Perspectives

White Fragility and Privilege in Librarianship

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IT's 2018. The world is on fire. Once in a while, I come across a message of hope, but for the most part, reading the news, listening to the radio, or scrolling through Twitter is simply a gallery of despair rooted in inequality, discrimination, greed, and fear. The temptation to look away is strong, but our moral conscience reminds us that it's a privilege to do so; to decide that we are going to switch off the bad and hide is not a luxury afforded to all—indeed, it is a luxury afforded to fewer and fewer.

So. What's a privileged Canadian academic librarian to do about this, then?

When I was asked if I would agree to write an opinion piece about diversity for this special issue of *CJAL*, I wanted to say no. As a privileged white settler, I doubted I had much of value to say, and thought that perhaps I'd said too much already given that I had just delivered the opening keynote address at the CAPAL 2018 conference. But I agreed. Not only out of respect for Maha Kumaran because she asked me to, but because while the temptation to hide, to stay quiet and hope all of this passes, is strong, I think it's no longer a feasible option for a career-status white person to choose silence. I acknowledge and feel emphatically that we need to elevate and make space for diverse voices, but I want to focus on the tension between the principle “Nothing about us without us” and the tremendous burden that we place on a small number of people from under-represented groups when we insist that they play a part in diversity initiatives cooked up by institutions trying to obtain some sort of inclusion-nirvana-by-committee.

In my keynote address, I reflected on how diversity initiatives in the university are a “box-ticking” exercise—a means for the institution to report on paper about all of the ways it is addressing diversity, but those ways don’t have meaning for the people they are intended to represent. In Maha’s closing keynote address, she noted that Canadian library leadership is silent on issues of diversity. She shared an anecdote of being asked why a special network for visible-minority librarians, the Visible Minority Librarians of Canada Network (ViMLoC)—a group founded by Maha to help her cope with feeling isolated as a person of colour (POC) in a white profession—was even necessary. Unfortunately, the answer to that question can be found in the fact that the question itself was posed.

The Big Picture

I want to talk a little bit about the Canadian context in general before coming back to academic libraries. It is a mistake to focus too closely on our inner world at the expense of what is happening around us. Within the academy, it is easy to lose sight of the privilege we have in being part of the mission to pursue knowledge. We have easy access to a wealth of information and incredibly smart and progressive thinkers in our faculty, our staff, and our students. This is not the case for all Canadians, perhaps not for our neighbours, the person who checks out our groceries, or the parents of the children who go to school with our own kids. It’s easy for us to imagine that we share a common Canadian experience, when in reality that couldn’t be further from the truth, despite what Tim Hortons commercials would have us believe.

In Canada, we like to congratulate ourselves for being progressive, inclusive, and multicultural. This rosy picture is occasionally clouded when a story hits the news about someone in Alberta getting drunk at a Denny’s and going on a racist rant (Dormer 2018), or a woman in a Toronto doctor’s office demanding to see a white doctor (Brockbank and Xing 2017), or the Proud Boys marching in support of a statue in Halifax (McMillan and Patil 2017). We are momentarily shaken: “There *are* racists among us! But surely they aren’t anyone I know.” We assure ourselves that, no, those people aren’t us, they are a blight on polite Canadian society. And yet, when we look behind the curtain, there are any number of red flags that tell us otherwise but often go unnoticed by those of us who move through life in a white body with nary a barrier (physical or otherwise) placed in our path.

It behooves us to review from time to time the ways in which we know that we live in an unjust society. For a refresher, here is a sample of the ways that structural racism and hatred are rooted in Canadian society:

- More than 100 First Nations communities are without clean drinking water (Lukawiecki, Plotkin, and Boisvert 2018).

- Aboriginal youth make up 46% of admissions to correctional services but represent only 8% of the Canadian youth population (Statistics Canada 2018).
- 25% of African Canadian women live below the poverty line, compared to 8% of white Canadian women (UN Human Rights Council 2017).
- In 2016, 71% of hate crimes motivated by hatred of the victim's sexual orientation were violent crimes (Statistics Canada 2017).

