

The Sankofa Intervention: Combatting the Epistemicide of Parasitic Omission Through Civil Rights Literacy in Community Information Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Rocket City Civil Rights (RCCR) disrupts hegemonic epistemic history by reimagining community histories and driving social change through community collections derived from local libraries, archives, museums, digital projects and learning resources. This work amplifies the roles community information collections play in addressing epistemicide and epistemic injustices. Epistemicide is the annihilation of a way of knowing and its injustices are harmful to our capacity of knowing. We present specific tools used to suppress knowledge including parasitic omission and beneficent gatekeeping. We interrupt these tools and methods of epistemicide through the utilization of Sankofic principles, which in our context means going back and collecting the narratives that have been omitted in our community's history, curriculum, and collective narrative. Using RCCR as a case study, this research demonstrates how building civil rights literacy can help correct generational harm by amplifying the missing narratives within our communities, thus deriving new insights for LIS education.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

critical librarianship; digital humanities; archives; information ethics.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

parasitic omission; epistemicide; third harm; civil rights literacy; beneficent gatekeeping.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Sankofa connects to the proverb, “‘Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi,’ which translates to: ‘It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten’” (DeMello, 2014, p. 3). We believe the LIS field should interpret this as instructions to go back and collect the narratives and materials that have been omitted and devalued in our collections and

communities. This paper argues that the LIS field should address the epistemic injustices we've previously committed and to correct the parasitic omission which has long plagued our profession. Therefore, we posit community information interventions as a means to address epistemic injustices and to help foster civil rights literacy.

Parasitic omission is the practice of forgetting inconvenient truths and only remembering, archiving, or collecting materials in service of uplifting savior narratives or as a means of guilt appeasement. Parasitic omission demonstrates how collecting practices can function as a means to suppress history, as observed through an acknowledgement by the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH): "For well over a half-century, the agency committed extensive resources to the acquisition of Confederate records and artifacts while declining to acquire and preserve materials documenting the lives and contributions of African Americans in Alabama" (Murray, 2020, p. 1). Their collection still contains few resources featuring significant leaders and events from the civil rights movement, especially about the desegregation of schools.

Information professionals have the responsibility of selection, which positions them as gatekeepers of information for their communities (Metoyer-Duran, 1993). Beneficent gatekeeping comes from a sense of information professionals believing they 'know better' than their community members, which results in the gatekeeping of materials and the canonization of certain types of knowledge (Patin et al., 2021). We observed beneficent gatekeeping when former governor Doug Wilder complained about the processes followed by the state library of Virginia, whereby governors turn over their papers to the state library to be cataloged, digitized, and made available to the public. However, Wilder noticed the papers of his predecessors were available alongside the items from his successors, but his were not completely processed. Indeed, the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus asserted: "Too often the contributions of African Americans in the political sphere have not received the proper respect and acknowledgement.... We believe that it is far overdue for these archives to be processed with the care and respect they deserve" (Cunningham, 2020). Even though the state library has had almost 30 years to make the papers available, decisions were made to prioritize other collections due to budget constraints.

We investigate these oppressive practices by positioning this work within the larger ethical conversations around epistemicide and epistemic injustice. Next, we discuss specific methods of suppression, including parasitic omission and beneficent gatekeeping, and examine their role in perpetuating a cycle of interrupted knowledge development. Finally, we examine Rocket City Civil Rights as a case study to illustrate the roles community information collections play in addressing epistemic injustices and building civil rights literacy. By going back and getting, preserving, and presenting these narratives, our research demonstrates how civil rights literacy can help us address bias, intervene in the presentation of historical narratives, amplify our collections, and correct generational harms caused by missing narratives within our communities.

SITUATING EPISTEMICIDE

Epistemicide is the devaluing, silencing, killing, or annihilation of a knowledge system or a way of knowing (Patin et. al., 2020). Epistemicide consists of persistent epistemic injustices, which are the "wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). These injustices refer to the type of harm done that can impede a person's capacity to develop their own epistemological framework. Once an injustice occurs, the other specific types

of injustices may occur in singular or simultaneous forms. It is this cumulative and compounding experience of epistemic injustice which constitutes epistemicide.

