

READING WORKPLACE
DYNAMICS

ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP

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ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP VOLUME 55

**READING WORKPLACE
DYNAMICS:
A POST-PANDEMIC
PROFESSIONAL ETHOS IN
PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

EDITED BY

VANESSA IRVIN

East Carolina University, USA

AND

BHARAT MEHRA

The University of Alabama, USA



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	vii
<i>Series Editor's Introduction</i>	ix
<i>About the Editors</i>	xi
<i>About the Contributors</i>	xiii
<i>Foreword</i>	xix
<i>John M. Budd</i>	
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxix

Introduction: The Symbiosis of Public Librarianship – <i>Praxis</i> and <i>Ethos</i> for a Post-Pandemic Identity	
<i>Vanessa Irvin and Bharat Mehra</i>	1

SECTION 1 DYNAMICS: THEORETICAL LENSES

Chapter 1 Public Libraries in Brazil: Conceptual Review in the Post-Pandemic Era	
<i>Daniele Achilles, Renata Oliveira, Deise Sabbag and Nanci Oddone</i>	13
Chapter 2 “Reading” The Room in the COVID-19 Era as Womanist Canonical Praxis: Black Motherhood and Public Librarianship	
<i>Shalonda Capers</i>	27
Chapter 3 Voices in the (Information)Wilderness: Black Feminism(s) and Informational Practices	
<i>LaVerne Gray, Joseph Winberry and Yiran Duan</i>	35
Chapter 4 “When They Go Low”: Preparing Information Professionals for Threats of Violence in Library Workplaces	
<i>Beth Patin</i>	51

**SECTION 2
PRACTICES: OPERATIONALIZING PROTOCOLS
AND POLICIES**

- Chapter 5 Commitment to Justice, Empathy, and Community During COVID-19: Results from a Three-Phase Study of Public Libraries**
Denice Adkins, Jenny Bossaller, Ericka Butler, Wilson Castaño, Hyerim Cho and Joe Kohlburn 63
- Chapter 6 Equipping Librarians for Programming During and Post-Pandemic: A Turning Point for the Free Library of Philadelphia**
Veronica Britto and Valerie Taylor-Samuel 77
- Chapter 7 Exploring the Information Experiences of Immigrants Toward Public Libraries in New York City**
Jean Rene 91
- Chapter 8 Blount County Public Library’s Response to COVID-19: A Library Director’s Pandemic Story**
Kaurri C. Williams-Cockfield 109

**SECTION 3
CONNECTIONS: INSIDE/OUTSIDE LIBRARY
PARTNERSHIPS**

- Chapter 9 Partnerships and the COVID-19 Pandemic: From Threat to Opportunity**
Noah Lenstra, Nicole Peritore and Christine D’Arpa 129
- Chapter 10 Queer Reads and Resistance in Turbulent Times**
Rae-Anne Montague 147
- Chapter 11 Weaving Resilience: The Pandemic’s Tapestry of Librarianship in New Mexico**
Eli Guinnee and Kathleen Pickering 163
- Epilogue Chasing the Long Tail of COVID: Envisioning a Renewed Ethos for Public Librarianship**
Claudia Martinez 183
- Index* 189

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

Fig. 3.1.	The Culture-Centered Perspective of Information Practices.	39
Fig. 3.2.	The Black Feminist Information Community Model/Elements (Adapted from Gray, 2020).	42
Fig. 7.1.	Data Collection Procedure.	96

Tables

Table 8.1.	BCPL Use Data Comparison Between FY 2017–2018 and FY 2018–2019.	113
Table 8.2.	Daily Updates to the BCPL Library Board During Tier-3 Implementation – March 2020.	118
Table 8.3.	BCPL Use Data Comparison from 2018–2019 to 2020–2021.	123
Table 10.1.	Descriptions of Key Issues from Anti-LGBTQIA+ Bills as Reported by the ACLU.	153
Table 11.1.	Demographics of Participant Library Locations.	168
Table 11.2.	Themes from Survey Responses.	170

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SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

I am delighted to take this opportunity and introduce myself as the Series Editor of *Advances in Librarianship* since January 2021. In this capacity, I am extending the series' impact via integrating a critical perspective that spotlights social justice and inclusive praxis from the shadows to become an emerging canon at the very core of who we are and what we value as legit in library and information science (LIS) scholarship and practice. This strategic vision requires destabilizing of entrenched hegemonies within our privileged ranks and external communities to alleviate intersecting political, economic, social, and cultural anxieties and power imbalances we witness today. As we move toward the quarter-century mark, we also need to effectively document such paradigmatic shifts in LIS, serving as a foundation of inspiration upon which, together in our multiple identities and diversities, we can proudly contribute to the building of a meaningful society toward a brighter future for our children to inherit.

New stimulating models reimagining (or extending) the roles for cultural memory institutions (e.g., libraries, museums, archives, schools, etc.) and the field of information are much required to develop symbolic and real infrastructures for moving us forward. We also need to better tell our stories of information activism and community mobilization in the face of overwhelming challenges to human existence, from forces of neoliberal corporatization, political ransacking, media irresponsibility, climate change, environmental degradation, and pandemic dis/misinformation, to name a few. What do the contemporary threats of human extinction and cultural decay mean for LIS professionals, be it scholars, researchers, educators, practitioners, students, and others embedded in a variety of information settings? Not only does it require actions in the “doing” of resistance via information to decenter dysfunctional powerbrokers and their oppressions and entitled privileges. However, disseminating a forward-thinking agenda and narrative beyond our internally focused bastardized institutional bastions is equally important, as we adopt an active stance to promote fairness, justice, equity/equality, change agency, empowerment, community building, and community development.

Advances in Librarianship holds a special place in the hands, hearts, and minds of readers as a key platform to support creative ideas and practices that change and better articulate the vital contributions of libraries and the impact of information on diverse multicultural communities in a global network information society. Moving forward, my aim for the series is to engage our diverse professional communities in critical discourse that enable real transformations to occur. It is important to propel progress in shifting entrenched positionalities in LIS, while making visible content related to the “margins.” Decentering canons and practices toward equity of representation, inclusivity, and progressive change will

naturally occur. Intersecting social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals in recent times demand an urgent response from the LIS professions in this regard.

I am truly honored and privileged to build on the legacy of Paul T. Jaeger, who served as Series Editor of *Advances in Librarianship* since 2013. His research helped to mobilize LIS in addressing concerns surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion more substantially beyond past lip-service, also shaping the focus of the book series. I plan to operationalize new directions for single or multi-authored book-length explorations and edited collections by shifting focus on understudied spaces, invisible populations from the margins, and knowledge domains that have been under-researched or under-published in what we consider as high impactful venues in LIS and beyond. Examples might involve a reflective journey that established, or newly emerging LIS scholars, researchers, practitioners, and students critically reflect, assess, evaluate, and propose solutions or actions to change entrenched practices and systemic imbalanced inequities in different library and information-related settings. It might also involve decolonizing LIS publication industries in their biased Euro/Anglo-centricities with the inclusion of content from geographical diversities around the world.

I am reaching out to our multiple audiences for their support toward these goals in spreading the word for proposals to new volumes in the series. Let us find our “collective voice” in the LIS professions to make us all uncomfortable as we continue to “push the buttons,” thereby, becoming stronger in our quest to further social justice and develop our humanity, human dignity, respect, and potential to the fullest.

