

Nicollette Davis, Patrice R. Green, and Raymond Pun

Publishing under suspicion

Harmful hurdles in scholarly publishing

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a bimonthly *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors and they were given space to explore. We encourage you to follow and share these conversations about transforming libraries with ideas from the frontlines. This issue's conversation addresses discrimination in scholarly publishing and makes it clear that we have not arrived, wherever we are.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Raymond Pun (RP): I am pleased to be part of this conversation with you, my amazing colleagues, to address harmful barriers and hurdles in scholarly publishing for academic library workers. It is unfortunate that we experienced scholarly gatekeeping recently and need to make sense out of that experience by talking about it. Hopefully readers interested in scholarly publishing, and those who serve on editorial boards, will gain some insights from our experiences.

Nicollette Davis (ND): I agree, it is unfortunate that this has happened. The problem is that this issue isn't new and keeps a lot of folks outside of scholarly publishing. There's a belief that some of the best ideas are published, but what about those ideas and words that couldn't get past the gatekeepers? Our recent experience with *JMLA* specifically is surprising, not because it happened, but because it's *still* happening.

Patrice R. Green (PRG): These barriers tend to be top-down and are controlled by those who hold the most power. Sharing information is supposed to empower us as information professionals, and having to jump through these hoops affects us both internally and externally, with the former leading to restrictive access to information and the latter producing an intimidation factor that creates difficulty in speaking up about negative publishing experiences and the colleagues who cause them.

RP: For context, back in April 2023, we submitted an article for a commentary piece to the *Journal of Medical Library Association (JMLA)* for consideration. This article focused on the history of scientific racism in medical libraries, and highlighted journals and collections that libraries acquired; such collections perpetuated ongoing systematic racism. Advancement in medicine was at the expense of Black people and their bodies and were documented in journals/reports that libraries collected, and library workers needed to critically interrogate

Nicollette Davis is an assistant librarian at Louisiana State University, email: ndavis10@lsu.edu. Patrice R. Green is the curator for African American and African Diasporic Collections at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, email: patricergreen5@gmail.com. Raymond Pun is an academic and research librarian at the Alder Graduate School of Education, email: rpun@aldergse.edu.

racism in medical libraries. The article was referred to one of the section editors, and what happened from there was quite shocking.

At first, the section editor wanted to meet with us virtually because they had a few questions but instead interrogated us endlessly via email about our affiliations, MLA membership (which was not required for publication), and our “expertise.” The section editor claimed that this kind of research has already been published and that we needed to demonstrate what was unique about our research. In addition, the section editor said that they were going to be presenting this kind of research at the upcoming MLA/SLA Conference and wanted to know what was significant in our piece. It was possibly a way to get our thoughts so they could present them as their own. It gave us pause and we did not feel comfortable nor safe meeting with this section editor and publishing our piece with *JMLA* under their “guidance.”

ND: Initially, when we submitted the piece, I was very excited, but after reading the response that we received, it felt incredibly condescending and disheartening. I think what shocked me most is that it felt as if we had to prove our “worth” for this journal. It just reminded me that scholarly publishing is often so inaccessible to folks in this field.

PRG: Racialized and otherwise marginalized people are often not seen as the experts of their own information, much less information or knowledge concerning other populations. Scholarly publishing doubles down on this by leaning into exclusionary and discriminatory practices under the guise of being neutral, thus continuously placing whiteness at the center as “standard.” Framing whiteness as standard removes Black and Indigenous/People of Color (BIPOC), along with any traditional or cultural knowledge, from the equation in a way that later also removes our credibility from our own experiences in storytelling.

ND: Exactly, Patrice. One of my favorite writers, Toni Morrison, famously talked about removing the “white man from your shoulder” when writing in order to decenter whiteness. I think that’s definitely one layer, but what about when whiteness is centered in scholarly publishing? Many of us are required to publish in order to get promotion and tenure, and based on my conversations and observations, BIPOC folks are often denied tenure. It’s not due to lack of trying, but they’re often rejected from the start. This constant rejection and interrogation of our knowledge leads to some tough feelings that can make it difficult to move forward in this field. I have been concerned for some time about the retention of BIPOC librarians. It’s not enough to simply recruit, making it a safer space to retain should be the ultimate goal.

