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Critical Information Literacy and Collections: Developing Praxis for Public Libraries

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Introduction

In March of 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic took hold globally, with the United States response involving debates on the effectiveness of masks, conflicting information on the severity of the disease, and protests to reopen the economy after an initial shutdown to slow the spread. On May 25th, the police killing of George Floyd led to the beginning of a summer uprising focused on racial justice, which sustained and regained momentum on Wednesday, September 23rd, 2020 with the Grand Jury decision to charge only one of three police officers involved in the murder of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky.

Amidst all of this, an uptick of racial justice readings on the New York Times Bestsellers list suggests that the general public is searching for answers to understand the social conditions that are impacting this moment (Harris, 2020). The tension around medical information regarding the global pandemic, specifically the effectiveness of masks, is an issue of information literacy as well.

A vital role of public libraries at this crisis moment is to be an active guide to critical information literacy as it pertains to the social systems at play in current events. In doing so, public libraries must hold unceasingly to the Core Values of Librarianship - Access, Confidentiality/Privacy, Democracy, Diversity, Education and Lifelong Learning, Intellectual Freedom, The Public Good, Preservation, Professionalism, Service, Social Responsibility, and Sustainability (American Library Association, 2004). To determine how public libraries do this, I will examine how information literacy has been defined and applied in public libraries over the past thirty years, with critical information literacy becoming an increasing focus in the field. I will then apply Freire's banking concept to public libraries as they exist, and present suggestions for how

public libraries may continue to build a critical praxis in collections development as well as structural operations.

Information Literacy and Collections Development

Information literacy is summarized as the gathering of information, and evaluation of that information's validity based on its sources. The end goal is an analysis and application of knowledge gained from the process. Information literacy, defined by the American Library Association and elaborated on in a Report by the Presidential Committee on Information Literacy in January of 1989, has caught on in libraries nationally and internationally as a commonly-accepted objective of operations. I will begin with a breakdown of the foundational concepts from this notable early work around Information Literacy, before presenting actual field results from the following 30 years and implications for collections development.

Defining Information Literacy

With the arrival of the Information Age, libraries were faced with the task of determining their relationship to the societal shift toward life online. The resulting massive, seemingly infinite expanse of available information, and the task of sifting through it all, has become a mammoth endeavor for librarians. In their 1989 Report, the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy proposed a framework for approaching this task. In the report, the Presidential Committee notes that the most valuable information at the time was only accessible to people with particular monetary or social resources. The Presidential Committee proposed that if we are going to live in an information society, then citizens must have a right to equitable access to information as well as the tools to effectively evaluate that information for its use in daily life. In order to fully participate in an information society, citizens have to regularly

sift, understand, evaluate validity, and synthesize information they've gathered. To quote, "Information literate people are those who have learned how to learn" (American Library Association, 1989).

In the Committee's work to define information literacy, they identified a social justice element in the distribution of information literacy training and skillbuilding. The report noted the "empowerment," of using information to improve one's life. However, the report also stated the "empowerment" brought by information literacy was not being accessed by those who most needed it. The Committee identified some of the marginalized groups as minority and at-risk students, illiterate adults, people with English as their second language, and those who were economically disadvantaged. Though libraries were open and available to the entire public, the report suggested that these groups were not making it to the library to then be empowered with information literacy skill-building.

The Committee's guiding recommendations to report back to American Library Association included suggestions to change how information was organized and understood, with emphasis placed on the role of libraries and information centers as part of the restructuring process. The Committee also suggested promoting a love of learning for all ages, as a way to facilitate in-depth exploration of information and encourage citizens to be active participants in their own life-long education.

In this initial work defining information literacy as it applies to public libraries, we see the opportunity to revolutionize libraries, with a focus on democratization and equity. The Committee noted that access barriers, especially economic, would tend to create an "Information

Elite." It is important to keep this identified danger in mind when evaluating how information literacy has come to be understood since the publication of this report.

