

Baharak Yousefi | she/her/او | November 4, 2022 | @BaharakY

Critical Librarianship & Pedagogy Symposium

Thanks very much Niamh, and thanks also to the rest of the conference organizing committee, Ellen, Yamila, Michelle, Cas, Nicole H., Nicole P. Jessica, for all your care and labour. Thank you for recognizing that we are living through a pandemic and making this gathering accessible. Thank you also to all the great moderators and presenters for your work and wisdom. My sincere congratulations for organizing a really fantastic conference! And thanks to you all for being here today.

I am joining you from my home by the beautiful Salish Sea on the unsundered lands of the Musqueam, Squamish & Tsleil-Waututh, Indigenous nations and peoples who steward the waters and lands we call Vancouver.



Illustration: Roshî Rouzbehani for The New Yorker | used with permission

From Canada to Palestine, may we struggle for the uprooting of settler colonialism and imperialism everywhere. From Wet'suwet'en to Tehran, may we struggle for people's rights to life, dignity, and self-determination. And a big shout out to our colleagues in Ontario who are out standing in solidarity with education workers today.



Photo: Enayat Asadi for NPR | used with permission

A little bit about me and where I come from. I am Iranian of Persian and Bakhtiari descent. Persians are an Iranian ethnic group that make up over half the population of Iran and Bakhtiaris are a group of nomadic Indigenous Iranians who have lived in the Zagros Mountains in western and southwestern Iran for the past several thousand years. This photo along with a few others was published earlier this month in an NPR article about the Bakhtiari. I thought they were really beautiful so sharing one of them with you here.

Sara Ahmed
Combahee River Collective
Angela Y. Davis
Mike Davis
Emily Drabinski
Ruth Wilson Gilmore
David James Hudson
Robin D. G. Kelley
George Lakey
Yoonhee Lee
Mark Leier
Ebony Magnus
Dale McCartney

Fred Moten
Sean Orr
Nicole Pagowsky
Sam Popowich
Arundhati Roy
Steven Salaita
Gina Schlesselman-Tarango
Jane Schmidt
Lisa Sloniowski
Dean Spade
Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò
Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

Before we get started, a few acknowledgements. These are the names you'll hear me mention in this talk, but above and beyond formal citations, everything I share with you today is stuff I've learned from library workers and comrades whose thinking informs my own. I promise I am not trying to share the blame—errors and omissions are all mine—I am just giving credit where credit is due.



When I first sat down to write this talk, I had two people top of mind: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Arundhati Roy. In thinking about our work in libraries, I am guided and awed by Ruth Wilson Gilmore's description of being a good geographer (which is the other thing I am trying to be) I think it is the most thrilling description of not just geography but of any field. And of research and analysis broadly defined.

“Being a good geographer means going to look, and see, and then to challenge oneself in one's description of what one is seeing. But politically, it is giving all the attention you have to the thing so [you] understand how it works.”

Ruth Wilson Gilmore

Gilmore says: “Being a good geographer means going to look, and see, and then to challenge oneself in one’s description of what one is seeing. But politically, it is giving all the attention you have to the thing so [you] understand how it works.”

<https://antipodeonline.org/geographies-of-racial-capitalism/>

I believe looking, seeing, and challenging ourselves in the description of what we’re seeing is foundational to the work we do together as library workers and as comrades.

“The opposite of hope is not hopelessness. There’s a field in between the two, and that’s where I live and work, where I grow and water things.”

Arundhati Roy

And, while we do the work, I hold close what Roy (Nov 2019, live event, Vancouver) says about hope: “The opposite of hope is not hopelessness. There’s a field in between the two, and that’s where I live and work, where I grow and water things.”

This talk assumes that despite their history and despite their present, libraries are worthy of our lives and work. This talk isn’t about rejecting libraries or refusing them. Though I’ve dabbled in that too. I guess today’s talk is about doing work in the world we’re in, but also about other worlds and other possibilities.

Four Provocations for the Time Being



So today I want to share with you four provocations about libraries. A few places I've landed for the time being. Acknowledging that there's always more to look at, more to see, and more to challenge my understanding of how libraries work.

