Using Historical Context to Inform Future Policy

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"...it has two pairs of very wide doors opening onto the gallery, showing

white balustrades against a fair summer sky that fades into dusk and night

during the course of the play…"" (Cat on a Hot Tin Roof)

A plantation home on the Mississippi Delta or the original library of an academic institution designed by one of the Founding Fathers of the United States? Either way, the setting for the Tennessee Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof paints the picture of an idyllic summer day in the south-- grand white columns of a grand southern home. The Rotunda at the University of Virginia was built in 1826 and designed to sit in an area of prominence in the Academical Village as "the library and symbolic repository of knowledge" of the institution (2017 Herrington, 14). Thomas Jefferson, determined to stay away from any architectural form signifying life under British rule, modeled many of his architectural designs after the Roman Pantheon and other neoclassical styles (Larson 2015). Only Roman styles of architecture belonged in a new republic, which he found in the design of republican-era Rome. The Rotunda and other buildings at the University of Virginia are not the only example of this structure, but this design can also be found at institutions such as Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and many more. These imposing forms of architecture meant to boast knowledge. These classical structures represent the idea that there is an authority of information, but who is the authority and why is it important to draw the connection between freedom of knowledge and Jefferson's authority of the subject? The irony is that the Rotunda was constructed by slaves and for years to come these institutions would be inaccessible to minoritized patrons. Brick by brick, the revered institution that symbolized freedom and opportunity was constructed by enslaved individuals and only really symbolized opportunity for white males. This essay seeks to understand how the American higher education system is rooted in white supremacy, the implications on student success, and

how academic libraries can respond to these histories and current issues in social justice for the sake of balancing the scale of justice in the pursuit of knowledge.

Historical Context

The example of Jefferson's academical village being constructed by slave labor is particularly insightful as it relates to the history of the academic institution as a whole. According to Deetz (2018) research on the construction of buildings in the University of Virginia, for almost 50 years slaves were made to work at the university, oftentimes being forced from their families. Slave women often were subject to assault from white male students attending the university, leaving them to live in fear while working at the institution. Black women were subjected to this masculine gaze that perpetuated the idea that black women were not respected and lesser than white men. Deetz (2018, 264) uses the term "collegiate entitlement" to refer to the privilege of the student body contrasted with the horrific mistreatment of black women in slavery that built the very institution designed to give students opportunity. The University of Virginia is just one example.

This irony is no surprise given the history of authorities in American education denying access to whole groups of people or denying the authority of other culture's belief systems. The history of education has been centric to European American ideas and culture, which we know from the first attempts of Europeans to educate Indegenous Americans in their language. Kuelzer and Houser (2019) track how education was first used as a tool of assimilation for Europeans and Indigenous children in the 1600s, which set the racist standard of determining whole cultures' way of life inferior or uncivilized. While English colonists attempted to control the thought and way of life of first peoples through educating them how they wanted people to be educated, slave owners were determined to control the lives of their slaves through anti-literacy laws in the

1830s. The idea remains the same: white education is thought to better the status of any individual-- education gives someone the opportunity to prosper. Anti-literacy laws were rife through the southern states in times leading up to the Civil War as Southern slave owners used anti-literacy to make sure slaves attempting to escape to freedom did not have the capacity of knowledge to communicate with each other (Tolley 2016). No matter the context, education has historically been a tool of control and oppression. For the oppressor, education was a dangerous tool that could be used to disrupt the status quo way of life. Interwoven into the history has also been this idea that such oppression was just because white education and culture was specific to a civilized, Christian, "good," way of life and advancement and only those deemed deserving could have access to the tools of education. Therefore, whole cultures and civilizations have been denied the right to exist through the oppressors' need to wipe out any culture, religion, perspective inconvenient to the oppressors way of life. Kuelzer and Houser also discuss how even well into the 1950s, quality and funded educational facilities were hard to come by for many African American families. While the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, racist attitudes towards minority groups would continue through the whitewashing of textbooks and emphasis on Western perspectives throughout history (Aronson, Meyers, & Winn 2020).

