This is a pre-print of a book chapter published in Gina Schlesselman-Tarango's (ed.) Topographies of Whiteness, Library Juice Press, 2017.

Chapter 11

Mapping Whiteness at the Reference Desk

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Whiteness in Librarianship

There are several factors that influence librarians of color, which either contribute to their success or lead to their attrition. These factors include whether or not they are the sole librarian of color on staff; their relationship to and with support staff, who often reflect a greater ethnic diversity than credentialed librarians; how much support they receive from administration or groups such as a Board of Trustees; and whether or not they encounter racism from either patrons or staff. In exploring the social construct of race, the concept of whiteness can also be evaluated:

> Most of the time white people don't notice or question our whiteness and the benefit it brings. Racism keeps people of color in the limelight and makes whiteness invisible. To change this, we must take whiteness itself, hold it up to the light and see that it is a color too. Whiteness is a concept, and ideology, which holds tremendous power over our lives and, in turn, over the lives of people of color.[1]

This power can take the form of an ingrained belief that only white people can hold positions of authority, and an assumption that people

1. Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2011), 10-11.

of color solely hold support positions. These ingrained beliefs can lead to uncomfortable interactions between white patrons and librarians of color, especially at the reference desk.

Perhaps one question that reference librarians of color, including the authors of this chapter, dread more than others is, "Can I speak to a real librarian?" This seven-word question suggests more than it lets on. It implies that these librarians aren't real. It questions whether they should exist at all. It suggests that their knowledge isn't recognized by those in positions of privilege. It states that many white patrons still prefer and expect to be assisted by someone who looks like them, still prefer and expect to see someone who looks like them behind a reference desk. It's a seemingly polite way of refusing help without directly saying, "I'm refusing your help." Other variations of this question include, "I'd like to speak to the person in charge," when that person may very well be the person of color behind the reference desk.

The history of public resistance towards African Americans and other people of color inside the library, as both patrons and employees, is rooted in the segregation laws of the early twentieth century. In *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library*, Wayne Wiegand explains that black-only branches were the norm in southern cities such as Houston, Texas, and Louisville, Kentucky, where segregation was the law.[2] Meanwhile, "[b]lacks also experienced obstacles to integrated library services in the north, where real estate redlining and complicit city governments all but guaranteed ghettoized neighborhoods in which branches, like Chicago's Hall and [New York City]'s 135th Street libraries, served almost entirely black populations."[3] Today, this unofficial redistricting continues to occur in black and brown communities, and is a contributing factor to why white communities may see few patrons of color in their local libraries, let alone librarians of color. This poses a challenge for a country in which minorities are becoming, and in some

2. Wayne A. Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 155.

3. Ibid., 174.

areas already are, the majority. This also creates a significant challenge for a profession that is actively seeking to recruit and retain people who are diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, as well as other forms of identity, including gender expression, sexual orientation, and disability.

Microaggressions on the Reference Desk

"[T]he idea of a black head librarian is still an oxymoron for some. After 22 years of serving as a library leader, I still get asked the question from white colleagues: 'Is this [head librarian] a new role for you?'"[4] With this statement, Theresa S. Byrd, contributor to *The 21st-Century Black Librarian in America: Issues and Challenges*, touches upon an underlying reality that presumably all people of color in service fields face: the assumption that their skills are elementary and may not compare to those of their white colleagues. The unspoken question is whether or not they obtained this position because of their race, especially if they are in a position of authority. This question of qualifications, ability, or competency has been posed to the authors in a number of variations, such as, "Is this your first job?" and "Have you worked in a library before?" These questions are particularly telling when new white colleagues are often simply asked, "Which library did you work at before?" The underlying assumption is that the white person is already a skilled information professional.

For the nonwhite librarian, coming up against whiteness on the reference desk is nothing new, and while endlessly frustrating, rarely comes as a surprise. In a profession in which eighty-eight percent of credentialed members are white,[5] it is not a wonder that librarians of color are faced

4. Theresa S. Byrd, "Managing the Academic Library: The Role of the Black Librarian Leader in Three Different Institutional Environments," in *The 21st-Century Black Librarian in America: Issues and Challenges,* ed. Andrew P. Jackson, Julius Jefferson, Jr., and Akilah Nosakhere (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 108.

5. American Library Association, *Diversity Counts 2009-2010 Update,* last accessed April 25, 2016, http://www.ala.org/offices/diversity/diversitycounts/2009-2010update.

with bias and racialized judgments in the midst of their day-to-day work. Librarians of color are continually questioned about their qualifications, challenged regarding their authority and intellect, and forced to perform above and beyond the requirements of their white colleagues.[6] These often subtle verbal and behavioral slights based on race, or *racial microaggressions*,[7] occur frequently and their negative effects can add up.