Information Literacy as Commodity: a Neoliberal Context

Political activist Angela Davis noted in her February 12, 2013 speech at Davidson College, "education has thoroughly become a commodity. It has been so thoroughly commoditized that many people don't even know how to understand the very process of acquiring knowledge because it is subordinated to the future capacity to make money…" (Davis, 2016, p. 120). This statement about education is part of Davis's description of the goals of the Black Freedom Movement, most of which have not yet been fully achieved now in 2020. It is an important statement to bring into an analysis of public libraries and information literacy, given the end goal of information literacy to produce citizens that have learned how to learn.

In the 30 years since the 1989 report from the Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, the term has evolved into an adoption by libraries of neoliberal values with a focus on job-readiness, and assisting patrons in navigation of the job market (Seale, 2013). This narrows the function of information literacy to a focus on the library patron as only a worker who gathers, analyzes and applies information according to its market value.

This emphasis on market value of information results in library services benefitting the business sector more than citizens. In *Capitalism and Freedom* which predates the library sector's discussion of Information Literacy in an Information Age, economist Milton Friedman discusses the inequality of access to training for students as a problem due to its impediment of competition in the post-graduation job market. Friedman proposes that if only those whose parents can afford to send them to college are given an education, the available pool of graduates

is severely limited and potentially better candidates are denied a chance to compete. According to Freidman, "full use of human resources" requires an increase in availability of education capital which improves "equality of opportunity" (Freidman, 1962, p. 77). When public libraries define and promote information literacy as skill-building for job-readiness as a means to improve equality, according to Freidman's analysis businesses may then also benefit by having a wider, more qualified applicant pool. This increase of access to job skills training may benefit the individual citizens who are successfully hired, but it is largely the business sector who benefits from having a larger applicant pool from which to select. It does not, however, directly benefit the remaining unemployed citizens in said applicant pool, or fully engage structures of inequity beyond a lack of access to job skills training.

Outside of its application in libraries, neoliberalism as an ideology has been heavily critiqued while being identified as the "defining political economic paradigm of our time" (McChesney, 1999, p. 7). In his introduction to Noam Chomsky's renowned *Profit Over People,* Robert McChesney suggests that neoliberal ideology is, "the immediate and foremost enemy of genuine participatory Democracy" (McChesney, p. 12). This scathing critique is rooted in McChesney's description of how a market-centric social structure discourages citizen involvement in political debate beyond that of minor issues. The disengagement of citizens, McChesney notes, occurs alongside the influence of corporate business interests on national politics. When corporations invest in media that influences political decision making and elections, and citizens are turned into consumers, the results are a disengaged and powerless public (McChesney, 1999). Applying this analysis to information literacy, Nathanial Enright notes, "it seems unlikely that there will be any social justice so long as neoliberalism continues to subordinate all aspects of human endeavor to the calculus of profit" (Enright, 2013, p. 33).

To hold "democracy" as a core value of librarianship (American Library Association, 2004) while acknowledging critiques of neoliberalism as an anti-democratic ideology currently present in our society and libraries, shows us that expanding information literacy to value information skills and use beyond their market value is necessary.

Critical Information Literacy

Critical information literacy builds on the standard definition of information literacy by including an analysis of political, economic, social and corporate systems that "have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption" (Gregory and Higgins, 2013). This framework acknowledges how larger socio-political structures may impact the ability to find, to use or to analyze information.

Freire's Banking Concept Applied to Public Libraries

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a notable reference for developing critical information literacy praxis in public libraries. Freire's banking concept of education, and "problem-posing" alternative, include an analysis of power dynamics that may also be applied in the context of public libraries and their educational efforts around information literacy.

To adapt Freire's banking concept for public libraries based on my personal work experience, I will replace Freire's "the teacher" with "the public librarian" and "the student" with "the patron." In doing so, I will show how daily operations and library structures may perpetuate a hierarchy which mirrors the teacher-student contradiction that Freire engages.

a) The public librarian curates materials, and the patron consumes;
b) The public librarian has the correct information, and the patron seeks it;

c) The public librarian selects programs according to materials budget and work time available, and the patrons participate without participation in planning;
d) The public librarian "confuses the authority of knowledge with their own professional authority, which they set in opposition to the freedom (Freire, 1970, p. 73)" of the patrons;
e) The public librarian is the subject of the information structure, and the patrons are objects.

