

# **“They don’t necessarily play nice with power structures”: Experiences in a critical librarianship reading group**

**Elizabeth Foster**

*University of Pittsburgh*

**Anne McLaughlin**

*University of Pittsburgh*

**Zia Meyer**

*University of Pittsburgh*

**Derek Nuzum**

*South Park Township Library*

**Marcia Rapchak**

*University of Pittsburgh*

**Heidi Reis**

*East Carolina University*

**Jess Saunders**

*Tulane University*

**Paula Wiley**

*University of Pittsburgh*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article provides insight into the motivations, experiences, and lessons from a critical librarianship reading group through interviews with twelve participants. Critical librarianship has gained traction as an important movement in the LIS field as it grapples with the library's role in systemic oppression. Providing spaces for conversation and critique around critical librarianship is critical to move toward praxis. The critical librarianship reading group discussed in this article grew out of a critical librarianship course and now includes faculty, students, and alums. The themes generated from analysis of the interviews show the importance of having such a space to encourage deeper thinking and action for justice in workplaces, educational institutions, and communities.

**Keywords:** critical librarianship; reading groups; praxis; interview research; informal learning



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*Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

## Introduction

Librarians and information scientists have been heralded as the stalwart stewards of shared resources for the tax-paying public and tuition-paying scholars alike. They have also been publicly harassed, challenged, and sued for providing unfettered access to information and working to uphold the American Library Association's (ALA) mission to "enhance learning and ensure access to information for all" (American Library Association, 1988). Recent events have included a township vote to defund a public library after unsuccessful attempts to censor the library's collection (Austin, 2022), the Proud Boys white supremacist hate group interrupting a Drag Queen storytime for children (Schachtman, 2022), and ever-growing challenges to what is on library shelves (American Library Association, 2022). However, despite occasional pushback, the public view of libraries has generally remained positive (Pew Research Center, 2013). To outsiders, those who greet them at the reference desk, help with school papers, or connect them to social services have remained somewhat unchanged, if not timelessly homogenous. But operating on the frontlines in public service and continually evolving to meet the ever-changing needs of communities has not left the field as fixed as it might appear to community members and patrons. Instead, library and information science (LIS) is in the midst of a reckoning in which professional standards and norms that position librarians as top tier knowledge holders grapple with a praxis that views the library patrons, students, community members, and paraprofessional library staff as stakeholders and decision makers in their own library experiences. This praxis rejects the narratives of white saviorism and vocational awe that fuel so many careers (Ettarh, 2018). We must continue to explore what it means to be a library worker. These points of tension are among those considered through the lens of critical librarianship.

Critical librarianship can aid all LIS workers in building a framework to audit our careers, our institutions and organizations, and the LIS field to create and participate in practices that center justice and humanity above all else. However, as detailed by interview participants below when addressing their library work, and highlighted by the work of Nicole Cooke, critical librarianship has struggled to gain a foothold in day-to-day library practice, due in part to remaining largely underexplored by formal LIS programs and knowledge institutions (Cooke, 2017). This paper examines the motivations and attitudes of a group of graduate students who learned about critical librarianship during MLIS degree pursuits through an inaugural critical librarianship elective, word of mouth, or an invitation to join a student-created critical librarianship reading group. The authors of this paper believe that participation in academic and extracurricular critical librarianship spaces fosters motivation and helps participants build the necessary skills to implement critical librarianship ideals in their library work.

### *Why and How the Group Formed*

The summer semester of 2020 at the University of Pittsburgh was held online. In-person and on-campus interactions went on an indeterminate hiatus as infection and casualty rates of the COVID-19 pandemic rose. Within a few weeks of the semester's beginning, George Floyd's murder at the hands of police inspired protests around the

world, along with conversations focused on racial injustice in the United States. Amidst this growing turmoil, students and instructors at colleges and universities across the United States wrestled with how to maintain the sense of community that academia often provides. Among them was a small group of LIS graduate students at the University of Pittsburgh who were in the process of completing their asynchronous coursework for the University's first critical librarianship class. Motivated by the lively and often thought-provoking exchanges that took place in the class discussion board, the instructor reached out to the four asynchronous students of the class to propose a continuation of these conversations. What grew from this was a critical librarianship reading group that continues to meet monthly to discuss topics and trends within the LIS profession. Developed and maintained purely online over email, Slack, and Zoom, the group developed a sense of community because of — rather than despite — the tumultuous context that brought us together.

### *Format and Group Structure*

The reading group meets monthly for one hour. There are no requirements to be part of the group, meaning regular attendance at meetings or enrollment at the University of Pittsburgh have no bearing on whether a person may participate. To become a member, one only needs to express their desire to join, and they are added to the group email list and Slack channel. Our Slack channel serves as the social hub between meetings where members can share content such as job postings, interesting articles, pet photos, and have open discussions on any topic. The day of the meeting is chosen democratically via a Doodle poll. Prior to the month's chosen meeting date, an individual volunteers to lead the discussion. The topic of discussion centers around an article related to librarianship chosen by the month's discussion leader. Though there is no formal timeline, it is typically considered timely to have the article and meeting credentials sent to the group roughly two weeks prior to the meeting date so everyone has time to read the material and select their own supplemental items.

The discussion leader sends their chosen article to the group via email. All articles are open access. While not required, it is suggested that individuals read the selected material and review one additional item such as an article, podcast, book, or video of their choosing related to the topic of the month's discussion. On the day of the meeting, the discussion leader poses questions to prompt dialogue among participants. All attendees are welcome to inject their insight and opinions of the topic though there is no requirement to do so — solely listening is an accepted form of participation in group discussion. There is no formal charter or hierarchy for the reading group, and often it is explicitly stated by participants that it is a space for open learning and growth.

