But... *mechanics*. This is where I think your “recalibration” concept comes into play and, if you'll tolerate an extended metaphor, it makes me think of clocks.

We're tempted to assume there's a deep similarity to the work we do on systems of power and white supremacy at *whatever* scale, because we recognize the pervasiveness and replicability of those very structures. Imagine a gear in a pocket watch. It wouldn't fit a grandfather clock. But it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume it's structurally and functionally the same, with the same set of tensions acting on it and interrelations with other parts, as a corresponding gear in the larger system. You'd recognize it as part of a timepiece, and it's not hard to imagine scaling it up—or one from the grandfather clock further down—appropriately. So, if it's functioning in the way you want it to, you have a seeming template. And this tricks us into thinking it is all a matter of scale.

Open up the clocks and really start examining their mechanisms, though, and it's a different story. Here you've got a spring. There you've got a pendulum. The grandfather clock is designed to stay upright. The pocket-watch has to tolerate being flipped any which way. *There are structural consequences to where power and momentum lie.* So, the materials, the positioning, and the specific connections of your gear might have to change in order to support (or counter-balance) essentially the same function.

This means that if you've got something that's working at one scale, exerting a good kind of pressure and making some wheels turn, you can probably re-engineer it with careful attention to the surrounding conditions of the other. Well and good. But the real challenge is what happens (to take a page from Rasheedah Phillips, whose work on Black Quantum Futurism¹ has been a huge influence on me) when you start to question whether that template for a timepiece—whether *what has been ticking along for so many years*—is what we really need at all.

¹ Digital Library Federation, “Rasheedah Phillips,” DLF Forum 2017: 23-25 October, Pittsburgh, PA, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://forum2017.diglib.org/speakers/rasheedah-phillips/>.

YS: I loved Rasheedah Phillips' keynote at the 2017 Digital Library Federation Forum and her assertion that this devotion to time and punctuality can take on a value status for those who covet it, or it can be weaponized against those who live their lives alongside time and not in direct relation to it.²

BN: Exactly! This is a way of thinking about Black futures, Black flourishing and thriving that Phillips calls "dismantling the master clock." I think it's helpful not just for interrogating underlying colonial frameworks like Western time (which, as you share, is one major focus of Black Quantum Futurism³), but for imagining how we'd assemble radically different, more generative libraries and so-called memory institutions and how we'd collectively build new ways of being in the disciplines and fields and communities that converge here. Why? Because we work in a space that's all about messing with time: about the histories we elevate and the futures we make possible or foreclose.

Yasmeen, I'm curious if this resonates with you, or feels way too abstract compared to the work you're taking on in your new, dual roles at JMU. You and I have been talking a lot lately about how to balance the need for *quick, visible motion and crystal-clear messaging* around scholarly communication and other justice and equity related initiatives, with the understanding that dismantling systems of oppression and putting critically-informed, alternative structures in their place is truly the work of generations. A lot of it happens in bureaucratic systems and slow, relational, and interpersonal efforts behind the scenes. How do you keep from getting stuck or overwhelmed?

YS: It does resonate, for a few reasons. Firstly, I think the analogy about clockworks and scale is really on point. The systems are different, and we'll need different approaches to have a maximal impact. Secondly, I think we *need some of this abstraction* to clearly see the complex, insidious, and engrained structures that hold libraries (and schools and governments) back from being liberatory and just systems. Yes, I am a concrete-thinking and action-driven, impatient person who believes that our work must have visible outcomes in order to be of value, but it's not either/or. We must think expansively about the problem so that we can most effectively identify which levers can have a quick effect,

² Rasheedah Phillips, "Creating Communal Space-Times, Activating Quantum Time Capsules" (Keynote address, DLF Forum, Pittsburgh, PA, October 23-25, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAjX2h7OGCQ>.

