



seeding
change

cultivating
trauma informed
librarianship

by kimberlie sullivan

Trauma Informed Librarianship

seeding change



“Instead, growing the world we want is like the slow tending of a garden, transforming the plants by fostering relationships, trust, skills, community accountability, and healing. It requires cultivating new habits internally, seeding restorative ways of being together interpersonally, uprooting practices of inequality institutionally, and planting alternative possibilities structurally. If we only concentrate on our internal work while ignoring the fires burning all around us, we’ll eventually be consumed. But if we only concentrate on putting out the blaze, we’ll eventually burn out.”



ruha benjamin

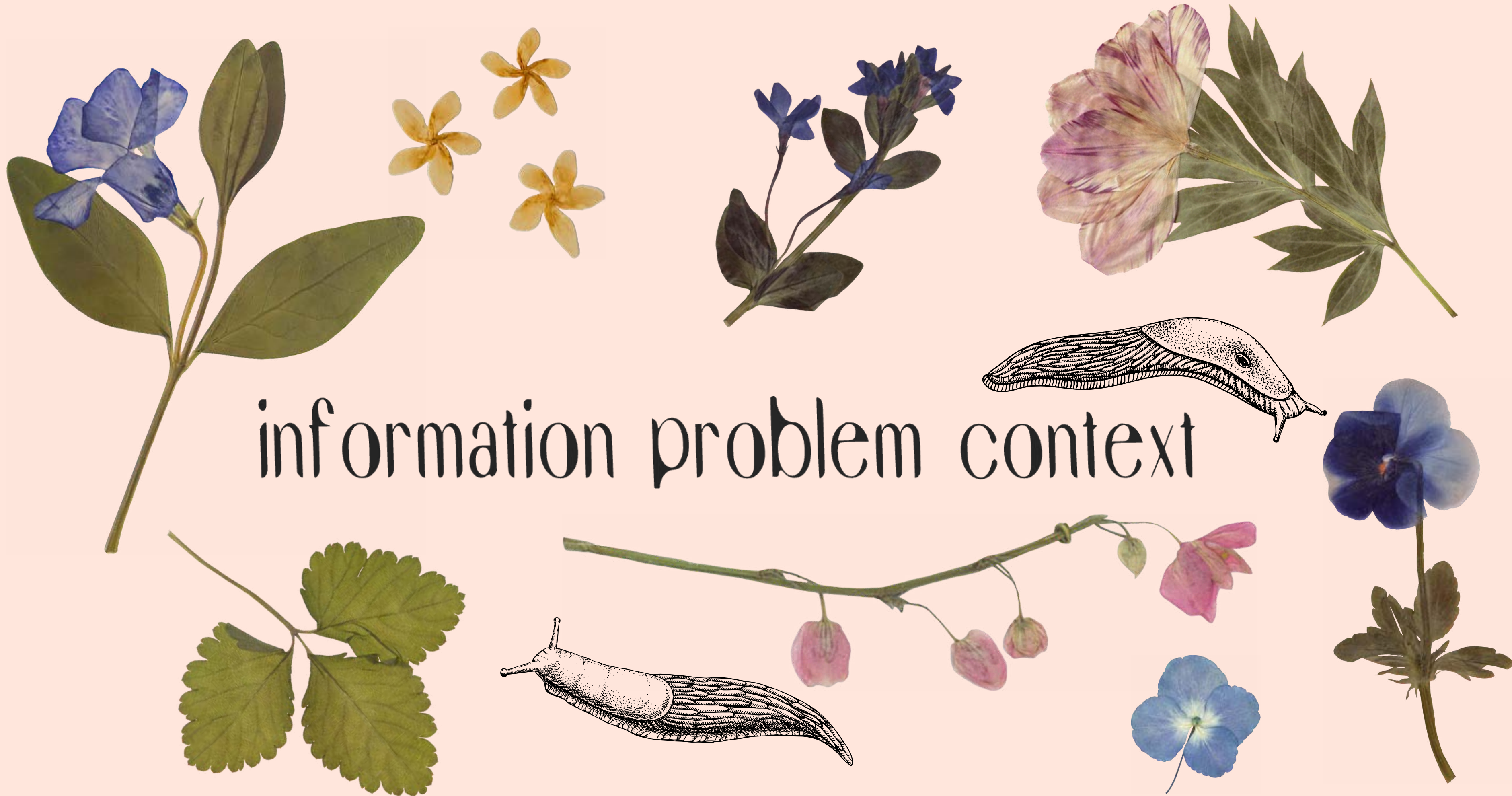
how we grow the world we want

hello!

