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# We Here: Speaking Our Truth

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MARISA MÉNDEZ-BRADY

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we seek to seed an honest conversation about how librarianship needs to meaningfully address systems of structural oppression in order to actualize diversity and inclusion initiatives at large. We will investigate issues of recruitment, retention, education, and mentorship within the library and information science profession through the lens of our experiences as women of color, and as early-career librarians; we will also weave relevant insights reflected from within the literature to support our narratives. Central to this work is an understanding of the barriers that people of color (POC) face in our workplaces and the profession at large; we will discuss this at length throughout. Finally, we will conclude with recommendations on how the profession, as a whole, can do better at retaining and supporting its marginalized workforce. This is a call to action for librarians at every level to hold themselves accountable for the ways in which they are complicit within systems of oppression and inequality. Concurrently, this article aims to generate momentum in coalition building as a tool for POC attempting to navigate the overwhelming whiteness evident within the profession.

## A CALL TO ACTION

*I have written elsewhere, and shared in numerous public talks and conversations, that my decisions about writing style, about not using conventional academic formats, are political decisions motivated by the desire to be inclusive, to reach as many readers as possible in as many different locations.*  
(hooks 1994, 71)

Scholars of color continually document the importance of critiquing whiteness and systems of oppression, encouraging “us to question the

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structures instead of simply trying to succeed within them” (Moore 2017, 204). The authors of this article stand united in voicing how librarianship has feigned political and social neutrality while exploiting the labor of those who exist outside the spectrum of white, able-bodied, cisgender, neurotypical-ness that so many working librarians occupy. This article provides us with space to both question and challenge those very structures; even our stylistic decisions and writing tone are an attempt to resist the white-centered norms of scholarly writing styles that demand a distanced perspective.

We are four women of color dedicated to employing intersectional lenses in our personal and professional praxis, so it is important that we establish what that means within the context of this article early on. We came together at the 2017 #critlib Unconference, which occurred prior to the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Biennial Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, to build community and offer solidarity with other librarians of color, resisting assimilative practices that such conference spaces typically encourage; what came out of this gathering were conversations that illustrated just how ragged we all felt while traipsing this field. Now, this article seeks to continue conversations that began in that space, as we investigate the profession’s pervasive whiteness and how its neutrality “denies our authority and ability to share information with context or history” (Williams 2017).

We tackle these topics in the wake of a scathing critique from Jarrett Drake, now a PhD candidate at Harvard University, who recently departed the archival profession: “Professionalism,” he said, “emphasizes ‘the work’—its completion, its evaluation, its perpetuity, etc.—without a meaningful critique of how ‘the work’ mandates a replication of the patriarchy, oppression, and violence many in our world experience” (2017).

His admonishments remind us of what happens when the profession ignores, or refuses, these critiques; librarians who are othered are often forced to conform, to edge toward proximities of whiteness and “fit” within our profession’s structural hierarchies. It’s “fiction that our fidelity, niceness, obedience, and servitude will save us and our jobs”; tacit acceptance, instead, leaves us silenced and suffocating “in the open air; at work; at conferences,” and drives away the very individuals it claims to support (Drake 2017). Narratives like Drake’s are easily accessible, and regularly circulate through established library channels such as listservs, blogs, and scholarly works. Yet, the profession resists change, often refusing to acknowledge the validity of these reflections or that racism exists within it. In doing so, it continues to push librarians and archivists of color out of the profession while claiming to want to retain them. Drake’s words are another reminder of how the profession continues to perpetuate these injustices; silent complicitness will not bring us back from the brink.

We write this article in the hopes of adding more voices to the growing

body of work that resists white supremacy in librarianship. After all, critiquing with an “an antiracist approach . . . requires honest, personal, and subjective examinations of library work on individual, collective, and institutional levels” (Brook, Ellenwood, and Lazzaro 2015, 248). So, we write this article with our positionalities in mind. We aim to highlight issues of recruitment, retention, and mentorship for marginalized librarians working in the field, and to support coalition building as a tool for people of color (POC) attempting to navigate the profession’s overwhelming whiteness. We claim our history, *and* our context, here and throughout.

### THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM: NEUTRALITY AND FOUNDATIONS OF WHITENESS IN LIS

Before we can address discrete portions of the overall problem, we must first unpack the core of it. A common misconception about our failures to diversify librarianship is that there is nothing wrong with the profession. Fobazi Ettarh coined the term “vocational awe” to explain “the idea that libraries as institutions are inherently good. It assumes that some or all core aspects of the profession are beyond critique, and it, in turn, underpins many librarians’ sense of identity and emotional investment in the profession” (Ettarh 2017a). If there is nothing to critique about the library and information science (LIS) profession, then there can be nothing to improve. This kind of mindset is detrimental, especially for those of us who have been made to feel as though we do not belong.

Framing the library as “inherently good,” or within contexts such as centers of “democracy” and “neutrality,” conceals covert structural forms of racial exclusion that protect white interests, a system Lipsitz labels “possessive investment in whiteness” (2006). As Todd Honma asserts in his seminal piece “Trippin’ Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies,”

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. (2005, 5)

Gina Schlesselman-Tarango furthers Honma’s concept, writing, “Because of its insistence on not naming itself, whiteness largely remains invisible” (2016, 669). Constructs of invisible whiteness aid the idea that our libraries and our profession are somehow neutral, where neutrality is equated with whiteness. The fact that professional library culture refused to engage with racism in the past, and continues to do so, demonstrates how it has become an entrenched part of the culture to *not* discuss race. Without interrogating this idea of neutrality and whiteness further, we as a profession cannot move forward in discussions of diversity and inclusion.

An important example of how the invisibility of whiteness plays out

can be gleaned from discussions within the LIS scholarly conversation: While we have not conducted a quantitative study of LIS literature for this article, it is worth noting how rare it is for white librarians and scholars to openly state their whiteness anywhere in their writing or presentations, or as part of the methodology or limitations of the research they conduct. When whiteness is not recognized as what everyone sees/accepts as “normal,” it is difficult to call out and name the issues within our profession. In particular, “Scholarship—the formal production, identification, and organization of what will be called ‘knowledge’—is inevitably political,” so we cannot pretend such works exist outside our identities (Crenshaw et al. 1996, xiii). In our attempt to further an honest dialogue about the barriers we face as women of color, we ask our readers to stop for a moment now; reflect, have an internal dialogue about the ways in which they may unintentionally perpetuate whiteness and vocational awe, and encourage problematic norms that continue to marginalize us.

## ENTERING THE PROFESSION

### *The Library and Information Science (LIS) Curriculum*

The problem of invisible whiteness (which is at the root of the profession’s inability to recruit and retain people of color) is not limited to our workplaces. It starts at the beginning of the professional journey, in LIS programs and curricula. If recruiting diverse students is truly a goal of LIS programs, then we posit that the curriculum itself needs to be analyzed, which would in turn directly impact service interactions with our communities as well as with colleagues within our workspaces. One specific area we’d like to address in this section is the potential benefit of incorporating critical theory into the LIS curriculum.

The LIS curriculum generally fulfills the practical, hands-on aspect to the profession. This approach emphasizes the patron in the abstract. When we begin working in libraries, the patron is no longer abstract. When we fail to take into account the lived experiences of those we provide service to, we not only fail our patrons and communities but also uphold whiteness—through the standardized exclusion of POC. The LIS curriculum rarely incorporates theoretical frameworks, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), that help us better understand our positionalities and their impact on the work we undertake, as well as the context of our work within our institutions, the larger society or structures, and the world.

Brook, Ellenwood, and Lazzaro (2015) note that in education, “the epistemological foundations of CRT include the recognition that racism is central, permanent, and endemic to explaining individual experience in higher education” (251). Shaundra Walker (2016) has also written on CRT applied to LIS education specifically, and notes this theory has been used to examine “areas such as representations in children’s and young

adult literature, archives, and cataloging” (137). As Walker states, if we were to view education, recruitment, and retention with a CRT lens, it would require the profession to examine the impact of legislation and federal policy, understanding “years of legally segregated and unequal educational systems [adding] perspective to the current discussion” (139). One of the recommendations in the “Recruitment, Education, & Retention” section of the *Final Report of the ALA Task Force on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion* (ALA 2016) was to “ensure equity, diversity, and inclusion [and overall cultural competence] is integrated into every part of every library school class and training and is not a separate thing” (12). One of the ways in which this could be accomplished is to incorporate more critical theory into the curriculum. According to John Carlo Bertot and Lindsay C. Sarin’s (2016) white paper, presented to the ALA on the value of ALA-accredited master’s programs in LIS, students are learning “the canon of information seeking behavior models,” “subtle variations in the theories,” and suggestions on how to incorporate these theories into their respective practice (10). What is lacking is critical reflection in the LIS curriculum at large. If the curriculum focused more concretely on how the practical work intersects with critical theory, we would be better equipped to engage with this kind of education from our context as women of color.

