

Editors' Note

Black Lives *Still* Matter for LIS: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Back in 2020 when we issued the initial call for papers for this special issue, we, like many of you, were stunned, saddened, and outraged by the well-documented murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the shooting of Jacob Blake by the police, as well as the militaristic ways in which police have responded to protestors in the wake of their deaths. We added the names of Floyd and Taylor to a long list of Black people who have met untimely deaths due to state-sponsored mass murder.

Three years later, we are still stunned, saddened and outraged to be adding names to this list. Marcellis Stinnette. Daunte Wright. La'Mello Parker. Fanta Bility. Tracy Gaeta. Keenan Anderson. Hundreds of others, each name a universe imploded.

We recognize that these murders are instantiations of a system of white supremacy that has touched virtually every aspect of society in the Americas for the past half-millennium since Columbus' landing. Other manifestations of this system include the mass incarceration of Black people and people of color, racialized forms of surveillance, and vast economic, educational, and health disparities. White supremacy is so ingrained in our society that it is often difficult to envision how best to resist this system, imagine a way out of it, and/or dismantle it. With this special issue, we continue the work of figuring out how to resist, dismantle, and imagine our way out of white supremacy in library and information studies.

Although libraries, archives, and museums have a troubled history and ongoing legacy of supporting inequity, racial segregation, and the status quo, we know that the future of our profession, practice, and academic field does not have to look like its past. We are simultaneously encouraged by the efforts of individual librarians and archivists to

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support protestors, educate the public about the history of white supremacy, and document police violence and resistance to it, *and* disheartened by the inaction of many LIS professional organizations and academic institutions on these same issues, including those that issued statements in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020. We must not lose our focus in confronting and dismantling anti-Black racism in the U.S., even as we remain cautious about the co-opting of anti-racist language by organizations and institutions that continue to benefit from its proliferation.

We would be remiss in not pointing out the incredible mobilization of far-right extremism that has become mainstream during the time we have worked on this issue, as a backlash, in part, to the call that Black Lives Matter. The ongoing normalization of death threats, harassment and harm by organized white supremacist, white nationalist, and neo-Nazi and misogynist organizations is central to making sense of the threats to organizations that work on behalf of racial justice causes, many of which are often thwarted by smear campaigns, racist propaganda, and viral internet campaigns. No clearer evidence of this is the attempt to overthrow the United States government on January 6, 2021, when rhetorics of racial violence were weaponized against public officials by right-wing organizations who sought, in the end, to blame Black racial justice organizers and sympathizers for the damage inflicted upon the electoral political system.

We also could not have anticipated COVID-19 and its impact on issues of racial justice. We watched our students, our colleagues and millions of people around the world flood the streets to protest the death of George Floyd at a time when little was known about the coronavirus but the death toll was increasing every day. We honor those who put themselves on the line for racial justice in the face of a virus that has taken so many, and disenfranchised even more. What COVID-19 showed us is that Black communities were even more likely to be harmed by the failures of our systems, from lack of universal healthcare to uneven and precarious employment from the economic devastation of the global pandemic. We have witnessed and survived so much. We still have so much to do. The times require more from each and every one of us.

As we release this special issue in April 2023, the corporate media headlines have (predictably) shifted away from matters of racial justice reckonings for Black lives. Power wielders believe that, with the spotlight turned away, many of the gains that were made due to the righteous demands of the past few years can be backpedaled, deprioritized or removed wholesale. In the broader landscape of information systems and professions, the introduction of social justice-informed practices such as responsible/ethical AI, where much work on mitigating racial bias in technical systems has gone on, first proliferated during BLM's initial protests. And, perhaps not surprisingly, these same teams were among the first to receive the ax when rounds of cynical layoffs hit the tech sector in late

2022 and continued into 2023.¹ As Elon Musk completed his takeover of Twitter, protections for people of color and the general climate for thriving communities like Black Twitter have worsened, reminding us that all institutions, including our own, must not be left to their own devices in matters concerning justice for Black lives, as they routinely will not prioritize them. For this reason, among many others, we believe our issue to be as timely and as urgent as ever. The pressure and demands must continue.

This special issue is an effort to channel our grief, rage, fear, and motivation for change into something productive. The four articles and a dialogue in this issue address the ways that library and information studies (broadly conceived as an academic discipline, a set of theoretical constructions, and a lived practice) can affirm the importance of Black lives, in 2020, in 2023, and in all future years.

