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Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies

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**Abstract:**

The issue of race has been evaded in the field of Library and Information Studies (LIS) in the United States through an unquestioned system of white normativity and liberal multicultural discourse. To counteract these paradigms, this paper draws from various scholarly writings about race and racial formation in order to center race as the primary axis of analysis in the reinterpretation of major theoretical issues in LIS. Beginning with an analysis of the historical construction of libraries as an institution complicit in the production and maintenance of white racial privilege and then turning toward present-day discourses surrounding diversity and multiculturalism, this paper discusses at length the epistemological forms of racism that exist in LIS.

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### **The Omission of Color: An Introduction**

One must face a palimpsest of written histories that erase and deny, that reinvent the past to make the present vision of racial harmony and pluralism more plausible.  
—bell hooks (1997)

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, W.E.B. DuBois (1903) wrote that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (p. xi). A century later, race relations in the United States remain as crucial an issue as ever.<sup>1</sup> As Leon Litwack (1999) writes, “The problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will remain the color line and the ongoing struggle for racial equality, but it will be fought out and resolved in a strikingly different America (an America one-third black and Latino), and in a world in which the vast majority of people are non-white” (p. 1). Despite a long legacy of race-based scholarship in many fields of the academy, as well as the ever-diversifying user population in the United States, the field of library and information studies (LIS) has failed to keep up with the on-going discussions and debates about race, and instead functions in a race-blind vacuum while failing to recognize the disfiguring implications such blindness embodies. Lorna Peterson (1996) provides a cogent argument on this point when she writes, “Although there has been scholarship in the area of race and racism, it has not been given the serious attention it deserves” (p. 172). Both scholars and students in the field of LIS have echoed these sentiments numerous times, yet a sustained critical discussion surrounding the issue of race within LIS remains disturbingly absent. In order to counter such deficiencies in scholarship, the following questions need to be raised: Why is it that scholars and students do not talk openly and honestly about issues of race and LIS? Why does the field have a tendency to tiptoe around discussing race and racism, and instead limit the discourse by using words such as “multiculturalism” and “diversity”? Why is the field so glaringly white yet no one wants to talk about whiteness and white privilege? With such questions in mind, this paper will critically interrogate the omission of color and perpetuation of whiteness in the LIS field.

In order to advance the discussion around race and LIS, a critique of canonical LIS thought must begin by challenging prevailing ideologies that treat the subject of “race” as lying outside the realm of objective library scientific inquiry. Michael Harris (1986) deconstructs this positivist paradigm and encourages a “debate on both epistemological and normative issues surrounding the research endeavor in library science” (p. 522). Such critiques are necessary in order to understand the foundational prejudices that have shaped the construction of libraries and LIS and to eschew previous conceptualizations within the field

that have worked to conceal its racialized formations. Hence, this paper will engage in these two projects as Harris proposed—interrogating the epistemological foundations of library science and challenging normativity, or more specifically the white racial normativity, in LIS. By synthesizing literature from within the field of LIS and incorporating various theoretical lenses from outside fields of study, such as ethnic and American studies, women’s studies, and queer studies, I will present a multi-perspectival critique of the racial discourse within LIS, one that includes the viewpoints of marginalized groups and recognizes the complexity and intersectionality of various forms of privileges and oppressions. This answers the call by Harris to engage in a more “holistic” approach to LIS. He writes that LIS “is not a separate discipline, but rather a mediating profession concerned with knowledge derived from all other disciplines, and researchers in this profession must be alert to, and prepared to draw upon, developments in the social sciences generally which promise to contribute to the solution of problems specific to libraries” (p. 523). Drawing from Harris’s critique, it should be noted that my analysis will specifically address issues within the area of librarianship, although these problems also continue to exist in areas such as archives and other information institutions and practices.

All too often the library is viewed as an egalitarian institution providing universal access to information for the general public. However, such idealized visions of a mythic benevolence tend to conveniently gloss over the library’s susceptibility in reproducing and perpetuating racist social structures found throughout the rest of society. By contextualizing the institution of the public library within histories of racialization, as well as present-day trends in liberal multiculturalist logic, I attempt to draw a perspective much in line with the work of critical whiteness studies scholars such as David Roediger and George Lipsitz, in “focus[ing] on the history of white identity, and on its presence, as keys to understanding continuities in oppression and the possibilities of new departures” (Roediger, 2002, p.16). Like Roediger, I avoid a strict linear treatment of the past/present, in order to uncover a “‘usable present,’ which will enable us to oppose racism today and to pose different and better questions about the past” (p. 16). As these scholars illustrate, race and racism in U.S. society is a socio-historical construction, and our abilities to comprehend the current state of U.S. race-relations hinges upon our ability to examine these social forces.

With these motives in mind, the first part of this paper will concentrate on examining the foundations of the U.S. public library and the ways in which this institution has been treated as a subject of analysis within the field of LIS. As Wayne Wiegand (1999) points out, “without a deeper understanding of the American library’s past we cannot adequately assess its present and are thus unable to plan its future prudently” (p. 2). I will then turn my attention to

contemporary discourses of “diversity” and “multiculturalism” and critique their inability to adequately represent the racial discrepancies in the field. Finally, I will discuss the legacies of such ambiguous racial(ized) scholarship by examining the epistemological exclusions that prevent the issues of race and racism from being more fully integrated into LIS. In doing so, this article identifies alternative trajectories that will allow us to chart new directions for LIS, paths that will ultimately lead toward an increased social responsibility and accountability for a field that is in desperate need of a prolonged, systemic critique of its racial discourses.

