Interview

It Starts at Home:
Infusing Radical Empathy into Graduate Education[1]

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ABSTRACT

This interview features a conversation between a library and information science educator (Cooke) and three archival and special collections professionals with varying levels of experience in the field (Warren, Brown, and Jackson). Among the goals of this frank conversation is to highlight the lived experiences of practicing archivists and educators and discuss why it is becoming increasingly important to talk about empathy, diversity, equity, and inclusion in greater context. As part of that context, we must discuss the need to continuously infuse these values into graduate education, professional development, research, writing, and peer mentoring. Espousing and implementing an ethics of care is an ongoing and necessary process and commitment—to ourselves, to the information professions, and to our communities.

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[1] Portions of this interview were edited for clarity.

INTRODUCTION

Information professionals of color work in a variety of archival and library settings and have long been cognizant of the whiteness, oppression, and microaggressions that can mar our work and hinder creativity and authenticity in our daily professional lives. We are now in a wonderful phase of being able to have proactive and hard conversations about feminism, queerness, cultural competence, race, anti-racism, whiteness, privilege, ableism, etc., in an effort to more fervently rid the profession of inequality. Chief among these conversations are the roles information professionals (archivists, librarians, and so many others who provide books, artifacts, information, and other services to the public) play as caregivers—caregivers of their communities, and caregivers of one another. It is not hard to agree that this should be a goal, but in reality, there are many information professionals and archivists who do not act as caregivers of their communities. Instead, they may selectively collect, process, and prioritize materials and artifacts based on their inherent biases and adherence to Western heteronormative values, and they may even act as (jealous) gatekeepers of their collections and organizations, which is often the antithesis of caring for patrons. As Jimerson stated so plainly,

> Archives at once protect and preserve records; legitimize and sanctify certain documents while negating and destroying others; and provide access to selected sources while controlling the researchers and conditions under which they may examine the archive record.[2]

The impetus for this article emerged from several difficult interactions the first author had with large and well-known archival collections. The author has sought out several significant collections related to the history of people of color in the library and information science (LIS) profession, and libraries and institutions that served people of color when predominantly white institutions refused to do so. Within this pursuit, a variety of archives were queried, including one at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU); another at a public Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI); and, two others were public libraries that house major African American collections. In each case the collections were open to the public and the HSI even offered to make copies of materials for a fee; when this service was requested, the author was told that she was incorrect (i.e., that the service did not exist), and that since her institution had more resources, she should not be requesting the documents from a smaller institution (the implication was that they were short-staffed and such work would cause a hardship for them). The collection at the HBCU did not have any finding aids and when the author inquired about

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[2] Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2009), 2.

the contents of the boxes, she was told that their staff "won't do your work for you." One of the public libraries could not locate part of the collection they claimed to have, and it took a year and a personal favor to access the materials. Finally, the second public library's collections were suddenly closed to the public indefinitely after being touted and displayed to international visitors and two of the author's white students. In all of these cases, it was painful to be treated so unprofessionally, and while it's suspected that some of this treatment was a result of the author being a Black woman and being a professional peer in LIS (as opposed to a member of the public who might not notice the lack of collection processing or other flaws), this lack of access is unacceptable and speaks to the need from more degreed archivists who are less invested in ego and competition and better trained in ethics, pedagogy, and empathy.

These difficulties may have also arisen because of the employees' lack of training and education (i.e., non-archivists serving in roles they are not prepared for), and/or because these individuals do not understand or practice radical empathy, and they do not know how to lead with love and hospitality.[3] With this in mind, how can we enact this ethics of care in real world environments? How can we be more intentional and purposeful about empowering new professionals and encouraging radical empathy in library and information science (LIS) graduate programs?

This interview features a conversation between a library and information science educator (Cooke) and three archival and special collections professionals with varying levels of experience in the field (Warren, Brown, and Jackson). Among the goals of this frank conversation is to highlight the lived experiences of practicing archivists and educators and discuss why it is becoming increasingly important to talk about empathy, diversity, equity, and inclusion in greater context. As part of that context, we must discuss the need to continuously infuse these values into graduate education, professional development, research, writing, and peer mentoring. Espousing and implementing an ethics of care is an ongoing and necessary process and commitment—to ourselves, to the information professions, and to our communities.

THE INTERVIEW

Cooke: *To begin our conversation, I pose the following question. How do we infuse empathy into the skilling, or formal education, of new professionals?*

Warren: A great but complex question, and a response depends on context. The conversation of empathy or affect in librarianship and archives has been going on for

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[3] Nicole A. Cooke, "Leading with Love and Hospitality: Applying a Radical Pedagogy to LIS," *Information and Learning Sciences* 120, nos. 1/2 (2019): 119–132, https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-06-2018-0054.