Bharat Mehra, PhD
Professor & EBSCO Endowed Chair in Social Justice
School of Library and Information Studies
University of Alabama, USA

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Vanessa Irvin, MSLS, EdD, is an Associate Professor with the Master of Library Science Program in the College of Education at East Carolina University (USA). She received her Master's in Library and Information Science from Pennsylvania Western University at Clarion and her Doctorate in Literacy Studies from the University of Pennsylvania. Dr Irvin's primary areas of expertise include reference services, public librarianship, youth services, and librarian professional development. Irvin is particularly interested in studying the evolution of librarian professional practices under the influence of emerging technologies, having published actively and led multiple research projects in this area. Dr Irvin currently serves as Co-Editor-in-Chief of the open-access peer-reviewed journal, the *International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion* (IJIDI).

Bharat Mehra is EBSCO Endowed Chair in Social Justice and Professor in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alabama. His research focuses on diversity and social justice in library and information science and community informatics or the use of information and communication technologies to empower minority and underserved populations to make meaningful changes in their everyday lives. He has applied action research to nurture a just society while collaborating with racial/ethnic groups, international diaspora, sexual minorities, rural communities, low-income families, small businesses, and others, to represent their experiences and perspectives in the design of culturally appropriate community-based information systems and services. Dr Mehra primarily teaches courses on social justice and inclusion advocacy, diversity and inclusive leadership in information organizations, community-engaged scholarship, outreach to diverse populations, public library management, collection management, and grant development for information professionals.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Daniele Achilles is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Librarianship, the Graduate Program in Social Memory, and the Professional Master's Degree in Librarianship at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO). She is Leader of the Research Group Libraries, Memory, and Resistance, CNPq and Leader of the Community of Practice in Public Libraries Extension Program. Achilles received her Bachelor of Library Science – UNIRIO, Master's and Doctorate in Social Memory – UNIRIO, and Sandwich Doctorate in Information Science at the Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia.

Denice Adkins is Professor and Associate Director of the School of Information Science & Learning Technologies, University of Missouri, Co-editor of the *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science*, and Treasurer for REFORMA (The National Association to Promote Library & Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking). Prior to her academic career, Dr Adkins was a public librarian serving diverse communities in the southwestern United States. Her additional past experiences include a Fulbright Scholarship to Honduras and a Fulbright Specialist to India, as well as serving as president of REFORMA, the executive board for ALISE, and councillor-at-large for the American Library Association.

Jenny Bossaller is an Associate Professor at the School of Information Science & Learning Technologies (SISLT) at the University of Missouri at Columbia (MU). Her teaching and research focus broadly encompasses public libraries, information policy, the history of libraries and information, and related social and technological phenomena. She has focused especially on the public's access to information. She co-developed two IMLS education grants focusing on public library leadership and community and professional immersion (PuLL) another to revitalize the school's health information and librarianship track (C4CH). She is the author of numerous articles related to libraries and health and is co-author of Introduction to Public Librarianship. She was the recipient of the 2022 ALISE/ Connie Van Fleet Award for Research Excellence in Public Library Services to Adults.

Veronica Britto is Chief of the Adult Services and Programs Division at the Free Library of Philadelphia. She administrates programs that aim to increase Digital Inclusion, English Language Learning, Adult Basic Education, Business Education, Workforce Development, and Culinary Literacy in Philadelphia, PA. She also manages the Social Services and Engagement initiatives of the Free Library. In 2004, Veronica received a full scholarship from the US Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to pursue her MSLS from

Clarion University. She received her Undergraduate degree in Humanities and Communications from Pennsylvania State University and her Master's in Library Science from Clarion University of PA. Veronica serves on the governing board of PhillyCAM, a Public-Access Media Center (Philadelphia, PA).

John M. Budd is a Professor Emeritus in the School of Information Science and Learning Technologies of the University of Missouri (USA). He has been active in library and information science (LIS) professional associations for over 30 years, chairing the American Library Association's (ALA) Library Research Round Table, and serving as president of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) and the LIS honor society, Beta Phi Mu. Budd has been on several committees with the Association of Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) and has published over 100 articles in prominent LIS journals such as *Library and Information Science Research*, *Journal of Documentation*, and *JASIST*. Dr Budd's publications also include several books, including *Knowledge and Knowing in Library and Information Science: A Philosophical Framework* (2001), *Self-Examination: The Present and Future of Librarianship* (2007), and *The Library as Forum in the Social Media Age* (2022).

Ericka Butler is a School Librarian and Recent Graduate from the University of Missouri Columbia with a Master's Degree in Library and Information Science. She is an Advocate for reading, literacy, and sharing tips on reading with families. Ericka's other interests include connecting families to mental health resources, sharing community resources, and helping communities understand the importance of self-care and literacy. Some of her past working experiences include being a Public Library Manager, Mental Health Librarian, and Lead After-school Teacher.

Shalonda Capers is a Womanist communication scholar and Doctoral candidate at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. As a community-engaged scholar, Shalonda operationalizes her positionality as a Womanist boundary spanner, to create and disseminate scholarship that flows from community \leftrightarrow academy. By utilizing the four principles of womanism as both a theoretical framework and a methodology, Shalonda is presently engaged in intersectional and intergenerational research aimed at fostering coalitions both within and outside of academia, with a specific emphasis on advancing the discourse surrounding Black motherhood. Alongside her work as a Doctoral candidate, she is currently developing a peer-support model of care for mothers of children diagnosed with cancer through her organization, Golden Moms.

Wilson Castaño is an Associate Professor at the Interamerican School of Library and Information Science at the University of Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia. He works in the technology core for undergraduate students. Castano is pursuing his Doctoral degree in Information Science and Learning Technologies at the University of Missouri (USA). His research interests are information science technologies, digital reading, information literacy, and digital repositories.

He received a Master of Digital Communication from the University of Antioquia, Colombia.

Hyerim Cho is an Assistant Professor at the University of Missouri iSchool. She received her PhD in Information Science at the University of Washington, Information School. Her primary research area is information needs and behavior, particularly of popular cultural multimedia information users such as video gamers, anime audiences, and webtoon readers. Some of Dr Cho's recent research has been funded by the American Library Association (ALA), Reference & User Services Association (RUSA), and the Academy of Korean Studies.

Christine D'Arpa, MSLIS, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the School of Information Sciences at Wayne State University in Detroit. Her research focuses on the history of libraries; the role of the federal government in information provision; and public libraries and community engagement. Her educational training includes an MS and PhD in Library & Information Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Yiran Duan is a PhD Student at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies, USA. She holds an MA degree in Anthropology from Florida State University, USA. Her current research interests are at the intersection of social media influencers and social network analysis. Specifically, she is interested in exploring how influencers use hashtags in social movements.

LaVerne Gray is an Assistant Professor with the iSchool at Syracuse University (USA). Her research uses Critical Race and Black Feminist perspectives to explore information location and value in marginal community spaces. Dr Gray is keenly interested in African-American historical information collectives and archival-evidence analysis.

Eli Guinnee has been the State Librarian of New Mexico since 2018. He was formerly the Director of the Chautauqua-Cattaraugus Library System and Patterson Library in western New York. He is Chair of Education and Engagement for the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs. He is a Councilmember of the Connect New Mexico Broadband Council and serves as Chair of Digital Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility. His primary research area is rural libraries and the role of librarians in community systems.

Joe Kohlburn is a Doctoral candidate, Librarian, and Activist. Joe's current research interests include activist media ecologies, news journalism, information use among self-identified activists, and communities of care for intra-institutional and organizational reform. Joe is also interested in video game and new media studies, and how games and media can impact user wellbeing. Joe works closely with intellectual freedom advocates and activists in Missouri and nationally. He is past chair of the Missouri Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Committee,

and currently still serves as a regular member. Joe advocates for the rights of readers, librarians, teachers, and parents to have access to a diverse collection of materials in their local libraries, and for the rights of historically marginalized communities to see their experiences and identities reflected in institutional and local collections.

