

# Confronting Librarianship and its Function in the Structure of White Supremacy and the Ethno State

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**ABSTRACT:** Rising socio-cultural and political tensions have helped increase awareness about long-standing structures of violence and abuse, as we have seen in the development and tumultuous expansion of the #MeToo movement. However, other significant conditions of injustice and oppression continue without drawing attention. This seems to be the case with the library profession. Despite strong and persistent links to white supremacy and a well-established record excluding minorities from its ranks, the library profession has been remarkably successful in nurturing an unassailable public image of virtuous liberal benevolence and near mythical devotion to the highest ideals of freedom, individual rights, and democracy. Its unsurpassed ability in evading scrutiny or criticism of any serious consequence while maintaining a strong record of dedicated service to white power is all the more remarkable at a time where social media is used to amplify campaigns against injustices or organizations believed responsible for conditions of oppression. Although Critical Librarianship, or #CritLib, is beginning to question some of the doctrinal assumptions underlying the practice of librarianship, an examination of some of the mechanisms with which white supremacy has been able to build an entire system of racial protectionism as an occupational sector that intersects with areas of significant public interest is an important and timely research concern.

**Keywords:** critical librarianship, race, white supremacy



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## Introduction

Electoral cycles in the United States over the past decade have been marked by the intensification of socio-political and cultural conflicts to unusually high levels (Beauchamp, 2018; Lilleker et al., 2016). The tensions are striking for a country with a political system largely defined by public apathy and where critics see elections as events controlled by the public relations industry (Chomsky, 1991, 2002, 2018). In the most recent elections, the points of contention have covered a range of issues, including women's rights and the status of *Roe v. Wade* in the Supreme Court, race relations, immigration, as well as the catastrophic dangers posed by climate change. In some cases, these conflicts have created conditions for important and long-overdue shifts in public attitudes, as observed in the development and tumultuous expansion of the #MeToo movement (Conor, 2017; Felton, 2018; Tambe, 2018).

Although the contested areas are not entirely new, the confrontations have given new life to questions regarding the ideological control of information and communication systems (Herman and Chomsky, 2002). Of particular interest is the function and influence of news organizations and the deliberate manipulation of content in social media to shape opinions in a society growing increasingly dependent on sophisticated digital networks and smart devices (Lilleker et al., 2016; Tucker et al., 2018).

Amid the unprecedented socio-political turmoil, there is also growing consensus on the need for digital citizens to be well equipped to assess the value, relevance, and accuracy of information (Alvarez, 2017; Anderson, 2017; Cooke, 2018; Sullivan, 2018). If there is a sense of urgency about the need for sophisticated, information and social-media literate citizens, the feeling is well justified as the nation is also witnessing a dramatic surge in racist and xenophobic demagoguery, violent, targeted hate crimes, bigotry, and emboldened white supremacists in a broad range of contexts (Anti-Defamation League, 2018, 2019; Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2018; South Asian Americans Leading Together, 2018; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

However, efforts intended to counter the alt-right's brazenly stated goal of building an impenetrable ethno state as we have seen in organized campaigns to diminish the influence of *Fox News* and *Breitbart* or shut down Alex Jones' *InfoWars* Internet machine of hate have accentuated a perplexing condition. Not all of the institutions, practices, or systems

associated with white power or white supremacist objectives whether political or cultural have been the subject of critical public attention, forcefully repudiated, and effectively displaced from whatever position of social, cultural or political influence they may have. Some seem to be remarkably successful in managing and shaping public perceptions even when their existence focuses on serving the needs of white supremacy and its design for complete political and cultural domination. While there is general agreement on the need to condemn organizations and practices associated with conditions of injustice or oppression, the professionalization, normalization and acceptance of white supremacy and racial protectionism in the management of informational and cultural resources for education and related public interests does not generate significant attention, let alone widespread indignation, criticism or condemnation.