This public library adaptation of the banking concept of education is in contrast to a problem-posing public librarianship. A liberation-centered approach focuses on the dialogue between public librarian and library patron. By engaging in dialogue with patrons, rather than a banking model of engagement, public librarians are better able to build critical information literacy and meet their role in a healthy democracy.

Critical Collections Development

Collections development is part of a critical praxis for public libraries to meet their educational goals around information literacy. Applying a critical lens to collections development not only includes the continued building and weeding of materials, but also evaluation of existing collections to determine gaps of representation or failures in selecting materials which align with the interests and information needs of patrons. In order for a public library to succeed in serving its community, with success in part measured by its circulation statistics, the library must accurately reflect the community's self-determined learning goals in its collection.

The critical evaluation process begins with identifying what is lacking or inaccurate, and Augusta Baker is an example of a librarian demonstrating this with her annotated list of books

representing Black life. During her work in the children's section at a New York Public Library branch Baker became "more and more aware of the denigrating picture of the Black child in books that seemed to be among the most popular publications." Her first list of books representing Black life was published in the 1930s. In order to get the list published, she included a book called *Little Black Sambo* which she noted to "still have trouble with, although it is popular with so many storytellers." She described the book to be an untrue depiction of Black life not only in America, but also in Africa (Smith, 1995). The tension between popular but racist representations of Blackness, and Baker's work to select empowering, accurate representations of Black life, is work worth examining as an early model of critical collections development.

Improving representation of marginalized groups in the collections development process also improves quality and use. An exampled of collections development failing to include community input can be identified in George Utley's writing of his article, "What the Negro reads." During his writing process, he expressed surprise at the lack of circulation of its poetry, music and religious books in the basement collection from which he was gathering evidence for his article. The sparingly-circulating collection to which he was referring was largely selected based on stereotypes held by white librarians at the time. This proved unsurprisingly to be a failing materials selection strategy (Knott, p. 182).

By moving from making selections based on stereotypes toward a collaborative selection process based on community needs and preferences, libraries can expand their traditional collections to include alternative or self-published materials such as zines. In a case study examining People of Color Zines Project, Bold acknowledges that "there has been much discussion and media coverage about the lack of diversity in cultural output," with zines being an answer to the historical lack of representation of marginalized people. Due to the self-publishing of zines,

control of what stories are being told and why is in the hands of the people making them. This is empowering especially to marginalized people, who have been historically denied platforms or control of narrative about themselves (Bold, p. 223). Building on Duncombe's statement that zines' "freedom from the 'specialness' or 'professionalism' that are supposed to accompany any creation of culture in our society is liberatory," the inclusion of zines in library collections "asserts the possibility of a participatory and democratic culture" (Duncombe, 1997 p 131). Bold agrees that the accessibility of zine production can make cultural industries - or in the case of this discussion, collections development- more democratic (Bold, 2017. p. 226).

In building critical public library collections, it is worth considering critiques of Freire's work. Tuck and Yang note that Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was written in conversation with Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, with a primary difference between the works being their approach to "natives" and "settlers." Fanon's work centers on decolonization as a path to liberated education. Tuck and Yang propose that, "pursuit of critical consciousness, the pursuit of social justice through a critical enlightenment, can also be settler moves to innocence-diversions, distractions,which relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility, and conceal the need to give up land or power or privilege" (Tuck and Yang, 2012). In other words, it is possible for attempts at inclusivity and social justice to primarily serve people in positions of power who want to feel better or relieved of their participation in structural oppression, without actually changing oppressive structures. Public libraries, given their historical position within systems of power and oppression, must also consider the ways in which collections development challenges or upholds those systems. By evaluating and adjusting collections development, including collaborative exchange between librarians and patrons,

public libraries can build a critical information literacy praxis aligned with the core values of librarianship and move toward a decolonized, liberated educational culture.