³ Rasheedah Phillips, "Organize Your Own Temporality: Notes on Self-Determined Temporalities and Radical Futurities in Liberation Movements," *Organize Your Own: An Exhibition and Event Series About the Politics and Poetics of Self-Determination Movements* (blog), July 3, 2017, <https://organizeyourown.wordpress.com/2017/07/03/organize-your-own-temporality-by-rasheedah-phillips/>.

even if it's a relatively shallow treatment, and which structures will require slower, measured, and deliberate effort to dismantle.

For example, we can quickly revise or revoke a policy that has exclusive or harmful implications. That will have an immediate benefit to the community. But then we also need to have some interrogation of why that policy was implemented: what values were being promulgated by it and whose experiences? And here is where the work at an institution, rather than an association, is so much harder. Because here is where we get into the culture of a workplace and whose culture is centered as the valued and primary concern.

BN: Yes! This feels like a great encapsulation of the work we're trying to do here, on the local scale: to identify those levers of change and pull them, for people's immediate benefit—while building broader recognition, within the Libraries and at JMU, that *only doing that* and leaving the rest of the structure in place is not the goal (and nothing to be self-congratulatory about). Please say more about the impact on libraries of that default centering: “whose culture is centered and valued.”

YS: Academic libraries in the US exist, by and large, as white spaces designed by white people, for white people, to study and support the culture of White America and thereby affirm and reinforce white supremacy. So now we must reconcile a legally desegregated America that gives lip service to equality and unity with the America that has done zero reparative work to the scars and structures from its past, and we somehow expect that our workplace cultures will naturally take on inclusive practices? And more than that, that these spaces will naturally incorporate Black-affirming culture?

This is where I get revved up for action because it's so *unjust* to live in this reality. But yes, the work of building more equitable and just knowledge systems and practices—as I am trying to do in my work with scholarly communication—is the work of decades. You ask about getting stuck and feeling overwhelmed by the scope of the problem and the timescale. It's honestly inevitable. I try to view it as waves of despair that wash over us but don't pull us under. Some days those waves are bigger than others, but I find buoyancy in the work and support of others.

Systems favor stasis and will exert energy to maintain it. Dismantling anti-Black racism is a threat to that stasis and one person working alone in any environment, regardless of the scale, will be crushed by the system. Building community to do this work is critical, and then doing the work to sustain the community is the commitment. Sometimes these are formalized communities, like the light that is *We Here*,⁴ and other times they can be more diffuse, like a community of researchers or activists addressing a common topic.

⁴ We Here, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://www.wehere.space/>.

Here I want to draw in ideas that Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom brought up in her recent keynote at ACRL 2021.⁵ Her insightful call to action, or “provocation” as she called it, pinpointed information capitalism as a means of oppression and disenfranchisement, and she identified academic librarians as keenly positioned to disrupt that system. She urged us to develop a human-centered code of data rights and view our engagement in the information marketplace through a justice lens. When you reflect on her words, the entrenched white supremacy of libraries and of capitalism, and the thoughtful work that we are doing to dismantle it using a framework of care, what does that action look like to you?

BN: First, it means finding principled collaborators who never ask a small or easy question! Thank you for being one of those people in my life.

One of the many things I love about *We Here* (speaking as an outside investor) is how fundamental the recognition is—how baked into the concept—that all the other activities of the community have to be rooted in a safe, caring, collective, and protected space in which BIPOC library and archives workers are centered, not “included.” Inclusion and diversity rhetoric has become so shallow in administrative spheres. This is why I was excited when you proposed a primary focus on *equity initiatives* as defining both your scholarly communications leadership (you know, your day job) and what you wanted to bring to organizational and campus conversations in the additional role of Special Advisor.

