A New Vocabulary for Inclusive Librarianship: Applying Whiteness Theory to Our Profession

Isabel R Espinal

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Discussions on ethnicity in the library profession tend to focus only on ethnic minorities. This chapter proposes a new way to talk about inclusiveness, by bringing in whiteness theory, a concept from anthropology and cultural studies.
This chapter introduces a new conceptual framework, from the fields of anthropology and cultural studies, into ethnic librarianship: whiteness studies. I use the term “ethnic librarianship” to mean the work and issues of people of color vis-à-vis libraries and librarians. Approximately thirty years ago, librarians of color started forming ethnic caucuses within, as supplements to, or as protests against, the American Library Association. Among these were REFORMA: The National Association to Promote Library Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking; the Black Caucus of the American Library Association; the Asian Pacific American Library Association; the American Indian Library Association; and the Chinese American Library Association. These caucuses have done an incredible amount of work with very few resources. They have provided scholarships for people of color to enter the profession, mentoring to incoming and continuing librarians, a space within librarianship for librarians of color, training and development for librarians of color, training and development concerning issues of library services to communities of color, literary and professional awards that recognize writers of color and librarians of color, and so forth.

Yet the North American library scene continues to have enormous gaps in numbers of librarians of color as well as in services to communities of color. The latest large-scale attempt to address these issues was initiated under the leadership of Elizabeth Martínez when she was executive director of the American Library Association. She instituted the Spectrum Initiative, a nationwide $1.5 million project that provides scholarships to fifty students of color each year for the three-year period that funding is available. Another recent nationwide effort culminated in 1997 with the institution of a diversity officer, a first in the history of the American Library Association.

Spectrum. Diversity. Ethnic. People of color. Latinos. Spanish Speaking. Black. Chinese. Indian. These are some of the words we are currently using to address the cultural inequities in librarianship. But what’s missing from our vocabulary list? Notice that there is no mention of whites or whiteness. It is assumed, for example, that people of color means people of non-white color. White is taken not to be a color. Also, white is assumed not to be ethnic. Please don’t get me wrong: I’m not here to accuse the library ethnic caucuses or the Spectrum Initiative or any other group that I have mentioned of reverse racism or of denying whites their rights, as some have done. Quite the contrary! I hope to show in this introduction to the concept of whiteness in librarianship that alleging reverse racism is a typical white cultural practice that is fundamentally racist. What I do want to say by bringing up the topic of whiteness in librarianship is that unless we address whiteness, unless we identify and name it, many of the
problems that plague us collectively and as individual librarians of color will continue. The theme of REFORMA’s second national conference is The Power of Language. I hope to show how powerful the language of whiteness studies can be in furthering our work as Latina/o librarians.

It is imperative for those of us in the field of librarianship who are working to overturn the racial domination of whites in the profession to apply whiteness theory anthropologically to the profession of librarianship. Indeed, it is time for those of us who are active in the ethnic caucuses of the profession to admit that overturning racial domination is what we are doing. We need to make explicit how this profession in the United States, and perhaps worldwide, has been defined by whiteness. We also need to examine whiteness in librarianship vis-à-vis other professions. Currently there are crises and problems in librarianship that have been articulated in terms of the profession’s response to diversity. The most significant problems are often expressed as librarianship’s inadequate response to the changing cultural and racial demographics of its clientele and its very low numbers of people of color in its ranks and seeming inability to attract them to the profession. These crises and problems stem from the field’s very constitution as a white profession and cannot be solved or even tackled until the facts of whiteness in librarianship and libraries have been exposed in a systematic way.

Conversely, applying whiteness theory to librarianship can make a contribution to whiteness studies and anthropology in that it allows for an examination of how whiteness is played out specifically, by uncovering behaviors of individuals, practices of institutions, and histories of groups. There are particularities to librarianship and libraries that help to highlight specific aspects of whiteness. One example is the predominance of women in the profession, which can help us examine how sex and gender operate in relation to whiteness and what impact affirmative action has had in libraries, both on people of color and on whites.