Helping people and supporting my community is at the heart of my work, and librarianship has become the site of the actualization of this work. I graduated from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 2020 with degrees in Environmental Studies and Literature, and after reflecting on how to democratize research, I decided to pursue a Masters in Library and Information Science as well as a Graduate Certificate in Disability Studies from the University of Washington.

Throughout my time at UW, I have prioritized taking courses that address systemic issues in librarianship and focus on practical skills I can apply to my future career. I believe that my Capstone project is a culmination of everything I have learned in this program. Through my studies in disability studies, I've gained insight into the ways libraries inadvertently perpetuate ableism prevalent in higher education. Additionally, in indigenous librarianship classes, I delved into the inherent biases of traditional librarianship, deeply intertwined with whiteness and racism. These classes illuminated the potential for alternative approaches that prioritize community care. Further, in my exploration of information and social justice, I deepened my understanding of the pervasive whiteness within library systems and embraced Ruha Benjamin's concept of "seeding change," or implementing small, practical changes daily that start to shift the culture of an organization. Libraries have so much potential but have not historically created and disseminated information in ways that are accessible to everyone. I aim to help libraries reach their full potential, and I believe that advocating for and further developing trauma informed librarianship is a way to concretize this goal.





information problem context

the embedded whiteness of libraries



In Sara Ahmed's "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," the pervasive influence of whiteness in contemporary society is examined through a phenomenological lens. Ahmed uncovers how whiteness operates as an omnipresent and often invisible norm, shaping social interactions, perceptions, and power dynamics. She elucidates how whiteness extends beyond racial identity, encompassing a system of privileges and entitlements deeply embedded in everyday practices and institutions. Ahmed emphasizes the unquestioned assumption of whiteness, contrasting it with the marked marginalization of non-white identities. Furthermore, Ahmed argues that the concept of whiteness extends to physical spaces, underscoring how environments are imbued with racialized meanings and power dynamics. Spaces can be experienced as white not only due to their predominantly white occupancy but also through their reflection and reinforcement of white norms, values, and hierarchies. Ahmed contends that whiteness operates through spatial arrangements, architectural design, and the organization of social interactions within spaces, perpetuating systemic inequalities while marginalizing or excluding non-white individuals.