Noah Lenstra, MLIS, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Library & Information Science and an Affiliated Faculty Member in the Gerontology program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where he founded Let's Move in Libraries in 2016. He has served as the Principal Investigator of multiple federal and state government programs focused on the diffusion of innovation of new models of public library work as community work, including HEAL (Healthy Eating and Active Living) at the Library via Co-Developed Programming and South Carolina Public Libraries & Health: Needs and Opportunities. He earned an MS and PhD in Library & Information Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Professional memberships include the Public Library Association and the Association for Rural and Small Libraries: Within the latter, he is a co-chair of the Association's Partnerships Committee.

Claudia Martinez is a retired Public Librarian who devoted her career to the Free Library of Philadelphia from 1983 to 2012 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. Claudia earned her Master's in Library Science from Drexel University in 1990. She worked with the Free Library first as a page, then as a paraprofessional library assistant, then as a librarian, then as a branch manager, and then as a regional administrator. Martinez has served at all levels of public library service within an extensive municipal library system in an urban setting. Thus, Claudia comes with a wealth of professional knowledge, experience, and wisdom that helps us to appreciate public librarianship as a vital contributor to the healing of society post-COVID.

Rae-Anne Montague is an Associate Professor and Library and Information Science (LIS) Program Coordinator at Chicago State University. Dr Montague is a former teacher and school librarian who has written several articles on LGBTQIA+ library services in addition to coediting *Queer Library Alliance* (Litwin Books, 2017). She is past chair of the American Library Association (ALA) Rainbow Round Table (RRT); and a co-founder and former co-chair of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) LGBTQ+ Users Special Interest Group. Her scholarly interests include inquiry, learning communities, and social justice.

Nanci Oddone achieved full professorship in 2021 and is currently Head of the Department of Librarianship and Deputy Coordinator of the Graduate Program in Librarianship at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO). She received her PhD from the Graduate Program in Information

Science at the Brazilian Institute for Information in Science and Technology (IBICT), in association with the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) in 2004. She was a Visiting Academic at Kent Law School, University of Kent, at Canterbury, UK, from 2008 to 2009. Her research interests include scholarly communication, open science and open access, books, and e-books.

Renata Oliveira is a Master's student in the Graduate Program in Library Science (PPGB-UNIRIO). Member of the Libraries, Memory and Resistance Research Group. She is a teacher at the Rio de Janeiro State Department of Education (SEEDUC-RJ). Oliveira graduated in Library Science from the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO) and graduated in Literature from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ).

Beth Patin is an Assistant Professor at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies. Dr Beth's research agenda focuses on the equity of information in two research streams: crisis informatics and cultural competence. She is the Co-founder of the Library Information Investigative Team research group. Currently, she is working on projects about epistemicide and the intersection of disability and race in youth literature. Additionally, she is a member of the Advisory Board of the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries.

Nicole Peritore, PhD, CHES®, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Community Health and Behavioral Sciences at Augusta University in Georgia (US). She is also the Program Director for the BS in Health Promotion program there. Dr Peritore teaches classes such as Introduction to Nutrition, Public and Community Health, Health Literacy and Health Promotion Program Planning, Design, and Evaluation. Her publications include work with creating health policies, promoting the importance of working with community partners, and exploring ways that communities can improve their health through food and physical activity opportunities. Peritore has worked to help organizations realize the significance of coalition building for sustaining successes brought upon communities through grant funding. Peritore's current research is focused on community-based health, focusing on the evaluation and sustainment of programming.

Kathleen Pickering is the Director of the Belen Public Library and Harvey House Museum. She has a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is Professor Emeritus at Colorado State University. Her teaching and research centered on indigenous self-determination and participatory community and economic development approaches.

Jean Rene is a community-focused librarian who believes in providing transformative services to the local community. He is responsible for Programming and Outreach at the Central Library, Queens Public Library. He is also an Adjunct Assistant Professor at York College, CUNY. Dr Rene is passionate about the role libraries play in enriching the lives of immigrant communities.

Deise Sabbag is a Professor at the University of São Paulo, Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters of Ribeirão Preto (USP) and the Postgraduate Program in Information Science at the Universidade Estadual Paulista – UNESP, Marília. She is a leader of the ECOAR Research Group – Contemporary Studies in Information Organization, Analysis, and Retrieval. Sabbag received her PhD in Information Science from UNESP – Marília.

Valerie Taylor-Samuel is the Assistant Chief of the Youth Services and Programs Division for the Free Library of Philadelphia. During her 20-year tenure with the Free Library, she has worked in various positions as a Librarian, but always with an interest in teen services and overall youth programming. She currently oversees the management of a number of the Free Library's city-wide programs, including out-of-school time programs: the Literacy Enrichment Afterschool Program (LEAP), the Summer of Wonder summer learning program, Playful Learning Kits, Middle Grade programming, Teen Reading Lounge, and Read Baby Read. She serves on the Free Library's One Book, One Philadelphia committee and co-chairs the Summer of Wonder learning program committees. Valerie received a BA in English from the Pennsylvania State University, and an MSLS from Clarion University, with an emphasis on Public Librarianship.

Kaurri C. Williams-Cockfield has 30+ years of progressively responsible work experience in both US and international library settings including public, academic, school, and corporate institutions. She holds both a BS in Library Science and an MLIS in Information Science from the University of Southern Mississippi. From 2003 to 2021, she served as a Public Library Director in Tennessee taking a two-year break to serve as the Director of Library Services for the Cayman Islands Government. She retired from public library service in 2021 and is currently an Adjunct Instructor for the School of Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee Knoxville where she teaches public library management and adult services (since 2011). In 2022, she taught collection management for the University of Alabama School of Information Science. She is currently a PhD Student at the University of Alabama. Her published research has focused on how public library programming impacts community social justice issues and how public libraries impact the development of sustainable communities.

Joseph Winberry is an Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Information and Library Science. His research currently emphasizes critical library practice and impact, especially in relation to societal aging. Dr Winberry's service activities include serving as the co-convener of the Association for Library and Information Science Education's (ALISE) Historical Perspectives Special Interest Group and as the founding co-chair of the Aging Rainbow Coalition which is a new initiative which emerged from his dissertation to meet the aging services information needs of LGBT+ older adults in East Tennessee.

FOREWORD

John M. Budd, PhD

Reading Workplace Dynamics: A Post-Professional Ethos in Public Libraries is very timely, to say the least. All complex organizations, including libraries, are under considerable stress, with pandemic changes (some of which appear to be permanent), wage and price pressures, budgetary constraints, and personnel issues looming large. These matters are putting pressure on organizations to be responsive to changes on many fronts. The essays in this book address a number of pressures and changes in thoughtful and productive ways. This Foreword will not attempt to summarize the chapters but rather will form a kind of prelude, noting three particular challenges: the effects of the pandemic on libraries, managing the libraries – especially public libraries – in complicated times, and ethics for libraries *as* complex organizations. The three issues will be taken in turn and will, I hope, provide an entrée into the rest of the book. The chapters will deal with particulars; this Foreword is intended to approach the matter of the workplace in general terms. For one thing, we all must realize that the times are rife with matters demanding attention. As Howard Gardner and Shulman (2005) put it:

The hallmark of all professions, even beyond the prototypical practices of each, is the ubiquitous condition of uncertainty, novelty, and unpredictability that characterizes professional work. ... This means that professional practice is frequently pursued at or beyond the margins of previously learned performances. (p. 15)

The present work, *Reading Workplace Dynamics: A Post-pandemic Professional Ethos in Public Libraries*, is an effort to address this challenging present and future.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

Early in 2020, the world changed. In many ways, the world shut down. When the COVID-19 outbreak was declared officially on March 13, 2020, most public libraries (as well as schools, academic, and special libraries) closed their doors because there could be no risks of spreading the disease by having extended and close contact among people. The closings were intended to protect staff and community members. Employees everywhere, including librarians, began working from home, providing people with as many services as possible. Pandemic restrictions were lifted officially in the United States on May 11, 2023, three years, two months, and two days after lockdown.