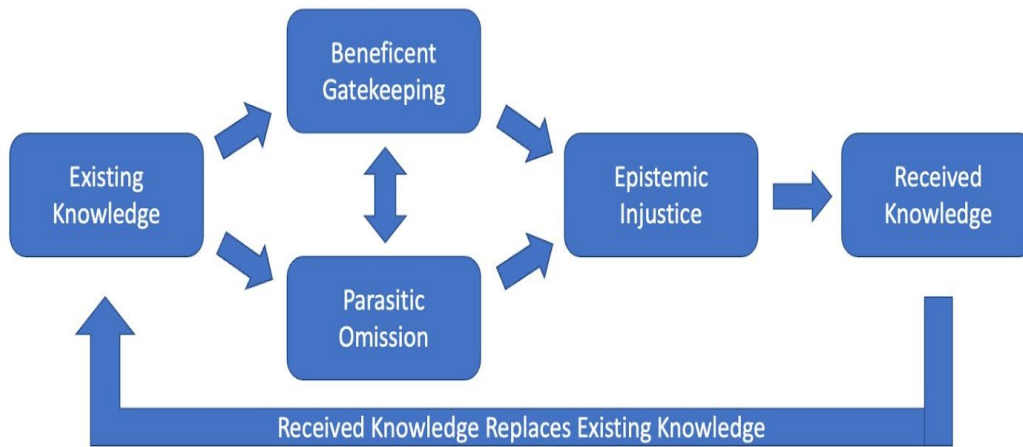
Four specific types of epistemic injustice have been identified thus far. Testimonial injustice occurs when “prejudice” causes the receiver of the information “to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s world,” whereas hermeneutical injustice happens “when a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker, 2007, p. 4). Curricular injustice happens when resources are not available to help support epistemic growth, whereas participatory injustice is the exclusion of one’s participation in their own epistemological development (Patin et. al., 2021). In practice, it is critical to consider the presence of epistemic injustices in adjacent domains within LIS (e.g., classification, preservation, digital scholarship), for if we prioritize access or digitize materials without considering historical instances of injustice or oppression, then we risk perpetuating these same injustices.

Epistemicide is a traumatic experience, as Sousa Santos (2014) detailed, creating repercussions for generations. While these injustices harm individuals who experience them, harm is not restricted to only individuals. When an epistemic injustice happens, impact extends beyond the individual, which often leads to harm in both immediate communities and future generations, also known as the third harm (Patin et. al., 2021). Andrews (2018) writes about resistance in the LIS tradition and draws on historical trauma theory to discuss the process of decolonization through Indigenous scholarship. As Andrews points out, this kind of harm sometimes creates purposeful intergenerational harm, as colonization attempts to exterminate entire cultures via assimilation into a new dominant one, and often it occurs without purposeful intention or malice. The violence of erasing knowledge inflicted upon one generation will impact the next, and it can be especially difficult to recognize when it comes in the form of beneficence (Patin et. al., 2021). The next section introduces how two tools for manufacturing epistemic injustice, parasitic omission and beneficent gatekeeping, cyclically interrupts the process of sending and receiving knowledge between knowers, and likewise impacts our professional practice.

TOOLS OF EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE AND THE INTERRUPTED KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT CYCLE

As we experience epistemic injustice, our capacity for receiving and sharing knowledge changes. Regardless of circumstances or intention, beneficent gatekeeping and parasitic omission serve as weaponizations of knowledge that aid in the construction of barriers inhibiting and interrupting knowledge development and transfer between knowers. We posit that this process of interrupted knowledge development occurs in a cycle, presented in *Figure 1*, which details the relationship between beneficent gatekeeping and parasitic omission, and situates them as tools for manufacturing knowledge barriers and perpetuating epistemic injustice that subsequently impacts the transfer of knowledge.

