Diversity, Social Justice, and the Future of Libraries

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abstract: In this essay, we embrace a vision of the future of academic libraries where librarians confront and creatively address the lack of racial and ethnic diversity within our profession and actively pursue a social justice agenda within our libraries and in the communities we serve. This future requires that we acknowledge that many of our current practices reinforce existing structures of inequity and privilege, and that we leverage our services and resources to support, document, and encourage diversity and social justice efforts within librarianship and society.

Introduction

The American Library Association (ALA) affirmed diversity as a core value in 1999,[1] and yet librarianship remains a painfully homogenous profession. Social responsibility is likewise one of the core values of librarianship, defined, the ALA says, "in terms of the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society."[2] The persistence and growth of economic and racial inequity, combined with increasingly vitriolic debate and punitive policies that fail to protect and often further restrict

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the rights and life chances of nonwhite, queer, poor, or immigrant populations, indicate that diversity and social justice are critical issues that librarianship can and should address. In this essay, we discuss why it is essential to prioritize both diversity and social justice in the practice and theory of librarianship. We explore how academic libraries are changing (and how successfully), while imagining what further change is called for by an active and collective commitment to diversify the profession and, ultimately, pursue social justice in the broader world.

The authors also offer the collaborative writing of this essay as an example of encouraging diversity in the library and information science (LIS) literature.[3] The invita-

tion to write this essay came to one of the authors (Chris Bourg) through a professional connection born of shared participation in networks of leaders from large research libraries. Chris immediately invited her colleague Myrna Morales to collaborate on the piece—primarily because Myrna has different experiences and insights that are critical to discussions of this topic, but also in an attempt to ensure that publishing opportunities like this one are shared across structurally designed segregated social networks. To Chris's delight, Myrna suggested including Dr. Em Claire Knowles as a third coauthor, thus further broadening the expertise, experiences, and perspectives that could be collectively leveraged in writing about this topic. We each write from our own specific personal and professional perspective, as well as in our own style and voice. By doing so, we hope to model the very diversity and collaboration we want to encourage in our profession and to highlight important disagreements regarding how we should define diversity and social justice in librarianship and the connection between them.

Defining Diversity and Social Justice

In defining diversity as a core value of librarianship, the ALA asserts, "We value our nation's diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve."[4] Diversity is a term used primarily to describe the mix of individual characteristics (for example, race, gender, social class, and ability) present in groups, organizations, or societies. Although diversity programs are prevalent on college and university campuses, recent analyses indicate that most diversity initiatives and programs not only fail to address issues of power and privilege but also "may unwittingly

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reinforce practices that support exclusion and inequity."[5] Given the extreme lack of diversity within the library profession, efforts must be made to attract and retain members of underrepresented groups into librarianship, while also recognizing the limits of diversity as a concept.[6]

In the context of library resources and services, we argue that the profession must confront diversity, power, and privilege in a number of areas: library staff, library collections and access, and the variety of services libraries offer in their communities.[7] In contrast, "social justice" is a concept that encompasses more than representation and diversity, and is generally understood to refer to the ability of all people to fully benefit from social and economic progress and to participate equally in democratic societies.[8] In other words, social justice addresses power and privilege on a structural level, as well as at the level of mere representation. We believe that libraries can and should play a key role in promoting social justice; and that a commitment to diversifying our profession, our collections, and our services is critical to social justice work in and for librarianship.

A key reason for imagining a future for libraries and librarianship that is more diverse than our current state is that we believe the profession can and should live up to its stated values. Moreover, as the nation becomes more diverse and as social justice

issues become a more prominent part of the national dialogue, we believe libraries are especially well suited to model a more equitable profession and to provide services and resources that would support, encourage, document, and sustain social justice efforts in our communities and help assist in the transformation of society.

Toward a More Diverse Librarianship

This part of our essay focuses on social change in academic libraries from the perspective of the demographic makeup of both library staff and current and future patrons. For too long, talk about how libraries must change has focused on the brick and mortar of library facilities (though in poorer communities, these brick and mortar facilities are being closed down),[9] with less attention given to the people and staffing decisions that facilitate change. Moreover, across the spectrum of library types (academic, school, special, and public), the demographic makeup of the profession has remained predominantly white and female.

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It is important to note that while librarianship in general is 80 percent female,[10] only 58 percent of directors of libraries in the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) are female.[11] Increasing the diversity of staff at all levels within academic libraries is a prerequisite to effectively leveraging libraries and librarians in the cause of social justice.