Conclusion

With the arrival of the information age, public libraries have been tasked with determining their role as an institution that serves information needs of the general public. Information Literacy is a term coined to identify the building of equitable access for all citizens to "learn how to learn" given the vast amount of information available (American Library Association, 1989). The implementation of Information Literacy goals, however, has been increasingly focused on job-readiness, with collections and resources selected based on their market value. (Seale, 2013) In order for public libraries to work according to the core librarianship values of democracy and social responsibility, it is necessary that collections be developed in a way that goes beyond serving patrons as workers. In addition to providing skill-building materials to increase hireability, and maybe more importantly, libraries should be in dialogue with patrons to provide educational resources that illuminate the complexity of current economic and social structures that "have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption" (Gregory and Higgins, 2013). Considering the empowerment experienced by citizens when information literacy skills are improved as noted by the Presidential Committee (American Library Association, 1989) building and promoting a more broad definition of information literacy contributes to the collectively- informed participation necessary for a healthy democracy.

Critical collections development involves not only materials selection according to this expanded definition of Information Literacy, but also includes a restructuring of the selection process to include critical evaluation of libraries themselves and encourage public participation in

determining community information needs. Given the severity of ongoing global crises such as climate change, systemic racism and the pandemic, it will be increasingly necessary to have a public that uses critical information skills to evaluate resources to understand current events and inform collective problem solving. Should public libraries develop their collections accordingly, libraries will be fulfilling a role of building healthy democracy in our communities. Adding a zine collection could be part of this process, as the accessibility of zine creation has been noted to be democratic, as well as empowering for marginalized communities in allowing community members control of their own narrative (Bold, 2017. p. 226).

Public libraries are not currently or historically separated from systems of power and oppression, so the continued evaluation and adjustment of collections development is a necessary part of developing a democratic critical praxis. In doing so, public libraries may more effectively meet our communities information literacy education goals, while also being aligned with the Core Values of Librarianship.

