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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4np5n0zb>

ISBN

978-0-8389-3883-6

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Publication Date

2021-12-01

Engaging with Ethnic Studies Librarians

An Interview with Lillian Castillo-Speed and gerardo “gary” colmenar

In this interview, we speak with Lillian Castillo-Speed, head of the Ethnic Studies Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and gary colmenar, subject librarian for ethnic studies at University of California, Santa Barbara. Over the years, Lillian and gary have been very active in promoting ethnic studies programs and collections in librarianship. This interview conversation centers on their experiences in the field and what ethnic studies means to them.

Editors: Thank you for speaking with us! We are excited that you both could speak with us about your work and experiences in ethnic studies librarianship! First, we are wondering what does “ethnic studies” mean to you both?

Lily: It’s historical. Our library’s beginnings are rooted in the history of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) Strike of 1969 on the UC Berkeley campus. Students could not find relevant or respectful information about their ethnic communities in the main library system. They wanted to bring that kind of information to the curriculum, and so they made that part of their strike demands. Continuing the legacy of those early collections in the current Ethnic Studies Library is part of our mission. The radical curriculum that was created for the new Ethnic Studies department established in 1969 is the basis for what I think of as “ethnic studies.” It has

undergone changes in the last fifty years, yes, but for me it always goes back to the demands of the students at the beginning.

gary: Thank you Kenya, Melissa, Ray for inviting us to contribute to this timely and necessary engagement to talk about Ethnic Studies librarianship. I am pleased to collaborate with Lily, a longtime colleague and ally. As Lily mentioned the field of Ethnic Studies has a radical tradition. To borrow from a philosophy organization, ethnic studies was “Born of Struggle.”¹ To open our conversation, I want to share a quote that speaks to my library career. It is from *America Is in the Heart* by Carlos Bulosan. “I had only one escape—the Los Angeles Public Library.”²

Personally, Ethnic Studies means a lot to me, from the first moment I took an Asian American Studies course at U.C. San Diego. It was the first time I read a significant amount of literature that reflected my experiences as an Filipinx immigrant whose family moved to the United States during the Martial Law period. Reading *America is in the Heart*, in an Asian American Literature class was a major turning point in my education and career path, which led me to pursue a degree in the Ethnic Studies Department with an emphasis on Asian American cultures and history. It was then that I began to gain a deeper and critical understanding of the Filipinx American experience in relation to other ethnic and racial groups in the United States. Learning about the socio-political connections between the Philippines and the U.S was important also. This experience greatly influenced my career choice that led me to pursue a career in education. After spending time working in the UCSB library and learning from several librarians I decided on academic librarianship. Reading Sanford Berman’s classic text, *Prejudices and antipathies: a Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*, further opened my eyes to a critical aspect of librarianship that I related to the critical scholarship and methods in ethnic studies. I was lucky to have had a supportive and a critical scholar as an advisor in the library program. I covered this aspect of my beginnings in more detail in an earlier interview with Ray also.³

Editors: Can you please describe your day-to-day work as ethnic studies librarians?

Lily: As is true for gary, I’m sure, these days a typical day is not typical. We are working remotely and have been since spring of 2020. I usually have several Zoom reference appointments every week, sometimes two or three in a day. Our library supports our department’s courses, and usually we have classes coming into the library to get in-person introductions to our services and collections, and also classes on how to access online materials. We also have classes from other departments, such as English and History. During the pandemic, instead of offering these in-person sessions, we have had to produce videos that introduce our staff and collections and that are shown in Ethnic Studies courses.

Besides reference, I select books and materials to order for the Chicano Studies Collection, and there’s also a lot of administrative work. I supervise two full-time

librarians and three part-time non-librarian staff. In a typical semester, we also have about fifteen work-study students staffing the circulation desk and helping with technical services and digitization tasks. Of course, there is always committee work. And then there is my work on the Chicano Database. I am the database manager of this bibliographic database that is produced and published by our library and is distributed by EBSCO. I was introduced to this work by my mentors Francisco García-Ayvens and Richard Chabran while I was still in library school, and I'm inspired every day by their vision and dedication to continue it.

gary: When I arrived at UCSB, subject librarians had three major responsibilities—teaching, reference, and collection development. At first it seemed a bit overwhelming for a new librarian to juggle these responsibilities, especially collection development and teaching. (Although the Master's Program had courses on bibliographic instructions, there was not a lot of opportunity to teach) I soon learned that my undergraduate curriculum prepared me well in engaging the students and faculty, especially in the Asian American Studies Department. I especially enjoyed the teaching and collection development aspects of my work to this day. However, with the re-organization implemented this year, ordering books will be handled by another department.