So, to get back to the beginning of our conversation about mechanisms, but also pick up on that notion of “a framework of care” that is really, explicitly overt in the way I’m trying to lead our Libraries: I see the things that establishment professional organizations do, even at vastly larger scales (like run a journal or contribute to other kinds of knowledge production, offer learning opportunities and networking functions, etc.) taking on a really different quality in a space like *We Here*. Their BIPOC-first approach feels not simply like a necessary counterweight to those old, ticking clock-gears of the white supremacist—and eugenicist, and colonial—system we’ve got going in libraries, archives, and museums, but rather like the start of a whole new mechanism: something more likely to offer generative, healthy counter-structures for people to gravitate to and advance all kinds of work. We don’t even know yet what that work can be. What LIS and cultural heritage will look like in collectives so organized, protected, and run. I guess I see both of what you call “formalized” and “diffuse” activity happening in spaces organized around an ethic of care and a fundamental stance toward Black flourishing and joy: the

⁵ Lisa Peet, “Keynoter Tressie McMillan Cottom Talks Human-Centered Data Rights and Pragmatic Hope,” *Library Journal*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=Keynoter-Tressie-McMillan-Cottom-Talks-Human-Centered-Data-Rights-and-Pragmatic-Hope-ACRL-2021>.

work of more *life-giving community-building*, which is a precondition to the kind of *world-changing work* that Dr. Cottom is calling for.

Something like *We Here* looks like a clock. But I think it's a time machine. The people who really step into it are the ones I want leading us to the future. Is that too wacky? What do we need to talk about next?

YS: Okay, here is where I will push us from the conceptual and abstract notions of dismantling and futurism and ask you about the point where good work can fall apart: accountability. This is baked into the ethics of care: responsibility and competence. I think some of the hard work we have ahead of us involves building a sense of responsibility *across* our organization while we also nurture and grow the competencies needed to meet that responsibility.

I know we are not alone in this challenge. Where are you looking for aid in this work, in terms of concrete activities? Because we both know that “diversity trainings” aren't it...

BN: Yes, let's get down to brass tacks. We need accountability at all levels, and that requires clarity about a number of things. First, in my view, is the moral clarity that work toward racial equity is *necessary* for libraries, that it's integral to meeting our complex and crucial missions and advancing our organizational strategies—not some extra thing, nice to have, relevant only to some (some employee roles, some sectors of the community...). *It is the work.*

I cite that moral clarity as a “concrete activity” because it has to stay at the forefront of internal and external communications, and that requires daily action. If this kind of clarity from senior leadership is in place, then I think it becomes easier to understand why certain baseline competencies and fluencies are necessary, increasingly applying to *everyone* in the organization since everyone is connected to the mission. And it becomes clearer why we must have much higher expectations of our leaders at all levels. For white leaders, especially, this requires a humility and perpetual learning stance around how to foster greater equity—and for everyone it means being staunch and building stamina and acumen around the work to dismantle oppressive systems. All of those competencies and expectations have to be defined and kept in front of people. But I also think they have to be laid out in such a way as to foster a growth and learning mindset for everybody. Both are part of a caring approach: the clarity and the space for growth. Some people will find it a struggle to get to the merest baseline, while what we might set as “high expectations” will seem far too unambitious to others. Everybody enters at a different spot.

But that's all about *personal* accountability and change. We also need concrete measures of progress at the organizational scale, connected to the various responsibilities we have as a university library. Data is a necessity in all of this: but I think a radically different kind of data, or stance toward data, than we have traditionally collected and

tracked and used. I want to hear what you, as a former data librarian, think about our best bets for new measures.

Before you answer that, though, I'll say I'm finding value right now in a couple of general assessment frameworks. The first is one that was meaningful to me when I worked in a non-profit, and that is the Western States Center's "anti-racist organizational development tool."⁶ It's kind of unstinting. It's just a table, but it helps you pinpoint where your organization sits on a scale from "all white club," through "token or affirmative action organization" and "multi-cultural organization" to a truly "anti-racist organization"—by looking at factors like how decisions are made, where the money comes from and who you're accountable to, and the power structures, programs, and general culture in your org. I'm also interested in Racial Equity Impact Assessments (REIAs),⁷ like one recently done by the Chicago Department of Housing to examine possible impacts and mitigate harm in designing new programs.⁸ This strikes me as the most missing element, or point of awareness, in most "diversity" programs in libraries and higher education—their self-awareness about a likelihood to do harm alongside the good.

