

# Radical re-imagination: centering a BIPOC library workforce in an asset-based autoethnography

BIPOC library  
workforce

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Academic BIPOC librarians oftentimes struggle to envision themselves and navigate in White-dominant spaces due to deficit thinking. To better understand how DEIA efforts can bolster structural change in academic libraries, the two BIPOC authors opted to lean on an asset-based exercise—imagining a positive work environment made possible through a library staffed entirely by BIPOC individuals.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Through collaborative autoethnography, the two authors interviewed one another and centered their unstructured conversations around one question: “What does an academic library composed entirely of a BIPOC workforce look like?” Three emergent themes were agreed upon and finalized by the two authors.

**Findings** – The authors’ imagined library is able to foster a supportive community and also function efficiently thanks to its shared purpose grounded in DEIA. Despite relying on an asset-based framework, the authors found themselves having to reckon with trials and tribulations currently faced by BIPOC librarians. Effectively envisioning the “ideal” library environment is not possible without also engaging with librarianship’s legacy of racial injustices.

**Originality/value** – Recognizing that confronting systems of oppression naturally invokes trauma, this paper encourages librarians to challenge deficit thinking and instead rely on asset-based models to candidly imagine an anti-racist academic library. The authors acknowledge that BIPOC voices and experiences add tremendous value to the library workplace. At the heart of this paper is the belief that reparations for past racial injustices should not only fix past wrongdoings, but also contribute to positive workplace cultures.

**Keywords** Academic libraries, Diversity, Autoethnography, Asset-based community development, Deficit thinking, Diversity recruitment programs

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

What does an academic library composed entirely of a Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) workforce look like? In this collaborative autoethnography, we critically reflect on our personal experiences to address this question.

For a profession lacking in diversity based on race and ethnicity, incremental change will not address racist activities; radical re-imagination will. Anti-racism and diversity in library staffing can seize the opportunity for equitable access to participation for marginalized groups.

We approach this project seeking to re-imagine diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) efforts in academic libraries and to illuminate the tensions and complexities inherent in the work to counter oppression. By using an autoethnographic method and a lens of asset-based thinking, we identified strategic ways to deeply embed DEIA work within academic librarianship.

We feel that incorporating asset-based thinking into DEIA efforts can improve library culture for BIPOC library workers. When BIPOC voices are centered, systems of oppression are removed, strategies in support of BIPOC communities are incorporated, and the experiences of BIPOC library workers in academia can transform for the better. Recognizing



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first-hand that advocating for inclusive spaces can be emotionally and intellectually draining, our study uses asset-based frameworks to disengage from trauma and baggage—we instead lean on restorative imagination rooted in “what if . . . ?” narratives for a more inclusive and supportive environment; recognizing, however, that perfection is impossible.

### **Our identities within this profession**

*Janis*

Advancing the BIPOC community’s potential has been the objective throughout my career. I began my education in libraries with a desire to make STEM students fully aware of information resources to enhance their education and personal growth. In essence, my intent was to become the professional I wished for as a Black college student, an encouraging mentor and information professional motivated to further BIPOC interest and involvement in STEM education and careers. As I traveled my LIS path in graduate school, I pursued every opportunity to learn and lead without necessarily knowing where I would land. The mentorship programs I have been privileged to participate in (the American Library Association (ALA) Spectrum Scholarship Program and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Kaleidoscope Program), urged me forward by instilling confidence, cheering my determination, and recognizing my belongingness. As the Student Outreach and Engagement Co-Chair for Illinois’ Black Faculty and Professionals Alliance (BFAPA) and member of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA), I strive to balance what I think I do not know with confidence in what I do know.