These observations seem to capture the unique status of the library profession at a time of acute historical importance. Despite reflecting committed and disciplined service to white power, a segregated structure, as well as a well-established trajectory of resistance against meaningful racial integration, the library profession has been remarkably effective in constructing and maintaining a powerful and seductive cultural myth around its support for higher democratic ideals (American Library Association, 1999, 2004; Ditzion, 1947; Honma, 2005; Horrigan, 2016a, 2016b; Kranich, 2000, 2001; Zickuhr et al., 2013).

## **White Supremacy in Librarianship**

The links between librarianship and white supremacy and racism are difficult to dismiss although rarely discussed and framed as such, at least publicly. When the problem of race surfaces (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007; American Library Association, 2007, 2012, 2017), the issue is examined and filtered through the apologetic and complicit lens of white liberalism (Chadley, 1992; Gohr, 2017; Hathcock, 2015, 2017, 2019). In many cases, the history of white dominance in librarianship and the profession's unquestioning service to a race-based system of oppression is minimized and deceitfully misrepresented. We are simply expected to accept the carefully crafted image of librarianship as a fundamentally noble enterprise and believe that the problem is not white supremacy in the conceptualization, structure and practice of librarianship or the profession's service to white power, but one limited to adjustments toward evolving cultural trends and norms favoring "multiculturalism" and "diversity". These concepts,

and their operationalization, are then left largely undefined (Honma, 2005; Hudson, 2017; Reese and Hawkins, 1999; Vinopal, 2016) although one does not have to be a sophisticated or unusually harsh social critic to understand that the use of these concepts reinforces the dominant power structure and its cyclical reformulations. The historical and undisputed centrality of white power in professional practice (Peterson, 1996; Mirza and Seale, 2017), as well as the function of librarianship in a larger design for a race-based system of social, educational and cultural control are with only a few and often timid exceptions ignored in the professional mainstream literature. They are also almost universally excluded from the dogma embedded in professional training curricula in library and information schools operating under the oversight of the American Library Association (ALA).

Not surprisingly, repetitive exhortations to increase diversity and minority representation through recruitment and retention initiatives do little more than simply revalidate and strengthen the effectiveness of the existing framework of segregation and white supremacy. The imagery and symbolism of a self-appointed and unaccountable racial elite managing the composition of a workforce recruited and retained for a condition of subjugation to white power and its integration into the core institutional function of racial protectionism makes diversity initiatives and their purposefully designed failure all the more telling (Hathcock, 2015).

Accepting that the solution to the problem of race in librarianship rests on a perpetually and suspiciously elusive perfect plan for the recruitment and retention of “colored” librarians requires a considerable degree of self-deception (Panki, Theiss-White and Bushing, 2010). The underrepresentation of minorities in librarianship is not a condition waiting to be solved by well-intentioned white liberals working on yet another distracting campaign, fashionable slogan on “diversity, equity and inclusion” (DEI), or proposal for paternalistic action or meagre handout shrouding racism (e.g., ACRL, 2007; ALA, 2017). The underrepresentation is simply a visible symptom of a much larger problem: librarianship as a *system* whose existential function is to preserve, manage, and defend a structure for informational, educational, cultural and political race-based domination.

Nevertheless, the points raised by mainstream critics with increasing frequency over the past thirty years or so should not be ignored as they help illustrate increasing awareness and a response to conditions that are totally unacceptable. Mainstream librarianship

represents a historical trajectory of evolving practices whose present status continue to embody an enterprise for race-based supremacy and white power. The results of these practices are reflected in the grim reality of de facto segregation in our communities, the enduring differences in educational achievement and opportunities, as well as in the structure and composition of the field itself. Briefly, the great majority of librarians are white, as are the great majority of students in library and information science programs in colleges and universities offering nationally accredited degrees in the field (Association for Library and Information Science Education, 2010, 2018). Most of the faculty in library and information science programs are also white. Blacks and Latinos are badly underrepresented, and at levels that would be thought of as scandalous elsewhere (AFL-CIO, 2010, 2018; Association for Library and Information Science Education, 2010, 2018).