These are the structures-- the histories that students of a diverse nature are expected to succeed in academically. Unfortunately, library staff and collections are also not reflective of a diverse student population or society. An Ithaka S+R report (2017) on inclusion and diversity in the library shows that 89 percent of library administrations are composed of white people. Beilin (2017) discusses the long history of white librarianship, which is also reflected in the library collection and space in the example of Columbia University and Harlem. Though Columbia's Butler Library is in close proximity to Harlem, the institution was almost exclusively white. He

writes: "the association of European classical and medieval architecture with libraries and higher learning in general persists… because of an association with elitism, exclusivity, and class distinction" (Beilin 2017, 86). At Columbia University, portraits of past presidents of the college, including Dwight D. Eisenhower, a Prime Minister, and even Queen Elizabeth gaze unwaveringly at the student population. What could be described as a tribute to the institution's history is also an overwhelming reminder of white authority within libraries and education. As if the architectural structure of the libraries were not reminder enough of oppression, the artwork throughout the building reaffirms the racism of the system. Reed and Lohnes (2019) dive into the issue of library space and artwork, as well as they discuss Union College's Schaffer Library and the history of whiteness in the space though the campus has a high level of diversity. Like many libraries, there are an endless amount of portraits of white notable alumni and former college presidents or department heads. It is clear that the architectural design of these academic institutions and the artwork throughout is not a welcoming reflection of a diverse community, but a memorial to systemic racism.

Current Implications

But what does artwork and architecture have to do with student success in today's libraries? Walking through these grandiose academic buildings with their constant reminder of systemic racism is not conducive to intellectual discovery and lifelong learning and is a direct reflection of modern issues in pedagogy. In fact, if such structures dissuade students from entering or studying in the institution, then the library must address these concerns in terms of accessibility. Infrastructure is not the only signal of white supremacy in higher education. According to Ithaka's S+R's (2021) survey on the demographics of librarianship, white, non-hispanic librarians make up an alarming 75% of the whole. Unfortunately, those numbers do

not improve higher in the ranks of librarianship with Ithaka reporting an even more concerning 89% of non-hispanic white librarians making up those in leadership roles. Therefore, not only do students bear oppressive connotations of these historical structures, the faculty and staff of these structures are also not reflective of a diverse society. Unfortunately, Morales'(2015) survey on microaggressions in higher education revealed that black students are often subjected to microaggressions connecting them with lower income or working class and various stereotypes in gender. Nadal et., al (2014) posit that microaggressions lead to students feeling inadequate, unvalued, and lowering their self esteem. As college students navigate the stress of finances, academic expectations, work, and their personal lives, feeling invisible or unvalued at their academic institution can make a great impact on student well-being.

Of course, the issue is not just what the students see or hear as they walk among their peers in the academy-- the roots of white supremacy in higher education are present in current pedagogy. Recent literature has criticized the ACRL's *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* for not including rhetoric on diversity or race, which seems to undercut the lack of cultural representation in the history of American education (2020, Rapchak). Because the *Framework* does not address the barriers to information literacy and the impact of oppression on the learner's knowledge base, the *Framework* adopts a sense of neutrality. Rapchak uses Critical Race Theory to scrutinize the shortcomings of the *Framework* and identifies three specific areas of concern: "Authority is Constructed and Contextual," "Information Has Value," and "Scholarship as a Conversation." While biases are addressed within some of the explanations, they are still devoid of mention of race, which is inherently tied to bias in education. From the aforementioned history of white authority and oppression mentioned in the historical context section of this research, we know that structural racism is pervasive enough for