some time.[4] From my past experience as a non-traditional undergraduate student, academia is sorely lacking in empathy. I think that empathy has not been important in an academic setting because it is a site of hierarchy and competition—attributes that are interpreted as patriarchal. Higher education, particularly universities, are organized top-down. I specify universities here because my first position was with a community college library, and we had a flat management structure. Granted, community colleges generally have smaller libraries, but in my experience, there was less competition for resources, and it was a more supportive environment. The public research university library I currently work for is organized as library administration at the top, department heads, faculty, staff, and student employees. Certain position categories are organized under a union, but for the most part this is a hierarchical structure. And although union organization offers a vague notion of shared governance, final decisions come from the top. Even if academic librarians—who facilitate research and learning—hold faculty status, they are still considered second-tier workers. From that second-tier position it seems compulsory to be more empathetic. Academic librarians attempt to make up for their second-tier status by positioning themselves as useful. Empathy is connected to utility; this is where it gets complex because academic librarians in public services have demands for emotional and intellectual labor from faculty, students, and library administrators. I interpret this as a need for storytelling—the learning process requires empathy,[5] and that can be draining for all involved: students, and new and veteran professionals. I think we can employ storytelling or autoethnography through LIS and archival science literature. Storytelling is essential for underrepresented librarians because there is a *culture of dissemblance*.[6] Because it is associated with Black women and sexual violence, I don't use this term lightly. It is a concept introduced by historian Darlene Clark Hine. "Hine's work shows that by divulging little about their personal lives revealing next to nothing about their own interests, triumphs, or defeats, and shielding their authentic personalities behind a performance of racial and gender tropes, black women crafted a kind of psychic safe-space beyond the surveillance of the white families for whom they worked."[7] [The notion of a] culture of dissemblance describes the ways in

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[4] See: Briony Birdi, Kerry Wilson, & Joanne Cocker, "The Public Library, Exclusion and Empathy: A Literature Review," *Library Review* 57, no. 8 (2008): 576–592; Briony Birdi, Kerry Wilson, & Tso Hin Man," The Nature and Role of Empathy in Public Librarianship," *Journal of Librarianship & Information Science* 41, no. 2 (2009): 81–89; Lisa P. Nathan, Elizabeth Shaffer, and Maggie Castor, "Stewarding Collections of Trauma: Plurality, Responsibility, and Questions of Action," *Archivaria* 80 (2015): 89–118.

[5] Ronald Wheeler, "On Empathy," *Law Library Journal* 108, no. 3 (2016): 490.

[6] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912.

[7] Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 59.

which Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) librarians go into self-preservation mode. We need a body of knowledge to refer to when we are often the only BIPOC librarians working for an institution or department.

Jackson: I once heard the sobering phrase, "suffering is the human experience at scale." I do not recall the setting in which I heard it, but I do recall being among colleagues and reflecting on the cumulative past and present suffering being withstood at that moment in that room. No one has a monopoly on suffering, but I also believe no one has control over who gets to feel joy. All the emotions, experiences, setbacks, successes, and quotidian tasks that comprise our present states journey with us into our workplaces. [Coupled with] this natural phenomenon is the fact that our field has spent a considerable amount of time and effort aiming to recruit colleagues who identify as POC, and we now have a growing critical mass of colleagues whose cultural and historical suffering was notably different from those in the past and result from intense and sustained oppression.

Perhaps in the past, empathy meant something completely different when the majority of a team was comprised of a homogenous group derived from a historical ruling class. Today, the skill of empathy for new professionals, regardless of their backgrounds, entails having conversations about this trajectory the academy is endeavoring to take and the path it has been taking since its inception. Empathy extends beyond pleasantries and being collegial at meetings and moves into new territories of enabling authentic cultural exchanges and fostering mutual respect.

Beyond the issues we are facing and the changes we are advocating to see realized, areas of management are actively shifting their approaches as their successes are directly related to acknowledging this shift in thinking. Bridges writes:

> Adapting to the realities of this new world, leaders are confronted with a serious problem: in a quickly transforming landscape, they must be able to move their organizations from an initial idea to full-scale implementation with little to no time for employees to adjust to the new way of doing things…Leaders cannot just tell people what to do—and then expect them to do it. Employees in today's organizations must be able to do more than follow orders or be simply compliant. People must be allowed to think for themselves, work productively without close supervision, be creative, take risks, and go the extra mile for the customer for optimal results. *Employees have to bring both their hearts and minds to work* (emphasis added)[8].

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[8] William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2009), ix-x.

Adding to the layers of historical challenges to management (recruitment, retention, motivation, promotion) are those of representation, disrupting systemic behaviors, and introducing avenues for authentic and empathetic experiences to be shared, understood, and respected. Moreover, adding these priorities to the suite of others that have existed must be viewed as a positive and beneficial goal not only to bottom lines but also to career satisfaction and organizational health.

Being clear and honest about the cultural context of our institutions—their founding, their legacies, and their missions (both positive and negative)—is vital to creating a space for empathy to flourish. Reflection is always essential to benchmarking work and focus, but it cannot happen in a vacuum. If the success of one person was to the detriment of another, both aspects of this (the success and the negativity) must be addressed. Skills in communication from a knowledge of historical challenges and personal hurdles are tantamount to successes of individuals as well as ensuring harmony in the workplace.