## **Literature Review**

Critical librarianship, influenced by a variety of critical theories, is a movement within LIS that asks us to consider the library's role in systems of oppression and to work with our communities to dismantle hegemonic structures that maintain power and perpetuate harm. Critical librarianship has many similarities and overlaps with social justice movements in LIS, but it specifically embraces critical theory in its

*Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

approach to understanding the structures that impact LIS (and how to change them). While critical librarianship is not new, with Sanford Berman attempting to add it as a Library of Congress Subject Heading in 2007 (Garcia, 2015), it has seen increased popularity in recent years. There are regular Twitter discussions that use the #critlib hashtag, and a search for “critical librarianship” in Library and Information Science Abstracts generates 109 results, with 83% of these results being published in the last six years.

The practice of critical librarianship has affected instruction through critical information literacy. Critical information literacy, inspired also by critical pedagogy, questions the ways in which power shapes how information is produced, distributed, used, and evaluated. Some ways that librarians teach critical information literacy are through content that includes looking at subject headings critically, addressing social justice topics in search strategies, and facilitating class and group discussions and problem-proposing approaches (Tewell, 2018). This process of critical information literacy involves and emphasizes critical reflection; this reflection in the discussion of a particular subject and/or reading centers people and power dynamics (Graf, 2016). Emphasis on critical reflection allows for the practice of sharing leadership among groups for discussion-based learning and helps balance power structures within the group. This shared leadership and critical reflection are essential elements of our reading group.

Critical librarianship is not exclusively concerned with critical information literacy. Other movements within critical librarianship include critical cataloging, critical collection development, critical approaches to library labor, and more. The readings we have explored address everything from medical racism (‘Health equity tourists’: How white scholars are colonizing research on health disparities) to disability justice (Access is not Problem Solving) to resistance to capitalism in librarianship (In Resistance to a Capitalist Past: Emerging Practices of Critical Librarianship).

Along with critical librarianship’s emergence in LIS instruction, social justice has become an important initiative in LIS education, though there is still much room for growth. Cooke, Sweeney, and Noble (2016) described creating and reinstituting social-justice themed courses in response to student concerns at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. These courses addressed issues of representation and misrepresentation of information professionals, discussions of race, gender, and sexuality, and social justice movements in LIS. Approaches of integrating social justice in library and LIS education are described in *Teaching for Justice: Implementing Social Justice in the LIS Classroom*, edited by Nicole Cooke and Miriam Sweeney (2017). Rhiannon Jones (2020) reviewed 10 LIS program websites to examine how social justice is addressed in LIS programs, and found that of the 546 courses analyzed, only 46 included elements of social justice in the courses, with only four being from a required course. Other ways of addressing these topics—like in extracurricular reading groups—becomes essential because of the importance of social justice and critical librarianship for LIS and LIS workers so that we can help create more equitable communities and a more equitable profession.

Cooke, Sweeney, and Noble (2016) described an extracurricular reading group, Reading Around Race, which was co-facilitated by faculty and students. Like the *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

reading group described in the present study, facilitators provided discussion questions and the group was open to participants to attend as they were able and/or wished. An additional similarity is that the reading group developed a core of participants that regularly attended sessions, but the authors noted that the “free-form structure presented some challenges for sustaining and deepening conversations among a constantly shifting knowledge base” (Cooke, Sweeney, & Noble, 2016, pp. 113-114).

Laila Brown (2019) examined the experience of LIS students in two different book clubs: a feminist book club as well as a critical librarianship book club at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa which led to participants creating “a feminist diversity ethic.” In her master’s thesis on the topic, Brown (2018) described how these book clubs provided a community of practice, extended learning outside of the classroom, and helped to develop participants’ identities as professionals. Through observation and interviews, Brown (2018, 2019) sought to find the ways that the participants understand the concepts of diversity, feminism, progressivism, and librarianship, along with why they participate in the book club. Our study similarly asked participants about their experience of the reading group and its connection to the LIS program, but it also asked participants about their understanding of critical librarianship, professional praxis, and the impact of critical librarianship on their coursework or professional work. We hope in exploring this that we can better understand the degree to which such reading groups encourage solidarity, community, and action, resulting in more information professionals practicing critical librarianship. While there is camaraderie that the reading group has encouraged, which was perhaps the most important (and subversive) aspect of the reading group of three academic librarians described in the chapter “Ordering Things” (Coysh, Denton, & Sloniowski, 2018), our group does not focus on a single institution or a single text. We realize that book clubs and reading groups can be limited in what they accomplish. David Hudson (2020) provided an excellent commentary on the ways that reading groups, particularly self-proclaimed antiracist reading groups, can provide a sense of accomplishment for white folks without encouraging meaningful change. This is something we, as a group, try to be cognizant of as we encourage discussion that moves beyond reflection into action.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Goals*

The goals of this research project were to:

1. Understand the motivations for members to join the critical librarianship reading group.
2. Understand participant attitudes toward critical librarianship and the reading group and determine whether the reading group has impacted members’ academic and/or professional work.
3. Examine critical librarianship praxis and identify where it is least and most applicable in reading group members’ work.
4. Gather evidence for some recommendations to others wanting to start a reading group.

*Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

## *Design*

This study used a participatory design where all eight researchers were also interviewees, and four interviews were conducted with participants who were not researchers. To determine motivations for joining the reading group and its influence on members' librarianship practice, we conducted semi-structured interviews which allowed for flexibility for interviewees to provide additional information outside of the scope of the provided questions. To analyze the results of the interviews, we determined that thematic analysis following the stages of Braun and Clark (2006) would be the best methodology to follow, as it allowed us to review and adjust themes after they were initially generated, which was helpful with eight researchers coding interviews on the project. Coders familiarized themselves with the data, generated initial codes, searched for themes, reviewed themes, defined and named themes, and then produced the report. Members of the research team developed the script and interview questions by asynchronously adding relevant questions to a shared Google Doc and then finalized the twelve chosen questions in a group meeting using consensus. The interview questions were broken up into three sections, Background (five questions), Impact and Praxis (three questions), and Limitations and Interpretations (four questions). The script and final questions can be found in Appendix A of this paper. Pairs of researchers coded interviews together, and the entire research team came together to finalize themes.