the need to go beyond discussing biases and agents of authority and actually identify issues in racial oppression. Saunders (2017) also discusses the limitations of the *Framework* through a discussion of information literacy as a human right. In their work, Saunders cites Article 19 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights assertion that everyone has the right to" seek, receive and impart information and ideas, through any media and regardless of frontiers" (Article 19, 1948) to make the point that information literacy becomes a human rights issue due to how it ties in with information access. Because communities are often limited to their worldview and the trajectory of access they have had, information literacy fails groups who rely on their silo of information. If "information is created within existing power structures" (Saunders 2017, 67) then the *Framework* is not aggressive enough in maintaining that it is imperative students evaluate the authority of the social structure. Battista et al. (2017) acknowledges how the *Framework* lists the need for the student to examine and understand bias and their own privilege, but no application of challenging normalized racist behavior. Rather, the Framework suggests that there is a structure and process to the student crossing the threshold of academic research, but relies on the student to determine for themselves where privilege and authority lie in their own context. Also, learners are still responsible for evaluating information and learning in ways "that the academy deems acceptable" (Battista et al. 2017, 117), which is contradictory to the student needing to understand how authorities are contextual. What value is an authority rooted in white supremacy that does not directly acknowledge the crisis of denying the legitimacy of non-Western thought. Keer and Bussman puts this idea into perspective:

> "Critical race theory, indigenous cultural wealth, corrupted globalization,
>
> unbalanced power relations, decolonization and liberalization of knowledge are
>
> all elements of information ethics but have been mostly neglected by higher

education instructional librarians as exemplified by their absence from the

information literacy instructional *Standards* and *Framework*" (6-7).

Ultimately, Keer and Bussman iterate that the *Standards* and *Framework* act as though students

are merely consumers that must make their own judgements and, as a byproduct, will reproduce

Eurocentrism in the classroom through following the set rules of the academy. Given the

historical context of education, the role of the academic librarian, and current, pervasive racial

tensions, how can librarianship even begin to balance the scale of justice for its users in crisis?

The Library and Social Justice Advocacy

According to the ACRL's State of America Libraries Report (2017), most libraries are

open an average of over 100 hours per week with at least 20 million students going in and out of

an academic library during a typical week. Through circulation, instruction, the collection, and

reference help, librarians have the opportunity and responsibility to support the needs of the

student community on their quest for academic success. Librarians and library workers are the

gatekeepers to the obscure fortress of information services-- the authority through which the

students rely upon to tell them which information is accurate and, therefore, good. If librarians

preach the law of equal access to information then how can they respond to the eurocentrism of

modern education? I will make the assumption that the average of the thousands of students

walking in and out of academic library buildings every day will not be quick to point out the

architectural symbolism of white balustrades and lament at the lack of social justice in their

society-- they don't have to. We perpetuate white supremacy without blatant expressions of

racism because it is built into the very structures through which we operate and this is a

librarian's responsibility because it means that we might not meet the public good, provide equal

access, and promote lifelong learning *for all*. The following is my recommendation for an

overhaul of efforts in terms of how the academic library can attempt to reconcile the dark history of American education with service and hope for the future.

Step One: Providing Immediate Information

First, any director leading diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts should begin with gathering resources on anti-racism. Pagowsky and Wallace (2015) of the University of Arizona document the creation of a guide designed to disseminate information to support the diverse college community in response to multiple recent instances of police brutality and the resulting #BlackLivesMatter movement. The authors address the protests against police brutality as a crisis facing the community (197). Because of this recent crisis, the librarians saw their role as information literacy instructors to support student learning by acknowledging institutional racism. Furthermore, Pagowsky and Wallace would encourage institutions of higher education to ask themselves "how our collections, organizational schemes, interfaces, instructional practices, and learning objects impact our communities" (200) when it comes to institutional racism in education and the world. If injustices of all types are a crisis of the community, then the library can address that crisis by shedding light on cultural bias and advocating for social justice through the collection, instruction, policy, and programming. Simmons University Library (Collins 2021) as an extensive anti-racism libguide featuring resources on anti-oppression and targeting racism across many demographics. The LibGuide does not just provide information, but defines terms like oppression, social justice, and "-misia." Oregon State goes even further with providing a Diversity Scholars Program for students of color that will mentor and academically support students interested in studying and seeking future employment in the world of library science (Fernandez & Williams). Offering this path and advertising the program in a LibGuide doesn't

just show that the library is committed to supporting diversity initiatives at the college level, but supporting students who will make it their mission to change the future of educational practice.

