

## Diversity matters? Rethinking diversity in libraries

ShinJoung Yeo and James R. Jacobs, *Radical Reference* [<http://radicalreference.info>]

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“Rather than stressing the importance of diversity and inclusion, as do most multiculturalists, I think that significantly more emphasis should be placed on the social and political construction of white supremacy and the dispensation of white hegemony. The reality-distortion field known as "whiteness" needs to be identified as a cultural disposition and ideology linked to specific political, social, and historical arrangements.”

--Peter McLaren, *Revolutionary Multiculturalism: Pedagogies of Dissent for the New Millennium*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997. P.8.

Today American Libraries symbolize democracy and intellectual freedom.<sup>1</sup> Despite the dominant notion that librarianship at its core is neutral (both in terms of politics and collections), the library as a social, educational and cultural institution has never been isolated from its political and social climate or historical context. As with many other institutions, the library did not evolve outside of the context of U.S history. American history is replete with examples of genocide of Native Indian populations, imperialism, slavery, segregation, racism and Jim Crow laws, white supremacy, oppression of women, etc.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it is not an accident that the profession has been lacking in minority library workers, in services for people of color and the economically disadvantaged, and has set up systems of knowledge organization that are nothing short of imperialistic.

It is a well-known fact that the library profession has historically been a predominantly white female profession.<sup>3</sup> However, as the U.S population becomes increasingly diverse, library communities have come to recognize the importance of recruiting library workers from diverse ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds to reflect their own constituencies. There are ongoing initiatives that focus on recruitment of minority librarians and staff. Many libraries have set up diversity committees, and some even provide residential programs for minorities. These initiatives and programs are important and necessary for creating diverse environments.

However, diversity means little if there is no understanding of how the dominant culture and ideas are articulated within our institutions and our daily library practices; and what's worse is, at this time, there is little questioning on dominant ideas and values going on in our libraries or library degree programs. As Peter McLaren, Professor at UCLA's Graduate School of Education stated,

“Diversity that somehow constitutes itself as a harmonious ensemble of benign cultural spheres is a conservative and liberal model of multiculturalism that, in my mind, deserves to be jettisoned because, when we try to make culture an undisturbed space of harmony and agreement where social relations exist within cultural forms of uninterrupted accords we subscribe to a form of social amnesia in which we forget that all knowledge is forged in histories that are played out in the field of social antagonisms.”<sup>4</sup>

One must ask oneself if it would be possible to really achieve diversity without challenging our racist, homophobic and sexist consciousnesses that are so deeply imbedded that we don't even recognize them? If we are blind to our unconscious biases, then striving for numerically diverse organizations is building on a foundation of sand.

Ironically, while libraries discuss the recruitment of library workers from diverse backgrounds, common library tools and practices contribute to the repression of diversity rather than its promotion. Take subject headings for example.

Subject headings are one of the librarian's and researcher's most powerful conceptual tools. We use them so often that we rarely look at them with a critical eye; and therefore, do not recognize how they are biased,

disempowering to certain groups of people and interpret history from the dominant Western perspective. When you search your library catalog we recommend taking a careful look at the subject headings. You may be surprised at what's there – and what's NOT there. What will be found are some terms that are poorly representative of the subject, classified and interpreted by the dominant culture or completely misrepresentative of the subject.

A typical example of how classification systems are Eurocentric can be seen in the Dewey Decimal system (DDC)'s representation of religion. In the DDC, religion falls into the 200s. However, 90% of this area (200-289) is concerned with Christianity and its derivations while only the last 10% of the 200s (290-299) are set aside for other and comparative religions.<sup>5</sup> Michael McLaughlin, in his article, "The need for American Indian librarians in the Native American Time," points out that both the Library of Congress (LC) and the DDC systems inadequately address the histories and contemporary realities of American Indians. McLaughlin states that, "neither system adequately addresses the histories and contemporary realities of American Indians. For example, neither system has a category for 'tribal sovereignty' and as a result even a book entitled 'Tribal Sovereignty' might be classified under 'Civil Rights – United States' or classed as a subtopic of 'United States – History' but not as a concept of government."<sup>6</sup> This is but one example among many imperialist, sexist, culturally biased phrases that are used by LC or DDC. Plenty of literature on this issue has been written,<sup>7</sup> but amazingly, very few libraries have actually put these critiques into practice.