### *How a Less Critical Curriculum Negatively Impacts the Profession*

Not offering a curriculum that reflects experiences of POC, or a space to be wholly represented, actively works toward the exclusion of potential students at the margins, leads to poor service due to the lack of understanding of the communities one serves or why one might serve them in a particular way, and breeds ignorance for the lived experiences of fellow colleagues, particularly those of underrepresented groups. We are told how to conduct a reference interview, but generally we do not discuss the reasoning or justification for a particular approach or technique. We focus on replicating proven strategies rather than critically examining the worth of extant practices. It’s akin to “teaching to the test,” assuming that there are definite, single-solution answers for every scenario.

An educational shift toward incorporating critical theories, such as CRT, aids in the recruitment, retention, and advancement of POC because it emphasizes inclusion and empathy, helping POC feel seen. By encouraging critical thinking, students and faculty can begin to reflect on their own positionality. This shift has the potential to break the cycle of white supremacy in librarianship by moving us beyond current approaches to diversifying the profession.

When we reflected on our LIS educational experience, we realized an important commonality: though each of us was educated in different areas of the country, in four different programs, we didn’t have opportunities to engage beyond a general overview of information theory. If we desired

a critical perspective, whether it be critical pedagogy, indigenous studies, or even an introduction to information literacy for underrepresented populations, we had to work to find them. These courses were either not offered, offered only by a professor who was on sabbatical at the time, or were discussed outside the classroom; these topics were not part of the core of the curriculum.

Discussion of race, sexuality, and gender within a theoretical framework and practice cannot solely be the responsibility of the few POC faculty and students. bell hooks (1994) comments that when white students learning to think more critically about race and racism engage in open dialogue, they are given “both the opportunity to know that difficult experiences may be common and practice at integrating theory and practice: ways of knowing with habits of being” (43). Requiring LIS students to utilize critical theory will ensure that students see themselves reflected in LIS curriculum and confront systems of inequality that they’ll inevitably encounter in service-oriented and professional contexts.

### *Retention Narratives in LIS Programs and Early-Career Appointments*

To illustrate how the current LIS curriculum contributes to the lack of diversity in the profession, we look to research on retention at both the graduate level and across institutions with academic librarian appointments. Studies show that while LIS programs and academic institutions *sometimes* work to recruit students and professionals of color, they fail to measure key factors affecting retention, an astounding reminder of our field’s propensity for lip service over action.

Kyung-Sun Kim and Sei-Ching Joanna Sin suggest that “[recruitment and retention at the LIS educational level has] received much less attention than recruitment/retention in libraries;” their nationally distributed web-survey provides granular data on how recently minted librarians of color feel about “the efforts LIS schools and associations have made to recruit and retain” them (2008, 155). Open-ended questions shed light on how many respondents felt “dissatisfied” with their programs, and “forgotten and abandoned once they were recruited and began their studies” (167). Other surveys indicate similar patterns of dissatisfaction (Dali and Caidi 2016; Morgan, Farrar, and Owens 2009), but Kim and Sin also dissect this disappointment as it occurs across intersecting racial and ethnic axes. This challenges how “groups [are] often lumped together as the ‘minority’” in measurement mechanisms, acknowledging positionality as a crucial lens through which retention can be understood (Kim and Sin 2008, 169).

Once in the professional workforce, exploitation occurs at the hiring level, as many academic libraries use “residency, internship, and fellowship programs” for recruitment (Kim and Sin 2008, 156). “Diversity Resi-

dent Librarian” programs or “Diversity Librarian” positions are largely seen as first- or early-career options for POC in order to begin careers in academic librarianship. These positions are designed to give early-career librarians an opportunity to explore different areas of specialization, akin to an internship. Residents within these programs typically rotate throughout an academic library, gaining a fast-tracked understanding of different departments, personalities, teams, and situations. Diversity librarians also have the added unstated responsibilities of representation, mentorship, committee work, and attracting other “diverse” candidates to a particular institution.

