SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ANTIRACIST LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

JUSTIÇA SOCIAL E BIBLIOTECONOMIA E CIÊNCIA DA INFORMAÇÃO ANTIRRACISTA

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RESUMO

O presente artigo se refere à palestra de encerramento ministrada pela Professora Kimberly Black, da *Chicago State University*, no Encontro Internacional de Bibliotecárias(os) Negras(os) e Antirracistas (I EIBNA). Encontra-se estruturado a partir da (i) posição da autora enquanto palestrante, afro-americana e bibliotecária negra; (ii) posteriormente discute sobre os problemas do racismo e as promessas do antirracismo; (iii) discorre sobre antirracismo na Biblioteconomia e Ciência da Informação; (iv) revisita os documentos e orientações internacionais para desenvolver um plano de ação visando a promoção da justiça racial, por meio da profissão bibliotecária e, por fim, indica estratégias para justiça social em comunidades antirracistas por intermédio da Biblioteconomia e Ciência da Informação.

Palavras-Chave: Justiça Social. Racismo. Antirracismo. Biblioteconomia. Ciência da Informação.

ABSTRACT

This article refers to the closing lecture given by Professor Kimberly Black, from Chicago State University, at the International Meeting of Black and Antiracist Librarians (I EIBNA). This article is structured around (i) the author's position as a speaker, African-American and black librarian; (ii) later discusses the problems of racism and the promises of anti-racism; (iii) discusses anti-racism in Librarianship and Information Science; (iv) revisits international documents and guidelines to develop an action plan aimed at promoting racial justice, through library professional and, finally, indicates strategies for social justice in anti-racist communities through Librarianship and Information Science.

Keywords: Social justice. Racism. anti-racism. Librarianship. information Science.

1 INTRODUÇÃO

I would like to thank the esteemed conference conveners for creating such a wonderful event and for giving me the great privilege of sharing my thoughts in dialogue with you on this important topic, "the challenges of black and anti-racist librarians in the construction of an anti-racist society, emancipated and committed to diversity." My talk is entitled, Social Justice and Antiracist Library and Information Science. I apologize that I only speak English. I hope that you will overlook my linguistic limitations.

2 MY POSITIONALITY

Before I begin, I would like to let you know a little about me and let you know something about my positionality and my identity so that you know where I stand when I speak. I am a U.S. African-American and Black librarian and Library and Information Science educator. "African- American" is a broad term in the context of the United States.

It can describe individuals of African descent who have generations long family history in the U.S. as well as more recent immigrants from African, European and Caribbean nations. I have descended from individuals from African who were brought to the Americas in chains against their will and enslaved in the U.S. for many generations. According to family lore, our surname, "Black" was a shortened form of "Blackstock" which was how we were described in the ledgers of the plantations in middle Tennessee where my ancestors were enslaved for generations. My family did not adopt the surname of the white former plantation owners as many Black families did back then when they were emancipated – instead they reclaimed their assigned description as property and took it as a name and then redefined and transformed it into the living legacy of family which continues to this day. Rather than claiming the legacy of former white masters as a name, my family chose themselves as a source for the name. I am so proud of my name and what my name signifies, because it means we were not destroyed through the Maafa – the Great Tragedy that connects all of us of African descent to the modern contradiction in which we all currently live. We did not die. You did not die. We are all here together in place and in a way that our ancestors could scarcely have dreamed, but probably did somehow perceive because they kept on going in the hopes that one day we would be here and that we would continue the work.

I have been a part of the Library and Information Science field for nearly 30 years. I am part of a profession that struggles to acknowledge its own racism and complicity with institutional structures

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of oppression, exclusion and injustice and which has adopted countless strategies to present itself as race-neutral. My early scholarly work centered on understanding how certain race-neutral processes and practices in library collection development resulted in the systematic exclusion of Black women's voices in academic collections. Because academic libraries collect for posterity, the absence of our recorded wisdom from academic collections is an intellectual atrocity for all peoples in the future.