Sanford Berman, retired head cataloger at Hennepin County Library (HCL) system in Minneapolis MN, is a laudable exception. For over 30 years, Berman has tirelessly advocated for more accessible and inclusive subject headings – not to mention more humane library policies toward the poor and homeless. Not only did he send countless subject heading recommendations to the Library of Congress but he also created local subject terms for the HCL catalog that were easily accessible and understandable to diverse groups of users.<sup>8</sup> We believe that librarians have an ethical obligation to provide voices for the oppressed that are often invisible in our society. Berman understood how classification could empower users and give them their own voices rather than imposing dominant ones on them.

Some might say that they are only words, but one has to understand, language carries power and power is exercised within language. Few library workers understand the underlying inequalities inherent in our classification systems or are willing to challenge them. The silence among library workers may be the result of not recognizing the history of oppression or not understanding how history affects our consciousness and guides our current and future practices and policies.

The most common way to evaluate diversity in librarianship is to quantitatively analyze the field. Keith Curry Lance in his recent *Library Journal* article<sup>9</sup> looked at the racial characteristics of our field compared to the racial characteristics of the US as a whole. Lance concluded that, compared to the racial makeup of the US, the library was not doing too badly in terms of diversity. The problem with his article, like the many others of this ilk, is that, while he did mention education, Lance did not address at all why minority groups have to struggle with the inherent unequal access to education and why minorities' numbers are higher as library assistants compared to librarians. In addition, his number crunching did not take into account the disparities seen within specific sub-fields of librarianship – special collections, reference, government documents, technical services, access services.

The American Library Association (ALA) and Association of Research Libraries (ARL) have kept statistics about ethnic and racial diversity for years.<sup>10</sup> However, neither of these organizations has broken those statistics down into the various sub-fields either. These statistics do nothing to show the ghettoization of certain subfields within librarianship.

Julie Grob, Special Collections Librarian at the University of Houston Libraries, wrote a rare article on this topic and addressed why historically, Rare Books and Manuscripts (RBMS) has been homogeneous and white dominant – a trend that continues to this day. Grob's article "RBMS, special collections, and the

challenge of diversity: the Road to the diversity action plan”<sup>11</sup> explains that the RBMS field evolved from wealthy white collectors purchasing the contents of important British and American private libraries. Those collections would later become major rare book collections at American university libraries. Grob goes on to state how certain fields within the library are historically white and continue to be so. She concludes that much more needs to be done in terms of recruitment of diverse populations.

When attending library meetings or conferences, it is instructive to look around and see the ethnic, racial, and gender characteristics of the group and compare it to who is actively participating – as well as which groups are not represented or are silent. We hope you will be able to see the normalized whiteness of your community. We should strive to recruit more diverse populations into the library community, but, as stated before, we have to be able to see beyond mere numbers and recruitment into the profession. While recruitment is important, it is much more crucial to engage in and create space for dialog to challenge our consciousness and dominant ideas within the community – however difficult or uncomfortable this may be. Many libraries hold library workshops or invite speakers to talk on a topic of diversity, but these one-time activities will not be truly effective unless they can contextualize issues of diversity within everyday practices. We in the library field, as one of the primary cultural institutions, need to hold ourselves well above society’s standards for diversity.

The library is a place where conflicting ideas co-exist, where people can discover undiscovered knowledge, and where the powerless can be empowered through access to knowledge. At the same time, the library can be a place that maintains hegemonic social and cultural order by collecting, distributing and organizing hegemonic knowledge. Controlling knowledge has historically been a way of controlling people.

When one understands that the role of the library is a double-edged sword, diversity comes to hold a vital place. However, from the dominant culture’s perspective, diversity in libraries is a threat because it challenges normalized knowledge, ideas, and practices.