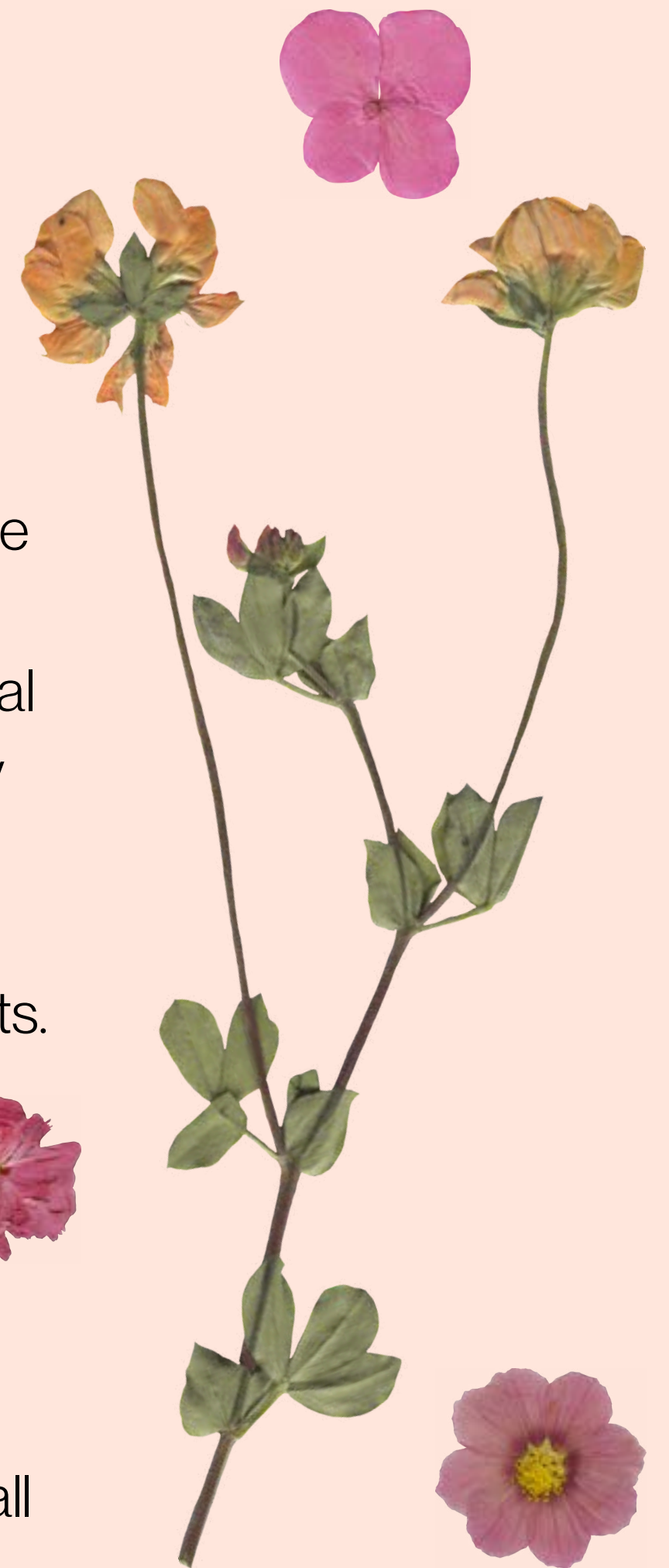
Diane Lynn Gusa further expounds on the systemic incorporation of white values, cultures, and norms within higher education, coining the term "White Institutional Presence." Gusa identifies four manifestations of White Institutional Presence in higher education: white ascendancy, monoculturalism, white blindness, and white estrangement. These phenomena uphold and perpetuate the dominance of whiteness within academic spaces, influencing everything from authoritative perspectives and curricula to interpersonal interactions and physical environments. By illustrating how academic libraries function within this framework, Gusa reveals how they mirror and perpetuate the culture of whiteness prevalent throughout the profession.

the embedded whiteness of libraries *continued*

In academic libraries, the dominance of whiteness is evident across various aspects, including staff demographics, cultural norms, physical environments, interactions, and services.

Historically, libraries have been predominantly staffed by white individuals, contributing to feelings of exclusion or marginalization among people of color. Cultural norms within libraries often uphold and reinforce white intellectual traditions and the myth of neutrality, neglecting the diverse perspectives and experiences of non-white individuals. Additionally, library spaces reflect historical and cultural norms through classical architectural features, artwork, and spatial practices that prioritize white cultural norms and values. Interactions and services provided by library staff may perpetuate racial biases or assumptions, further marginalizing non-white patrons. Collectively, these mechanisms perpetuate a culture of whiteness within academic libraries, reinforcing systemic inequalities and hindering efforts to create inclusive environments.

To address these issues, library staff must recognize and challenge the dominance of whiteness within their institutions. This involves actively promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives, critically examining cultural norms and practices, and prioritizing antiracist practices in service delivery. By fostering a deeper understanding of how whiteness operates within library contexts, librarians can work towards creating truly inclusive and equitable spaces for all patrons.



the embedded ableism of libraries



In *Academic Ableism*, Jay Dolmage critiques higher education's historical marginalization of disabled individuals, highlighting the systemic perpetuation of ableist perspectives and practices. Dolmage contends that academia reinforces structural ableism by prioritizing able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, relegating disabilities to exceptions rather than embracing them as integral components of diversity. This deficit model stigmatizes disability, positioning disabled academics as less capable and productive within academia and underscoring unrealistic standards that overlook diverse minds and bodies. Retrofitting existing structures to accommodate disabilities often falls short of creating truly inclusive environments, perpetuating structural inequalities rather than addressing underlying systemic issues.

