

## Ep 15 - Catalyzing a Community Led Future at the Free Library of Philadelphia with Andrea Lemoins - Transcript

AJ: Allison Jones

KN: Karen Ng

AL: Andrea Lemoins [@ALemoins](#)

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AJ: Welcome to the Organizing Ideas podcast. I'm Allison.

KN: And I'm Karen and we are two new librarians and archivists, and your hosts for this podcast.

AJ: Together, we're taking a closer look at the relationships between organizing information and community organizing, how libraries and archives are never neutral, and what we mean when we say that knowledge is power. We are recording on the unceded and ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

KN: Today our guest is Andrea Lemoins. Andrea is the Community Organizer at the Free Library in Philadelphia, and an Asset Based Community Development practitioner looking to support communities in preserving their local memory institutions. She is currently enrolled in the Masters of Library and Information Science program at Clarion University of Pennsylvania.

And we're really excited to talk to her about her work in community organizing, community archives, and professionalization, and white supremacy, and Afrofuturism.

AJ: It's a good episode. Have fun listening.

KN: Whee !

<intro music>

KN: So Andrea, you're the Community Organizer at the Free Library in Philadelphia. So we've mostly been interviewing a lot of people from Vancouver and I think our listener base is mostly people in Vancouver. Can you tell us about Philadelphia and what is the Free Library? Is it the public library? I remember when I first went to Philly in the summer I was not sure why it was called, like, the *Free* Library.

AL: Yeah, that's a question that everyone asks. So I'll give you a little bit of a background of Philadelphia and then I'll go into why it's called the Free Library. So Philadelphia in American history, it is one of the oldest cities in the nation. It was the city where, that was the centre of the revolution. So it was the nation's capital during our revolution from the English. Our

constitution was written here. A lot of American history is based on battles and political decisions that were decided here in Philadelphia. That gives you kind of a background to it. People come here to visit the Liberty Bell. William Penn was a founder and designed the city. The city is based on, I wanna say, Versailles or a part of Paris, the way it's designed. We're twin cities. So you see a lot of that, the way the design of the city is and how old it is. Also, just as you know, just to kind of give you some background on where I work at, Philadelphia is the sixth largest city in the United States. It is about 1.6 million people. I wanna say it's about 43% Black as well. So there's a large Black population in the city. It's about 34% whites, and then you go down Latinx, Asian, API populations.

[4:22]

The reason why the Free Library is called the Free Library is because the history of libraries in the United States. One of the first libraries that was opened was here in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin. But it was a club. And so you actually had to pay to have access to the library. And so people brought their books together, old rich white guys, brought their books together. They'd share their books, share their knowledge. And for people who wanted to join the club, you had to pay. And so when public libraries actually began founded in Philadelphia, people put the term free in front of it so they knew that it was actually open to the public and you could come and you didn't have to be a member. So Free Library still sticks. People know that, like this is not, we're not going to charge you. This is open to the public, this is your library. You can come in. So that kind of gives you a background to the city, the general population makeup right now, and also why the library is called the Free Library.

AJ: Awesome, thank you. So what do you do as a Community Organizer for the library?

AL: Oh that's a very good question. As far as I know—I asked quite a few people that I work with and people in this library system—the group that I work with are really the first real community organizers hired for a library system in the United States. Of course there's librarians who do community outreach, but we are not librarians. We really focus on doing community engagement in the library. The vast majority of my job is really being a connector. Our public libraries in Philadelphia are drastically underfunded, which I think is a general issue with most public libraries. Our staff is really spread thin. And so my job technically is with the Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation. So there's a foundation which is a nonprofit that is a fundraising arm for the public library and so they're actually able to get grants to help support different positions. So my job is—I think all of our jobs as community organizers—is grant funded. And so we support library staff and building relationships with community. My goal is really to focus on equitable relationships. There's a lot of people with privilege who come to fundraisers and sit on boards and have a lot of say so in how the libraries are run. So my job is to make sure that the people who live in the community around the library and actually visit the library have a say so and have a voice in the library. Like, what kind of programming, how it's run, what the priorities are. And I really focus on building—help strengthen relationships with different nonprofits and community members with library staff, and make sure that the library is community led in its decisions and in its programming. Does that make sense?

AJ: That totally makes sense. It's the first library that you know of in the US with community organizers—I haven't heard of anywhere in Canada where that's a thing.

AL: I was gonna ask.