“We’re educated to complexify everything, but I’m rather tired of that formula. Some things need to be simplified. For example, Zionism is inhuman. Anti-Black racism is ubiquitous. Capitalism is leading us to ecocide. U.S. imperialism never serves the common good. These facts need no nuance. Sometimes ‘fuck that’ or ‘fuck them’ is all the theoretical analysis you need.”

Steven Salaita

I’m a fan of this Steven Salaita quote:

“We’re educated to complexify everything, but I’m rather tired of that formula. Some things need to be simplified. For example, Zionism is inhuman. Anti-Blackracism is ubiquitous. Capitalism is leading us to ecocide. U.S. imperialism never serves the common good. These facts need no nuance. Sometimes ‘fuck that’ or ‘fuck them’ is all the theoretical analysis you need.”

<https://stevesalaita.com/punishment-and-reward-in-the-corporate-university/>

Ok. Let’s do some analysis.

1. What we need now is worker-run libraries

I think libraries should be run by us, by the workers. I think our libraries should be collegially and democratically run. Collegially as in equal sharing of power and decision making authority. Not collegially as in nice. While I am under no illusion that a flat hierarchy or a structure agreed on by library workers themselves will solve all our problems, I think it is a reasonable alternative to the top-down, autocratic leadership we see in many libraries today. Refusing the master narrative of anything, libraries included, require us to grapple, to think beyond what we've been told is possible. And in order to do that, I think we need all of us. We need all of us to be in this and to have a say. We need to go and see. We need to reject the shapes and refuse the limits of what our administrators see as possible. No masters, no flakes! As the wonderful Dean Spade teaches us.

So what are we really talking about here? I am going to share with you two examples of how I see power being reproduced and consolidated in libraries. Both examples are Canadian because this is what I know, but I suspect that the patterns may be familiar to those of you in the US as well.



Northern Exposure
to Leadership



First example: I've been working as a librarian in Canada since 2007. During this time, I've been aware of two library leadership programs, where many library managers across the country have gone to receive training: Northern Exposure to Leadership Institute (NELI) and Library Leaders Excellence and Development (LLEAD). NELI which as far as I can tell ended in 2016 cost \$3000 and LLEAD, which is currently in place, costs \$6000.

NELI's website is still up and states that "Only those nominations by employers, library and information studies schools, or library organizations will be considered."

<http://northernexposuretoleadership.ca/>

LLEAD requires, I am quoting from their website, two letters of support, one from a senior leader in the applicant's organization, and one from the individual to whom the applicant reports. Both letters must attest to the applicant's readiness and potential to manage strategic functions or initiatives, and be a transformational leader.

<https://www.libraryleadership.org/>

According to the LLEAD brochure, they are the only leadership program for employees in any supervisory role in academic or public libraries in Canada. Though I think a different (but similar?) one got started this year on the academic side, they've pretty much been the only game in town. While the price tag may not be high compared to MBAs or other leadership programs, especially in the US, they are prohibitive on an individual level. So you'd typically have to be financially supported by library administration and also be seen by them as management material. LLEAD's curriculum is a business school type curriculum based on a piece published in the Harvard Business Review in 2003 by Henry Mintzberg and Jonathan Gosling. One of the key people behind both programs is Dr. Ken Haycock, the former director of the San Jose library school.



This article is **Advertised** by Copeman Healthcare

Local News

A happy event of life-changing healthcare

Five years ago, Dr. Ken Haycock, a Vancouver-based consultant and research professor, was at a difficult point in his life. He had just suffered a personal tragedy, the death of his wife of 25 years, and was in need of a new physician. Living in West Vancouver at the time, Haycock didn't know where to begin.

Advertisement
May 29, 2017 • May 29, 2017 • 3 minute read



The same Dr. Ken Haycock, the person with an over-sized influence over the library sector in Canada, wrote one of these advertorials in the *Vancouver Sun* to promote private healthcare in Canada. In a country of publicly funded healthcare, the library management guru wrote an article in support of private healthcare. If you don't live in Canada, or if you're not familiar with healthcare in Canada, supporting private healthcare is a very big deal and not at all a good thing around these parts.



I confess I am a wee bit obsessed with this and the fact that this didn't seem to have cost him his standing among our library bosses and I love to tweet reminders about it. I am sharing Lisa's response with her permission. Lisa wrote "I remember being at a leadership institute where he told us that libraries needed to stop talking about being a public good. And focus on value for taxpayer money. Amazing how that's been utterly normalized."