*Ben*

Before making the switch to librarianship, I pursued a field in cultural resource management and archaeology. Although I found anthropological research to be compelling, exciting, and worthwhile of my time and cognitive energy, I steadily came to the realization that it wasn’t my calling to be a professional archaeologist. A job opening at the University of Montana’s Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library popped up and I ended up working a couple of years in a paraprofessional role which gave me the space and time to explore—eventually determining whether pursuing a library degree would fit with my long-term aspirations. When I became a freshly-minted academic librarian, I felt the need to establish meaningful connections right from the get-go—in particular, I wanted to expand my network with other persons of color to navigate spaces that were not historically meant for me. I was fortunate enough to have had supportive co-workers, but I continued to remain in spaces where I was the only person of color. I was able to take advantage of formal mentorship programs (ARL Kaleidoscope Program and Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association) that provided access to invaluable mentors; these individuals could answer my questions that not only relate to librarianship as a whole, but also the nuances of higher education politics and navigating White spaces. Friends and colleagues would encourage me to lead in the field (i.e. committees, projects, etc.), but I’ve always doubted myself: Am I good enough? What happens if I fail? Sure, failing is a critical part of the learning process, but would I lose general trust and confidence of my colleagues when moments of failure are inevitable? As a person of color (POC), I feel pressured to prove myself and go the extra mile, otherwise I run the risk of the “majority” reaffirming that I am not worthy to occupy the space—just as they had expected all this time.

*Why we came together*

Our idea behind this project can be traced back to January 2019. Alongside thirteen other folx, we both belonged to the 2018–2020 cohort of ARL’s Kaleidoscope Program (formerly the Initiative to Recruit a Diverse Workforce). “The goal of the ARL Kaleidoscope Program is to

attract master of library and information science (MLIS) students from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups to careers in research libraries and archives” ([Association of Research Libraries, 2021](#)). A major benefit of the program was access to a supportive community of peers where a network of program alumni nurture and mentor each individual to develop leadership and career skills and readiness. The 2018–2020 cohort had the opportunity to meet twice in 2019: once to attend the 15th Annual ARL Leadership Symposium in Seattle, Washington (during the ALA’s Midwinter Meeting) and once to visit ARL-member libraries in the Chicago, Illinois region (University of Illinois at Chicago and Northwestern University). During our last night of the Seattle programming (January 24–27, 2019), the fifteen of us sat down at a hotel lobby to reminisce about our experiences and lessons learned within the past two days. Although we had only known each other for a span of 48 hours, we were able to come together as friends and leverage each other’s positive energy—gaining confidence to pursue librarianship knowing that we had each other’s backs. One exciting discussion topic emerged: imagining what it would be like if all fifteen of us worked in the same library or archive. To this day, the smiles and the elation that filled that hotel lobby are still engraved within our memories. A few years later, we are now revisiting the question and are looking at it with an asset-based lens: What does an academic library composed entirely of a BIPOC workforce look like?

### Asset-based community development and deficit thinking

Asset-based thinking grounded this study’s conversations—whenever our discussions veered away from this framework, we stopped, reflected, and attempted to steer back on course. Assets, at its most basic definition in a library context, are the physical spaces, collections, and staffing. Organizations and communities of all kinds have conditioned themselves to look outward for resources that provide quick fixes for addressing perceived local deficiencies. [Kretzmann and Knight \(1993\)](#) define assets as the skills, gifts, and capacities of individuals and groups harnessed by the people already situated within a community; these assets can get overlooked and ignored by residents when trying to address quality of life improvements. As such, doing asset-based development work calls for the mobilization and identification of resources for achieving collective goals ([Green, 2013](#), pp. 4-6).

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) provides a framework for organizations to acknowledge existing resources as catalysts for self-directed community change ([Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993](#)). As a “grassroots model that builds on the assets, or skills and talents of local residents, associations, and organizations” ([Edwards \*et al.\*, 2013](#), p. 24), the model identifies community members as experts within their respective settings and contexts; ABCD goes against the traditional needs-based models of development which assumes that the investment in outside agents is necessary for solving in-house deficiencies. Needs-based models also center “the problem” which takes attention away from the positive fabric already woven within a given community. Rather than being identified as clients, ABCD sees internal people as active citizens who have sole autonomy in community development ([Mathe and Cunningham, 2003](#)).