Similarly, academic libraries have historically approached accessibility through retrofitting, focusing on enhancing existing services rather than proactively planning for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Most accessible library services concentrate on digital content accessibility for visually impaired individuals, neglecting discussions on learning or physical disabilities. This approach merely scratches the surface of accessibility, failing to fully reimagine libraries to cater to the needs of disabled patrons. By embracing collective access, which views disability as intertwined with various lived experiences and advocates for solidarity and interdependence, librarians can shift from individualistic to community-oriented approaches to accessibility. Addressing barriers within library services and instruction is essential to fostering greater accessibility and inclusivity for all members of educational communities, particularly the nearly 70% of disabled students with invisible disabilities who often go unnoticed and unsupported. By providing universally available support services and dismantling institutional barriers, libraries can facilitate positive changes and enhance accessibility for all patrons.



why trauma informed librarianship



Trauma is widespread, affecting 70% of adults in the United States, with higher prevalence among marginalized individuals, defined by experiences of discrimination based on factors such as race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and language proficiency. Marginalized populations disproportionately face various injustices, including violence, homelessness, discrimination in housing and healthcare, unemployment, poverty, wage disparities, sexual assault, human trafficking, and incarceration. These adverse experiences often lead to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, significantly impacting mental health. Moreover, marginalized individuals may also experience historical trauma, even if not directly involved, as learning about past injustices can evoke stress and anxiety, affecting their well-being and identity.

Trauma survivors may re-experience trauma when triggered by similar situations, even in library settings. These experiences can manifest as flashbacks, intrusive memories, or overwhelming feelings, prompting maladaptive coping mechanisms like dissociation, hypervigilance, and avoidance. Such symptoms can hinder academic performance and may be misinterpreted by peers and staff. Recognizing trauma symptoms enables staff to identify signs within the library and refer patrons for support.

Interpersonal conflicts may arise for individuals exhibiting trauma symptoms. Hypervigilance may lead to distrust of others, resulting in disproportionate anger. Transference, where a person triggers memories of a traumatic individual, is common, especially in academic settings where authority figures may evoke past traumas. Recognizing transference allows staff to depersonalize situations and empower individuals by focusing on present choices and experiences.

why trauma informed librarianship *continued*

A trauma informed approach is not just for patrons— it also helps library staff. A trauma informed approach utilizes a strengths-based perspective to empower individuals, emphasizing the importance of personal self-care to support healing and resilience. This approach recognizes the significance of healing within supportive communities, fostering environments that prioritize safety and trust. It actively works to prevent re-traumatization by implementing practices that promote emotional and physical safety. Trauma informed librarianship acknowledges that trauma-related symptoms and behaviors stem from adaptive responses to traumatic experiences. A trauma-informed approach also seeks to promote trauma awareness and understanding to create a more compassionate and supportive environment for all.

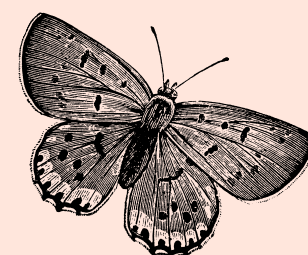
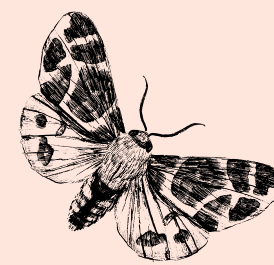
Simply put, a trauma-informed approach acknowledges that patrons' behaviors are influenced by their life experiences. Additionally, a trauma-informed approach:

- Recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and identifies potential paths toward recovery
- Identifies the signs and symptoms of trauma in individuals
- Integrates knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices
- Strives to actively prevent re-traumatization and secondary trauma





project overview



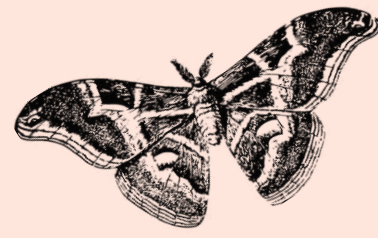
project objectives

- To make trauma informed practices more accessible to library workers.
- To demonstrate that trauma-informed librarianship can be implemented through simple, actionable steps in everyday library practices, fostering gradual but impactful change.
- To encourage library staff to critically assess the scope of their services and their approach to delivering library services.
- To continue to develop the literature around trauma informed librarianship.