Anyway, back to Haycock's outsized neoliberal influence in the field, according to LLEAD's website, 50% of their grads are now in key management positions. Add to that, LLEAD is supported by a group of "learning guides." These are current library administrators and managers from across the country who volunteer their time as mentors. Add to that, if you are a LLEAD sponsor, like EBSCO is, depending on how much money you're giving them, you may be eligible to author blog posts and co-instruct a session on sector issues, talk with participants about sector business models, and provide product literature to attendees. Looking forward to when Lexis Nexis is a sponsor, I guess.

If you go on the LLEAD website, you can watch testimonials of folks who have attended and one of the emphasis of the testimonials is the networking, relationship building, "cones of silence", and close professional relationships that the program fosters for managers and administrators. So what I am saying is there are structures in place that aim to make the library leadership landscape in Canada, and maybe in your contexts too, politically homogeneous.

Of course, this characterization does not apply to every single individual (some of my best friends are NELI and LLEAD graduates!), but the point remains that there is little opportunity to try things beyond what the current crew are serving up and it seems, from what we know about self-perpetuating systems like this, little opportunity to do so in the near future. Say what you want about the administrative class, but they do know how close ranks.



Second example: This one got a lot of attention and will be familiar to some of you here. Our colleagues Jane Schmidt, Sam Popowich, and others have written about it brilliantly and I encourage you to go and read their work if you haven't already.

In October 2019, Toronto Public Library hosted a public event at one of their branches. The event featured Meghan Murphy, founder and editor of the website Feminist Current, who spoke on a panel organized by a group called Radical Feminists Unite. This group is part of a "gender critical" movement, which is to say Meghan Murphy is a TERF. Murphy has appeared before the Canadian Senate and Scottish Parliament to speak against gender identity legislation, which seeks to protect trans people against discrimination based on gender expression and identity.



Photo: Gelel Badheysang | used with permission

The reactions to the event announcement from the trans and allied communities in Toronto and across the country was predictably negative, with thousands of people signing a petition which asked the TPL management and board to cancel the event. The main points emphasized in the petition, and by groups opposing the events, is that the humanity and dignity of trans people is not a topic for debate, and that these types of events promote hate and violence against trans people in our communities.

It was within this context that Toronto's city librarian, Vickery Bowles, appeared on CBC Radio (that's our national broadcaster) to announce that despite the public protests, and objections from the community, she is "not going to reconsider" holding the event at Toronto Public Library, but she remains committed to the safety of the trans community.

Bowles told journalist Carol Off: "I am committed, and the library is committed, to offering safe and welcoming space for everyone, including members of the trans community. But as a public library and as a public institution, we have an obligation to stand up for our democratic values and principles, and free speech is something that protects everyone."

Following Bowles' interview with Carol Off, the Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC), which has the chief librarians of all large urban library systems across the country as members, wrote a letter to CBC Radio's Ombudsman condemning Carol Off's "approach" and lack of "impartiality" in the interview. Similarly, in 2018, CULC Chair and CEO of Edmonton Public Library, Pilar Martinez co-wrote a letter to the Vancouver Public Library Board in support of VPL's decision to allow Feminist Current to host an event at their library. The letter was co-signed by 42 heads of library systems from across the country.

Of course, when Bowles says she is committed to a "safe and welcoming space for everyone," it is clear by her actions that the trans community is not included in her commitments. When she says that libraries and librarians have an obligation to "to stand up for our democratic values and principles" those values and principles do not extend to the members of the Toronto Public Library Workers Union Local 4948, who represent over two thousand library workers in 98 branches across the City of Toronto, and who collectively called for the cancellation of the event. And when she says she supports "free speech" and "intellectual freedom," her support does not appear to extend to journalist Carol Off.

Examples of contradictory policies and actions that prioritize power consolidation and institutional cruelty under the guise of valuing democracy and intellectual freedom are commonplace in North American libraries. Currently, power is consolidated. Currently, power looks like forty plus library directors lining up to support each other's decisions. Decisions that library workers are protesting. But things could be different. Libraries could be run by library workers. I started this provocation with Steven Salaita and I'll end with him too...