### **Library Ontologies and the Construction of Whiteness**

To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it.  
—Coco Fusco (1988)

John Budd (1995) argues that “without an understanding of the ontological purpose of the library—its essence of being—the empirical study of its function as an organization lacks a fundamental context” (p. 306). He defines the ontology of the library as “the core of the library’s being, the reason for the library’s existence...At its core the library exists to collect, organize, and provide access to information” (p. 306). While Budd correctly points out that understanding the ontological purpose of the library is essential to the study of LIS, he is particularly shortsighted in his treatment of the library as an immutable, transhistorical institution. He treats the “ontology” of the library as if it were independent of ideological or sociopolitical geographies and temporalities. In other words, Budd presents a myopic view of the “core of the library’s being” (p. 306), focusing on decontextualized micro-level phenomena, rather than exploring a larger macro-level analysis that would yield a more complex understanding of the library and the specific sociopolitical milieu in which it functions. As Scheurich and Young (1997) argue, ontologies are “not outside history or sociology; they are deeply interwoven within the social histories of particular civilizations and within particular groups within those civilizations” (pp. 7-8). Such shortsightedness on the part of scholars like Budd serves to perpetuate the seeming neutrality of the library system, fails to recognize how libraries are ideologically constituted by other social forces and how they have been engaged in historically-situated racial projects.

Historical depictions regarding the public library tend to veer toward the celebratory, touting an egalitarian spirit encapsulated by the public library and its mission within the public sphere. Rubin (2000) summarizes the historic mission

of the public library as follows: “(1) to support the education and socialization needs of society; (2) to meet the informational needs of a broad spectrum of citizens; (3) to promote self-education; and (4) to satisfy the popular tastes of the public” (p. 244). However, more critical scholarship has developed in the last twenty years to cast suspicion upon this erstwhile image of the public library. Scholars such as Harris deconstruct and dispel the laudatory foundation myths of the public library, and instead reinterpret libraries and librarians as “agents of authority and social control” (Rubin, 2000, p. 235). By examining the sociopolitical histories of libraries, in particular public libraries in the United States, we can get a better understanding of the library’s formation—the ontology, if you will—as one that is both racial and racist.

A careful examination of how the public library has both upheld and contradicted its purported mission as a democratizing institution for the good of the general public reveals its particular role in the processes of U.S. racial formation. As Omi and Winant (1994) pointedly assert, racial formation is “a process of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized... racial formation [is linked] to the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled” (p. 56). Libraries have always held a distinctively racial motive, intentional or not, that library historians, practitioners, and theoreticians have very seldom investigated. Omi and Winant (1994) further explain that a

*racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning* (p. 56).

With respect to LIS, libraries have historically served the interests of a white racial project by aiding in the construction and maintenance of a white American citizenry as well as the perpetuation of white privilege in the structures of the field itself. By reframing the origins and development of libraries in the United States, we can see how libraries have been complicit “in the process of developing and institutionalizing racial policies and practices, [and] in the articulation and socialization of racial meanings” (Winant, 2001, p. 101), which in turn has contributed to the ongoing white racial privilege that continues to haunt the field of LIS.

Before moving further, an elaboration on the concept of whiteness would be instructive. According to San Juan (1998), whiteness is “the sociopolitical constitution of the various European cohorts as a hegemonic collectivity

coinciding with the history of the formation of the U.S. nation-state as a ‘settler society’” (p. 162).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Frankenberg (2001) outlines an eight-point definition of whiteness, which points to the multiplicity and shifting meanings of the category. Among these definitions, she writes, “Whiteness is a location of structural advantage in societies structured in racial dominance.... [It is also] a product of history...[whose] meanings are complexly layered and variable locally and translocally...simultaneously malleable and intractable” (p. 76). George Lipsitz (1998) implicates whiteness as a socio-cultural category constantly created and recreated as a way to uphold the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and opportunity. He further states that “[a]s an unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (p. 1). As these scholars indicate, “whiteness” works as an invisible and elusive structure of privilege, one that allows for constant reinvention and rearticulation to protect the interests of a white racial ruling class. The identification of whiteness and its structuralizing principles is necessary in order to combat its invisibility and normative effects. Hence, the theoretical investigation into histories of whiteness is a crucial intervention within the LIS field, as we shall see when considering the foundation and development of the U.S. public library system.

The founding of the first major public library in the United States was greatly impacted by the social and political forces of the time, among them the urbanization of the United States, the increase in public services and social institutions to enhance a more informed citizenry, and the influx of immigrants into the United States, particularly from Eastern and Southern Europe (Rubin, 2000, p. 232-234). Harris (1973) notes the immigration patterns of the 19<sup>th</sup> century helped to spur the establishment and the mission of the public library. According to Harris, George Ticknor, a leader in the establishment of the Boston Public Library, “saw an urgent need to ‘assimilate their masses’ and bring ‘them in a willing subjection to our own institutions’” (p. 2510). Furthermore, he points out, “The idea was to induce people to pull themselves upward—morally and intellectually—by their bootstraps” (p. 2511). These founding principles speak to a common hegemonic U.S. rhetoric of white ethnic assimilation and meritocratic advancement, both of which have been critiqued extensively by scholars in the social sciences, particularly for their fallacious ideals of an egalitarian U.S. society that ignores ideological and material discriminations based on race. For example, Omi and Winant (1994) contextualize the assimilation model within the history of U.S. sociological thought, and critique its inability to account for non-white experiences. As they explain, assimilationist theories that attempted to predict the incorporation of non-white ethnic groups into the rubric of mainstream (white) U.S. society proved inadequate because they were “solidly based in the

framework of European (white) ethnicity, and could not appreciate the extent to which racial inequality differed from ethnic inequality” (p. 16). In other words, assimilationist efforts failed to recognize the importance that skin color played in determining a group’s (in)ability to morph into the dominant collective U.S. racial identity. The immigrant assimilation programs of public libraries played a complicit role in perpetuating these same racial processes. Thus, from its very inception, the public library system was engaged in a racializing project, one whose purpose was to inculcate European ethnics into whiteness.

