

# Toward a Speculative Librarianship

Michael Kirby

ABSTRACT: (Academic) citation is a representational practice of hollow, ruined potential professional accumulation of intellectual capital. Critical librarianship finds itself in the same situation as Saint Anthony: beset by interpretive demons (Freud, Nietzsche, Marx), nearing total evaluative exhaustion, wandering in a theoretical desert of its own creation. “Where am I?” the lonely figure shouts as he’s lifted into the air. Prayer, even as a last resort, seems intolerable. What happens when critique loses its way?

KEYWORDS: bullshit, no innocence in their buffoonery; they are the king’s jesters



Property remark: *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.*

some bullshit: citation, special issue of *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, Vol. 12, 2026. pp. 38-55. Published 13 Feb, 2026.



*Hieronymus Bosch, Triptych of the Temptation of St. Anthony, 1501*

Critical librarianship finds itself in the same situation as Saint Anthony: beset by interpretive demons (Freud, Nietzsche, Marx),<sup>1</sup> nearing total evaluative exhaustion, wandering in a theoretical desert of its own creation. “Where am I?” the lonely figure shouts as he’s lifted into the

air. Prayer, even as a last resort, seems intolerable. What happens when critique loses its way?

First, an autopsy.

We might think of librarianship (or more directly, the knowledge economy *surrounding* librarianship) as occupying two distinct poles: The first produces an endless stream of surveys and case studies. Let’s call its practitioners behavioral scientists. The second produces scholarship that privileges the critical tradition, which sees the library as something to be corrected or, in some extreme cases, dismantled. Naturally, let’s call its practitioners critics. Broadly construed, we might think of the behavioral scientists as generative and critics as deconstructive. One group is determined to build a scientific—and therefore totalizing—base of knowledge for the field. The other wants to expose an already

---

<sup>1</sup> These three thinkers are paradigmatic of critique; nothing in the so-called “critical” tradition escapes their influence. See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago University Press, 2015). I’m also being somewhat tongue-in-cheek with this opening line. In other words, critical librarianship has made great strides in incorporating a Nietzschean critique of truth (via post-structuralists like Foucault and, subsequently, postcolonial figures like, say, Gayatri Spivak). It has been less successful, however, in incorporating Freud and, outside of a few innovative examples, Marx.

existing base of (racist, heteronormative) knowledge. One can see the incongruity.

There is flirtation, of course. I can think of numerous “scientific” studies that rely on critical methods, whether as impetus or after-the-fact justification. Similarly, we have critics who sprinkle “scientific facts” throughout their work in an attempt, one can assume, to bolster their arguments with a patina of objectivity. My argument is not that the proponents of these two poles remain estranged on every detail, or that cross pollination never occurs. I merely want to point out that what is possible (in terms of scholarly inquiry, political praxis) is inevitably limited to what exists on the following continuum:

behavioral science ————— critique

The space in between? The desert. *Courage, laisse-moi me lever d'ici !<sup>2</sup>*

This divide is reflected in each group’s preferred citation practices. Behaviorists, clearly, draw inspiration from the various social science disciplines.<sup>3</sup> And as with most of the work in these fields, it is the theory that drives the research, even if the subject might be better served by humanistic methods of analysis; the tools, in other words, often seem ill-fitted to the situations under consideration. Why is it that studies that foreground Maslow’s Hierarchy always end up positing a white male patron?<sup>4</sup> Can the human mind really be reduced to mental models?

There is not much to be said, in turn, about critical citational practice, except to reiterate the (rhetorical) question that has already been posed by jaime ding and Jorge López-McKnight in their call for this special issue: “Are we so dull and flat in our understandings of labor, instruction, and knowledge organization? And if so, can we just admit it?”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> “Courage, let me rise from here!” Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (Project Gutenberg, 2015), 24. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/52225>

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the historical origins of this bias within librarianship, as well of some its innate shortcomings, see Archie L. Dick, “Library and Information Science as a Social Science: Neutral and Normative Conceptions,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 65, no. 2 (1995): 216-235. <https://doi.org/10.1086/602777>

<sup>4</sup> A recent exploration of the whiteness of Maslow: Hannah Kim Sions, “Radical Possibilities of/for Art Education,” *Visual Arts Research* 51, no. 1 (2025): 4-17. <https://doi.org/10.5406/21518009.51.1.02>

<sup>5</sup> jaime ding and Jorge López-McKnight, “some bullshit (or not),” Google Forms, 2025, para. 3. Accessed August 21, 2025. I apologize for responding to your manifesto with a manifesto.

