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White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS

An article about the failure of diversity initiatives in library and information science.

It is no secret that librarianship has traditionally been and continues to be a profession dominated by whiteness (Bourg, 2014; Branche, 2012; Galvan, 2015; Hall, 2012; Honma, 2006), which is a theoretical concept that can extend beyond the realities of racial privilege to a wide range of dominant ideologies based on gender identity, sexual orientation, class, and other categories. In fact, recent years have seen LIS professional organizations and institutions striving to provide increasing numbers of diversity initiatives to help members from underrepresented groups enter and remain in librarianship (Gonzalez-Smith, Swanson, & Tanaka, 2014). The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and Society of American Archivists conduct the Mosaic Program to attract diverse students to careers in archiving; the American Association of Law Libraries manages the George A. Strait Minority Scholarship to help fund library school for college graduates interested in law librarianship; the American Library Association (ALA) runs its Spectrum Scholars Program to provide scholarships to diverse LIS students and a corresponding Spectrum Leadership Institute to help prepare these students for successful careers in the library field. Examples abound of library organizations attempting to address the "problem of diversity" in the LIS field.

Nevertheless, these efforts are not making any meaningful difference. As one of my colleagues has so accurately put it: "We're bringing [people] from underrepresented identity groups into the profession at same rate they're leaving. Attrition [is] a problem" (Vinopal, 2015). With minority librarians leaving the profession as soon as they are recruited, what can be done to render our abundance of diversity initiatives truly effective? Why are these ambitious and numerous initiatives failing to have the desired effect? Shortly after discussing this very issue with a colleague over lunch, I received an email regarding the approaching deadline for the ARL Career Enhancement Program, which is aimed at placing diverse, early career librarians in internships with member libraries. Reading through the onerous application process, the realization hit me: Our diversity programs do not work because they are themselves coded to promote whiteness as the norm in the profession and unduly burden those individuals they are most intended to help.

Whiteness in LIS

Studying whiteness in LIS has yet to hit the mainstream of library scholarship, but there have been a number of critical and radical library scholars who have taken up the challenge of interrogating and troubling the whiteness of the profession (Bourg, 2014; Espinal, 2000; Galvan, 2015; Hall, 2012; Honma, 2006). These critical examinations highlight the many dimensions of any accurate definition of whiteness as an ideological practice. As Galvan (2015) so succinctly puts it, "whiteness . . . means: white, heterosexual, capitalist, and middle class." Hall (2012) takes a different approach to defining the breadth of whiteness in LIS by differentiating it from the "black bodies" of LIS: "I would assert that [whiteness] is an issue, a question, that transcends race, ethnicity, any broad or limiting categorization and unites all librarians who identify or are identified as different" (p. 201). For these writers, whiteness refers not only to racial and ethnic categorizations but a complete system of exclusion based on hegemony. Likewise, in this article, I use "whiteness" to refer not only to the socio-cultural differential of power and privilege that results from categories of race and ethnicity; it also stands as a marker for the privilege and power that acts to reinforce itself through hegemonic cultural practice that excludes all who are different.

This system of exclusion functions primarily through the normativity of whiteness within librarian and larger societal culture. As Branche (2012) notes, "Whiteness and white normativity are embedded in U.S. library culture" (p. 205). The normativity of whiteness works insidiously, invisibly, to create binary categorizations of people as either acceptable to whiteness and therefore normal or different and therefore other. The invisible nature of whiteness is key to its power; when it is not named or interrogated, it can persist in creating a culture of exclusion behind the scenes of LIS practice (Espinal, 2001; Galvan, 2015; Honma, 2006). As Yeo and Jacobs (2006) note, "One must ask oneself if it would be possible to really achieve diversity without challenging our racist, homophobic and sexist consciousnesses that are so deeply imbedded that we don't even recognize them?"

For example, whiteness as hegemonic practice is at work when a librarian of color is mistaken for a library assistant by white colleagues at a professional conference. Likewise, whiteness is at work when genderqueer librarians are forced to choose between binary gender groupings, neither of which apply to their identities, when using the restroom at work. Finally, whiteness is at work when a librarian from a working-class background in search of employment is told by well-meaning colleagues, "Just take a job anywhere and move," when the unemployed librarian lacks the financial privilege to do so. This working of white normativity occurs without thought and intention but is still powerfully exclusionary and damaging to the profession.