## *Data Collection*

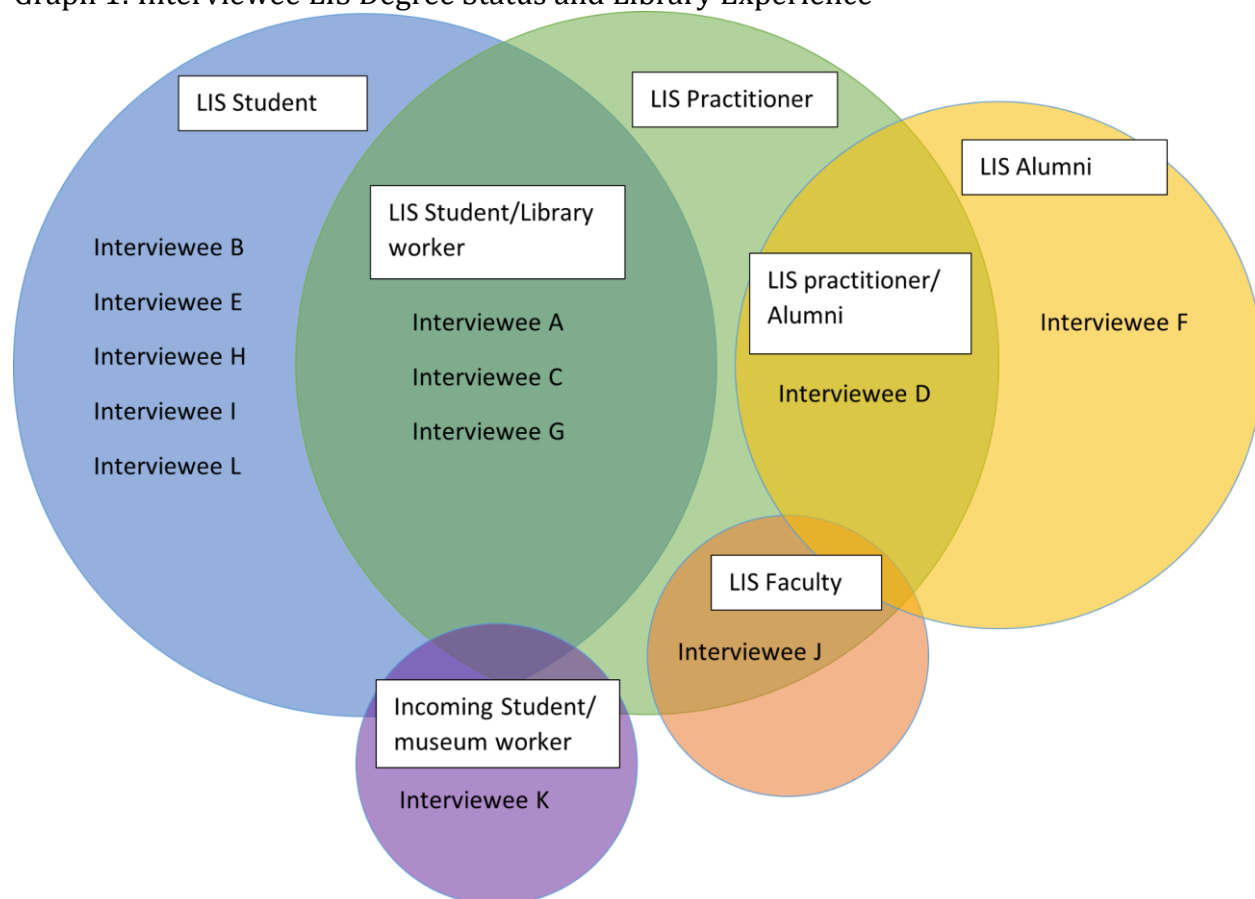
We used convenience sampling to identify research participants. All interested members of the email list for the Critical Librarianship Reading Group were asked to sign up for an interview with members of the research team, and all researchers signed up to be interviewed as well. We used a shared Google Sheet with a calendar for researchers to indicate their availability and for participants to sign up for an interview. Interviews were conducted over two months: July and August of 2021. Of the 12 interviews used in this research, eight were from researchers acting as interviewees and the other four were from interested members of the reading group. Eleven out of 12 interviews had two interviewers (only one had a single interviewer), which made it possible to have an interviewer and notetaker. The interview script included a verbal consent question, along with questions about motivations for joining the group, the impact the reading group has had, and any critiques they had of the group or critical librarianship in general. All participants were allowed to decline to answer a question or withdraw from the study at any time. The verbal consent and questions can be seen in Appendix A. Based on the type of research and purpose of the study, the institutional review board of the university determined that the study was not classified as human subjects research since the focus was on our own group and motivations of members. All interviews were conducted over Zoom video communications software and recorded to allow for interview transcripts to be created from the Zoom auto-transcription feature. Typically, the interview question and script were shared with the participant at least 24 hours before the interview. The interviewers worked together to correct the Zoom auto transcriptions and then shared the corrected transcriptions as a Word or Text file in a Google Drive folder with the other researchers.

*Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

### Demographics

The researchers did not ask participants for traditional demographic data like gender or race/ethnicity. Some participants self-disclosed gender and/or race/ethnicity, but we can only state that the majority of our interviewees, and the majority of the reading group, are white cisgender women. Our group demographic makeup is similar to the findings of the ALA's updated Diversity Counts report from 2012 that found that about 73% of the participants were 'white females' (American Library Association, 2012). Participants were asked to describe their interests and experience in the field of librarianship during their interview. Academic librarianship and public librarianship were the most expressed interests, both receiving five mentions each out of 12 participants. Archives was the next most expressed librarianship interest with three mentions out of 12 participants. Information Science and unspecified (no specific interest mentioned) were each mentioned twice among the 12 participants. K-12 schools, the private sector, and digital collections received one mention each. Graph 1 shows the makeup of the interviewees regarding MLIS degree attainment and library work.

Graph 1: Interviewee LIS Degree Status and Library Experience



### Data Analysis



The purpose of this research was to explore the motivations and attitudes of members of the Critical Librarianship Reading Group to engaging in and exploring critical librarianship. To begin the thematic analysis, research members were assigned three interviews to code as a pair. Each pair coded interviews separately to familiarize themselves with the data, following the steps of Braun and Clark (2006) and to generate initial codes using inductive coding. Inductive coding involves “coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions. In this sense, this form of thematic analysis is data-driven” (Braun & Clark 2006, p. 83). Pairs came together to generate a shared initial code and then searched for the coded themes in each interview, as per steps two and three of Braun and Clark. Once all pairs created their codes, the entire research team came together to finalize the codebook and define common themes (fourteen to start). The pairs then went back to search for the more finalized themes in the interview and teased out relevant quotes for each theme. The quotes for the 14 initial themes were added to a shared Google Sheet. After all quotes for the themes were found, the researchers met again to review themes and note any overlap. Due to overlapping ideas and information that would be more pertinent for demographic information, themes were combined and renamed with new definitions, creating a final set of five themes, found in Table 1 of the Findings.

## Findings

This section provides an overview of the major findings of our data. The final five themes that arose from our interviews are in Table 1. Each subsection of the findings focuses on one of the five themes. We took a feminist research approach and let participants “speak for themselves” as much as possible rather than relying on interpretive claims from the researchers (Pho & Chou, 2017, p. 231).

**Table 1: Interview Themes**

<i>Commitment and motivations</i>	Interviewee describes their personal interest in critical librarianship, either because of their identity or issues that are important to them.
<i>Reading group connections and structure</i>	Interviewee describes how the reading group has created community with other participants. Interviewee reflects on the structure of the reading group (things like focusing on the discussion aspect, or that it is an extracurricular learning opportunity, or that it aligns with their conception of critical librarianship).
<i>Critical librarianship in MLIS coursework and experiences</i>	Interviewee describes how critical librarianship appears in coursework or relates to an assignment or interviewee speaks about MLIS experience

	overall.
<i>Praxis and workplace connections</i>	Interviewee describes actions that they have or want to take because of critical librarianship, like being a better ally. These actions are often related to how critical librarianship has been or could be applied in the workplace.
<i>Tensions and limitations</i>	Interviewee describes where critical librarianship or the group falls short, addresses any contradictions within critical librarianship or tensions with society, individual or institutions. interviewee describes negatives, historical or current, in the LIS discipline or libraries.

### *Commitment and Motivations*

One question in the interviews focused on what drew interviewees to participate in the reading group. While some participants had been exposed to critical librarianship in the critical librarianship course, others had not taken the course before joining the reading group. In any case, the motivations of the participants went beyond intellectual curiosity. Many of the interviewees discussed their personal interest in critical librarianship, either because of their identity or issues that are important to them. As Interviewee H explained:

I use femme in like the queer context of like non-binariness, not woman or female. So, I like engaging with queer studies and feminism, and then I also like to be able to engage deeper on critical race theory because I move through the world as a white person, but my mom is Brown and she is Romany; and she's experienced a lot of racism. And my brother is also Brown and experiences a lot of racism. So, I always want to learn how to be a better ally, because I obviously move super differently in the world than my mom and my brother does and want to be super conscious of that.

For Interviewee H, their identity and the identity of their family members informed their interest in critical theory. Similarly, Interviewee I shared:

I began to recognize despite my love for the library, there's certain things that were happening, conversations that we're having that I was like you're talking about me, you're talking about my family, you're talking about like my intersections in life, and it was a view of how are these decisions being made and also you know, you see yourself, you know what I mean, like you really, really do.

For both Interviewees H and I, the experience of their identities and that of their families inspired an interest in moving to a more critical approach. They are personally committed to the goals of critical librarianship because of their own situations.

For others, being a part of the reading group was important because of their need to make sure that they remained grounded in issues of social justice. While they felt connected with social justice movements, they wanted to ensure that they continued to have these conversations as they related to librarianship. For example, Interviewee E said

I've always been a strong feminist and very much an advocate for individuals with disabilities, and that kind of it intersects beautifully with the idea of occupational therapy of helping individuals to do the most that they can for themselves. So, for me, in my definition of critical librarianship, kind of seeing how we can help the most people, and particularly those who are underrepresented, whether it's individuals who are minorities or individuals who have disability or LGBTQ.

Interviewee E is interested in connecting their own interest with social justice to their library practice. Other interviewees also mentioned the importance of continuing connections and conversations about critical librarianship with the group to keep up to date and avoid complacency. For several participants, the reading group ensured that they were connected to a group that had goals related to social justice in librarianship.

It is clear from the interviews that the participants are personally committed to the reading group because of their own identities and because of their own interest in social justice, but that they are also dedicated to improving the ways in which they talk about and implement social justice in their work. The reading group allows them to keep apprised of new developments in critical librarianship and to discover ways to connect more deeply with their communities.