“When administrators claim to value critical thinking, they’re lying to you. Well, maybe they’re not lying, per se, but they sure as hell aren’t being honest. There’s a difference between critical thinking as an unbounded practice, capable of disrupting orthodoxy, and critical thinking as a rhetorical commodity.”

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There’s a difference between critical thinking as an unbounded practice, capable of disrupting orthodoxy, and critical thinking as a rhetorical commodity.”

What we need now in libraries is unbounded practice. What we need now is all of us. No masters, no flakes!

2. One-shots are keeping us down

Here I want to express my deep gratitude to Nicole Pagowsky and all the authors in the recent College and Research Libraries special issue on one-shots. It is clear just from the number of downloads how much your work is valued and needed by our community. Generally speaking, the current systems of info literacy instruction, broadly defined, that many of us work within (i.e. the one-shot) devalues our labour and keeps us in our place.

<https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/issue/view/1623/showToc>

I really like and have been using Pagowsky's definition of one-shots: "a standalone session, superficially (or not at all) connected to course content, that is tacked onto a class. Within a curriculum, the one-shot has no memory of where information literacy has been and no vision of where it is going."

Are students learning? Is it our job to teach them?

I begin with two basic questions:

Are students learning?

Is it our job to teach them?

The first one is an empirical question. I don't actually know the answer to it in my own institution. I gather from my interactions with many (not all) students and from speaking to faculty colleagues and from other peoples' writing and research that the answer is probably not so much. One-shot instruction isn't, generally speaking, working.

Is it our job to teach them?

I went looking at the job posting for my current job and it says "Provide instruction and assistance to students and faculty in the use of information sources through instructional seminars, guides, and individual consultations." This suggests that it is my job to teach them.

So then what's going on? Why instead of claiming this as our turf, does library administration situate us, as Pagowsky puts it, as "helpers and assistants" and "reactionary yes-people unable to enact our own agency within campus power structures?"

In my experience, academic libraries fight hard to claim and maintain their place and their status on campuses. We're the "heart of the campus" or whatever it is we are at the moment, but when it comes to claiming info literacy as our area of expertise, as the thing we teach (whether or not others on campus do as well), we don't seem to have the backing of our administrators. We are told and trained to build relationships, to advocate, to try and get a seat at this and that table just to do the job we were hired to do. No physicist, historian, or geographer on our campuses teaches that way. No physicist, historian, or geographer who is responsible for teaching physics, history, or geography is going around begging people for the opportunity to do their job.

Imagine a new faculty member who starts out less than confident about teaching (and who actually care about teaching!). This person gains confidence through repetition, through seeing what works and what doesn't work. With time, this person gets better at their jobs. They also feel good about themselves as teachers and human beings when they get to see their students learn. As Schlesselman-Tarango says in her article "Faculty have direct and sustained access to students." This is a big deal. The fact that we don't is a problem. It's more difficult for our pedagogy to improve. It's more difficult for us to gain confidence in this area of our work. And, most importantly, it is more difficult for us to do our work.

People want to do good work. Working in an institution that claims to teach info literacy but has the one shot as the model means we don't have the tools to do our job. This in the long run impacts how we see ourselves and our place in the university. It impacts whether or not we speak up about things or keep our heads down and stay in our lane lest they find out that we don't know what we're doing.

Add to that the fact that we rarely have the academic freedom to choose our texts, our lot in the university as teachers who do not have the tools to teach comes into even sharper focus.

What do I mean by choose our texts? Well, if like me, you think that teaching how information systems work is an important part of information literacy instruction, the move to black box discovery layers in many of our libraries was a forced change in how we teach. What ILS we use in an institution that teaches information literacy should be a librarian decision.

If we're responsible for student learning and if one shot and discovery layers are our tools then one could argue that we don't have the tools to do our work.

Happy to talk more about this idea of ILS as text in the Q&A if folks are interested but for now going back to the students and what we're supposedly in the classroom to do, I want to wrap up section with an excerpt from my friend Dale McCarney's article on teaching labour history to international students.