Warren: I think that what Athena says about "being clear and honest about the cultural context of our institutions" is so important. Establishing from the outset that we are working in institutions that were not meant for us must be where we begin. We don't have shared spaces or curriculum—these are the property of whiteness. We must be honest and approach academic spaces as racist. Grounding our conversations in the fact that we work for racist institutions is related to one of the first tenets of critical race theory, "that racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society."[9] We cannot put blinders on and pile bodies on top of the problem.

Brown: As a library student at Simmons College, the School of Social Work (SSW) was just on the floor above us, yet we never collaborated with them informally or curricularly. As a program, SSW prioritized social justice values, diverse perspectives, and field education. Some of the core classes that [candidates in the master's program in social work] are required to take are "Dynamics of Racism and Oppression" and "Social Action"; in contrast, there is no anti-racism or cultural competency training that the School of Library Science (SLIS) requires of their students. Student groups at Simmons such as the Students of Color at SLIS and the Progressive Librarians Guild have facilitated such trainings, but the school has not at a curriculum level. I am not sure why this gap is aside from the fact that SLIS did not prioritize anti-racism at a structural level and left the work to students and professors who were committed enough to perform extra labor to try to provide opportunities, [and] there are some great professors there that do on an individual level. I think that as we are trying to skill new library and archive professionals, we need to think

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[9] Richard Delgado, *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013), xiv.

critically about what the curricula are and aren't requiring students to prioritize as they develop during their schooling, and how to address those gaps. Having the tools to be empathetic in a radical way relies on being able to recognize and confront oppression and racism, and those skills need to be emphasized in LIS curricula.

I think generally educating library science students on how to profoundly listen to others and how to create and maintain a generative community is important to better skilling folks entering the field. Chandler-Gilbert Community College has great resources on active listening, and describe it as "more than just hearing; it's hearing with the focus placed on what the speaker is saying and reserving your reply until comprehension is complete,"[10] which is what I think many LIS students, including myself, need to practice. Too often students in my classes were told to keep their heads down and get experience in anything technological or digital to remain relevant in the future, but that relevancy is nothing if we aren't building a critical community of empathetic practitioners who understand that their work is not done in isolation but will always affect others. Embedding a responsibility to each other and to whomever we serve is a component that should be more visible when talking about librarianship or archival labor.

Warren: Unlike Molly, I was fortunate enough to have classes in my graduate program that addressed concepts in race and social justice, diverse users,[11] and critical cataloging. That said, her points are valid. I thought the same in response to Athena's comments that change can only come through a just curriculum. And for me that means courses that include different knowledge systems in our curriculum.[12] If these concepts are not included at the curriculum level, the problems of racism, microaggressions, and lack of retention will persist.

Jackson: This is a great response and feedback. I wrote about this in a similar vein in a chapter for a book that came out a few years ago.[13] I think the curriculum challenge is a

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[10] Chandler-Gilbert Community College Learning Center. "Active Listening Strategies." Tutor Training. Retrieved January 30, 2019 from https://www.cgc.edu/Academics/LearningCenter/ Training/Pages/ActiveListening.aspx.

[11] Nicole A. Cooke, Miriam E. Sweeney, and Safiya Umoja Noble, "Social Justice as Topic and Tool: An Attempt to Transform a LIS Curriculum and Culture," *The Library Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2016): 109–110.

[12] Sardar M. Anwaruddin, "Can an Itinerant Curriculum Theory Travel?" *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (2013): 52–66, https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/tci/article/view/183252.

[13] Athena Jackson, "Succession Planning for 21st Century Special Collections Leadership: Initial Steps," in *New Directions for Special Collections: An Anthology of Practice: An Anthology of Practice*, edited by Lynne M. Thomas and Beth M. Whittaker, 215–224. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016.

huge gap and I hope working with colleagues like Nicole will engender a different and more enhanced partnership within our connected groups. I wrote,

> Collaboration with professional organizations around this issue of leadership training is one concrete measure we can take to ensure that library schools are effectively preparing students for the issues that managers and administrators deal with every day. Our library and information school programs have to cover a wide array of topics and to cultivate expertise during a finite amount of time with their students and our future colleagues. This is not an easy task. However, in a time of rapid change when the need for strong leadership increases, we should evaluate the curricula for our field to identify any gaps that might hinder us from addressing that need. Moreover, this is not a burden that practicing special collections professionals should leave entirely to our academic partners. Rather, we need active participants in the conversation. We should share in shouldering the responsibility for cultivating tomorrow's leaders today.[14]

So, I fully hear you when you rightly assert that the pedagogical approaches in preparing tomorrow's librarians is essential to our success.

Brown: Athena, thank you for sharing this passage. I agree that professionals also need to contribute as members of the field to gaps in the curriculum, and that academic institutions alone cannot address these gaps. Our education and our careers do not exist in isolation and should be more collaborative. Being collaboratively critical of both the education systems that teach new professionals and the professional organizations we join is the first step to engaging in a radically empathetic relationship with one another as colleagues.

Cooke: How do we prepare our colleagues better for the realities of a field that is not always as well-versed in the necessary changes that need to take place for sustainable success and leadership development to occur for colleagues of color?