The ABCD framework’s conception of needs-based models loosely parallels the deficit thinking phenomena pervasive in the K-12 and higher education sphere. [Davis and Museus \(2019\)](#) recognize that many scholars over the past decade have defined and unpacked the concept of deficit thinking in many lenses. The majority of education scholars interpret deficit thinking as a victim-blaming tactic: students’ failures are traced to individual, family, or community traits ([Bruton and Robles-Piña, 2009](#); [McKay and Devlin, 2016](#); [Valencia, 1997, 2010](#)).

Deficit thinking under the realm of education assumes that struggling students—specifically those from economically disadvantaged minority backgrounds—fail because of their internal deficiencies ([Valencia, 1997](#), p. 2). Rather than recognizing how varied life experiences can add value in the learning environment, a study on White pre-service teachers concluded that

educators tended to fixate on the “failure on communities of color rather than on the institutions that are inequitably serving them” (Picower, 2009, p. 210). By focusing attention on cultural and individual deficiencies, institutions overly rely on band-aid solutions to address disparate outcomes and experiences, turning a blind eye to root causes of the tribulations faced by BIPOC communities, low-income populations, and other minority groups (Vass, 2012).

Literature on deficit thinking in the context of academic libraries has predominantly focused on information literacy instruction. Folk (2018) found that first-generation students bring into the classroom a variety of strengths by virtue of their lived experiences, interests, and identities. Heinbach *et al.* (2019) suggest that transfer students’ collective experiences influence their ability to navigate information needs, libraries, and higher education spaces. Deficit thinking can prevent librarians from considering how “we librarians – as part of such educational systems – might ask ourselves to what extent we are part of the problem” (Ilett, 2019, p. 180). Although our study does not necessarily focus on information literacy instruction and pedagogy, we are collectively co-creating knowledge in an autoethnographic exercise: how we identify, understand, and apply the strengths/assets of a BIPOC workforce towards building an imagined landscape. For clarification purposes, we stress that whenever we mention “deficit thinking” during the rest of our paper, we are mainly referring to the needs-based or deficit-based approach within community development work.

Within the ABCD framework, our study defines “community” in two distinct ways, acknowledging that they inform one another and do not necessarily function in isolation: (1) the imagined academic library BIPOC workplace; (2) the community that the imagined library serves. Our study focuses on the former, although we explicitly state when we discuss the latter throughout the paper. Our imagined library assumes that the BIPOC library already exists—one that is fully staffed with BIPOC personnel. In efforts to create a more inclusive environment and service point, our imagined library community would leverage one another’s expertise and personal experiences as BIPOC to enact transformative solutions that better serve its surrounding community.

### *Framing diversity as a problem*

Opposite of the asset-based mindset, “diversity” as defined by a needs-based and deficiency approach can be identified as a means to address workplace culture defects. The ALA and its affiliate, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), identified diversity as a core value (American Library Association, 2010; Association of College and Research Libraries, 2019). However, the racial composition of librarianship at various institutions continues to be woefully unrepresentative of United States’ demographic makeup (Howland, 1998; Adkins and Espinal, 2004). To demonstrate diversity as a solution to address a need, many institutions incorporate “diverse” language in their mission. Espinal *et al.* (2021), however, encourages us to consider going beyond recognizing the presence of the word “diversity” in mission statements of libraries and instead look at the actual number of librarians of color in the profession. They also encourage us to inspect how much of a library’s budget has been appropriately allocated to the support, retention, recruitment, and promotion of librarians of color; only then would solutions go beyond temporary, band-aid fixes to address deeper cultural issues. Resource allocation narratives aside, our autoethnography envisions a library that has already met—and even exceeded—its BIPOC recruitment and retention efforts. In doing so, how would our imagined library assets, that being the BIPOC workforce, thrive and do good work?

When situated in a needs-based and deficiency approach, “diversity” can, itself, be interpreted as *the problem* for majority audiences; in this context, diversity places burden on White people. Put in another way, the failure to uphold diversity as a core value is inherently intentional because engaging with racism on a systematic and institutional level redresses

power imbalances. To offset the threat while also putting on the guise of accepting diversity as a core value, the diversity framework has focused on optics where organizations are only concerned with looking “good.” Derrick Bell, the forefather of Critical Race Theory (CRT), defines this mindset as interest convergence where Whites only move the needle towards racial justice if they can also reap the benefits (Ahmed, 2012). By tiptoeing around systemic change, “diversity” then becomes a tool used to preserve White racial domination rather than actively pursuing true racial justice. In our imagined library, “diversity” is not, by any means, seen as a deficiency or burden at the individual level as well as institutional and systemic levels.