### *Reading Group Connections and Structure*

The structure and dynamics of the reading group was another theme often mentioned during the interviews. Considering that the reading group was founded and developed using critical librarianship as its cornerstone, it became clear that equitable input was an important facet for many participants. Ensuring that everyone felt welcome and had a space to speak was valuable to many of the interviewees. Common threads included the importance of discussion, the connections made with other individuals, how the group served as an extracurricular learning opportunity for students, and how the reading group structure aligned with their conceptions of critical librarianship.

Being open to everyone was a necessary element to outline the expectations for reading group members, as Interviewee K illustrates:

From what I've seen, I think it does align a lot with my views of critical librarianship, with just the idea that it's open for everybody. The idea is to make sure that people come first in this situation and look at that perspective of highlighting what people need.

The opportunity for social connection was another important aspect of the group structure. Interviewees often discussed how the structure of the group (e.g., discussion-based, one-hour meetings over Zoom with additional communication over Slack, email, and text) allowed for collaboration while getting to know one another. As Interviewee C stated:

You know, it's more than just like a social group. It's this wonderful layer of being able to learn more and engage with other people within the profession while also having a social aspect.

Interviewee J discussed how the reading group structure shed light on others' passions and allowed them to connect with the other members:

I really have enjoyed being able to talk with you all about these concepts about these readings. It's really been great to have. I love the rotating readings and I have no control over what people will choose and that's really nice, because then it's just seeing what other people are interested in. It's not just based on my interests. I get a better sense of where people's passions lie. I've learned more about the members and I look forward to our conversations.

As Interviewee J mentioned, in addition to socialization, rotating discussion leaders is a staple of the reading group structure. As part of creating a fair platform, the discussion leader rotates every meeting, with one person volunteering to lead the next discussion, selecting a reading and topic to anchor the conversation. The other members read the assigned chapter or article, then locate another piece of supporting literature to supplement the reading. For example, if the monthly discussion is around LGBTQ+ equity in librarianship, members may choose to explore a recent qualitative study on inclusive spaces, or relevant resources through the ALA. The choice is up to them. This process of self-election and rotating speakers provides autonomy and dynamic conversation.

It is also important to note that members are not pressured to be discussion leaders, nor to speak during meetings if they do not wish to. Some participants prefer to listen. Others use Zoom's chat function rather than speaking. If members are open to learning and are respectful of others, there is no "right way" to participate. This helps create a welcoming group while also avoiding the constraints of learning often found in academia. Academia tends to favor particularly vocal students while outlining a rigid set of rules that participants are evaluated on. There is also a clear power dynamic between instructors and students. Interviewee J, a faculty member, touched on how the reading group structure helps dismantle those power dynamics by creating a space outside of academia:

No one's being graded. There's no grade at the end. And so, I find that to be a really enriching experience, to just have conversations. I think that there's a lot of problems with grades and a lot of problems with the way higher education is structured. You all are already professionals, so it's nice to be in that scenario where we don't have that dynamic.

Interviewee E, an LIS student, also talked about how having this extracurricular *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

space denotes a greater connection to the professional application. It provided them with a more “real world” experience where they could talk with other professionals and round out their education.

While overall interviewees appreciated how the reading group was run, some interviewees critiqued the reading group’s structure by pointing out that a discussion-based reading group lacked the action and activism central to the practice of critical librarianship. As Interviewee H explained:

I think the only way that [the reading group] doesn't align with my interpretation [of critical librarianship] is the fact that obviously, since we're a reading group, it's not like we're necessarily going out and trying to advocate for things in our program, our workplace. [I'm] saying that we all have to immediately do that or anything, just my interpretation also includes advocacy.

Overall, participants appreciated the reading group structure. The ability to hold a welcoming, shared space ensured that everyone who wanted to participate could do so. Having the reading group serve as an extracurricular activity also removed the expectations and limitations associated with academia and grading, while forming meaningful connections among members. Finally, the decision to incorporate rotating discussion leaders was a point of favor among interviewees, as it included members in decision making while dividing labor fairly among them.

### *Critical Librarianship in MLIS Coursework and Experiences*

Our thematic area, *critical librarianship in MLIS coursework and experiences*, stems from two related themes: *critical librarianship connection with coursework* and *participant’s MLIS program experience*. While pulling pertinent quotes from our interviews for these two themes, *critical librarianship connection with coursework* meant that the interviewee described how critical librarianship appears in coursework or relates to an assignment during their interview. The theme *MLIS experience* meant that the interviewee spoke about their MLIS program experience overall. Due to the interrelatedness of these two themes, they were combined as a thematic area for analysis and discussion.

Overall, interviewees felt that critical librarianship was or had been applicable to their coursework, especially when reading assigned articles and writing papers. Eleven out of 12 participants discussed this during their interviews. Interviewee I had a short quote on this topic that encompasses the spirit of other participants’ replies:

Within the MLIS, like I oftentimes see the things that we're bringing up in critical librarianship and in the reading groups, I will see those things, whether explicit as critical or not, or something that I just notice in other classes.

Due to the high frequency of participants who felt that critical librarianship was applicable to their coursework, there were a few participants who felt that their MLIS *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

program-required Python (programming language) class would have specifically benefited from the application of critical librarianship. Many of the assigned readings for the required Python class posited that librarians needed to learn to code and teach library users how to code to improve society and library user's lives. Interviewees B, C, and E noted that the current push for coding and the technification of libraries and MLIS programs lacked sufficient critical analysis. Interviewee E specifically felt that the reading group helped them keep a 'critical focus' in their Python class:

I feel like it's helped me when I'm reading articles to come in with a little bit more of a critical focus on [it]. A lot of times the articles that we will read for class are very bright and cheery and cheerful about the ways in which libraries and librarians change the world. Particularly with the Python class, you're reading articles about coding for kids and how you're going to change their lives forever with a coding boot camp class.