Warren: As an early career professional, and as someone who has had two careers prior to librarianship, I was really surprised by the hostility that I experienced seeking my first professional position. I had even taken some courses in my LIS program that I thought would prepare me for the realities of the profession.[15] I thought that I had cultivated a

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[14] Jackson, 219.
[15] Nicole A. Cooke, "Creating Opportunities for Empathy and Cultural Competence in the LIS Curriculum," *SRRT Newsletter* 187 (2014), http://www.ala.org/rt/srrt-newsletter-issue-187-june-2014#9.

pretty thick skin. I was in entertainment, and then an entrepreneur, and I had never experienced what I have experienced so far in librarianship and archives. I think that the best way to prepare our colleagues is to be honest with them, and to share some of our strategies with them. That doesn't mean being negative, but discussing the realities, and then seeking solutions within community. I learned quickly to find support outside of my work environment, and to build relationships through professional organizations or on campus.

Jackson: It may be time for seasoned/long-termed/successful colleagues with diverse backgrounds to remind ourselves that at the point of entry into the field (and in many cases still the same), we were essentially in an interstitial space. We were distractions to the already-in-place, fully charged momentum of a setting. We have much more to do on this front, but cementing our roles and underscoring areas where we slowed the momentum in some areas to increase it in hitherto untouched arenas are activities we can and should share with our new colleagues entering the profession. Sharing this openly with one another and often engenders hope, accrues power, and conveys longevity.

Warren: I agree, but documenting what our more seasoned colleagues have done and what early and mid-career professionals are doing is difficult. Many information and memory professionals frequently and abruptly leave their positions, and we often don't have time to document during conferences. Perhaps there is a way to document through the literature, i.e., how this article will serve as a good example of documenting the issues in time, and how information professionals are coping or not.

Brown: My first presentation on Radical Empathy was at the second iteration of a graduate student organized conference: DERAIL, or Diversity, Equity, Race, Accessibility, and Identity in LIS. DERAIL is a conference organized by students at Simmons College that wanted to generate a space for critical discussions around race, equity, identity, and white supremacy in LIS that were not present in coursework. The students who generated this space did so in response to a need that SLIS was not serving: offering a space to share and learn about critical librarianship in a way that invites conversation, community, and commitment to one another. I think their work embodies an incredible example of helping prepare and support students of many intersecting identities, providing a space to engage with one another and talk about the realities of the field and the imaginative futures they hope to enact.

As a white cis woman in the field, I learned a lot from DERAIL about how necessary those critical spaces are at school or at work, and how although they take a lot of labor and planning, they can be generated at a smaller level by creating networks where these conversations can continue and where colleagues can keep connecting one another to new resources, new professional groups. Cultivating spaces to engage with one another, to have a sounding board to discuss issues, or to have a space for encouragement and

celebration is a way to create a space that supports what a workspace might not. It is also important to make sure that it doesn't fall on my colleagues of color to always be the teacher and perform extra emotional labor to educate those that need to do the work themselves. These networks can share resources for doing that work and empower myself as a white person in the field to share these with other white colleagues.

Warren: I like that DERAIL addresses these pressing issues in LIS. It is a relief to see and hear about white students and professionals taking on some of the labor that Black and other information professionals of color have been doing for so long. At the same time, this approach still centers whiteness. There is nuance to working out our problems in the information professions. Concepts in social justice can be instrumental in the changes that we seek. White supremacy is insidious, and it transforms to protect itself. Social justice looks like our white colleagues standing back in support of our efforts to progress in the professions. Yet, we find that whiteness reproduces itself through our white colleagues being at the forefront of these conversations at conferences and in the literature. We should be able to work together, but we need to understand what exactly we are dealing with when we talk about racism and white supremacy in the information and memory professions. We need to support more research and publication for Black and other information professionals of color.

Brown: Just to make sure I give the folks who developed DERAIL proper credit, I did not contribute to the planning of DERAIL but volunteered and spoke at its second iteration. Many of the planners of DERAIL were students of color. But you are right, Kellee, it is important that while confronting issues of racism and white supremacy there should be critical attention to who is at the forefront of the conversations, and why. What Kellee said, "Social justice looks like our white colleagues standing back in support of our efforts to progress in the professions," is a really powerful way of capturing where myself and my white colleagues have a lot of work to do, to really critically define support and enact it so that we are not at the center or the forefront, but working together to support in a way that is socially just, not reproducing white supremacy. This also connects to Kellee's point that the literature is a space where the documentation of how more seasoned diverse professionals got to where they are, and how documentary and conversational articles like the ones Nicole produces are a way of beginning this shift in the literature.

Jackson: I don't think this is the only, or even the most sustainable, way to preserve our stories, but I do find that the recent efforts of the RBMS StoryCorps[16] are capturing some of the stories/histories and honest and sometimes raw experiences of current and active

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[16] "RBMS Diversity Stories," *StoryCorps Archives*, retrieved December 29, 2018. https://archive.storycorps.org/communities/rbms-diversity-stories-2/.

members of the archival/rare books/manuscripts field. I am grateful for the opportunities various groups find to better understand implicit biases and anachronistic historical habits that may be difficult to eliminate from all spaces of our work environments. The balance of self-care and self-awareness throughout the workday may underpin the empathy that drives our interactions. The "radical" part comes in every time we amplify our colleagues' successes and offer kindness during trying times.