My early employment was as an academic reference librarian at a university that served non-traditional students in an urban core in the American south. After earning my Ph.D. in LIS, I served as a faculty member at the University of Kentucky where I was only the second person of African descent to hold a faculty position in their LIS department. I later served on the faculty in the library school at the University of Tennessee where I again was the second person of African descent to ever serve on the faculty of their library school. This was a personal victory for me because my mother was not allowed to attend the University of Tennessee because of segregation. In my current university, I am the only faculty member in my department who is of African descent. My experience speaks to the deep need for more Black Library and Information Science educators to develop the future generations of librarians.

I made the unusual decision to join the faculty of the library school at Chicago State University. Chicago State University is a small, urban university which has the U.S. federal designation of being a "Predominantly Black Institution" or PBI. PBI's specialize in educating Black students who comes from families experiencing economic poverty. At the time, CSU's library science program was seeking initial accreditation by the American Library Association. I became the chairperson of the program and lead the program to attain American Library Association accreditation in 2018. Currently, Chicago State's LIS program is one of only two ALA accredited programs at universities that have a specific mission to serve Black students. So I am proud to be a Black librarian and a Black Library Science educator who is devoted to developing community through the work of our field.

I have just shared a lot about me. Here is how I will structure the remainder of my address:

First, I will outline some dimension of the problems of racism and the promise of antiracism. Next I will describe why library and information science is important to achieve antiracism and why Black Librarians Matter (BLM). Finally, I will end with a discussion about how to move forward on the antiracist agenda globally through the work of LIS practitioners, particularly the work of Black librarians..

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3 THE PROBLEMS AND THE PROMISE

Racism poses obvious problems for society, while its antidote, antiracism, holds endless promise to create to a just world. We all understand that race is a social, ideological and political category rather than a biological one. To begin to discuss the dimensions of the problems of racism, I will start with a simple definition of it.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) defines racism as:

> the categories into which society places individuals on the basis of physical characteristics…. Though many believe that race is determined by biology, it is now widely accepted that ***this classification system was in fact created for social and political reasons***. There are actually more genetic and biological differences within the racial groups defined by society than between different groups. (ADL, 2021, s.p.)

Therefore, racism is a social and political tool that can be used by one group to obtain unfair advantage over another based on an arbitrary collection of physical traits.

There are other definitions and approaches to the problem of racism, and perhaps my favorite is one expressed by the Nobel Laureate, Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison and others have long speculated that the essence of racism is whiteness as ideology and Morrison goes so far to suggest that the problem of racism – of whiteness – is something that should be confronted exclusively by white people. In an interview with Charlie Rose which aired on May 7, 1993, she rhetorically asks of white people

> What are you without racism? Are you any good? are you still strong? Are you still smart? Do you still like yourself? [....] these are the questions… part of it is, yes, the victim, how terrible it is for Black people… [However] I am not a victim. I refuse to be one. […] My feeling is that white people have a very, very serious problem and *they* should start thinking about what *they* will do about it. Take me out of it. […] (MORRINSON, 1993 apud KIRKLAND, 2019, s.p.)

Morrison resists the imperative that Black people should be responsible for finding the solutions to racism, when it is pathology of white people that whites must confront within their own psyche. On many levels I agree with Morrison, however, I don't feel confident that whites are fully capable of this work without considerable help from people of color.

I would like to focus on a more pernicious form of racism that is relevant to a discussion of our institutions such as libraries and that is, *systemic racism.* Systemic racism is

> […] a combination of ***systems, institutions and factors*** that advantage white people and for people of color, cause widespread harm and disadvantages in access and opportunity. One

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person or even one group of people did not create systemic racism, rather it: (1) is grounded in the **history of our laws** and **institutions** which were created on a foundation of white supremacy;* (2) **exists in the institutions and policies** that advantage white people and disadvantage people of color; and (3) **takes places in interpersonal communication and behavior** (e.g., slurs, bullying, offensive language) that maintains and supports systemic inequities and systemic racism. (ADL, 2021, s.p.)

Our institutions such as libraries are critical social structures that shape our reality. We are born into a world already inhabited by the institutions that shape and reinforce how we perceive reality as suggested in Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality* (1966). Part of the effort to dismantle systemic racism in society is to identify and eliminate it from the unconscious processes and practices that shape and enable our institutions to function. It is very hard work to uncover these unconscious institutional processes that result in systemic racism. For example, in my early work. I explored the patterns of collecting of contemporary Black women's writing in academic research library collections. I found that the predominate expressive literary form for African-American women was poetry, not prose, however, the tools, practices and processes used by librarians to make selection decision for academic collections privileged works of prose rather than works of poetry. Few of the academic research libraries in my study prioritized the collection of poetry and so many works of great intellectual value written by Black women were not collected because of their expressive form. These subtle processes that on the surface appear to have nothing to do with race, systematically result in biased collections.