Similar to Lily, most of our work is done remotely since the Spring Quarter of 2020. I set-up virtual meetings with students for research consultations as well as subject-specific library research workshops for any of my subjects. In the 2020 Fall quarter (2020), I co-presented for a Linguistics graduate seminar where my colleague presented on scholarly communication while I talked about the publishing landscape from an ethnic studies perspective.

Ordering monographs which already happens mostly through the YBP online platform, continue without any major interruptions during the pandemic. However, we all missed the ability to meet with co-workers in person to follow-up on specific requests and unexpected issues that arise.

I reach out to new faculty hires and graduate students in other departments whose research interests overlap with ethnic studies. I attend meetings and help in organizing events for the American Indian and Indigenous Collective and Asian American Studies Department.

Editors: What are the main facets or aspects of ethnic studies librarianship?

gary: Ethnic studies is a young discipline compared to anthropology, linguistics, sociology, and philosophy—other disciplines for which I am responsible. I would like to address this question with some comparative observations with respect to Asian American studies and Native American studies liaison work.⁴ An understanding of the department's origins and central mission, in my opinion, is a fundamental aspect for academic librarianship—to acquire the basic understanding of the intellectual

and theoretical debates in these disciplines as well as the department's research and teaching mission. This includes knowing the key thinkers and areas of specializations for each department. This facet enhances the liaison aspect, creates fruitful relationships, and engenders proactive collection development practice.⁵ I look beyond the mainstream trade publishers and university presses to add to the Asian American and Native American collections, such as nonprofit organizations, historical societies, small presses, to include the publishers (of English language materials) in the Global South. This aspect of collection development is different to the rest of my subject assignments. As you recall, students revolted because their stories were not represented in the literature, so in the beginning teachers were also engaged in creating their own syllabi, course readings, and materials from scratch. I would say that since the 1990s, the publication landscape has changed significantly. University presses and trade publishers have established monograph series and promoted topics in Asian American Studies.⁶

Working with the different ethnic studies departments, student organizations, and community activists, I acquired a deeper and nuanced understanding of the different political projects and imperatives of each community articulated by each discipline. It is important to note that these political projects are not always in total alignment with each other. In my opinion, to apprehend these differences is crucial in building strong solidarities across ethnic and racial groups beyond binary schema and identity politics.⁷ Marable articulated some of these differences further when he stated, "Indians are not an ethnic group and did not immigrate to the United States. They are the only indigenous group in the United States."⁸ In contrast to the political and social concerns for Asian Americans for example, citizenship and civil rights, Native Americans are concerned with treaty obligations, sovereignty, and territorial rights.

In this regard, Quynh Nhu Le's (professor in English department) recent publication that examines the issues around Asian American and Native American solidarities such as, settler colonialism represents a good model of recent scholarship on critical ethnic studies emanating from scholars across disciplines.⁹ I devoted much of this section to advocacy and politics these are essential facets of ethnic studies librarianship that I discuss below.

Mentoring new ethnic studies librarians in the contemporary practices as well as the history of the discipline is an important part of what we do.¹⁰ Lastly, building horizontal and vertical alliances is an important thing to remember.

Lily: I was fortunate to be hired soon after graduating from library school as the coordinator of the Chicano Studies Library on campus. Obviously I'm grateful because it turned into my current position as head librarian of the Ethnic Studies Library after the Asian American Studies Library, the Native American Studies Library, and the Chicano Studies Library merged in 1997. But I'm also very thankful that this job let me do a wide range of librarian tasks. For my small library I was the cataloger,

the reference librarian and teacher, the supervisor, the archivist, and the database manager.