Step Two: Intentional Policy and Curriculum

The practice of gathering resources on diversity and inclusion is not just for students and faculty, but will be a necessary step in the initiative. The library director must charge the heads of departments with examining how their collections and services are or can be inclusive to marginalized members of the student population. How the exact responsibilities would line up with each staff member is subjective to how the workflow is structured, but the goal of decolonising the library is the responsibility of everyone who works for the institution. Librarians responsible for the information literacy curriculum can adopt what Keer and Bussman refer to as "critical information ethics" which include questioning the status quo of peer review and "academia as sole arbiter of truth (16)." Critical information ethics expands access to include the conversation about access to authority for minoritized groups whose cultures of thought have been oppressed or eradicated. This initiative would expand accessibility into the knowledge world and give a voice to cultural representations of truth, empowering learners of all histories, backgrounds, and futures. Battista et al. (2015) claim that a good way to incorporate different voices in information literacy is to promote sources of information from the *ACI Scholarly Blog Index*. According to the authors, blogs have value because they contain perspectives that operate outside of normative the normative academic frame. If the *Framework* already requires that students evaluate and ask questions about resources from a blog post to articles from a peer-reviewed journal, then why not connect students with resources they would find every day on the web that might connect more to relevant topics on social justice issues? The most damning consequence of not having some kind of critical information theory is that students

might become unknowingly alienated from playing a role in their own education and questioning academic authority. Instruction sessions and information literacy curriculum must integrate how to use research to take action-- to teach the learner to think critically so they may become a socially engaged citizen. Librarians must make a concerted, documented effort to teach with this intention as part of their diversity, inclusion, and equity initiatives.

Step 3: Reaching Inward and Reaching Outward

Librarians and library staff should work with other departments on campus to provide programming and artwork representing multicultural student and community voices. I have already mentioned how library physical spaces reflect white supremacy, yet it may often be difficult for libraries to secure funding for complete renovations. If the space already exists and students are visiting the space in high volumes, then libraries can promote art, events, and pieces of the collection through space usage and outreach efforts. The Schaffer Library at Union College found a way to bring diversity into the future through their series of exhibits and art installation (Reed & Lohnes 2019). Some of the titles in the *Art Installation Series* have included *Black Space: Reading (and Writing) Ourselves into the Future* and Branding the Afrofuture, which showcased either artwork or print materials. The idea behind this series is to take historically white-centric spaces with their portraits of white, male notable historical figures and give authority to minorotized groups that the space exists to serve (or, should exist to serve). The library should form a committee and list potential partners-- forming an alliance with diversity student groups on campus and work collaboratively to showcase multicultural art, print collections, and events where the student/faculty/staff community can have these important conversations. The University of Hawai'i at Manoa's Hamilton Library created a volunteer exhibits committee to highlight collections and promote diversity through outreach (Chen,

Thoulag, & Waddell 2018). When planning an exhibit, the Exhibits Committee requests ideas for exhibits and reviews them to be scheduled. Any time a new exhibit is scheduled, the committee meets to document the title of the exhibit, the collaborators, the focus, the format, and how the exhibit promotes diversity. This is a very targeted effort to make sure displays that will be shown at the hub of the campus-- the library-- represent student voices, highlight the scope of the library collection, and promote diversity. This is an excellent example of having a targeted, intentional effort behind library policy and procedure-- a product of collaborative effort that might actually stand a chance of showing those who visit the library that marginalized groups have agency.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion training are not enough for library staff. The weight-- the burden of denied access to education for marginalized groups is too great and reform must occur at the core of what we do. David Hudson (Hudson 2017, 13) goes so far as to criticize diversity and inclusion initiatives, making the claim that "to be included in a space is not necessarily to have agency within that space." Librarians have the responsibility to think critically about the frameworks that define what they do-- how they support their community and students-- so as not to run the danger of continuing white supremacy. DEI training seems to assume that the majority of professionals in higher education are blatantly racist, but it is the system itself, founded in longtime oppression and violence, that continues to promote social injustice.

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