

**American Library Association
LibLearnX
Intersectional Justice in Libraries
Speakers: Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada, Annie Pho, LaJuan
Pringle**

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>> LESSA KANANI'OPUA PELAYO-LOZADO: Right. That was louder than I anticipated it being. Woo!

Okay. Good morning, everyone. It is so wonderful to see all of you here. Thank you for joining us for our Shop Talk on Intersectional Justice in Libraries.

I'm Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada, ALA president. I'm a mixed-race Native Hawaiian woman born and raised on the continent, who has been a children's librarian, teen librarian, and adult services -- or adult services assistant manager, as well as a member, leader in both ALA and the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association, APALA.

I believe strongly that one of the most important things we can bring to our work in libraries is intersectional justice and a strong understanding of intersectionality. That understanding has played a huge role in my development as a professional, and I know the two amazing leaders I have here with me today share that feeling.

So I am so happy to be joined by Annie Pho, who is the head of Instruction and Outreach at the University of San Francisco as well as the current APALA president, and LaJuan Pringle, who is a branch manager with Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

>> Woo!

>> LESSA KANANI'OPUA PELAYO-LOZADO: Yeah, look at that fan club! He's active within ALA, current serving as chair of the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Task Force of the Social Responsibilities Roundtable and treasurer of the Rainbow Roundtable. And just before we get to the panel, I do want to

give a quick plug for the Martin Luther King Jr. Sunrise Celebration --

(Applause)

>> LESSA KANANI'OPUA PELAYO-LOZADA -- tomorrow morning at the beautiful time of 6:30 a.m.

(Applause)

>> LESSA KANANI'OPUA PELAYO-LOZADA: I know it sounds early. I know. We were just talking about what time we're getting up tomorrow. He's getting up the earliest. But it's totally worth the experience, so please, please join us.

Now, on the topic at hand, we're going to start with, Annie, what is intersectionality, and why is it an important concept for our profession?

>> ANNIE PHO: So intersectionality is a term that was coined by critical race theory scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, and she came up with this theory to talk about how someone can have multiple intersecting social identities that are marginalized and oppressed at the same time.

So this is an idea that interlocking systems of power can also impact people who have multiple marginalized identities such as race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, class, et cetera.

Now, Crenshaw is a legal scholar who originally came up with the term because she was seeing legal cases where black women were being discriminated against in the workplace, but the court wasn't willing to -- like kind of see how racism and sexism were impacting these women at the same time, and so she came up with this theory to sort of explain that the experiences of black women were very, very specific and not something that you could isolate just race or gender, and so this is sort of this idea that came forth from that.

But one thing that I would say about intersectionality is that it is also a phrase that became very popular in 2015. I don't think that Kimberle Crenshaw anticipated that this -- the particular idea or theory would become mainstream, and so one thing that I want to come back to is just to make sure that we understand that, you know, race is really a core tenet of intersectionality and that sometimes we do have maybe well-meaning white colleagues who want to use this phrase of

intersectionality to explain maybe their own marginalized identities like their gender or sexual orientation while sort of trying to skirt the topic of race. And so I do want to make sure that we all understand that as a core tenet.

And then also understanding that social identity is a dynamic; right? So one can hold privileged identities in some places and also be marginalized in other spaces too. So I do feel like this is an important concept for our field, because we do serve a diverse set of communities, and people who come into our libraries from varying backgrounds that are potentially marginalized and then impacted by some of our policies and things that we do. So I think this is just something that we can consider as we shape our collections and our programs and services to serve our communities.

And then I think the last thing I'll add is that this also impacts ourselves, too, how we show up or are unable to show up in our workplaces.

>> LESSA KANANI'OPUA PELAYO-LOZADA: Thank you, Annie. I know that one of the things that we really look at, especially when we're analyzing our policies, right, and our policies around collections and programming and what are the barriers that we're looking at; right?

And so very often I think we look, you know, towards fines and fees, which is one, but what are the different intersections within our communities? If we start with race and look at how our policies impact individuals, and then we can start identifying all the other ways that our folks interact with our libraries, I think it's really important for us to take this to a structural level, as well, as we're analyzing things.

So, LaJuan, how can overlapping social identities create intersecting layers of oppression and impact the lived experiences of library workers?

>> LaJUAN PRINGLE: Thank you so much for having me this morning, and thank you so much for just mentioning the whole idea of structures and how they are related I think to some of the oppression that folks that have these inter -- you know, these conflicting social identities go through.