Until a few years ago, I was also the series editor of a small publications unit.

I also handled our book sales and at one point the sales of a CD-ROM version of the Chicano Database and then negotiated with distributors of the online version. I continue to work with community members who would like to donate their archival materials, including posters, films, and organizational records. Through all these varied tasks, I've tried to define for myself what it means to be a Chicano studies librarian and an ethnic studies librarian. All of these tasks are facets of ethnic studies librarianship because the common goal is to carry on the legacy of the TWLF students who established our department.

Editors: What are areas that new ethnic studies librarians should know or be engaged in?

Lily: Everything digital. Everything political.

gary: Indeed! This year in particular the recent pervasive attacks on Critical Race Theory and ethnic studies curricula in K-12 education. There is an essential disposition, an attitude if you will, that new ethnic studies librarians need to consider. This is articulated in a conversation with Professor Rick Bonus, chair of the American Ethnic Studies Department at University of Washington, about the kind support from the subject liaison, one that engenders trust and commitment.

Librarians who support ethnic studies departments, programs, and related fields would be in a better position and earn the trust if they understand the intellectual, political, and community formation of the discipline.¹¹ The Association of College of Research Libraries' Research and Planning Review Committee publishes the top trending topics in academic libraries annually. While the entire list will have an impact on ethnic studies librarianship, social justice, critical pedagogy and open access are worth mentioning.

Given the international component of ethnic studies research and practice since its beginnings, new ethnic studies librarians would greatly benefit from critical and respectful engagements with Area Studies disciplines. As Lily mentioned, we need to keep a watchful eye on the scholarly communication discussion on a global scale, especially with open access. I am thinking of the consequences of open access for the Global South. The 2017 conference at UC Davis provides some of the salient issues facing the Global South.¹² Social justice, critical pedagogy, and CritLib are additional areas to be mindful of.¹³

Editors: What are some current challenges with ethnic studies going forward, and where do you see ethnic studies librarianship going?

gary: Ethnic studies librarianship and collections exist because departments and programs in ethnic studies continue to exist at many institutions like the University of California University system where departments and programs in ethnic studies have been successfully existed for decades. *We are here because they were there!*

Despite their successes in producing new scholars and groundbreaking scholarship they continue to encounter questions of legitimacy and recognition from within and outside academia. A crucial challenge for ethnic studies librarianship is to continue building ties with people in the field of ethnic studies, to keep that history alive. To acknowledge that ethnic studies is not monolithic as the discipline has flourished into different strands and geographies. One example is the formation of Critical Ethnic Studies Association in 2011 whose mission includes a critic of the current state of the discipline.¹⁴

It is encouraging to see these struggles occur at the K–12 level to address curriculum standards and inclusive representations as evinced by organizations such as Save Arab American Studies, Ethnic Studies Now, and Rethinking Schools, to name a few.¹⁵

Specific to librarianship, the challenges are universal regarding declining library budgets overall. That includes collection funding at the same time the work that libraries are doing is expanding in the digital environment as Lily mentions. There is a trend in academic libraries to add more digital collections especially since the pandemic. While the bulk of university press books now appear in e-book format, we still receive requests from scholars and students for the print format. There remains a significant number of works available only in print from small and independent presses worldwide to include materials different languages. Along with the digital environment is the interest on Open Education Resource (ORE) to address the rising cost of educational materials and tuition.

Subject specialists versus generalists is a perennial challenge that happens as reflected in academic job postings in the University of California library system and elsewhere.

Editors: Do you imagine more positions like head of Ethnic Studies Library (like Lily's) are a possibility one day?