This suggests a new anthropological approach: “Ethnographers” of whiteness, who are living in situations where whiteness manifests itself, in cultures of whiteness, can provide a unique perspective on the discipline of anthropology. Although these ethnographers may not be professionally trained as anthropologists, they, as are traditional anthropologists, are living in a culture different from their home cultures and need to uncover the principles of the “foreign,” in this case white, culture.

The approach to whiteness used in this chapter is elaborated by Dr. H. Enoch Page, a professor of anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, in a seminar called “The Anthropology of Whiteness.” It is also supported by both the readings assigned in the seminar and many found through library research. I took this seminar in the hopes of answering some of the questions and doubts I had about the way we talk about and even think about cultural and racial differences in librarianship. I found that there is much that we can apply from the ideas
presented in the seminar and the readings, and I am happy to be able to share my insights with others in my profession. I will identify the various elements of study we followed in the seminar and discuss their application to the profession of librarianship.

**Defining Whiteness, Whiteness Theory, Sensate Theory, White Cultural Practices, and White Public Space**

Because many people in the field of librarianship as well as in the field of anthropology may not be familiar with some of the terms used in this paper, I will start off with some definitions. For Latina/os these definitions may be particularly useful because our cultures do not recognize the same definitions. Angel Oquendo writes, “The particular system of race-consciousness that prevails in the United States is foreign to the Latino community in the United States and so is the conceptual apparatus that corresponds to that system, including the peculiar notions of blackness and whiteness” (1995. Accessed June 12, 2001 from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe on the World Wide Web: http://lexis-nexis.com/universe). However, I would argue that as Latinos in this country, who have lived an alternative racial experience from the dualistic black-white divide, we are in a good position to help point out these definitions and indeed have been pointing out the contradictions of this system for some time.

I’d like to elaborate on what is meant by whiteness and the importance of this word. North American mainstream—white—culture is not accustomed to looking at whiteness or recognizing its very existence. In contemporary everyday speech and written white discourse it is indeed considered impolite and racist to discuss such a concept. Writers and scholars of whiteness studies make an important contribution to the discourse on race by showing us how and why we can talk about whiteness, race, and racism. Writers such as Charles Mills, Ruth Frankenberg, Angel Oquendo, and H. Enoch Page explain that race is not a biological fact but a social fact, a social construction. Not long ago, mainstream white discourse did posit that race was a biological fact, a view that scholars of color such as W.E.B. Du Bois were critical of and that activists of color, such as Martin Luther King Jr., fought politically. This white discourse has been called essentialist racism because it constructed and promoted the view that there was an essential difference between whites and non-whites, a difference they were born with. Essentialist racism has been repudiated in white public discourse, but it has not completely disappeared. Indeed, writes one whiteness scholar:

Essentialist racism has left a legacy that continues to mark discourses on race difference in a range of ways. First, precisely because it proposed race as a significant axis of difference,
essentialist racism remains the benchmark against which other discourses on race are articulated. In other words, the articulation and deployment of essentialist racism approximately five hundred years ago marks the moment when, so to speak, race was made into a difference and simultaneously into a rationale for racial inequality. It is in ongoing response to that moment that movements and individuals—for or against the empowerment of people of color—continue to articulate analyses of difference and sameness with respect to race. Thus for example, when the women I interviewed insisted that ‘we are all the same under the skin,’ within what I have described as a color-evasive and power-evasive discursive repertoire, they did so partly in response to essentialist racism...essentialist racism—particularly intentional, explicit racial discrimination—remains for most white people...paradigmatic of racism. This, as I have argued renders structural and institutional dimensions of racism less easily conceptualized and apparently less noteworthy. (Frankenberg 1993,139)