AJ: Yeah, it's really like community librarian, community led libraries kind of thing. There are some places where I've seen that those postings make the MLIS, the librarian degree training sometimes optional or a preferred thing. So maybe they hire people in who aren't librarians to do that kind of work, but no, nobody who's a community organizer. And do you want to talk about the difference between those two things?

AL: Oh yeah.

AJ: The difference between a community organizer and a community librarian?

AL: Yeah so what I understand, actually in my master's program, my first class, I actually was talking with someone who is a community librarian. And even though I understand that they're really focusing on community engagement, I think it's still has a lot of—in my personal experience—it still carries a lot of the settler baggage that is very prominent in library staff and kind of what you're taught in library school of: I have this education, I have this know-how. This is kind of what I think is best for the community. Where, coming as a community organizer, I don't have that at all. As a community organizer, I—and also too, a sidenote, I come from a union organizing background, which the vast majority of my coworkers do too. We just come with a very different power dynamic. We see power dynamics much more clearly and that's a big part of my job. So I would say the biggest difference, I think, is viewing what the power dynamic is and how it can be shifted. I respect staff, it's amazing, they do a great job. Staff is also community. They're also people living in neighbourhoods with their local library. And how can we make sure that staff and as community and as community voices are actually prioritized over the typical status quo of, I'm an academic, I've done all this studying and I know what's best for you. So I think the biggest difference is really this. My job is actually to break down the status quo and actually have community led voices outside the institution, instead of supporting the goals of the institution. Have y'all really worked more in depth with librarians who were community engagement librarians? What's your experience with that position too? Because I'm curious to hear that.

AJ: Yeah, I don't actually work in that position and my background before library school is maybe more similar to yours in that I was involved in organizing a union in my past workplace, other kinds of community organizing and that was for me, also an avenue into deciding to go to library school and working in libraries. Now that I've graduated and am working in a public library that is really trying to shift towards doing community led work, I am seeing the gaps between these two things much more clearly than I did when studying or thinking about this as a more abstract thing I might do.

KN: Can you talk a little about some of the challenges between community organizing work and community librarians? What is the communication the two?

AL: Well I think, maybe if I could rephrase your question. So I haven't had that much experience working with community engagement librarians. We don't really have them on the staff that I'm working on. So maybe are you asking, what's the difference in communication style between librarians and the general public librarian in the community?

KN: Or could you talk about, maybe your relationship with translating your work to say, other librarians at the Free Library?

AJ: You're doing community work, you're organizing, you're building relationships. It sounds to me like you go back to the library and that's where the librarians are doing their work. How do you interface?

KN: Yeah.

AL: Oh! Yeah that makes sense because that is I think a pretty big issue. So I will say that there has been, to be honest, there has been a lot of push back on the community organizers within the institution. It hasn't been this you know, wonderful, oh we're welcoming. So when we got hired, with these grants to actually do this work, but it's very new to the library profession. The language is very different, right? What you were saying, I'm talking to community. I will say this, I am blue collar, middle class, there's a certain language and a certain even aesthetic to just being who I am. The people who I work with in the community, which typically in Philadelphia—Philadelphia has the highest level of poverty in any large city in the United States. So when we're talking about those class differentials—we're talking about race differentials and class differentials. It's a really tough interface to be like, hey community really values this, right? Like this is what they value, this is what they say they want. Between when you go to an academic setting, where people are like, well statistically, this is what this community needs. Right? <laughter> Yeah, so there's two completely different things that are happening. Also, when we talk about—I wanna hear your experiences too with working in a library that's trying to be more community-led because one of the issues I find with interfacing is...like say I go out in the community and I hear that there's a wonderful person on the block who's been helping people write their resumes. Right, like, people are like oh my next door neighbour has this talent, and helped me write this resume, and now I have this job. And I'm like that would be something great to bring to the library. Like, here's a community member who has this talent who understands what jobs are available in the neighbourhood, has been shown to help their neighbours out. However, this person doesn't have the correct credentials, right? They might not have like, this wonderful resume, and the credentials that the library staff thinks that makes you qualified to actually run a program or teach a class on how to help someone with their resume. So that is where I feel like that's where the interfacing and where the communication has been very difficult and has been a lot of pushback on. Because it goes back to something like—like we talked a lot about in the class that we had this last summer, Karen, was that professionalization.