Lily: Well, I hope there are more ethnic studies libraries one day. But I think it is more important that the goal of social justice is served, whether through an ethnic studies library or through some other means. In the early days of the Ethnic Studies Department, there were separate libraries; one was the Chicano Studies Library (I was hired as coordinator of that library in my first UC Berkeley appointment). As a librarian just out of library school, I was confused and surprised to learn that the founding staff of the Chicano Studies Library saw the library merely as a useful tool to bring about social justice. They thought that it should not be an end in itself, and as soon

as it was not useful anymore it should be abandoned and they would find something more effective. I was used to thinking of a library as being an institution whose worth in itself would never be questioned. So if an ethnic studies library can evolve into the tool that is needed for its moment in history, yes, it should be supported.

gary: In agreement with Lily, I would like to see more library branches or collection funding devoted to ethnic studies units at universities. But with academic libraries undergoing reorganizations, expanding services, and budget issues, among others, we could only hope. The Ethnic Studies Library at Berkeley as well as the Ethnic Studies collections and California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA) at UCSB are examples of what could be achieved through collective action and protest led by students especially. And there are examples throughout history. At UCSB, the twenty-four-hour room library space that now expanded to cover a large footprint in the main library was a student-led demand and occupation of the library in 1993.¹⁶

At the same time, UC library administrations make decisions that have significant consequences for ethnic studies as well as area studies. One recent example is the aborted plans to close the Southeast Asian Studies library at UC Berkeley.

Editors: How can ethnic studies librarians integrate with other parts of the library based on your experiences?

gary: At UC Santa Barbara, this was easier or seems natural because of the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, a unit of Special Research Collections. CEMA is an internationally known distinctive collection at UCSB. CEMA was one of the reasons I applied for the UCSB Library Fellowship. As the liaison for Asian American Studies, I was able to facilitate the acquisition of the papers of Frank Chin and Peter Jamero. During my fellowship, I processed the papers of Nellie Wong and have formed a friendship bond with an activist and writer.

The Library Association of the University of California (LAUC), *The Many Voices of Diversity* report, offers a slew of recommendations on ways UC libraries can integrate into the library's mission and policies in support of ethnic studies departments. Although published in 1992, its recommendations and observations are still relevant if not more urgent as libraries experience reduction in resources while their mission expands to support the campus needs. The collective statement by department heads of Special Collections on UC campus on inclusion and equity in special collections, archives, and distinctive collections bodes well for more collaborative opportunities for ethnic studies librarians.¹⁷

Lily: Since our library is a unit within the Ethnic Studies Department at UC Berkeley, the ESL librarians work primarily to help our faculty, staff, and students achieve their teaching and research goals. However, that's not possible without interacting with and forming working partnerships with librarians and administrators in the main library system. The ESL is part of the main library's online catalog and circulation

system. And the main library assigns a subject liaison librarian to our department. That person works very closely with the ESL librarians and has been extremely helpful when we reach any kind of roadblock, helping us resolve issues, and making sure our faculty person or researcher gets what they need. Because of our strong librarians' professional association (the Library Association of the University of California [LAUC]), all librarians have the opportunity to participate and take leadership roles on committees, including the ESL librarians. So we have ample opportunities to integrate with our campus colleagues.

Editors: Can you share an experience in your role that you think many ethnic studies librarians can relate to?

Lily: Imagine there is a new student, sitting with their new peers in a library setting, listening to a librarian explain how to find materials in the campus online catalog. The librarian asks the group to suggest topics that she can use as examples. The student asks how to find information on the border wall and undocumented immigrants. The librarian says: "The term you need to use is 'Illegal Aliens.'" The student, whose grandparents immigrated from Mexico, is embarrassed and probably does not want to engage further in the exercise. The librarian has to explain that the tools that the library, the campus, and the university use depend on using that phrase to retrieve the information they asked about.

gary: Interesting question, and one is shared by librarians in general. It is satisfying as a librarian to connect people to the resources they need—that piece of correspondence, article, sound recording, photograph, or archival item that is hard to find. I get a sense of elation when I receive a request for an item that I have already purchased—proactive collection development!

It is likewise satisfying to connect students and scholars, especially in the field of ethnic and area studies whose research interests are related. For example, I initiated a scholarly connection between a UCSB graduate student in religious studies with a graduate student from Brazil whose research on African American religion in the Black Atlantic overlaps. I met the Brazilian student while attending the Caribbean Philosophical Association conference in 2018. The student at the time was a doctoral student in Chicago. Making these kinds of intellectual and research connections give me joy.