A number of works in LIS examine the role of libraries in the assimilation of immigrants and ethnic groups into mainstream U.S. society (e.g. Jones, 1999; Nauratil, 1985; Harris, 1973). However, these works fail to account for the library’s role in shaping a white racialized citizenry. For example, the assimilationist narrative in the history of U.S. librarianship is particularly privileged in chronicling the library’s adoption of the Americanization project. As Plummer Alston Jones, Jr. (1999) notes, “Americanization as a concept, even before it had attached itself to a movement was a term that connotated many meanings to many people, but for librarians it meant simply a two-part process: instruction in the English language and preparation for citizenship” (p. 10). Jones continues, “Librarians never questioned or debated in print whether Americanization was an appropriate mission for the American public library: it was *the* goal of library work with immigrants” (p. 10). While Jones recognizes the role of whiteness (which he refers to as “Angloconformity”) in the Americanization process, his discussion is confined to the level of description. Jones fails to interrogate the meaning of whiteness as a pervasive social structure within the field and its ideological ramifications for library patrons and staff alike. In doing so, Jones naturalizes the white racial category rather than detailing its very constructedness and its responsibilities in upholding the racial hierarchy of the U.S. nation-state.

The body of scholarship by Jones and other library historians is especially informative for the way in which whiteness, particularly as a discourse of power, goes unnoticed. The invisibility of whiteness that manifests itself within these works serves to reinscribe white normativity and fails to examine the material and ideological discriminations leveled against people of color in the United States. As Frankenberg (2001) writes,

The phrase ‘the invisibility of whiteness’ refers in part to moments when whiteness does not speak its own name. At those times, as noted, whiteness may simply assume its own normativity. It may also refer to those times when neutrality of normativity is claimed for some kinds of whiteness, with whiteness frequently simultaneously linked to nationality (p. 81).

Americanization in this sense, as promoted through the U.S. library system, refers to a whitening process whereby European ethnics possessed a particular ethnic mobility based on the color of their skin that allowed them membership to a white racial identity.

Despite the shortcomings of his analysis, Jones' detailed synthesis is particularly insightful for the ways in which he provides evidence for the historically-situated interlocking systems of race and citizenship. By advocating a "democratizing" mission for the public library, these Americanization programs only served those segments of the population granted access to U.S. citizenship. The purposeful exclusion of citizenship to people of color—the result of convergent racist histories of conquest and colonization of Native Americans and Chicanos, the enslavement of peoples of African descent, and importation of Asian immigrant labor who were legally branded as "aliens ineligible for citizenship"—paints a very different type of historical narrative and illustrates the racial nature of U.S. citizenship projects, in general, and library Americanization programs, in particular. In other words, through the promotion of this type of white racial socialization process, libraries were also guilty of perpetuating a corollary system of racial exclusion and oppression towards those who could not so easily shed the color of their skin and assimilate into the white racial citizenry promoted within the library system.

If the concept of citizenship is so interwoven with the perpetuation of a specific racial project, how do we adequately define and account for a library system that prides itself in making the "model citizen?" In other words, by interrogating libraries as exclusionary sites dedicated to the maintenance of a white racial citizenry, what are the possibilities of transgressing this hierarchical racial state? For example, jumping ahead in history, Harris, Hannah, and Harris (1998) explore the effects of World War II on the development of the public library and the renewed commitment to the ideals of U.S. librarianship. In the historical wake of book burnings and the suppression of libraries under the dictatorships of Hitler and Mussolini, their narrative chronicles the establishment of the Library Bill of Rights in 1939, stating:

Libraries were now portrayed as "arsenals of democratic culture," and the librarian was simply the neutral and passive conduit through which the day's intelligence would be transmitted to enlightened citizens in a democratic republic. The idea was to facilitate the democratic process by providing the access to the whole spectrum of human knowledge, no matter how trivial or controversial, without considerations of its possible effects. The reader was to be given the authority to decide what information to use and how to utilize it (p. 28).



However, as was the case throughout U.S. history, ideas such as “democracy” and “citizenship” have been (and continue to be) contested terms, terms that have been viewed with apprehension and distrust, particularly among the marginalized and oppressed members of the U.S. population. Such blanket “humanism” espoused by the passage above tends to promote “the heralded democracy of American exceptionalism while clearly relying on exclusionary assumptions about the bodies able to achieve the seemingly universal abstraction of citizenship both promised and demanded by entrance into the public sphere” (Wiegman, 1997, p. 6). The framing of the library within the terms of “democracy” and “neutrality” conceals the covert structural forms of racial exclusion that protect white racial interests, a system which Lipsitz accurately labels the “possessive investment in whiteness” (1998, p. 216-217). Lipsitz briefly yet insightfully touches upon the racialized development of librarians via a series of legislative acts passed under Roosevelt’s New Deal that privileged whites over people of color. His analysis ushers in a new racial politics that recognizes the covert and institutionalized forms of racial discrimination. He writes, “Racism in the United States sometimes proceeds through direct, referential, and overt practices of exclusion. But it manifests itself more often through indirect, inferential, and covert policies that use the denial of overt racist intent to escape responsibility for racialized consequences” (p. 216).

Listening to the voices of people of color will allow us to better view how whiteness has been operationalized in the field of librarianship. Rubin (2000) quotes research conducted by Haro on Latino perceptions of the public library and points out that “libraries are often perceived as one of many Anglo institutions that are designed and controlled by Anglos to serve Anglos” (p. 241). This comment contradicts the egalitarian or race-blind image of the library that mainstream academics and practitioners seem to advocate. These perspectives, as well as the interrogation of white positionality, need to be further explored in the field of LIS, if we are to begin to fully understand the racialization of libraries and the field of LIS in general.