[12:59]

KN Voiceover: Hello this is Karen from editing. Andrea is referring to a week-long course that we both got to take through the Rare Book School in June 2019 in Philadelphia. The course was called [Community Archives and Digital Cultural Memory](#), facilitated by Bethany Nowviskie. I will provide a link to the [reading list](#), which will also be available in the transcript and shownotes. All of the readings should be available in open access, but send me an email if you can't access any of them and I will see if I still have the PDFs on my computer. I definitely did not read all of the readings because there are very many, but it is so good. I will say that the Rare Book School is very expensive; there are very generous [scholarships](#) (which is why I got to go) so if you are very interested I would look into those scholarships that you can apply to go through.

AL: I admit when I took, when me and Karen took the Rare Books class, I admit I was blown away. I don't think I quite understood when we were questioning professionalization, what that meant. But now that I'm in school and I've been trying to talk to other people doing community archive work and really talking more in depth with librarians, what that means. I think I didn't realize how much that was a class barrier. Like saying, like talking about professionalization in the library industry. Yeah, it didn't occur to me that class difference was really what was butting up against each other and now I see it. And so I don't know if I really have an answer to your question, like how that works, but I can say it's been really difficult trying to communicate back and forth and make these connections and I think what I've been trying to do is really build strong and honest relationships with staff in order to bring them along.

AJ: Yeah.

AL: Because that's what's going to change. Because community is great. This is my thing. Community is always great. It isn't the community that's any kind of issue. It's the institution that's the issue. It's the institution that has the issues and needs to change and adjust.

KN: Right.

AL: Yeah. I don't know if that answers your question. <laughter>

KN: No, that was really interesting. Thank you.

AJ: To bounce off that, because you're asking what's it like in a library that's trying to move towards community led work and I think that's exactly the same tension around the institution and what its role is in the community. Because, similar to you, I think of community organizing, it's explicitly political. You're analyzing power relationships. You're strategizing, you're advocating for social change, right? You're pushing against racism and classism and sexism and all of those kind of things, whereas uh...like, libraries are, at least the way that public libraries are structured here in BC, is that they're very much state institutions, right? We're funded by the municipality, and although many librarians individually are people who may have a power analysis, or a personal idea of what they think social justice is or whatever. Professionally they are so committed to this idea of neutrality that it creates a lot of tension and I think that that's something I'm feeling myself in watching colleagues struggle

and going and doing, or trying to do this community led work, is that... For example, the city that I work in, one of the big issues is that there's a housing crisis and there's a lot of development going on in that city and gentrification and the demographics are changing really drastically and people are being pushed out of their neighbourhoods and are organizing to fight against that. To me, if I was a community organizer in that city that would be a thing to work on, power relationships, but the library isn't really there. The library doing community led work is more like okay, how can we host a debate about housing crisis, or create dialogue or offer people resources for finding housing, stuff like that. And those things have a place and it's important to have conversations as a community and things like that, but it's very different than a community organizer responding to gentrification and a housing crisis.

AL: Yes. Yeah. That's right. We could talk about this forever because that is very much, our roles as community organizers—I'm one of six on the team. Our jobs are extremely, our jobs are completely political. They hire these very political people to work in a system that has been trying to be, we're open and free for all, you know. I don't know if I've ever heard people at the Philadelphia library, in this library system, refer to being neutral. But I hear people trying to be not biased. And they use that in a certain term. But that's not what's happening in our community and that's not what our community wants from this space. How can you actually... And it's not so much actually frontline workers. Often it's staff or administrative, higher ups, who are really disconnected from what's going on at the community branch libraries. That's the struggle. The struggle is, and even within that, it's class. It's people who don't live in this neighbourhood, who don't have the same struggles as other people and trying to get them to see how other people are struggling with their lives and have empathy, is a really big challenge. It's just like all the issues that we're having politically in real life, it's just that the microcosm is at the library.

AJ: Totally.

AL: So this job that I have, it's really, it's difficult to walk that fine line, but it's also very rewarding to see when things shift and when things work. So yes, it's a tough decision and I think it's also too, one of those things where institutions tend to want to make a quick easy change when this is a very long-term, deep...it's not wide, it's deep. This is a long-term, deep, institutional change. Community organizers have only been working for the Free Library system for three years. I don't know how long they plan—because we're grant funded—so I don't know how long these jobs are going to go, like how long we'll be here. It's long-term work.

KN: Could you talk a bit more about that? I remember when I met you in the summer, you said you had just started in your position a year or two ago, and I think you said you were on a term if I remember that correctly?

AL: Yes.

KN: Is that still the case and how is that a challenge for working? Like you said, it is a very long-term thing, it's not like, oh we'll just slap a bandaid on it and then it'll go away. Yeah.