A major contributor to the invisible normativity of whiteness in librarianship has been the fact that whiteness has played such a fundamental role in the profession from the start. Public libraries in the U.S. developed initially as sites of cultural assimilation and "Americanization" of immigrants needing to learn the mores of white society (Hall, 2012; Honma, 2006). Given the historical context, white normativity continues to be a hallmark of modern librarianship.

White normativity in LIS extends to the ways in which we discuss and address diversity in the profession. Rather than being framed as a shared goal for the common good, diversity is approached as a problem that must be solved, with diverse librarians becoming the objectified pawns deployed to attack the problem. With this white-centered thinking at the fore, many LIS diversity initiatives seem to focus primarily on increasing numbers and visibility without paying corresponding attention to retention and the lived experiences of underrepresented librarians surrounded by the whiteness of the profession (Gonzalez-Smith, Swanson, & Tanaka, 2014; Honma, 2006; Yeo & Jacobs, 2006). Focusing on numbers rather than the deeper issues of experience and structural discrimination allows the profession to take a self-congratulatory and complacent approach to the "problem of diversity" without ever overtly naming and addressing the issue of whiteness (Espinal, 2001; Honma, 2006).

In many ways, this article serves as an extension of Galvan's (2015) examination of the practice of whiteness in LIS hiring and job recruitment. She identifies culture, conspicuous leisure, and access to wealth as barriers to entry for members from diverse backgrounds (Galvan, 2015). My research extends that framework to examine ways in which similar barriers come into play even before the hiring process—in diversity initiatives supposedly aimed at encouraging members of marginalized groups to pursue the education and training necessary for a career in librarianship.

"White" Diversity Initiatives

The profession is so imbued with whiteness, extending even to the ways in which we discuss and address diversity, it is no wonder that our myriad diversity initiatives are not working. When we recruit for whiteness, we will perpetuate whiteness in the profession, even when it comes in the form of a librarian with a diverse background. A look at the application requirements for a typical LIS diversity initiative demonstrates this point. In order to qualify for an internship through the ARL Career Enhancement Program, for example, applicants must submit:

- a completed application form;
- a resume;
- a 500-word essay detailing their professional interests and goals;
- an official letter of acceptance to an ALA-accredited MLIS program;
- official transcripts; and

- two letters of recommendation, one of which must be from a professor or employer.

Each of these requirements assumes that applicants are situated in positions of white, middle-class, cisgender normativity that allow for the temporal, financial, and educational privilege that fulfilling these criteria would require. Only an applicant with access to the privileges of whiteness would have the tools needed to engage in the requisite work and volunteer opportunities called for by the diversity program, have the high-level of educational achievement required, possess the close relationships with individuals of power needed for stellar recommendations, and be able to provide all the documentation necessary to complete their application through the online form. In many ways, this long list of requirements resembles the complex application processes of the most elite private institutions of higher education. Many public institutions, including almost all community colleges, do not require such detailed paperwork for matriculation into their undergraduate programs (see e.g., St. Petersburg College). These institutions take their public mission seriously to provide education to all members of the community. However, diversity initiatives in LIS that are meant to benefit members of underrepresented groups require lengthy applications that many individuals from diverse backgrounds may not be equipped to complete.

These applications are created particularly to recruit for whiteness and require the ability to play at whiteness in order to succeed. For example, applicants are required to submit resumes detailing their work experience, but an applicant from a working-class background may not have the requisite experience, either through work or volunteering, to place on a resume. Building a relevant resume assumes the applicant has the white, middle-class background that allows for early career professional work or volunteerism, whereas many applicants do not have that privilege (Galvan, 2015). It may also be the case that the applicant has plenty of work experience in low-wage jobs but is unaware of ways to frame that experience to reflect the transferable skills that relate to librarianship. Without the white-normative experience of applying for professional opportunities, the applicant will not know how to frame their resume to meet the requirements for the application and, because of this lack of knowledge, may decide not to apply at all.

Another example can be seen in the requirement of official transcripts. A genderqueer applicant who has since changed names and gender identities may not know how to navigate the legal and bureaucratic labyrinth of transferring their personal information from one name and identity to another. Because the transcripts must be official, the applicant will likely have to work with the educational institution, as well as the diversity program, to verify their identity. This process adds additional labor to the already onerous application process—labor that is not required of the white-normative, cisgender applicant—and could likely discourage the applicant from applying.

