**We Have Chosen Each Other**

**Identifying as a Queer Feminist Antiracist Ally in the One-Shot Session**

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This reflection came out of hopes articulated in a windowless room on a morning a year and a half ago. Eight graduate students from the Center for Women’s and Gender Studies and the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies met together for an orientation I facilitated on feminist and racial justice research strategies. This was my chance to meet these students and to introduce them to the University of Texas at Austin Libraries. I asked them to write on the board their response to the question: What’s a library for? Their responses offered savvy and hopeful expectations for the Libraries: “literature,” they wrote. “Archival violence,” “isolation,” “finding new books of poetry,” and “love.”

tatiana de la tierra writes of queer people of color searching library catalogs for validating visions of themselves – and often finding no results because of absent subject headings and a lack of activist search tools.[[1]](#endnote-1) In Shaneka Morris and Martha Kyrillidou’s study of U.S. university libraries, librarians of color and indigenous librarians made up 14.5% of the 8,844 librarians surveyed. And these librarians of color largely work on the west, south, and southeast coasts with far fewer librarians of color throughout the rest of the nation.[[2]](#endnote-2) So, when students scan the library desk for a friendly face, they often see only white people. “Isolation.” At that August orientation, I could see from the terms on the board that the students were already well aware of the missed connections and even pain possible in a library encounter.

As students in identity studies programs, they were also invested in re-membering our histories together, hopeful of finding at the library “love,” “literature,” “new books of poetry” that matter. Today I offer strategies for meeting this hope in one-shot sessions like this orientation in order to create relationships between students and librarians that both change our work as librarians and support students of color and LGBTQ students to become social justice researchers, complete their degrees, and, possibly, become librarians. I begin by drawing on feminist theorists to redefine librarianship, and then I offer strategies for what this looks like in the library classroom.

**I. Redefine Librarianship with Feminist Love**

Librarians have built our famously progressive reputation on opposition to censorship in any form.[[3]](#endnote-3) In this fiction of self-less-ness, librarians are interchangeable and unmarked, simply transmitting information. Recent work in critical librarianship, the long-standing Social Responsibilities Roundtable, and other librarian projects, have challenged this fantasy of neutrality, but we have still not sufficiently grappled with the relationship between our identities and librarianship.[[4]](#endnote-4) Through theories of feminist standpoint and feminist objectivity, Sandra Harding, among others, reminds us that starting any inquiry “from the lives of marginalized peoples […] will generate illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant group lives.”[[5]](#endnote-5) That is, our identities matter.

In a recent article in *Progressive Librarian,* Stephen Bales and Lea Susan Engle offer a related new vision for academic librarians: “Academic librarians, as intellectual laborers and gatekeepers of knowledge resources, should advance the interests of marginalized and disempowered groups. Doing this will make the library a more democratic institution: a position in line with the purpose of library work.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Audre Lorde offers us a map for using feminist love as a methodology for building these necessary alliances across difference. In her poem “Outlines,” she traces the lines of a love between “A Black woman and a white woman.” In their growing love, the women in the poem learn how to build political alliances across racialized difference:

our first winter

we made a home outside of symbol

learned to drain the expansion tank together

to look beyond the agreed-upon disguises

not to cry each other’s tears.

This domestic metaphor of the expansion tank, the pressure-release for a hot water system, interweaves our homes with our politics. Lorde emphasizes this connection with the amplified effect she sees in attending to this intimate labor:

we have chosen each other

and the edge of each other’s battles

the war is the same

if we lose

someday women’s blood will congeal

upon a dead planet

if we win

there is no telling.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Lorde tells us women’s survival—and I add librarians’ purpose—depends on our capacity for feminist love. Lorde was also a librarian. Feminist theorist Aimee Carillo Rowe sees how such feminist love can redefine power in our daily life. She asks, “How might our subjects be constituted if we were hailed by the needs and demands, struggles and joys, of those whose lives and loves are excluded from the realm of our affective economies?”[[8]](#endnote-8)

Outside of the classroom, I use these and other feminist theorists and poets to reflect on what it means for me as a lesbian white antiracist ally to do this work. In the closet-full of photo albums left behind after my grandmother’s move into memory care, long-term care for people with dementia, I see my growing up years alongside images of my grandparents’ family across East Texas. This is the family love I knew growing up, and it is a photographic mass of white people. My longing to, together, “win” the fight for feminist love Lorde describes, required me to create the different affective economy that I live in now. “Love,” the graduate students wrote on the board; longing for each other makes it possible to see our unearned privilege and the spaces for resistance. We need queer antiracist feminist librarians of color and their allies, in conversation, to redefine what libraries do. We need to drain the expansion tank.

**II. Classroom Strategies: Build Belonging and Relationships Outside the Classroom**

Before we enter the classroom, we are working on our vocabularies for alliance and our relationships as allies. By collaborating with faculty on teaching projects, we can build a foundation for the one-shot classroom.