Beyond outrageous underrepresentation, those who persevere and are ultimately “allowed” to enter the library profession or the academic field of library and information studies in higher education have little to celebrate (Alabi, 2015). Indeed, entry into the field is often accompanied by the unstated but well-communicated expectation of being willing to tolerate microaggressions as well as conditions that are sometimes privately described by minority librarians and library and information science educators as the modern-day equivalent of the standards observed in southern plantations. As members of underrepresented minorities in the field, many of us share these experiences to varying degrees. Unquestioning obedience is required and any deviation from the expected disposition for routine self-humiliation, servitude and acceptance of sexualized exploitation carries serious and guaranteed career-altering consequences few would be willing to entertain or accept. Minority librarians are expected to follow and adopt white practices, just as minority faculty in library and information science programs are expected to accept complete subjugation to dominant white values in every area of research, programmatic administration and instructional practice. These conditions are complemented by the expectation for both groups to extol the value and importance of “diversity, equality and inclusion” in professional service in addition to having the prerequisite enthusiastic smiles during photo ops for the production of institutional marketing materials.

The sophistication of the mechanisms of racial control and domination is compounded by

the language used and the normalization of a cruel Orwellian code. The need for obedience and observation of white practices is often linked to performance measures on a cluster of undefined and fluctuating attributes described as “professionalism” (behavior that pleases the masters) and/or evidence on contributions to the “advancement of the profession” (dedicated support to the preservation of the structure of oppression). In reality, the terminology masks an evolving and persistent system of white metrics.

In the case of teaching faculty in units offering graduate degrees accredited by the American Library Association (ALA), the expected subordination to white power without protest is sometimes articulated as an obvious requirement to “maintain ALA accreditation”, or not placing the status of accreditation “at risk”. The link is not completely off the mark as ALA accreditation is an exercise that reinforces the structure of domination and oppression by periodically examining the extent to which library and information science professional education programs in colleges and universities have demonstrated disciplined support for, and service to white, elite power.

These conditions are also enduring and self-sustaining as they are supported by a system of significant and widely accepted structural barriers, segregationist and discriminatory practices (Alabi, 2015; Reese and Hawkins, 1999). Left unchecked, these conditions are likely to continue unchanged indefinitely (Brown, 1986; Honma, 2005; Josey, 1998; Walker, 2015).

The design for white supremacy in the library profession is not only manifested in its persistent refusals to integrate minorities into professional practice or the ALA standards used to regulate and manage the educational structure used to prepare future practitioners. It is also embedded in the conceptual foundation of librarianship and the way it functions as a system to animate deeply rooted racial protectionism to sustain and defend white cultural and social dominance. This can be observed in the way libraries buildings and interior spaces are designed, collections defined, built, managed, cataloged, organized and their content communicated. Every area in professional life serves the overarching ideological structure. For example, the subject heading phrases used in shared bibliographic cataloging records to describe the topical content of published works have long been noted to include oppressive ideological content, including racist and imperialist messages (Adler, 2017; Bell and Méndez-Brady, 2017; Koford, 2017; Olson, 2001, 2007). Racist practices and the observation of a “culture of whiteness” in public services in

academic libraries have also been exposed (Brook et al., 2015). Professional gatherings such as annual conferences are also organized in ways that reinforce white supremacy and the expectation for minorities to remain obedient and accept conditions of perpetual racial subjugation in ways that are not always subtle (Hathcock, 2017, 2019). The links between librarianship and white supremacy are also evident in the function of school libraries and their support of racist oppression in education (Kohli et al., 2017; Stauffer, 2017; Yorio, 2018).