Kamala Visweswaran puts it this way: “In other words, to say that race has no biological meaning is not to say that race lacks meaning” (1998, 77). Du Bois has been one of the most eloquent writers on this point:

[S]ince the 15th century these ancestors of mine and their other descendents have had a common history; have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory... The physical bond is least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this discrimination binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas. It is this unity that draws me to Africa. (quoted in Visweswaran 1998, 78)

Likewise, whiteness as used in this study is not a biological reality or construct but rather a social and ideological one. Dr. Page, in his detailed definition of racism, presents this definition of whiteness:

As a generative principle of racism, “ideological whiteness” refers to a dual behavioral process entailing enactments of identity formation and resource access legitimation, both of which were practices once overtly recognized as aspects of “white supremacy,” but which now may be more subtly and covertly reproduced as an observable and routine set of implicitly prescriptive, but explicitly
disavowed, white supremacist beliefs and practices to which all who identify as “white” (or who behave as “whitened”) are expected to adhere—especially white males—if they wish to maintain their own racial standing as members of these two privileged white groups and assert their negotiable right to privileged resource access.

Whiteness may become a biological reality only insofar as the embodiment of whiteness as a social category leads to biological responses. Whiteness, however, is not an abstract concept; we infer it through people’s behaviors, not by what may or may not be inside their heads. In lectures, Dr. Page defines it as a “behavioral repertoire,” the behaviors he calls “white cultural practices.” Sensate theory of whiteness, a complete elaboration of which is beyond the scope of this chapter, delineates how whiteness becomes embodied. Sensate theory, as explained by Dr. Page, maintains that the only way we can know reality is through our sensory apparatus. The combination of our behaviors and our sensations leads to the sensate basis of self-embodiment and racial identity, affecting each one of us who live in this racialized society on an individual feeling level.

Whiteness, however, is also very much about how collective actions are defined and in many ways disguised. The concept of “white public space” helps us understand this:

White public space exists where controlled access to material and immaterial resources is managed by those who attempt to govern mass perception and the social construction of reality. . . . It is a highly politicized and shifting symbolic material dimension in which the dominant racial group routinely benefits from the governmental or corporate control that it exercises over information. . . . It entails an array of managed symbolic and material spaces that may be conquered, acquired, deployed, extended or retained, partly through coercion and partly through deception, but it more often endures through the routine bureaucratic production and dissemination of mass produced information. . . . In white public space, things of racial significance are made to seem fair, just, legitimate, and simplistically obvious when the embodied experiences of racial targets scream that they clearly are not.

Not only can I, as a librarian of color, relate the definition of whiteness and white public space to my profession, but I also notice the use of library “buzzwords” in both of these definitions, words such as access, information, bureaucratic, routine, and public. Although it is not likely Dr. Page was thinking of libraries specifically when writing these definitions, I do not think the overlap with library terminology is coincidental. I would like to posit that the traditional
North American library institution is an example of a white institution and white public space.

Dr. Page has stated in his lectures and writings that it is important to study whiteness from a black perspective. He has also noted that the majority of writings on whiteness that have received critical attention in mainstream academic venues have been written by whites. I do not know what definition of “black” Dr. Page was using in this statement, but I will assume a broad one and take as “black” any perspective that is non-white. By this I do not mean to oversimplify the issues, nor to negate or obliterate Latino, Asian, Native American, or other non-white perspectives. On the contrary, I wish to state openly and clearly that my non-white perspective is a Latina perspective, one of many Latina perspectives. As Dr. Page’s statements suggest, the concept of whiteness, although seemingly new in the mainstream culture and especially in academia, is not so new in the academic writings of people of color nor in the popular cultures of people of color.