To reflect the diversity of our communities and provide a full spectrum of diverse services and resources to those communities, library professionals need to be aware of the changing ethnic and racial makeup of the current and future college student populations. A more racially and ethnically diverse workforce in academic libraries is important not only as a measure of how well it reflects our communities but also because a more diverse staff provides academic libraries with a fuller range of perspectives, talents, knowledge, and experiences to draw on. Such a staff can be invaluable in building diverse collections and creating services that best meet the needs of local and global communities. To offer a more justice-centered approach, however, library professionals need to be sensitive to difference both regardless of *and* because of the demographic makeup of the communities they serve. Moreover, a social justice perspective compels us to find ways that librarianship and libraries are resources informed by, reflective of, and available to all people.

Changing Demographics of College-Bound Populations

There is abundant evidence to indicate that the college student population will be significantly more racially diverse in the near and long-term future. Recent United States Census Bureau demographic projections provide further evidence of the growth in nonwhite populations:

- The Hispanic population is expected to more than double, from 53.3 million in 2012 to 128.8 million in 2060. Consequently, by the end of the period, nearly one in three U.S. residents would be Hispanic, up from about one in six today.

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- The black population is expected to increase from 41.2 million to 61.8 million over the same period. Its share of the total population would rise slightly, from 13.1 percent in 2012 to 14.7 percent in 2060.

- The Asian population is projected to more than double, from 15.9 million in 2012 to 34.4 million in 2060, with its share of nation's total population climbing from 5.1 percent to 8.2 percent in the same period.

- American Indians and Alaska Natives would increase by more than half from now to 2060, from 3.9 million to 6.3 million, with their share of the total population edging up from 1.2 percent to 1.5 percent. The Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander population is expected to nearly double, from 706,000 to 1.4 million.

- The number of people who identify themselves as being of two or more races is projected to more than triple, from 7.5 million to 26.7 million over the same period.[12]

The United States is projected to become a majority nonwhite nation in 2043. While the non-Hispanic white population will remain the largest single group, no group will make up a majority.[13] In addition, recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that the projected college student population for 2021 will be 58 percent white and 58 percent female, with 17 percent of students being African American, 17 percent Hispanic, and 7 percent Asian/Pacific Islander.[14] Finally, a recent survey of college-bound high school students found that the majority of white youth were more discouraged about the value of four-year college, while the majority of black and Hispanic youth held more positive opinions about a college education:

> Solid majorities of Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and, to a slightly lesser extent, African-Americans all agreed that "young people today need a four-year college degree to be successful." Slightly fewer than half of whites endorsed that sentiment. That was a sharp drop among whites just since fall 2012, when the Next America survey last measured these attitudes."[15]

In contrast, the ALA's most recent report on diversity reveals that librarianship, including that of academic libraries, remains overwhelmingly white. In 2009–2010, 88 percent of credentialed librarians were white, 5 percent African American, 3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 3 percent Latina or Latino, and less than 1 percent either Native American or multiracial.[16] The racial composition of current MLS/MLIS programs gives little reason to hope that the profession will become more diverse without intervention. The 2012 data show that only 4 percent of students in ALA-accredited MLS/MLIS programs are African American, 4 percent are Latino or Latina, 4 percent are Asian, 5 percent are international, 9 percent are unknown, and 71 percent are white.[17] Without

radical, sustained intervention, librarianship will remain significantly whiter and more female than the populations it serves. We must ask ourselves what message such a stark lack of diversity communicates to patrons, to current and potential members of the profession, and to society at large. As many have said in the past, no profession becomes and remains this homogenous by accident.[18]

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Current and Future Efforts to Diversify Librarianship

Perhaps the best-known and arguably the most successful effort to increase the diversity of librarianship is the Spectrum Scholarship Program of the American Library Association. This initiative began in 1997 and is designed, the ALA says, "to address the specific issue of under-representation of critically needed ethnic librarians within the profession while serving as a model for ways to bring attention to larger diversity issues in the future."[19]