This is not to say that the racialization of libraries as a white institution has completely debilitated the possibilities of change and empowerment for communities of color. Library historians who focus on the roles of libraries in communities of color have demonstrated the transformative possibilities that libraries have to offer. For example, Du Mont (1986) provides examples of segregated libraries for black populations saying that “[t]hese independent black libraries were separate governmental units and had no official connection with any other public library system in the municipality” (p. 489). This dichotomous relationship between private black libraries and the public white libraries serves as supportive evidence for the exclusionary practices of public librarianship. It

further highlights the oppositional racialization of these two types of institutions, which directly reflects dominant racial discourse, and which is oftentimes framed within a black/white binary (one that problematically leaves out other racial groups). However, for the purposes of this paper, instead of focusing on these particular moments of resistance and aberration to the whitening practices of the library field, I have chosen to concentrate on libraries and whiteness to uncover the ideological formations and material consequences of the white racial hegemony found in the institutions and practices within the field of LIS.

While an examination of the library's ontologies or origins must account for its complicity in racial projects, such a disheartening view of libraries as a foundationally racist institution should not necessarily dictate the future trajectory of their practice. As San Juan (2002) writes, "Origins need not predetermine destinations, although sometimes they anticipate the direction of movement" (p. 35). Indeed, the direction of movement toward the whitened LIS field has been in some respects prophesied by these ontological beginnings.<sup>3</sup> By examining the ideological foundations of these sociohistorical processes, additional spaces can emerge to critically dialogue more openly about the covert and overt privileges found in the field of LIS, as well as to examine the different experiences and perspectives of people of color in the field so as to extend our analyses beyond the outdated black/white binary.<sup>4</sup> As Espinal (2001) points out, "Unless we address whiteness, unless we identify and name it, many of the problems that plague us collectively and as individual librarians of color will continue" (p. 133).

### **The Multicultural Intervention: From Politics to Self-Help**

A multiculturalism that does not acknowledge the political character of culture will not, I am sure, lead toward the dismantling of racist, sexist, homophobic, economically exploitative institutions.

—Angela Davis (1996)

While the field of LIS has rarely explicitly addressed the concept of whiteness, concepts such as diversity and multiculturalism have recently become fashionable terms to promote and accessorize. The rhetoric about diversity and multiculturalism tends to veer in two different, yet complementary, directions: either as a distressful "Oh no, there's not enough diversity!" or a laudatory "Let's celebrate our newfound multiculturalism!" For example, many works in LIS note with dismay the lack of ethnic and racial diversity within the profession and the academy, not to mention the populations that use the library (e.g., Reese and Hawkins, 1999; de la Pena McCook, 2000). In response to these disparaging figures, the diversity scholarship in LIS advances a plethora of case studies,

research reports, and other descriptive works on how professionals can manage diversity “@ your library!”<sup>5</sup> Ironically, despite the so-called multicultural trend in LIS, the precise reasons why we need to “diversify” seldom receive any close scrutiny.

A cursory glance at some of the major diversity projects of the American Library Association (ALA) illustrates the lack of critical racial discourse in the field. For example, the Office of Diversity, an arm of the ALA, states that diversity is necessary because library patrons “need to see themselves in the [library] displays, collections, websites, and staff, because to see yourself is the first human connection, the first human invitation to become a lifelong user of libraries. Seeing yourself makes you less of a stranger, more of a friend” (*Recruitment*, 2004). The Ethnic Materials Information Exchange Round Table (EMIERT) articulates its primary purpose “to serve as a source of information on recommended ethnic collections, services, and programs” with the rationale that “librarians, in serving the total community, work with people from many ethnic groups” (*A short history*, 2002).<sup>6</sup> From these brief introductory statements alone it becomes clear that ALA tends toward a service-oriented approach to multiculturalism and lacks a critical perspective in regards to the issues of race and racism. What should be noted, then, is how a double omission seems to be at work in this type of multicultural/multiethnic rhetoric. First, the focus on concepts such as “diversity” and “ethnicity” elides any mention of race, problematically divorcing these terms from the distinct power relations of their racialized meanings. Second, the failure to specifically indicate race leads to the inability to conceptualize and articulate social and institutional structures of discrimination that lead to the necessity of forming these special committees in the first place. By considering the historical development of “ethnic” library services in the context of a larger social history since the watershed period of the 1960s, the following section will uncover the neo-conservative trajectories that have infiltrated and prohibited meaningful discussions about race in LIS.

The 1960s and 1970s was a transformative period both within the United States and across the globe. Not only were “racial minority” groups in the United States beginning to demand for their own rights and self-determination through the Civil Rights and cultural nationalist movements, but decolonizing movements were also materializing in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The focus on racial oppression and the desire to change the white racist structures that pervaded society infiltrated all segments of U.S. society. Libraries were no exception. As Rubin (2000) writes:

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was a critical turning point in ensuring that African Americans and Hispanics were equally included in the missions of public libraries. The earlier public library movement

focused primarily on assimilating ethnic cultures into the American mainstream. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was a struggle for ethnic self-determination (Stern 1991). Groups such as African Americans and Hispanics did not necessarily desire to be assimilated; rather they argued for equal opportunity and rights to the advantages that American society had to offer. The concept of the melting pot was replaced by a concept of a multicultural society (p. 242).

The work done around ethnic and racial librarianship can be interpreted as antiracist projects, one that combated white normativity and white racial privilege and called attention to the discrepancies based on race in LIS. As Nauratil (1985) points out, “The socially responsive librarian would argue further that if the socioeconomic position of the community is one resulting from injustice, the library has a mandate to take part in the struggle against that injustice” (p. 123). Librarians, particularly those of color, exerted agency in how they approached the field of LIS, with new libraries and institutions being formed, and new critiques being leveled against existing institutional and social structures, ones that analyzed their relationships to power and knowledge production.