In summary, to borrow a title from South African writer Bessie Head, race is basically "a question of power." When we discuss racism, we are addressing struggles of power. Alex Zamalin notes this when he states that "Antiracists define racism as based not in nature but in arbitrary power --- the right to suppress, exclude, demean, deauthorized and degrade people -- based on […] [a] presumptive "right to dominance". (ZAMALIN, 2019, p. 29).

There is something about the ideology whiteness which presumes it has the right to dominate others and to hold and wield power. All of our institutions and institutional actors are implicated in racism which is endemic to contemporary global society because of the shared legacy and continuation of colonialism and imperialism.

So if racism is a game of power, then antiracism, too, is a question of that same power or as 19th century abolitionist Frederick Douglass has famously quoted, "power concedes nothing without a demand." This is the appropriate role of the antiracist – the demand justice until there is a concession.

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Alex Zamalin has outlined one of the insidious problems with antiracism in his book, *Antiracism: An Introduction*. He suggests that the most simple definition of an antiracist is an individual who professes to "not be racist" or who sees racism as inconsistent with democracy. Zamalin continues to observe that "almost every American today might call themselves antiracist" (ZAMALIN, 2019, p. 6) if this is the working definition. I think this is where I see problems in the library profession: librarians or library institutions confuse the act of making statements condemning racism with actually being antiracist. Antiracism is best understood as actions that result in changes in systems and structures that create justice for people of color.

Antiracism has many dimensions and I will discuss three of them. The first dimension of antiracism is in theory and ideology. In his study of the history of antiracism, Zamalin explains that antiracist thought and theory comes from lived experiences and that nascent antiracist theory grows from enduring conditions of oppression. Therefore, justice can be defined as freedom; justice "the right to flourish, to love, to enjoy and to live a good life." (ZAMALIN, 2019, p. 14). Philosophically, this is the essence of antiracism – it is will of people of color "to flourish, to love and to live a good life."

The second dimension of antiracism is in stories, narratives and myth. Zamalin privileges the humanistic approach to understanding political, social and material reality. He states that

> Anti-racists exemplified … [the] afro modern tradition, which was born out of the black diaspora struggle against enslavement worldwide.... Social identity for the anti-racist was understood to be constructed in ways that Euro modernity did not fully appreciate - through myths and narratives about human value, about who counted and did not - rather than simply through political institutions. (ZAMALIN, 2019, p. 13).

So our stories and mythologies are our power to reconstitute ourselves and to simply be in the world. This is why I started my talk sharing my family's story with you about our name. Stories are sources of deep power for antiracism.

The final and perhaps most critical dimension of antiracism is action. Antiracism is achieved through political action to promote structural changes in the world which support freedom and justice. Zamalin suggests the highest expression of antiracism is through political actions that enable structural change – changes to our systems, processes and institutions. Or as Zamalin states,

> […] certain forms of political engagement embody […] [the spirit of antiracism] much more fully than others.... ... Focusing on structural changes is more important than individual or interpersonal transformations. Ending mass incarceration and police brutality is better than efforts at racial reconciliation. Addressing racial disparities in wealth through policies of socio-economic redistribution is better than shopping in black-owned businesses. Never are these activities mutually exclusive, but those that address structures are better - not for

> philosophical or moral reasons but because history shows they have worked in the past and broadly affect more people. (ZAMALIN, 2019, p. 23).

So in exploring the concept of antiracism, he privileges political engagement as an expression of it – an antiracist is someone who acts to create change rather than someone who merely professes. Antiracism is transformative action.

4 ANTIRACISM AND LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

In this part of my talk, I will discuss why library and information science is important for creating the conditions for racial justice and antiracism in our communities and in the world. I will also discuss why Black librarians are essential in this effort.