AL: Yeah, that's part of the challenge too. So I am, I think they switched me onto a different grant. So starting in April I'm on a three year grant. So I believe that's April 2022? So a big part of my job, no one has explicitly said it, but I see the value in this work is how do I take the work that we're doing that is meaningful and impactful for community members and institutionalize it? So that is where I feel like the relationships, building relationships with staff, like frontline staff, is really important because how can we make this work sustainable past whatever grant funding or whatever this position is. I'm really lucky that the direct staff that I work with—so I work in a specific area. I work in Southwest Philadelphia. So a little background about the Free Library too. We live in a large urban city. So there are fifty-four locations. Fifty-four branches.

AJ: Whoa.

AL: Yeah, it's impressive. It is large. There's a lot of people, there's a lot of moving pieces. So in order to make it manageable, the administration broke it up into what they call clusters. So it's pretty much neighbourhoods, places that have similar, geographical areas. It's pretty much naturally how the city's fairly broken up anyway, how people would break up the city. So I work in Southwest Philadelphia. The staff that I work with is extremely—they're just dedicated to this work. They're very much dedicated into being community led and into community engagement. Quite a few of the library assistants live in this area. They are able to walk or easily take the bus to work. So for them this is personal work as well. You're living and working in the same neighbourhood. I personally have a lot of support. So I am working with the leadership in my cluster and in my area, and how we can make certain programs sustainable. So for instance, at this one program I'm working at, at this one library Paschalville, it's through an IMLS, that's the—it's a federal grant here in the United States and it's the Institute of Museum and Library Services. They provide a grant at this library that I'm working at and it literally is for us to do the asset based community development. So we are actually looking at all the amazing things going on in this community. And building on that instead of building on what typically seen as needs and negatives. So we have these story circles that we've been working on where we have themes that are suggested by community members and we invite community members to come out and just share their stories with each other. And so it really is just a community building practice and people love it. It's very beloved and so we're trying to figure out how we take something that I'm doing with this grant and build it into the programming and cultures of the library where we have funding, sustainable, and train staff on how to do it, and facilitate it and lead it. So that's just an example of things that we're trying to do to make it sustainable, but that's a huge question. I mean that's really up in the air. Unfortunately that's a huge problem with grants, right. All these foundations and different people jump on these bandwagons and it sounds really great but it's just like, this dumping and leaving in a community, it's not really long-term investment in a community. So I think that's a whole another conversation to be had about the nonprofit industrial complex.

AJ: Mhm. And it relates to another episode we had on the podcast before about precarious work.

AL: Yes.

AJ: And I can only imagine that the kind of people working in the community organizing positions like you're saying are people who are coming from lived experiences who are like, perhaps more marginalized in certain ways than the library staff as a whole and are being put into these short-term positions instead of permanent roles, which is another problem to have. Like it's similar in some ways to the diversity residencies that we were talking about, right? It looks good for institutions to do community led work at this moment in time and they hire people who are really good at doing it, but not with no security long-term.

AL: Yes. Yeah. That's really big issue. I mean when we look at...I don't know what it's like in British Columbia, but here... There are all things you can look at. There's lots of newspaper articles about what's going on in the library system in Philadelphia. Yeah, the more sustainable, steady work tends to be given to...higher paid work tends to be given to white women.

AJ: Yeah.

AL: They're the ones with the steady employment. Mhm.

<transition music>

KN: Part of the precarious nature also maybe relates to, like we talked about professionalization and accreditation and you know, having that master's degree, which is already you know a huge barrier. It's a lot of time, it's a lot of money. And I think even people being aware that it exists and that it's an option. That's another thing. We talked about professionalization in that community archives class at Rare Books, and you just finished your first term, right, with the MLIS?

AL: Mhm.

KN: Do you wanna talk a little about how that experience was, or if that's changed, or any thoughts that you have now that you started it?

AL: Yeah. Library school is not—I know, people are like don't call it that. I'm gonna call it that. Library school is <laughter> is very interesting. It's not what I thought it was going to be. If anything, I got a lot of warning. So I will say there are quite a few Black, female librarians that I work with in this system who have just been so caring and so supportive. I can't even tell you how much I really appreciate them with my job and really care for them. Everyone that gave me advice to go to library school, and the school I decided to go to—I'm also a state school person, no offense to anyone listening about private schools, but I believe in public schools and I believe in a state school. So that's just my personal value system, so I will always go to public and state schools. But when I started my—I'm going part-time because I have to. I live under capitalism, I have to work full-time so that's all I can do is go to school part-time to pay the bills. My first two professors are POC, are people of colour. And I told my coworkers, they're like that never happens, what's happening in library school,