In both cases, an application process rooted in whiteness can have a chilling effect on the types of applicants who actually apply, creating a self-selection process that further promotes whiteness in the profession. Even for those applicants who successfully apply and are accepted into these diversity programs, playing at whiteness is still a requirement for career success. Programs like the ARL Career Enhancement Program assume that successful applicants possess the privileged free time, financial backing, and familial circumstances to allow them to relocate for these internships, residencies, or ALA-accredited library programs. Moreover, these diversity initiatives not only require whiteness for the application process but they also require continued whiteness to succeed in the profession (Galvan, 2015). Thus, those applicants who find success in these diversity programs are those who can successfully replicate necessary whiteness. As Espinal (2001) observes, "Many librarians of color have commented that they are more accepted if and when they look and act white" (p. 144). This means the inverse is also true: Those librarians not able to play successfully at whiteness will be continually excluded from the profession (Satifice, 2015).

This phenomenon is not unique to LIS. Writing about the technology sector, K?ra (2014) notes, "When we talk about diversity and inclusion, we necessarily position marginalized groups as naturally needing to assimilate into dominant ones, rather than to undermine said structures of domination." Jack (2015) makes a similar observation regarding elite undergraduate institutions matriculating underrepresented minority students—the "privileged poor"—from private high schools: "Elite colleges effectively hedge their bets: They recruit those already familiar with the social and cultural norms that pervade their own campuses." Manipulating diversity programs to recruit for whiteness ensures that only those diverse candidates adept in whiteness will succeed.

My own experience serves as a prime example. I am a cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class black woman, raised by two highly educated parents who taught me from a young age the importance of playing at whiteness to achieve. I can specifically remember my mother admonishing me to "play the game and do what you want later" throughout my life. I have grown very adept at playing at whiteness; it has allowed me to complete a number of post-graduate degrees, spend time practicing corporate law at an award-winning global firm, and successfully transfer careers to a rewarding position in academic librarianship. This playing at whiteness also allowed me to apply for and successfully obtain a position as an ALA Spectrum Scholar in the 2012 cohort. Knowing how to replicate whiteness has served me well.

"Lifting as We Climb"

While my own ability to play at whiteness has served me in my career, it is a privilege that I know I cannot use selfishly. As my mother reminded me in a recent conversation about the issue of diversity in the professional world, "You play the game and give the white world what it wants just to get through the door. Then, once you're inside, you blast that door wide open for others to follow you" (B. Evans Hathcock, personal communication, August 18, 2015). Just as the National Association of Colored Women exhorted fellow middle-class blacks to do in their motto "Lifting as We Climb" (Wormser, 2002), it is important that those of us in LIS with privilege—be it the privilege of actual whiteness or the privilege of skill in playing whiteness—serve as effective allies to those who do not. We need to make space for our diverse colleagues to thrive within the profession. In short, we need to dismantle whiteness from within LIS. We can best do that in two equally important ways: by modifying our diversity programs to attract truly diverse applicants and by mentoring early career librarians in both playing at and dismantling whiteness in LIS.

One of the first steps to washing away the blackface of white librarianship is to reframe diversity initiatives so that they attract and retain applicants from truly diverse backgrounds. When we recruit for whiteness, we will get whiteness; but when we recruit for diversity, we will truly achieve diversity. It is important to note that reworking application processes to accommodate applicants with different backgrounds and experiences in no way requires lowering standards. Talented applicants from truly diverse backgrounds—that is, backgrounds not functionally equivalent to standards of successful whiteness—exist and can be recruited and retained for these programs. To identify and attract them, however, requires framing application questions and required material in ways that make sense for the applicants' experiences.

For example, instead of requiring that at least one or all letters of recommendation come from professors or former employers, it may be useful and more relevant to allow applicants to submit letters from community members or other acquaintances who can provide equally informed assessments of the applicant's work and goals. Assuming that an applicant has the necessary relationship with a professor or supervisor means assuming that applicant attends school or works in a white, middle-class, cis-male environment where closeness with professors or supervisors is the norm. A diverse applicant may not have the opportunity to form those kinds of school and work relationships. However, that same applicant may know a staff member at the local public library who is well aware of the applicant's career goals and the work they have put toward achieving them. The local library staff member would not qualify as either a professor or former employer but can still provide valuable insight into the qualifications of that particular applicant.