Figure 1: *The Interrupted Knowledge Development Cycle*



In moving from existing knowledge to received knowledge by a knower or knowledge entity, beneficent gatekeeping and parasitic omission operate as weaponized tools of epistemic injustice and exist as knowledge transfer barriers. Beneficent gatekeeping is used as a means of privileging one's own knowledge over others, reinforcing the idea that they know better or best. Similarly, parasitic omission filters existing knowledge to standardize ways of knowing by privileging dominant epistemologies. Both lead to a devaluation and silencing of knowledge that manifests as epistemic injustice. However, these tools do not necessarily operate independently from each other. For example, when beneficent gatekeeping is used to privilege one's own knowledge, there is an implied parasitic omission that purposefully restricts a knower's access to knowledge. Conversely, when parasitic omission is used to filter existing knowledge as a means of upholding preferred narratives of history or culture, there is an implied beneficent gatekeeping that omits and privileges 'better' ways of knowing. Both tools fan the flames of epistemic injustice and thus harm and chip away at our capacity to know. If these dangerous tools are used to commit and amplify epistemic injustices, then the received knowledge derived from existing knowledge will be limited or incomplete.

Consequently, in the future sharing of knowledge, received knowledge effectively replaces and becomes our new existing knowledge, ultimately perpetuating a cycle of interrupted knowledge development. This cycle gradually diminishes our capacity to participate in future knowledge transfer as the proliferation of beneficent gatekeeping and parasitic omission continues. Without an acknowledgement of such harms, or an exploration of interventions that might work to mitigate them, our continued exposure to epistemic injustice—at individual, community, and generational levels—will assert, sustain, and inevitably lead to epistemicide. This framing of interrupted knowledge notably works to build on distinctions made by Bates (1989) between the universe of interest compared to the universe of knowledge, in that our received knowledge that replaces existing knowledge reflects a limited, incomplete, and skewed way of knowing.

To observe this cycle in action, we examine Alabama state education standards used in sample 4th grade lesson plans about the civil rights movement published by the Alabama Department of Education on the Alabama Learning Exchange (2017). Many of the standards listed rely on pre-2010 texts and discussion topics that fail to account for the increased societal relevance of civil rights history today. However, the main concern is that these lesson plans uphold an educational canon of the civil rights movement, one that fails to include the contributions of community leaders, and directly introduces vocabulary to talk about issues of racism in the past and present. There is little mention of activists outside of the educational canon of popular knowledge that includes activists like Sonnie Hereford III, who led the legal fight to desegregate Alabama public schools, or Martha Hereford, whose participation in Huntsville sit-ins and subsequent arrests made national headlines. It is here where the ADAH participates in beneficent gatekeeping, by using their authority as a historical institution to position themselves as knowing better, and parasitic omission, by which they privilege of the canon of the civil rights movement over the contributions of local leaders and focus on the violence of the civil rights movement rather than the local community engagement and activism it sparked. Following the cycle, this curriculum results in students receiving incomplete knowledge, which then becomes their existing knowledge relied on in the future. Next, we examine how Rocket City Civil Rights addresses and interrupts these injustices and this cycle through the promotion of civil rights literacy.

CASE STUDY: ADDRESSING HISTORICAL HARMS WITH ROCKET CITY CIVIL RIGHTS

Rocket City Civil Rights (*RCCR*) is a non-profit organization dedicated to collecting, documenting, and amplifying the civil rights narratives of Huntsville, Alabama. We analyze how RCCR is working to address epistemicide within the State of Alabama, which has intentionally privileged the collection of materials from the Confederacy over the history of Black Alabama. RCCR's mission is to "archive, advocate, and assist in social reform rooted in Huntsville's contribution to the Civil Rights Movement... Our hope is for generations to critically apply lessons from Huntsville's past to further foster its growth into the twenty-first century" (RCCR, 2022).

RCCR began informally in 2016 through a group of local historians, scholars, civic leaders, and participants from Huntsville's civil rights movement. Recognizing the omission of Huntsville's contributions to the larger Alabama civil rights movement narratives, RCCR has since developed and delivered instructional programming for educational and professional organizations, continues to process archival collections, and curate digital resources and exhibitions. With collaborative support and funding from several community organizations, including the Huntsville Historical Foundation, University of Alabama Huntsville, and Calhoun Community College, RCCR continues to build community knowledge surrounding Huntsville's involvement in the civil rights movement and address the historical gaps in collecting and education that have overshadowed Huntsville's valuable contributions to furthering equality.