David Roediger elaborates on this point:

But few Americans have even considered the idea that African Americans are extremely knowledgeable about whites and whiteness. In the mainstream American culture, and certainly in intellectual circles, a rough and unproductive division of labor exists where the claiming of expert knowledge and commonsense wisdom on race are concerned. White writers have long been positioned as the leading and most dispassionate investigators of the lives, values, and abilities of people of color. White writing about whiteness is rarer, with discussions of what it means to be human standing in for consideration of how racial identity influences white lives. Writers of color, and most notably African American writers, are cast as providing insight, often presumed to be highly subjective, of what it is like to be a “minority.” Lost in this destructive shuffle is the fact that from folktales onward African Americans have been among the nation’s keenest students of white consciousness and white behavior. (1998, 4)

Similarly, I would like to suggest that the concept of whiteness is not new in the cultures and discourses of librarians of color. I expect that much of what I am saying is not new to librarians of color. What probably is new is the framing of these issues in this theoretical apparatus. I also suspect that there are many instances and patterns of whiteness that I have not covered or even alluded to here but that other librarians of color have either exposed in writings or have experienced. This brings me to an exciting possibility for this line of study in terms of anthropological and ethnographic methods. My suggestion is for those readers who are either librarians of color or library patrons of color (or race cognizant/race
traitor whites)\(^5\) to add to this ethnography of whiteness in librarianship by contributing their own examples and experiences. This method may very well subvert the power of the (traditionally white) anthropologist, as well as the very notion of the professional anthropologist.

### Conducting a Literature Search for the Term “Whiteness” as a Subject or Keyword in the Professional Library Literature

That whiteness has not been addressed as a topic in librarianship and library studies is borne out in a review of the library literature. In December 1999 I conducted a search in the library literature section of the online database Firstsearch, which produced no hits on either “whiteness” or “white privilege” as keywords in the article title, subject, or content fields. However, a search in Sociological Abstracts (in February 2001) yielded 92 records with the word *whiteness* in the title and 214 with *whiteness* in at least one field in the record.

### Examining Areas of Librarianship Where Whiteness and White Cultural Practices Are Factors

#### Racial Make-up of Staff

Evan St. Lifer and Corinne Nelson (1997) report that, according to American Library Association data, Latinos represented 1.8 percent of the profession in 1985 and 1.8 percent in 1991; blacks, 6.1 percent in 1985 and 6.28 percent in 1991; Asians 3.4 percent in 1985 and 3.85 percent in 1991; and whites, 88.5 percent in 1985 and 87.7 percent in 1991. Deborah R. Hollis (1996) has compared the percentage of people of color in librarianship to other professions where women predominate—nursing and teaching—and found that the percentage in the library field was the lowest, 14.4 percent, compared to 16.2 percent in nursing and 16.2 percent in teaching.

#### Management of Libraries

When we look at the managerial level, more striking underrepresentation figures are found for African American, Latina/o, Asian American, and Native American managers. For example, at present there is only one Latina who is the director of an elite ARL (Association of Research Libraries) library, a group of more than 120 libraries. Also, Al Milo, moderator of the
REFORMANET electronic list, has compiled lists of public library directors who are Latinos and has commented on REFORMANET on how few there are.

Services to and Attitudes Toward Non-Whites and Defining Library Service as a Service for Whites

Non-librarian members of REFORMA are sometimes in a good position to elicit information about the behaviors and opinions of mainstream librarians regarding Latinos, whereas REFORMA librarians may not be privy to such behaviors and opinions. At a recent library conference in the South, a white librarian told a Spanish-language book vendor: “It’s useless. Those people don’t read.” Another non-librarian REFORMA member, who works as a library advocacy director for a nonprofit organization, heard a similar comment from a librarian about Latinos in Northern California. The advocacy director, a light-skinned Puerto Rican, had not made her non-white status known to the librarian prior to this comment. When she told the librarian that she was Puerto Rican and that the librarian should stop making racist comments, the librarian exhibited extreme shock and surprise. The librarian obviously had been trying to engage in the white cultural practice that Christine Sleeter calls “white racial bonding,” defined as interactions that have the purpose of affirming a common stance on race-related issues, legitimating particular interpretations of oppressed groups, and drawing we-they boundaries. These communication patterns may consist of inserts into conversations, race-related “asides” in conversations, strategic eye-contact, and jokes. Often they are so short and subtle that they may seem harmless. (1994, 261)

When asked if libraries are in the service of whiteness, Dr. Page answers in the affirmative and offers libraries’ classification and subject headings as the first example:

My question: “Do you think that libraries are in the service of whiteness?”