## Methodology

We incorporate collaborative autoethnography in our work. Autoethnography is described as both a “process and a product” according to Ellis and Bockner (2000, p. 739). By relying on an autoethnographic medium to frame our lived experiences, we combine personal and cultural contexts that aim to resonate with both insiders and outsiders. Autoethnography challenges canonical methods of doing research and instead interprets the research process as actions that are socially-just, political, and socially-conscious (Adams and Holman Jones, 2008). Hughes and Pennington (2016) identified and compiled 23 types of autoethnography. Our paper resonates most with two types of autoethnography: “interactive interviews” and “estrangement autoethnography” (Hughes and Pennington, 2016, pp. 16-17).

According to Adams (2008), interactive interviews are collaborative endeavors where both the researcher and the participant (one of the same) ask each other questions about a particular topic. Unlike the traditional one-on-one interview, all actors involved already have established relationships, resulting in an organic method for co-creating knowledge—both in the emergent stories and in the analysis of resulting interactions (Ellis *et al.*, 2010). As alumnus of the ARL Kaleidoscope Program, we consider ourselves to be friends who frequently connect to chat about matters that transcend both the personal and the professional.

Our study also loosely aligns with estrangement autoethnographies in which researchers intentionally perform in countercultural ways to butt against the status quo and norms of dominant cultures; by doing so, the autoethnographers are able to critically examine their own selves while in an estranged state (Keenan and Evans, 2014). Traditionally, estrangement autoethnographies also encourages researchers to examine how others observe and react to their estranged actions; for example, Keenan and Evans’ (2014) work involves university students performing estrangement tasks in public (i.e. ordering the same meal twice at McDonald’s, smiling at strangers and noting their responses, etc.). Although our study did not incorporate outside observers like Keenan and Evans (2014), the estrangement autoethnography format still resonates with our research goals: We applied an asset-based mindset to envision a library workforce and workspace that defies the dominant narrative imposed upon many BIPOC library staff. For many BIPOC librarians, the library workspace is riddled by low morale resulting from institutional, social, and political systems centered around race (Kendrick and Damasco, 2019, p. 182). We instead situated ourselves in an imagined landscape where the entire workforce identifies as BIPOC.

We recognize that our imagined library comes with assumptions:

- (1) A library that is staffed entirely by BIPOC is still susceptible to systemic racism in the periphery—from the institutions it serves, to the vendors that provide resources, to the surrounding community.
- (2) Our imagined library assumes that the organization has a shared understanding of inclusive spaces. We acknowledge, however, that the real world encompasses BIPOC folk with diverse ideals and world views—some of which may conflict with some of

our own thoughts and wishes surrounding the concept of an ideal or even “perfect” workplace. We also acknowledge that internalized racism exists and will be present in our imagined library.

- (3) Our exercise of imagining a fully BIPOC staffed library is not meant to solve institutional or systemic problems. Rather, our autoethnographic exercise opens the opportunity to identify positive outcomes and changes without burdening ourselves with cynicism and underlying trauma.

The two of us met on two separate occasions via conference calls. Each session was three hours in length. Dialogue was unstructured, giving us the appropriate space to make sense of perspectives and meaning—rather than being tightly held by agendas (Bosetti *et al.*, 2008, p. 100). Although unstructured, we were guided by one singular question: What does an academic library composed entirely of a BIPOC workforce look like? We talked about our backgrounds and what inspired us to pursue librarianship. We also leveraged our observations of the profession at large and our current workplaces as sources of discussion topics. We relied on Google Documents to do collaborative note taking; when one of us spoke, the other would be responsible for note taking. After the conclusion of the two conference calls, we teased out themes individually. We then met again two times via conference calls to collectively combine and finalize the themes.