Generally speaking, there is a lack of disaggregated race-based data in Canada. On its mission to Canada, the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent noted this as a serious issue in its report. Its recommendations included:

The Working Group recommends that a nation-wide mandatory policy on the collection of data disaggregated by race, colour, ethnic background, national origin and other identities be implemented to determine if and where racial disparities exist for African Canadians so as to address them accordingly. (UN Human Rights Council, 17)

While the working group in this instance was focused on the experience of African Canadians, it is certain that such a program would reveal a much more nuanced picture of the experience of all racialized Canadians as well as those of other marginalized identities. It's easy for us to tell ourselves that we aren't biased, if we don't have to face data that tell us otherwise.

As champions of access to information, mandatory collection of disaggregated data should be at the top of our agenda in raising consciousness. Whether it be in the classroom or in advocacy work in associations, we need to rally around this cause. In the meantime, however, a lack of evidence—a concept that librarians deify (sometimes to a fault, as when we dismiss the lived experience of those who experience discrimination)—should not dissuade any of us from the very real and present racism that exists in Canadian society.

The Smaller Picture

Librarianship is an overwhelmingly white profession, both by the numbers and in practice. The 2015 report *8Rs Redux: A CARL Libraries Human Resource Study* noted that visible-minority librarians had increased from 5% in 2003 to 11% in 2013, while the percentage of Aboriginal librarians had not changed, stuck at 1% (CARL 2015). In the report's subsequent section on strategic human-resources planning implications, there was a clear recommendation that more needed to be done to increase these numbers, recommending scholarship programs and more options for online education. The 2016 CAPAL census also indicated that academic librarians are overwhelmingly white (Revitt, Schrader, and Kaufman 2016). This head-counting practice, while informative, doesn't seem to have translated into any meaningful progress or visible advocacy work to get us on track. As David Hudson observes, the

pursuit of LIS diversity de-emphasizes white supremacy as the root of the problem to be solved, and actively reinforces the existing social order by tokenizing new “diverse” hires as a means to an end (Hudson 2017).

Cultural taxation is an experience all too common for racialized people in the workplace. Once hired, the service burden becomes disproportionate to that of their white colleagues (Joseph and Hirshfield 2011). April Hathcock discusses this phenomenon in her widely cited 2015 paper:

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. (Hathcock 2015)

At the beginning of this piece I remarked on the staggering pressure on the minority of the so-called culturally diverse among us to show up, be present, and activate the work underway on diversity and inclusion initiatives. The obvious solution to this issue is to hire more diverse librarians; however, once hired, racialized librarians quickly feel exhausted by the sheer weight of their burden (Hathcock 2015; Caidi and Dali 2015). At a recent summit, POCinLIS, attendees heard that 20% of ALA Spectrum Scholars leave the profession due to racial trauma in the workplace (Rapue 2018). Congruent with Maha’s experience in responding to why ViMLoC was even necessary, the oppression that comes with library whiteness needs significant work. The act of hiring is simply not enough.

When we elide over the reality of white supremacy, preferring to use terms like *white privilege*¹ order to reduce discomfort, we ignore a very real history of violence. When we look at diversity as an equation to be solved or a check box to be ticked, we ignore the lived experience of those who work in our institutions. Simply employing the right number of people who represent various backgrounds does not mean the work is done. It’s a crucial first step (seriously, hire more POC in your libraries), but the work is not done once the contracts are signed.