Dr. Page’s answer: “Oh I don’t think there’s any question about it. The Dewey Decimal system is in the service of whiteness and I don’t think that the Library of Congress system changes the pattern too much. . . . For example: most of the stuff pertaining to my area of study, especially as it regards Black people, is going to be under Black, is going to be under Afro American, is going to be
under Negro, is going to be under Black Americans, is going to be under all these different, diverse subject headings. There is no way in which the Dewey Decimal system or the Library of Congress system puts all of those things in the same place. So you’re going to find it under American Studies, some of it under sociology, some of it somewhere else, and somewhere else. . . . If the Library were working to serve the interest of overcoming whiteness, it would have to say, “We are using the Dewey decimal system or the Library of Congress system, but in addition to that we’re also going to systematize stuff that has not been accessible in the past.” And that would help me a lot. (1999)

Collections

REFORMA, the Black Caucus of ALA, and other groups have focused a lot of their attention through the years on looking at library collections to see how well the collections included materials by non-whites. In the beginning years of these organizations, especially those of the ethnic library caucuses, they too often found that library collections across the country did not include enough materials by non-white authors. Lillian Castillo Speed, head librarian of the Ethnic Studies Library at the University of California, Berkeley, writes that at the beginning of the Chicano movement, mainstream libraries either discarded or did not collect materials from the Chicano perspective. They were considered too political, too ephemeral or too specialized. Chicano libraries in the Southwest were established by students who foresaw the need to document and preserve this information. The same was true for Puerto Rican, Dominican, and other ethnic collections. (REFORMA 2000)

Digital Initiatives

Digital initiatives are all the rage in libraries. Digital libraries are seen as the future of librarianship. Yet many libraries and librarians who have jumped wholeheartedly into digital initiatives are paradoxically quite bound by tradition in their approach and the patterns of the past: the tradition and patterns of whiteness. Many of the studies on the “Digital Divide” are really a continuation of the age-old racial information divide. REFORMA’s Information Technology Committee (ITC) has begun to address this point in a major way with a series of position papers called “REFORMA’s Information Technology Agenda”: 
A number of recent studies reveal that there are disparities in access to telephones, personal computers, and the Internet. These disparities are marked by race, ethnicity, income, education and place of residence. These inequalities signal not only lack of access to technologies but, more fundamentally, access to resources which are becoming critical in today’s society. It is in this larger sense that we refer to a “digital divide” between the haves and the have-nots. The use of high technologies among Latino communities is only now beginning to be investigated. Currently we do not have a demographic profile of Latinos that includes key technology and communication variables. At the national level the “Falling through the Net” series published by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has provided the most useful information. This influential series has noted that there is not only a persistent but an increasing gap in computer and on-line use among Latinos and African Americans. The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute has also made important contributions to our understanding of these issues, especially in the areas of computer ownership and school use. Regional trends are beginning to be tracked by research organizations like the Center for Virtual Research at the University of California, Riverside.

(REFORMA 2000)

Definition of Competencies

What makes a good librarian? We need to look at the established definitions closely to see to what extent a definition is culturally or racially bound.