RP: It’s very true what you both shared. For this piece in *JMLA*, we decided to inform the *JMLA* editorial board members, the editors-in-chief, and the conference program organizers about what was going on and how it felt so inappropriate for this section editor to interrogate us and then to claim that they were presenting on this topic too while stating that our proposal had no merit or that we had to “prove” to them why our paper was needed. The editors-in-chief apologized on behalf of *JMLA* and asked if we could reconsider our withdrawal. After rethinking about it as a group, we decided to take the opportunity to publish it with *JMLA*¹ because it was important work. Remember, we also discussed how we needed to reflect on this harrowing experience together because others have experienced this too. Our takeaway from this experience is that scholarly gatekeeping is real and has deep implicit and explicit harmful consequences toward marginalized and minoritized folks.

PRG: Something I personally struggled with despite working with some of the best scholars in the field is the overwhelming fear of retaliation once we called out the editor’s undesirable

behavior. Toni Morrison also famously said that “the function, the very serious function of racism, is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work.” And now we’re literally sitting here writing this article instead of focusing on other projects. I’m glad we’re taking the time to demonstrate to other writers that intimidation does not always work, but it’s incredibly exhausting to dedicate so much of your time to explaining yourself regardless of the amount of time you’ve been in this field. It’s part of a long-growing trend of different competing realities about information and whose knowledge to value.

ND: Yes, I completely agree. As Patrice and I have discussed, we’re both in our early careers. This was the first major journal that we had submitted to, and this experience has made me reflect deeply on not just my career, but others who are also new. Libraries often claim that they want diversity, but I don’t believe they understand how we have to navigate things so differently. When the institution is built on whiteness, it is inherently harmful. We often have to consider and think ten steps ahead for self-preservation because we know that it will be a battle and that we’ll be wounded in some way in the process. As we face harsh criticism and rejection, it’s almost normal to think about negative reactions from the beginning. I appreciate publications like *up//root*, which focuses on BIPOC scholarship and centers our ways of knowing and gives us space to create unapologetically.

RP: Totally. As someone who is mid-career and has published in double-masked peer-reviewed scholarly journals before, I was in disbelief about the process we experienced. I had conversations with other library workers of color about it and they also shared their dismay and terrible experiences about scholarly publishing. These stories and anecdotes happen far more often than we realize. My hope is that those serving in editorial boards in any roles operate with the lens of compassion, clarity, and helpfulness, and through some kind of ethical and humane framework. The whole process for us and for others has been a dehumanizing experience.

ND: Beautifully said, Ray. I’m sorry to hear about your colleagues’ experience. Changing the framework goes beyond anti-racism training, book clubs, and diversity, equity, and inclusion statements. My dream for the future is more proactive harm reduction. There are a lot of folks who have caused harm that cannot be healed—they continue to hold decision-making roles and authority. The critiques are not just whispers and watercooler chats. I dream of a future of accomplices who push aside brief discomfort to center the safety and care of historically marginalized persons. I mourn the voices that we have lost in this field due to similar experiences. And, as you said earlier Patrice, I mourn the time we have lost, the security, and the boxes we are so often confined to. What gives me hope is continuing to build community with fellow BIPOC library workers. Finally, I just want to thank you both for hearing me, understanding me, and helping me process this.

PRG: In the end, I sympathize with my colleagues who know this kind of behavior in the publishing industry “comes with the territory.” It absolutely does not have to be this way, but we’re subjected time and again to the scrutiny of disgruntled people who feel challenged by the very existence of others who dare use their voices to explore a variety of scholarship. As library and information science professionals, our end goal is to provide access rather than to gatekeep, and in terms of behavior toward one another in the field, I expected better (. . . but did I?). I hope that we can embrace criticism without employing harm.

Note

1. Raymond Pun, Patrice R. Green, and Nicollette Davis, “Medical Libraries and Their Complicated Past: An Exploration of the Historical Connections between Medical Collections and Racial Science,” *JMLA: Journal of the Medical Library Association* 111, no. 3 (2013): 740–46, <https://doi.org/10.5195/jmla.2023.1728>.