Well, yes! Here I am, admitting it. And, even if we managed to reference anything outside of the suspiciously small canon of established “critical” (library) thinkers,<sup>6</sup> there is little evidence that such a citational practice would do anything but fuel a “representational practice of hollow, ruined potential professional accumulation of intellectual capital.”<sup>7</sup> We risk undergirding, to put it plainly, an elite discourse in which, through the simple act of citing the “right” sources, we can pat ourselves on the back despite having solved absolutely nothing.

To some extent, this is already taking place. I offer two examples:

The first deals with the American Library Association (ALA) and its recent missive on the topic of climate change.<sup>8</sup> Called, rather self-assuredly, “The National Climate Action Strategy for Libraries Implementation Guide,” it advocates for a

[...] clear direction on where emphasis is necessary to move beyond good intentions to meaningful impacts, focusing on three areas: climate mitigation (reduction of greenhouse gas emissions); climate adaptation (helping people, institutions, and communities thrive in the face of climate change); and an overarching dedication to climate justice (increasing the empathy, respect, and understanding we have of all community members).<sup>9</sup>

An entirely worthwhile goal, but one which is undercut by the sources the writers have chosen to cite. A quick perusal of the document shows a fondness for the United Nations—in particular, its sustainability goals (SDGs), which seem to have left an undeniable impression. As has been discussed in several contexts,<sup>10</sup> the SDGs have been critiqued for their green growth-oriented approach to solving the climate crisis; the gist of their argument is that any transition to green energy

---

<sup>6</sup> Published, as the compilers of this special issue have observed, almost exclusively by Litwin Books.

<sup>7</sup> ding and López-McKnight, some bullshit (or not), para. 3.

<sup>8</sup> It can be found in its entirety at the following link:

<https://www.sustainablelibrariesinitiative.org/media/document/614>

<sup>9</sup> The American Library Association and The Sustainable Librarians Initiative, “National Climate Action Strategy for Libraries,” accessed on October 1, 2025. <https://www.sustainablelibrariesinitiative.org/media/document/614>

<sup>10</sup> Nicole Doro, “(The Problem with) UN SDGs as a Measure of Sustainability in Academic Libraries, and an Exploration of Alternatives,” paper presented at Library Assessment Conference, Portland, OR, November 6-9 2024).

must be paired with continued economic growth, lest capitalism fails and the global economy collapses.

The trouble with this line of argumentation, however, is that such a transition would require the continued expenditure fossil fuels,<sup>11</sup> effectively pushing the world past the tipping point of 1.5 °C.<sup>12</sup> The only effective approach to ending the climate crisis would be to immediately *degrow* national economies, which would necessarily depend on the emergence of a system that is no longer predicated on capitalist conceptions of property and growth. Despite this, “The National Climate Action Strategy for Libraries Implementation Guide” has already been deemed “radical” by some librarians, many of whom downplay the extent to which we as a society will have to change our consumption habits.<sup>13</sup> And through publishing the guide, the ALA is able to mark itself as a “progressive” organization despite (unwittingly?) advocating for the continuation of a growth-obsessed system that has brought about the exact opposite of what it purports to want: a solution to the climate crisis. A sustainable library, in all reality, would have to call for the end of economic growth, and, following this, would have to call for the end of capitalism.

The second example comes to us from the hallowed pages of *The Journal of Library Administration*. Writing in response to a rapidly shifting educational environment, the authors discuss how AI, despite its almost ubiquitous presence, is poorly understood by librarians.<sup>14</sup> The profession should become more involved in the development and deployment of AI, the argument goes, because the profession is uniquely suited to discuss concomitant issues such as information literacy, disinformation, and an increasingly fractured public sphere. The unquestioned assumption, however, is that AI is something librarians should feel

---

<sup>11</sup> Primarily because the EVs, windmills, solar panels, etc. that we would require to make this transition to a green economy depend on the procurement of huge amounts of rare earth minerals and steel. Combined, the mining and steel industries produce around 11-14% of total global carbon emissions.