where are you going? <laughter> And I've been very surprised. I was prepared for just lots of whiteness, lots of blandness, here's how you're a librarian, and to start school and I have one professor—and I'll also give you two a heads up, I'm online. So I think it changes the dynamic. I think if I was in person in classes I'd probably hear a lot more responses, or see a lot more responses. But for one professor to straight up be like, no question, we're using everyone's pronouns and respect everyone's gender in this class. And I was like *oh*, I'm down for this, alright, let's do this. And not one peep, no one said anything. Not one push back, not nothing. But I think it would be—would a pushback be written form, it would be in a text or a chat, so I think everyone's like, people were too scared to push back on it? But everyone has been doing it. People are just like no question, we're gonna respect everyone's pronouns, gender, no questions. And I'm like this is great. I didn't think this is what would happen in library school. I have another professor you know, talk about how capitalism commodifies information and how do we as librarians, discuss that with patrons who are looking for information, say, not at the library, and there's always paywalls and all these barriers to actually accessing information. And I'm like, let's also have a discussion about that. We had a great discussion in class about how the profession perceives us, librarians as being these wonderful angels of information when libraries historically and in nature very much pick and choose what information have access to. There's this myth of this free access and resource, important information, and how it's met and how it's not really true, and how we can actually advocate in our everyday lives to address boundaries to people who are racialized, to people who are maybe differently abled. How do we make sure that everyone actually has access to information that they need? So it's been an eye-opening experience. It actually gave me hope. I didn't go in with that much hope to library school. And so now I'm full of hope and I feel like I picked the right school for me. So it's a really good fit. So yes, this is a shout out to Clarion University. And then <laughter> This is what it's been so far, it's been great.

AJ: Amazing!

AL: My advisor is also—she's an older white woman and she's been really hearing me talk about working with... I'm specifically focused on Black people, descendants of enslaved people in the United States with community archives. That's my focus. She has been wonderfully supportive and completely understood... I was talking to her about Afrofuturism. You know, from [Rasheedah Phillips](#) from our class, Karen, and she was on it. She's like, oh I love her, all these things. I'm like oh this white girl's on it. This is so great. I've been really happy with my school. I was very shocked. So yeah, so school has been really interesting. Although I did just last month, I initially went in with a focus on archives. And just last month I decided to drop it. And yes, it was because that's when it hit me, Karen, all those conversations about the professionalization of the field. And how that could really affect community archives. Because I tried to volunteer with a few different groups in Philly who said that they were you know, inclusive, and they were fighting white supremacy in their archives, and they were supporting Black lives. I tried to volunteer or get involved with them and every group was led by white, cis, hetero women who were extremely fragile and did not want to change their practices to fit the communities they said they were serving. Every single group, and I was like I am not getting into this. This is not what I'm choosing, this is not what I want. When I on the daily basis from work, can just go to different community

meetings and work with wonderful, beautiful, Black community members who are already doing the work, who already have their systems in place. And just need space to do what they need to do, when I know I can provide them for them as a public librarian. I know I can do that. So I'm just like why am I going to try to learn this white supremacist system when there's people already out here doing the work? So that was a big change for me, and I get it, that class, that was one of those things I was like months later, oh I get this from that Rare Books class. I get what was happening. I truly get how deep that conversation was, but didn't at the time. And I am choosing not to engage with archives. Not on that level in that white professional way. Not in that. Not in that way.

KN: Thank you.

<laughter>

AL: Any thoughts that y'all have on that? Or, because I'm curious to hear what your experiences are, but I just. I'm in Philly. It's a large Black population and I'm just like, you white women do not want to engage. You say you do but your actions show that you do not truly want. Like, they don't want to be in other people's time schedules, they want things to look a certain way, there's only a certain kind of materials that they want. Black communities really focus on oral history, and I'm like if you're not down for oral history, you're not down for community archives. They're not willing to meet people where they're at. And so I'm curious about your experiences with that too.

KN: I don't have very many experiences with community archives, but I do find with archival studies, I think this is maybe also just the struggle with being a student and entering the field and not...and just learning about the field and kind of realizing oh, this is what it is. And Allison and I both started with the dual archival studies and the library degree, they're separate. We both started with archives together, and then when we switched, next term we did libraries. This one, Allison, <laughter> decided to drop it, and I'm sticking it out. But, Allison do you want to talk a bit more about...?

