

Review of Solving Names: Worldliness and Metaphysics in Librarianship

Joel Blechinger

Mount Royal University Library

ORCID: 0000-0002-4907-3601

ABSTRACT: Review of Popowich, S (2024). *Solving Names: Worldliness and Metaphysics in Librarianship*. Library Juice Press.

Keywords: library theory, metaphysics, Marxism, pragmatism, radical hermeneutics, generative artificial intelligence, intellectual freedom



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Journal of Radical Librarianship, Vol. 11 (2025) pp.86-88. Published 6 May 2025.

Sam Popowich, Digital Infrastructure Librarian at the University of Winnipeg and holder of a PhD in political science from the University of Birmingham, returns with his new book *Solving Names: Worldliness and Metaphysics in Librarianship*. Building on his 2019 book *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship: A Marxist Approach*, Popowich makes another significant contribution to the field of radical library theory.

What differs most markedly between Popowich's two books is his engagement in *Solving Names* with American pragmatist philosophy, which he then combines with the intersectional Marxist approach that he honed across his first book. *Solving Names*' title itself comes from a phrase coined by William James in his 1907 essay "What Pragmatism Means," where James critiques metaphysics as a search for control through naming—capturing the universe in terms like "God," "Matter," or "Reason," which become terminal points for inquiry. Popowich excerpts James in the book's epigraph: "That [power-bringing word or name] names the universe's *principle*, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. 'God,' 'Matter,' 'Reason,' 'the Absolute,' 'Energy,' are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest" (James, 1907/1922, pp. 52–53). These "solving names," Popowich argues, saturate library discourse—concepts like "intellectual freedom," "professionalism," "human rights," "community," and "neutrality" serve as fixed points that shut down critique and obscure material realities.

The book is organized around three main categories of "solving names": knowledge/reason (chapters one to four), science/technology (chapters five to eight), and intellectual freedom (chapters nine to twelve). According to Popowich (2024b), solving names buttress librarianship's idealist metaphysics because they are "presented and understood as transcending the messiness of human reality ... They must always appear timeless, unchanging, uncorrupted by questions of power, social class, race, gender, money, etc. Only by pretending to this kind of transcendental purity can these solving names remain beyond critique, ordering and disciplining the discourses grounded upon them" (p. 7). Following Edward Said, Popowich's project across the book is thus to reveal the "worldliness" of common solving names, which he does by practicing a radical hermeneutics: the "critical interpretation of everything (or, as Marx put it, the 'ruthless criticism of all that exists')" (Popowich, 2024b, 11). When a solving name is analyzed radically and hermeneutically, it is revealed to be thoroughly embedded in power, history, and ideology—never outside of them.

Given Popowich's radical hermeneutic program in *Solving Names*, one can understand how the breadth and depth of topics covered in the text will necessarily be wide-ranging, especially when compared with the narrowly scoped parameters of so much mainstream library research. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find another work in contemporary librarianship that deftly moves across such diverse subject matter: from sustained engagement with Antonio Negri's ideas of constituted and constituent power in successive chapters on trans rights and academic freedom (Popowich, 2024b, p. 109–137) and the "political ontology of computation" (Popowich, 2024b, p. 139–161) to inventive use of concepts from Ursula K. Le Guin's fiction and essays as part of developing his own "carrier bag theory of intellectual freedom" (Popowich, 2024b, pp. 295–315). On rare occasions, the reader less familiar with Popowich's source texts may struggle slightly with the fast pace at which he is able to navigate disparate thinkers and their ideas. That said, on balance, his ability to interweave concepts from—taking a random sampling from across

the book—Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty, Alisdair MacIntyre, Marx, Wittgenstein, Descartes, Kant, Hall, Ronald Dworkin, John Rawls, Alan Turing, Hubert Dreyfus, Paolo Virno, Franco Berardi, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith is a demonstration of adept and artful knowledge translation on his part. For librarians hungry for more intellectually rigorous and politically grounded theory, this book is a gift.

Three chapters stand out. Chapter eight, “‘More Clamorous than a Parrot Against Rain’: The Pedagogy and Politics of Generative AI,” joins several other previously-published pieces by Popowich (2023; 2024a) on the political economy of generative AI (GenAI), and this suite of AI-related writing should be read by any library worker trying to cut through the deluge of AI hype currently engulfing the information professions. In the chapter, Popowich places GenAI in the context of already-commodified capitalist education, but he also critically deconstructs writing from prominent AI proponents like Bryan Caplan, Scott Aaronson, and Bill Gates.