<https://www.iltjournal.ca/index.php/ilt/article/download/5980/6906/>

"Perhaps the most important step to creating a dialogic classroom and empowering students to be critical and to learn and change themselves is to build what pedagogical theorist George Lakey calls a "container." The term refers to the sense of solidarity and mutual aid that can be built within a classroom so that students trust one another and their instructor. As Lakey puts it, "to learn, people need to risk ... to risk, people need safety. To be safe, they need a group and/or a teacher that supports them." Containers are not about making students comfortable—as Lakey argues, it is sometimes important to make students uncomfortable in our efforts to explore and challenge exploitation and inequality. Containers are about making students feel safe—safe enough to take the risks necessary to be truly critical."

I think the time and energy we put into relationship building and advocacy with our bosses and our faculty colleagues just to be able to get into a class to do our jobs, need to be redirected to building opportunities for students to build relationships and to feel safe enough to take risks and to learn.

As teacher and historian Mark Leier has argued, "it has less to do with people listening to our voices and more to do with encouraging people to find their own voices. Under these circumstances, student-focused learning becomes something people do themselves, not something that is done to them."

I see this as not dissimilar to Emily Drabinski's 2014 conceptualization of kairotic pedagogy of information literacy instruction where teaching and learning is understood as dynamic and contextual, and students' already existing knowledge is centered and valued.

https://digitalcommons.liu.edu/brooklyn_libfacpubs/16/

But of course sustained access to students, not a feature of the one-shot as discussed earlier, is needed in order for us to be able to practice liberatory pedagogies described by McCartney, Lakey, Leier, and Drabinski.



Image: copyright Laitche, CC BY-SA 4.0 / FAL

We recently had municipal elections in Vancouver and I was able to cast my vote for three candidates that ran under a “vote socialist” banner. One of the candidates, Sean Orr, tweeted out an endorsement from his brother which I loved.

[A different image appeared in the original slide deck (rose + VOTE Socialist logo). It has been replaced here for copyright compliance.]

“Sean and I have been through a lot in our lives. During one of the darkest times in my life, Sean summed up my feelings of uselessness in a beautiful phrase. He said, ‘We have magic we can’t use.’ We had all these convictions, values, and passions but nowhere to put them.”

Those of us who are interested in being in classrooms differently, those of us who want to use our convictions, values, and passions, our magic if you will, in a way that serves our students first and foremost, need to come together and organize against not only one-shots but reformist approaches to one-shots. “What if you visited the class twice instead of once” type of thing.

So in addition to the two questions of are students learning and is it our job to teach them, I would ask why not provide the tools to a group of people who you are already paying to do the job? Arguably the university doesn’t benefit from us teaching one-shot classes either.

I imagine one of the answers is that university administrators are actually not all that concerned about teaching and learning and maybe that’s the whole story. I don’t know. But as a convenient byproduct, the university also gets a group of people who are walking around thinking “I am not very good at this therefore I will keep my head down and not make a fuss.”

We are deprofessionalized by being given work we can’t do well, and the very fact we can’t do it well makes us reluctant to resist the conditions of our deprofessionalization. And that about sums up why I think one-shots are keeping us down.

3. Removing the MLIS will devalue our labour

Last year David James Hudson, Yoonhee Lee, Ebony Magnus, and I wrote to the Canadian Association of University Teachers list-serve to express our concerns with the idea that academic librarianship should reconsider the Master's degree in library and information studies as a requirement for academic librarian positions because the MLS is perceived to be a uniquely exclusionary barrier to diversifying the profession.

I was initially planning to read the piece to you because I feel strongly about what we had to say and it is closely connected to autonomy, collegial governance, deprofessionalization and other ideas that we've talked about today, but in the interest of time and because the piece is available on Dave's website. I am going to share the link at the end of this talk and ask you to please read it. A take-home provocation if you will.

<https://www.davidjameshudson.ca/considering-the-mls/>

In the piece, we propose that all higher education is a barrier, and graduate degrees of all sorts feature barriers similar to those in MLS programs. There is no evidence that the MLS is uniquely exclusionary. In our context, when left to the hands of library administration, we believe that deregulation can only serve the interests of those who are keen to, in the long term, eliminate our positions from faculty unions, create increasingly more corporate library environments, and achieve a gradual lowering of wages, benefits, and autonomy for all librarians.

If you have had a chance to read it and have comments or questions about it at the end of this, please feel free!