I will start with a shameful confession. I have failed as an antiracist. A decade ago, I truly believed that if I could help a Library Science education program at a Black university attain American Library Association accreditation which is required for most U.S. librarian jobs, then this program would serve antiracists ends by producing Black librarians empowered to create change in their communities. Working on accreditation felt like I was climbing to the top of this huge mountain and when I got to the top and the program was accredited, I looked at it and I was saddened. I saw that our library science program at Chicago State largely looked like the status quo of white librarianship and that our program was reproducing the same kind of traditional librarians who could easily fit into the conservative white profession of librarianship. In order to earn accreditation, a program needs to look like the institutions that generate the racism in the profession. We do have more Black students in our program, but we are equipping them with the same tools as any other library school at a white institution. The accreditation process produces sameness. It is yet another one of those processes supporting the machine of systemic racism. So while we can get more numbers of Black people into the profession, I am not convinced that our graduates will be able to change anything simply because they are Black. And being black in a white profession, while difficult, is simply not enough to make social change. A library science education program has to produce graduates who adhere to the norms of the profession because one of the first things that is done to those who are new to the field is to socialize them into the profession as it currently is. Library science educators socialize students into the profession as it is --not into the profession that we should be. This is my failure. And recognition of this failure points to a solution. This is why I am doing more deliberate

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work in antiracism right now. As an educator of librarians, I need to cast a clean, strong vision for an ideal profession which does not yet exist and for a librarian who can create and support racial justice in our imperfect communities.

Black librarians are important. As I suggested earlier in my discussion of Toni Morrison, Black people have a unique role in assisting white people to understand white privilege and to confront the ideology of whiteness from which they benefit. Black librarians can hold a mirror to deeply embedded systemically racist practices in the field.

Librarians have unique skills and a unique social position that makes them effective agents for antiracist structural change in communities. Librarians have a deep understanding of literacy – of storytelling, narrative and expressive culture which can be harnessed to support the antiracist agenda. Librarians also occupy a unique position of trust in their communities; librarians are perceived to be knowledgeable, helpful and are trusted by members of their communities. Finally, libraries contain spaces (physical and virtual) which can contain and support constructive community dialogs about the dimensions of race and power in community life. Libraries can become incubators for community understanding.

In order for racial justice to thrive in a community, there needs to be "political will." Members of the community have to really want to see racial justice to the extent that they will engage in constructive political processes to seek it. Librarians can leverage their collections, their access to information and their services and programs in order to nurture political will among community members. Many of the young community activists and civic minded young people that I have seen have not studied the history of racism or the history of collective action for social change. Popular historical accounts of the civil rights movement in the U.S. present the idea that the civil rights protests in the 1950's, 60's and 70's spontaneously happened or happened with little planning. However, civil rights leaders like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. devoted a significant amount of time to study and in educating themselves in the philosophy and techniques of non-violent social change at the Highlander Folk School (now called Highlander Research and Education Center) in New Market, Tennessee. The entire civil rights movement in the U.S. was a tactical exercise conducted with precision by well-educated, well-trained, and highly disciplined people who were willing to risk everything for justice. Librarians can equip community members with the knowledge required to effectively promote change. It is essential for activists to learn before they act. Public libraries typically have a goal to encourage and nurture civic engagement in their service communities. Librarians can use their collections, their platforms and spaces for civic engagement to educate

communities about the effective engagement of political processes as well as intentionally cultivate the political will in people to demand justice.

5 ACCOMPLISHING SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ANTIRACIST COMMUNITIES THROUGH LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

In this concluding section of my talk, I suggest that we and the profession look to international documents and guidance in developing an action plan to promote racial justice through the work of our field.

The United Nations lays out basic principles of anti-discrimination in its **Universal Declaration of Human Rights.** Article 7 states that "All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination."

The UN has since made many declarations and resolutions and set up Special Rappoteurs to support the elimination of racism. Many of these efforts makes specific requests of information professionals to fight racism. I will mention a few:

United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination - Resolutions 1904 (XVIII) adopted by the General Assembly on 20 November 1963. Article 8 states that: "All effective steps shall be taken immediately in the fields of teaching, education and information, with a view to eliminating racial discrimination and prejudice and promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations and racial groups".