There is no doubt diversity librarian positions provide an incredible wealth of experience to early-career POC. However, these positions fail to do what Isabel Espinal (2001, 132) calls for, which is to address, identify, and name whiteness. The literature does little to discuss how the other librarians employed at institutions alongside these positions are preparing for mentorship responsibilities prior to a resident’s arrival, or how the institutional culture is evaluated before, during, and after the residency; all of these can be crucial factors that affect candidates as they navigate hierarchies of oppression. Such diversity programs and initiatives make the profession *appear* more diverse without actually tackling the systemic issues underlying librarianship, which we believe is the work of the host institution. It’s important to note that simply having a diversity resident does not automatically create an inclusive environment; it is not the resident’s sole responsibility to shift institutional culture. It is difficult to have real sustainable diversity in the profession if we’re not working to dismantle white supremacy within our own environments.

## CONTINUING IN THE PROFESSION

### *White Professionalism: Policing Our Behavior, Our Appearance, Our Words*

Having survived our LIS educational experiences and secured professional appointments, we’ve discovered that what has followed has felt even more harrowing. The recently updated 2017 demographic study from ALA states that 81 percent of ALA members are female and 86.7 percent of the membership identify as white (Rosa and Henke 2017). This is a fact we can’t fail to notice when we look around our library workplaces or attend an ALA conference. We feel isolated and lonely when we realize we are the “only” person of color in *all* of the rooms that comprise these events, no matter how big those rooms are. For many of us, the only time we ever see other librarians of color is if we create spaces for ourselves at larger conferences.

Recognizing this reality, we feel as though we have to present different versions of ourselves at work in order to fit in. This demands learning



about not only the organizational culture but also the white “professional” culture, all in an attempt to “fit” within our institution’s boundaries of whiteness. Mignon Moore points to this when she discusses the experiences of black women, specifically faculty, in academia:

There are unwritten rules that underscore both formal and informal personnel practices. These practices are often haphazard in nature and can be more structurally complicated for faculty of color relative to their white counterparts. Because they are less likely to be aware of the informal rules or to fully understand how promotion processes work, black faculty are often less able to develop an effective plan to navigate those pathways. (2017, 201)

If we do not learn what being “professional” means from other societal experience (let’s be real, this issue is not unique to libraries), our well-intentioned, white colleagues will quickly inform us. We are often told things like what’s considered “appropriate” work-wear, or to tone down our intensity. Black women, in particular, are told *just* how our natural coils should be shaped to conform to work-appropriate standards, as one author has experienced countless times before. Sometimes, this is told to us directly without apology; other times, it comes via microaggressions that take their toll slowly until we are browbeaten into complying with “white professionalism.”

### *Tiptoeing around Whiteness*

We are not fit for the profession if, in addition to not looking like what the ideal (read: white) librarian should look like, we do not think the way an ideal librarian thinks. Schlesselman-Tarango could not have better summarized what this looks like in practice:

If the ideal library worker . . . is not simply white, female, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle or upper class, but also subscribes to a specific type of benevolence, what sort of role does she play in regulating the types of people who desire to enter the library workforce today? Does she inform our ideas surrounding what constitutes “fitness for the position”? Does she stunt our ability to imagine a new type of subject or new types of ideologies in LIS, and does she perhaps limit the possibilities of what a librarian or library could be? (2016, 680–81)

We would answer all of these questions with a resounding “yes.” As librarians of color, we have had to close off parts of ourselves to make ourselves stand out less in order to minimize the number of microaggressions we experience.

However, even when we dress and behave “respectably,” we are still targeted. For example, many women of color are mistaken for students on campus, and then treated as though they are inexperienced or lack expertise. We are often questioned on everything from our age and qualifications, to our roles and research interests within librarianship.

“In discussing the intersections of opportunity in academic institutions, Stephanie Shields (2012) says one of the most energy-draining aspects of being on the margins is the constant requirement to justify your existence” (Moore 2017, 202). In order to prove that we belong in the profession, we often volunteer for more committees and present and publish more than is required.

The constant, overwhelming nature of professional fit and invisible whiteness often results in overworking ourselves to the point of burnout. The fact that POC think “White faculty [are] more influential” in the workplace, and that faculty librarians of color must “assume institutional roles (such as that of the ‘diversity specialist’)” further reveals the unequal power dynamics and structural racism that play into the expectations to “fit” within organizational systems (Damasco and Hodges 2012, 298). It is no wonder, then, that Ione Damasco and Dracine Hodges (2012, 299) found a “surprising 25 percent [of faculty librarians] stated they would seek employment elsewhere as soon as possible,” foregoing the job security that tenure-track roles beget.