The existing literature on trauma informed librarianship tends to be theoretical or geared towards large institutional changes. Much of the existing literature also focuses on public libraries solely, even though it is also essential for academic libraries to adapt trauma-informed practices. Recognizing a gap in resources for academic library workers seeking practical guidance on implementing trauma-informed care, I embarked on creating a resource tailored to their needs. College students face the same challenges and struggles as the general public— food insecurity, housing insecurity, mental health problems, discrimination. Students, faculty, staff have also experienced trauma, and their trauma also affects how they show up in the world, engage with higher education, and utilize library resources. This resource aims to address the specific structure, services, and practices of academic libraries, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. This project aligns with the concept of "seeding change," as it seeks to cultivate a shift towards trauma-informed practices within the academic library landscape, ultimately fostering greater accessibility and support for all patrons.

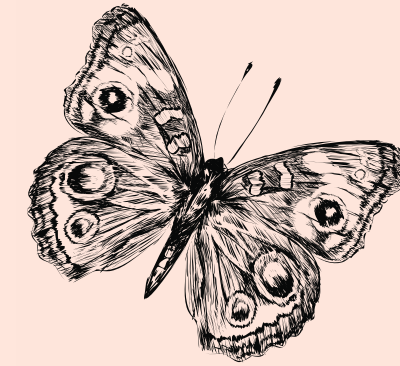
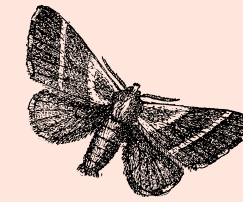
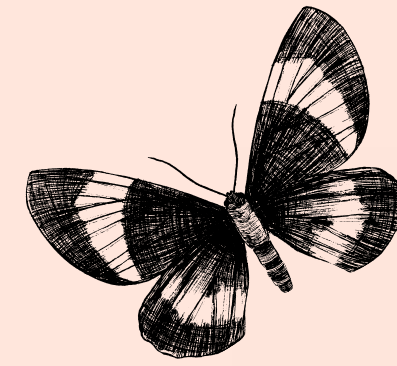
approach



Drawing from my knowledge in disability studies, indigenous librarianship, and information and social justice, I crafted this book with careful consideration.

Recognizing the privilege of accessing valuable resources through UW, I was driven to ensure that this work remains accessible to all by making it open access. It was important to me that others have the same opportunities to engage with this information, fostering a culture of inclusivity and knowledge-sharing.

My research journey began with a deep dive into various aspects of trauma-informed care, practices, and pedagogy. It began with attending a trauma-informed social work training, which provided foundational knowledge and insights. To further expand my understanding, I watched seminars and read books and articles covering topics such as trauma-informed librarianship, practices, trauma in college students, accessibility programs in higher education, nonviolent communication, de-escalation, cultural humility, to name a few. Through these endeavors, I've equipped myself with a robust understanding of trauma-informed approaches and began adapting what I learned to best be applied within library settings.



approach *continued*

Following my extensive research, I engaged in a reflective process where I distilled the essential components and contemplated their implications for librarianship. Drawing insights from trauma-informed care, pedagogy, and social work, I considered the distinct role and responsibilities of librarians within this framework. Delving into professional literature on best practices for librarians, I pondered how these principles could be adapted to create trauma-informed services tailored to the unique needs of library patrons. This reflective phase enabled me to synthesize diverse perspectives and concepts, laying the groundwork for the development of a nuanced understanding of trauma-informed librarianship.

In the writing phase, I embarked on the task of synthesizing my accumulated knowledge into a comprehensive book on trauma-informed librarianship. Striving for interactivity, I devised exercises to accompany each chapter, drawing from existing resources while also creating new ones to enhance reader engagement. Recognizing the significance of critical reflection in trauma-informed practice, I integrated thought-provoking questions throughout the book. These prompts encourage readers to introspect and evaluate their thoughts, actions, feelings, and behaviors, fostering a deeper understanding of trauma-informed principles and their application in library settings.



introduction: a call for trauma informed librarianship

The introduction serves as a clarion call for trauma-informed librarianship, advocating its necessity and outlining the rationale behind its implementation. Within this section, I present the context of the information problem, elucidating the challenges and exigencies that underscore the pressing need for a trauma-informed approach in library practices. I also provide an overview of trauma, delve into the concept of trauma-informed care, covering its principles and distinguishing it from trauma-informed practices. Furthermore, I introduce the six principles of trauma-informed librarianship that I propose, laying the foundation for a holistic understanding of how libraries can adopt a trauma-informed approach in their practices.