Many countries adopted the **International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.** Adopted and opened for signature and ratification by General Assembly resolution 2106 (XX) on 21 December 1965. Article 7 of this convention state that countries who signed the convention have agreed to:

> undertake to adopt immediate and effective measures, particularly in the fields of teaching, education, culture and information, with a view to combating prejudices which lead to racial discrimination and to promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations and racial or ethnic groups.

United Nation's Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice: Adopted and proclaimed by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) at its twentieth session, on 27 November 1978. Article 5.2 of the declaration states that:

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> States, […] have a responsibility to see that the educational resources … are used to combat racism, more especially by ensuring that curricula and textbooks include scientific and ethical considerations concerning human unity and diversity and that no invidious distinctions are made with regard to any people; … by making the resources of the educational system available to all groups of the population without racial restriction or discrimination […]

The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action – Declaration of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance from Sept. 2001. The Durban declaration again asserted the principles of equality and non-discrimination as essential human rights and charged states (countries) with the primary responsibility to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. The Declaration encouraged the development of comprehensive national action plans to eradicate racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. It also called for national institutions (which includes libraries) to reinforce national legislation and the administration of justice towards victims of racism and discrimination.

Human Rights Council resolution 7/34 **- Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance** of 28 March 2008.

This mandate established a Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Special Rapporteurs are formed by the UN Human Rights Council in response to urgent human rights need. This Special Rappoteur was charged to "gather, request, receive and exchange information and communications with all relevant sources, on all issues and alleged violations …and to investigate and make concrete recommendations, to be implemented at the national, regional and international levels, with a view to preventing and eliminating all forms and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance."

After the global unrest and protest of the death of George Floyd by police violence on 25 May 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights investigated and issued two reports, **Agenda towards transformative change for racial justice and equality**. The reports collectively asserted the following four imperatives:

1. Reversing cultures of denial, dismantling systemic racism and accelerating the pace of action;
2. Ending impunity for human rights violations by law enforcement officials;
3. Ensuring that the voices of people of African descent […] are heard and that their concerns are acted upon;

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4. Confronting legacies [of racism] through accountability and redress.

These imperatives were described in United Nations, **Human Rights Council Resolution 43/1**

My recommendation is the global library and information science community which includes educators, scholars and practitioners alike integrate this plan of action in their thinking and their practice. Here is a summary of what we should do.

1. "**STEP UP**" – members of the profession and all of our associations and institutions need to stop denying the existence of racism and need to dismantle systems, infrastructures and processes that enable systemic racism. We need to acknowledge that we have historically practiced racism in our profession and that this racism is deeply embedded in or tools, our ideas, our processes and our everyday practices. Systemically racist structures include our organizational schema and taxonomies, our practices of description, our patterns of preservation, our collections, in how we arrange and use our facilities, in our services and programming and in our technologies. We also need to dismantle systemic racism in our libraries as workplaces.

2. "**PURSUE JUSTICE**" – individually and collectively we need to actively promote racial justice. We can do this by equipping our communities with information that accurately reflects the historical record regarding race and providing factual information about persistent inequalities of outcomes because of racism. In addition to informing our communities, we can help shape their thinking with enhanced education in information and media literacies that reveal systemic racism in societal structures and through deconstruction of media messages. Finally, we can offer our spaces and resources to help our communities organize themselves to pursue justice.

3. "**LISTEN UP**" - We should provide structures, spaces, platfoms and opportunities for people of African descent to be heard. We should be recording and preserving their voices for posterity. This includes ensuring that expressive works by people of African descent are collected, made available and preserved. Our societal stories and mythologies need to include the diverse perspectives of individuals of African descent. We must tell the truth about the ever-unfolding impact of the Black diaspora and how it informs processes of globalization.

4. "**REDRESS**" We need to offer reparatory justice to our communities which may include enhanced, specialized and increased services and resources in response to long legacies of

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disinvestment. Redress may also include acts and processes of reconciliation particularly in instances where reparations are difficult.

To conclude, my hope is for transformation and liberation. My hope is for racial justice and the ability of all Black people to flourish, to love, to enjoy and to live a good life. We have the capacity in our work as library professionals to create racially just communities that celebrate the dignity and majesty of our shared humanity. Thank you for your time.

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