AJ: I really relate to pretty much everything you're saying. I'm not Black, but I also came in with a real interest in community archives and felt that the way archival studies is being taught in our program is just, definitely very Eurocentric, super focused on the written record, extremely narrow-minded and prescriptive in terms of how things are done and what kind of experience and knowledge is validated and yeah. And I felt similarly that I felt that there's actually a lot of space within public libraries and libraries to do community-based work. Libraries also have a lot of that history and a lot of those problems, but...

KN: But I find with libraries and librarians, it's more open to at least I think, considering, re-considering you know, more traditionally ways of thinking. I found that with archival studies, it was, for me it was really hard to challenge because I just didn't really know anything about it. It felt off, but also for me, coming to graduate school, I'm very much taught to respect authority and not to [unintelligible], especially being a first generation student, it's very much, oh I just have to appreciate being here. But I think like, what Allison said, there's

so much focus on the written record, so much of my undergrad was built on how do I be a real English major and how do I fit in?

AJ: For me I do think that the two professions also have a different attitude to being questioned, and to people asking questions. The other thing that really helped me make that decision was doing a professional experience where I was working mostly with archives, and feeling very cut off from communities even in a position that had way more working with community groups than most archival positions. And in public libraries, like, even in a very traditional public library setting, you're working with people a lot, very regularly. Even if you're like very traditional, on a reference desk, answering questions kind of thing, you're interacting with people and you're used to people asking questions and encouraging people to ask questions and think about things in different ways. Whereas I felt like in the archives program, it was like, the professional role is to...

KN: Preserve this piece of paper.

AJ: Preserve this piece of paper, and force other people to be confused, to try to figure out what they wanna do.

KN: There wasn't a lot of consideration of really...there was like, where did it come from? But also, there's so many ways different ways of generating a 'documentary heritage' and it seemed like the way, at least our archives program was formed, it worked for you know, maybe certain institutions, but the world isn't one government institution. But anyway.

AJ: Which is why it's really cool that your instructors were both POC and that you're getting encouragement to ask those questions and talk about capitalism, talk about white supremacy, talk about how to build spaces that are positive and inclusive for trans people.

AL: Yeah!

AJ: Amazing.

<laughter>

AL: And y'all are added to the list of people who were like, are you serious, did you talk about this? I actually took pictures of the slides and sent them to coworkers, like can you believe this? This is in a lecture, we're having this conversation, and yeah. And really pushing back. So one class too, we were talking about reference service, the questions like, what would you do if someone came up and asked you how to build an atomic bomb. That basic, how would you operate with that question? And of course here I am, I'm the oddball, I'm just...you answer the question. You give them the information. No average person knows how to build an atomic bomb, they're just curious. You give them the information. But people in the class were like, oh that's dangerous and you should be scared. And then it didn't really occur to me how much, I keep forgetting that people come from a lot of fear. And that they project that fear on so many other people. One of my professors gave some pushbacks, it's your job as a librarian to support people's curiosities and help support them find things. I

actually, on the blog post, I got a lot of pushback from people being like, you shouldn't give out information willy-nilly. And I'm like we're studying to be librarians! Is this seriously like, what you're coming at? You're trying to control the information instead of giving people the information? Not to say there aren't those people in my classes, but my professors have been giving really, I feel like, been really pushing back on that fear of othering people. Just in general, and it's been really refreshing. So I hope this is part of the continuation of the rest of my program because I still have a year and a half left. I will keep y'all up to date as I head along.

KN: It sounds like you're starting off really well.

AL: Yeah thank you. I'm happy with my decision. This is where I wanna be in. I also feel like I work in a place where we can ask those questions too. I have really supportive staff in the area that I work at, constantly questioning how are we really fulfilling the mission of being librarians and being a public librarian, and how are we really encouraging curiosity and encouraging question-asking, what you were talking about, Allison. So I do see that and I do see that, back to what you were saying, Allison, as a big difference between archives and public librarianship. I saw that too when I started volunteering and working with groups. I just can't, if I can't ask you questions, I can't be here. And people are like, I don't understand. I'm a community organizer, this is not how I roll, this is not who I am.

<transition music>

KN: Can you talk about the support that you've been receiving in the workplace and at school? How has that helped you and uplifted your work?