Measurement of Good Library Service
and Good Libraries

A white cultural practice identified in Dr. Page’s seminar is the practice of maintaining that white reality is the norm. Related to this are the practices of using universalism—allegedly treating everyone the same—to defend whiteness, and perpetuating and applying “pseudo-universalistic notions of standards” (Gabriel 1998, 88). That is, in a white-dominated society, standards are applied and are described as neutral, universal, and true for all people. But in fact the criteria are not universal. They come from a white perspective. In librarianship, an example of this is over-reliance on statistics in the management and funding of libraries. One of the most commonly used statistics in libraries is to count the circulation of materials. Most often this is a count of how many books, videos, CDs, and other materials are checked out of a library in a certain period,
usually by month and then by year. These circulation figures are used for many kinds of comparisons. One of the most common ways in which circulation statistics are used is to compare circulation among different libraries as a measure of a library’s value or importance to a particular community. I would maintain that this type of analysis is indicative of a white cultural practice; it is unfair if not racist. Communities whose libraries have high circulation figures are seen as placing a high value on their libraries, whereas those whose libraries have low circulation figures are seen as not caring about their libraries. Similarly, those libraries with high circulation figures are seen as doing a good job, and those with low circulation figures are seen as doing a poor job. Those of us who have worked in libraries serving non-white communities know that there are reasons for the low or non-use. We also know that what may be considered low use in other communities may not be considered low in our communities because of different lifestyles, leisure time available for reading books, and literacy levels, among other factors. The introduction and use of circulation statistics are attempts to standardize the management of library service, to use a “neutral” measure by which libraries can be compared. But using the ethnographic lens from whiteness studies reveals that this practice is not neutral.

There are likely to be other cases throughout the country in which library circulation figures are used in what ultimately turns out to be a racist way, regardless of intentions to be just. A research survey of how libraries use circulation statistics would make a great contribution to the study of librarianship but is beyond the scope of this paper. I will discuss three cases with which I am familiar to demonstrate why this is an important question and to show whiteness at work in librarianship. In 1997 and 1998, I was the manager of a branch library of a small library system in a small, racially mixed city in southwestern Connecticut, within commuting distance of New York City. The branch was in a neighborhood that had high concentrations of African Americans and Latinos and growing numbers of Asians in addition to whites. Many of the residents had low incomes. I took the job of manager knowing that that particular branch library had more than once been slated to be closed down by the majority white city council, the majority white library board, and the all-white library system administration. I had read in the local newspaper and heard from librarians and politicians that the major reason for wanting to close down the library was low usage and that the low usage was demonstrated in the library’s low circulation figures vis-à-vis the other branch in the system and other branch libraries in Connecticut. One day, in a meeting of library managers, I criticized the use of circulation statistics as a way to judge how well my library was doing. I talked about how my previous job of managing a library in an almost all-white, middle-class neighborhood in a nearby town showed me that circulation numbers were culturally and socially relative, not a universal or neutral measure. I said that from my experiences in the two branches I might have a person from one neighborhood who checks out ten books per week, whereas in the other neighborhood a person
might check out one book per week; yet, in both cases, as a librarian, I could feel equally successful. A white male manager in the meeting took issue with my comparison. Insisting that what I was proposing was pure nonsense and illogical, he said, “Don’t tell me that one equals ten. One does not equal ten!” Others in the room either defended his point of view or were silent. I felt discredited, as if I were negating the “truth” of the statistics. But I know I was experiencing the rigidity of a white perspective; there was no room for discussion of who makes these rules (white people), whose standards are used (white standards), and whose interests are served by those rules and standards (the interests of whites and whiteness). Yet, from my own experience of having worked in these two neighborhoods that were culturally very different, I saw that the circulation numbers were not a product of how well I was doing or how effective I was in my job as a library manager. Nor can these numbers alone be relied on to give a complete analysis of the library’s effectiveness.

Existence, Role, and Funding of Libraries in Geographic Areas Where Non-Whites Predominate

The misuse and abuse of statistical measures too often lead to decisions not to fund services for communities of color, and this is a phenomenon not limited to libraries. As Paul Wachtel writes,

From a quite different vantage point, the low scores of students in poorly funded inner city schools, rather than being viewed by middle class whites as a compelling indication that greater funding is needed, often serve as a rationale for maintaining the very inequities that generate them.