The effects of the pandemic were indeed global and severe. The very concept of public library services had to be altered to address the question: when people could not enter library buildings, how could services be continued? In many

instances, there was initiated curbside delivery of books and other materials, with surgically masked librarians handing the materials to people who waited in their cars. E-books enjoyed a spike in purchase and circulation. Kimberly Shotick (2022) reports that some dynamics in public libraries remained the same, including the thinking and actions behind marketing library access and services. Communities had to be alerted as to which services would continue (albeit in a revised form), which would be curtailed, and which would be offered for the first time. Granted, some of the access and services have been ramped up considerably. For example, chat reference services, which had existed pre-pandemic, were enhanced and increased in many settings. Websites were expanded with detailed information to let the public know what they could expect from their libraries. Jon Goddard (2020) tells us that

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public libraries have demonstrated, in many ways, their value to their communities. They have enabled their patrons to not only resume their lives, but to help them learn and grow. Additionally, electronic resources offered to patrons through their library card have allowed people to be educated and entertained. (p. 1)

During what could have been an information services crisis on top of a public health crisis, public library leaders proved themselves to be remarkably agile in responding to a predicament, not of their making. They built upon some existing services, such as the provision of electronic resources that could be accessed from people's homes. They developed new services to meet the needs of the public, such as employing Zoom® to reach people via virtual communications to conduct story times, feature speakers, teach tutorials, and many other services. Kanupriya Singh and Jenny Bossaller (2022) note, "The nature of teamwork also changed as libraries developed new workflows and staff roles to meet the demands of virtual services. Teams developed new methods for communication, creating virtual teams using new collaborative and communication technologies" (p. 513). Singh and Bossaller (2022) conclude that "[w]hether or not we see continued outbreaks that wreak such havoc soon, the pandemic has given us tools that increase agility in libraries. Librarians are now better prepared to instigate rapid changes, including in how teams operate" (p. 531). Many innovations developed during the pandemic persist since patrons have become accustomed to accessing services remotely from the physical library. At the outset of COVID-19,

libraries relied on their online offerings, so more e-books and other online resources were acquired. Staff learned that they could do quite a bit of their work from home. They could still respond to email and phone messages. They could evaluate and order new material. They could deliver online programs like summer reading and story time. They could interact with people on social media. They could put together key resources for patrons and post them on the website. (Ayre, 2020, p. 1)

Ayre (2020) also remarks that areas not served by broadband and digital technologies are "dark spots" when it comes to remote library services. These are decided inequities in the provision of library and other vital information services, especially in rural areas and small towns. However, librarians can and sometimes do, serve on state commissions and national boards, which determine how broadband services might expand to rural communities. By assisting in efforts aimed at

expansion, librarians can help their institutions reach an even greater population. Again, these kinds of services can persist beyond the pandemic.

The number of librarians and staff working (at least some of the time) from home has remained much higher than in pre-pandemic times. WebJunction reports that:

While public libraries and their communities across North America continue to grapple with the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the collective strength of libraries continues to endure and grow. Public libraries have proven during these challenging times that they are essential community assets, and patrons and community members alike continue to hold up libraries as one of the most trusted institutions as they work together to overcome key challenges in the COVID-19 era. (Negron, 2022, para. 1)

Community members did tend to embrace many of the digital access and service mechanisms provided by public libraries, and many continue to turn to these mechanisms in post-pandemic times. It does appear that some of the changes wrought by COVID-19 are permanent alterations to the service imperative of libraries and are not likely to go away in the coming years. Indeed, the management of public libraries has become more complex with the sudden and profound changes the COVID-19 era has spawned.

Managing in Uncertain Times

Managing libraries, which are indeed complex organizations, is more difficult now, post-COVID, and it will only get more difficult in the future. Case in point, at the time of this writing, inflation has been unprecedented in the last few decades in the US and throughout the world. The inflation rate affects the materials and access that libraries seek to provide patrons. Unfortunately, many database providers' pricing information is proprietary, so no figures can be given here. But readers who work in libraries can easily find out how much it costs to provide access to, for instance, EBSCO's *Academic Search Complete*. A larger public library's budget for databases is likely to run into seven figures. Fortunately, though, the price of a recreational book has remained more or less stable for the last number of years. However, the costs of printing a book have risen because of cost increases of paper, personnel, and equipment. Public library budgets have, by and large, not risen lately, so there is considerable pressure on libraries to provide a continuing stable of materials (books, magazines, and databases) to meet community needs. The pricing pressure is not a new phenomenon for libraries; prices have outstripped library budget increases for many years. This applies to all types of libraries and is not limited to public libraries.

Even in those libraries where there may be an adequate budget, societal pressures must be faced. In 2023, in the state of Missouri (USA), the House Budget Committee Chairman proposed cutting the entirety of the \$4.5 million appropriation to public libraries in a dispute over an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit challenging a new law that would ban materials deemed "sexually explicit" from schools and libraries. The state Senate later restored the funding, but only after active lobbying by many individuals, including librarians. Had the cuts been made permanent, the smaller libraries in the state would have felt the pinch much

more than the urban libraries, which have larger tax bases. According to the American Library Association (ALA), the year 2022 saw 1,269 formal book challenges in libraries amongst 2,571 unique titles, indicating that book challenges often involved multiple titles. This surge of challenges doubled the number from 2021 and was the highest number of book challenges since the ALA began keeping data on this phenomenon at the turn of the 21st century (ALA, 2023).

Navigating the political nature of book challenges is an issue where librarians, particularly library directors, might lose their jobs. The current climate is such that almost any title in a library collection could be challenged. Even if a book portrays certain topics, such as sexual issues, in an unfavorable light, the text may be challenged. This is evident in the fact that Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* is among the most frequently challenged titles. Of course, most librarians ascribe to the principles of intellectual freedom; however, citizens may carry other ideals that motivate them to attempt to ban books. For example, in 2022, about 15% of book ban attempts originated from citizen-run library boards or administrations. Another six percent emanated from librarians or political officials, meaning that about one-fifth of the book challenges were more or less internal. Library leaders must, however, reluctantly address the challenges to materials to which they are presented, including addressing their biases to certain topics and issues.

ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) further reports that 48% of book challenges occur in public libraries and 41% in school libraries (ALA OIF, 2023). In March of 2023, the Florida state legislature passed a bill that could result in a book being banned because of a single request due to sexual explicitness. "Sexual explicitness" is left vague in the law. These activities strike at the heart of intellectual freedom, which may be the foremost of the profession's core values.