I think that when we are talking about the lives of library workers, you have to look at things like wages. You have to look at pay. And we know for a fact that for every dollar that a white male makes that, you know, black males make 78 cents,

white women make 74 cents, and black women make 64 cents. So, like, that's an area right there.

And I'm sure -- as I was looking into this, I was looking into some research that had been done with research libraries and -- with regards to pay, and all of those things are true with regards to research libraries. Some of those same findings have been found with regards to pay. So you do have to kind of, like, look at those things from a professional standpoint.

Also, professional development opportunities. You know, when folks -- the thing to remember about intersectionality is that it's all kind of structured within a white supremacist culture and ideology. So when you're thinking about, like, things like professional development opportunities, like how often do those opportunities go to people that deal with those intersectional -- those intersectional, I guess, identities in libraries.

The other thing that we have to look at is, like, hiring and/or promotions within libraries. Sexual harassment is another thing that folks may experience as a result of these overlapping social identities, and then it also lends itself to turnover and job dissatisfaction.

Those are all kinds of things that we have to really deal with when we are dealing with such a diverse profession as ours. And it's something that I hope that all of us are thinking about as we move forward.

>> LESSA KANANI'OPUA PELAYO-LOZADA: Thank you, LaJuan. I think the interesting thing, also, when you mentioned professional development, I was, like, how does intersectionality show up; right? Because I think also in the professional development opportunities that we pick and we select and where we put our time and energy is also reflective of who we are; right?

So I am now the American Library Association president, but I started off in APALA as an Asian Pacific American woman because that is where I felt seen and that is where I felt heard and that is where I was given leadership opportunities.

And so what I think part of my pathway was was being an emerging leader on behalf of APALA that really got me into ALA work and seeing where I could fit in to make a difference on the impact of our different identities and where we all feel the most comfortable. And I think that's one of the great things of

the NALCos, but also Rainbow Roundtable, right, is making sure that whoever we are, whatever we are bringing to the table, that we make a space within ALA, within our associations, our professional development work, but also taking that concept and applying it to our libraries and our work every day regardless of what type of library we work in.

So I think that's a really important point. That was just, like, oh, man, I got to think about this. And I'd like to delve way deeper into it, also, but I also want to hear from both of you: How can a deep understanding of intersectionality contribute to a more socially just profession? I'll let you decide who wants to go first.

>> ANNIE PHO: Yeah. I actually thought about this question for a long time because I think it's a really big one, and I think -- I encourage everybody here to also think about this too, because for me a deeper understanding of intersectionality means a deeper sense of empathy for our colleagues as well as the communities that we serve. And everything is something that we each and every single one of us here can practice regardless of whatever position you have in the library. So whether you are a manager, whether you're in tech services, or you are, like, working on the front lines and, like, working with people every single day.

And it's kind of like what Lessa was saying, too, in terms of, like, some of the structural things, like, are there policies that we can also adjust. Maybe library fines that we can remove just because, again, acknowledging that some of the patrons who are coming into the library -- you know, a library fine might not be a problem for one person, but it might be a huge problem for another person too; right? So even little things like that can make a really big difference.

Or, like, you know, now I'm a manager. And so let's say, you know, there has been, like, racist incidents that have happened at my library, and that -- again, understanding that that's going to impact my colleagues of color differently than some of my white colleagues who maybe has no effect on them at all or maybe they didn't even realize or see the microaggression, whatever it is; and so, you know, how can I also, understanding what intersectionality is, be a better colleague, be a better advocate. You know, these are just some of the examples of what we can do.

And then I also thought about how we can again more than just policies, even just looking at our collections; right? So how

can our collections really be diverse and representative of our communities and again sort of addressing sort of those intersectional identities.

And then, also, different programs too. So, you know, whether that's something like supporting first-generation students of color or maybe having, like, a gender-affirming closet in your library, those kinds of things that you can also do. You know, wherever you can find wiggle room I think is like an example of that extension of empathy. Yeah.

And then the final thing I'll say is that, you know, justice is really important and hard work, and understanding intersectionality gives you a deeper understanding or perspective of the people around you, and I think that can really shape how you act and also the values that you decide to uphold.

>> LaJUAN PRINGLE: Thank you, Annie. And what I will quickly add to that is that I believe that one of the things that we should also be doing is really getting to know and understand and check our own biases, because all of us have our own biases, and our bias does shape the way that we view things. It shapes the way that we approach work. It shapes the way that we approach the customers or the patrons that we serve when we're at work and really understanding that you have bias as key.