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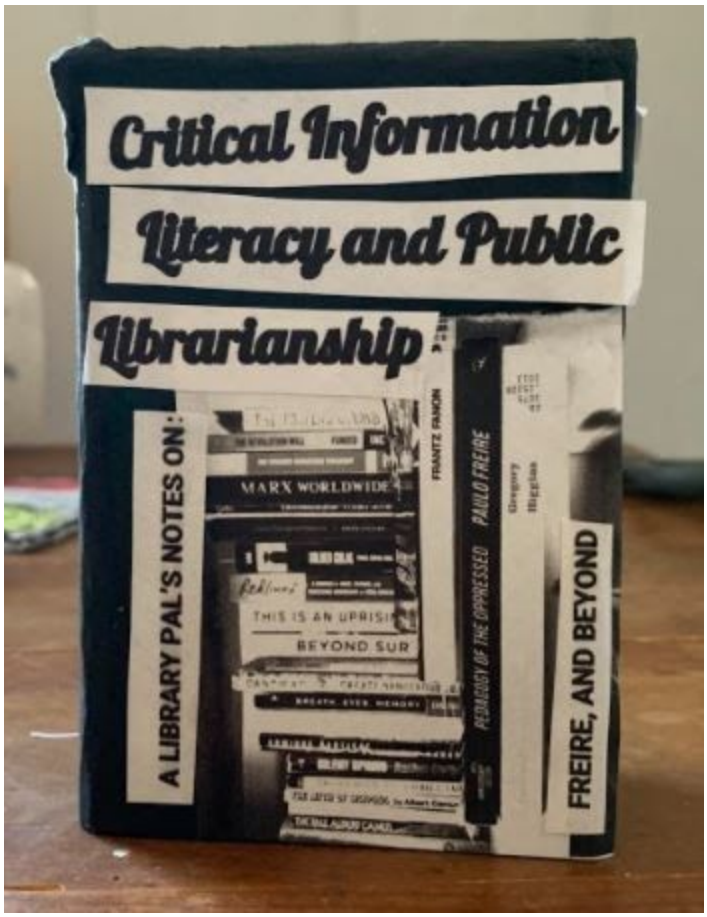
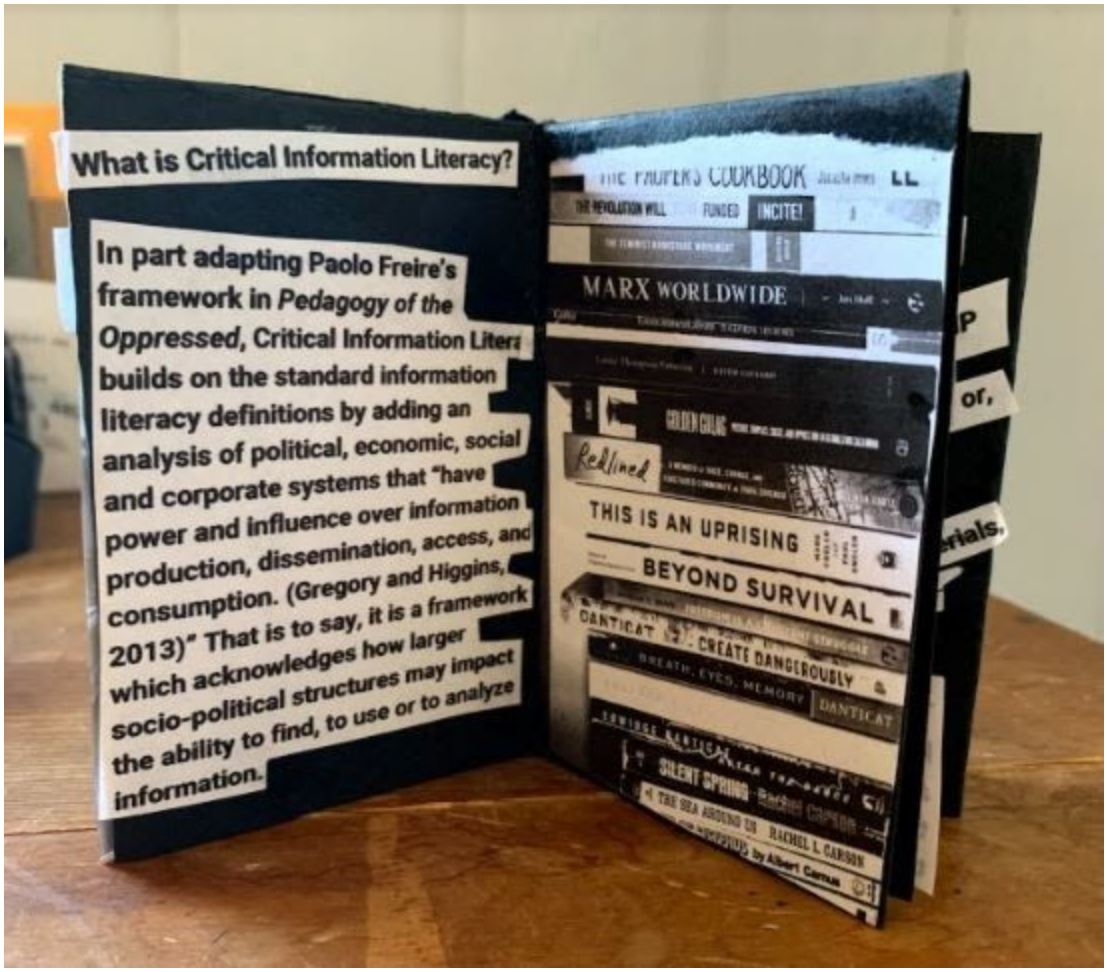
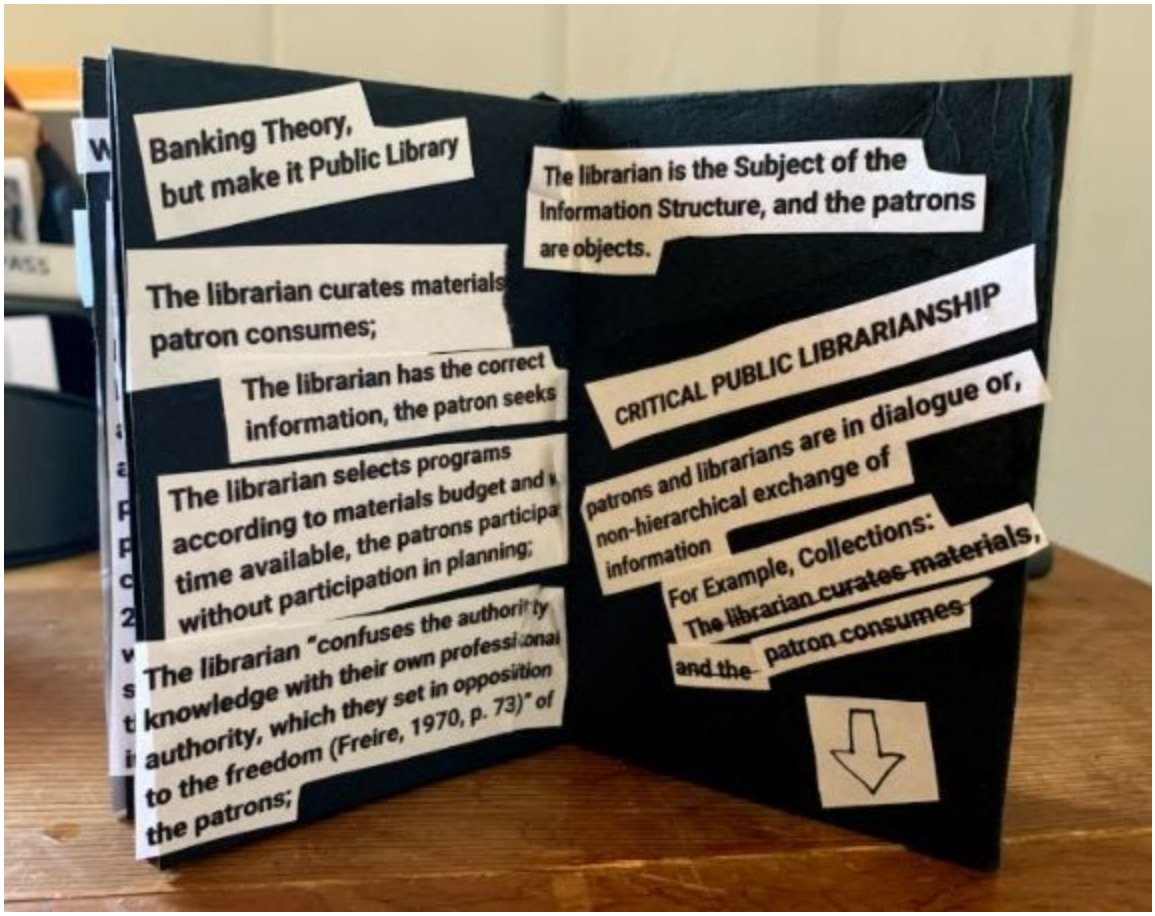