The white attitude frequently is: “These kids can’t learn; the reading scores show it again and again. So what’s the point of pouring good money after bad in a futile effort to bring them up to standard? Better to spend the money on kids who can learn!” The result of course is that once again the scores in the inner city schools are low and the rationale for not investing in them is maintained. (1999)

Similarly, the attitude too often seems to be “Those people don’t read. Why spend money on libraries in those neighborhoods?” A faculty member of color who was interviewed for this chapter spoke about how the community he grew up in had to fight to even have a library in the neighborhood, that libraries were reserved for white neighborhoods. Greg Reese, 1999 president of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, writes about his early experiences as a library school student and how he was moved to pursue a Ph.D. in the field to
research and write about the disparities in funding of libraries in black communities versus those in white communities. He was dissuaded from doing so because this was not considered an appropriate subject of study in librarianship (Reese and Hawkins, 1999). The fact is, however, that the situation undeniably exists and deserves legitimate study. Recently, as president of the Black Caucus and as a library director, Greg Reese was able to use his position to halt the planned closure of libraries in predominantly Black neighborhoods in Savannah, Georgia (Black Caucus Newsletter 1999). Lack of funding in public library budgets for libraries in non-white communities has prompted communities of color to start their own libraries using outside sources of funding. Such is the case with the César Chávez Library in Oakland, California.

Access to Technology

Now that more and more of the functions of libraries have been transferred to high-technology arenas, a new white public space—the Internet—has been created that poses additional threats to information access for non-whites. It is interesting to note that, when the Internet was introduced in libraries, the standard of service and the audience to whom it was marketed was white. I was a librarian in the first library in Connecticut to offer Internet access, and it was not until I introduced workshops and marketing in Spanish that any thought was given to providing this new library service to the Spanish speakers of that city. Likewise, the first effort to market the new service to that city’s African American community came much later than the introduction of the technology and was initiated by an African American librarian. Thus whiteness theory offers another way to look at the “Digital Divide.”

Everyday Culture and Behavior of Librarians

Many librarians of color have commented that they are more accepted if and when they look and act white. For example, Deborah Hollis states,

To be brutally honest, in the academic setting they will look for the non-threatening minority who looks ‘safe.’ I can shoot my mouth off because I’m a light-skinned African American. Those colleagues of mine who have more of an ‘ethnic’ look have more difficulty; they are not taken as seriously because the administration doesn’t think they will ‘fit.’ Hollis works ‘on the front lines,’ she said, because she looks ‘ethnically ambiguous’ or ‘okay’ to students. People of color on a campus will be the housekeeping and maintenance detail primarily, and if it’s a predominantly white school, the students might not think that a minority can be in a position of authority. (quoted in St. Lifer and Nelson 1997, 42)
Explaining How Principles of Sensate Theory Clarify These Practices in Librarianship

Sensate theory, a theory elaborated in seminars by Dr. Enoch Page in relation to whiteness, posits that the only way we can know reality is through our sensory apparatus; the theory places an emphasis on sensations and emotions. There are many examples in librarianship of how racial knowledge is embodied knowledge. One area I would like to point out is the physical reaction that many librarians of color have to whiteness, which often results in either a very angry or very tearful reaction or both. For example, Khafre Abif, an African American male children’s librarian, has been told he is “not exactly the type one would expect to find splayed on the canary-colored rug of a public library reading Good-night Moon to a gaggle of three- and four-year-olds.” Abif recounts his experience:

One week after I celebrated my first anniversary at the District of Columbia Public Library, I found myself in tears. . . . I realized I was crying because I felt so many disappointments despite the progress that had been made. I cried because I felt the library administrators were not functioning as I thought they should. I cried because the bureaucratic politics made me feel powerless. . . . Thus, I cried because of the frustration of dealing with children’s librarians and managers who did not have the same cultural orientation as me. . . . I felt that new approaches, focuses, and directions needed to be channeled into our schools and our public libraries. I wanted change and the power to make things happen. (quoted in St. Lifer and Nelson 1997, 42)