<sup>12</sup> One of the most sustained criticisms of green growth comes from Kohei Saito, whose main intellectual focus has been on rehabilitating Marx for the ecological left. For a theoretical exploration of the contributions Marxist thought has made to the degrowth (as well as some of its conceptual limitations vis-à-vis the environment), see *Marx and the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). For a much more accessible, manifesto-style summarization of these same ideas, see *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto* (Astra Publishing House, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> See Monika Antonelli et al., “The Storm is Here: Public Libraries’ Role in Disaster Preparedness and Community Recovery,” *Electronic Green Journal* 1, no. 51. <https://doi.org/10.5070/G3.39629>

<sup>14</sup> Erin McCusker and Russell Michlak, “AI Policies in U.S. Universities: A Critical Analysis of Policy Gaps and Library Involvement,” *Journal of Library Administration* 65, no. 6: 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2025.2560268>

exists within our purview, is something we must actively involve ourselves with from conception to implementation.

But, as is often the case in these types of articles, the critical thrust is solely aimed at AI's racist underpinnings or its negative effects on the environment. However, the presumption that AI is in and of itself a worthwhile pursuit and should be allowed to develop is accepted as obvious fact, as the unquestioned reality of a society (and profession) that prizes technological progress above all else. Looking at it from this point of view, these anti-racist and environmentalist modes of criticality function as convenient cover for proponents of AI, allowing them to garner cultural cachet while aiding and abetting much more insidious forms of disenfranchisement. Principal among them is that AI will drastically change the nature of our labor while simultaneously weakening the bargaining position of librarians more generally. As others have pointed out, to allow for the proliferation of AI, even a presumably less racist and more environmentally friendly version, would, at a minimum, completely deskill the so-called "technical service" professions (cataloging, acquisitions, serials).<sup>15</sup>

It is much easier to dismiss the behaviorists. Much of the work they produce is of dubious quality. An article in the *New Yorker* sums it up pretty well: "If you [torture] the data long enough...it [will] confess to anything."<sup>16</sup> In addition, their work is often woefully limited in scope, dealing with just one or two libraries. This is not necessarily a bad thing (the devil is in the details), but one does have to question if the small scale of these projects betrays an inherent political disinterest. In short, the behaviorists love to tinker with the liberal democratic mode of librarianship but never *really* challenge its underlying structure. Every case study, every survey, begins with the (unsaid and therefore unquestioned) assumption that the moral, economic, and political core of the profession is

---

<sup>15</sup> I have to agree with Kailyn "Kay" Slater; the only sensible response to the encroachment of AI into our professional lives is complete and unequivocal refusal:

...we should refuse to use generative AI because it is a 'destructive force' that is infrastructurally racist, marketed as a solution to increasing socioeconomic disparity while gleefully scraping all possible traces of digital and digitized labor, does not magically produce information with integrity without requiring further human scrutinization, and creates an unnecessary excess of energy emissions that is detrimental to our ecosystem.

See Kailyn "Kay" Slater, "Against AI: Critical Refusal in the Library," *Library Trends* 73, no. 4: 601. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2025.a968497>

<sup>16</sup> I can no longer find the *New Yorker* article from which I stole this quote. In any case, Google tells me I should attribute it to the economist Ronald Coase.

immutable. These case studies and surveys then engender further case studies and surveys, which, in turn, legitimize this immutability to an even greater extent. Feed the machine.

The critics, on the other hand, seemingly rage against the machine:

- The library is built on/perpetuates systemic racism.
- The library is a (neo)liberal institution and therefore reifies the (neo)liberal order of things.
- The professional value of “neutrality” keeps librarians from being truly inclusive.

(These are all facts, but they often function as the end point of critical inquiry, when they should, more properly, function as its starting point. Maybe I am too bitter, living, as I am, through the carnage of a second Trump presidency. How did we get here? Why did our warnings fall on deaf ears? Perhaps the issue is that we provided substantial evidence of librarianship’s crimes in the past and present but never really articulated a compelling case for its future.) Many of the articles that take inspiration from critical theory have an almost formulaic quality. We (the readers) are left saying “We know,” ad infinitum. What don’t we know?