Several years ago, I formulated a set of reform issues intended to assist library leaders (at all levels) in dealing with the pressures under which they come. They are:

- Engage in debate at prominent forums (including Public Library Association and American Library Association Conferences) on the purposes of the library, especially the goal of fostering democracy [with a small d]
- Clear assertion of goals relating to community building through providing the apparatus for democratic participation
- Development of policies that are aimed at achieving the goal of egalitarian access to mainstream and alternative sources of information
- Creation and maintenance of library programming that puts egalitarian democratic policies into action
- Building collections and access mechanisms that include mainstream and alternative sources of information. (Budd, 2007, p. 13)

I noted at the time that these matters might be controversial; they are no less controversial now. The public library may be the epitome of a liberal (with a small l) institution since the people fund it and is open to all residents of a

community. As I wrote, “Liberalism, as it is used here, is *not* what is commonly thought of as part of the liberal-conservative dichotomy. Liberalism, in the classic sense, is a political and economic framework that privileges individuals’ autonomy, freedoms, rights, and self-determination” (2007, p. 4). So, one’s freedom *to* read something trumps someone else’s freedom *to ban* something. The prohibition of reading and access is not considered a freedom when it infringes upon another person’s freedom to access a book or other informational item. The management of the library organizations that seek to provide reading materials and information to all within the community is under pressure to meet the goals of the profession. The ideals just spoken of are at odds with what a minority of populations want to bring about. It is an open question of what the future will bring to library management.

Envisioning a Discursive Grace

With the world still recovering from the pandemic, library management and leadership can respond to the needs of the public by offering the library as the locus of conversations surrounding the most pressing concerns of our time. Public libraries have frequently been a destination where issues can be discussed. For centuries, they have served as community spaces devoted to presentations and debates on various viewpoints and topics.

In the public sphere, when people address one another face-to-face, they tend to be civil and respectful in their discourse. As Simon Blackburn (1984) says, the civility of discursive practices depends on the very nature of speech; “The speaker uses language. With it, he [*sic.*] can put himself into various relations with the world. He can describe it, or ask questions about it, issue commands to change it, put himself under obligation to act in various ways” (p. 3). Speech and language are at the heart of what libraries are; their existence is, in actuality, discursive.

Those who frequent libraries are engaged, in important ways, in speech acts, and in uses of language. In public discourse, citizens value expressiveness and articulateness. Can the same be said of non-library users? Can it be that those citizens who eschew reading are not prepared for conversations that explore viewpoints held by themselves *and* by others? Michael Polyani and Prosch (1975) assert that

[w]e might justifiably claim, therefore, that everything we know is *full* of meaning, is not absurd at all, although we can sometimes fail to grasp these meanings and fall into absurdities. ... [M]eanings can be missed, since the emergence of life opens up the possibility of success but also, of course, the chance of failures. (p. 179)

When considering the library’s agency in communities within a post-COVID world, library managers need to be fully cognizant of the power of speech and discourse within the context of the library itself. In setting the library up as a public space for civil conversation, leaders should be willing to apply certain principles that surround discursive practice. Another thing that should be taken into account is that the conversations that take place within libraries among people

with disparate viewpoints should have rationality as their basis. Jürgen Habermas (1988) emphasizes this point:

Well-grounded assertions and efficient actions are certainly a sign of rationality; we do characterize as rational speaking and acting subjects who, as far as it lies within their power, avoid errors in regard to facts and means-ends relations. (p. 15)

People can disagree, but their minds may also be changed through civil argumentation (in the strict sense of the word). I have maintained that “[t]hese are rigorous strictures that may not always exist in the course of communication among individuals. What they are constitutes the necessity for reasoned outcomes” (Budd, 2007, p. 99). Managers of libraries who are aware of the foregoing strictures are in a position to guide and provide ground rules for conversations that take place within library walls. They can take to heart another condition that Habermas speaks of:

Thus, the question “What should I do?” takes on a pragmatic, an ethical, or a moral meaning depending on how the problem is conceived. In each case, it is a matter of justifying choices among alternative available courses of action. But pragmatic tasks call for a different *kind of action*, and the corresponding question, a different *kind of answer*, from ethical and moral ones. (p. 8)

Managers realize that people are agents in the world who have the capacity to ask the above question and formulate pragmatic responses in a social milieu. Stephen White (1994) expands upon Habermas’s idea, saying,

Habermas’s conception of communicative action... implies a structure of *intersubjectivity* from which one can derive a mutual “speech-act-immanent *obligation to provide justification*” for the different sorts of claims which are continually raised in understanding-oriented action. This obligation is one which every actor has “implicitly recognized” simply by virtue of having engaged in communicative action. (p. 51)

The foregoing makes demands on library leaders and managers, but the potential outcomes are worth the effort to ensure that the discursive practices in which libraries are engaged result in some mutual understanding, perhaps, and agreement.

Meaningful consideration of changes in public discourse in libraries, as an outcome of COVID-19, allows me to reiterate something I said in the above-cited paper, “An ethical stance toward communities demands action on the part of professionals. The kind of action that can make a difference should be part of the consciousness of public library professionals and education for the profession” (2007, p. 2). That action should entail democratic deliberation by all involved in public libraries now that we are beyond the isolationist days of COVID.

Ethics for the Library Workplace

I have reserved what I believe to be the most important and essential issue when considering new workplace dynamics in public libraries post-COVID, for last: developing and maintaining an ethos for libraries, librarians, and service within the organization. Elsewhere I have written, “in this article, I address the practical (the ways we live as professionals in relation to our communities) and the normative (what standards for action we can agree upon and why)” (Budd, 2006,

pp. 251–252). The same strictures apply here. The practical is provided, in part, through documents and policies put forth by the American Library Association. For the normative, we must turn to other writings and thoughts, sometimes articulated by philosophers.

For example, Shelly Kagan (1998) says that normative ethics “involves substantive proposals concerning how to act, how to live, or what kind of person to be. In particular, it attempts to state and defend the most basic principles governing these matters” (p. 2). Kagan’s view offers some guidance for exploring ethics in the library workplace; it presents a way to think about how the library as an organization, and how the people in it *should* behave and carry out the work of the library. I do want to emphasize the normative aspect here; there is a way in which the people in the organization ought to live and work. In turn, that normative element affects the communities where libraries live and how those communities “live” with the library. Standards of behavior provide both an ontological (in the sense of being and life) and an epistemological (in the sense of how we think about our existence) foundation for the people in libraries.

Kagan (1998) further states, “I think the best factor to consider first is this: the goodness of outcomes. This is a factor that I think virtually everyone recognizes as morally relevant” (p. 26). I agree with Kagan and aver that the missions and goals of public libraries stand as testaments to that principle. Furthermore, though, the strategies for achieving the missions and goals of libraries are extremely important. These factors recognize that outcomes depend upon collective action on the parts of librarians and staff. Thus, it is essential that librarians pay very close attention to the development and articulation of a mission and a set of goals and strategies. Mission statements are generally quite broad and encompassing. One example comes from the St. Louis County Library of the state of Missouri: “The mission of the St. Louis County Library District is to provide the resources and services to enrich individual minds, enhance lives, and expand perspectives” (St. Louis County Library, “About Us – Mission,” 2023). More specifically, the St. Louis County Library has formed a strategic plan, the elements of which are:

Promote Literacy and Support Lifelong Learning: We serve the community’s literacy needs from infancy to adulthood. We are the best resource for supporting lifelong learning and individual growth.

Foster a sense of Community, Inclusion, and Belonging: We seek to understand the needs of our community and provide opportunities to connect and enrich the lives of our patrons.

Increase Access, Impact, and Awareness: We strive to increase access to and awareness of the library’s resources and services (St. Louis County Library, “2023–2026 Strategic Plan,” 2023)

Beneath each strategy are specific tactics to be employed to achieve the strategies. The mission, strategies, and tactics form a set of outcomes to be accomplished.