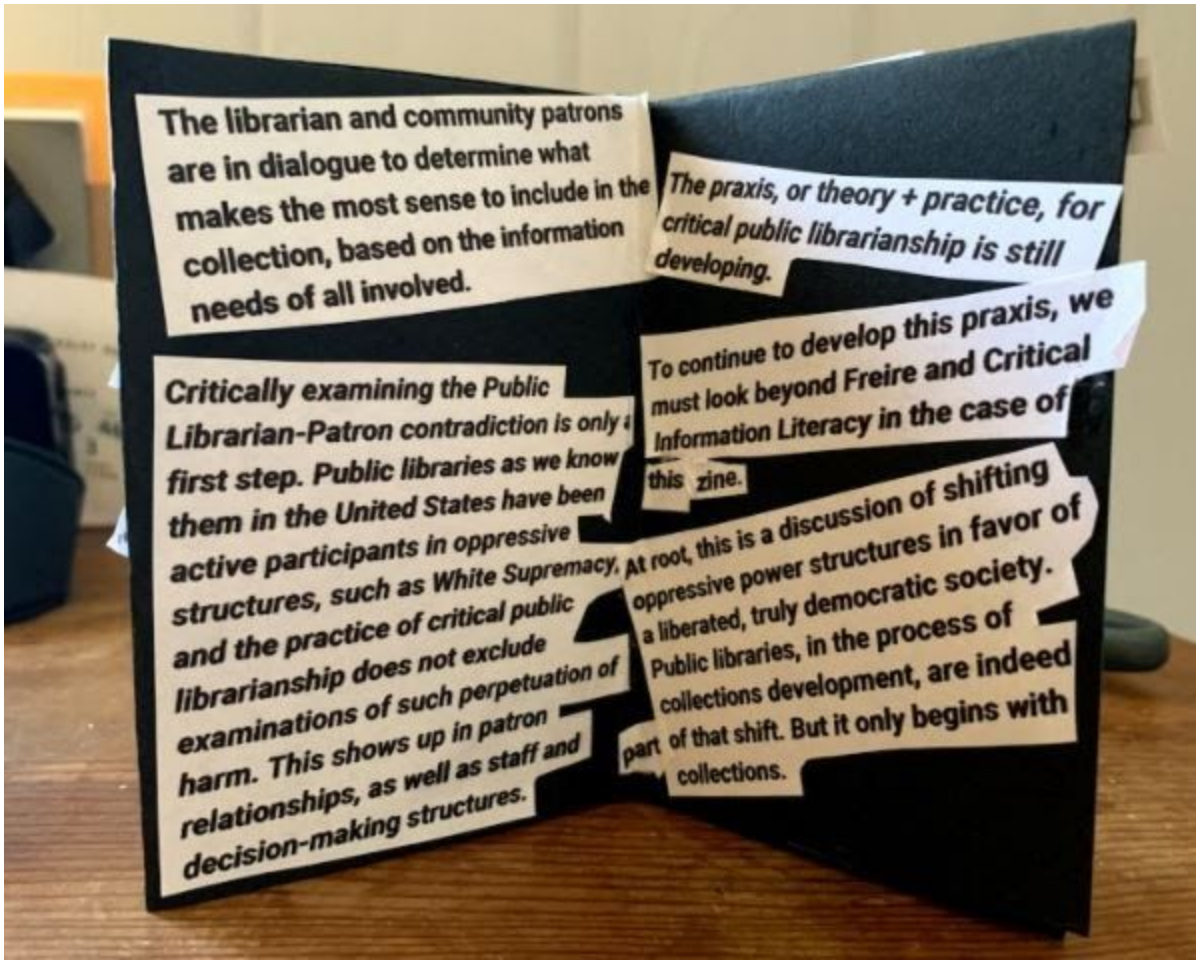
Appendix: Zine - Freire, and Beyond: a Library Pal's Notes on Critical Information Literacy and Public Librarianship