Ah, right. The autopsy. Critical librarianship has a lot to say about what exists, but very little to say about what *could* exist. A self-destructive tendency within a profession that so needlessly continues to spill ink over the structures and practices we already know to be evil. This is a waste of time and energy. Critical librarianship, in essence, ends up in the same place as the behaviorists—liberalism, at the very least, is openly challenged, *but nothing ever seems to change*. To put it perhaps more critically: both behaviorists and critics are equally dependent upon the existing liberal democratic system for sustaining their own legitimacy—behaviorists because they covet a position within the system, critics because the endless critique through which we make a living depends upon an inexhaustible target, i.e., critical methodologies as they currently exist need the system alive. (There is no money in screaming at a corpse.) Enter the liberal democratic discourse we continually confront but never seek to supplant.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> I am, of course, referencing Sam Popowich’s seminal work, *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship: A Marxist Analysis*. Besides offering one of the first real attempts to apply a Marxist lens to librarianship, it also offers some potential forms our profession might take outside of (or at least in contention with) its dominant liberal democratic orientation: in this case, what Popowich calls dual power and mathesis, concepts too technical to discuss here but nonetheless interesting as thought experiments.

“The point is not to put poetry at the service of revolution, but to put revolution at the service of poetry,” Guy Debord famously quipped.<sup>18</sup> To put it another way, what we call poetry is limited, in both a conceptual and material sense, by a mode of production based, in the last instance, on the value-form.<sup>19</sup> What would poetry look like if it was not (by necessity) attached to the name of an individual, shaped, in a sense, by that individual’s need to sell her labor (poetic or otherwise) on the market, to create, in a word, *value*? “To get the kind of poetry that poetry deserves, we need to destroy capitalism.”<sup>20</sup>

Following Debord, I could summarize my central claim as follows: The point of critical librarianship is not to put librarianship at the service of revolution, but to put revolution at the service of librarianship. The kind of librarianship that librarianship deserves can only be realized after a different mode of production emerges—one that, in the words of Moishe Postone, rests on the “historical negation of value itself.”<sup>21</sup> The question then becomes: *in what ways can currently existing librarianship be weaponized in pursuit of this historical negation?*

I offer this evergreen (but over-cited) quote: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world...The point, however, is to *change* it.”<sup>22</sup>

What I am suggesting is that critical librarianship suffers from a dearth of positivity, in every sense of the word. Despite providing salient (and necessary) critiques of the varied ills—racism, queerphobia, sexism—that plague our profession, it simultaneously refuses to define a comprehensive alternative to the liberal mode of contemporary librarianship. And to have no positive project is to be faithless, is to believe in the inevitability of the present. Much like Saint Anthony in the desert, surrounded by the demonic hordes of untold ferocity and variance, we lie prostrate in our own incapacity.

---

<sup>18</sup> Guy Debord, “All the King’s Men,” *BLACKOUT* ((poetry & politics)), accessed November 30, 2025, <https://my-blackout.com/2018/09/16/guy-debord-all-the-kings-men/>

<sup>19</sup> Value, in the Marxist sense, is the historically particular way in which labor is organized, measured, and expressed under capitalism. It is specific to a world in which goods are produced for exchange.

<sup>20</sup> Joshua Clover, “The Causality Runs Both Ways: A Conversation with Joshua Clover,” interview by Jack Chelgren, *The Rumpus*, para. 30, <https://therumpus.net/2018/01/01/the-rumpus-interview-with-joshua-clover/>

<sup>21</sup> Moishe Postone, “Rethinking *Capital* in Light of the *Grundrisse*,” in *Karl Marx’s Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, edited by Marcello Musto (Routledge, 2008), 125.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” Marx2Mao, accessed August 28, 2025, <http://www.marx2mao.com/M&E/TF45.html>.

*Il essaie de parler ; impossible ! Il a l'impression que tous les liens de sa vie se brisent et se dissolvent ; et, ne pouvant plus résister, Antoine tombe prosterné sur sa natte.*<sup>23</sup>



*il Sassetta, St. Anthony Beaten by Devils, ca. 1430–1432*

Where do we go from here?