Cooke: How do we identify and address issues of power and gatekeeping? Are power and gatekeeping antithetical to radical empathy?

Warren: What can we do? Who dominates these conversations on equity, diversity, and inclusion? Who is the loudest voice in these discussions on empathy? Although my standpoint reflects some privilege—i.e., I am a special collections librarian in higher education and hold supervisory responsibilities—as a Black woman in academe, I still don't hold much power. I am what Patricia Hill Collins calls "the outsider within." Collins describes this standpoint as being somewhat "useful" for Black women; however, it is still a position of disadvantage.[17] I don't think that I am alone among BIPOC professionals when I state that my position title and responsibilities conceal the insecurity of my employment. Of course, I can identify power and gatekeeping, but all I can do is maybe point out to LIS and archival science students and newer professionals how to navigate those situations, and I guess that is where radical empathy comes in. We would call that shared power. Many experienced professionals don't know how to share power. They don't know how to stand back and allow space and give voice to students and new professionals. It is not good for the profession and one of the reasons why we have problems with retention of underrepresented professionals. I like to compare my experience entering my current professional position to the underground railroad, and not a "pipeline"; the "pipeline" is industrial imagery to me, whereas the underground railroad was about community. I had and have Black librarians, archivists, and other librarians of color who really listened to and supported me. I didn't feel like I needed much advice. I think that I needed more encouragement to keep going, and I received that from my peers and mentors.

Jackson: Gatekeeping is a charged term that can certainly be reimagined in the context of openness, sharing, and accessibility that underpin the ethos of our current work. Radical empathy is explaining the reasons why certain aspects of our work (such as archival materials) are held in spaces that seem to be under lock and key from the public. Preservation requires controlled environments for the best possible conditions for a given

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[17] Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): 15.

format of a historical or cultural artifact (such as, books, photos, or artwork). That said, the balance should tip nearer to access and discovery when and where possible. This can happen with facsimiles, digital surrogates, and exhibitions. Messaging and communication are essential to sharing the elements of our work that requires oversight for the preservation of history and the veracity of the historical record.

Brown: Athena, I really appreciate your emphasis on communication throughout your response, and how you describe radical empathy as being an act of explanation. Sharing [as an ethos] and sharing clear messages [through communication] are ways to navigate times when the systems we work in prevent openness and access we hope to provide.

Warren: I have to negotiate the gatekeeping within the profession on two fronts: the work that I do with students, researchers, and the public, and work that I do with my colleagues. I have observed the people who undermine inclusion initiatives and see how library administrations persistently assign the same people to these initiatives, positioning them in increasingly powerful positions; and yet they don't or refuse to see it. This is why there is such a problem with retention. The people that undermine inclusion efforts are able to move forward and add these initiatives to their CVs, while Black and other information professionals of color leave. Fortunately, I work for a public institution, so the notion of gatekeeping is not as strict as some other institutions. But I currently experience more gatekeeping within my institution than externally, and yes, that is antithetical to radical empathy. Not only do I have to fulfill the duties of my position, but I have to manage the internal gatekeeping.

Brown: I think when we talk about power, it is important to define the source and priorities the power has. Often the source of power in many information structures is systemic and racist; however, there are other definitions of power and empowerment that can be liberatory. I believe that a notion of power can exist under radical empathy, but it can only exist if it is power that is informed by love or the feminist ethics of care and shared by a community responsibility for one another.[18] I think identifying the power source first can unpack the following issue of gatekeeping and how it needs to be identified and handled.

Warren: Molly's response is very thoughtful. How do we define power? Its source and priorities? As I mentioned, whiteness will reproduce itself at any cost. So how do we get to the liberatory aspects of power? Power must be shared, and professionals with less power cannot force the powerful to share. The powerful must acquiesce of their own

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[18] Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81, no. 1 (2016): 23–43.

accord. In the meantime, we have to continue the work of radical empathy within the community of professionals of color.

Jackson: I fully agree with the concept of "power" and the complicated aspects of its use in many spaces of our work. I think we are moving toward another definitive phrasing of radical empathy: sharing power.

Brown: "The powerful must acquiesce of their own accord." Yes. Kellee, I think here again returns to your point about how white colleagues in the field need to be supporting the work of diverse colleagues rather than centering themselves. We also need to be conscious and helping our other white colleagues to become conscious of how to shed and share the power they hold and how to redefine it, so it is indeed liberatory. This work makes me think about [Michelle] Caswell's article, "Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives," and how the article concludes by discussing the possibilities of "radical archival interventions" and what is necessary to build them.[19] What those will look like will take time to formulate, but they begin with students and faculty members and professionals who think critically about white supremacy, with white people acknowledging their own roles in promulgating it and with all of us imagining ways out of it through concrete action. This isn't necessarily a response to Kellee's important point about how the powerful will acquiesce their power, but it resonates with how to begin to imagine that process. And it leads into the phrase you introduce, Athena, "sharing power," and I think sharing power looks similar to how Kellee described social justice looking like: "white colleagues standing back in support of our efforts to progress in the professions."