Do any of these scenarios foster an inclusive environment? We certainly don’t think so.

### *Yes, It Is About Race*

Some of our white-lady, cisgender librarian colleagues often distance themselves from taking responsibility for our burnout, claiming good intentions. Ettarh (2017b), Accapadi (2007), and Schlesselman-Tarango (2016), however, each explore this concept of white women as being “drafted to carry out the reproductive work of whiteness” (Leonardo and Boas 2013, 315) in higher education institutions. With whiteness established as the default, any experience that falls outside of whiteness can be easily regulated to the margins. Accapadi writes, “The White woman’s reality is visible, acknowledged, and legitimized because of her tears, while a woman of color’s reality, like her struggle, is invisible, overlooked, and pathologized based on the operating ‘standard of humanity’” (2007, 210). It is easy to dismiss the experience of the minority, especially when it has been silenced in myriad ways.

An example of this occurred at a recent national conference, when one of the authors gave a presentation on a social justice approach to outreach. A white woman in the audience interrupted at the very beginning to ask for a definition of social justice and could not answer when the question was turned back to her. Later in the presentation, she wanted to know why the presenter was leaving out issues of class, specifically, “what about poor white children?” In order to not allow race to be erased from the conversation, the presenter was forced to discuss intersectionality in very simple terms. “Poor white children” do not have to worry about being killed for walking down the street because of the color of their skin. Black

people are never allowed to forget their blackness. White people do not even see whiteness as a race. Race is only for the Other, POC. This experience is not uncommon for librarians of color.

Ettarh writes, “Many white women will tone police, dominate conversation, and then when challenged follow the following playbook [referring to Accapadi 2007]—cry, accuse people of bullying, and/or attempt to excuse their behavior using self-care” (2017b). Many of our white colleagues do not seem to try to understand our differences and how we bring color (pun intended) to their very white spaces. We experience the truth of this any time we try to speak up for ourselves in white spaces. In discussion after discussion, race is removed from consideration, and if a POC tries to bring it up, it is likely that they will be told, “Why do you have to make it about race?” We have to make it about race because whiteness dominates this profession: it’s the way it’s always been. It’s easy to ignore racism if you’re a member of the dominant race.

### *Performing Diversity*

Returning to this idea of vocational awe, libraries and librarians are susceptible to this question: “How can we be racist if we are committed to equality and diversity?” (Ahmed 2012, 116). Sara Ahmed poses this question to illustrate this seemingly logical argument. As though by simply stating an institution, a profession, or an individual is committed to these values of equality and diversity, that makes it true. “The ease or easiness in which diversity becomes description shows how diversity can be a way of not doing anything: if we take saying diversity *as if* it is doing diversity, then saying diversity can be a way of not doing diversity” (Ahmed 2012, 121). We see this play out with positions that contain “diversity” in the title, but the rest of our institutions remain white; we see this in our collections, in our knowledge systems, in our administration, in our teaching, and we see how this affects our users. Instead of real engagement with racial justice and confronting white invisibility and white supremacy, white librarians fall back on performing lip-service to diversity and inclusion to take its place.

Even our colleagues who claim to have overcome *all* of what we have outlined here perpetuate these lip-service diversity performances; a prominent example is critical librarianship (also known as #critlib), which can be defined as a movement of librarians committed to uncovering “the ways in which libraries and librarians consciously and unconsciously support systems of oppression” (Garcia 2015). For librarians of color, many of us have been doing this work for decades. The term came into existence perhaps around the time that Sanford Berman suggested it be added to the Library of Congress in 2007. In the last few years, #critlib has grown into a full-blown movement with a website ([critlib.org](http://critlib.org)), Twitter chats, books, un-conferences, and more, all through unofficial channels. Resultantly,

#critlib gave the authors hope that there were other librarians interested in integrating social justice into their everyday practices.

However, the same issue of invisible whiteness cropped up, even though this movement meant to be “a direct challenge to power and privilege” (Garcia 2015). The major scholarly articles are mostly written by white librarians and researchers. In an ACRL panel on critical information literacy at the ALA Annual 2016, only one out of five of the invited panelists was a person of color. Even more troubling is that the movement does not seem to want to turn a critical eye upon itself or the profession, focusing mostly on critically engaging with the work librarians do, such as instruction, reference, or cataloging. It does not, for example, question the fact that the profession is replicating structures of white supremacy in LIS curriculum, programs, recruitment, and the culture of the profession.

