

Q&A with Cynthia Palacios and Eva M.L. Rios-Alvarado: community organizing and the founding of Librarians of Color, Los Angeles

Cynthia Palacios, she/her/hers, was born to Central American migrant parents and raised in South Central Los Angeles, hence her interest in social justice. After completing her B.A. in Political Science, Cynthia realized that she can best help empower minority communities via librarianship. Cynthia earned her M.A. in Library and Information Science from the University of Arizona, and is part of the Knowledge River program (which fosters cultural competency of working with minority communities via the library sciences). Cynthia's desire to help motivate and inspire individuals manifests itself in various grassroots ways, she believes that sometimes just telling someone that they have potential can be the push a person needs to inspire a proactive mentality. Cynthia Palacios is a 2014-2015 Scholar, currently working as a Children's Librarian at the Los Angeles Public Library.

Eva M.L. Rios-Alvarado, she/her/hers, attributes her empowerment, spirituality, and beautiful-resistance from Xicana and Black Feminist practice. With a B.A. in Geography (<http://www.calstatela.edu/>) and MS, in Library Information Science (<https://www.simmons.edu/academics/schools-departments/school-of-library-and-information-science>), she works alongside community college students exploring and crafting their unique information literacy repertoires. Currently, she is the Student Equity & Outreach Librarian at Mt. San Antonio College Library (<http://www.mtsac.edu/library/>). If you asked Eva what is the most powerful force in leadership she would answer love, the power of community, the creativity of local activism, and daily resistance you find in your personal life. Eva was a Spectrum Scholar from 2012-2013. Find her on Twitter @EvaRiosAlvarado (<https://twitter.com/EvaRiosAlvarado>) @LOCLALibrarians #XicanaMLIS #Decolonize #LAallDay #librarianOfColor #POCinLIS #LOCLALibrarians

What is your current job and how did you become interested in the library and information science world?

Cynthia: Currently, I am a Children's librarian for the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL); however, I previously worked for San Diego County Library, and Pima County Public Library, among other systems. Having worked as a substitute clerk at 37+ branches of LAPL I noticed that out of their 72 branches I had only encountered a handful of Spanish speaking librarians. Noticing the customer service aspect of librarianship and the community based impact, I developed a desire to enter the field in hopes of providing culturally competent services to community members with the goal of having visitors feel support and community ownership over their library. My goal was to help empower and educate minorities from underdeveloped communities through access to information and resources based on the community's needs and interest.

Eva: I serve as the Student Equity & Outreach Librarian at Mt. San Antonio College Library. Mt. SAC is a single-district college, which serves over 30,000+ students. A first position of its kind at Mt. SAC, I have major responsibilities with leading the first formalized library outreach on campus.

Before I decided to become a librarian, I was on the pathway to joining the world of geography. My B.A. is in Geography from CSU, Los Angeles. It was there where I explored the intersectionalities of being Xicana and the social and structural urban human geographies of my hometown Los Angeles. Works of Laura Pulido, the mentorship of my colleague Rosamaria Segura, la profesora Dionne Espinoza who introduced me to my

now Associate Dean Romelia Salinas, and also muxeres I met during my student/academic activism in Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social, MALCS, contributed to a deep dialogue of decolonization within myself, the community, and in my academic journey.

It was in the late stages in my degree at CSULA when I noticed a shift in my next trajectories. To make a long and complicated story short: I decided to become a librarian. I put all my energy into finding employment in libraries, but it was in 2007 when the economy had collapsed and librarians were being fired in Los Angeles. I was living in Echo Park at the time. I happened to meet Lisa Palomi from LAPL doing outreach at the local Lotus Festival. Lisa put me in contact with a wonderful librarian who became a mentor and supporter, Nadine Flores, who I worked for at Echo Park library for about 2-3 years.