Bruno Latour, in a now famous essay in *Critical Inquiry*, accused the critics in his day of much of the same sort of navel-gazing:

[...] yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to the truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the

---

<sup>23</sup> “He tries to speak;—impossible! He feels as though all the bands of his life were breaking and dissolving;—and, no longer able to resist, Anthony falls prostrate upon his mat.” Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 30.

some bullshit: citation, “special issue of Journal of Radical Librarianship,” Vol. 12, 2026.

very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives.<sup>24</sup>

There are various issues on which I disagree with Latour—his dismissive attitude towards socialist thought and praxis,<sup>25</sup> his obsession with objects and their autonomy—but this is not a diatribe against actor-network theory or affect studies, but instead a call for a renewed sense of the utopian. Latour’s real contribution to the debate vis-à-vis critique is that he (the consummate Catholic) injects faith back into the political conversation. Of course, the kind of faith we are discussing would be religious in structure but not so much in content. Its injunctions, rather, might resemble something like what José Esteban Muñoz outlines in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*: “We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”<sup>26</sup>

I desperately want to cruise my way out of librarianship as it currently exists. Let an unapologetically utopian vision be the means of my ecstatic propulsion. Or, to get to the title of this essay somewhat belatedly: I want to *speculate* about what a radical version of librarianship would look like, unencumbered by the rehabilitative and/or purely deconstructive imperatives of liberal democratic librarianship. The trick is to direct our argument in a way that avoids endless reformatory or critical engagement with systems that are—definitionally—unable to bring about real change. The immediate objective, simply put, is to critique in a way that articulates *some revised first principles for the profession*.

*If only it were so easy, tease the naysayers. These are the questions you leave conveniently unanswered: How does the speculation you have described avoid the*

---

<sup>24</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 227. <https://doi.org/10.1086/421123>

<sup>25</sup> He, for example, deemphasizes social relations (the bread and butter of communist critique). But, as described by Alyssa Battistoni, Latour had a late career engagement (détente? reconciliation?) with Marx: “If Latour continued to offer perfunctory critiques of the insufficiency of Marxist analysis, in other words, his own arguments tended to redescribe familiar left positions in his own idiom – or, conversely, to use Marxian language to talk about something else entirely.” I am mostly interested in this aspect of Latour’s work—his insistence on idiosyncratic readings of, well, everything. Talk about an unassimilable citational practical! This essay should be interpreted in the following way: it seeks join the tradition of French writers who have coopted religious figures (Badiou’s Saint Paul, Barthes’s Abbé Pierre, and yes, Flaubert’s Saint Anthony) to talk about things that, in the end, have almost nothing to do with religion.

<sup>26</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 1.

*pitfalls of critical librarianship? Haven't you simply invented a new mode of critique, twice removed from the behaviorists but nonetheless prone to ossification and eventual assimilation by critics and then, in all likelihood, by management? A critique of a critique, in other words; critique all the way down.*

Answering these questions is most appropriately served by describing, in a somewhat inverted gesture, the type of librarianship we want to see in the future. This is where the speculative aspect of the title comes into play; our theorizing begins with identifying—clearly and concisely—the historically negative form of librarianship we seek to construct. Eventually, a second order theoretical gesture will have to take place, aimed at discovering the methods by which we can build this alternative configuration. But having an unshakable faith in the idea that such a configuration is possible, that there can be an alternative form of anything, precedes the discussion of practicality or praxis.



Back to the poor beleaguered Saint Anthony. After toiling in the Egyptian desert, he, against all odds, beats back the demonic horde. The tool of his salvation? A little something called faith. And as a reward for his devotion he is met with the golden face of Christ.

*Annibale Carracci, Christ Appearing to Saint Anthony Abbot, ca. 1598–1600*

What might our Christ look like, our gilded sign among the cumuli? Let's speculate:

## The Environment

*Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But it is perhaps otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency break.<sup>27</sup>*

---

<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, (Harvard University Press, 2003), 402.

some bullshit: citation, “special issue of Journal of Radical Librarianship,” Vol. 12, 2026.