Many librarians of color have already felt unwelcome because the movement regularly highlights the work of white librarians without recognizing that librarians of color have been doing this work without calling it “theory.” Did the critical work that librarians of color have done and are continuing to do in these areas not matter? Why isn’t their work being highlighted more frequently, and why aren’t librarians of color being seen as experts on these issues? It has begun to feel like another way in which our work and culture are being appropriated to fit into white cultural structures. In many ways, #critlib plays the same performative role that general “diversity and inclusion” language does. On the surface, it seems to be addressing the problems of racial inequity, but probing more deeply reveals that more has to be done to enact meaningful change.

## THE ROLE OF MENTORSHIP

### *Overcoming Professional Isolation*

Without effective mentorship, librarians of color may feel alienated and ostracized. Professionals at all stages of their careers are able to succeed when they have access to groups and networks that encourage personal growth and are attuned to the particulars of life and career situations (MacKinnon and Shepley 2014). For librarians of color, this means having an awareness of the specific challenges minorities in monocultural environments face (Anantachai et al. 2016).

Many formal mentorship opportunities available through mainstream professional organizations do not take into account the impact of navigating life in a sea of whiteness, which often leads to imposter syndrome and other psychosocial stress disorders (Dancy and Brown 2011; Zambrana et al. 2015). We have participated in a range of programs for academic librarians and found that programs not geared toward POC did little to foster a supportive environment. White-centered mentorship opportunities often have the unintended consequence of pushing librarians of color to as-

similate into the whiteness of librarianship, alienating those at the margins even further.

As Brook, Ellenwood, and Lazzaro (2015) write, mentorship often treats “white cultural norms [as] something to be aspired to if students and faculty of color are to succeed in higher education” (257). Diane Gusa (2010) further explains how cultural assimilation perpetuates hostile racial climates in defining white institutional presence. White institutional presence (WIP) refers to the homogenizing practices within disciplines and within academe that are the result of white ascendancy and white supremacy sustained over time (Gusa 2010). When WIP is not identified, named, or interrogated as part of the mentorship process, early-career librarians of color are left to feel that their marginalization is inevitable and undefeatable.

### *Diversity-Centered Mentorship Programming*

Our experiences with professional mentorship programs aimed specifically at POC librarians provide a stark contrast to the exasperation we have often felt when participating in mainstream mentorship opportunities. The ARL Career Enhancement Program (CEP), the Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians from Traditionally Underrepresented Groups, and mentorship through the Spectrum Scholarship Program are some examples of supportive networks that foster a sense of professional belonging for LIS students and librarians of color. When we’ve been selected to participate, we have relished the opportunity to discuss whiteness in librarianship in a supportive space. This type of intentional community building is essential for POC, especially those who are an “only.”

The difference in experience for POC between white-centered and diversity-centered mentorship is unsurprising considering the additional pressures we face to police ourselves. Angela Galvin (2015) lays out these challenges in no uncertain terms when she asks white librarians to consider how those on the margins must “conceal their authentic selves in the interest of survival.” Creating a supportive mentorship environment that acknowledges the harmful effects white cultural norms have on POC librarians is a critical component of helping librarians of color navigate the professional space. Mentorship that allows for expressing authentic and intersectional identities requires compassionate approaches to supporting and encouraging marginalized librarians. When mentoring affirms the experiences of participants and is founded in empathy, mutual development built on trust occurs for both mentor and mentee (Lucey and White 2017).

Particularly in academic environments, librarians of color need the guidance of those who have managed to identify and overcome the challenges inherent to being a minority in higher education (Cavazos 2016). Frequently, we have to reach out beyond our own libraries to find mentors

that share our experiences (Anantachai et al. 2016). This article, a cross-institutional collaboration, illustrates our own inability to build diverse networks within our local environments. Collaborations such as these are often built through informal networks that can be a potent resource for mentorship.

### *Building Intentional Sustainable Communities*

The study produced by Damasco and Hodges (2012), as cited previously, about the experiences of librarians of color as they navigate promotion and tenure articulates the need for safe spaces to build supportive communities. The authors note, “Several respondents discussed the importance and need for more informal mentoring relationships and peer support networks as a means for alleviating feelings of isolation” (296). This type of mentorship integrates the voices of the mentee organically and provides opportunities to cocreate a productive and meaningful space (MacKinnon and Shepley 2014).