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To date, more than 800 students from underrepresented ethnic and racial groups (African American, Latino American, Asian American, and American Indian, Hawaiian, and Alaskan) have been awarded Spectrum Scholarships to offset the costs of enrolling in graduate programs in library and information science. These Spectrum scholars have also received additional support in the form of matching funds from their respective LIS programs and other scholarships and assistantships to ensure they are able to complete their studies. In many instances, the Spectrum scholars have become leaders in both academic and co-curricular activities at their schools and eventually leaders in their professional positions. The Spectrum Scholarship Program has also initiated a doctoral fellowship program to finance the training of underrepresented ethnic and racial group members. Through two cycles of doctoral fellow awards, the program has supported approximately twenty-five students, and it is hoped that these students will successfully enter the teaching faculties of LIS programs to support and mentor future Spectrum Scholars and other students of color.[20]

The School of Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville is also collaborating with the University of Arizona on a grant to recruit and educate four Hispanic or Latino doctoral students, with the goal of placing them in faculty positions in LIS programs.[21] Other programs designed to recruit and support MLS/MLIS students from underrepresented groups include the LIS Access Midwest Program (LAMP), the iSchool Inclusion Initiative, Knowledge River, and Project Increasing Diversity of Librarians (IDOL).[22]

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) also has a comprehensive set of diversity programs designed to recruit people from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups into librarianship. In addition to scholarship programs for racial and ethnic minority

students enrolled in MLIS or equivalent degree programs, ARL also runs the Career Enhancement Program, which provides internships in academic libraries for MLIS students from underrepresented groups. Finally, ARL sponsors the Leadership and Career Development Program to prepare mid-career librarians from underrepresented groups for leadership roles within academic libraries.[23]

These programs are laudable and likely to be of great benefit to both the participants and the participating libraries and their communities. Nevertheless, the impact of such programs on the overall demographic diversity of the profession is constrained by the small number of participants and scholarships available.

Personnel changes, such as increased recruitment, support, and retention of underrepresented LIS students by academic libraries, will help create a base of librarians of color to fill openings. These librarians will facilitate the acquisition of relevant resources and collections that will keep the library at the heart of the academic community as librarians prepare to sustain their presence in light of social justice.

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As colleges and universities experience changing demographics in their student populations, libraries can benefit from the shift to a more diverse group of students by ensuring that the body of student library workers reflects that demographic shift. In addition, while some of the student workers exposed to library work may choose to pursue the profession on their own, LIS professionals should seek out promising candidates and encourage students to consider the field. This investment in the profession will help keep it vibrant and relevant to future citizens. The continued promotion of the field and recruitment efforts will help find the best and most talented replacements for ourselves. Replacements who mirror these changing demographics will therefore be attuned to the social justice struggles impacting their communities and able to innovate ways to address those struggles within academic libraries. These students, once dedicated to the field, will fill future positions in academic libraries that can help to maintain the library's continued relevance to its patrons and its continued commitment to social justice work.

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Although it is absolutely essential that librarians find ways to address the lack of diversity within the profession, increased diversity will not guarantee that librarianship as a profession will commit to the pursuit of social justice agendas. It will take more than demographic diversity within librarianship to ensure that academic libraries as social institutions play a significant role in promoting social justice and equity. To truly leverage the power and influence of academic libraries in the service of social justice, librarians must address the impacts of our own standards and practices.

Library Standards and Practices: An Attempt at Social Justice Praxis

Academic libraries and librarians exercise considerable influence over the diversity (or lack thereof) of scholarship through choices they make in fulfilling the primary missions of collecting, preserving, and providing access to information. Academic librarians are perhaps uniquely equipped and empowered to define and redefine systems of knowledge that convey "truths" about what we know about the world and how that knowledge is organized and evaluated.

However, this unique ability of librarianship is not always realized or substantiated. My (Myrna Morales) introduction to librarianship as a system that helped maintain structural injustices began at Bates College in Lewiston, ME. There my thesis research focused on Puerto Rican political activity in the 1960s in New York City and employed a comparative analysis of the Young Lords Party (YLP) publication *Pa'Lante* and *The New York Times.* In my quest, I first searched for the YLP with the subject heading "organizations," subheading "political organization," in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature.* There I found no mention of the YLP. I was surprised, as I had known the YLP to be a prominent political organization—one that addressed political disenfranchisement, government neglect, and poverty. A (twisted) gut feeling told me to look under the subject heading of "gangs." There it was—Young Lords Party. This experience changed my view of the library system, from one impervious to subjectivity and oppression to one that hid within the rhetoric of neutrality while continuing to uphold systemic injustices.