While I was just starting my job as English Literature and Women’s and Gender Studies Librarian, I was collaborating with a group of staff, faculty, and a visiting artist to create a course called Performing Justice. I used this as an opportunity to experiment with what a social justice library classroom could look like. In the spring, one of us, queer feminist artist Wura-Natasha Ogunji, taught the course, and I visited the class as the WGS librarian. Today I offer this class as a tool chest of transferrable exercises for seeing and choosing each other in queer transracial alliances in the one-shot session.

**III. Classroom Strategies: Students Read Erasures in Search Results**

The one-shot session, that one class a librarian teaches during another faculty member’s semester-long course, seems a hostile landscape for relationship building. We see the students once and only for about an hour. Megan Alrutz, another of the class-design team, interweaves social justice theatre pedagogy with youth digital storytelling in a way that I find useful here. She sees that youth, “through the production of their own narratives and performance products about their own lives, […] also [challenge] their often assigned roles as passive consumers of media culture.”[[9]](#endnote-9) My one-shot session prioritizes student agency by starting with a group reading of a series of searches in Google Scholar and moving towards students as authors of information systems.

We start with a Google Scholar search for “Black feminist,” and we talk through the results together. “Black feminist” appears in the title and full text of our results, a list that starts with Patricia Hill Collins’ central work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Major authors of Black feminist theory appear on the first page of results: Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and the Combahee River Collective. Next we try “Black lesbian” and then “Black queer.” There is some overlap between the results. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* appears in both the Black feminist and the Black lesbian search. Medicalizing discourse also appears in this search with an article from the *Western Journal of Medicine*. The Black queer search moves us back out of medicalization and into critical theory starting with the foundational *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. The search trajectory offers us the opportunity to talk about the limits of searching (you can only find articles and books whose language matches your searches) and about the disciplinary use of terminology (the medical field will talk about lesbians but not as often about people who term themselves queer or feminist).

Next we push “to look beyond the agreed-upon disguises.” If in early in a Google Scholar search Audre Lorde appears as a Black lesbian but not a Black feminist, how can we reach beyond the stereotypical two-dimensional identities we know to be hostile fictions?

**IV. Classroom Strategies: Students Analyze Search Tools and Authorship**

The students have now had a crash course in critically reading search tools; search tools are now texts we can – and should – analyze. Using a few tools that create identity movement-based contexts for information, we now take a look at how searches can become more powerful. In the process, we acknowledge that research tools are, at best, products of critical scholarship with authors and readers. I gather the students into groups to look at an identity studies database. Groups look at Africabib.org, the Bibliography of Asian Studies, the Chicano Database, or the International Index to Black Periodicals. Here we practice choosing each otherboth by reading each other and by seeing each of these databases as Women’s and Gender Studies databases. I ask the students to see what they can find out about who created each database.

The Chicano Database was built by the Ethnic Studies Library at UC Berkeley. African Diaspora studies scholar and librarian Davis Bullwinkle created the open access Africabib.org. It seems nearly impossible for us to find out who Davis Bullwinkle is, or how the Chicano Database came into being, or whether ethics of feminist love ground each project. For those databases whose origins and authors seem hidden, we talk about how that absence shapes our understanding of this text. Who created the tools and how they created them matters.

**V. Classroom Strategies: Students Author Critical Catalog Entries**

We then look at a genre-bending encyclopediaand two catalog records to show us how to build connections through authoring information systems. In their simply-titled *Encyclopedia*, feminist racial justice artist and scholar editors Tisa Bryant, Miranda Mellis, and Kate Schatz include entries that reimagine how we define and connect with each other. The editors also recruit authors and artists of color for at least half of their entries. On the title page an epigraph by Robin Coste Lewis serves as a prophetic entry out-of-place: “Let’s re-think our classifications.” And below that the cross-reference: “See: Fable.” We look at a few examples of entries on the projector, the students read or describe them out loud, and discuss what the entries mean. Dawn Lundy Martin, Black lesbian experimental poet and professor, writes an entry for “Ghost,” a story poem of witness and narrative. Cross-references invite readers to: See: Aporia, Body. Six intimate drawings by Rikki Ducornet of what might be water-worn rocks are the entry for “Gift.” The note tells readers: See: Encyclopedia. Across four pages appear images of embroidery on green paper, Wura-Natasha Ogunji’s image story of a father drawing mud on skin, “a map for his daughter,” washing it quickly lest others “mistake him for a ghost.” This is the entry for “Journey.” *Encyclopedia* reshapes readers’ understandings of the entry titles through the entries and the complexities of cross-references. In so doing, *Encyclopedia* embodies an alliance-building through cross-referencing. This is what information organization can do.

We pass around the two volumes while I pull up the Catalog entry for *Encyclopedia*. The assigned Library of Congress Subject Headings are:

English prose literature – 21st Century.

Literature – literary collections.

English prose literature – History and criticism.

The subject headings both refuse to acknowledge this book as an encyclopedia and ask us to read encyclopedias as narrative, literature, and history.