One of the authors recalls a particularly trying shift doing legal reference, when a white student approached the desk and asked that she "go get the librarian for a question." Despite her best efforts to assure the student that she was in fact a librarian and fully capable of helping with his request, he insisted on waiting until she fetched her white colleague for assistance. Such an experience was humiliating for the author, an accomplished practitioner and teacher with two law degrees and full library credentials to her name. The idea that a black woman could be qualified to work as a librarian and respond adequately to a legal reference question was beyond the student's imagination.

Unfortunately, the barriers erected by whiteness on the reference desk, while incredibly isolating for the librarian of color, are in no way rare or unique experiences. Librarians of color are constantly beset by perceptions from patrons and even colleagues that they are paraprofessionals rather than credentialed librarians, that they do not fit the embodied expectation of a research librarian, or that they are not a "cultural fit" for the library institution and needs of the patrons. When one of the authors tried to change this perception by dressing above the dress code—from business casual to business professional—she found that white patrons still perceived her as support staff, while patrons of color,

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6. Juleah Swanson, Isabel Gonzalez-Smith, and Azusa Tanaka, "Unpacking Identity: Racial, Ethnic, and Professional Identity and Academic Librarians of Color," in *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions and Presentations of Information Work*, ed. Nicole Pagowsky and Miriam Rigby (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2014), 160-61.

7. Ibid., 160; Jaena Alabi, "Racial Microaggressions in Academic Libraries: Results of a Study of Minority and Non-Minority Librarians," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41, no. 1 (2014): 47-48, doi: 10.1016/j.acalib.2014.10.008.

on the other hand, rightly assumed she was a credentialed librarian or even a branch manager.

This assumption that nonwhite librarians are not in fact librarians is further exacerbated by the fact that, in many libraries, people of color are often in positions of support (e.g. library assistant) while white personnel hold credentialed librarian positions. According to the American Library Association's *Diversity Counts* report:

> Credentialed librarians are predominantly women, ages 45–54, and white. Non-credentialed librarians represent approximately 43% of those reporting for the industry "library" and have a slightly more balanced ethnic and racial distribution than do credentialed librarians. Sixteen-point-eight (16.8) percent of non-credentialed librarians selected non-white race/ethnicity categories, whereas only 11% of credentialed librarians did so.8

Additionally, being the sole librarian of color among support staff who have a balanced racial distribution can lead to isolation and insecurity—either the feeling that one doesn't belong or is too good for members of their own race.

While some of these perceptions are overtly racialized—such as when a patron approaches the reference desk and comments that a librarian of color doesn't "look like a librarian"—many of these biased perceptions can be coded in the seemingly neutral language of professional standards or organizational expectations. Nonwhite librarians doing reference work can often find themselves called out by supervisors for a lack of "approachability" or "niceness," standards that are steeped in racialized expectations and constructs.[9] This kind of race-based marginalization can take a physical, mental, and emotional toll on librarians

8. American Library Association, *Diversity Counts Report* (Chicago: Office for Research and Statistics, Office for Diversity, 2007), 5, http://www.ala.org/offices/sites/ala.org.offices/files/content/diversity/diversitycounts/diversitycounts_rev0.pdf.

9. Freeda Brook, Dave Ellenwood, and Althea Eannace Lazzaro, "In Pursuit of Antiracist Social Justice: Denaturalizing Whiteness in the Academic Library," *Library Trends* 64, no. 2 (2016): 270, doi: 10.1353/lib.2015.0048.

of color and can result in feelings of isolation and a sense of loss of professional identity.[10]

Moreover, these types of racial microaggressions can come not only from white patrons, but from patrons of color as well. Whiteness on the reference desk is a phenomenon that affects all library users, just as whiteness in general stands rooted in the whole of society.[11] However, those moments of surprise when patrons of color discover that the person who looks like them behind the desk is in fact a credentialed librarian can be great moments of connection. On one such occasion, one of the authors found herself developing an almost instant rapport with a black female student in a predominantly white institution who had approached the desk for help. She approached the desk tentatively and said, "I'm not sure if you can help me, but I could really use some assistance." When the student realized that she could, in fact, be assisted by a black librarian, her face lit up in surprise and joy. The student proceeded to sit in front of the reference desk to chat, not only about her research question but to receive advice on navigating school and hairstyling tips as well.