Another example of the power of library classification systems to frame scholarly inquiry comes from Chris Bourg's experience in researching the history of gays and lesbians in the U.S. military. She learned that a scholar browsing the shelves for books on military history is unlikely to encounter Randy Shilts's seminal 1997 work *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays & Lesbians in the U.S. Military* because the book is subclassified under the subject "Minorities, women, etc. in armed forces." In her own library, this means that the definitive work on the history of gays and lesbians in the armed forces is shelved between *Secrets of a Gay Marine Porn Star* and *Military Trade,* which Amazon.com describes as "an edgy, enlightening, and richly entertaining collection of voices with a passion for servicemen."[24] Over in the military history section of the stacks, she found no books devoted to the service of gays and lesbians.

These examples, and others highlighted in the work of LIS scholars and activists like Hope Olson and Sandy Berman,[25] demonstrate the power librarians and their standards and practices have over how knowledge is described and organized, and therefore how and who might discover, find, and use the resources in library collections. In the long transition to a more digital library environment where discovery happens online, these same processes of marginalization and exclusion are repeated unless librarians explicitly incorporate notions of social justice into digital library technologies and tools.[26] In describing a feminist agenda for library discovery, Bess Sadler and Chris Bourg argue that a feminist and social justice approach to library discovery would incorporate the values of plurality, self-disclosure, participation, ecology, advocacy, and embodiment,[27] as described by Shaowen Bardzell in her work on feminism in HCI (human computer interaction).[28]

The collection development decisions made by academic libraries and librarians have profound impacts on who and what is represented in the scholarly and cultural

record. The decisions made about whose archives to collect and preserve and what books and journals to buy are inevitably biased, based as they are on some combination of the judgments and interests of individual libraries and librarians and on those same librarians' sense of the tastes and needs of patrons. While it is tempting to assume that patron-driven collection development practices would result in collections that reflect the diversity of the communities served, such an approach ignores the systemic biases that affect access to the resources necessary for a scholar to publish her work and to have that work marketed and recognized as authoritative. One example of such biases at work is the finding that white writers wrote 90 percent of the books reviewed by *The New York Times* in 2011.[29] Other evidence points to a significant gender imbalance in the publishing industry, as males outnumber females among reviewers, reviewed and profiled authors, and published authors.[30]

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To ensure that library collections truly do reflect the profession's stated commitment to diversity, academic librarians must actively and aggressively collect resources by and about underrepresented groups. Relying on patron-driven acquisitions programs and circulation data alone will almost certainly result in a less diverse collection now, and an even more biased version of the scholarly record preserved and made available to future generations.[31]

A Model for Social Justice Librarianship: The Pappenheim Library

The Yvonne Pappenheim Library on Racism in Boston has been around for many years and has been stewarded by many people, including nonlibrarians.[32] The library has given support to researchers looking to find information not otherwise available in their local or institutional libraries. It has been a resource for policy makers, community organizers, and other individuals looking to learn more about the impact of, and actions against, racism. Due to budget cuts, there has been a lull in typical "library activities," such as lending books and holding programs specific to the collection. With the help of volunteers, however, the library has provided a more active voice in the community. With the help of the Radical Reference Collective of Boston, the library has steadily moved toward implementing an online catalog.[33] It has also used the powerful information skill of association to connect other organizations with one another. The library has not only made recommendations on choices of reading materials but also shared broader information on resources, indicating, for example, which organization is working on which issue and who—as opposed to what—might be the best resources to meet the patron's research and organizing needs. The library has also taken on research initiatives, such as investigating ways information further perpetuates structural racism, one of those initiatives resulting in the exploration of racism manifesting on the Internet.[34]

The Pappenheim Library does not view the printed word (whether on paper or screen) as the only resources available to patrons. Library stewards look to other people

who work and live within the communities most affected by a particular issue as resources. To increase access to and knowledge about its resources and services, the library also participates at functions, events, and rallies, providing handouts listing relevant resources and making books selected from the collection available at events.

Additionally, the library's space serves as home base for many entities working on political and activist campaigns. This availability is a boon for these groups, since the library is centrally located in the city, across the street from the Massachusetts State House and up the block from Boston City Hall. Library stewards also send out a "Resource for Justice" weekly e-mail to members, which highlights a particular resource that is usually time sensitive and likely of interest to this audience. Much of this work to expand access is done with little or no budget, as is the research. The work based in the library that was done around racism and the Internet was undertaken at the conveners' own time and expense. Presenting on the topic at the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color was supported in strategic and communal ways, including sharing lodging and figuring out ways to subsidize airfare.

