

Connecting Chatman to This Moment

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“Listen to Black women.” “Believe Black women.” “Cite Black women.”¹ We hear these refrains every time the country finds itself in crisis, or in the heat of yet another conversation on violence, death, disease, upheaval, or elections. The past five years have shown the dangers of avoiding the social and economic politics of information and data, and the limitations of white-only, nondisabled, cisgender worldviews. The view from the margins, as hooks tells us, gives a wide perspective. From the margins we see internal social structures and power and recognize potentially harmful or destructive patterns as a matter of survival. It is here that we first met Elfreda Chatman’s work.

The past few years have brought worldwide pandemics, international recognition of the movement for Black lives, and the seemingly inevitable backlash to the movement. As justice became “popular,” we watched our colleagues, having just discovered the precognizant wisdom of Black women and feminist scholars—Lorde, Butler, Crenshaw, hooks, and Morrison—taking center stage to lead conversations about equity. Despite the truism that library and information science focuses broadly on connections among “people, technology, and information,” we have long seen conceptual limitation and ethical fragility in a field grounded in the perspectives of a small group of mostly white scholars. The LIS canon, as it were, betrays its restrictive assumptions about *who count* as people, what technology *should* do, and *whose knowledges* and definitions of information are worth investments of time, effort, funding, and promotion.² In Chatman, we find a scholar who pushed LIS to confront uncomfortable questions about perspective,

¹ Christen A. Smith, Erica L. Williams, Imani A. Wadud, Whitney N.L. Pirtle, and the Cite Black Women Collective, “Cite Black Women: A Critical Praxis (A Statement),” *Feminist Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2021): 10-17, <https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12040>.

² Beth Patin, Melinda Sebastian, Jieun Yeon, Danielle Bertolini, and Alexandra Grimm, “Interrupting Epistemicide: A Practical Framework for Naming, Identifying, and Ending Epistemic Injustice in the Information Professions,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 72, no. 10 (2021): 1306-1318, DOI: 10.1002/asi.24479.

positioning, and privilege, and whose insights opened doors for those of us to come. We are honored to be able to continue to push forward along the path she forged.

This issue of JCLIS asks new questions of Chatman's work and builds on the foundations set by her research. Some of the works here are years in the making, considered and reconsidered after a barrage of national emergencies that turned many of our institutions upside-down. Our colleagues have built on Chatman's foundations, challenged her assumptions, extended her theory, and critiqued with clarity. We are proud to have supported them through publication.

Franklin begins by building on Chatman's small worlds and normative behavior theories to examine the isolation, racism, and hostility Black doctoral students face in primarily white institutions (PWIs). Costello and Floegel extend Chatman's small worlds and information poverty theories, describing queer world-building as a counter to information poverty and as a means for constructing epistemic authority. Roy and Shiroma reconsider four key concepts in Chatman's theory of information poverty (secrecy, deception, risk-taking, and situational relevance) in the light of Cajete's model of a fulfilled Indigenous life.

Several of the pieces pushed past what the authors saw as limitations of Chatman's work to propose more expansive or pointed articulation of concepts and theories. Kitzie explores the dynamic complexity, and sometimes contradictory nature of insider/outsider identities. Ndumu and Mabi and Gray take different approaches to critiquing the assumptions underlying information poverty as a deficit model, and the assumptions often made about communities deemed "information poor." These two pieces focus on different populations but are both ambivalent in their assessment of Chatman's impacts on research. Ndumu and Mabi challenge us to reconsider our assumptions about immigrants and to question essentialist assessments, while Gray proposes abundance as a counter to information poverty's deficit stance. Perhaps offering the strongest critique of Chatman's work—and of the field—Mehra pushes readers to think beyond the social incrementalism that often plagues work related to race and gender in LIS, calling us to define and practice social justice more clearly, and challenging us to produce bolder, less "sanitized" work. Taken together, the issue provides excellent theoretical and historical coverage of Chatman's research, writings, and historical context.

A CHALLENGING FIELD

In 2022, the 20th anniversary of Chatman's untimely passing, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPoC) in library and information science (LIS) faculty are still grappling

with the issues of racism, misogynoir,³ tokenism, and isolation that she undoubtedly faced. Additionally, we're still saddled with the fallacies of neutrality and color blindness in society and within the profession. As BIPOC faculty have been working tirelessly to reverse these and other ideological barriers and speak blunt truths to power,⁴ we are still tokenized and marginalized within our own discipline.⁵

What does it mean for Chatman's (and other BIPOC LIS faculty's) work to be tokenized in LIS? It means engagement with consistent cycles of hypervisibility and invisibility. Chatman is hypervisible in the sense that she might be the one Black scholar of her generation that many senior scholars today can name, and her work has been (we would say, incorrectly) credited with fully exhaustive examinations of equity, race, inclusion, and power, implying or suggesting that no one else needs to continue this work). Chatman's perspectives were challenging in an epistemic culture that emphasized colorblindness, prioritized the individual as a unit of analysis, and demonstrated an aversion to critical (or uncritical) conversations around race, or other "demographic" categories and concerns.⁶ Chatman (along with many other BIPOC faculty) remains invisible in the sense that she isn't often taught as part of the "canon" of library scholarship. When her work is taught, the intersectionality of her experiences and perspectives as a queer Black woman are certainly ignored.

³ Moya Bailey and Trudy, "On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 762-768.