The penultimate chapter, “Libraries on Stolen Land: Hegemony and Indigenous Exclusion,” is a searing analysis of the increased securitization that started in 2019 of Winnipeg Public Library’s central Millennium location. Combining an awareness of his own positionality and personal history in Winnipeg with Owen Toews’ urban history of the city, Popowich (2024b) observes, “the exclusion of Indigenous people from Millennium Library is a double exclusion, the exclusion of Indigenous people from a public space on already-stolen land” (p. 273). In the Winnipeg Public Library security crisis, Popowich’s analysis demonstrates how the Indigenous Other was demonized and characterized as an undifferentiated mass that was, ironically, not afforded the individual rights grounded in the liberal, pluralist Canadian paradigm typically championed by public libraries. In other words, as he points out, no one cared about Indigenous patrons’ intellectual freedom, for example, because they did not appear as differentiated individuals that could qualify for intellectual freedom consideration or protections.

Finally, the closing chapter, the aforementioned “Gathering Information: The Carrier Bag Theory of Intellectual Freedom,” is arguably the most provocative. Popowich critiques intellectual freedom’s roots in capitalist conflict: “capitalist vs. worker, have vs. have not ... The dominant, traditional view of intellectual freedom is the reductive, patriarchal, capitalist one of conflict and overcoming rather than containing and cooperating. But what happens if we reject the primacy of conflict in intellectual freedom?” (p. 300). As an alternative to this inherently conflictual and agonistic model of intellectual freedom, Popowich proposes “intellectual responsibility.” As he questions, “[w]hy not use a worldly term like ‘responsibility’ instead? Intellectual responsibility as a library value would ... help us avoid many of the inconsistencies and aporias of intellectual freedom while clarifying what we take responsibility for, who we feel responsibility towards, and what form that responsibility takes” (p. 314). Popowich’s question works to refocus librarianship on accountability and care.

This chapter—paired with *Solving Names*’ short conclusion that immediately follows it—fundamentally reimagines the terrain of the exhausted (and exhausting) social justice versus intellectual freedom debates within librarianship, and, in doing so, represents perhaps the most vital contribution that Popowich makes to broader library literature in the book.

Reading *Solving Names*, I was repeatedly struck by how intellectually nourishing it felt to

engage with a book of library theory that was so fluent with—and, crucially, unafraid to take itself seriously as a work of—political philosophy. Reading the text also called to mind a now distant memory of being told by a professor in my library degree’s mandatory research methods class that library science was, essentially, a discipline of “middle-range theory” where we could try on different theories like different methodological hats, discarding parts of them as we saw fit. The social-science-indebted positivism that was inherent to that approach was, of course, never explicitly stated, which is, in retrospect, not particularly remarkable, given LIS’ perpetual yearning for the academic and professional capital that accompanies claims made to scientism. This is even something that Popowich (2024b) touches upon in the book (pp. 103–4). What was then an inchoate impression back in graduate school, however, I now think the experience of reading *Solving Names* has helped me articulate more firmly: there is an intellectual impoverishment to constraining ourselves solely to so-called middle-range theory. Instead, thinkers in LIS should not be afraid to have explicit and fully-articulated theoretical commitments—for example, to provide an overarching account of how power works in the world—and to return to those commitments across their work. It only takes reading a book as ambitious and, frankly, as inspiring as *Solving Names* to make the value of this approach clear. Popowich’s book resists the foreclosure of critical possibility in LIS and, by doing so, it invites future librarians to create many more works of library theory that take the risks that *Solving Names* does. The profession and, dare I say, the world that librarians and libraries serve would be all the better for it.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author of this review previously interviewed Sam Popowich for a student radio show at the University of Alberta in 2019. The author of this review also participated in the online launch event put on by Library Juice Press for the reviewed book. Neither the reviewer’s previous interview of Sam Popowich, nor his participation in the launch event for *Solving Names* had any influence over the content of this book review.

References

- James, W. (1922). *Pragmatism: A new name for some old ways of thinking*. Longmans, Green, and Company. (Original work published 1907)
- Popowich, S. (2023, February 8). ChatGPT, commodities, and tools. *Sam Popowich Blog*. <https://www.spowich.ca/blog/chatgpt-commodities-and-tools>
- Popowich, S. (2024a). ChatGPT and the commodification of knowledge work. *CAUT Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.63409/2024.37>
- Popowich, S. (2024b). *Solving names: Worldliness and metaphysics in librarianship*. Library Juice Press.