## **Librarianship as a System of White Supremacy**

Confronting librarianship head on as a *construct of white supremacy and a design for racial subjugation* challenges the doctrinal myth of a benevolent structure for public service with a few internal contradictions that may or may not need to be resolved. This approach carries important analytical and theoretical implications. To start, it alters the direction of critical inquiry by bringing the examination of librarianship into alignment with our interest in understanding the structures and connections that support systems of power. Calling white supremacy for what it is and without fear would also get us past the superficial and euphemistic treatment of an issue whose centrality is rarely addressed or directly confronted (Galvan, 2015; Hathcock, 2015; Hudson, 2017). This implies moving past the stagnation of repetitive, unproductive and ever-evolving liberal illusions and apologies on workforce management as we see in the most current diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) formulations (ALA, 2017). It would also give us an opportunity to further expose the argument of professional neutrality, a central and potent theme in librarianship dogma, and treat it as a deceptive and harmful ideological artifact for professional indoctrination, one deliberately intended to obscure the library profession's and its training programs' position in the structure of white supremacy. Challenging the dogma of neutrality would ultimately remove the protective shield used to deflect criticism and calls for accountability. As Ferretti correctly points out, neutrality upholds white supremacy and effectively “reinforces structural oppression” (2018).

As an alternative, and beyond the most pressing theoretical and explanatory needs, a critical perspective that looks at the library profession as a construct for white supremacy forces us to unmask the true existential function of librarianship. It forces us to abandon romantic illusions of the library as a place of “all American” goodness (code for white)

and idealized historical purity and Manifest Destiny/exceptionalism giving us an opportunity to re-examine the problem from a socio-structural standpoint. This alone would guide our inquiry and direct it to the interactions between race and social class, as well as the subordination of social classes to the needs of racial power, a key consideration when trying to understand the function of the ALA accreditation process and the structure and purpose of ALA-accredited graduate degrees. This perspective also implies forcefully rejecting any illusions associated with the possibility of gradual or incremental liberal reforms actually delivering desirable democratic or socially responsible outcomes. Indeed, the alternative proposed here would help us direct our focus to the harm caused by liberal accommodations to, and suspicious coexistence with racial power and reinforce the need to dismantle the current structure of professional training and professional practice. This view is consistent with the posture of social movements that have had or are confronting other forms of oppression. It implies reconceptualizing our function and bringing it into alignment with the needs of social justice.

A further advantage in adopting a perspective that looks at librarianship as a formalized system and structure of white power is that it would create a context to better situate *our* experiences in the field and the results of its practices. This would help explain the experiences of those of us who have been drawn into, or forced into brutalizing cultural and educational systems built on racism and in particular, systems designed as structures of coercive assimilation, indoctrination and symbolic slavery.

This is an important concern given that the integration of minorities into librarianship and library and information science education is primarily based on the reproduction of a model for forced assimilation and expected servitude, not unlike the experience of indigenous populations crushed by colonial masters. The inclusion of the experiential perspective of marginalized and suppressed voices in an explanatory framework would help expand our understanding of the mechanisms used in the construction of cultural oppression. It would also provide us with a foundation for meaningful, transformative social action for the dismantlement of librarianship as presently constituted.

From this stance, we will be able to examine librarianship as part of a much larger, sophisticated, and *deliberate* construct for racial subjugation. In doing so and through the integration of the experiential perspective of those of us who endure its oppression—*our* marginalized voices—we would also be able to speak of cultural and educational systems



built and perfected to sustain and defend an overarching structure of racial, socio-economic, and cultural dominance. This is where we need to situate the library profession to unmask it and critically examine its role with the objective of moving past liberal illusions on libraries as contributors to participatory democracy.

By confronting librarianship as a design for white power we would also be able to counter the relative anonymity that makes it possible for the professional training programs for library and information science in colleges and universities to operate outside the reach of critical analysis. Librarianship and its practice in support of white power is part of a large system of indoctrination and that system includes a political position and a tightly controlled curricular structure with a particular intent and purpose. A design for white power does not just simply “happen”. It is a predictable outcome of an educational strategy, a deliberate intent and its disciplined, relentless execution.

The alternative being proposed would also contribute to analytical clarity, by allowing us, for example, to better understand some of the structural shortcomings in the movement of Critical Librarianship (#CritLib) and comfortably predict that the movement’s expansion and accommodations will not produce significant changes to the underlying structure of librarianship.