4. We need to understand that we are part of each other's struggles

When I started writing this provocation, I called it “librarianship needs a feminist methodology,” but changed it to “We need to understand that we’re part of each other’s struggles.” For me, they mean very similar things but they may not for you and I wanted to be as clear as possible.

Feminism, Angela Y. Davis tells us, “is not something that adheres to bodies, it is not grounded in gendered bodies. It is an approach—a way of conceptualizing, a methodology, a guide to strategies for struggle. That means that feminism doesn’t belong to anyone in particular.”

I am a feminist. It is my training, my politics. More specifically, I am an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, internationalist, intersectional feminist. A Combahee River Collective feminist, if you will.

Of course, many of you here are very familiar with the 1977 Combahee River Collective statement and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s excellent 2017 book *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* but just as a refresher, this excerpt from the “what we believe” section of the Statement is what we’re talking about here:

"We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation."

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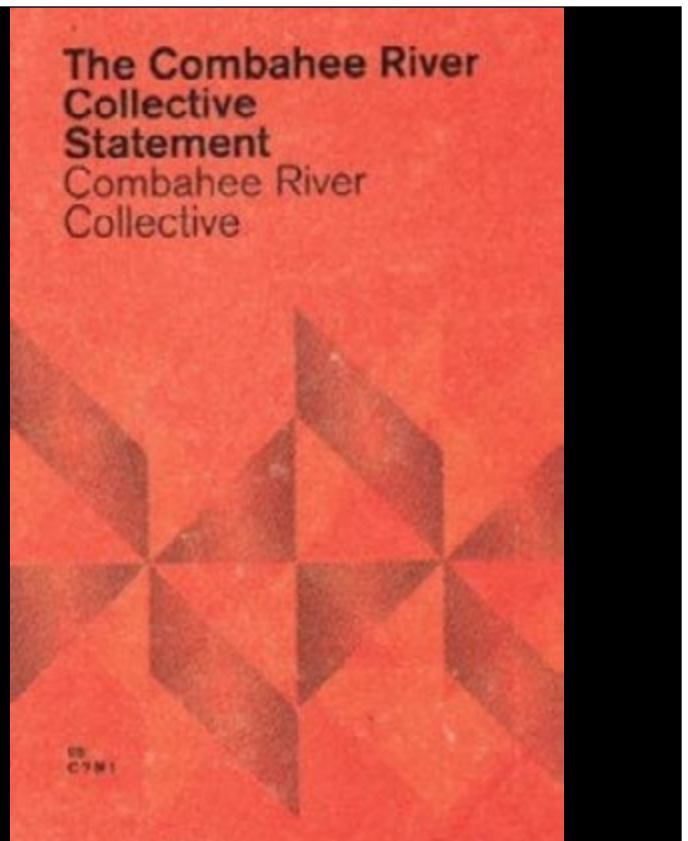
<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>

If feminism isn't how you describe your politics, I hope you see your politics of solidarity in this because what we're really talking about here is that we need to understand that we're part of each others' struggles.

As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Olufemi Taiwo, and others have made clear, the Collective's original formulation of "identity politics" was a way of counteracting what the members accurately saw as identity-based exclusions in various movements of the 60s and 70s. Their stated goal was never division based on identity, but collective liberation. The Collective itself was clear on this. They wrote:

"If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."

Combahee River Collective



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To our detriment, this capacious understanding of identity politics isn't necessarily in the room with us when we talk about this stuff in libraries. In many (not all!) rooms we're in, what we have at play is what Taiwo refers to as deference practices and elite capture. I encourage you all to read Taiwo's 2022 book *Elite Capture* if you haven't already, but in very general terms, Taiwo argues that the assumption that the interests of elite individuals from marginalized groups are aligned with full group interests is both naive and dangerous.

For those who are deferred to, Taiwo writes, it can "supercharge group-undermining norms".

“For those who defer, the habit can supercharge moral cowardice. The norms provide social cover for the abdication of responsibility: it displaces onto individual heroes, a hero class, or a mythicized past the work that is ours to do now in the present. Their perspective may be clearer on this or that specific matter, but their overall point of view isn’t any less particular or constrained by history than ours. More importantly, deference places the accountability that is all of ours to bear onto select people – and, more often than not, a hyper-sanitized and thoroughly fictional caricature of them.”

Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò

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<https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/post/being-in-the-room-privilege-elite-capture-and-epistemic-deference>

Imagine we’re all in a room in one of our libraries talking about the protests in Iran and how to best support our Iranian student body at this time. As an Iranian, I probably have some knowledge and perspective on the protests and I should be heard. No argument there. But to assume that by listening to me, you are to quote Taiwo, “centering the most marginalized,” or somehow accessing what it’s like to be out in the streets of Iran protesting is not right either.

If I were to insist on my voice being either representative or the last word on the issue, it would undermine the group and the work they’ve gathered to do together, which is to help our students. And if you all were to sit back and let me take this on, it is an abdication of your responsibility.

Solidarity means we all need to step up. To say “I don’t know what it’s like to be Iranian so I am going to not say anything and just listen” isn’t OK either. It is all our responsibility to learn about each others’ struggles, to be intellectually and otherwise humble, to speak up, to understand that solidarity isn’t perfect, but it is more than standing on the sidelines and letting the one or two brown people in the room do all the work.

"Amidst the apparent noise in public discourse, we are swiftly approaching a sort of intellectual gridlock. Solidarity can never be pristine. It should be challenged, debated, argued about, corrected. By precluding it, we reinforce the very thing we claim to be fighting against."

Arundhati Roy

To quote Arundhati Roy on this: "Amidst the apparent noise in public discourse, we are swiftly approaching a sort of intellectual gridlock. Solidarity can never be pristine. It should be challenged, debated, argued about, corrected. By precluding it, we reinforce the very thing we claim to be fighting against."

<https://thewire.in/rights/arundhati-roy-stuart-hall-memorial-lecture>

When we say "I don't know what it's like to be a refugee, I don't know what it's like to be Black, I don't know what it's like to be Palestinian" I think a couple of things are happening.

First: We are assuming that we need to know or recognize "what it's like" on an individual level in order to stand in solidarity. We don't.

"Empathy requires identifying with the person you're empathizing with. And sometimes you only identify with those whom you recognize. That's a problem because part of solidarity is the people you don't recognize. The people who you don't see yourself in. And we're raised in this particular era of liberal multiculturalism to see ourselves in others... The fallback is always, 'Well, if it were me,' or, 'I can see how other people feel,' as opposed to, 'Let me step outside myself.'"

Robin D. G. Kelly

Robin D. G. Kelly has talked about this in a way that I find really helpful.

"...empathy requires identifying with the person you're empathizing with. And sometimes you only identify with those whom you recognize. That's a problem because part of solidarity is the people you don't recognize. The people who you don't see yourself in. And we're raised in this particular era of liberal multiculturalism to see ourselves in others... The fallback is always, "Well, if it were me," or, "I can see how other people feel," as opposed to, "Let me step outside myself."

<https://black-ink.info/2020/01/16/solidarity-is-not-a-market-exchange-an-interview-with-robin-d-g-kelley/>

And second, I think we are failing to make connections between the systems of power and oppression that operate in all our lives. Or as Fred Moten has famously put it: "the coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us..."

Four Provocations for the Time Being

1. What we need now is worker-run libraries
2. One-shots are keeping us down
3. Removing the MLIS is anti-labour
4. We need to understand that we are part of each other's struggles



I don't want to pretend this isn't extremely hard but I also can't afford to pretend that it isn't extremely important. We have to figure out solidarity. There really isn't any other way. We have to struggle. We have to be humble, brave. We have to find our comrades and celebrate our wins. We need each other and all of us.

The question of living a feminist life, Sara Ahmed tells us, is a practical question. It's a question of how we go on. How we survive. I said at the beginning that this talk assumes libraries are worthy of our lives and work. I hope it's clear from what I have shared with you that when I say libraries, I mean all of us. Not some glorified concept or grand building.

We are what's worth our lives and work.

Thank you.

"What keeps us going, ultimately, is our love for each other, and our refusal to bow our heads, to accept the verdict, however all-powerful it seems. It's what ordinary people have to do. You have to love each other. You have to defend each other. You have to fight."

Mike Davis (1946–2022)



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Thank you very much for your attention.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/aug/30/mike-davis-california-writer-interview-activism>