### Themes

Three themes were drawn out from our interactive interviews—Efficiency, Supportive Community, and Handling Trauma—based on their frequency in our reflection process. Each emphasizes the importance and difficulties of embedding DEIA into our work.

#### *Theme 1: efficiency through shared purpose and goal*

Given our firm stance that an anti-racism mission is a necessity within librarianship, we believe that a BIPOC library workforce would be a highly efficient organization. Much like how a grounded vision and mission can help shape a well-oiled organization, so does a shared understanding of DEIA. We believe that our imagined workplace would not require nor need a diversity committee—rather, the traditional “charge” of a diversity committee would already be embedded within our work. Initially, the urgency for such a committee would no longer exist:

There would not be a diversity committee, it’s just part of the work!

However, upon further discussion, we acknowledged the intersectionality within our BIPOC community would still necessitate a diversity committee to address misunderstandings, sensitivities, and offer an open space for dialogue to share concerns and ask questions.

We think about DEIA all the time, and it would resonate with all aspects of our work: from whom we hire (i.e. “how will this person benefit our students and patrons,” etc.), to how we build our collections, to how we frame our policies. In reality (outside of our imagined library), limited-term residencies, siloed diversity initiatives, and diversity task forces and committees are touted as transformative when, in actuality, they end up only bringing in more BIPOC to merely replace those who have been pushed out of White dominated spaces:

If it’s just one committee or individual doing the work, there are issues surrounding sustainability. If he leaves, who will write the newsletter?

Committees are examples of “so-called solutions [that] perpetuate ongoing systems of oppression and cause harm and trauma to those they purport to help” Leung and López-McKnight (2021, p. 3).



Being surrounded by colleagues who embrace justice and anti-racism would allow us to easily act upon DEIA work without being burdened to defend why this type of work is a necessity for a healthy organization; it would already be a given. And even if resistance surrounding our justice and anti-racism efforts arise, we would be more willing to push the boundaries and confront library leadership because we could seek support from an in-house and culturally proficient BIPOC community. Janis mentioned that, in the current environment, you can never truly “win”: silent protest results in no change and confrontation comes with risks. Pushing the envelope is less overwhelming and risky when there is a willingness to listen and be heard; in the real world, both of us agreed upon the sentiment that we are conditioned to be defensive when we voice stances that are deemed “anti-majority” or “anti-White supremacy.” The defensive nature of such work can be tied to the activism role that has long been connected to non-White librarians filling spaces not built for non-White people. For Ben, being on the defensive role has been exhausting, and being in an environment where pushback is welcome is liberating:

We’ve been excluded for decades. Can we have something for ourselves for once?

Black librarians, in particular, have long held the burden of facing consequences of dual, unequal, and segregated education systems, necessitating the need to fulfill the role of activists within their respective campuses and communities (Walker, 2021, p. 163). The activist role is harder to pursue when the assumption of library neutrality maintains a strong foothold in North American librarianship, serving to minimize, obscure, and even deny past librarians’ efforts in activism (Beilin, 2018). However, our envisioned library workforce would acknowledge that neutrality is unobtainable, nor does it align with our shared mission and vision. Efficiency safeguarded with the investment in staff time, bandwidth, and cognitive load, would be allocated towards fostering an inclusive environment rather than debating whether decision-making surrounding policies, collection development, staffing, and so forth are considered “safe” and neutral. Our library would support us when one of us challenges macro-level institutional racism, hence encouraging us to deny inequitable labor practices. Although we recognize that external forces (i.e. surrounding townships, institutions that academic libraries are part of, etc.) may still be entrenched in majoritarian and White supremacy, it is our imagined library’s support system which fosters the courage to pursue anti-racism work that is impactful.