For Abif, the experience of encountering whiteness in the library setting is one that is felt in the body; it is more than an intellectual abstraction. Likewise, my experiences of whiteness in my work as a librarian have often led me to tears. The reaction I have received from my white colleagues has been very different from that of colleagues of color.
Conducting an Ethnographical Study of White Cultural Practices Evident in a Large Academic Library

The library staff is mostly a bunch of “white women in sensible shoes.” This comment is the closest the librarians at one academic library have come to admitting their whiteness. It was made by a member of the Library’s Diversity Committee—a committee that in 1999 was composed of six white female library employees and two non-white female employees, of which I was a member—and has been repeated often by others. This humorous statement gets to the heart of the problem, in essence stating that, on the surface, there is nothing threatening about librarianship’s whiteness. The white woman who told the joke should be given credit for having sensibility. But before you can do anything about whiteness, you have to go further than this. You have to identify whiteness and describe it in detail, which is what traditional anthropological ethnography has done about all kinds of cultural practices. This is not a safe academic type of study for either whites or non-whites. As a new student of anthropology who is also a librarian of color, I’m in a special position to do an ethnography of this profession. It is exciting for me to do this type of “reverse ethnography” and to practice “reverse applied anthropology” in this way. However, it is also an enterprise that can be risky due to the lack of understanding about the very concept of whiteness and the emotions involved.

I hope that this chapter can be a beginning by introducing the concept of whiteness into our professional vocabulary. I also hope it offers a venue for anthropologists to do original fieldwork that can help update the discipline of anthropology. Most anthropology has been carried out from the point of view of whiteness without mentioning its own whiteness, traditionally toward the cultures of people of color who are seen dualistically as the Other. Instead of examining the cultures of people of color as the “target” cultures, a whiteness study will take the culture of whiteness as its object. Additionally, a whiteness study by a librarian of color avoids the dualism found in most traditional anthropology in that the librarian of color/anthropologist must address her or his own whiteness and the white cultural practices she or he partakes of. Although whiteness can and has been shown to have its own definition and identifiable set of practices and principles, the sensate theory of whiteness posits that whiteness can be embodied by anyone, regardless of color. Finally, whereas much of applied anthropology has had a “development” focus of trying to “fix” the target cultures (of people of color) or preserve them, applying a theory of whiteness to the very real problems of librarianship reverses the approach by suggesting that it is the whiteness that needs fixing—or, rather, eliminating. In our professions as well as in ourselves.
Notes

1. Among the Latino writers, Caribbean ones have been especially vocal on points of race vis-à-vis whiteness and blackness. See, for example, Jesús Colón (1982) and Piri Thomas (1973).

2. Not everything that falls under whiteness studies follows the same approach. Indeed, Dr. H. Enoch Page criticizes most whiteness scholarship for its overemphasis on identity and lack of attention to behavior, among other things.

3. This quote comes from a handout Dr. Page gave us in the seminar.

4. Ibid.

5. The term “race cognizant white” is one that appears in the literature of whiteness to denote white people who are aware of their whiteness, whereas “race traitor whites” denotes those who go beyond that to denounce whiteness as a concept, an ideology, and a political system. See, for example, Alison Bailey (1998).

6. Although we must be very careful not to confuse the issue and ascribe whiteness only to white people, because of the demographics of the library profession, it is most likely whites who are making these rules, but it need not always be so. There are many cases where people of color become the agents of whiteness. Ward Connerly in California is but one example. In the particular cases under discussion here, it just so happens that it is whites who are making the rules.

References


Black Caucus Newsletter, Spring 1999.


———. 1999, December. Personal interview.


Part 4

Latino Programs and Models of Service