As librarians, we spend a significant amount of time discussing the allegedly “unbiased” role we play in providing access to information. And while this may have had some historical utility, in the modern era it has mainly allowed for right-wing forces to spread anti-democratic, anti-science propaganda under the guise of “fairness” and “viewpoint diversity.” This is particularly evident in the case of anthropogenic climate change, where so-called “neutrality” has become an obstacle to dealing, openly and honestly, with the question of the coming climate catastrophe. There is no institution as well-positioned as the library—built, in an idealized but not yet actual sense, on principles of democratic governance, resource sharing, and freely available information—for the widespread dissemination of degrowth policies. The dire circumstances of the current ecological moment call for a librarianship that is ready to “activate the emergency break,” that is unflinching in its commitment to preserving the ecological stability of the planet; there will be no library if the substratum on which humanity depends is depleted.

## The Nation State

*The right of self-determination of the people includes the right to a state of their own. However, the foundation of a state does not increase the freedom of a people. The system of the United Nations that is based on nation-states has remained inefficient. Meanwhile, nation-states have become serious obstacles for any social development.*<sup>28</sup>

Despite frequent reference to the transnational nature of capitalist modernity, the nation-state is still the defining political structure of our time. As noted by Erik Olin Wright “capitalism is often described as having developed in the interstices of feudal society [...] Market relations developed in the cities, which were less fully integrated into feudal relations and over time this created the context within which proto-capitalist relations and practices could emerge and eventually flourish.”<sup>29</sup> This alternative form of librarianship will draw inspiration and strength from the interstices of our own political moment—the indigenous land movements, the Zone à défendre in France, the Zapatistas in rural Mexico, all of which see themselves as existing in opposition to their given nation-states.

---

<sup>28</sup> I’ve taken this from a passage in Abdullah Öcalan, *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan: Kurdistan, Woman’s Revolution, and Democratic Confederalism* (Pluto Press, 2017), 72.

<sup>29</sup> Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Verso, 2010), 323.

What would this look like practically? A starting point would be to end all reliance on organizations that see the nation-state as a legitimatizing political force—including the ALA. As previously discussed, the ALA frequently draws upon the United Nations to bolster its authority; the former organization takes the latter’s directives as unquestionable facts with almost no critical oversight. To draw this comparison to its farthest point, the ALA often functions as a quasi-nation-state, lording over the profession with its missives on a whole host of topics, funneling well-intended political energy towards upholding the system that is most amenable its continued reproduction: liberal capitalist democracy.

Do we lose something, though, when we abandon collective organizations of this sort? As Kristin Ross reminds us, “The contradiction is not between the state and anarchy but between the state and another organization of political life, an alternative kind of political intelligence, a different kind of community. To the extent that the state recedes, the communes and their way of life flourishes.”<sup>30</sup> What I am proposing is that abandoning the ALA allows for a different conception of the library to take root, one which prioritizes communities over the nation-state, democracy over technocracy, well-being over profit. We might call this new form *library-as-commune*, an emergent political configuration which sets the age-old institution directly at odds with the neoliberalized university. Its objective, in short, would be to extend the influence of our extant communal practices (OERs, openly-sourced integrated library systems) with the sole intention of counteracting privatization and disinvestment. This, as one might imagine, depends upon an emboldened workforce.

## Labor

*While efficiency remains important...a genuinely multi-critical librarianship, capable of meeting the needs of all...would need to incorporate a broader array of care priorities...[including] respecting ecological limits...fostering meaningful rather than degrading [labor]...[and] community cohesion or autonomy.*<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Kristin Ross, *The Commune Form: The Transformation of Everyday Life* (Verso, 2024), 61.

<sup>31</sup> I’ve replaced one word, “economy,” with another: “librarianship.” The quotation itself comes from a recent article in the *New Left Review*: Aaron Benanav “Beyond Capitalism—I,” *New Left Review* 153 (2025): 65–128. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii153/articles/aaron-benanav-beyond-capitalism-1>

The library profession has spent a lot of its time uncritically incorporating various technologies, most of which line the pockets of major corporations while simultaneously weakening the position of workers. Post-digitization cataloging, for example, has been forced to abandon analog modes of bibliographic record production over which catalogers had more control, leading to increased precarity within the sub profession, a fact that is brushed away with almost incessant talk about efficiency and progress.<sup>32</sup> These buzzwords—efficiency and progress, but also other mainstays of corporate jargon, like streamlining and disruption—are shorthand for the continued deskilling of librarians.