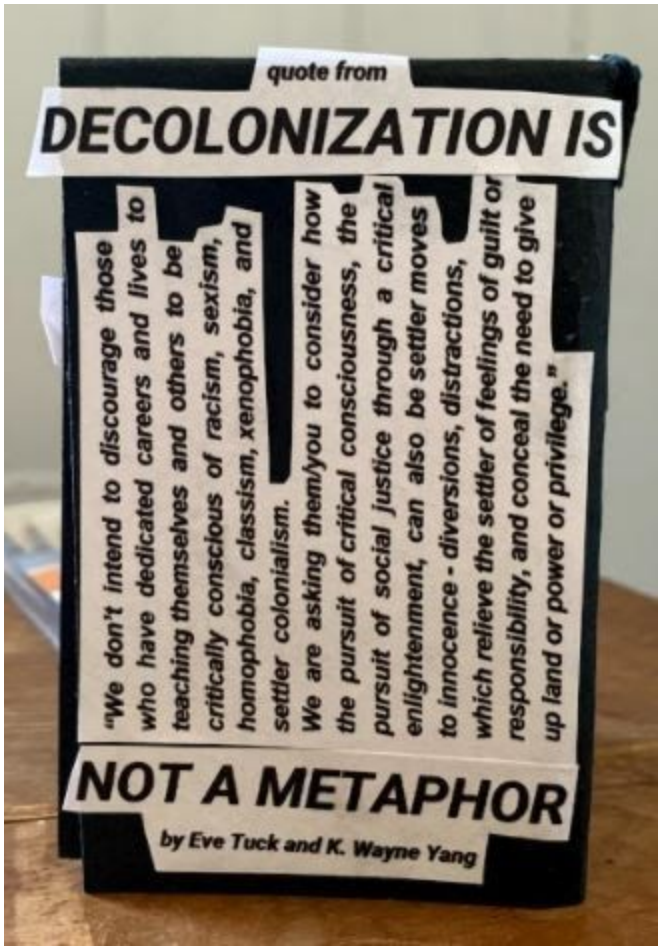
Images below are of the 8-panel booklet zine, made using an 8.5x11" piece of cardstock paper. The cut and paste, unpolished look was chosen as a nod to punk culture in which zines have been a popular method of not only creative expression but also political education.