We often perceive diversity as creating an harmonious and tolerant environment. This is only scratching the surface of diversity without exposing our biases within us. Library communities need to unlearn racism, sexism, homophobia and relearn what we have learned. No matter how much we try to create a more so called “diverse” library community, without unlearning and exposing our own racist thinking we can never create a truly diverse environment. The library should be a place where we not only facilitate the education of our users, but also of ourselves. Diversity is not an end but a consequence of transforming our consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> See Code of Ethics of the American Library Association  
[<http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/codeofethics/codeethics.htm> accessed 1/10/2006]

<sup>2</sup> See Howard Zinn, *Peoples’ History of the United States: 1492 - present*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999. In addition, E.J. Josey and Eric Moon give broader perspective on diversity and the none-too-distant history of the American Library Association (ALA) in terms of ALA’s development during the US civil rights movement of the 1960s. For example, Josey points out that it was not until 1964 that ALA was challenged to end its tolerance of segregated state library associations. See, Josey, E.J. and Ismail Abdullahi. “Why diversity in American libraries. *Library Management*. 2002. 23(1/2). 10-17. See also, Kister, Kenneth, *Eric Moon: The Life and Library Times*. Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland & Co., c2002. Especially pertinent to this discussion is Chapter 9: “Exploding the silent subject: libraries and race in postwar America.”

<sup>3</sup> The US Census Bureau’s Census 2000 EEO Data Tool, 86% White, 6% Black, 3.3% Hispanic, 3.1% Asian, 0.4% American Indian or Alaskan Native. Of those, 82.6% are Female.  
[<http://www.census.gov/eo2000/> accessed 1/11/06]

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<sup>4</sup> Peter McLaren from Steinberg, Shirley. "Critical multiculturalism and democratic schooling: An Interview with Peter McLaren and Joe Kincheloe." In Christine Sleeter and Peter McLaren (eds). *Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the Politics of difference*. New York: SUNY Press. 1997.

<sup>5</sup> The Dewey Decimal Classification summary can be viewed OCLC's Web site. [<http://www.oclc.org/dewey/resources/summaries/default.htm> accessed 1/11/06]

<sup>6</sup> McLaughlin, Michael. "The need for American Indian librarians." *Native American Times*. 10/12/2005. Reprinted in *Versed: the Bulletin of the Office for Diversity American Library Association*. November – December, 2005. [<http://www.ala.org/ala/diversity/versed/versedbackissues/november2005ab/needforAllibrarians.htm> accessed 1/10/06].

<sup>7</sup> For a list of works critiquing LCSH, see the appendix of Olson, Hope A. (1996). *Between control and chaos: An ethical perspective on authority control*. In *Authority Control in the 21st Century: An Invitational Conference*, March 31 - April 1, 1996, Proceedings. [<http://digitalarchive.oclc.org/da/ViewObject.jsp?fileid=0000003520:000000091795&reqid=354> Accessed 1/11/06]. Also see Professor Olson's list of publications on her Web site [<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/SOIS/directory/olson2.htm> Accessed 1/11/06].

<sup>8</sup> For more on Sanford Berman, please see the Sanford Berman Web site. The site includes a biography, bibliography with full-text access to many of his writings from the 1950s – present. The site also includes Berman's seminal tract, *Prejudices and antipathies: a tract on the LC subject heads concerning people*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1993. [<http://www.sanfordberman.org/> Accessed 1/10/06]

<sup>9</sup> Lance, Keith Curry. "Racial and Ethnic Diversity of U.S. Library Workers." *American Libraries* May 2005: 41-43. [[http://www.lrs.org/documents/workforce/Racial\\_and\\_Ethnic.pdf](http://www.lrs.org/documents/workforce/Racial_and_Ethnic.pdf) accessed 1/8/06]

<sup>10</sup> ALA's current demographic survey asks only 6 questions and does not ask for principal area of work. The survey does collect ALA member number, but it is unclear whether member information will be collated within the survey. See ALA's Office of Research Statistics [<http://www.ala.org/ala/ors/researchstatistics.htm> Accessed 1/10/06] and ARL's Statistics and Measurements Program [<http://www.arl.org/stats/arlstat/index.html> Accessed 1/10/06].

<sup>11</sup> Grob, Julie. "RBMS, Special Collections, and the Challenge of Diversity: the Road to the Diversity Action Plan." *RBM: a Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 4(2) (Fall 2003): 74-107. [<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/rbm/backissuesvol4no2/Grob.pdf> accessed 1/8/06]