Additionally, two interviewees touched on why the MLIS experience may lack a sufficient critical focus. Interviewee C attributed it to the ALA's stances and its influence on library schools. Interviewee C feels that "[MLIS] programs aren't prepared to be critical, and they're not prepared to look at the American Library Association" and see how their principles differ from the principles of critical librarianship.

Interviewee F posited that the MLIS experience lacks a sufficient critical focus due to being undervalued by the program administrators:

I also joined the reading group because, when I first took the class, it seemed to be undervalued by administrators. But I think it is undervalued and when the opportunity arose to push forward with it, I wanted to make sure interest was clear. This is a really important thing to have within the [LIS] program, even if it wasn't fully sanctioned the administrators or [that people] the program [don't] know about us being a part of it.

Several interviewees shared that they felt the analysis and discussion of critical literature in the reading group helped them gain a deeper appreciation for their coursework. The practice of analyzing and discussing critical theory within literature in the group helped participants delve deeper into their assignments and apply a critical lens. To illustrate this point, two interviewees explained how participation in the reading group deepened their engagement with their coursework. Interviewee E mentioned:

For my current class, we're writing a paper on ethics and reading about the Association for College and Research Librarians. The code of ethics really strives to talk about issues such as the ethical considerations behind objects that may have been taken from a community without their consent. It really makes me appreciate the ways that a lot of libraries are really thinking about this. They are taking these steps, and they're having these discussions. I don't know that I'd be quite as appreciative of that work if I wasn't taking that Critical Librarianship group.

*Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

Similarly, Interviewee L shared that participation in the reading group had a major impact on their schoolwork through interjecting “a sense of critical librarianship into every class,” and that their participation gave them a greater sense of purpose in the MLIS program before graduation.

Overall, interviewees felt that participation in the group helped them apply critical librarianship concepts to assignments that were lacking them to improve their own MLIS experience. Participants had a strong desire for classes and assignments to include critical approaches. In their interviews, a significant portion of participants were concerned with the technification of the field, their program, and its lack of critical perspectives. Some interviewees hypothesized that critical librarianship is undervalued by program administrators who determine the scope of MLIS programs, and by the ALA which determines what library schools receive accreditation.

### *Praxis and Workplace Connections*

Most interviewees felt that reading group participation directly helps draw attention to the dissonance between institutional practices and various principles outlined in critical librarianship/critical theory. Several interviewees have acquired language that allows them to identify issues related to the demographic imbalances in their workplace practices. Participation in the group also provides a new understanding of their position within their community. Many use these new understandings to draw attention to previously unnoticed work-related issues and power imbalances. Interviewee C shared:

There were things that I was already thinking about but didn't really know how to voice and didn't and felt really helpless about. I'm a white woman working in a predominantly Black community. I work in a predominantly white profession that has a history of privilege and being part of an oppressive state. Knowing those things, but not actually fully contextualizing and really understanding. Critical librarianship really helped me understand it better and understand my place better.

Interviewee A stated that the group also helps to prepare participants to speak about and work towards a practice that benefits the communities. They explained:

I like to think the importance of what we're doing is, we are equipping ourselves to be able to articulate these things and also for the practice of being able to benefit the communities. Because I've been talking a lot about, how I, as an individual, feel like I could be making changes, and so I don't want to neglect talking about who these changes are being made for because it's not just me and it's not just other professionals. But the practice of including the community and speaking to your stakeholders and making sure that you include them because that would, just, it wouldn't technically be critical librarianship if I went off with my own ideas of what justice looks like and I started fighting for them.

According to Interviewee A, the framework provided by the reading group provides *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

guidance on working with the community to include them in justice work. Interviewee L shared:

I recently had a conversation with my supervisor about someone who works under me and this person's general attitude in meetings. And not so much attitude but just like the way this person responds to questions. And I guess that I probably would not have responded this way if it wasn't for how used to talking about these topics I was. But my feedback is like: we want to be a diverse employer, and this person is a diverse hire, and so because of that they come from a different background than you do, and the values that you're espousing right now, are very like Eurocentric white, hetero...

Interviewees found that participation in the group provided useful tools to help align their professional praxis with values and ideals presented by critical theory and critical librarianship. Some interviewees also found that the reading group discussions informed their worldview. Overall, the critical librarianship reading group meetings were reported to have positively impacted interviewees in asserting themselves as community resources. This demonstrates the ways that the reading group has moved beyond discussion to impact.

### *Tensions and Limitations*

Two central themes throughout all interviews were points of *tension and limitations*. Points of tension were identified most frequently when understanding or applying critical librarianship caused interviewees to directly confront societal and systematic status quos that affected their immediate environments, notably in academic and professional environments. Limitations identified typically related to times when applying critical librarianship was dangerous or impractical. By purposefully grappling with the shortcomings and contradictions within critical librarianship, we hoped to avoid falling into the trap of a feel-good reading group for white people described by David Hudson (2020). This exploration allowed us to consider how to overcome some of these limitations. Common tensions and limitations identified by interviewees were barriers, contradictions, dangers, inadequacies, and vocational awe.

When discussing barriers to the application of critical librarianship, several interviewees discussed the level of support and safety in the workplace for applying critical practices and issues with threading the needle of applying praxis within a department, library, or institution. Interviewees discussed the difficulty of making changes in librarianship, pointing out that the homogeneity in librarianship might contribute to a lack of momentum to take direct action for change. Interviewees discussed the difficulty of creating change when up against the status quo and how exploring alternatives rather than breaking down these barriers may create a path forward. As interviewee J argued,

It's not easy to change the culture of a place. It's not easy to have institutions, especially higher education, structurally change when there are so many systems that exist to keep the status quo. And it can feel very defeating. If your community doesn't support you, your administrators don't support you, it's

*Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74



very hard to make the change. We have to find ways to grassroots make changes within the system, but we might also be thinking about the alternatives.