If we do it right, we're going to learn more about our own biases and how to effectively check them. And to be more socially just, we must be aware of our own bias and our own privilege. Understand that our bias is rooted in white supremacist culture.

I have to, like, acknowledge the fact that sometimes I feel a certain type of way when I see certain groups, like, walk in a facility or a building together. Everybody has to do that. And I think that if you are really real with yourself, if you understand that bias that happens, then you are able to, like -- we are able to think more broadly about, like, the structures in libraries that are really rooted in, like, white supremacist ideology. So...

>> LESSA KANANI'OPUA PELAYO-LOZADA: And I think that's a really important point, also, you guys, when we're talking about leadership and what that looks like; right? Because leadership has to be really intentional because we are coming with these preconceived biases. So when I feel a certain type of way during a meeting or when I'm speaking with a patron or with an

employee, I have to check myself; right? It's, like, okay, let's go through their identities. Let's go through what I know is happening in their lives. And let's go through what is the real outcome that we are looking for here.

And I think that one of the difficulties that we find in really understanding intersectionality and social justice within libraries is just how much time it takes, because it takes, like you both said, so much self-reflection, so much understanding, and you can't just do it overnight because it changes all the time because our life experiences also change all the time. And so a bias that we may have now may not be exactly the same tomorrow because we might be able to undo that bias that we grew up with, but then we will then have to undo another one that may come along.

And so I just want to really emphasize, everyone, that this is, unfortunately, ongoing work that we will have to deal with with the entirety of our lives, but it is good work because it makes us better library workers and better people, also, when we can see the humanity and the core of everyone as they are coming into the libraries.

So we are about to wrap up. These Shop Talks go so quickly. But I do want to ask you two if you two have closing thoughts on intersectionality how it shows up in your work every day or in the way that you both lead, because you are both such strong leaders, also, within the profession. You know, you both write and publish and do so much. So any closing thoughts that you have for us?

>> LaJUAN PRINGLE: You know, I just -- I guess prior to, like, being asked to speak on intersectionality I never really thought about intersectionality as a topic. You know, I've been black and queer all my life, and, like, I've never really thought about it one way or the other. But what I will say is that I am well aware of how much it impacts the way that I see things, the way that I lead, the way that I work, and I think that that's just really important for everyone to really kind of understand what your experiences are, what you bring to the table.

Be proud of those things, but at the same time understand that it leads you -- it leads to a certain way that you reflect on life. It leads to a way that you think about things and that you approach things. And I think that if you're armed with that knowledge and you're kind of thinking about things, you will spend more time doing good, and that's what we're here to do,

so...

>> ANNIE PHO: Yeah. I think I just want to echo what LaJuan was saying, which is, like, you know, if you don't really think about it and you are somebody who's, like, a person of color, and maybe you are holding multiple intersectional identities, like, this is also our lives. This is kind of what we were talking about earlier. And so I do feel like as maybe more mainstream intersectionality has become, there is also power in naming some of these dynamics.

And I think also to really highlight what LaJuan was saying in terms of white supremacy work culture, I do recommend if folks haven't heard of the white supremacist work culture characteristics, I mean, it's a quick search on a search engine, you can pull those up, and to really see how that also intersects with libraries just from the ways that we run our work meetings to, like, the concepts of what we consider are professional.

And then even, you know, we're all, like, fortunate to be here at this conference, but think about what barriers there are for some of our colleagues who maybe couldn't be here for whatever reasons. Maybe they have child care. Maybe they are not able to travel due to it being a pandemic, et cetera. So, again, like, this is something that a lot of us are already living every day, and sometimes it just takes a moment to wake up and recognize the dynamic and name it so that then you can really address it.

And, yeah, thank you, Lessa, for having us.

>> LaJUAN PRINGLE: Thank you so much, Lessa, I really appreciate this.

>> LESSA KANANI'OPUA PELAYO-LOZADA: Thank you. Thank you both. Please, round of applause for these individuals, for Annie and LaJuan.

(Applause)

>> LESSA KANANI'OPUA PELAYO-LOZADA: And I think also a round of applause for yourselves for being here with us today.

(Applause)

>> LESSA KANANI'OPUA PELAYO-LOZADA: You know, as they both said, right, this work is not easy work; it is difficult work.

And it is really, I think, heartening to see so many individuals interested in this topic. We did a very brief overview today, and so we really encourage you to dive deep. There are so many wonderful resources and conversations that are happening out there and to have conversations as you go through this conference.

So we look forward to seeing what you all do on behalf and with your intersectionality. So thank you so much, everyone.

(Applause)