This would force us to once again reconsider our reliance on the ALA and its affiliate groups—ACRL, AILA, ARSL. This alternative form of librarianship (*library-as-commune*) would have little use for organizations in which decision-making responsibility is shared with members of management. Despite their “good” intentions, these individuals are almost always aligned with major corporations at the expense of rank-and-file librarians. While this does not necessarily imply a large-scale push for unionization,<sup>33</sup> it would certainly entail a more general redefinition of labor within the profession *as what’s best for library workers*, not what’s best for institutions (or management...or corporations).

A revitalized critical librarianship, in summary, would be 1) committed to a degrowth principles, 2) suspicious of the nation-state and its proxy organizations, and 3) open to expansive notions of labor in which sustainability and community cohesion—not efficiency—take priority. To return to the question of assimilation: the alternative form of librarianship outlined above cannot be subsumed into the liberal democratic mode of the profession simply because it exists in direct opposition to that mode’s founding principles: capitalist notions of property and growth, efficiency, individualism, and, perhaps most importantly, the value-form.

This leaves open the question of how to practically achieve this transition. I draw on Sam Popowich, who has articulated a more nuanced view of the relationship between theory and praxis: “But there is no real distinction between

---

<sup>32</sup> I explore this topic at length in “The Bib Record in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” *Journal of Radical Librarianship* 11 (2025): 146-158. <https://journal.radicallibrarianship.org/index.php/journal/article/view/135>. The overall library workforce has declined by about 20 percent over the past decade. See Petrowski, Mary Jane. 2023. “3 Questions on Academic Library Staffing for ACRL’s Mary Jane Petrowski,” interview by Joshua Kim. *Insider Higher Ed*, February 21, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> The utility of unionization in the struggle against capitalism has rightly been called into question. See Leo Panitch, “Trade Unions and the Capitalist State,” *New Left Review* 128 (1981): 21-43. The topic deserves further investigation vis-à-vis academic and library unions.

the real world and theory, because that would suggest that people could live their lives without thinking about them and at least trying to understand them, would suggest that facts are transparent and don't need to be "made sense of."<sup>34</sup> This "making sense of" is an integral step in the process of building an alternative political project, of which this essay is a preliminary venture. More, obviously, will have to follow.

This is a rudimentary vision for the future, one that will be subjected, I would hope, to substantial expansion and revision. Its actualization, besides being built on an explicit faith in the mutability of the world, likewise depends on a critical practice that privileges what we don't know, that leads us away from liberal democratic librarianship and towards this something else—however roughly I've defined it here. Latour, once again: "What would critique do if it could be associated with *more*, not with *less*, with *multiplication*, not *subtraction*."<sup>35</sup> For his part, Flaubert's Saint Anthony prefers infinite subdivision:

divide myself everywhere,—be in everything,—emanate with all the odors,—develop myself like the plants,—flow like water,—vibrate like sound,—shine like light,—assume all forms,—penetrate each atom,—descend to the very bottom of matter,—be matter itself!<sup>36</sup>

It is true: A superfluity of the usual suspects haunts my reference list. Have I fallen into the trap I was meant to diagnose and then, *Deo volente*, cure? I hope, at the very least, I have made the case for a *prefigurative* librarianship, one with the aim of exploding the intellectual foundations of the (neo)liberal library. From the remnants of its hollowed-out husk, we can start to pick and choose what best suits the utopia we've yet to realize *but must continue to believe can exist*. A piece of this, a piece of that, and perhaps something new, discovered while wandering amidst the rubble.

---

<sup>34</sup> Sam Popowich, *Solving Names: Worldliness and Metaphysics in Librarianship* (Library Juice Press, 2024), 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>36</sup> Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 160-161.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Jose Guerrero, who pointed me towards the (very helpful) Debord essay, and to all the other contributors (especially nicholae cline, our moderator!), whose conversation and encouragement helped me to better frame my own thoughts. And thank you to jaime and Jorge, who got the conversation started.