Cooke: What does empathy mean at this point in the profession? How do you feel empathy informs the work that you do? Where in your work does it come up?

Warren: This is a difficult question for me because I work with historical collections, and most, if not all, of the collections that I am charged with caring for and using in instruction are of the official record. Some collections that are under our care are difficult for me. We have an Atlantic Slave Trade collection that contains some offensive content, and I've had to use it in my instruction. I can't say that I agree with the notion of expressing empathy for the records creators in this instance.[20] Most of the materials contained in the collection represent violence towards the African Diaspora, and that means that I have to center the subjects, the enslaved people, and this requires emotional and intellectual

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[19] Michelle Caswell, "Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives," *The Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (July 2017): 222–235.
[20] Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 24–25.

labor. It is a complex loaded system, or an *ouroboros*. I suppose empathy in my specific context means that I have to figure out ways to offer access to those collections that are hidden or unprocessed that are not a priority for my colleagues. And, other than to emphasize the biases of some creators with collections that are challenging, I try to center the subjects more than the creators. In short, I use a critical approach to information and archival literacy.

Jackson: At this point, our world has been in a tectonic shift technologically, politically, socially, and academically. Every aspect of our work is an exploration into new territory or a re-examination of areas that were overlooked, underserved, or misunderstood. Empathy is recognizing this aspect as it makes its way into the daily work we do. That said, empathy is often realized in one-on-one moments with colleagues, supervisors, students, and researchers. I focused a lot of my energy on listening before responding. As a manager, I often had to speak and share my perspective, but regardless of the decision I made sure it was informed by many perspectives beforehand of my colleagues and leadership.

Brown: Empathy while in graduate school meant consistently reinforcing that the work we do as information professionals affects others, including users, colleagues, groups and individuals represented in records, and communities.[21] Understanding our responsibility as librarians and archivists for the network of people our work affects and those we should be collaborating with and including at the table. However, radical empathy has become very important as a recent graduate and in my new position working with visitors to the Archives and Special Collections. In our collections, we hold material from social justice organizations and activists in Boston and also have materials that represent portions of the history of Black, Latinx, Asian American, and LGBTQ communities in Boston, which draws a diverse set of users to our collections. My mutual affective relationship with users of our collections has been key while helping researchers find, or navigate not finding, what they are looking for. It is an even more fraught experience for first-time archival visitors as they are balancing doing something they have never done before in a historically rule-forward environment, while also being unsure of what they may or may not find. Radical empathy is important to create a space where folks can navigate the highs and lows of archival research without feeling monitored, judged, or silenced.[22] Shifting language of "what did you find" to "how was your search," and trying

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[21] Caswell and Cifor, 24–25.
[22] Jarrett Drake, "Liberatory Archives: Towards Belonging and Believing (Part 1)," *On Archivy* (blog), Medium, October 22, 2016, https://medium.com/on-archivy/liberatory-archives-towards-belonging-and-believing-part-1-d26aaeb0edd1.

to shift the task of archival research away from being transactional to being an affective relationship has been something I've focused a lot of my radical empathy work on.

Warren: Athena and Molly's comments highlight the many differences between institutions. As a majority-minority serving institution, the university that I work for has a problem with showcasing the diverse collections that we hold. It is a combination of processing priorities, and limited staff. But I see what are prioritized in the daily operations of the special collections library, and they are not balanced or even tilted toward the underrepresented in the archives. When I initially took on my position, it had been communicated to me that my senior colleagues worked together. But over the past two years, I found that that was simply not the case, and the addition of a Black professional to the department seems to have complicated things. The department was composed of all white professionals, with professionals of color floating in and out of visiting faculty positions. Unsettled hostilities existed before I arrived, and then you add a person—me, the only Black professional in the department, and in a cultural context comfortable with direct lines of communication. It was and has been very unstable. In the midst of this instability, I was promoted to the tenure track. There had been no head of the department for two and a half years, and my supervisor left a few months after I accepted the promotion. All of these incidents can happen to any professional, but if you add all of these together and include microaggressions and other non-supportive actions, it highlights why the LIS and archival professions have a retention problem with professionals of color. In essence, my senior colleagues barely got along, so it has been essential for me to locate those intimate or, as Athena put it, those "one-on-one" moments where I can express empathy. I have found them in different locations on campus and through conference attendance.

Jackson: I see a growing critical mass of colleagues whose concerns for the field transcend the old adage of "what we've always done" to "what we can do now," and this is tantamount to our success. I admit to being cautiously optimistic about the future of our work; however, I am no stranger to the ways an experience of growth and satisfaction can change from one institution to another.