However, these gains took a backseat with the rise of neoconservatism in the 1980s and the emergence of a new rhetoric of “multiculturalism” that ultimately reinscribed neo-conservative politics. With the incorporation of multicultural discourse came the renewed danger of obscuring race and promoting a celebratory rhetoric around cultural difference. Gordon and Newfield (1996) identify the contradictions in the uses of this type of discourse: “Multiculturalism in the 1980s sponsored renewed protests against white racism, and yet it also appeared to replace the emphasis on race and racism with an emphasis on cultural diversity. Multiculturalism rejected racial subordination but seemed sometimes to support it” (p. 3). The legacies of this shift in perspective have left us with an ambiguous political terrain, which Peter McLaren (1994) has characterized as ranging everywhere from conservative/corporate multiculturalism to revolutionary multiculturalism. What has most often surfaced in the discourse of LIS is a benign liberal multiculturalism that celebrates difference and promotes “cross-cultural understanding” empty of critical analyses of race and racism that instead adopts a commodified diversity management more in line with capitalist market relations than emancipatory anti-racist struggles. San Juan (2002), in paraphrasing Slavoj Žižek, sums it up this way, “The inherent contradiction of the liberal democratic project...lies in its objectification of the Other, reducing the others—minorities, strangers, immigrants, undocumented aliens, refugees, and so on—into folkloric spectacles or objects, the ‘ethnic Thing’ supposedly liberated from the transnational market and the reign of commodity-fetishism” (p. 347).

An outspoken critic of the multiculturalism debates, Lorna Peterson (1995) issues the following challenge:

Librarians use the term [multicultural] in many ways, and from our literature one cannot tell whether multicultural refers to racial minorities, concerns marginalization and equity, or merely celebrates differences as exotic. This careless language shapes a library policy weak on equity. Even worse, the universal application of “multicultural” to any type of difference trivializes injustice experienced by the oppressed. Librarians should clarify what they mean by “multicultural” before continuing with diversity plans and programs (p. 30).

As Peterson suggests, in order to truly combat the issues of race and racism that plague LIS a more rigorous intervention is needed in order to dismantle liberal multiculturalism and to promote a critical or revolutionary multiculturalism (if the “multicultural” discourse is to be used at all) that re-centers the importance of race, as well as other social axes of domination, in the analysis and practice within the field. Similarly, Marable (2001) states, “Instead of just celebrating diversity, we must theorize it, interrogate it, and actively seek the parallels and connections between people of various communities. Instead of talking about race, we should be theorizing the social processes of racialization, of how certain groups in U.S. society have been relegated to an oppressed status, by the weight of law, social policy and economic exploitation” (p. 9). In short, LIS needs to embrace a “revolutionary multiculturalism” which McLaren (2003) defines as “a socialist-feminist multiculturalism that challenges the historically sedimented processes through which race, class, and gender identities are produced within capitalist society....[and is] dedicated to reconstituting the deep structures of political economy, culture, and power in contemporary social arrangements...[and] rebuilding the social order from the vantage point of the oppressed” (p. 291).

However, the state of LIS seems to be a far cry from achieving such a framework. Given the racial discrepancies within the demographics of the field, LIS scholars and practitioners are still caught up in a limited form of representational politics. For example, as Clara Chu (1999) states:

Activities, such as the American Library Association (ALA) Spectrum Scholarship Initiative for ethnic minority students and the Diversity Fairs held the last two years at the ALA annual conference, give the appearance that multicultural information services and librarians of color are a top priority in the field. Although these efforts are to be commended equity of services has yet to be achieved and the number of librarians of color remains low (p. 3).

While these efforts at diversification are certainly admirable and necessary interventions, a concentration on simply numbers or equitable representation appeals to a limited form of identity politics. Such initiatives fall easily in line with liberal multicultural orthodoxies of celebrating diversity and difference, and deflect attention from the collective and liberatory struggles toward social justice and anti-racism. In other words, representation alone cannot solve the problem of white privilege in LIS any more than (self-)congratulatory visions of inclusive multiculturalism can defeat historical legacies and institutional manifestations of racial discrimination. The process of examining the limitations of representational politics, and its complicity in the commodification of identities and the advancement of neoliberal ideologies of difference, allows us to see the need for a more progressive agenda in advocating for a multiracial LIS state. In re-evaluating their struggle against racial discrimination, librarians of color, then, must recognize the power relations involved in dominant society's strategic institutional maneuvering which does little to challenge the structural racism that remains on a more covert level. Hence, the mere inclusion of tokenized bodies of color into LIS will not change the overall system foundationally and institutionally structured around race and racism.

Moving toward a more emancipatory path for LIS, Chu (1999) advocates for a "transformative information services," which conceptualizes information as a "discourse of power...[and] shows the role of libraries and librarians as both supporting racism and in fighting for not only racial but social justice" (p. 1). Chu further elaborates, "My call is for a social and color consciousness in our field in order to account for racist and other oppressive practices and the experience of disenfranchised people" (p. 6). With such goals in mind, how then do we conceptualize a critical study of race and librarianship? The next section is an exploration into the state of LIS and the exclusions and discriminations that take place based on its inability to talk about race and the whiteness that has shaped the field. Amidst such a debate, I advocate for an epistemological regrouping of LIS as a field of study and the implementation of a new (inter)disciplinary framework in line with "transformative information services."

### **Epistemologies of Racism (Notes Toward a Transformative LIS)**

The victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim; he, or she, has become a threat.

—James Baldwin (1976)

As explored in the previous two sections, the field of LIS has inherited two problematic paradigms in the study of race: unacknowledged whiteness and celebratory multiculturalism, both of which elide critical discourse on race and racial inequality. Given these limitations, how do we struggle toward a conceptualization of race that moves beyond identity and representation, and begins to interrogate race as a social system linked to issues of power, privilege, oppression, and exploitation? In addition, not only must we articulate what is missing from LIS, we must also question and theorize exactly why such omissions occur in the first place. This section attempts to uncover and interrogate some of these challenges. Drawing upon theories and insights from ethnic, queer, and feminist scholarship—voices which stand at the margins of dominant discourses and provide insights into the ways that society replicates its own particular ideologies—we can see how the prevailing systems of thought in LIS contribute to the reproduction of discrimination and the exclusion of the voices of those who could potentially destabilize the current hegemony of whiteness.