By critically examining how the level of support in a department and institution affect the practical logistics of enacting critical librarianship, interviewees acknowledged tensions between reality and theory.

Interviewees also discussed the dangers that individuals faced when advocating for critical librarianship in academic and professional milieus—spaces where advocates become targets and are othered—as when Interviewee G shared their experiences advocating for critical librarianship supported practices on a workplace equity, diversity, and inclusion committee.

You can only be “that person” so many times before you start to have a little bit of a target on your back. I can see my fall from grace as it's happening. Everyone was really excited that I'm on this DEI committee and that I wanted to do this work... and now [that I'm doing it] I think I'm a little bit of a mosquito for folks.

While many interviewees discussed the barriers and dangers that were the result of pushback against critical librarianship ideals, three interviewees—A, B, and G— also addressed the points of tension and limitations presented by vocational awe. As defined by Ettarh, “vocational awe is the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique” (Ettarh, 2018). Interviewees discussed how vocational awe in libraries and academia results in the notion that because librarians and library faculty are doing important work, they are above critique and their calling to librarianship means they should overwork themselves. As interviewee A explained:

There are so many times where I have conversations where it's like ‘yeah, we're salary’ yet there's that vocational awe that tells you your work is so good that you're willing to sacrifice an hour or two after five [o'clock] every once in a while, just to get more stuff done. But, at the same time, what are the things that are creating this context for us?

A central point of tension for many interviewees in critical librarianship praxis was the presence of contradiction within critical librarianship itself. Interviewee F discussed the tension between critical librarianship and its role in exposing and exploring societal assumptions while only being able to wrestle safely with certain controversial viewpoints. For instance, an LGBTQ+ collection might be acceptable, but a Marxist collection might not. Interviewee A pointed out that critical examinations of society essential to critical librarianship create inherent tensions, stating, “The conflict is in the nature of critical librarianship and that's just sort of the point of critical theories in general right, they don't necessarily play nice with power structures.”

Interviewee L argued that the focus of critical librarianship on dismantling and *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

interrogating power structures within our society and information systems is contradicted by the requirement of many librarians to attain the MLIS degree to obtain professional positions:

If I want to level the playing field, I make librarianship not need to be something that you get a master's for, therefore completely getting rid of the program that I benefit from. And if I go even a step further, I make college not exist or people not care that you went to college in order to get a job... This praxis would look like tearing down the institution in its most extreme form. So, operating within the institution sometimes feels like a betrayal.

Interviewees also addressed contradictions in LIS academic programs and academia. Interviewee E argued that LIS programs focus on “beautiful theories,” and when critically examining the reality of applying such theories in the real world, they do not hold up. Along these lines, Interviewee D spoke about how academic research around critical librarianship can also focus too heavily on theory while, at the same time, be elitist and exclusionary. They discussed how, in teaching toward the ALA accreditation, LIS programs present theories “that don't always stand up in real life.” Interviewee D stated:

It's something that's very academic, something more elitist versus that grassroots effort to make a change. A lot of the [published] research is by white academic women and so it's sometimes exclusionary to the people actually affected by systematic oppression and injustice. It's research focused on the terms, or what we've done well, instead of listening. When [white] people start agreeing something is important, that radical element can get lost.

A final category of *tensions and limitations* identified by interviewees was the inadequacies where critical librarianship and the reading group fall short of meeting their own goals. Several participants mentioned how the reading group could feel self-congratulatory or performative at times, especially without a dedicated avenue for action within the group. As Interviewee C stated:

I think sometimes [a frustration] was the lack of answers and more just really focusing on critique without real world application. I've found that when I look for articles, I look at the conclusion first to see if there are action steps included.

As demonstrated by the quotes from the interviews, participants in the reading group identified several barriers and limitations to applying critical librarianship principles in their workplace, schoolwork, and other areas of practice. Participants critiqued critical librarianship and discussed frustrations encountered when attempting change within a contradictory system and unequal society. While solutions to these limitations and tensions were not proposed, the acknowledgement by participants of the systematic inequalities in the librarianship and society, in addition to the willingness to critique critical librarianship itself, is an essential aspect of the research.

## Discussion

In addition to building from the principles of critical librarianship, this study follows previous initiatives of developing an inclusive, progressive LIS book club (Cooke, Sweeney, & Noble, 2016; Brown, 2018; Brown, 2019) and provides insight into the motivations, structures, and outcomes of the current reading group. Examining where critical librarianship is least and most applicable within the reading group composition is beneficial to unpacking what works and what may need expansion. This may also shed light on how future organizers can adapt these practices and create capacious spaces for LIS professionals.

Participants had multiple motivations for joining the reading group. Many were personally driven by their identities and families. Others mentioned a responsibility to recognize their individual privilege. There was a collective sense of responsibility to use progressive practices in their coursework and/or their place of employment. Staying grounded within social justice movements and related discussions empowered participants while abating fears of complacency. It is important to recognize that people entered the reading group with a variety of different motivations, backgrounds, and knowledge bases. Centering the group around critical librarianship grounded participants around a shared interest.

The structure of the reading group was also important to its function. The reading group was designed to be open to everyone, with participants voluntarily joining and leaving. While some participants cited the group as a pleasant extracurricular option, there was no obligation, grade, or responsibility tied to participation. One-hour Zoom meetings were short enough to integrate into busy schedules while allowing for socialization and feelings of connection during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants mentioned that they enjoyed rotating discussion leaders. This allowed for more equitable input and helped dismantle any potential hierarchies. While discussion was cited as a positive pillar of the structure, the discussion-only format was also a source of weakness, as it limited the group's ability for action and in-person organization. Activism is a component of critical librarianship that is crucial but absent in the current structure. Future groups would benefit from incorporating more tangible action and organizing. While not present in the current structure, connecting with the wider critical librarianship community through other online spaces, such as CritLib's Twitter Chats, or branching out to organizations focused on activism, such as The Commons Social Change Library, may be avenues to explore.