## **The Prospects for Critical Librarianship**

Critical Librarianship has several objectives, including raising awareness about the importance of social responsibility in professional practice. The movement also embodies a complex collection of interests and beliefs not typically covered in mainstream, corporatized graduate training programs. Its roots combine several important and influential historical traditions and strands of progressive thought. Among the most recognizable are the libertarian, socialist and anarcho-syndicalist traditions from the 1930s, as well as those that emerged from the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table in 1969 (Garcia, 2016). In its current formulation, the framework of Critical Librarianship includes a feminist perspective, as well as concepts and analytical tools drawn from critical race theory (CRT). With strong links to concepts derived from Paulo Freire’s school of critical pedagogy (1970), Critical Librarianship synthesizes an expanding and evolving body of theory with attempts to redefine professional practice (Shockey, 2016, Nicholson and Seale, 2017).

Critical Librarianship also reflects a relatively broad continuum of thought. It can provide comfortable accommodation to a range of opinions and perspectives, from the needs of liberals and “social justice warriors” to far more progressive or “radical” perspectives, at least within the definition of acceptable and publishable reformist discourse.

Although the movement for Critical Librarianship has the potential to invigorate an important analysis and produce a sophisticated, and transformational body of theory to redefine professional practice, its limitations in its current status of development cannot be ignored or easily dismissed. The expanding bibliography of materials published to date (e.g., Epstein, Smallwood and Gubnitskaia, 2019; Nicholson and Seale, 2017) and the online meetings held under the #CritLib tag (<http://critlib.org/>) point to a highly elitist and exclusionary intellectual process, one that tends to privilege academic librarianship above all other forms of professional practice. This has already been acknowledged (Nicholson and Seale, 2017).

Those of us in marginalized groups and with perspectives outside accepted professional discourse or approved liberal dissent recognize the appealing contours of #CritLib. However, while we hear sincere voices calling for meaningful and necessary transformations, we also detect currents of opinion aimed at advancing white liberalism as a refreshed and sanitized, friendly version of white supremacy and white power, all under the required and fashionable veil of progressivism. If we appear somewhat cautious in embracing #CritLib it is understandable as our experiences as members of marginalized groups have taught us that the loudest voices calling for “social justice” can sometimes be the voices of those who serve power and the structures of oppression. Historical echoes that take us back to the writings and admonitions of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X on the challenge posed by moderates and liberal “allies” are difficult to ignore (King, 1963; X, 1969).

Some of the structural weaknesses of Critical Librarianship can also be illustrated by historical references to the failure of superficial changes intended to “reform” or manage slavery or the Apartheid regime in South Africa. As presently constituted, Critical Librarianship is not defined as an organized attempt to radically transform practices or dismantle the MLS/MLIS industry and the oppression it represents. One can further visualize the internal contradictions in Critical Librarianship and its reformist inclinations by drawing attention to its refusal to even consider questioning the ongoing and persistent

use of the term “librarianship” or even acknowledge the many ways the term itself stands as a painful reminder of racist practices, forced assimilation and cultural colonialism and oppression.

This is a point that needs to be stressed: The many progressive, dedicated information activists in the movement for literacy, critical pedagogy and social justice are *not* engaged in critical librarianship. They are in the struggle to build a better society and they should not feel obligated to accommodate, refresh or sanitize the image of a structure whose function is to support race-based social domination.

The fact that the American Library Association is extending its tentacles to co-opt and manage Critical Librarianship as a fashionable product is not surprising. Quite the contrary. This is perhaps one of the strongest indications of the limitations inherent in trying to reform a well-constructed and functioning system of oppression from within. Anyone who gets to spend time examining ALA materials on Critical Librarianship, including what gets published in *American Libraries*, will be able to recognize the direction of its efforts. The archives of #CritLib Twitter chats further reinforce this point. Even the most trivial issues are proposed, advanced and validated as a representation of a wider social justice interest.