## References

- American Library Association and The Sustainable Librarians Initiative. "National Climate Action Strategy for Libraries." Accessed on October 1, 2025. <https://www.sustainablelibrariesinitiative.org/media/document/614>
- Antonelli, Monika, Rebekkah Aldrich, Rene Tanner, and Adrian Ho. "The Storm is Here: Public Libraries' Role in Disaster Preparedness and Community Recovery," *Electronic Green Journal* 1, no. 51. <https://doi.org/10.5070/G3.39629>
- Benanav, Aaron. "Beyond Capitalism—I." *New Left Review* 153 (2025): 65–128. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii153/articles/aaron-benanav-beyond-capitalism-1>
- Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938-1940. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Battistoni, Alyssa. "Latour's Metamorphosis." Sidecar (blog). January 20, 2023. <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/latours-metamorphosis>
- Clover, Joshua. "The Causality Runs Both Ways: A Conversation with Joshua Clover." Interview by Jack Chelgren. The Rumpus. <https://therumpus.net/2018/01/01/the-rumpus-interview-with-joshua-clover/>
- Debord, Guy. "All the King's Men." *BLACKOUT* ((poetry & politics)). Accessed November 30, 2025. <https://my-blackout.com/2018/09/16/guy-debord-all-the-kings-men/>
- ding, jaime and Jorge López-McKnight. "some bullshit (or not)," Google Forms, 2025. Accessed August 21, 2025.

some bullshit: citation, "special issue of Journal of Radical Librarianship," Vol. 12, 2026.

Dick, Archie L. "Library and Information Science as a Social Science: Neutral and Normative Conceptions." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 65, no. 2 (1995): 216-235. <https://doi.org/10.1086/602777>

Doro, Nicole. "(The Problem with) UN SDGs as a Measure of Sustainability in Academic Libraries, and an Exploration of Alternatives." Paper presented at Library Assessment Conference, Portland, OR, November 6-9 2024.

Felsk, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Flaubert, Gustave. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Project Gutenberg, 2015. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/52225>

Kirby, Michael. "The Bib Record in the Age of Digital Reproduction." *Journal of Radical Librarianship* 11 (2025): 146-158. <https://journal.radicallibrarianship.org/index.php/journal/article/view/135>

Kohei, Saito. *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*. Cambridge University Press, 2023.

———. *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto*. Astra Publishing House, 2024.

Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225-248. <https://doi.org/10.1086/421123>

Marx, Karl. "Theses on Feuerbach." Marx2Mao. Accessed August 28, 2025. <http://www.marx2mao.com/M&E/TF45.html>

McCusker, Erin and Russell Michlak. "AI Policies in U.S. Universities: A Critical Analysis of Policy Gaps and Library Involvement." *Journal of Library Administration* 65, no. 6: 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2025.2560268>

some bullshit: citation, "special issue of Journal of Radical Librarianship," Vol. 12, 2026.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009.

Öcalan, Abdullah. *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan: Kurdistan, Woman's Revolution, and Democratic Confederalism*. Pluto Press, 2017.

Panitch, Leo. "Trade Unions and the Capitalist State." *New Left Review* 128 (1981): 21-43.

Petrowski, Mary Jane. "3 Questions on Academic Library Staffing for ACRL's Mary Jane Petrowski," interview by Joshua Kim. *Insider Higher Ed*, February 21, 2023.

Popowich, Sam. *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship: A Marxist Approach*. Library Juice Press, 2019.

———. *Solving Names: Worldliness and Metaphysics in Librarianship*. Library Juice Press, 2024. Routledge, 2008

Postone, Moishe. "Rethinking Capital in Light of the Grundrisse." In *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, edited by Marcello Musto. Routledge, 2008.

Ross, Kristin. *The Commune Form: The Transformation of Everyday Life*. Verso, 2024.

Sions, Hannah Kim. "Radical Possibilities of/for Art Education." *Visual Arts Research* 51, no. 1 (2025): 4-17. <https://doi.org/10.5406/21518009.51.1.02>

Slater, Kailyn "Kay." "Against AI: Critical Refusal in the Library." *Library Trends* 73, no. 4: 588-608. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2025.a968497>

Wright, Erik Olin. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. Verso, 2010.

some bullshit: citation, "special issue of Journal of Radical Librarianship," Vol. 12, 2026.