

# Liberate our library: social justice and the need for change

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**Marilyn Clarke, Goldsmiths College**

As a library worker at Goldsmiths College, an institution focusing on arts, humanities, and social sciences with a very diverse student population in the heart of inner city SE London, I would like to discuss the role of the Library and Academic Skills Centre in teaching and pedagogy, through a liberation lens.

Taking my lead from the words of bell hooks in her transformational book *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*, I see the work of the librarian /

information professional today as thus: “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin”. Published in 1994, hooks’ words resonate with me now more than ever. Alongside students and their liberation agenda, I as a library worker seek to transgress against the boundaries imposed by racism, classism and heteronormative structures in both knowledge dissemination and organisation, as well as institutional structures.

Alongside the National Union of Students’ call to ‘liberate our degrees’, Goldsmiths as a HE institution is similarly engaging with the Students’ Union (SU) by explicitly citing the *liberate our degrees* agenda in the [Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy](#) (LTAS). It is the SU who enabled this strand to become a part of the LTAS. The library as a professional service must also play a fundamental role in this work as a conduit for access to learning and teaching resources.

After the work of the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford campaign, a movement to decolonise Oxford University from its foundations upwards which was inspired by their South African student counterparts at the University of Cape Town, the call for changes to decolonise curricula and teaching in the UK grows ever stronger amongst the student populace. I feel hooks’ book – as well as the works of the great Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, best known for *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* – are works that must be read by us as library professionals as foundational texts if we are to take seriously our engagement with the critical pedagogy movement.

At Goldsmiths Library *we are serious* about this liberation work within our outward facing commitments as outlined on our [Liberate our Library](#) web page. We make two broad statements:

“We will work to diversify our collections, to de-centre Whiteness, to challenge non-inclusive structures in knowledge management and their impact on library collections, users, and services.



We will take an intersectional approach to our liberation work to encompass the many parts of a person's identity.”

It is extremely important to us to work alongside the Students' Union as we commit to "ensure access, inclusion, and robust learning support for all our students". To this end we have established a Liberate our Library Working Group that meets regularly with SU sabbatical officers to thrash out ways in which we can collaborate and deliver on this agenda.

Like many students across the UK, Goldsmiths students are asking questions such as “Why is my curriculum White? and “Why isn't my professor Black?” These are huge questions that require strategic collaborative decolonisation work across the institution; from the lecture theatre to the library book shelf. And like many academic and professional staff who have been, to use Sara Ahmed's analogy in her essay ['Feminism and fragility'](#), '*chipping away*' at the old historical structures – library professionals have been similarly engaged. In Ahmed's words, if we “Chip, chip, chip. Things splinter. Maybe we can turn that chip, chip, chip into a hammer: we might chip away at the old block”. Sadly, in some parts, the historical legacy is still strongly intact.

Our liberation work so far includes:

- dedicating a portion of our resources budget to purchase students' suggestions made as part of *liberate our degrees*. Students can now search for all such purchases as a library collection in LibrarySearch (Primo)
- decolonising curricula by working alongside academic departments and students to identify marginalised, underrepresented groups
- collaborating with teaching staff to create decolonised and inclusive reading lists to better represent the identities and experiences of our student body, and by doing so, 'self-decolonise'
- delivering academic skills workshops to further equip students' approaches to the decolonisation agenda, such as [Decolonising research methods](#) and, [Remapping reading and retrieval: taking steps to decolonise our library practice](#)
- setting up a Critical Librarianship Reading group – sharing and discussing relevant readings
- dismantling and identifying DDC's inherent (mis)representation and discrimination problems “to renovate the master's house to make space for the voices of excluded others” (Hope A Olson, 'The Power to Name: representation in library catalogs')

On a more personal level at my institution I am a member of the BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) Attainment Gap project group looking at the sector wide issue around why BAME students are not being awarded as many firsts and 2:1s as their white peers. This group comprises of academics, SU members, and professional services members. The Library will strategise its work with the findings and recommendations of this group as a further liberation commitment.

As a member of our internal HR and Equalities Committee, and a member of the still nascent CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) BAME Professionals Network, I am committed to tackling the underrepresentation of BAME library and information professionals in a workforce where 96.7% identify as white, a reality exposed so brilliantly in Ka-Ming Pang's [96.7 shades of white](#) in this very publication last year. I see this also as part of *my* liberation work. I am actively working with our HR department to identify why we as a profession have this problem by looking at our recruitment and retention procedures. It is not a coincidence that such groups as [Diversity in Libraries of the North](#) (DILON), set up by Jennifer Bayjoo, are coming into existence. The cry for change is resoundingly loud and will only grow louder, but the emotional labour of such work must also be acknowledged.

I am a black mixed-race woman who was educated in the UK from childhood and have been at the forefront of an education system that did not see me or acknowledge me and my experience in its staff or in its teachings. I am a library worker in a senior position in a profession that lacks diversity, where inertia to change is far too evident.

I am firmly of the belief that libraries are not and should not be neutral spaces and wholeheartedly agree with Maria T Accardi's assertion in '[Leaky ceilings, staplers, and Nazis: collocating reference work and social justice](#)', that, "It is immoral to remain silent and allow this to persist while people are suffocating on the toxic ash of white supremacy". We, as librarians, are in a unique position to institute real and positive change through our social justice work to represent marginalised communities and voices. We must all self-decolonise - now!

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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