Editors: With the discussions toward diversity, equity, inclusion, social justice, and anti-racism, how do you manage your role and work as ethnic studies librarians? Are there connections to be made? Are there specific areas that are overlooked?

gary: Your question is central to ethnic studies, so thank you! To answer, this I want to quote a statement by Evelyn Hu-DeHart, a scholar in comparative race and ethnic studies and former director of several ethnic studies departments:

The Ethnic Studies approach to knowledge, described as interdisciplinary, must be more than simply separate applications of discipline-based methodology. Unlike traditional disciplines, which are long divorced from any community base or origins, Ethnic Studies scholars *must ask* the question, *Why do research and for whom?* After all, its *raison d'être* is to correct the omissions and distortions in mainstream academia.¹⁸ [emphasis added]

Given the long and hard fought struggle that took place in the formation ethnic studies, a struggle that continues to the present, Ethnic Studies librarians must ask the question: **Why collect materials and for whom?** At library meetings or presentations by campus officials when I hear the word *stakeholders* I sometimes ask myself in private, *Who?* Do they mean the faculty in departments I am responsible for? Staff? Donors? Campus administration? Community Students? Or is it all of these different communities?

Speaking of students, we cannot forget the collective power of students in making positive gains. As Lily mentioned in her opening statement, "...it always goes back to the demands of the students at the beginning." A plethora of examples sit in the archives of many institutions and communities that scholars excavate with accompaniment from archivists and librarians.

The present moment is always the perfect opportunity to make these interventions happen—to find stories that lie underneath the dominant stories and see the deeper connections in order to form new solidarities grounded along class, gender, race, and other salient identities.

When I arrived at UCSB I was surprised to work in a library that has a twenty-four-hour room. I later learned from colleagues that student protest and occupation of the library made this happen!¹⁹ Similarly, the Black student protest along with Chicana/o students was crucial in the establishment of the Ethnic and Gender Studies Collections and CEMA.²⁰ Student protest actions in 1974 presented a list of demands that was far-reaching and radically inclusive.²¹ Joy Harjo became the first Native American woman to become the Poet Laureate of the United States. Is it a coincidence that this became a reality under the watch of Dr. Carla Hayden, the first woman and first African American to hold the Librarian of Congress position? And Hayden was nominated by former president Barack Obama.

I mention these historical events in my library one-shot courses and student organizations to remind students of their collective power and importance in creating solidarities across boundaries in an age of individualism and entitlements. I would say that my happiest moments are when I make these connections and immerse myself in the conversations and struggles with the students, faculty, and community members. As Lily mentioned above, the birth of Ethnic Studies came from student demands.

Editors: Anything else you'd like to mention that we did not get to ask?

Lily: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to have a conversation with Gary.

I've learned a lot from his comments. That brings up the fact that there have been efforts since the 1990s to address library diversity issues on all ten campuses of the University of California system. Reports were written and committees created, and that was all to the good. However, it is difficult to maintain communication among UC librarians who support ethnic studies faculty and staff on their campuses. Early on an online discussion group was created, the Ethnic Studies Libraries Network (ESLN), and I appreciate Gary's efforts to keep that list active. I hope that once we are able to travel and go to in-person meetings, that those of us working in ethnic studies can meet and come up with a plan to collaborate as a UC team.

Gary: Thank you for inviting me to contribute to this anthology. I am pleased to be part of this anthology with a wonderful and respected colleague, Lily. As Lily mentioned, the UC Ethnic Studies Librarians Network was a major resource for everyone—mentorship, information exchange, and camaraderie. With a new cohort of ethnic studies librarians, Lily and I are hopeful for the future. The set of questions you provided really pushed us to think critically and self-reflexively about what ethnic studies librarianship means to us. It is a shared past. If I may end with a quote. *The shared past is precious, not for itself, but because it is the basis of consciousness, of knowing, of being.*²²