The idea that LIS is “trapped in its own discursive formations” (Wiegand, 1999) is a key concept to consider in approaching the field of LIS and its problematic relationship to theorizing race. As cited earlier in this essay, Harris (1986) discusses how the positivist paradigm continues to be reproduced throughout much of LIS thought and scholarship. What oftentimes goes overlooked in the discussion and critique of positivism is its roots in Western philosophy and its role in the perpetuation in white racial academic projects. Robyn Wiegman (1997) considers this type of scholarly and ideological entrapment and re-inscription a result of academic capitalism and the privileging of straight white male hegemony, particularly in its role in reproducing the “bourgeois subject.”<sup>7</sup> Wiegman’s critique of the academy, as well as issues of inclusiveness and disciplinarity, resonate quite strongly within LIS, particularly when viewing the reproduction of knowledge systems as a heteronormative pattern within the discipline.

Following the ontological discussion about libraries as white racial projects, I contend that LIS as a field of study is currently engaged in a similar project of whitening, one that may not necessarily be intentional but whose effects are still the same—the exclusion of voices of color within a field plagued by racism. By turning our attention to this idea of “unintentionality,” we need to figure out how this seemingly innocuous term really translates into complicity with dominant oppressive social structures and the failure to recognize the material effects of histories of racism and white supremacy. For example, Allan Bérubé (2001), in analyzing the unintentionality of gay whiteness, writes:

It’s important for me to understand exactly how that racial *unintentionality* gets *constructed*, how it’s not just a coincidence. It seems that so long as

white people never consciously decide to be a white group, a white organization, a white department, so long as we each individually believe that people of color are always welcome, *even though they are not there*, then we do not have to examine our whiteness because we can believe it is unintentional, it's not our *reason* for being there (p. 252).

Bérubé's words are particularly insightful in stressing on how racialized fields are constructed, or more specifically for this discussion, how LIS has been constructed as a white field of study. What follows then is an explication of LIS epistemological concerns and the implications of racial exclusion.

A disturbing trend in the literature of LIS is the way in which racial difference is seldom articulated. In other words, what counts as "universal" knowledge is an unquestioned and unacknowledged white perspective. While this of course is a product of Enlightenment values and positivist philosophical trends, I would also argue that this is a distinct product of whiteness and white racial privilege in particular.<sup>8</sup> In the field of LIS, this white epistemological tradition allows the formation of white Eurocentric knowledge to emerge as *the* legitimate form of knowledge that shapes and informs the discipline. As Manning Marable (2001) writes, "Whiteness gives whites the luxury of not having to think about race, because when whiteness is defined as the universal standard, it frames the social reality of everyone else" (p. 7). This type of policing of thought allows for the reproduction of whiteness in LIS as an unquestioned and unproblematic ideological force, in which all those who control the academic apparatuses (academics, administrators, publishers) uphold the "possessive investment in whiteness." Hence, overt displays of racism are unneeded, for such regulatory systems already exist on an invisible ideological level. In discussing the mechanisms of this type of structural racism, Robert Blauner points out that "institutions either exclude or restrict the participation of racial groups by procedures that have become conventional, part of the bureaucratic system of rules and regulations. Thus there is little need for prejudice as a motivating force" (quoted in San Juan, 1998, p. 45).

From my own informal discussions with library practitioners and scholars, many of whom are people of color, I believe that these ideas being expressed are not necessarily new or groundbreaking. Rather, they have been undertheorized in the academy precisely because of the racist knowledge projects interrogated above. Espinal (2001) voices a similar concern when she writes that "the concept of whiteness is not new in the cultures and discourses of librarians of color....What probably is new is the framing of these issues in this theoretical apparatus" (p. 137). While the critical study of whiteness has occupied the imagination of the academy—particularly in "identity-based" fields such as ethnic and women's studies, as well as more traditional disciplines such as history and



sociology—over the past decade, it is interesting to note that only now does whiteness as a critical axis of analysis finally enter into LIS. It is interesting on two levels—first, for the very fact that it takes so long for these types of critiques to enter an interdisciplinary field such as LIS; and second, that the critical interrogation of race begins with whiteness at the center.

All of these discussions point to the inability to articulate race and racial privilege in LIS. Voicing her frustrations with the current state of LIS, Peterson (1996) writes:

If the profession is serious about understanding race and racism as they relate specifically to librarianship, we would push them from the margins and into the center. Race studies would be accorded the respect for intellectual expertise we award to other areas, and not dismissed as a subject area that emanates from personal characteristic and experience. But acknowledging race studies, not as personal experience, but as the domain of scholars, where scholarly inquiry, intellectual rigor, integrity, and authority are assumed as the ability to be an expert, is a threat because this would supplant the white experience as the experience worthy of scholarship. It is this arrogance, as well as ignorance, that hinders race studies from flourishing in librarianship (pp. 172-173).

In order to address this issue, we must look at the ways in which knowledge production in the field of LIS perpetuates racist exclusions of non-white thought. While not completely disregarding Peterson's claim about the ignorance and arrogance of the current scholars/scholarship in the field, we must also contextualize these systems of belief amidst an overall racialized political economy of knowledge within academia. Part of this process is recognizing, as Sandra Harding (1989) suggests, that all Western sciences and Western knowledge systems need to be considered as local knowledges so that the work of nonwestern and nonwhite scholars are not simply viewed as peripheral fields of thought. In other words, asking the necessary questions of "Whose science? Whose knowledge?" (Harding, 1991) is key to transforming the ethnocentrism, or the privilege of whiteness, in LIS, and redirecting it towards one that locates privilege and discrimination, works towards identifying social situatedness (racial, gender, class, etc.), and examines both the production and the reception of knowledge in the field.