I started librarianship for a completely different reason. Today, I am an academic librarian because I fully believe in organizing and working to justice inside and outside of the institution. I am not perfect at it, but I do strive daily to empower. Librarianship provides me the vehicle to live and practice social consciousness as a Xicana Feminist. I believe in the power and palabra of librarianship. POC in LIS have the unique ability to harness struggle and use it for social change. It's like hip hop. You live it, you are it. Like Rebel Diaz states in the song Canto,

"I choose to rap cause sometimes

It's my only option

It's my freedom of expression

It's the voice of the oppressed

Y es por eso que yo canto

It's the power of the word

Man, you gotta use it

Y es por eso que yo canto"

I chose to be a librarian because I felt it was the only way, at the time, to express my freedom of expression within the system.

Could you give us some background on the initial creation of LOC-LA and the POCinLIS Summit? How did these two communities come into existence?

Eva: Librarians of Color, Los Angeles is a grassroots collective created by and for library workers of color in Los Angeles. It started with real-talk between myself and Nancy Olmos. Nancy and I met through a mutual friend of ours in the Latinx queer community and shortly after we started meeting more like-minded librarians, such as Suzanne Im, Cynthia Palacios and Aisha Conner-Gaten. Our space and community stemmed from the need to find and organize community inside the library world, which was honest, non-judgmental, free of racism, homophobia, essentially directly aligning the needs of people of color in Los Angeles and surrounding communities.

The #POCinLIS Summit (<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/pocinlis/>) was the brainchild of librarians from Loyola Marymount University. Aisha Conner-Gaten, Nataly Blas, Rachel Deras, Jessea Young, and the planning crew for the POC in LIS Summit invited Nancy Olmos, Suzanne Im, and myself to present on the formation and commitment of librarians of color in Los Angeles. We each presented a poem to bless and honor the space. If you would like to read mine, I wrote "POCinLIS America"

(https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/do/search/?q=author_lname%3A%22Rios-Alvarado%22%20author_fname%3A%22Eva%22&start=0&context=1609392&facet=) in honor of my journey through librarianship.

What motivated you personally to get involved in these community spaces?

Cynthia: I became involved with LOC-LA when I was invited to a game night by a friend. I distinctly recall a sense of pride and collegial respect at my first LOC-LA event. I loved being among this communal group of other LOC's from public, academic, archives, medical, and the special sector; this was the first group of its type that I found with such IRLS (Information Resources and Library Science) diversity. While preparing for one of my first academic interviews, I recall mentioning it to an LOC-LA member; I was surprised as they made arrangements and reserved a conference room for me to present my mock presentation to the group. The support I felt was not only helpful but was a game changer in my intellectual confidence of having a support system. The feeling of knowing I had professional friends on my side with a genuine interest in helping me succeed and flourish professionally, was and remains the reason I am involved and believe in LOC-LA.

Eva: What motivated me was the need and want to collaborate outside of the institution. Los Angeles has many active circles, collectives, and alternative spaces for political, social, activist, artistic collaborations. In the end, it is my venue to just be with others outside of dominant and oppressive LIS spaces. It also serves as a community. Anyone can lead in LOC-LA. There is no one leader. Everyone is a leader and we support the development of all, you just have to show up.

What do you believe to be the greatest strengths and challenges within the LOC-LA community?

Cynthia: I personally believe that simultaneously the greatest strength and challenge our group offers is that of being a safety net, a support system made up of LOC whom are empathetic of the struggles of being an outcast for various reasons but particularly in having to set out in creating your own professional path not always having family support nor friends to turn to. For obvious reasons LOC-LA being a support system is a strength however, it is also challenging to nurture close relationships and be that shoulder for our friends when they share past traumas which at times affect them in current day and their profession.

If someone asked you what you hope to see LOC-LA become in the next 5, 10, 20 years – what would you say?

Cynthia: I hope to see that LOC-LA has a reputation for being where early professionals can seek out support in dealing with interviews and skills which the profession expects you to possess however does not teach you. My hope is that we - LOC-LA can be the support to early professionals of color whom may not have the support desired/ needed at home that our group can offer dealing with real life issues eg. imposter syndrome, employment transitions, life long code switching, dealing with authenticity and all the bureaucratic red tape that leads to burnout and jaded professionals.