Notes

1. Philosophy Born of Struggle website, accessed March 13, 2021, <https://pbos.com>.
2. Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart*, Washington Paperbacks, WP-68 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 265.
3. Janet Hyunju Clarke, Raymond Pun, and Monnee Tong, eds. *Asian American Librarians and Library Services* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
4. While I don't have the formal education nor claim to be a subject expert in anthropology, linguistics, Native American studies, and philosophy, I learned about the general contours of the discipline by meeting individuals, attending classes, and reading. This work helps bridge the intellectual gap between librarians and faculty.
5. Proactive collection development happens when a subject librarian understands the department's research areas and buys materials that support these units in anticipation of the need. It is different from a collection development model that responds to the request at a point of need.
6. As the subject editor for Asian American studies in the Resources for College Libraries database, I see the scholarly production increase in number and topics each year.
7. Lisa Lowe offers a cogent analysis of the limits of identity politics and binary schema in the Asian American context: "I want to suggest that essentializing Asian American identity and suppressing our differences—of national origin, generation, gender, party, class—risks particular dangers: not only does it underestimate the differences and hybridities among Asians, but it also inadvertently supports the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogeneous group, that implies we are 'all alike' and conform to 'types....'" Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 30.

8. Manning Marable, "The Problematics of Ethnic Studies," in *Color-Line to Borderlands: The Matrix of American Ethnic Studies*, ed. Johnnella E. Butler (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 50.
9. Quynh Nhu Le, *Unsettled Solidarities*, Critical Race, Indigeneity, and Relationality (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2019).
10. Professor Clara M. Chu, my graduate advisor at UCLA School of Information Studies, was and continues to be a mentor and supportive of my work. She provided me the freedom to thrive in the program and support in applying for the UCSB Library Fellowship.
11. Phone conversation with Rick Bonus, January 23, 2021.
12. Open Digital Global South: Risks and Rewards, conference website, UC Davis Law School, May 25–26, 2017, <https://www.library.ucdavis.edu/icis/past-events/an-open-digital-global-south-2017/>.
13. For a salient discussion about critical librarians and progressive librarianship, readers will find the conversation between Elaine Harger and Rory Litwin informative. Rory Litwin, "Interview with Elaine Harger, PLG Co-founder," Litwin Books and Library Juice Press website, July 21, 2016, <https://litwin-books.com/interview-with-elaine-harger-plg-co-founder/>.
14. Critical Ethnic Studies Association Mission Vision, <https://www.criticalethnicstudies.org/mission-vision>
15. Save Arab-American Studies home page, <https://savearabamericanstudies.org/>; Ethnic Studies Now home page, www.ethnicstudiesnow.com/; Rethinking Schools home page, <https://rethinkingschools.org/>.
16. Ivy Weston, "Students Take Over Library in Peaceful Protest," *Daily Nexus* (University of California, Santa Barbara) 73, no. 98 (March 4, 1993): 1, <https://alexandria.ucsb.edu/downloads/5999n454c>.
17. *The Many Voices of Diversity*. Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on LAUC Regional Workshops on Cultural Diversity in Libraries. <https://lauc.ucop.edu/sites/default/files/attached-files/ed357744.pdf>; Elaine Tennant et al., "Statement on Inclusion and Equity in Special Collections, Archives, and Distinctive Collections in the University of California Libraries," University of California Systemwide Libraries, 2021, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mq1461d>.
18. Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Ethnic Studies in U.S. Higher Education," in *Color-Line to Borderlands: The Matrix of American Ethnic Studies*, ed. Johnnella E. Butler (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 107.
19. Weston, "Students Take Over Library."
20. Jim Bettinger, "Blacks Take North Hall," *El Gaucho* (University of California, Santa Barbara) 49, no. 20 (October, 15, 1968): 1, <https://alexandria.ucsb.edu/lib/ark:/48907/f3dz0b8w>; Erica Bennett, "Special Libraries and Collections: 'Invisible as Night, Implacable as Wind': California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA): The First 20 Years," in *Pathways to Progress: Issues and Advances in Latino Librarianship*, ed. John Ayala and Salvador Güereña (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2012), 59–80.
21. W. J. Eting, "Rally, Meeting Held to Hit Administration," *Daily Nexus* (University of California, Santa Barbara) 54, no. 154 (May 21, 1974): 1, <https://alexandria.ucsb.edu/lib/ark:/48907/f3k939kn>.
22. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xxxv.

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