AL: Oh, that has been so important. I mean, when you think about the relationships you have at work. I mean, I'm spending forty hours a week with people. If I didn't have their support I wouldn't be able to get the work done, which I think maybe speaks to Allison, what you were saying, your library with community led initiatives. If staff isn't behind it, nothing is going—staff has to be a hundred percent behind it, or nothing is going to happen because you need that support. This is a lot of emotional work. This kind of work is, is a labour of love, it's a labour of just working with community to give birth to these wonderful ideas and actions. It's very political. It can be emotionally exhausting. Facilitation is a very exhausting act. The whole space for people to hold emotion for people. Really having supporting staff who understand that and understand how emotional this work is, and who are willing to be in it with you, to stand in space with community and all fight for the same thing. That's a lot, it's very important. I've just been really lucky. I could not do the work if it wasn't for staff supporting me.

AJ: Very cool. We've touched on white supremacy a couple times, it's come up with archives stuff, the history of libraries in Philly.

AL: Yeah, a lot of Carnegie libraries, lots. I'm in one right now.

AJ: Karen also shared with me this piece that I guess you two read for your course.

KN: For Andrea and I, we took Community Archives and Digital Cultural Memory with Bethany Nowviskie through the Rare Book School in June 2019. One of the first readings was [Yusef Omowale's piece, "We Already Are."](#) And I remember you talking at length about how important this piece was to you.

AL: Yeah.

KN: Could you talk about that again now for us?

AL: Yes, yes! Well first of all, that reading list from that class. I've shared that with so many people. That reading list was life-changing. There's that, even that other one, "Lady Bountiful" by Michelle Caswell.

KN Voiceover: Hello it's me again from editing. The article that Andrea is talking about is called ["The Legacy of Lady Bountiful: White Women in the Library" and it's by Gina Schlesselman-Tarango](#). Michelle Caswell did not write that one, but she was also featured many times in the reading list.

AL: I've shared that with so many people. I'm just like white supremacy, white women in the library, this is your thing, this is your issue. But, "We Already Are" by Yusef Omowale, and I do, I read it constantly. I love that it's a treatise and a list of demands, which I think is so powerful. I don't think I've ever read... I've read quite a few articles or blog posts by Black archivists talking about the level of white supremacy in the system. But I've yet to read one that was just like, this is a list of things that we can do to actually really change how we as Black people view ourselves in the archive, which I thought was really interesting. And also, the first real thing I read about white supremacy just pretty much in librarianship that really talked about refusing. And like, the power of saying no, and I'm not going to engage with this, which is also one of my favourite things that I've been really working on personally. What hit me the most was that, there's so many things, it's the refusal to acknowledge that white people say that we're not in the archives when we are. It's about whose archives are you talking about, how dare you erase me from my own history. And how diversity and inclusion is very much used by a lot of white academics. I feel like a lot of white academics use diversity, inclusion, as a tool to really, to not talk about the real issues of anti-Blackness, and institutional racism. It's almost like a diversion. Oh, let's talk about equity and inclusion, and I'm like no, let's talk about me being here and existing, but you not wanting me to exist. That's the real conversation. So that article is just, it's beautiful to me, I read it all the time. I quote it all the time. One of my favourite quotes from it is, acknowledging people who are not chosen by imperialism. You know? I will say this, I'm sure I will get lots of hate back for it, acknowledging people who are not the Beyonces and Jay-Zs, right? People who are not chosen as passing enough to be accepted into white culture. How do we as people working to support memory institutions tell our stories and keep our stories and keep our stories of people who are outside of the white gaze? Of Black people who do not fit into this idea of Blackness that white people have constructed. That article is just so powerful, talking about as we ourselves, we have the strength, and we have the talent, and we have the knowledge for ourselves, and living outside of the white gaze, which I don't feel like a lot of Black

archivists are really talking about. I feel like a lot of Black archivists are talking about the experience [unintelligible] in the white gaze, and not thinking about the future and who we are and what is possible living outside of whiteness, which I think very much goes into Afrofuturism of thinking about who are we outside of whiteness.

AJ: Mhm.

AL: I hope that... It's so emotional to me, how to explain how important that article is. That article solidified my love of community archives and how important it is. I remember reading that before I decided to drop the archives focus. So Clarion has it where I can have an MLIS and an archives focus in a two year, 36 hour program. I decided to drop it because I'm like, I am refusing to engage with that level of white supremacy. I am choosing to engage with Blackness and our lives outside of the white gaze, and that article was a big part of me dropping that.

KN: Thank you.

AJ: We'll link to it so that other people can be

AL: Oh please. I send it to everybody, I'm like read this, it's amazing, it's life-changing. It's my treatise, here, read this.

AJ: I think people are really going to love that.

AL: Yeah.