And just to mention one more framework that reminds me of our clocks: I've recently started digging into a report by *Equity in the Center* on seven "levers" (or strategic elements to leverage) that they've identified for building organizational momentum toward a racial equity. These are things like the role of senior leadership, of managers, of the learning environment you create, etc. The report is called "Awake to Woke to Work," and *data* is both one of the seven levers itself and a factor that sits within each of the other six.⁹ In other words, the way data is used and understood (by managers, by senior leaders, within your culture of learning) is part of how you measure whether your organization is simply awake to the problem of inequity, getting more and more woke, or actually doing the *work* to address it.

Anyway, data. How are you thinking about data as part of the mutual and organizational accountability we need to build?

⁶ Sarah Natchipolsky, "Where Does Your Organization Fall on the Scale of Anti-racism?" National Juvenile Justice Network, July 30, 2020, <https://njjn.org/article/where-does-your-organization-fall-on-the-scale-of-anti-racism-->, accessed March 19, 2022.

⁷ The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Race Forward, *Racial Equity Impact Assessment* (Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, May 10, 2009), <https://www.aecf.org/resources/racial-equity-impact-assessment/>, accessed March 19, 2022.

⁸ City of Chicago. "The Chicago Department of Housing Announces New Racial Equity Focus for Affordable Housing Resources," March 15, 2021, <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/doh/provdrs/developers/news/2021/march/the-chicago-department-of-housing-announces-new-racial-equity-fo.html>, accessed March 19, 2022.

⁹ Equity in the Center, *Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture*, 2020, <https://equityinthecenter.org/aww/>.

YS: Once a data librarian, always a data librarian! While I recognize the need to have data as a way to measure progress and assert accountability, I find it the relationship between anti-racism and data gathering and use awkward. Most likely, this is because data has become a commodity in many ways and is a key component to racial capitalism. Using it as a tool towards liberation requires special focus and attention, or else we risk treating it like time: something to weaponize or fetishize. So, I share some skepticism with respect to how institutions start implementing data-driven assessment in DEI or anti-racist efforts. Like you said, we need to think about the data differently.

BN: Wow, yes! Excellent point. Jessica Marie Johnston makes a similar argument with regard to scholarly and bureaucratic use of data—and the commodification of Black lives from archives of the Transatlantic slave trade to the digital humanities—in one of the best essays I know. It’s called “Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads.”¹⁰ She theorizes Black digital practice, and how it understands the connection between data and embodiment, data and *humanity*, as something truly transformative and liberatory and intimate and almost standing outside of time. That’s a stance toward data that institutions—historically white-led institutions particularly—are just not equipped to take. Say more about data in our context.

YS: Well, if we’re going to use data to help determine progress, we must have clarity around the variables to be measured, the limitations of those variables, and the ways that we will manage unknowns. This is foundational research design stuff, but I don’t think libraries and archives apply this lens to themselves very successfully—mainly because there is a lack of acknowledgement about the limitations and biases of the *variables*. Because, as I mentioned, academic libraries are generally white spaces, the variables exist in that context of whiteness as well. How do you measure for diversity and inclusion in one of the most homogenous professional fields? How do we define those terms and set markers for what progress looks like? Is moving from zero to one (of whatever variable) progress? Is it satisfactory progress? These are the kinds of questions we need organizations to ask of themselves, with respect to data.

With respect to actually becoming anti-racist, I think organizations need to ask if that is truly the goal. Are the people who work in libraries prepared to accept different ways of knowing, doing, speaking? Are they prepared to adjust norms and expectations in order to create more equitable, inclusive, and diverse environments? Will they actively interrogate their work, assumptions, and culture to create less oppressive futures? Very

¹⁰ Jessica Marie Johnson, “Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads,” *Social Text* 36, no. 4 (2018): 57-79, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7145658>.

likely, no. Not without a mandate from leadership *and* peers. This work must be co-created and co-facilitated. The personal accountability you talked about will drive organizational change and vice versa. That's part of what makes this work seem hard to engage with; it's a process of co-development and working from the inside-out and the outside-in simultaneously, echoing your observation that we need both formalized and diffuse activities. Our structures, systems, and bureaucracies are not built for this coordination.