What is Critical Information Literacy?
In part adapting Paolo Freire's framework in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Critical Information Litera builds on the standard information literacy definitions by adding an analysis of political, economic, social and corporate systems that "have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption. (Gregory and Higgins, 2013)" That is to say, it is a framework which acknowledges how larger socio-political structures may impact the ability to find, to use or to analyze information.
THE REVOLUTION WILL
FUNDED
INCITE!
MARX WORLDWIDE
Reclined
THIS IS AN UPRISING
BEYOND SURVIVAL
CREATE DANGEROUSLY
BREATH, EYES, MEMORY
DANTICAT
SILENT SPRING
RACHEL L. CARSON
or,


Banking Theory,
but make it Public Library
The librarian curates materials
patron consumes;
The librarian has the correct
information, the patron seeks
The librarian selects programs
according to materials budget and
time available, the patrons participa
without participation in planning;
The librarian "confuses the authority
knowledge with their own professional
authority, which they set in opposition
to the freedom (Freire, 1970, p. 73)" of
the patrons;
The librarian is the Subject of the
Information Structure, and the patrons
are objects.
CRITICAL PUBLIC LIBRARIANSHIP
patrons and librarians are in dialogue or,
non-hierarchical exchange of
information
For Example, Collections:
The librarian curates materials,
and the patron consumes


The librarian and community patrons are in dialogue to determine what makes the most sense to include in the collection, based on the information needs of all involved.
The praxis, or theory + practice, for critical public librarianship is still developing.
To continue to develop this praxis, we must look beyond Freire and Critical Information Literacy in the case of this zine.
Critically examining the Public Librarian-Patron contradiction is only a first step. Public libraries as we know them in the United States have been active participants in oppressive structures, such as White Supremacy, and the practice of critical public librarianship does not exclude examinations of such perpetuation of harm. This shows up in patron relationships, as well as staff and decision-making structures.
At root, this is a discussion of shifting oppressive power structures in favor of a liberated, truly democratic society. Public libraries, in the process of collections development, are indeed part of that shift. But it only begins with collections.


quote from
DECOLONIZATION IS
NOT A METAPHOR
by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang
"We don't intend to discourage those who have dedicated careers and lives to teaching themselves and others to be critically conscious of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, xenophobia, and settler colonialism.
We are asking them/you to consider how the pursuit of critical consciousness, the pursuit of social justice through a critical enlightenment, can also be settler moves to innocence - diversions, distractions, which relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility, and conceal the need to give up land or power or privilege."