A library’s mission, vision, and strategic plan act to form a connective engagement with the community, serving as a kind of integral contract with the constituency (individually and collectively). The strength of this bond is dependent upon a cooperative ethos between librarians and community members, a cooperation that is defined especially well by John Rawls (2001):

The central organizing idea of social cooperation has at least three essential features:

- (a) Social cooperation is distinct from merely socially coordinated activity.... Rather, social cooperation is guided by publicly recognized rules and procedures that those cooperating accept as appropriate to regulate their conduct,
- (b) The idea of cooperation includes the idea of fair terms of cooperation: these are terms each participant may reasonably accept, and should accept, provided that everyone else likewise accepts them,
- (c) The idea of cooperation also includes the idea of each participant's rational advantage or good. The idea of rational advantage specifies what it is that those engaged in cooperation are seeking to advance from the standpoint of their own good. (p. 6)

There can be an expansion of Rawls's conception of cooperation and the notion of good, as expressed by Kagan (1998). Kagan says that "each of us should not only count everyone but should count everyone *equally*" (p. 42). From a conventional point of view, this understanding should apply to everyone *within* the library and with respect to the community members. Additionally, Kagan (1998) charges us with a question that should be asked by everyone in librarianship: "Is the morally relevant factor not only how good the outcome is *for me*, or is the morally relevant factor how good the outcome is *overall*, taking *everyone's* well-being into account?" (p. 42). The answer to that question should be evident, particularly during these post-COVID times when humankind is recovering from a collective crisis.

Considering our profession's ethos from a practice-based lens, the pertinent concern is *how* librarians and library staff ensure good outcomes for everyone within and without the library. It is here that professional statements come to the fore. For example, the profession's core values should be considered and taken to heart in all aspects of the workplace. The values adopted by the Council of the American Library Association in 2019 are:

- Access
- Confidentiality/Privacy
- Democracy
- Diversity
- Education and Lifelong Learning
- Intellectual Freedom
- The Public Good
- Preservation
- Professionalism
- Service
- Social Responsibility
- Sustainability.

(ALA "Core Values of Librarianship," 2019)

About 20 years ago, Thomas Weissinger (2003) assessed the practical efficacy of the values and concluded,

Do core values make a difference between orthodox and modified models of librarianship? The answer to this question is a qualified yes. With regards to reformed librarianship into an even more socially conscious profession, they make a difference. The profession is either more liberal or conservative depending upon whether its values are defined qualitatively or operationally.

Qualitatively, there is a full range of possible values that can and perhaps should be linked to the profession.... When values are defined operationally, the profession's range of possible values is severely limited by whatever counts as the core set. (p. 37)

It is unfortunate that some of these values are being called into question today and that, in some political circles, they are being refuted. A newly passed and signed law in the state of Florida would revise:

the duties of the Board of Governors relating to the mission of each state university; requiring the Board of Governors Accountability Plan to annually report certain research expenditures of a specified amount; prohibiting specified educational institutions from expending funds for certain purposes; revising how general education core courses are established; specifying a one-time limit on the requirement to change accrediting agencies, etc. (Florida Senate Bill 266, 2023)

A principle of the ALA Library Code of Ethics (2021) is the antithesis of the Florida law:

We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces.

It is up to all of us in librarianship to answer Kagan's question in the affirmative and guard against all efforts opposed to the profession's values and ethics. As I've posited and reiterate here to emphasize the timelessness of the point:

The derivation of a formal, consistent, agreed-upon practical and normative ethics is no mean feat. In actuality, librarianship has, in many ways over many years, aimed at this goal. The LBR, codes of ethics, expressions of core values, and other statements are tangible products of the effort. (Budd, 2006, p. 266)

CONCLUSION

The preceding hints at what is in store for the reader of the essays in this volume. Theoretical and practical issues will be discussed; matters of principle and fact will be addressed. Some of the foregoing will be elaborated upon, and the breadth and depth of the coverage of workplace topics will enlighten all readers. The authors are exceedingly well-qualified to delve into their respective chapters. This volume will greatly interest professional librarians and can be used in educational settings as readings in coursework for master's programs. What has gone before in this Foreword is only a taste of what will come.

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INTRODUCTION: THE SYMBIOSIS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIANSHIP – *PRAXIS AND ETHOS* FOR A POST-PANDEMIC IDENTITY

Vanessa Irvin^a and Bharat Mehra^b

^aEast Carolina University, USA

^bThe University of Alabama, USA

The COVID-19 pandemic affected every human being on Earth; its impacts have served as a pivot in American social, emotional, psychological, and cultural history contemporarily situated and globally positioned in turbulent ripples experienced all around the world (Horton, 2021; Mehra, 2021a). During the years of the pandemic, 2020–2023, when it came to the workplace, public librarians creatively adjusted their practices and their *praxis* to keep communities engaged with a myriad of virtual information services and distal information delivery during lockdown that lasted for often long, uncertain, and random periods of time, so it seemed (Mehra, 2023; Pomerance et al., 2022). When the lockdown phase ended in late 2021, library staff had to pivot again to transition back to providing information services that resembled pre-pandemic services but with added virtual options that library users had become accustomed to because information delivery was changed for everyone (Kociubuk et al., 2023). However, because the pandemic happened to all humanity, including librarians, library staff, and library administrators, how the pandemic affected librarian praxis has become a testimony of how librarian ethos has grown and become stronger for the lessons learned (McMenemy et al., 2023).

We are defining the librarian ethos as the character of the librarian identity. Many times, the librarian identity has been in tension with odious forces that have tried to muddy librarianship's agency or stifle its growth, be it neoliberal

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commodification, sustained pressures of shrinking budgets, digitization and competition with electronic resources, or political ransacking of information in recent years, amongst other influencers (Pautz & Poulter, 2014). Despite such external or internal challenges, and maybe due to the interplay of both challenges, the librarian ethos has continued to emerge, again and again, as the spirit that rekindles a resilient profession, proving wrong its numerous naysayers (Grace, 2020). We posit that the librarian ethos is “the chest stuff,” “the heart stuff,” upon which we are motivated to engage in *praxis*, a standard of practice organically created collectively at the library workplace. We understand *praxis* to be in a symbiotic relationship with ethos because ethos is the foundation upon which the work of library and information science (LIS) folks rests. We apply theory to practice and arrive at an intentional *praxis* where we apply what we know (knowledge) to what we do (action) to create a dynamic interplay between ideas and real-world experiences. The LIS ethos shapes ways in which we apply our profession’s ethics for individual and collective problem-solving, decision-making, and information delivery (Irvin, 2023). During the past decade, the librarian ethos has evolved toward integrating a proactive social justice and social equity agenda in making the world a fair, just, equitable, and inclusive place for all via systematic, intentional, action-oriented, and community-engaged initiatives (Cooke et al., 2016; Lopez et al., 2023). Thus, we recognize that the pandemic has impacted the LIS ethos because we all had to shift our ideas, and therefore our beliefs, about what, how, and why we do what we do in response to new information needs based on peripheral social interactions, learning, and knowledge-building, and the re-acclimation of all of that and what it has implied (Samek, 2022). Yet, we also believe, as do all the contributors in this collection, as evidenced in their writing, that the ethos of the public librarian has emerged stronger and more resilient as a result of the conditions and circumstances surrounding COVID-19 in a post-pandemic era.

Praxis reinforces and strengthens ethos by emphasizing critical reflection and inquiry-based evaluation (Rugut & Osman, 2013). As librarians engage in praxis, they gain insights into the impacts of their practices and the effectiveness of their professional ethics, behaviors, and competencies (Mehra, 2021b). This practitioner inquiry stance allows librarians to refine their understanding of the LIS ethos as they make more informed choices in their practice (Irvin, 2023). As a testing ground for ethos, praxis refines and reinforces the relevance and impact of librarian practice. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970), Brazilian world-renowned philosopher of education and political activist of the 20th century, calls for an uprising of *conscientização* (i.e., critical consciousness) amongst the socially oppressed, the downtrodden in society, via developing praxis that “refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” to further positive transformations (p. 9).