Brown: I think radical empathy can be a method for answering the question, "what can we do now," as we consider ways to transform the work we do in the field away from "what we've always done." Kellee's centering of subjects rather than creators in challenging collections is a great example of that work, as well as Athena's practice of infusing empathy into her one-on-one interactions.

Cooke: *How do you ensure that your practice of empathy is radical? What do you see as the distinction between empathy and radical empathy in practice?*

Warren: I keep referring to my identity because I think that informs how I choose to express radical empathy and how often empathy is demanded or coerced. Historically, Black women were forced into forms of violently coerced care in this country, and I think this is what entraps us in and exacerbates the controlling image of "Mammy."[23] Further, Black women and women of color are currently the highest number of people who work in the care fields, e.g. nursing, hotel housekeeping, etc. [24] Often, we are hired in librarianship or special collections for diversity or as cleanup crew, completing duties that previous staff or faculty did not. In this sense, Black librarians and archivists are caught in a "double bind," coerced into a caretaking role, and also being framed as strong.[25] Librarianship is a service industry, with differences, of course, which range from faculty appointments to para-professional positions. That said, I think being in special collections public services is radical in and of itself—there really are not that many BIPOC in rare books and special collections. I have to manage how people interact with me almost every day of the week, which is taxing. We have to encourage self-care because the research inquiries are much longer in special collections, which on the one hand is great and the reason why I enjoy what I do. On the other hand, special collections reference interactions can be stressful because the community is still so very white (especially in rare books), and researchers and donors usually expect to work with white professionals; they don't expect to see me.

      A negative experience with a former colleague highlights the two fronts on which I have to battle negativity and microaggressions. Upon leaving her position, a former colleague said, "We want to maintain the goodwill that we've built up over the years," which was directed at me. It was offensive to say the least. This was definitely a microaggression, and she was implicitly positioning me as the "bad" Black professional, and her as the "good" white professional. I am also surrounded by colleagues who have been in the profession much longer than me, and they can be cold or hostile. After many experiences like this, I spoke with someone in library administration and told them that I would like colleagues, not combatants. Library administration has a lot more power than they are willing to use to protect their professionals of color. I have yet to understand

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[23] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 40.

[24] Natalie J. Sokoloff, *Black Women and White Women in the Professions: Occupational Segregation by Race and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2009); U.S. Department of Labor/Bureau of Labor and Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," 2018, retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18.htm on December 25, 2018.

[25] Mekada Graham, "The Ethics of Care, Black Women and the Social Professions: Implications of a New Analysis," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 1, no. 2 (2007): 201.

why they don't use it. I think that I do understand on a visceral level, but they communicate that they want diversity, equity, and inclusion, right? In spite of the negativity, I rely on a combination of the work that I do outside of the library—presentations, workshops, etc.—and how much I enjoy working with students and teaching faculty, but wonder how long that type of Jedi mind trick will last. In any case, since I work for a public institution, I can create opportunities for radical empathy in sharing my expertise with community organizations, and with middle and high school students by inviting them into special collections. I have created opportunities by offering service outside of my institution. While I still represented my institution in the form of outreach, it was also a form of radical empathy. I don't offer community members the illusion of giving them something in order to take something. I can ask them what they need, and I can offer them my expertise. Lastly, when I'm engaged in conversation with a collector who is excited about an item in our collection, they are very connected and emotional about it, so they have my complete attention.

Jackson: "Goodwill" really struck me. I think that term can get confused with the status quo in the context you shared. I'm glad you are moving forward in your work.

Brown: I agree that your outreach is definitely a form of radical empathy. Your use of the words "offer" and "create" really strike me as important terms when we imagine any outreach role. Outreach is not "give and take," but it is a continued process of asking and offering and creating spaces where those processes can take place. It is definitely taxing work, as you say, but it is important.

Jackson: Empathizing in today's context requires zero myopia. Know the past of your institution, your field, yourself. Start there. Earn the trust of colleagues so that whether or not they choose to share their journey, you understand their goals enough to encourage their work in ways that satisfies their sense of fulfilment, not yours.

In their book, *Thanks for the Feedback*,[26] the authors argue that "one of the primary reasons we interpret data different is that we have different rules in our heads about how things should be. But we don't think of them as *our* rules. We think of them as *the* rules." When I read this, I realized that due to the homogeneity of our field (and most systems and drivers in society), the rules are often discerned and adhered to adamantly by the groups that represent this historical typical culture. In essence, they are "the" rules, we just didn't have a role (as POCs) in making them, validating them, or deeming them important to success. When I engage with my colleagues, I seek to learn how aware they are of "the" rules being primarily derived from a group and at a time where I (nor any

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[26] Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen. *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

cultural ancestor of mine) took part in creating them in society. It is a challenging conversation to have when it is a supervisor from the originating group, so I have honed my words to carefully lead into the context of the rules rather than an assessment of their characters.

Brown: Athena, I really appreciate this approach of asking colleagues to consider where "the" rules come from, who created them, and who continues to benefit from them. It is really key. I think it is also an essential part of moving toward defining and sharing power.

