Navigating Whiteness and reflecting on identity, vocational awe and allyship in hegemonic library cultures

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Siobhan Haimé, Acquisitions and Reading Lists Assistant, **Leeds University Library**

Since 2020, we have seen a slow shift in the UK HE sector in how we think about racism. There is a growing interest in inclusive pedagogies and we are entering a new wave of thinking around reading list diversification which considers embedding good practice and long-term implementation. Libraries are often closely involved with - if not leading - these efforts and there is a growing recognition in the library sector that innovation cannot act as a mitigation or replacement for poor policy. Yet positive disruption is still a difficult process for many. With this piece, I hope to provide some thoughts for discussion and reflection on the role of Whiteness in academic libraries, and to generate positive disruption. These thoughts emerged from reflections on my experiences as a mixed-race, often 'white-passing' woman in libraries and academia.

In many ways, working in higher education and libraries especially has been an overwhelmingly enriching experience. I have enjoyed many positive conversations about my interests in open access, digital collections, collection analysis and much more. Like many, my entrance into academic libraries was entirely accidental. I had volunteered in public libraries and interned in an archive - but had never heard of a 'Masters of Library and Information Science' or considered librarianship as a profession. I stumbled into a role as a part-time publishing assistant for an open access university press and it snowballed from there. I assumed academic libraries

would be similar to my experiences with humanities departments in terms of their staff composition; not great in some places (particularly at the top) but with a visible shift in its early-career staff and others entering into the field. I soon realised I might have been somewhat overoptimistic. When I eventually read about the often cited 96.7% statistic of white-identifying library staff[1] it felt discouraging but also made things fall into place. One of the things I realised was that for the first time in my life, I was in an environment where monolingualism was normative. This retrospectively helped me make sense of what had initially been a frustrating and baffling experience.

When job hunting in the HE sector (in libraries as well as other departments), I received feedback on a few occasions that I did not meet the language/literacy standards required for a role. For full clarity: despite being non-native, I have had the privilege of bilingual further education and BA, MA and PhD being taught in English (the latter two at a UK university), as well as previous work experience in English-speaking environments and multiple internationally recognised certificates testifying my language skills. I am not sure whether these experiences stemmed from xenophobia or racialisation based on my name (which I have since changed to my current, anglophone name), I do not know and will likely never know. But xenophobia and racism are common bedfellows and both feed the bias which leads to systemic discrimination.

Whilst infuriating, I framed it as merely a symptom of a flawed system during a period when jobs were scarce (as the alternative was much more upsetting). I only realised how foreign this experience was to my white, anglophone colleagues after I shared it in conversation when, ironically, discussing my difficulties around feeling out of place and doubting my professional abilities as a result. Fortunately, this conversation was incredibly positive and reassuring; it made me feel both welcomed and appreciated, and encouraged me to further explore my growing interest in librarianship. I had to remind myself of this conversation a few months later when my work on inclusive reading lists led me to overhear an interaction on my ethnicity. It included speculation on the skin colour of any hypothetical children I might have and comments of a sexual nature linked to my mixed ethnic heritage. I struggle to this day to comprehend what exactly would inspire someone to have the audacity to say this aloud, much less what may make someone think it was appropriate in any setting at all. It was an upsetting and invasive experience which made that space feel explicitly hostile to me as a mixed-race professional. It made me reconsider the way we expect marginalised people to lead the way on inclusion without ensuring that our presence as professionals - or even people - is respected in the sector[1]. Especially since this occurred when I was volunteering to support an event on improving pedagogical practice with research I had been doing in my own time. At least there was the silver lining that I could withdraw my involvement without serious repercussions. I am sure I won't need to explain how rarely this is possible.

I have thought long and hard about whether to share the latter experience in a public, professional forum. I wondered if I may regret this in years to come - whether my writing might be deemed too inappropriate, confrontational or uncomfortable. I concluded that this likely will be the case, which is exactly why it needs to be shared. If we are unable to sit with discomfort and acknowledge the reality that racism creates, we have no chance of disrupting the structures that uphold it. The demands of White professionalism are incompatible with the needs of anti-

racism and inclusion. I will undoubtedly come to regret my words later in my career - because as marginalised people we are expected to shoulder the discomfort forced upon us and avoid causing disruption. Yet, I wonder if the person who spoke about me has ever reconsidered their words. And herein lies one of many problems. By voicing my discomfort, I feel I am inherently not adhering to the status quo which favours the White professionalism we are required to adopt to succeed as professionals and which grants us potential access to power. More often than not, if we wish to change the system for the better we are forced to render ourselves vulnerable in ways rarely demanded from our peers from comparatively more privileged backgrounds. This is due to the Hegemonic Whiteness ('Whiteness' as the dominant cultural and/or social norm) that shapes our profession[2].