Therefore, the dynamics that are in play in the public library workplace during a once-in-a-century historic pandemic require that we learn from one another’s experiences and stories, memories, and reflections. In this vein, navel-gazing is a welcomed and necessary act that crystallizes the ways in which we “read” our

work as data, history, and memory. This edited volume is a collection of research, case studies, and reflective narratives historicizing memory work in the public library during a rare historic moment, the COVID-19 pandemic.

PUBLIC LIBRARIANSHIP'S COVID SHIFT

This book is a collection of chapters that considers the question: “In what ways did the environment of COVID-19 impact public library principles, practices, agency, and partnerships during the lockdown phase of the pandemic and the recovery process post-COVID?” We also ask the central question: “How has COVID-19 changed public librarianship?” Indeed, through the trepidation and angst during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, it seemed a productive time for library spaces, librarians, and library workers. This book curates a corpus of experiences, reflective practices, and theoretical reconsiderations regarding how COVID-19 impacted the way we think about public libraries today. Through modes of necessary adjustments to practice and knowledge construction, COVID-19 heralded a renewed ethos for public librarianship.

In our experience of being in lockdown during the pandemic, reclaiming our work pace, and values post-COVID, we have found that the LIS ethos has shifted as we enacted it. “Work” has become softer, gentler, and slower. Our core values for excellence motivate a framework of heightened compassion and empathy for what we do and how our work possibly impacts readers, thinkers, and practitioners beyond our intended audiences.

Reading Workplace Dynamics explores the epistemological makeup of public librarians as information professionals in the public sphere during this volatile post-pandemic digital age (Benner, 2003). Digitization of communication has required professional and paraprofessional library workers to operate on a nearly 24-hour-7-day-a-week cycle due to the library’s mercurial nature as a workplace constantly shifting between face-to-face and virtual interactions. This ongoing information cycle begs a reflective and critical stance to question: “Who are we in librarianship; who are we willing to be; who are we beyond equity-diversity-inclusion-accessibility (EDIA) concerns – especially during and while recovering from a once-in-a-century pandemic?” This collection includes reading beyond the margins from all aspects of public librarianship, including the interaction of internal and external voices in staff questions, librarian answers, policymaker decrees, and community practices. This volume addresses reconciliations from a “-ism laden” dysfunctional LIS heritage to promote a professional ethos that furthers social justice ideals of fairness, justice, equity, change agency, empowerment, and change agency of underserved populations.

As co-editors, we seek to give voice to the innovative ways that public librarians, administrators, and scholars witnessed and experienced the effects of the pandemic in their workplaces. Therefore, while we conducted blind peer reviews for each chapter, we asked the reviewers if they wanted their responses to be voiced (quoted) and for them to be named (cited). In this vein, while honoring Western standards for peer review, we also honor local ways of naming and signifying

that speak to traditional ways of knowing and being where feedback is often transparently community-based. As we summarize each chapter and its authors in this introduction, some reviewers step from the shadows of blind peer review to share their reader response to the works herein. For us, this is also a kind gesture to acknowledge their efforts, which are often unrecognized and provide value to their contributions and points of view.

This collection includes works that integrate the emerging and evolving theoretical frameworks and modes of ethos that shape new modes of existence and identity, programs and policies, and workplace and community relationships (i.e., “workplace dynamics”) in public libraries around the world owing to the trauma and anxieties of COVID-19. The term “professional ethos” captures the challenges and opportunities in shaping public libraries’ sense of being. The LIS ethos identifies philosophies, approaches, and strategies for moving forward as we reconsider past ways of working with their external communities (active/progressive versus passive, inclusive versus exclusionary). It also calls for efforts that integrate aspects of EDIA realities beyond the lip service and tokenism of the past. The term “reading” captures all these dimensions in tangible and intangible shades of meaning-making while responding to a worldwide public health crisis. “Reading” workplace dynamics includes the real, the symbolic, the visionary, and the mundane as we consider the implications of a renewed ethos for public librarianship in a post-pandemic era.

THE READING OF *READING* WORKPLACE DYNAMICS

Reading Workplace Dynamics comes at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has unprecedentedly affected public library services and professional practices. This book critically examines pandemic-affected dynamics of public library workplaces in the public sphere. The collection of chapters is a mix of theoretical and practice-based research reporting on the outcomes of social discourse in public libraries as library users adjust to a new world, post-COVID. As co-editors, we have demarcated interrelated topics into three sections, (1) theory, (2) practices, and (3) connections, in order to ensure that chapters are arranged according to a holistic vision of the ways in which praxis and ethos are operationalized symbiotically.

Section 1 – Dynamics: Theoretical Lenses, begins our collective story about “reading workplace dynamics” in public librarianship. The chapters in this section convey workplace dynamics via creative approaches to the left hand of ethos: theory. In this section, LIS scholars present creatively courageous approaches to theory; indeed, the pandemic required us to think differently about how we theorize the past with the present to create a memory upon which to actualize a sustainable future. *Chapter 1* starts this conversation with a conceptual treatise by Brazilian librarians Daniele Achilles, Renata Oliveira, Deise Sabbag, and Nanci Oddone, who contemplate Brazil’s public libraries as part of a new COVID-19-affected public space. Achilles et al. identify a “socio-anthropological gap” in the public sphere and wonder how the pandemic has affected the public library as an educative aspect of the societal landscape.

In *Chapter 2*, Shalonda Capers captures a creative vision of how a global pandemic can amplify the public library as a safe haven for identity formation. From a Black womanist lens, Capers provides “snips,” a creative form of narrative presentation, to illustrate how Black motherhood as an identity of intersectionality was interwoven with public librarianship via a nexus of womanist memory work, contextualized by the pandemic. For Capers, COVID-19 exposed ways in which one’s intersectional identity constructs (private) can become amplified when a global health crisis, like the pandemic (public), dictated protocols that compel unveiling one’s intersectionalities in the public sphere.

LaVerne Gray, Joseph Winberry, and Yiran Duan identify COVID-19 as not just a public health crisis but also an information crisis. In *Chapter 3*, the research team expands on Elfreda Chatman’s concept of “small worlds” as an information behavior. They consider the context of COVID-19 and its impacts on library users as a lens through which users’ intersectionalities can be considered what they call “information marginalization.” They introduce the Black Feminist Information Community (BFIC) Network as a tool to conceive information from a culturally centered perspective. Their position is that recovery from COVID-19 is an informational process that must consider all cultural contexts.

LIS public libraries scholar Beth Patin offers a harrowing testament in *Chapter 4* as she reflects on her Zoom experiences during lockdown. In her storytelling about the Zoombombing she experienced as a LIS scholarly speaker on Zoom during the pandemic, Patin conveys a vulnerability that makes us consider how we information professionals not just “show up” online but also *experience* the online environment. Dr Rita Reinsel Soulen, a LIS faculty member at East Carolina University, noted that

[l]ibrary and information professionals and paraprofessionals aim to “go high” when engaging and interacting with the public, but it is not always easy. Threats to personal, physical, and emotional safety are particularly harmful in public environments, both virtual and face-to face, and especially when experienced by people from minority or marginalized backgrounds. Dr. Patin’s work is valuable as it contextualizes Zoombombing and other similar disruptions as forms of oppression for which we need to prepare our library and information specialists to protect our communities of practice.