Dismantling whiteness from the infrastructure of our diversity programs is key, but it will take time. In the meantime, there are diverse individuals out there who wish to become and remain successful librarians. Thus, another important step in washing away the blackface of white librarianship involves teaching new librarians from diverse backgrounds how to navigate effectively the white system that we have. We also need to teach these new librarians how to dismantle whiteness' stranglehold on the profession. Being a nonwhite librarian playing at whiteness is an isolating and lonely practice, so it is essential that new librarians from diverse backgrounds get the support they need and have safe spaces to go in the midst of this work.

Fortunately, there are a number of communities of radical and critical librarians who are willing to provide support, guidance, and mentorship in bringing true diversity and anti-racist practice to the profession. One colleague and fellow beneficiary of LIS diversity initiatives has created a mentorship group for students of color to help them navigate the realities of learning and working in a privileged space and to assist them in fulfilling the requirements of whiteness necessary to succeed (Padilla, 2015). Social media spaces, such as #critlib and #radlib on Twitter, provide public spaces for librarians to vent frustrations and share strategies for combating whiteness—comprising a range of hegemonic statuses, as defined above—in LIS. For those not comfortable with speaking out publicly, social media can also provide useful points of contact for more private, offline relationships and discussions aimed at combating whiteness in the profession. Even within our professional organizations, a number of caucuses and interest groups, including the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table and the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association exist to help members of diverse identity groups find community in the midst of the whiteness of librarianship (Espinal, 2001; Gonzalez-Smith, Swanson, & Tanaka, 2014).

There are many ways for nonwhite librarians and library students to gain the support and knowledge they need to enter the doors of the profession and subsequently "blast them open." Likewise, there are many practical ways more experienced librarians—from all backgrounds and levels of privilege—can help to fight whiteness in our diversity initiatives:

Volunteer to serve on ALA and workplace committees and working groups tasked with organizing LIS diversity initiatives and speak up regarding ways those initiatives can be modified to embrace a more diverse applicant pool.

Offer to take part in formal mentoring programs through professional associations or within your institution. Help library workers new to the profession to navigate the culture of whiteness in the profession at large and within your specific place of work. For example, the Association of College and Research Libraries' Dr. E. J. Josey Spectrum Scholar Mentor Program pairs academic librarians with current Spectrum Scholars interested in academic librarianship, and mentor applications are always welcome.

Participate in informal mentoring with nonwhite library workers and students. With social media, it is possible to serve as an effective resource and ally for someone, even from miles away. Do what you can to let new colleagues from diverse backgrounds know that you are available as a resource for advice, to serve as a reference, etc.

Even if you are yourself new to the profession, you have a role to play. Develop relationships with more seasoned librarians who have demonstrated a commitment to inclusivity and learn from their experiences in the struggle. If you have privilege, begin speaking up for those who do not and signal boost their messages.

Fighting whiteness is hard work that requires additional labor from everyone. As Lumby and Morrison (2010) note, "It is therefore in the interest of all to address inequities, and not just in the interest of the apparently disadvantaged" (p. 12, citing Frankenburg, 1993).

Washing Away the White Librarianship in Blackface

Whiteness has permeated every aspect of librarianship, extending even to the initiatives we commit to increasing diversity. We can, however, make meaningful and important changes. With continued critical study of whiteness and its effects on LIS, it is possible to redirect our thinking about diversity from a problem to be solved to a goal worth achieving. Moreover, we can and should develop real strategies for attaining that goal. The first step is to help diverse applicants navigate the whiteness of the profession and make a concerted effort to dismantle whiteness from within. In doing so, we can recreate the profession into one that truly embraces inclusivity. We can wash away our white librarianship in blackface.

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Abstract

English

Whiteness – an ideological practice that can extend beyond notions of racial supremacy to other areas of dominance – has permeated every aspect of librarianship, extending even to the initiatives we claim are committed to increasing diversity. This state of affairs, however, need not remain. This article examines the ways in which whiteness controls diversity initiatives in library and information science (LIS), particularly in light of the application requirements set upon candidates. It then suggest ways to correct for whiteness in LIS diversity programs by providing mentorship to diverse applicants struggling to navigate the whiteness of the profession and concurrently working in solidarity to dismantle whiteness from within.