So yes, the data can surface things that may be relatively easy to conceptualize, and then provide a mechanism to pull an organization together towards a common goal (i.e., improve variable X). But the *will to change*, the desire for self-interrogation and action, that must come from another place. That comes from community-building and sharing. Empathy. A desire for justice. These are much, much harder concepts (let alone actions!) because they take time to authentically generate. They take unlearning some things and relearning others.

I think the resources you mention are a part of that process, but so too is creating the *time and space* for that education, interrogation, and processing of different ways of being in community with one another. This requires care and sharp attention to power dynamics and potentials for harm. It also requires a huge amount of patience on the part of the most marginalized in the organization. Consideration from leadership for how BIPOC colleagues will be shielded from harm as the organization works through its self-education and rebuilding is paramount. That's part of the accountability process too: who is responsible for mitigating harm, how can they be successful, and how will they know if they were?

BN: This resonates with me so much and with all of our conversations about the work we're doing here, both within the libraries and as part of our broader campus struggles in matching intent to awareness and impact. (You know, those conversations where we always *run out of time!*) I'm glad we dug into these ideas by drafting a slightly more formal dialogue. Any last thoughts?

YS: I end this conversation with more questions, I suppose. And what we thought could help us surface ideas and strategies for "dismantling systems of white supremacy and building systems that affirm the importance of Black lives" (as in the special issue's CFP) became more of a manifesto about the ways of thinking and doing that are required to do this work authentically. But maybe that is the most realistic place for many institutions like ours to start: reckon with the histories. Reckon with the systems. Reckon with ourselves. And then be honest about the work (and resources, time, and will) that is necessary to advance justice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Race Forward. *Racial Equity Impact Assessment*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, May 10, 2009. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/racial-equity-impact-assessment/>.
- City of Chicago. "The Chicago Department of Housing Announces New Racial Equity Focus for Affordable Housing Resources," March 15, 2021. <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/doh/provdrs/developers/news/2021/march/the-chicago-department-of-housing-announces-new-racial-equity-fo.html>.
- Equity in the Center. *Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture*. 2020. <https://equityinthecenter.org/aww/>.
- Johnson, Jessica Marie. "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads." *Social Text* 36, no. 4 (2018): 57-79. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7145658>.
- Natchipolsky, Sarah. "Where Does Your Organization Fall on the Scale of Anti-racism?" *National Juvenile Justice Network*, July 30, 2020. <https://njjn.org/article/where-does-your-organization-fall-on-the-scale-of-anti-racism-->.
- Peet, Lisa. "Keynoter Tressie McMillan Cottom Talks Human-Centered Data Rights and Pragmatic Hope." *Library Journal*, April 14, 2021. <https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=Keynoter-Tressie-McMillan-Cottom-Talks-Human-Centered-Data-Rights-and-Pragmatic-Hope-ACRL-2021>.
- Phillips, Rasheedah. "Creating Communal Space-Times, Activating Quantum Time Capsules." Keynote address presented at the DLF Forum, Pittsburg, PA, October 23-25, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAjX2h7OGCQ>.
- Phillips, Rasheedah. "Organize Your Own Temporality: Notes on Self-Determined Temporalities and Radical Futurities in Liberation Movements." *Organize Your Own: An Exhibition and Event Series About the Politics and Poetics of Self-Determination Movements* (blog), July 3, 2017. <https://organizeyourown.wordpress.com/2017/07/03/organize-your-own-temporality-by-rasheedah-phillips/>.
- We Here. Accessed March 16, 2022. <https://www.wehere.space/>.