proposed principles of trauma informed librarianship:

- I. Mindful Navigation of Power Dynamics
- II. Open, Empathetic and Flexible Communication
- III. Proactive resistance to re-traumatization
- IV. Empowerment, Safety, and Trust
- V. Commitment to Community and Self Care
- VI. Commitment to Continual Learning



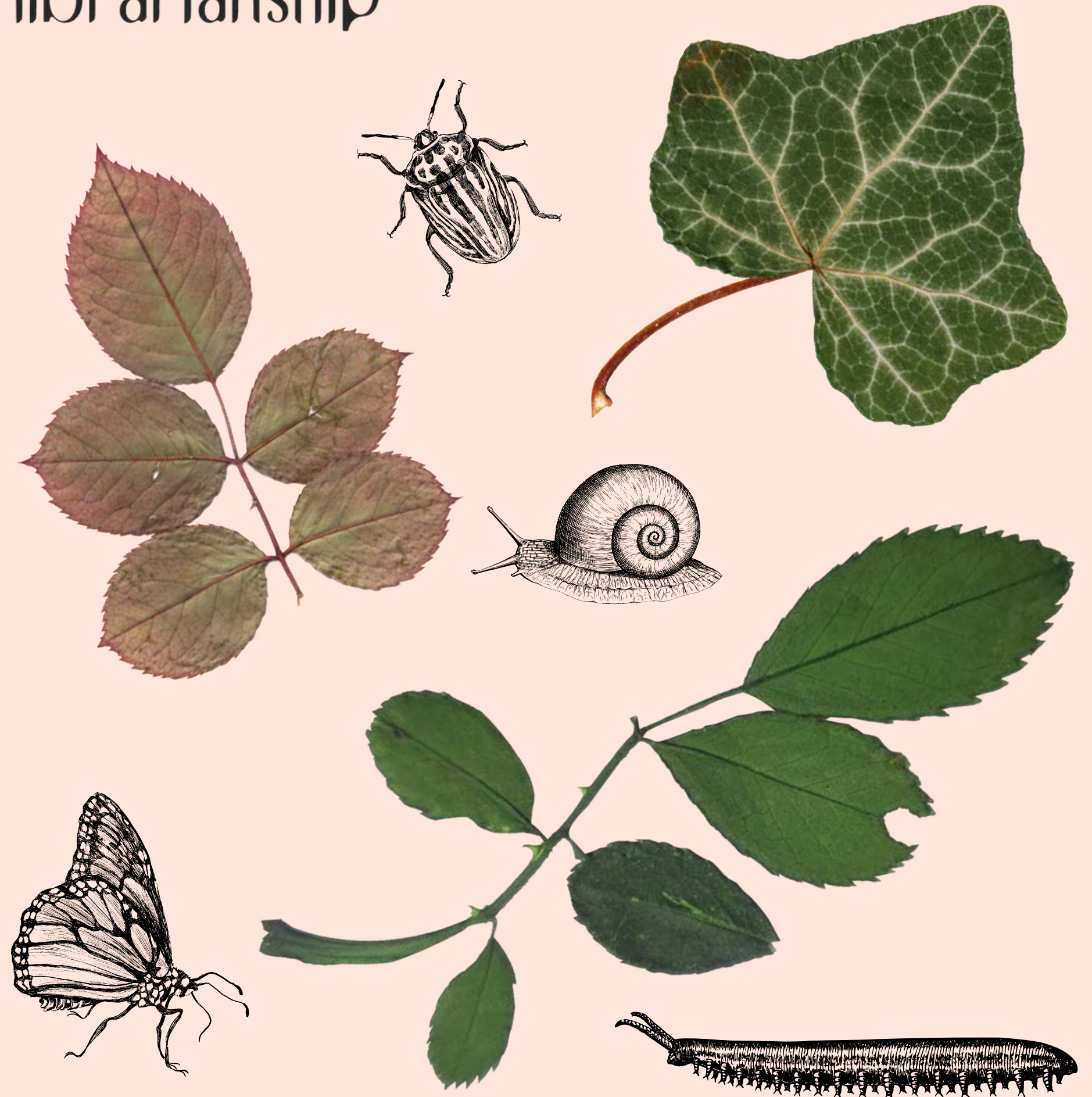
part I: the foundations of trauma informed librarianship