The effectiveness of the American Library Association’s efforts to co-opt Critical Librarianship is also evident in the views of its advocates about library and information science education. Some seem to believe that adding a few “#CritLib courses” to graduate-level curricula will somehow help the profession transform itself into a movement for liberation and social justice or make it more responsive to socio-political trends.

This perspective reflects a serious misunderstanding of the function of information and library and information science/studies education. An educational system designed to promote and sustain white power and cultural supremacy could not possibly be expected to integrate elements that could in any way lead to equality and its own demise. Self-destruction is not an institutional objective for structures of power. Library and information science/studies programs were designed to protect white knowledge, and defend and support the needs of white power and all of its privileges. These needs are supported by a complex system that works with remarkable efficiency. Anyone with intimate knowledge of the internal workings of library and information schools, including their hiring and student admission decisions, should know this. One would only need to

examine the political history of the United States and the sustained subjugation of large sectors of the population to appreciate the effectiveness of the educational structures. Libraries fit into that structure and professional training programs for librarianship work to produce predictable outcomes. In this context, ALA accreditation ensures long-term compliance with the fulfilment of the core institutional mission with very few possibilities for deviation (Shockey, 2016). This cannot be “fixed” by the addition of a few courses to a menu of consumer choices that reflects a curricular framework built on, and intended to support white power.

## **Conclusion**

The political processes in the past decade and the period leading up the most recent presidential election in the United States have been marked by socio-political conflicts and increased levels of political awareness and participation. Since the November 2016 election, there have been several large-scale and well-publicized campaigns aimed at confronting the rise of the alt-right and state-directed abuses against identifiable, vulnerable groups. These campaigns include the mobilizations that challenged the Muslim travel ban outlined in Executive Order 13769 of January 27, 2017, as well as the protests against the Trump administration’s controversial policy of separating the families of migrants crossing the southern border and the universally condemned practice of using metal cages to hold children in detention under conditions resembling concentration camps.

In isolation from any further consideration, the responses to extreme policies could be said to support the view that American society is built on the highest ideals of justice and where oppression or any condition that stands against fundamental human rights is likely to be exposed and successfully challenged. A further preliminary conclusion would argue that the institutions for public education work as intended and always in the public interest. They act as an effective barrier against the rise of authoritarianism, bigotry and state-sponsored hate, or any subtle or overt inducements to violence. In this view, schools, libraries, and other institutions of education and cultural enrichment help in the development of sophisticated, well-informed and socially responsible citizens.

However, a more careful appraisal of United States history and the most recent elections and political developments present a far darker reality, one that should force us to

carefully examine and reconsider the function of our educational and cultural institutions as well as their contribution to the ideals of a healthy society. Despite repeated claims about the value of libraries nurturing and strengthening democracy and its social ideals, we need to question the extent to which they function to support and advance the interests of white supremacy and the long-standing objectives of an ethno state. The ability of the library profession to sustain the myth of its neutrality as it works to support the ideological and cultural infrastructure of white power and accommodate its needs for violence is an extraordinary achievement, one most likely attributable to the effective use of a well-designed and complex propaganda system.

Undoubtedly, countering the function and use of the information and educational infrastructure as a tool of ideological control and racial oppression poses enormous long-term challenges. However, historical trends suggest that brutal social realities can be successfully confronted and defeated. Although the Critical Librarianship movement risks undergoing a process of colonization and dilution it may still help create conditions for a healthy debate and the development of a framework for effective action and a process of democratization of information studies education and the opening of alternatives outside the control of the existing structure of race-based information management. While we may not see the necessary #BoycottTheALA movement in the immediate or near future, the current political climate and the internal contradictions of white liberalism may precipitate the necessary decline and dismantlement of the library profession as a structure of racial protectionism and service to white power. This process may contribute to the creation of a movement for effective critical information literacy, social action pedagogy, the democratization of the information cycle, as well as the development of a new, alternative model for public education.

## **Correction**

This article was originally published on 27 May 2019 with an incorrect reference on p.88 to Bell (2017), which should have read Bell and Méndez-Brady (2017). The information was corrected on 5 October 2019. The publisher apologizes for this error.

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