<transition music>

KN Voiceover: Andrea mentioned to Allison and I that she's working on a grassroots oral history project and will be working on an IMLS (which stands for Institute of Museum and Library Studies) Memory Lab in January. The audio was a kinda wonky, so re-recording here.

AL: I strongly believe the universe pulls us and pushes us on the path that we need to be on. IMLS has this grant, it's a Memory Lab grant where they actually will provide a public library with support in building a digitization centre that's open and free to all. I knew that I was going to get the tools and training that I wanted and digitizing and creating a memory lab, you know, archives for the people. It's preservation, archives, completely for the people. It's coming to the main library where I work at, actually this room I'm sitting at is where we're going to have the Memory Lab. So we're asking in the next month we're going to ask for donations to help us create VHS tapes, scan documents, and pictures of, and I really want to focus on Black people in the southwest area of Philadelphia. Gentrification is coming from the universities that are just north of here. So there's UPenn and Drexel University and they're heavily gentrifying West Philadelphia and they're going to move into Southwest Philadelphia. And so thinking about this huge white supremacist industrialization, academic industrialization that's coming our way, how can we preserve the memories of this

neighbourhood. So yeah, I'm actually going to be working with community and doing community engagement to train community members on how to use technology to digitize and keep and preserve their histories, which is beautiful! And that's what I wanted and that's what I want to do, and I don't need to do this white supremacy stuff, I can do it through this and work completely with community and we can build what's important and vital. One thing that I love about this grant is we're going to spend the first couple of the months of next year to do community engagement, and talking to people about what materials do you have? What do we need to get to make sure we can convert and meet your needs, and what important programming do you want come out of this in order to help us build it? So we're not going to start putting it physically together until next summer. That time that we're allotted to actually dig in deeply to this, is so meaningful. When I saw that with the grant, that's the important work. That's the work that gives us time to dig in. Talk to community, see what they want, and then we can try to do our best and build up and support community with what they want. And then training them on how to digitize their materials and also train them on how to run it. Like, this is yours, take it, own it, run it, and have your own memory hub and memory centre. So it's really powerful, it's the work that I want to do, and I'm really excited and I couldn't be happier to have this at a neighbourhood library.

AJ: Wow, that's awesome! It overlaps really nicely with this morning, we were interviewing a couple of Métis librarians who work here at UBC and one of them, Sarah Dupont, has been very involved for a long time called [Indigitization](#), which works with mostly First Nations communities around BC to do similar stuff to what you're talking about.

KN: Here are the resources.

AJ: Here are the resources, workshops, taught by First Nations people who do digitization work in a community based way, and to build those skills within community so that it's sustainable and ongoing and people have the resources they need to do that. And to control their own materials so they don't have to send it off to other institutions and put it in the hands of, usually settlers.

AL: Right.

AJ: We'll send you a link to their stuff because there might be useful—they've got open, accessible training materials and stuff like that, so.

<transition music>

AJ: It's really inspiring, it's really cool, it's really lovely.

KN: It's really heartwarming, I feel.

AL: Aw, thanks! It is!

AJ: Thinking about some of the same stuff that we're so interested in about yeah, community libraries, community organizing, where are they similar, where are they different, what can we be learning. So thank you so much. I hope we talk again soon.

AL: Oh thank you! This has been really fun and thank you for making this happen, Karen. This has been really great and that one podcast where you interviewed your friend who was also doing community organizing and had the library.

KN: Y Vy Truong in Chinatown.

AL: Yes, oh my gosh. She is doing amazing work. I'm like, yeah that's my dream, would be to have just one library in Philadelphia just dedicated to like, yeah, supporting community archives and having community memory, tools, accessible to people no matter what that looked like. It could be, I don't know, like a visual arts room, a digitization space, whatever people wanted to make in those spaces, like a general maker space. I think that would be so lovely, and thinking about really intimate pieces of Philadelphia history that I think that the larger archives definitely miss. I'd love to create that space.

<transition music>

AJ: So before we go, if anyone wants to reach you or get in touch, are you public on social media or have an email or something people can?

AL: Yeah, I will say I'm public on twitter. My handle is my name, it's [@ALemoins](#). I talk about random library stuff and currently a lot of stuff about the *Mandalorian*, it just depends. I'm all over the place on twitter. But people can happily follow me there.

AJ: Fantastic, thank you.

KN: Great! We can be found on Twitter at OrganizingPod (that is organizing with a Z and not S). Our email is organizingideaspod @ gmail . com and our website is organizingideaspod dot wordpress dot com. Bye!

<outro music>

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Transcribed by Karen Ng