This sense of limitation and lack of action is not unique to the reading group. Participants shared their frustrations with critical librarianship in praxis. In many cases, critical librarianship can be seen as heavy in theory but light in application. A common criticism of critical librarianship is that there is often a cycle of discussion of issues with little insight into how the theory could be applied to LIS work to enact substantial change (Ferretti, 2020). While this could be seen as a shortcoming in the reading group, it also needs to be addressed in critical librarianship as a whole. Through the types of conversations seen in this reading group amongst people who are either studying LIS or currently working within libraries, more may feel empowered to address these limitations which may lead to more concrete changes in the field.

Many participants in the current group noted that the discussions translated to their activism and helped them to better articulate their positions outside of the group. The readings and discussion provided participants with a stronger foundation for their beliefs, improving their language and self-efficacy. This, in fact, was the most cited connection between the reading group and how interviewees utilized critical librarianship in their workplace. Other frequently mentioned practices for reading group participants included actively listening to their community members, pushing back against harmful social constructs within their work, and implementing more inclusive solutions. Similarly, many participants shared how they were able to apply the critical lens they gained as part of the reading group to their MLIS course work. Even in cases where their professors weren't applying critical theory to their content, participants were better equipped to explore the nuances of what they were learning due to their work in the reading group. Some participants credited the reading group for rounding out their MLIS education, providing them avenues of thought and exploration they might not have normally had in a typical MLIS program.

Though there were cited concerns about the limitations of both the reading group and critical librarianship itself, participants overall expressed positive experiences around the reading group. While there is still more work to be done within MLIS programs and LIS as a profession, providing opportunities, such as the reading group, for LIS professionals to explore critical theory may go a long way towards enacting critical change within the profession.

## **Conclusion**

By no means do we wish to imply that our research shows that a reading group can be transformative on its own, and we recognize that coming together to discuss critical librarianship does not mean that we are engaged in antiracism or justice work. However, our group has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with group members leaving and new members joining, and has provided a framework and deeper understanding for engaging in conversations and actions in our workplaces, schools, and lives that can create positive change. It has also created connections among faculty, students, and alumni and a sense of solidarity in the face of several challenges - political and personal.

For other organizations that are looking to create their own reading groups, we have several recommendations. This should be a grassroots effort of those who are interested, not an edict from above. Distribute leadership to create a sense of shared ownership. Invite new members frequently who are perhaps not as connected to the current reading group (not students, not at the institution, etc.) to refresh the membership and encourage widespread participation. We encourage participants to read an additional text beyond the shared reading each month, as we have found that doing so enriches conversation. Connecting the readings to current events ensures that the conversations feel relevant and actionable. Having clear guidelines about conduct within the group can help to ensure that everyone feels safe to participate. For our group, to ensure that we will be addressing action, we ask facilitators to include at least one question about the application of the reading to our workplaces, education, or other aspects of our lives.

*Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.53–74

Critical librarianship, as we understand and practice it, requires a constant drive to be better, to learn more, and to engage others in resisting structures of power and working toward justice in our libraries and communities. While a course or series of courses in an LIS program is a positive step toward wider adoption of critical librarianship, this does not provide the sort of extended effort required to move critical librarianship theory into practice. A reading group can provide a place for continuing, boundary-crossing education that encourages co-learning, explorations of real-world critical librarianship praxis, and a sense of community.

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## Appendix A: Script and Interview Questions

The purpose of this research study is to determine what the motivations and attitudes are of participants in the Critical Librarianship Reading Group. For that reason, we will be interviewing as many participants in the reading group as possible. The interview will take about thirty to forty-five minutes. If you are willing to participate, our interview will ask about your attitudes toward the Critical Librarianship Reading Group, how the group has impacted your approach to your work, and what your goals are in the group. The risks associated with this study include a possible breach of confidentiality, meaning that someone may be able to associate your answers with your identity. There are not any direct benefits to you in participating in this study. The interview will be recorded over Zoom, but will only be shared with research members. The recording and transcript will be password protected. Your participation is voluntary, you may withdraw from this project at any time, and you may decline to answer any of the following individual questions at any point during your interview.

### Background

1. Can you talk about your area of interest in libraries, archives, or museums?
2. How did you hear about the group (MLIS discussion board, word of mouth, etc)?
3. Were you familiar with Critical Librarianship as a concept before this group? How did you become familiar with it as a concept?
4. What motivated you to join the Critical Librarianship Reading Group? What were your goals going into the group?
5. Were you / are you enrolled in Critical Librarianship, and, if so, why did you also join the reading group?

### Impact and Praxis

6. Has being a part of the group led to a sense of community building online? If so, how?
7. How have the concepts covered in the discussions and readings in the Critical Librarianship Reading Group affected your work/school work?
8. Where are you able to apply Critical Librarianship praxis and practice (school, public library work, academic library work, etc.) and where is it difficult to apply?

### Limitations and Interpretations

9. What are the limitations of Critical Librarianship praxis?
10. If applicable, how do you find Critical Librarian theory and/or praxis interacts or conflicts with power structures within the MLIS program? ...academia in general?
11. How do the practices of the Crit Lib Reading Group align with your interpretations of critical librarianship? How do they differ?
12. How does critical librarianship intersect with your own identities? Please feel free to answer this however you want or to skip this question if you are uncomfortable.