Once hired, how are those individuals encouraged to bring their whole selves to work? It is often the case that people feel unsafe or uncomfortable doing so because of the coded whiteness that is pervasive in our structures. For example, how are meetings organized and designed? Are they venues where all participants are on equal footing? How is everyone made to feel as though their contributions are worthy and taken into serious consideration? Do meeting chairs provide sufficient background information beforehand for everyone to review independently? Are there

1. I had the good fortune to hear Desmond Cole speak on this topic at the 2018 White Privilege Conference. He describes “a disembodied white privilege. A white privilege that drops from heaven. A white privilege that is not connected to the history of colonialism, slavery, capitalism—that just exists ‘cause it exists ‘cause it exists, and it’s sad and unfortunate, but that’s just the way it is.” This term ensures that society distances itself further from white supremacy and Cole calls for a rejection of this insidious distinction (Sloan 2018).

opportunities for anonymous feedback submission for those who may not wish to “share with the class”? What about tenure and promotion processes: How closely is the collective agreement followed? Do new hires feel they are all on equal footing? Are there unspoken rules that demand publishing in the “right” journals or going to the “right” conferences?

Learning, Always Learning

In libraries, it is a given that we support training to learn the new framework for information literacy or a new software or database, but diversity/anti-racism training or academic pursuits of theoretical focus are often left optional or at the margins. Often when there are opportunities to engage in learning more about these issues, the same people continually show up—and they are hardly ever new to the topic. At my campus, there are endless opportunities to attend public lectures, participate in training sessions, or take courses to learn more about our settler colonial past and present, to name just a few examples. There is no shortage of (often free!) ways to learn, but we need to be willing to show up and—crucially—we must accept that we are never finished learning.

That also means accepting that there is always more to know, and recognizing that definitions change, language is living, and new perspectives and world events shape the world in new ways every day. If you took a women’s studies course in your undergrad in 1994, chances are that course looks very different today. Chances are that department doesn’t even exist as it did and is now called gender studies. There are countless ways of knowing, learning, being, and sharing, and being open to learning about them means you are contributing to an inclusive atmosphere.

As a litmus test to see if you need to take some time to brush up on a few key concepts, ask yourself if you can easily define, name, and offer examples of the following concepts in a contemporary context:

- Microaggressions
- Whiteness and/or white supremacy
- Privilege in its myriad forms (sane, class, ableism, etc.)
- Implicit bias
- White fragility

I want to briefly expand on white fragility, the

state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (DiAngelo 2011, 54)

Talking about race is difficult but it is also absolutely necessary, and not the sole responsibility of the racialized. White fragility and the volumes that have been written about it are evidence that white people have not been great at accepting their share of this work. It is a privilege in and of itself to make a choice *not* to participate; meanwhile, persons of colour deal with the effects of white supremacy every day, such as feeling isolated in a sea of whiteness or reading headlines about hate crimes amidst the increase of xenophobic and racist messaging in politics. The comfort of white people when confronted about racism, in this light, seems trivial. While it is true that white supremacy is a concept that is alienating to some white people, it is also true that the violence that has been—and continues to be—inflicted by it vastly outweighs that discomfort. Learning to be an ally means accepting that you will make mistakes, but this is not a sufficient reason not to do it; knowing when to speak up and when to be quiet and listen takes practice. When you get it wrong, you apologize, learn from it, pick yourself up, and keep trying. We've been taught this skill since kindergarten, and it's just as relevant now as it was then.

Every year, we reflect on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy when our neighbours to the south celebrate a federal holiday. But there are two versions of that legacy: the one that is comforting to white people, in which MLK's dream is realized and no one is judged by the colour of their skin, and the more accurate one, that saw MLK become a radical who felt emboldened to call out passivity in the face of white supremacy—specifically, the passivity of white people (Jackson 2018). Fifty-plus years on, here we still are.

Much like the #MeToo movement was a wake-up call for those who thought that the feminist battle for equality had been fought and won, this is a similar time for white people to reckon with racism. It's 2018. The world is on fire. We are not living in a post-racism utopia. Diversity hiring initiatives and affirmative action may have pushed the needle forward, but there is still much work to be done, and white people must rise to it.

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