Brown: A common misconception that was made when I was first talking about radical empathy with students and professors was that "empathy" was a synonym for being openly emotional, and bringing your emotions to the center. That certainly is not always the case, and frankly can be a dangerous practice that misdirects where the focus should be. My emotions as a white woman should not be at the center, and white folks have a lot of work to do to learn how to decenter themselves. I believe that radical empathy can help that work when it is used to strategically and systemically address oppression and white supremacy through generating relationships informed by feminist ethics of care. Radical empathy, while something that hopefully comes from a personal space, is a commitment that orients the relationships you develop and foster to move towards addressing equity and dismantling power structures.

Warren: It is important to do all of the research up front on your institutions and the people with whom you may be working. There is also work to be done in self-reflection, and in my case, I have to reflect on my interactions with students, faculty, and the public. It's work that I haven't really integrated into my practice, but I am working on it, and was introduced to it through the critical librarianship literature. I also recently read an article by Nicole Cooke that was very informative, and that I will have to revisit in my special collections instruction.[27]

Cooke: What about radical love, radical hospitality, feminist pedagogy, and other frameworks—how, if at all, do they fit in with radical empathy?

Warren: In my work, archival records are personal, meaning [that] some manuscript material is described as personal papers. Radical love in an archival context calls for criticalness, and that work was started by historians, philosophers, and archivists in the literature decades ago. But what I want is for more marginalized people who are subjects of the archive to get their hands on those materials. This means a rethinking of the rush to digitize for example. Some community members have never seen original resources,

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[27] Nicole A. Cooke, "Leading with Love and Hospitality: Applying a Radical Pedagogy to LIS." *Information and Learning Science* (2018): 119–132.

and archivists are saying "we know what's best for you, and that's digitization!" Digitization is for researchers who are a privileged class. When we think about digitization, we have to ask who are we digitizing for? I also want marginalized communities to have more power to manage their materials—that would be radical love from the profession.

Radical hospitality is, I think, a spiritual concept. I grew up in a Christian community building, and I think that it instilled in me the notion of invitation and openness. We had a potluck dinner almost every Sunday evening. We ate together, the adults talked, the children played, and there was music. I know that we have a responsibility to care for distinctive materials, but we need more of a potluck spirit in archives and special collections spaces.

Brown: I second Kellee's point that we need to rethink our field's approach to digitization and embed it with a sense of radical empathy and love. Carefully considering the effects of digitization, who it is for and who is affected by the digitization, is something that we need to build into our project assessment and into our fieldwide conception of what digitization does.

Jackson: So much yes to all of this. Change is constant and definitely not linear. Flexibility can only be present when you have stretched your own mind, your own perspectives, and your own limits. And, being flexible is key to self-care and professional fulfillment. I have only one goal as a leader fundamentally (and I assure you I did not always get it right): to empower my colleagues to embrace opportunities and follow their instinct and expertise so that every day is not simply a template for a job description but a temple for curiosity.

Brown: I absolutely believe that radical love, radical hospitality, among other frameworks fit into radical empathy. Feminist disability studies is another framework that expands the methods of critically assessing our connections in archives that radical empathy gives us. Gracen Brilmeyer's article "Archival Assemblages" does an exceptional job of opening up the way a feminist disability studies approach illuminates and requires critical and intersectional approaches to description and representation. Brilmeyer invites archivists to use feminist disability studies as a way to "expose the layers of power within an archive."[28] It asks for a "collective responsibility," which resonates with the relationships brought up in Cifor and Caswell's initial article on radical empathy.

Warren: We must highlight and support the literature produced by underrepresented voices in the information professions. I hinted at this earlier, but we have to be careful

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[28] Gracen Brilmyer, "Archival Assemblages: Applying Disability Studies' Political / Relational Model to Archival Description," *Archival Science* 18, no. 2 (2018): 95–118, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-018-9287-6.

about whose voices are at the forefront of conversations on inclusion and radical empathy and love, and who is rendered invisible. Also, as a person who now has supervisory responsibilities, I think that it is important to support new professionals, and express radical empathy through that role. I agree with Athena in that I want to empower new professionals. I don't want what I experienced and continue to experience to be something that they experience. It is surprising that more senior professionals believe that early career professionals should have a bad experience because they did, a type of hazing ritual if you will. I don't believe in that. I was given the opportunity to hire a new professional, and my approach was to give them enough space to become acclimated to the position and the institution. I also wanted them to have the space to think about what their goals are for the future, and how they see those aligning with the institution, and then what we can accomplish together as BIPOC information professionals. It is up to them to exploit that or not. In my opinion, radical love and a Black feminist pedagogy are essential to a self-reflexive practice. It is my approach to work with my fellow colleagues of color, and how I work with students, faculty, and community members.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Great gratitude is extended to Kellee, Molly, and Athena for their generous and candid critical self-reflection which contributed to this conversation. By modeling the type of radical empathy and generosity of spirit that are so needed in our profession, their experiences inform what should be included and prioritized in formal LIS and archival education programs, and exemplify what professional practice should be in theory and in reality. May we continue to have these important conversations for the betterment of our communities, collections, organizations, and our profession.

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