That student could have easily bypassed the reference desk because of an assumption, rooted in whiteness, that reference help can only be provided by, for, and to white people. Instead, she sought help with her academic question and was able to connect with a librarian who looked and lived like her. She was able to break through the barrier that whiteness imposes on the reference desk and made a connection that ended up being advantageous to her throughout the year. The author heard from that student on numerous occasions after this encounter and even met other students of color who had been referred to the author for research help. Indeed, research has shown that this kind

10. Swanson, Gonzalez-Smith, and Tanaka, "Unpacking Identity," 161.

11. Todd Honma, "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005): 3-9, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nj0w1mp.

of ethnic identity sharing can enhance librarian-student interactions.[12] Overall, interactions like this and comments from patrons such as, "I never realized this was a career available to us," demonstrate the problem librarianship has in both performing outreach to communities of color, as well as working effectively toward the recruitment and retention of credentialed librarians of color.

Moving Forward

What can librarians do to combat these frequent microaggressions and help dismantle whiteness at the reference desk? More particularly, what role can and should white librarians play in providing support to their colleagues of color? Fighting against racism and whiteness at the reference desk cannot and should not be the burden of librarians of color alone.

One specific strategy that white librarians can adopt is *bystander intervention*.[13] Bystander intervention requires that white librarians step up and get involved to interrupt microaggressions and other forms of racist action as they witness it happening. For many, this can be a very uncomfortable prospect, but this kind of unabashed action is essential to developing a truly diverse and inclusive workplace.

One of the authors distinctly remembers a particularly encouraging moment when a supervisor engaged in this kind of upfront intervention. A patron demanded to speak with a white supervisor because he did not believe that the author had the skills to help with his request. When the supervisor arrived, she immediately told the patron, "this librarian is very talented, and we are lucky to have her. If you need help, she is the one to help you. I will leave you in her very capable hands." The supervisor then left the reference desk and returned to her office. The patron grudgingly agreed to the author's help and was surprised to find

12. Swanson, Gonzalez-Smith, and Tanaka, "Unpacking Identity," 163-64.

13. Eric Anthony Grollman, "A Call for Bystander Intervention to End Racism," *Eric Anthony Grollman, Ph.D.* (blog), February 27, 2013, https://egrollman.com/2013/02/27/bystander-intervention-racism/.

that she was able to get him exactly what he was searching for. Most important to her, however, was the knowledge that her supervisor, by intervening without hesitation, "had her back."

Another effective strategy involves using frequent *micro-affirmations* to counteract the negative effect of microaggressions. Micro-affirmations are small verbal and behavioral acts of encouragement, support, and confidence, most often done publicly, to show that a marginalized colleague is a valued and integral part of the team.[14] By engaging in micro-affirmations around colleagues of color, especially in front of patrons and other colleagues, white librarians can counteract, and even help to curtail, future racial microaggressions. Simple acts like openly deferring to a librarian of color's expertise in a particular area or actively soliciting a colleague of color's opinion on an important matter can make a significant difference.

In addition to this kind of proactive anti-racist practice on the part of white librarians, the library profession as a whole can work to dismantle whiteness at the reference desk by increasing the diversity of the librarians working at the desk. This kind of increased diversity in the profession can only be achieved by focusing on the development of effective strategies for both recruitment and retention. Unfortunately, studies show that "despite recent diversity recruitment measures, some racial and ethnic minority groups, notably African Americans and Latinos, are actually seeing a decrease in the number of credentialed librarians under age 45."[15] Therefore, besides increasing representation in the workforce, measures must be taken to promote and advance diversity long term to ensure that librarians of color, as they enter the profession, have meaningful opportunities for professional growth and advancement. Without this dual focus on recruitment and retention, libraries will continue to serve as no more than revolving doors for the

14. Mary Rowe, "Micro-Affirmations & Micro-Inequities," *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* 1, no. 1 (2008): 46, http://www.ombudsassociation.org/Resources/IOA-Publications/IOA-Journal/Journal-PDFs/Volume1Journal.aspx.

15. American Library Association, *Diversity Counts Report*, 11.

members of those communities that our organizations will increasingly depend upon for survival.

For the sake of the future of the profession and the important work we do as librarians, we must all work together to dismantle whiteness at the reference desk. Our patrons should be able to seek help from and work with librarians who reflect the diversity of their own communities. Our colleagues of color should be able to work in environments in which they are safe from victimization. The reference desk should not be marked by whiteness, but by diversity and inclusion for all—both in front of and behind the desk.

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