Efficiency is also possible via streamlined channels of communication. In our imagined library, we see our library community as being a space where BIPOC librarians learn from one another, which is not possible, when “you’re the only one.” Library workers in academia oftentimes embrace collective knowledge organization and building to navigate around new and accurate information. For BIPOC librarians, collective knowledge mechanisms also provide invaluable spaces that help negate or challenge epistemic supremacy. A success story for a shared space among librarians of color is the Libraries We Here Group which offers job support and functions as a questions-and-answers forum centered around technical skilling up and professional development (We Here, 2021; Morales and Williams, 2021, p. 87). We Here’s existence is critical because Whiteness is solicited in the current librarian job market, creating barriers for entry in three distinct ways: cultural negotiation, access to wealth, and conspicuous leisure (Galvan, 2015). We both suffer from imposter syndrome, and we felt feelings of relief when we imagined a safe space where we can ask questions without fear of judgement or worse, repercussions. We think our BIPOC library is going to notice that some librarianship workplace norms are probably rooted in dominant White culture.

### *Theme 2: supportive community*

As BIPOC librarians, we believe a supportive community is a group of library workers committed to a common goal: to uplift and inspire individuals to be resilient and thrive.

These communities exist in different spaces (online, and in-person), places (i.e. workplace, conferences, association affiliates, etc.) and encompass workers at any level in their career (i.e. student, professional, retiree, etc.).

When making the choice to address conflict as “the only one,” I run the chance of not being supported. As the minority, bringing something up that is anti-majority can feel like going against the grain.

Attending ARL’s Leadership Symposium has made an impact on both of us. Not too long ago, this initiative immersed us into a network of BIPOC colleagues who helped propel us into our early careers. The relationships we began to build in 2018 were vital then and are more so today, as we work in predominantly White institutions and continue to need a supportive BIPOC community. Not all BIPOC librarians have access to a supportive community from leadership and scholarship programs; rather they have gained valuable connections for mentorship and encouragement from friends, other librarians, “community work, conferences, campus affiliation and familial connections” (Almeida, 2021, p. 19; Hathcock, 2015; Winston, 2021, p. 283).

We would be empowered to make change.

As racially and ethnically diverse library workers exhausted by confronting racism and structural inequity on the regular, we desire a positive workspace grounded in DEIA that would center our voices while also addressing surrounding community needs. In this workspace, we would use our unique experiences to engage and teach the community, while also allowing us to be our authentic selves without hesitation. “Thriving cannot happen without a community that is deeply invested in racial uplift” (Love, 2019, p. 65).

*Authentic self.* Black and brown library workers struggle to bring their whole selves to work (Almeida, 2021; Bryant *et al.*, 2019; Gonzalez-Smith, 2014). We feel that identities and values that accompany the authentic self would be encouraged in a supportive community.

Gonzalez-Smith (2014) tackles how personal values clash with organizational culture when BIPOC librarians are employed in a predominately White profession. This research also examined how individual experiences with racial identity and ethnic identity impact one’s ability to relate with values held by an institution. BIPOC library workers rely on emotional labor to communicate their authentic selves in addition to “being seen as a professional . . . connecting to our communities and users, and being aware of structures of privilege and oppression” (Bryant *et al.*, 2019, p. 819).

Almieda (2021) found that when she created a culture where students are seen as “whole people” she could expect them to use her library as their authentic self. By investing in BIPOC librarians, and in this case students, the authentic self is embraced when whole selves are accepted and a community effort is made.

We feel that if BIPOC library workers were embedded in a similar supportive community, sharing our authentic self would automatically be comforting rather than burdensome when engaging with others.

*Impacts on the community.* The system of higher education was not built with a focus on BIPOC student success, and frequently the burden of failure is placed on students rather than the system.

Within academia, institutional factors impact the rate at which BIPOC students attain degrees in higher education in comparison to their White peers. Ajayi *et al.* (2021) argue that BIPOC students leave institutions primarily due to ill fit of the institution, and that institutions should address this by building “a community of support and increase belongingness” by hiring a diverse employee cohort to retain BIPOC students. In this instance, a network of BIPOC can connect minoritized students with resources that enhance their education and personal development. Additionally, Quinonez *et al.* (2021, p. 258),



emphasize that when underrepresented students in higher education are provided with the similar supportive tools as BIPOC library workers, their sense of “belongingness” increases. This, in turn, validates their presence and fosters connections to a supportive community.