If we view the current state of LIS as a local knowledge system, particularly as one that has been dictated through the voice of whiteness, we must do better in finding nonwhite local systems of knowledge that more adequately encompass the populations that have been silenced, marginalized, and overlooked. For example, Binnie Tate discusses the tendencies of LIS research to homogenize

blackness, without taking into considerations its multiple manifestations, such as in relation to an urban New Yorker versus a poor rural Southerner (Stern, 1991). The particularities that Tate points out show us that even in racial discourse a totalizing view of “blackness” cannot claim universality for an entire population. Rather, we must articulate race as it is constructed through other axes of difference such as class, gender, sexuality, and geography. These new perspectives and frameworks will allow us greater insight into the types of subjugated knowledge that have hitherto been ignored by the scholars in the field. The incorporation of different viewpoints then is not simply a matter of equitable representation. Rather, as Harding (1989) points out, diversity is an epistemological necessity. She states: “If social groups who are likely to have the most critical perspectives on the dominant belief systems are systematically excluded from and devalued in research communities through formal and/or informal processes, the alternative problematics, hypotheses, concepts, and evidence that will be the most critical of the beliefs represented in the scientific community will not be voiced at all” (p. 13).

By recognizing the importance of one’s particular social location and the insights and knowledge that can be gleaned from that position—a hallmark trait of feminist standpoint theory—the field of LIS can move towards a more inclusive knowledge system that includes the voices of different racial backgrounds. In doing so, “[e]ach oppressed group can learn to identify its distinctive opportunities to turn an oppressive feature of the group’s conditions into a source of critical insight about how the dominant society thinks and is structured. Thus, standpoint theories map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemological, scientific, and political advantage” (Harding, 1989, pp. 7-8). Failure to incorporate these ideas results in nothing less than a form of racism at the epistemological level.

This idea of epistemological racism has been posited by education theorists Scheurich and Young (1997) who state that:

our current range of research epistemologies—positivism to postmodernisms/poststructuralisms—arise out of the social history and culture of the dominant race, that these epistemologies logically reflect and reinforce that social history of that racial group (while excluding the epistemologies of other races/cultures), and that this has negative results for people of color in general and scholars of color in particular (p. 8).

The identification and acknowledgement of epistemological racism in LIS is a first step in advancing a theory of race and social responsibility. However, simply identifying and adding in different perspectives would be akin to the multiculturalist commodification of identities discussed in the previous section.

This type of individualist tokenism needs to be avoided, for “one can not simply...add issues about racism and imperialism to approaches to the sciences and technologies which have been constituted within insistently Western and white supremacist assumptions” (Harding, 1989, p. 10-11). In other words, within LIS, how can we simply and unproblematically incorporate alternative viewpoints into a field so profoundly shaped by racial and racist projects?

This is not to imply that all interventions and efforts to infiltrate dominant academic research and discourse are bound to perpetuate a system of oppression (I hardly think institutional knowledge and individual agency can be generalized under such totalizing terms). As scholars in the feminist and postcolonial sciences have pointed out, despite the colonial and racist epistemologies and uses of sciences in the past, this has not hindered the potential of science to be harnessed for socially progressive purposes. Instead, the incorporation of previously marginalized voices has transformed science and scientific inquiry to include the concerns of oppressed groups, such as people of color, women, and gays and lesbians.<sup>9</sup> These groups have been instrumental in redirecting scientific inquiry and opening up new spaces of epistemological possibility. By taking such examples into serious consideration, LIS can also benefit from this more expansive framework. This requires the establishment of what Chandra Mohanty (2003) calls a “public culture of dissent [which] entails creating spaces for epistemological standpoints that are grounded in the interests of people and that recognize the materiality of conflict, of privilege, and of domination. Thus creating such cultures is fundamentally about making the axes of power transparent in the context of academic, disciplinary, and institutional structures as well as in the interpersonal relationships (rather than individual relations) in the academy” (p. 216).

However, in the context of LIS, I would like to posit an alternative (re)conceptualization of the field and its disciplinary and organizational structures. Invoking a now cliché phrase that gained particular canonization in the sixties, LIS needs to oppose traditional disciplinary models of scholarship and learning and instead take its cues from the fields of study that emerged in the wake of the social movements of the sixties—namely the fields of ethnic studies, women’s studies, and queer studies—and truly dedicate itself to the oft-heard goal: “To serve the people!” More specifically, in order to address the gaping racial divide in LIS, looking at ethnic studies fields such as African American Studies, Asian American Studies, Chicano Studies, and Native American Studies, can help LIS to successfully theorize oppression and bridge the gap between the university and communities of color. As Marable (2001) points out, “At the foundation of ethnic studies, or the rich and complex scholarship of comparative minority populations in the United States, is a critique of what can be termed structural racism, or systemic racism” (p. 7). A successful ethnic studies model

redefines education, values knowledge based in the community, and engages in a dialectical praxis that incorporates theoretical investigations into privilege and power and uses this model strategically to transform the material conditions of reality.

The foundation for LIS education seems conducive to an ethnic studies model, in that it shares interests that are “not just academic, but also [seeks] to introduce into academia new modes of work derived from a conviction in the need to bridge academic work and community involvement” (Dirlik, 2003, p. 167). However LIS currently lacks the social justice vision that was foundational to the emergence of ethnic studies. LIS needs to embrace this spirit of social justice if it is to truly engage in meaningful discussions about race. In discussing the enduring legacies of ethnic studies and women’s studies, Mohanty (2003) writes: “The struggle to transform our institutional practices fundamentally also involves the grounding of the analysis of exploitation and oppression in accurate history and theory, seeing ourselves as activists in the academy, drawing links between movements for social justice and our pedagogical and scholarly endeavors and expecting and demanding action from ourselves, our colleagues, and our students at numerous levels” (p. 216). These are the same expectations and desires that we should come to expect from a field such as LIS, a field grounded in the lives of our communities and our collective struggles against ignorance, oppression, and marginalization. Furthermore, as Mohanty points out, these changes need to be instituted at all different levels, not just the academy, in order to usher in a truly transformative LIS—one that transforms itself and the world.