Through sharing her experience, Patin’s insights about the LIS ethos inspire us to be courageous about how we approach practice and our responses to violence as a workplace dynamic that may occur in practice virtually, emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Section 2 – Practices: Operationalizing Protocols and Policies details workplace practices that changed during COVID-19. Reflective research is presented to illustrate how public librarians, staffers, and administrators operationalized protocols and policies to adjust to a changing reading public responding to distally delivered information services.

In *Chapter 5*, Denice Adkins, Jenny Bossaller, Ericka Butler, Wilson Castaño, Hyerim Cho, and Joe Kohlburn share results from their three-year federally funded study exploring how librarians provided services to communities during COVID-19. The research team’s original premise was to mark public librarians’ experiences providing information services during the pandemic. The team

learned that librarians often turned negatives into positives to enact a commitment to justice, empathy, and community-building in response to distal information needs. Dr Joseph Winberry, of the LIS faculty at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, noted that Adkins et al.'s chapter "provides a useful case study for anyone questioning the durability and value of public libraries to community wellbeing in times good and bad."

Chapter 6 opens this section with a chapter by public library administrators Veronica Britto and Valerie Taylor-Samuels of the Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP) (Pennsylvania, USA), offering an insightful reportage on ways in which frontline public library services adapted to sudden changes in information delivery services to a diverse virtual audience during lockdown. The FLP administration also had to navigate innovative approaches for responding to racial tensions that arose nationwide during COVID-19 and seeped into the morale of the staff. Britto and Taylor-Samuels share best practices developed during COVID-19 and lessons learned for developing better, culturally sensitive, and competent workplace dynamics at their library in the heart of an urban setting.

Librarian Jean Rene of the Queens County (New York, USA) Library System shares, in *Chapter 7*, his study with local immigrant populations that researches their information needs during the pandemic. Rene triangulated three prongs of data (i.e., interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups) within a two-tiered research design to discover insightful outcomes of librarian practices enacted to provide unique information services to immigrant groups during the height of the pandemic. *Chapter 8* is Kaurri C. Williams-Cockfield's reflection on her experience as a public library director during the onset, height, and aftermath of COVID-19. Williams-Cockfield shares a riveting semi-autoethnography of how she worked to galvanize her staff and community stakeholders to provide community-based services for a public library system in the American South while sustaining staffing, keeping facilities COVID-free, and navigating an oppositional library board that balked at paying library workers for working from home during lockdown. In her review of the chapter, Dr Anne Goulding of Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, posits that Williams-Cockfield "shares the experiences of those working on the front-line of public libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic – their challenges and successes – giving a voice to those who continued to meet the needs of their communities in the face of the unprecedented adversity." Williams-Cockfield's pandemic story is a cautionary tale of self-care for practitioners. She reports how she resolved the trauma of being blocked in her advocacy for safe and equitable public library services by an oppositional library board, which caused a downfall in workplace relationships.

Section 3 – Connections: InsidelOutside Library Partnerships showcases four chapters reporting how staff and community relationships were built in response to the pandemic. This book's closing section demonstrates librarian courage and resilience during polarizing times. For example, in *Chapter 9*, Noah Lenstra, Nicole Peritore, and Christine D'Arpa investigate how public library workplace dynamics have been impacted by the pandemic through the synthesis of two studies they conducted, a survey of 895 respondents and interviews with 129 public

library workers and community stakeholders. Their research focuses on how public library staff (professional and paraprofessional alike) need to be supported to be active community partners that build sustainable relationships with local stakeholders. Chapter 9's reviewer, Dr Brady Lund, an LIS faculty member with the Department of Information Science at the University of North Texas, noted that Lenstra et al.'s research "is a vital resource for demonstrating the role of effective leadership and professional values for librarians during health emergencies and other disaster situations."

In *Chapter 10*, LIS scholar Rae-Anne Montague shares how the impacts of COVID-19 protocols became interwoven with the book-banning and censorship movement that gained momentum during the height of the pandemic. Montague provides a valuable timeline of how the social restrictions of the pandemic rubbed up against the book-banning movement, particularly for LGBTQIA+ materials. Montague delivers a narrative that highlights librarian resilience during challenging sociocultural times.

In *Chapter 11*, New Mexico's State Librarian Eli Guinee and cultural anthropologist librarian and museum director Kathleen Pickering contribute an engaging research narrative based on the outcomes of an online survey conducted across the 98 public library locations throughout the State of New Mexico. The librarian scholars share their research in a narrative style where they report how the pandemic affected public and tribal libraries in New Mexico, "weaving resilience" into relationship-building with local libraries and community organizations to build social cohesion during COVID-19. Dr Mónica Colón-Aguirre, assistant professor of LIS at the University of South Carolina (USA), noted that Guinee and Pickering's research

presents a snapshot of an area which, due to some specific circumstances, had challenges during the pandemic which are not commonly presented in the [LIS] literature. The method of presenting narratives from the point of view of library employees ... offers detail, nuance and richness to the topic [of public library workplace dynamics].

The book closes with an *Epilogue* penned by retired public library administrator Claudia Martinez, who recorded a stellar career with the Free Library of Philadelphia (Pennsylvania, USA). Mrs Martinez shares her knowledge and wisdom on what a renewed ethos for public librarianship means for LIS praxis and identity. As an emeritus of public library front-line practice, Claudia Martinez reminds us that the more things change, the more they stay the same because the ethos of public librarianship perpetually calls for cultural humility, empathy of care, and a service-oriented stance toward the public good of which we practitioners, are also a part.

Collectively, this text is transgressive because while complying with traditional Western scholarly writing conventions, we, as editors, were also mindful of preserving space for authors' authentic voices in saying what they wanted or needed to say in the ways that they wanted or needed to say it. Thus, personal reflections are expressed as-is, honoring the creativity of authorial intention and language expression while respecting traditional writing conventions for legibility. We feel this inclusive approach is essential because reflective, inquiry-based narratives

that incorporate experience and memory must have textual space to breathe into their shape, which is another contribution to a new LIS ethos that is action-based from a socially just lens.

TOWARD A RENEWED ETHOS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIANSHIP

Therefore, *Reading Workplace Dynamics* offers a renewed ethos for public librarianship because frontline practitioner outcomes are synthesized with LIS scholarship via a blend of chapters that present innovative and bold testimony on ways in which COVID-19 forever changes public librarianship. We strove for a diverse geocultural scope of this topic, with all chapters mindfully focusing on the value of regionality and geoculture as the milieu upon which public librarianship evolved during COVID. We center and highlight new voices in LIS research, although the authors may not be new in the field of public librarianship. We document the knowledge and wisdom of scholars and practitioners whose front-line experience and longevity in public library services can contribute to the evolving field of LIS as we continue to reflect on the impacts of a global pandemic on our work in the world.

Reading Workplace Dynamics will appeal to public library professionals in other countries because public library scholarship and practitioner initiatives are evolving throughout the global LIS discourse due to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19. This book will appeal to public library professionals interested and invested in their professional development. This book will appeal to readers seeking to relate to experiences, practices, and initiatives in public libraries. One goal of the book is to feature chapters from a global context, as much as possible, for a holistic coverage of public library theory and practice. This book could be useful for LIS courses specializing in public librarianship. For example, this book would be very appropriate for a seminar course about public libraries where topics including workplace issues are discussed. We are grateful to have gathered such a fascinating group of public library practitioners and scholars whose stories are forever interwoven in this volume as a blended tapestry of witness, testimony, signification, and memory of COVID-19's impacts on public library workplaces. These stories document public librarians' reflections on the myriad ways that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted theory, practice, and the LIS service-oriented ethos, where public librarians' keen reading of their workplace dynamics makes for information service delivery in the public sphere that is an action of restorative social justice.

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