⁴ See: Amelia N. Gibson, Renate L. Chancellor, Nicole A. Cooke, Sarah Park Dahlen, Beth Patin, and Yasmeen L. Shorish, "Struggling to Breathe: COVID-19, Protest, and the LIS Response," *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion: An International Journal* 40, no. 1 (2020): 74-82, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-07-2020-0178>; Bahrat Mehra and LaVerne Gray, "An 'Owning Up' of White-IST trends in LIS to Further Real Transformation," *The Library Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2020): 189-239, <https://doi.org/10.1086/707674>; and Nicole A. Cooke and Joe O. Sánchez, "Getting It on the Record: Faculty of Color in Library and Information Science," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 60, no. 3 (2019): 169-181.

⁵ Nicole A. Cooke and Mónica Colón-Aguirre, "Killing It from the Inside": Acknowledging and Valuing Black, Indigenous, and People of Color as LIS Faculty," *The Library Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2021): 243-249; and Nicole A. Cooke and Vanessa L. Kitzie, "Outsiders-within-Library and Information Science: Reprioritizing the Marginalized in Critical Sociocultural Work," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 72, no. 10 (2021): 1285-1294.

⁶ See: Todd Honma, "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.5070/D412000540>, and Reijo Savolainen, "Everyday Life Information Seeking: Approaching Information Seeking in the Context of 'Way of Life,'" *Library & Information Science Research* 17, no. 3 (June 1, 1995): 259-94, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0740-8188\(95\)90048-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0740-8188(95)90048-9).

Because critical works in the literature (especially work written by scholars of color) are not required reading in most programs,⁷ LIS students can graduate from master's and Ph.D. programs without ever engaging with them. This gap in LIS education adds to the disproportionate labor expected of those of us who regularly engage with work like Chatman's. When we write in our field's journals, our manuscript reviews and editorial colleagues frequently ask us to remove, justify, or explain in great detail concepts that are largely considered basic and uncontroversial in other fields that study human behavior. BIPOC professionals should not be constantly put upon to explain these basic concepts and the oppressions they encounter in the profession. In this way, the non-BIPOC communities in LIS are held to a different standard—editors, reviewers, and readers are not expected to be equitable or culturally competent.

Patin et al. (2020) aptly describes a culture of extraction and appropriation from BIPOC scholars, in which our colleagues find us to be viable sources for "inspiration," but not for proper citation.⁸ Not having read our work but consuming our ideas in less formal settings, they co-opt or repackage them and claim them as *their* novel contributions to their subfields. Because so many of our colleagues are unfamiliar with our research and are not well-grounded in the process of building critical theory, the peer review process fails to stem this behavior. Again, BIPOC scholars are given the choice to dedicate additional labor to policing plagiarism or accept erasure. LIS struggles to acknowledge and discuss issues of interpersonal, structural, epistemic racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia ingrained in practice, teaching, research, and publication in an authentic and sincere way. These ideas should be part of the field's basic vocabulary. Chatman enabled the field to begin having these discussions, and we need to advance her thoughts and demand action and remedies to said oppressions and inequities.

Chatman theorized social norms, identity, and information practices as all bound together and information as performance of social roles and of belonging within communities that she described as insulated (but that we might call "marginalized" today). Her work challenged the field of information science to look beyond straightforward assumptions of deficit and to examine assumptions about information poverty and illiteracy described by LIS scholars since the 1970s. Building something akin

⁷ See: Amelia Gibson, Sandra Hughes-Hassell, and MeganThreats, "Critical Race Theory in the LIS Curriculum," in *Re-envisioning the MLS: Perspectives on the Future of Library and Information Science Education*, ed. Johnna Percell, Lindsay C. Sarin, Paul T. Jaeger, and John Carlo Bertot (Bingley, England: Emerald Publishing Limited), pp. 49-70, <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0065-28302018000044B005>; and Tawanna Hodge, "The Importance of Teaching Critical Race Theory in MLIS Programs," *CRT Collective* (blog), accessed March 21, 2023, <https://crtcollective.org/the-bell-ringer-blog-posts/>.

⁸ Beth Patin, Melinda Sebastian, Jieun Yeon, and Danielle Bertolini, "Toward Epistemic Justice: An Approach for Conceptualizing Epistemicide in the Information Professions," *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 57, no. 1 (2020): e242, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa2.242>.

to a sociology of information, Chatman outlined information as a performance of individual and collective understandings of self and of our appointed roles within the worlds we inhabit. As she reminds us, "Community in its most intrinsic sense is the most existential definition of who one is."⁹

CONCLUSION

Judging from her work (and by all personal accounts), Elfreda Chatman was a rigorous researcher and teacher. She was a dean. She was a pioneer in the field, but she was also human, and her work was not infallible. Reflecting on her contributions to the field from our position today, we see that her theoretical work was limited by the time and cultural norms of the profession in which she worked.

We are told that she was a rigorous and intentional theorist, one who would not stand for sloppiness born of hero worship. Like most theorists, her writing developed and expanded over time, and would no doubt have continued to change with the world and the field. We view her publications as a foundation for current and future scholars to build upon, and we reject the tokenism that weaponizes Chatman's contributions and legacies against current scholars of color in the field. It is important to continue the rigorous examination of her ideas, to build our own from them, and to continue to draw new lessons for our current work moving forward. LIS that has not always been welcoming to work that challenges the racial, gendered, or ability-based status quo. We owe it to ourselves, the field, future scholars, and of course to Elfreda Chatman, to continue cultivating brave spaces in the literature and in our classrooms; to provide more opportunities to BIPOC authors; to allow space for slow scholarship and community building; and to further theorize and implement community literacy and applied information behavior research with diverse populations. These are the ways we will honor and extend Chatman's legacy.

⁹ Elfreda A. Chatman, "A Theory of Life in the Round," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 50, no. 3 (1999): 207-217.

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