In the first section of this book readers delve into various aspects of trauma-informed librarianship, starting with the different types of trauma, including acute, chronic, complex, racial, generational, and historical trauma, gaining insights into their unique impacts. They will explore identification of trauma symptoms spanning cognitive, behavioral, psychological, and physical manifestations, such as intrusive thoughts and hypervigilance. The book delves into the link between trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), offering an understanding of how early-life trauma shapes later outcomes. Additionally, readers will grasp the distinction between the learning brain and survival brain modes, essential for comprehending stress responses. Beyond awareness, the book elucidates the broader framework of trauma-informed care, distinguishing it from trauma-specific practices. Readers will traverse interdisciplinary insights into trauma-informed practices across psychology, social work, medicine, education, and, importantly, librarianship. Further, they will comprehend the fundamental principles of trauma-informed care and their practical applications within library settings, recognizing the pivotal role of organizational culture in shaping practices, particularly in trauma-informed care. This guidebook also spotlights key implementation areas within libraries, including staff training, community engagement, accessibility, evaluation, cultural competence, leadership, and education. Readers will engage in reflective exercises throughout the book to assess personal and organizational readiness to adopt trauma-informed approaches, considering various factors such as governance, policies, physical environment, engagement strategies, cross-sector collaboration, and personal biases, challenges, and strengths in implementing trauma informed librarianship. Through this resource, library staff will develop strategies to infuse trauma-informed principles into library operations, fostering environments grounded in safety, trust, respect, and resilience for all patrons and staff alike.



part II: trauma informed librarianship

In the second section, readers will delve into a comprehensive understanding of trauma-informed librarianship. Readers will delve into each principle one by one, examining the theoretical underpinnings of trauma-informed librarianship, understanding how each proposed principle of trauma informed librarianship is rooted in trauma informed care, and discerning its tailored adaptations for library environments. Readers will also learn practical strategies for implementing trauma-informed approaches into everyday library practices, emphasizing their relevance and applicability within academic library settings. Through this holistic exploration, readers will emerge equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to foster trauma-informed environments that prioritize empathy, inclusivity, and accessibility within academic libraries.



part II: trauma informed librarianship *continued*

Below is an outline of each chapter and the key concepts covered:

I. Mindful Navigation of Power Dynamics

- Challenging Whiteness: Creating Inclusive Library Spaces in Trauma-Informed Practice
- Embracing Cultural Humility in Trauma-Informed Practice
- Critical reflective practices

II. Open, Empathetic and Flexible Communication

- Navigating trauma-informed communication in the library: adaptability and efficiency
- Active listening
- Nonviolence communication

III. Proactive resistance to re-traumatization

- Practicing consent and utilizing content warnings in the library
- Building empathy
- Holding yourself accountable

V. Empowerment, Safety, and Trust

- The Window of Tolerance
- De-escalation

V. Commitment to Community and Self Care

- Separating personal values and work values
- Community care and strategic partnerships
- What impact can this work have on us?
- Self-care / wellness strategies

VI. Commitment to Continual Learning

- Committing to an antiracist study
- What is racialized trauma?



insights

Here are some key takeaways from my project:



- While there is abundant literature on trauma-informed care, its adaptation to library settings is crucial for optimal implementation. Particularly, strategies and concepts from trauma-informed pedagogy offer readily adaptable frameworks for libraries.
- Despite the ideal scenario of institutional change, individual library staff members possess the agency to implement trauma-informed practices autonomously, significantly influencing their community's well-being. This has been evidenced by the impactful initiatives undertaken by individual branches within public libraries.
- Library staff must engage in critical reflection regarding the delineation between what falls within and outside the scope of their services. Given the central role of libraries in higher education, they wield considerable potential to positively impact students' overall well-being and academic success by proactively addressing their holistic needs and facilitating access to resources conducive to their advancement.



project experience

This project has been an immense undertaking, but I am very proud in what I have accomplished and all of the knowledge I've gained throughout this experience. The end result is a 55,000 word book, and it required significant dedication, time, and effort, but I'm genuinely pleased with the outcomes achieved and the insights garnered along the way.