The American Indian Library Association (AILA), Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA), The National Association to Promote Library & Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking (REFORMA), the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA), and the Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA) are some ways in which librarians of color organize. Informal communities also develop not only at national conferences such as ACRL and ALA but also at conferences convened specifically for POC librarians such as the 2016 National Diversity in Libraries Conference (NDLC), the 2017 Pushing the Margins Symposium at UCLA, and the recurring Joint Council of Librarians of Color Conference. Discussing the impact of the pervasive whiteness of librarianship in productive and meaningful spaces has been key to each of our careers. However, as is the case with many formal mentorship programs, establishing connections at conferences require resources and institutional support.

Without a supportive and well-resourced institution, where can librarians of color go to find peers? This is a question plaguing those of us who are striving for a sense of belonging in a field where librarians insist on their own neutrality despite evidence to the contrary. In the absence of travel funding, established spaces where librarians of color feel comfortable seeking out advice, support, and guidance are critical. We, along with peers, have begun to create such spaces on social media platforms such as blogs and closed online networks for informal mentorship. For geographically isolated librarians, these networks are invaluable.

### *Peer Mentorship: We Here*

One of the authors of this article created a Facebook group called *We Here*, designed as a space for librarians of color to reach out and show one

another that *we here*, that we exist and you aren't alone. This group immediately gained traction as an avenue for informal mentorship preceding ACRL 2017. When academic librarians converged in Baltimore, the organizing power of this group in connecting librarians of color in the physical space became a potent tool for us to find each other within the sea of whiteness typical for an academic library conference. In the wake of the conference, *We Here* extended to include a Wordpress site, a Google Group, a Slack group, Twitter and Instagram accounts, and monthly virtual meetings where librarians of color can turn for encouragement and support.

An important facet of this network is that many of these platforms are closed to white librarians and work to form a counterspace. Counterspaces are "safe campus spaces and communities where [students of color] can process and respond to the rejection that they experience attending a historically White college" (Yosso and Lopez 2010, 94). Counterspaces are invaluable peer mentorship resources because so many of the issues we face are dangerous to express in predominantly white spaces. Fear of discrimination, being further marginalized, or being passed over for promotions silences those at the margins. April Hathcock describes the necessity of counterspaces in her blog *At the Intersection*:

We need exclusive spaces where we can curse our lot, speak our minds, and then dry our faces and take back up our fighting stances. We need places where we can be weak and vulnerable without being in danger or exposed. (2016)

Utilizing peer networks to build a safe community facilitates a true sense of professional belonging and provides us with effective peer mentorship.

Informal peer mentorship for those on the margins of academia has also proven effective in other disciplines, demonstrating the pervasive challenges faced by minorities involved in academe. The group Research for the Educational Advancement of Latin@s (REAL) provides peer mentorship to Latinx and is one example of such a network. The experiences of faculty involved in REAL mimic our experiences in *We Here*; these networks give us the tools and the resources to persist in the face of existing on the margins (Cavazos 2016; Ek et al. 2010). For us, *We Here* represents an attempt to carve out safe spaces to resist white domination. In the words of Galvin (2015), "Without interrogating whiteness, the only winning move for marginalized librarians is not to play."

### *Deciding to Stay: How We Retain Ourselves*

A recent qualitative study on the impact that mentoring has on underrepresented POC faculty found that about half of the participants received inadequate mentoring that impeded career growth in academia (Zambrana

et al. 2015). This rings true for us, as two of the authors were on the brink of leaving the profession when peer mentors stepped in. Finding our voice within the confines of academic librarianship seemed an impossibility at times. Utilizing informal and formal modes for mentorship to build communities of practice helped us both stay in the profession and advance in our careers. Publishing is often a requirement for librarian tenure and promotion (Bonnette 2004; Damasco and Hodges 2012), and the ability to find coauthors who share experiences and values is an indispensable tool for helping librarians of color rise through professional ranks.

