**Type of Contribution: PANEL**

**Toward a Critical Optimism: Enacting Access, Diversity, Inclusion, and Democracy in Difficult Times**

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# Introduction and Background

From austerity measures to digital disruption, privatization efforts and the skyrocketing cost of scholarly information, libraries and librarians worldwide are facing an uncertain future at a time when they are most needed. In this panel, four librarians will take an auto-ethnographic approach to describing how they navigate their roles as librarians to maintain and stance of what we have come to call “critical optimism.”

These threats to libraries and librarianship are occurring at a time when libraries are also seen as the front lines for work that promotes access, inclusion, diversity and democracy: serving the under-served and marginalized; creating inclusive spaces; preserving indigenous knowledge; building community; and hosting civic discourse. Efforts to change and dismantle libraries and other information institutions have been met with impassioned and poignant defenses, however, to do this work in difficult times requires optimism and courage. Above all, it requires a solid belief that the work that happens in libraries matters, that that work can help solve seemingly intractable problems, and that libraries can indeed change the world.

The question that then emerges is this: how do individual librarians find and maintain this belief in the potential of libraries in their day-to-day work? How do librarians configure their work within the profession to enact change and to empower their libraries toward changing the world. Critical optimism, we believe, must exist as more than an unquestioned, uncritical assumption.

**Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this panel is to use autoethnographic approaches to demonstrate how intentional and critical reflection on practice supports and enables social justice work in libraries and information institutions. Four librarians will offer critical reflection on how they work to reconcile their belief in the potential powers of libraries with the realities of critical librarianship.

**Topics**

Anne-Marie Deitering will draw upon recent experience using autoethnography, a reflexive and recursive research method, to examine professional practice in libraries to frame the connection between critical reflection and values-based practice. Emily Drabinski will reflect on the ways that skills gained in an organized labor struggle can be deployed in order to produce both hope and power in the context of broader fights for the value of libraries. Heidi LM Jacobs will consider her experience developing a community-based digital historical project aiming to preserve and reclaim a forgotten story about race in Canada as a way of making sense of and working to change the discussions of race emerging in North America. Peter Bailey will reflect upon the difficult emotional work of defending and advocating for public libraries within a dominant discourse of austerity. He will consider who the “public” is in discussions of the future of public libraries.

**Format and Makeup of panelist**

The panel will begin with an overview of what autoethnography is and what the questions are that inform the panel. Each of the four librarians will then offer an ethnographic overview of their topic. The panel will raise 4-6 questions that audience members will be invited to consider and discuss. The panel will end with a coming together to share new insights and raise new questions for further inquiry.

# REFERENCES

Deitering, Anne-Marie, Robert Schroeder and Richard Stoddart, eds. 2017. *The Self As Subject: Autoethnographic Research into Identity, Culture and Academic Librarianship.* Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.

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