I'm excited to share something I've created that I'm truly proud of and hope will be widely used. It encapsulates my passion for the field and reflects what I've learned during my time at the iSchool. Drawing on my experiences in various positions in UW libraries, directed fieldworks, and courses, I've synthesized my understanding of library operations, accessibility, and social justice. This project not only aligns with my interests but also represents the culmination of my academic journey.



next steps

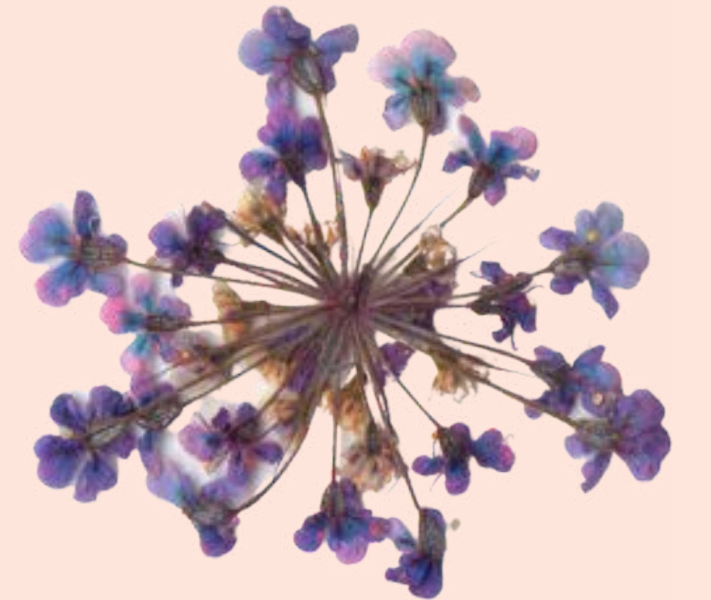
In terms of immediate next steps, I've begun connecting with individuals actively involved in trauma-informed librarianship, as well as librarians and faculty at UW to expand awareness and utilization of my book.

More long term, I am committed to furthering my engagement with trauma-informed librarianship, continuously expanding my knowledge base and contributing to the literature. My aim is to remain at the involved in this evolving field, actively seeking opportunities for professional development and research. I hope that this work can help libraries to realize their full potential as sanctuaries of support and inclusivity. Through ongoing study, collaboration, and advocacy, I endeavor to catalyze positive change within library environments, ensuring they remain steadfast bastions of empathy and accessibility for all individuals.





conclusion





“In this series of decisions, we observe the convergence of many different factors: a professor’s decision to encourage reading outside the canon, a student’s decision to bring those insights to bear at his university, a lab director’s decision to act beyond the conventions of scientific norms, a medical institute’s decision to put its money where its mission statements are—realizing lofty ideas about diversity and inclusion by reckoning with the history of racism in science and medicine.

All of these might seem like small steps, but together they are trying to shift how institutions operate. This by no means repairs the harm that has been done... [E]ach of these decisions bucks the status quo, helps to seed different possibilities, and gives us an example of how change can unfold. Crucially, none of these were top-down phenomena where powerful institutions... simply decided to do the right thing. They entailed numerous smaller actions . . . viral justice.”



ruha benjamin
how we grow the world we want

After reading my book, I hope readers grasp the profound impact of trauma-informed librarianship, which extends far beyond mere accessibility for trauma survivors. It serves as a transformative pathway for embedding anti-racist and anti-ableist practices within library services.

Trauma-informed librarianship represents a fundamental shift in the ethos of libraries, going beyond traditional notions of accessibility. It signifies a dedication to creating environments that not only accommodate trauma survivors but actively challenge systems of racism and ableism. By prioritizing the experiences and needs of marginalized communities, trauma-informed practices become catalysts for constructing more equitable and inclusive library spaces. Through deliberate anti-racist and anti-ableist initiatives, libraries can emerge as potent forces for social change, advocating for justice, dignity, and empowerment for all patrons.

I also hope that readers feel empowered to seed change throughout their institution. While organizational change remains the ultimate goal, it can be challenging to achieve, and we may not always influence organizational decisions. However, we retain agency over our actions and interactions with patrons. Even in the absence of organizational endorsement, we can still instigate change within our community and gradually steer our organization towards a trauma-informed approach through our individual impact, as these actions aim to reshape institutional norms and cultivate environments of healing and equity. While they may not fully rectify past injustices, each decision challenges the status quo, promotes alternative approaches, and serves as a model for transformative change.