To contrast this sparse record we look at the Catalog entry for another bibliographic tool, *Carry the Word: A Bibliography of Black LGBTQ Books* compiled by Steven Fullwood, Reginald Harris, and Lisa Moore. This is the origin source of the Black Queer Studies Collection I helped to create at the University of Texas at Austin Libraries,[[10]](#endnote-10) so the record carries that Local note followed by nine subject headings including these:

American literature – African American authors – Bibliography

Lesbians’ writings, American – Bibliography

Transgender people’s writing, American -- Bibliography

Homosexuality and literature – United States – Bibliography

The subject headings separate African American authors from LGBT authors, though the list together acknowledges the multiple identities made visible through this bibliography. The sixth subject heading incites students to wonder aloud whether it is valuable to include potentially harmful language, the medicalizing “homosexuality,” or whether including this subject heading redefines and resists medicalization.

The students are now ready to author their own Catalog entries. To invite them to author information records is to invite them to expect more of, to reimagine and recreate, these records, to look for themselves and each other in information systems. I hand out three-by-five notecards and ask each person to create an index record for their project for class. For most of the students, their project is a performance based on their own identities and communities. We discuss how their subject terms can put them in conversation with other people and how they might use that connection to introduce new terms and new possibilities for identities, histories, futures.

These conversations resurface long after our one-shot session, at the end of their semester, when they submit their performance archives to the UT Digital Repository and include their list of subject headings. For her images of a box installation with artifact photographs, Devon Howard creates this list of subjects: performing justice, queer, oppression, visual art, performance art, languages, silence, voice, violence, aesthetic, endurance, heteropatriarchy, transgender.[[11]](#endnote-11) For her archive of her blog analyzing – and creating – representations of Asian identity, Paula Chin creates this list of subjects: performing justice, culture, identity, Asian American, anti-racism, feminism, anti-yellowface, human immigration rights.[[12]](#endnote-12) With these genealogies, the students are writing new identities, weaving together divided peoples, and calling forth, longing towards, each other.

By preparing our foundations in queer antiracist alliance building before the classroom session, we can meet our activist scholar students’ hope for love in the libraries. We engage students in tracing and rewriting the information systems that weave our communities. We drain the expansion tank, and we choose each other and the edge of each other’s battles.

1. tatiana de la tierra, “Latina Lesbian Subject Headings: The Power of Naming,” *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front*, Ed. K. R. Roberto, McFarland, 2008, 94-102, 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Shaneka Morris and Martha Kyrillidou, “Minority Representation in US ARL University Libraries as of 2012-2013: Taking a Closer Look at the Evidence,” Association of Research Libraries, Poster, 2014, Web. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The hundreds of articles, chapters, and books in publications in librarianship indicate librarians’ investment in sustaining this identity. Librarians’ participation in antiwar activism during and after the US war in Vietnam shifted their self-definition with the creation of committees including the Social Responsibilities Roundtable and the Activities Committee on New Directions (ACONDA) (Raber 675). In 1971, ACONDA urged, “If we believe in the importance of intellectual freedom, we must be willing to take risks in order to defend it”; the resurfacing of this quote in 2014 discussions of Edward Snowden indicate the continuing relevance of ideas of intellectual freedom and anticensorship to contemporary librarians’ self-definition (Harger 10). Douglas Raber, ACONDA and ANACONDA: Social Change, Social Responsibility, and Librarianship,” *Library Trends* 55.3 (Winter 2007): 675-697. Elaine Harger, “Abandoning Snowden… and Privacy? Hegemony at Play in ALA,” *Progressive Librarian* 42 (Summer 2014): 10-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For more information about critical librarianship and the Social Responsibilities Roundtable, see the following resources among many others. Maria Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, editors, *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2010. Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*, Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2013. Toni Samek, *Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in American Librarianship, 1967-1974*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, editors, *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” *Feminist Epistemologies*, Edited by Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, New York: Routledge, 1993, 49-82, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Stephen E. Bales and Lea Susan Engle, “The Counterhegemonic Academic Librarian: A Call to Action,” *Progressive Librarian* 40 (Fall/Winter 2012): 16-40, 23-24. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Audre Lorde. “Outlines.” *Our Dead Behind Us*. New York: Norton, 1986. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Aimee Carillo Rowe, *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. As a result of Alrutz’s strategies, the youth in one series of engaged workshops created a collective digital story and process of production that “offered an initial critique of discourses and systems of power shaping their lives, such as institutionalized racism, generational poverty, and state-sanctioned policing” (49). While this is certainly beyond the one-shot session, Alrutz’s engaged workshops offer a pedagogical framework for process, combination of critical reading and digital media, and value of youth authorship that inform my library classroom. Megan Alrutz, *Digital Storytelling, Applied Theatre, and Youth: Performing Possibility*, New York: Routledge, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Kristen Hogan, “‘Breaking Secrets’ in the Catalog: Proposing the Black Queer Studies Collection at the University of Texas at Austin,” *Progressive Librarian* 34/5 (Fall 2010): 50-57, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Devon Howard, “Performing Justice,” Austin: University of Texas Digital Repository, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Paula Chin, “Performing Justice,” Austin: University of Texas Digital Repository, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)