A BIPOC workforce embraced by a supportive community would be empowered to influence all pockets of the library, specifically leadership. BIPOC leadership would have the authority to dictate diversity in programming, the (physical) space and collections. Also, we would be more likely to push boundaries for change with a BIPOC workforce to “back us up.”

### *Theme 3: handling trauma*

Although we both came into our interactive interviews with an asset and strength-based mindset, we found ourselves struggling to stay on track and instead diverting into needs-based or deficit-thinking territories. During our interviews, we noticed how frequently we reverted to talking about the challenges we currently face as BIPOC librarians and how we feel burdened with doing diversity work with little or virtually no support. This sentiment aligns with the observation that the “marginalized library worker is subject to inequities, while the White/heteronormative worker has the luxury of choosing whether or not to engage or interrogate inequities” (Ferretti, 2020, p. 142). Throughout our exercise, we struggled to “practice what we preached.”

We believe that our inability to stay completely focused on an asset-based mindset is unsurprising because we still had to reckon with our racialized histories. Completely putting aside and disregarding past and current traumas can be counterintuitive or perhaps even harmful—in fact, doing so would be analogous to celebratory multiculturalism efforts that fail to treat diversity work as difficult work that is grounded in restoration and reparations. We found that applying an asset-based framework while acknowledging and engaging with librarianship’s legacy of racial discrimination only strengthens our deep understanding of why we even pursued this exercise and study in the first place. Hudson (2016) expressed that the term “diversity” in the LIS profession is used as short-hand in discussions of difference—although problematic, it has remained the default framework for discussions revolving around race. As such, the responsibility of solving the “diversity problem” or the “accessibility problem” has been assigned to diversity committees, human resources units, and upper administration.

## **Observations**

### *Limitations*

While we identified themes as part of our interactive interviews, we also identified limitations. Although we firmly believe that collaborative autoethnography is a powerful method for collecting a pool of unique data, we also recognize how it can conflict with the asset-based model. We found that the intrusion of past trauma impedes the flow and exchange of ideas. We also reckon with complications raised by internalized racism.

Collaborative autoethnography has its share of criticism due to non-accountability, non-representativeness, and non-generalizability (Rituparna and Uekusa, 2020, pp. 388-389). Fully freeing ourselves from self-indulgence and narcissism was near impossible because we entered the project with the notion that a fully BIPOC staffed library can be a solution to combat DEIA issues in librarianship. When autoethnographers confront their inner trauma, there is a higher likelihood of subjectivity and selectivity when analyzing data. Although we used collaborative autoethnography to co-create “truths,” certain “truths” can only be tapped by individual researchers and their unique lived experiences (Schultz, 2017). Thus, it is impossible to ignore the radical subjectivity of the individual researcher—specifically how

these perspectives can conflate when we came together to consolidate and present our collective stories and findings (Dauphinee, 2010).

As we continued to interview one another with an asset-based mindset, we found ourselves revisiting past struggles and current challenges. Not having conducted an autoethnography before, we struggled to completely avoid deficit thinking and realized that asset-based thinking is “hard work.” Although we could not sustain asset-based thinking throughout our interviews, we persisted and successfully re-imagined a full BIPOC library workforce as a force for change.

We cannot assert that an all-BIPOC library will solve institutional or systemic problems and we cannot assert that each individual is culturally proficient or shares the same core ideals. But we can emphasize that many BIPOC have been conflicted with internalized racism. David *et al.* (2019, p. 1060) discusses Pyke’s (2010) definition of internalized racism as “the individual inculcation of racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society about one’s racial group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for one’s race and/or oneself.” In a post-interview context, we identify internalized racism as a major obstacle for mitigating trauma in our fully BIPOC staffed library. Nevertheless, we intentionally did not discuss the impact of internalized racism during our interviews since it would have diluted our efforts at asset-based thinking.

Through studies of the professional and personal life experiences of academic BIPOC librarians, racial identity influenced how they viewed themselves, their ability to overcome internalized racism and to look to one another for support (Curry, 1994; Gonzalez-Smith, 2014; Hathcock, 2015; Swanson *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, when we interviewed one another, we found commonalities in our identities and experiences in the dominant White culture of our institutions.