Hegemonic Whiteness also aggravates vocational awe[1], which frames libraries and librarians as inherently progressive and committed to inclusion[2]. This has the danger of creating a culture in which these tenets are claimed, but not practised or examined. There is no space to embrace discomfort, as failure is constructed as a source of fear, rather than an opportunity. This effectively blocks our ability to engage in critical self-reflection. But critical reflection is vital when questioning professional practices and their underlying beliefs, as well as the potential for libraries to act as institutions that normalise and ratify cultural practices - though this is not necessarily a negative trait! Positive disruption will include and require normalisation and ratification of a different professional culture - one that values change and fosters growth.

Vocational awe further impedes this through its linking of professional practice with personal identity. It thus poses the risk of creating a professional identity centred around (performative) 'allyship' whilst avoiding the (reflexive) praxis (practical application of theory) required for positive disruption of the racialised professionalism and its White standards. By doing so, we are prevented from meaningful interaction with criticisms of our practice. This is furthered by White fragility[3] and its associated resistance to critical reflection.

Another element I want to briefly touch upon related to critical self-reflection and the ability to embrace flaws is the societal limitations placed on women which give them less licence to take ownership of mistakes. In a predominantly white, female profession, it is important to also recognise the intersectionality between these identities and their position relative to others. White femininity enforces both respectability politics[4] and an unattainable pressure to be perfect - especially in the public eye. It can prevent someone from being able to recognise oneself as (potentially) flawed both in the past and present[5], and engage with this constructively. We must acknowledge that hegemonic Whiteness, White femininity and vocational awe all exist in the space of our profession and that taken together they can frame the _archetypical_ librarian as incapable of harm due to their personal investment in equality. That is not to say we necessarily act out these patterns of thought and behaviour, but it is an undercurrent that has the potential to affect the norms that we reproduce uncritically. While this analysis does deserve much more in-depth attention than is possible in this editorial, the intersection between these concepts is worth reflecting on as their ideological tenets are inherently incompatible with anti-racist work.

So what can we *do[6]*? The first thing to keep in mind is that discrimination is a systemic failure, not a personal one! Though positive action on an individual level is a necessity to affect systemic change. This means we have an individual responsibility as well as collective power. *Everyone* holds power - it is a question of whether we manage to wield it. And often, relinquishing power is powerful in its own right when we platform new voices. There are also difficult conversations about White fragility that need to be had, which need to come from those who have examined their own relationship to it. These conversations require a different kind of power - one that does not act along vertical, hierarchical lines but instead along horizontal, social lines. This also coincides with conversations and self-reflection around our need for perfectionism and resistance towards embracing mistakes. We must move away from allyship as an identity, and instead embrace allyship as praxis.

Praxis may take many shapes, on many levels. There are opportunities to implement positive action traineeships and provide non-white staff with opportunities and support for career progression, and ensure that job adverts are fair and equitable for all[1]. But there are also considerations to be made around allowing and engaging with honest and critical feedback from non-white staff regardless of their institutional power. This also includes recognising that people from non-white ethnicities are *not* monolithic and have different, individual experiences. As such, there is much to be gained in allowing a variety of people to participate in discussions that shape policy. Inclusion is a process that demands constant change. It will never be truly complete, but therein lies its beauty. Much like the academy's pursuit of knowledge and learning, inclusion is about the learning process as much as the outcome.

And sometimes inclusion is about something as simple as listening to a colleague during a difficult conversation. Much like the conversation I had which gave me confidence and ultimately convinced me to stay in the profession and inspired me to explore it further, not *despite* my identity, but *because* of it. And perhaps, that was the most important conversation of all.

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[1] CILIP & ARA, 2015

[2] Also see: Universities UK, 2020b and Universities UK, 2020

[3] See also: Espinal, Sutherland & Roh, 2018

[4] "Vocational awe describes the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique" Fobazi Ettarh, 2018

[5] See also: Santamaria, 2020

[6] See: DiAngelo, 2011

[7] "an attempt by marginalized groups to internally police members so that they fall in line with the dominant culture's norms." Kendall, 2020

[8] Also see: Hamad, 2019

[9] For more structural examples see: Universities UK, 2020

[10] Fair library jobs

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