But what happens if the participation of librarians of color in counterspaces is discovered by senior librarians who insist that working toward multiculturalism is enough? When POC make spaces that are their own, such actions can be perceived as subverting the white cultural norms that dominate librarianship (Brook et al. 2015, p. 257). The tangible output from these counterspaces works to create counternarratives. Counternarratives affirm the reality of POC's experiences of racism and provide evidence for discrimination and microaggressions. The Tumblr blog *Speaking Truth To Power: The Real Lives of Librarians of Color* was created by one of the authors in 2017 as a space for all librarians of color to contribute counternarratives. *We Here* has a Medium channel to capture our stories. The more we raise our voices together, the more our experiences cannot be dismissed as outliers within the profession.

Building communities of practice and telling counternarratives has the added benefit of helping overcome impostor syndrome. We can attest to the confidence that writing with each other has given us. At different times throughout the authorship of this article, each contributor experienced self-doubt that manifested itself in various ways. Likely, this impostor syndrome is because much of our earlier work was invalidated by white audiences when they could not be situated within a white-centered perspective (Dancy and Brown 2011, 617–21). Despite that impostor syndrome, this article came to fruition by encouraging each other throughout the process.

Finding this sense of belonging and confidence for librarians of color can be difficult work. Make no mistake, mentorship is work. The notion of cultural taxation is helpful in understanding the necessary work that those at the margins do in validating each other. One potent example of cultural taxation is the amount of service and mentorship work by academics of color that is not considered in promotion and review criteria (Dancy and Brown 2011; Turner 2002). Moore (2017) notes how the cultural tax for women of color in academe “tends to go unreported and unacknowledged” (200). The emotional labor and time spent mentoring peers is significant, even at our early-career stages. This is work that is done with great satisfaction, but also at great cost of time and energy. We want to lift as we climb, but we also want to avoid burnout.



## HOLDING OURSELVES ACCOUNTABLE

*If organizations are saying what they are doing, then you can show they are not doing what they are saying.* (Ahmed 2012, 121)

Traversing oppression requires honesty and courage. The most transformative work starts with diving inward to assess support for those on the margins. If we are to overcome the isolation that mars our experience, the LIS profession as a whole must be critically examined starting from the shared acknowledgment that our values, systems, policies, education, and institutions are based on whiteness. We have to move away from the language of diversity and toward the action of social justice. As it stands, “nothing short of a rebellion will cause librarians, associations, and individuals to step forward and act upon the affirmation action and diversity rhetoric notion that the cream always rises to the top” (Wheeler 2000, 171).

Equality and diversity do not equal social justice or the dismantling of systems of oppression present in our society, just as equity, inclusion, and social justice do not happen through statements. They happen through action. Lee Anne Bell gives this definition of social justice:

Social justice is both a goal and a process. The *goal* of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The *process* for attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change. (2016, 3)

Using this definition, how can we create change if we are not actively trying to include people from all social identity groups to mutually shape our libraries? If we are not asking ourselves whenever we revise our existing services, systems, policies, or job descriptions, or create new ones, “Who is this privileging and how?” then we are not going to change the profession. We must all hold ourselves accountable for becoming social justice-minded.

The LIS profession needs to be asking itself, if we are actually making strides forward, why is it still so hard to recruit and retain librarians of color? Instead of thinking that there may be something wrong with librarians of color, perhaps white librarians need to ask themselves, “Is something wrong with us as a culture, as a profession, as a field?” If the “Code of Ethics of the American Library Association” (ALA 2008, article V) asks librarians to “treat co-workers and colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith,” maybe we as a profession need to be reflecting on whether we are actually doing that.

We need to have these difficult discussions about how race and white supremacy play out in our profession’s underlying infrastructures and sys-

tems. We can take a page from critical pedagogical practices and engage in critical thinking around our profession's position within white supremacy. Room for these discussions has to happen in a true environment for learning, in spaces ranging from LIS programs to conferences to daily work meetings. As hooks (2010) reminds us, "Genuine conversation is about the sharing of power and knowledge; it is fundamentally a cooperative enterprise" (45).

Honest dialogue is something that we have talked about at length among ourselves as we wrote this article. As women of color in the academy, how do we continue to have these conversations with our white colleagues who may view us as threatening and still decide to stay? How do we avoid succumbing to professional burnout as we try to lift and push simultaneously? For us, the answer lies in each other, and in the people who continue to mentor us. We cannot begin to express our gratitude for those who came before us and made space for us to exist in this profession. If you're a person of color reading this and you feel as disheartened as we have many times throughout our careers, please reach out. Get in touch in any way you can. *We here*, and we're standing on the shoulders of giants.

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