The Pappenheim Library also collaborates with the Radical Reference Collective of Boston and the local chapters of the Progressive Librarians Guild in a number of ways, such as their work with the Audre Lorde to Howard Zinn Library, a space where much activity of the Occupy Boston movement occurred in Fall 2011. The library also collaborated with these groups in hosting antiracism training for librarians in 2011 and 2012.

These are just a few examples of the grassroots social justice work that goes on within the Boston librarian community. As Rebecca Martin, a steward of the Pappenheim Library and member of the Boston Radical Reference Collective, states:

> Increasingly though, I am seeing a number of librarians who identify as activists and want to infuse social justice work into librarianship—into the practices of the profession itself. Not only through volunteer work on a local level, but through social justice ideals, tenets and structures on an institutional level.
>
>   . . . So far, these librarians have held a symposium focused on asking questions that challenge and reimagine the role of the librarian as activist and are planning a second one focused on how to interject the activist librarian into data management. They have also held multiple conversations focused on how librarians unwittingly, or perhaps wittingly, provide power and credibility to harmful or incorrect information in the name of balance and neutrality. The neutrality conversation in Boston among these same librarians often segues into a conversation on race, racism and racial diversity in the profession, and the importance of moving past the idea of racial diversity for balance to racial diversity as a key to unraveling the systemic racial privileges of the profession.[35]

Other examples of librarians actively using their expertise and resources in the service of social justice include the libraries established in support of the Occupy Wall Street movements[36] and the work of Radical Reference in providing reference services to activists, journalists, and researchers, online and in person, at events such as the Republican National Convention in 2004.[37] In a presentation at the 2013 LACUNY (Library Association of the City University of New York) Institute on fostering civic engagement in urban library communities, Lisa Sloniowski, Mita Williams, and Patti Ryan discussed open-source tools, the building of subversive collections, and the programming of critical information literacy events as examples of ways librarians can promote social justice

in our communities and equip our patrons to do the same.[38] If academic librarianship were to truly pursue a social justice agenda, librarians must learn from and build on examples such as the Pappenheim Library and others already doing social justice work in and with libraries.[39]

Conclusion

Demographic shifts will both necessitate and contribute to a changing librarianship, if they are properly embraced. Support for librarians of color at the student and professional level will help to diversify library staffing. For libraries to truly diversify their service to their communities, however, and to embrace the mission of helping to achieve social justice for its members, library leadership not only will have to pay close attention to the dynamic needs of the community but also will need to forge nontraditional collaborations with formal and informal grassroots and community-based libraries. To truly embrace our social responsibility for promoting social justice, librarians and library leaders must also acknowledge the ways in which library practices frequently contribute to inequity, marginalization, and injustices; and commit to transforming our practices and standards in ways that leverage the power, expertise, and responsibility of academic librarians and libraries as forces for social justice.

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The authors imagine the future of academic libraries must include, at the very least, both diversity and social justice agendas. Moving aggressively toward realizing our stated value of diversity and toward embracing a social justice agenda as part of our core mission will be a powerful way for academic libraries to remain relevant in a society that is increasingly diverse and increasingly in need of sustained attention toward equity and justice. Historically, libraries have been considered the heart of academic institutions. We believe they will remain so if and when they come to be seen as models of diversity, equity, and social justice.

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35. Rebecca Martin, in conversation, December 28, 2013.

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37. See Radical Reference, "About Radical Reference," accessed February 17, 2013, http://radicalreference.info/about; and Eli Edwards, "Taking It to the streets: Passion, Librarians and Radical Reference," *Clamor Magazine* 35, 5, (January–February 2006).

38. Lisa Sloniowski, Mita Williams, and Patti Ryan, "Grinding the Gears: Academic Librarians and Civic Responsibility," *Urban Library Journal* 19, 1 (2013), Special Issue: Libraries, Information and the Right to the City: Proceedings of the 2013 LACUNY [Library Association of the City University of New York] Institute.

39. To see *some* of the efforts already happening, check out the poster session G in both breakout sessions and session D in breakout session 1 in the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) New England Conference 2014 Program Schedule, retrieved February 17, 2014, from http://conference2014.acrlnec.org/.