Despite challenges posed by internal trauma and internalized racism, we still see value in co-creating imagined workspaces grounded in asset-based thinking. Although our ideas for developing a more inclusive and supportive workplace uniquely represents Janis and Ben’s wishes, we believe that the process itself carries a lot of merit that can extend its reach to other BIPOC librarians.

### *Our process*

The process of reflection is invaluable and a key takeaway.

Coming together and having the space to reflect was instrumental to restorative imagination. Early in our time together, we realized our study placed a lot of emphasis on the process, so we intentionally created space to reflect. We ended up valuing the space just as much as the writing itself.

First, the process of reflecting on our personal experiences was more revealing than our curated list of elements that make up our “perfect” library (i.e. non-hierarchical organizational structures, increased opportunities to connect with BIPOC students, etc.). We saw how external forces (i.e. vendors, the complex university ecosystems, etc.) and factors dictated how our discussions unfolded. By focusing on the assets and experiences of BIPOC library workers (as well as our personal views on justice) our ideas to improve diversity in librarianship expanded—unfettered by our creativity and enthusiasm.

Second, through the use of asset-based thinking, our focus on the strengths of positive energy grew exponentially, scaffolding new ideas from preceding ones. As we became more comfortable in the euphoria of asset-based thinking, our desire to see a fully BIPOC library workforce became validated. The increased good feelings associated with asset-based thinking motivated us to steer clear of deficit-based thinking because the associated negative feelings held us back.

Third, we conducted literature searches as part of our process. Understanding that our collaborative autoethnography centered our unique and personal voices, we found it also important to link concepts from the field and outside of LIS.

Fourth, we observed our process while experiencing it. As we accelerated to the end of our study, our continued reflections allowed us to pinpoint common themes and experiences that exemplified asset-based thinking.

## Conclusion

Throughout our work, we felt a tendency to critique our method, while the most valuable part of our work was *the process*. Our autoethnographic exercise reminded us of the importance of critically reflecting on researchers' role in knowledge production (Sawyer and Norris, 2015; Martin and Garza, 2020), while also elevating the value and understanding of our shared experiences (Ngunjiri *et al.*, 2010, p. 13; Price-Dennis *et al.*, 2017).

We do not recommend embedding our asset-based exercise within organizations with few or solo BIPOC library workers because the inherent trauma would be theirs to bear alone. Although asset-based thinking is, by design, more restorative and "feel good," confronting trauma is still a key step for BIPOC librarians to fully imagine a more promising future. We believe that it is impossible to imagine an inclusive library workplace without doing some engagement with librarianship's legacy of racial injustices.

For leadership to fully see their BIPOC staff as assets within their respective organizations, they must accept that problems uniquely raised by BIPOC staff are real. It is up to employers and/or employees to come together to recognize their BIPOC assets as conduits for transformative change within our dominant library workplace cultures. At the very bare minimum, leadership should invest in their BIPOC librarians, ensuring that they can easily participate in professional and supportive networks that interweave and lift BIPOC voices (i.e. ARL's Kaleidoscope Program, the BCALA, Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association, etc.).

Inserting ourselves into an asset-based mindset was not easy. There were times when we did not see nor feel joy in this process. "It wasn't all lollipops and rainbows," and we actively struggled to distance ourselves from traumatic and deficit-thinking. At times it was hard and painful work. But now as we look back, we feel that using a collaborative autoethnography (grounded in interactive interviews and estrangement autoethnography methods) was a meaningful way to reflect on the challenges BIPOC library workers face.

Pronouncing the BIPOC identity as an asset is, in many regards, a form of resiliency against systems of oppression. Imagining spaces where BIPOC staff thrive is forthrightly an appreciation of what can happen when power dynamics are redistributed more equitably and marginalized voices are amplified to the fullest extent possible. Asset-based perspectives allow BIPOC individuals to claim their workplace instead of playing along to performative "solutions" that fail to engage in meaningful progress and reparations. We hope that our study inspires BIPOC librarians to embrace positivity in order to see the possibilities that lie ahead.

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### Further reading

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