The knowledge generated from RCCR's community initiatives also work to interrupt and dismantle the tools used to commit and perpetuate epistemic injustices, while actively mitigating the impact of previous harms. RCCR has constructed a variety of curricular resources, from K-6 lesson plans to interactive timelines that incorporate primary documents from that time, making

learning about Huntsville's history digestible, accessible, and engaging. RCCR has also produced multiple oral histories as well as a variety of presentations and media for organizations like WAFF48 News (2022), Paradox East Radio (2021), Huntsville Historical Foundation (2022), Colgate University (Patin, 2022) and WLRH News (2022) on topics including Black History Month and Huntsville School Desegregation, and ongoing court case (Hereford IV, 2017), which have made testimonies about Huntsville's civil rights movement more accessible and educational by creating new opportunities for public participation in preserving local history. Another recent initiative from RCCR involved digitizing and republishing "A Civil Rights Journey," a 1999 documentary on Huntsville's civil rights history (Hereford III, 1999). Although previously available on VHS/DVD, making this educational media available online and optimized for digital accessibility has enabled a new generation of youth to engage with Huntsville's history.

INFORMING LIS EDUCATION

RCCR's commitment to access, education, and racial equity, and their work to share this knowledge with the community, also works to build Huntsville's civil rights literacy, defined as a capacity to be culturally and historically knowledgeable about social movements, thus breaking the cycle of interrupted knowledge development (*see figure 1*) and building the local community's capacity for acknowledgement, reflection, and change. In promoting civil rights literacy, RCCR is combatting beneficent gatekeeping by rejecting the whitewashed view of the civil rights movement and pre-established declarations of core leaders in the movement and combating parasitic omission through the creation of resources that provide a holistic picture of Huntsville's contributions to the civil rights movement. Indeed, how can we understand what must change in today's world if we don't study our involvement in the past?

Through a commitment to promoting civil rights literacy, RCCR is correcting the narratives constructed by beneficent gatekeeping and parasitic omission that have enabled the historical silencing, devaluation, and exclusion of knowledge about Huntsville's involvement in the civil rights movement. While Huntsville continues to reckon with the past, RCCR provides us with a community-centric approach to combating the censored, conflated, and skewed or missing perspectives of civil rights history. Ultimately, by providing equitable access to the important community stories and collections encompassing overshadowed narratives, *RCCR* disrupts hegemonic epistemic history, thus informing the creation of a framework for reimagining community histories and driving social change.

Beneficent gatekeeping and parasitic omission are tools for committing epistemic injustice. Yet, by building a capacity for change in our communities by promoting civil rights literacy, we can counteract and amplify overshadowed ways of knowing. We encourage fellow LIS educators to critically recognize and self-reflect on the ways we potentially communicate knowledge, provide information resources, and participate in both parasitic omission and beneficent gatekeeping. As LIS educators, practitioners, and scholars alike, it is imperative that we demonstrate a commitment to upholding collective responsibility for providing equitable access to knowledge and educating our students on being intentional in the design of information resources and educational materials. This attention to detail and intentional prioritization of an ethics of care places an emphasis on reducing harm as we usher in the next generation of LIS professionals. Furthermore, information-based organizations and cultural institutions have a

societal responsibility to collaboratively draw from multiple collections and interpersonal perspectives to fill the gaps in our collective knowledge in the pursuit of civil rights literacy.

CONCLUSION

Epistemicide is not unique to the LIS field. However, LIS professionals are much more capable of committing these injustices on a grander scale because our purview includes handling information from all fields of knowledge. We deem how information is findable, what words and structures should be used to organize knowledge, and in fact, determine what information is worth preserving or sharing at all. Community collections archives have valuable stories to tell, and if they are ignored or suppressed by individuals or institutions, we enable beneficent gatekeeping and parasitic omission.

While this work serves as a foundation for encouraging change, future work will continue to address the implications beneficent gatekeeping and parasitic omission in the sharing of knowledge and situate civil rights literacy alongside broader information literacy frameworks. Holding space within academic and educational environments to understand our participation in using tools to commit epistemic injustice, and likewise leverage our experiences to brainstorm solutions, enables personal growth, sharing of expertise, and community engagement that brings us closer to ending the generational harms of epistemicide.

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