In “Panopticism and Complicity: The State of Surveillance and Everyday Oppression in Libraries, Archives, and Museums,” Ana Ndumu, Victoria Van Hyning, Diana E. Marsh, and Sydney Triola provide examples of surveillance and state power as they manifest in contemporary data infrastructure and information practices. Arguing that disrupting institutional fixations with utilitarianism that reify the carceral state in the United States need not mean that libraries, archives, and museums ignore the personal sovereignty and well-being of the communities they serve, the authors revisit ideas of panoptic power to examine the role of LAM institutions as sites of social enmity. From being alert to the central assumptions of LAM assessment and evaluation tools and seeking alternatives to refusing to involve law enforcement and penal systems in LAM institutional processes, the authors reflect on how LAM workers can combat structures that rely on oppressive assumptions and claims to information authority.

Continuing the conversation about centering sovereignty and liberation as part of professional practice, in “Archiving Black Movements: Shifting Power and Exploring a Community-Centered Approach,” archivists Tracy S. Drake, Aisha Conner-Gaten, Steven D. Booth close the gap between archivists stewarding movement materials and activists themselves, interviewing Black organizers about how they would like to be preserved in archives. By asking organizers, “What does Black liberation look like to you?”, the authors propose a fitting method to realign archival collecting for liberatory aims. This article puts Black people at the center of archival work, as organizers, subjects of records, archivists, future users, and in so doing, pushes archival theory and practice to enact liberatory memory work.

There is no question that the Black Lives Matter protests that took place during the spring and summer of 2020 stood out against the backdrop of a longer call for racial reckoning that has been underway in the United States for decades. Motivated by a desire to capture the perceptions and voices of information professionals during this unique

¹ Sharon Goldman, “Why Meta and Twitter’s AI and ML Layoffs Matter,” *VentureBeat*, November 14, 2022, <https://venturebeat.com/ai/why-meta-and-twitters-ai-and-ml-layoffs-matter-the-ai-beat/>.

moment of protest, in “Does It Matter?: Have BLM Protests Opened Spaces for Collective Action in LAMs?” Sumayya Ahmed, Rachael Clemens, Ericka Patillo, and Angela Murillo interrogate whether and how conversations, social spaces, teaching practices, policies, workplace dynamics, and demands were changed in the workplace environments of libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs) in response to the Black Lives Matter protests. Using Critical Incident Technique as a methodology, the authors provide a preliminary analysis of changes that LAM professionals reported in their workplaces, professions, and themselves as well as providing insights into the impact of the 2020 social justice movements in information settings writ large.

As pervasive as white supremacy is in the U.S., it also has to be examined in a global context. In “Brazilian Black Librarianship: The Fight Against the Epistemicide of Black Thought in the Library Profession,” Franciele Carneiro Garcês and Gustavo Silva Saldanha provide one of the first-ever English language summaries of the impact of Black intellectual and philosophical traditions on LIS theories and practices in Brazil. As they assert, discussions of racism and racialization are not distinct from LIS education, the profession of librarianship, and the conditions of knowledge production, but central to their core. The authors remind us of the symbiotic relationship between genocide and epistemicide and challenge us to expand our analysis beyond imperialist borders.

The Dialogue between Yasmeen Shorish and Bethany Nowwiskie further advances the conversation about developing personal and organizational accountability that is threaded throughout this issue. In this thoughtful discussion, two differently positioned library leaders offer perspectives on their collaborative work to advance equity and racial justice within the contexts of a predominantly white academic library and an educational technology organization. Touching on topics ranging from issues of scale and temporality when reckoning with structural racism to developing workplace cultures that both support growth and learning and mitigate harm, this Dialogue offers guideposts for those working authentically toward change.

Dismantling oppression is a set of everyday and systemic practices that cannot be realized in some far-off future. We need to reimagine the values that guide our field and live and work by different principles and action, while building in new support systems that will help us realize different presents and futures. Collectively, these articles catalyze us, as a field, to take stock of where we are in countering anti-Black racism almost three years after the murder of George Floyd. While these articles offer us glimmers of hope and point us in exciting and liberatory directions, they also underscore that we still have a long way to go.