### **Social Justice and LIS: An Unfinished Project**

I told the Englishman that my alma mater was books, a good library.  
—Malcolm X (1965)

Renowned poet/activist/scholar and former librarian Audre Lorde (1984) once wrote, “I became a librarian because I really believed I would gain tools for ordering and analyzing information. I couldn’t know everything in the world, but I would gain tools for learning it. But that was of limited value” (p. 105). For Lorde, the limitations of the tools of documentation and classification lay in her recognition that the mere existence and acquisition of knowledge does not necessarily lead one to understanding. As she states, “They [knowledge and understanding] can function in concert, but they do not replace each other” (p. 104). Such is the dilemma of LIS. Information devoid of a social context fails to live up to its potential as a transformative agent in a world increasingly shaped by

racial inequality and the global spread of neoimperialist capitalism. Yet despite the problematic role that libraries have played in history, as one of the last vestiges of a shrinking public sphere, libraries hold the promise of occupying a “critical category that redefines literacy and citizenship as central elements in the struggle for self and social emancipation” (Giroux, 2001, p. 116). In order for libraries to fulfill these goals, the struggles against racism and other forms of discrimination need to involve not just those who benefit from white privilege or those who suffer the effects of racism; rather, we must all become involved in the collective effort towards self and social emancipation.

Brazilian critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (1987) recognizes this emancipatory potential when he writes, “The popular library, as a cultural and learning center, and not just a silent depository of books, is a fundamental factor for the improvement and intensification of a correct form of reading the text in relation to the context” (pp. 44-45). For Freire, the library functions as a vital part of the community that encompasses such values as the “magical understanding of the written word” and the “critical-democratic spirit” (p. 48). Similarly, Malcolm X (1965) looked upon his time reading in the prison library as a life-altering experience, as his own personal form of schooling. He writes, “No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and understand” (p. 173). Indeed, for these progressive activists and educators, the library has functioned as a crucial sphere to access knowledge and understanding in the process of politicization and social emancipation.

But now I return to the experiences of Audre Lorde, who after years working as a librarian abandoned the profession to pursue other political projects. She writes that “I knew by the time I left Tougaloo that teaching was the work I needed to be doing, that library work...was not enough” (p. 92). What I find so interesting in her statement is the delineation Lorde makes between library work and teaching. Is not library work in itself a form of educating? What is the disconnect that Lorde, and other progressive-minded individuals like her, identifies between librarianship and the struggle for social justice? These are questions that those of us in LIS must seriously consider as it becomes increasingly apparent that our field needs to better engage in the social and political contexts in which we live. As Franz Fanon (1963) once wrote, “Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it” (p. 206). In a world of neocolonial capitalist accumulation and the continued spread of imperialist violence and global racism, now more than ever there is an urgent need for the field of LIS to articulate a renewed commitment to anti-racism and social justice. The path to such a goal has yet to be charted, but opening up a space for us to critically dialogue about various interlocking systems of

oppression and their intersections with the field of LIS is the first step in mapping librarianship's social cartography of struggle and, ultimately, transformation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge that the discussions surrounding race and LIS in this paper will focus specifically on conditions in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> San Juan (2000) uses the paradigm of the U.S. as a "settler society," rather than the "immigrant model," in order to explain the "sanctioned racially based subordination of nonwhite groups and communities (indigenous, enslaved, conquered), [which] entails the corollary notion of 'internal colonialism'" (p. 162).

<sup>3</sup> However, I am by no means advocating for such a narrowly deterministic view of libraries. Rather I am arguing that its racist origins, and hence the racialized structure of the field of LIS, need to be interrogated, that whiteness in its various forms need to be recognized, deconstructed, and reinterpreted in order for the field to advance and for scholars and practitioners to recognize the problematic nature of race and librarianship in the United States. Omi and Winant (1994) state, "The processes of racial formation we encounter today, the racial projects large and small which structure U.S. society in so many ways, are merely the present-day outcomes of a complex historical evolution" (p. 61).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note how whiteness has been shaped in relation to multiple "racial others," and not simply limited within the black/white racial dichotomy (Roediger, 2002, p. 17). It should also be noted that the issue of race becomes more complex with the consideration of multiracial and multiethnic peoples and issues. At the same time, we must also guard against the celebratory notions of the "race is over" debates, which triumph multiracial and multiethnic peoples as evidence of a harmonious colorblind and race-free future society. Such discourse problematically treats race a-historically, failing to examine the legacies of U.S. racial formation (which has a long history of racial intermixing) and ignoring issues of power and privilege associated with the ways race continues to structure life opportunities within U.S. society (Roediger, 2002, p. 10).

<sup>5</sup> "@ your library" is the slogan adopted by the Campaign for America's Libraries, a purported five-year project of the American Library Association to increase visibility and understanding regarding the importance of libraries and librarians in our communities. For more information, see the ALA website: <https://cs.ala.org/@yourlibrary/>.

<sup>6</sup> EMIERT functions under the coordination and support of ALA's Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS). While EMIERT focuses on identifying and developing ethnic resources and providing ethnic information, it does not

focus on race and racial inequality as part of their overall mission. It should also be noted that four race-based librarian organizations have developed and currently exist independent of (although affiliated with) ALA. Despite the important work these organizations do to address the pressing needs of librarians of color and library and information services to people of color, they have yet to take a proactive, concerted, long-term approach to tackling structural racism in LIS.

<sup>7</sup> Wiegman defines the bourgeois subject as “the social subject produced out of the contradictory tie between a capitalist economic order and the political philosophy of democratic citizenship—that subject who is able simultaneously to insist on its own willful self-creation and maintenance while being disciplinarily tied to the economic and political hierarchies intrinsic to capitalism” (p. 7).

<sup>8</sup> Of course Enlightenment values and positivism were intrinsically tied to ideologies and practices that perpetuated racism, colonialism, and the enslavement of whole populations based on the color of one’s skin. For example, see Goldberg (1993) and Wiegman (1997).

<sup>9</sup> For examples of such projects, see anthologies by Figueroa and Harding (2003), Harding (1993), and Nader (1996).

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