Eva: LOC-LA will evolve as it needs to. The framework behind LOC-LA is meant to be horizontal. Everyone is an equal leader and we work to support everyone's projects, ideas, art, activism, life, etc. As for myself, I would like to see more librarian and library worker-led activism and local organizing and practice. I am working on a toolkit at the moment to have non-traditional community unconferences for LIS workers. JCLC,

Ahora Que or JCLC, Now What will be a way to gather the POC, LIS minds and provide dialogue to action - to get LIS folks thinking locally and adapt to the needs of their local communities. I hope I can get the support of others to do similar type work with their networks. If there are other librarians or any LIS worker who would like to contact me - please do.

Support is something not all people have the luxury of having in person. The human connection component is what we are able to provide. I think We Here and Spectrum do an amazing job of being digital spaces to support folks in LIS. Spectrum even provides mentorships and other activities in person which are valuable and life-changing. LOC-LA is a geographically localized collective. Primarily, LOC-LA was called to action to support Black Lives Matters and defend and honor the journeys of POC librarians without judgement, in supportive community. We offer our time and passion not for payment or recognition, but in unity and justice.

What advice would you give to those interested in community organizing?

Cynthia: Don't let your fear hold you back from helping yourself and others. Be the difference you want to see, get mad, get frustrated and get up and do something about it; take action. It was so hard at times that between the anxiety attacks, the insecurity, the feeling of jumping through obstacle courses, and the frustration of knowing that I have sacrificed and worked so much more than some of my non POC in LIS colleagues discouraged me. Use your frustration to create a path in which the next POC from your neighborhood do not have it as hard, make the path just a little easier for the next POC to progress and get out of their struggle; that's how you create community change one step at a time bring one person in to share your vision and help pave that road. Keep it simple, start small with one person, just start.

Eva: Control & Schedules

It can be very hard to find networks if you are not part of an infrastructure. In Los Angeles, for instance, we suspend in animation with commuting and living in terrains which can be challenging for a cohesive meeting schedule. It's okay if everyone is not there at once. People will come when they come, and as they need to. Being okay with less structure will help you move further and allow others to lead.

Honesty & Capacity

Honest conversations and actions are definitely transparent in relationship building. It has been a challenge for me to do all the organizing I want since I have been working hard on tenure and my job. I often have a hard time finding balance. Health is vital to being totally present.

Mission & Values

The most valuable part of organizing is knowing what motivates you and others - the why and knowing who you are. Our first working point was to create a manifesto to align our values to a mission. This may evolve, shift, or evaporate and that's okay. All progress is moving forward and that is organizing to something. That being said, it is critical to have the drive and passion to push and hold each other accountable. Having accountability, passion, and awareness will help in networking with your local communities and collectives. Find partners and allies. Make friends. Take on challenges to build. It's okay if you have to keep trying or learn through the process.

How has your experience as a Spectrum Scholar influenced your life thus far (personally, professionally, etc.)?

Eva: One of the perks of having the title Spectrum Scholar is the recognition and comradery that complement the scholarship. Well... and of course, we should count the money which helped pay for some housing and classes. Spectrum has helped me leverage my power in LIS spaces. Especially, as in academia, we are often measured by the prestige of our academic institutions. While many folx choose to employ academic banging, I have had situations where people find out I am a SS and they are shocked or they say something like "oh... I didn't know you were a SS". I'm not one to brag and I don't find interest in doing so, but Spectrum has buffered off some individuals who have the need to measure my worth in prestige. Honestly, I am not as active in Spectrum as many of my other LIS colleagues. I think this is because I often dislike the idea of working in large systems. Perhaps this is a personality flaw, but I do support others who make large efforts to do the work within SS. I applaud their work and value the contributions and support SS offers LIS students and the network after graduate school.

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