

Moving Beyond Whiteness in North American Academic Libraries

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Over the last half a century, North American universities have become diverse institutions with multicultural students and programs in Women's studies, Black/African studies, regional studies and gay/lesbian/transgender studies. Academic libraries have responded to these changes and today most have policies or programs in place to support diversity goals. Despite this good start, a closer examination of common collection, service and cataloging practices reveals

that libraries still have a significant way to go before becoming fully inclusive institutions. Using African studies as a case example this article considers current academic library practices which are problematic, or lacking, in terms of moving beyond whiteness. Top down commitment and an allocation of financial and staff resources are needed for academic libraries to shed lingering vestiges of eurocentricism and move forward towards meaningful cultural inclusivity.

The academy expands – Some history

Historians have extensively chronicled the 1960s as a decade in which a renewed interest in civil rights gave rise to the hippie, feminist, peace and Black power movements in North America. During this era the university sector was one arena, among many, that came under critical scrutiny. People of color, women and others articulated that their stories, and bodies, were largely missing and began to pressure academic institutions to be included. The exciting result was the birth of women's studies, Black/African studies, regional studies and more recently gay/lesbian/transgender studies. This diversification of the curriculum and student body has had positive spin-offs for universities. One study found that

more than two-thirds of faculty respondents said that students benefit from learning in a racially and ethnically diverse environment, both with respect to exposure to new perspectives and in terms of willingness to examine their own personal perspectives (American Association of University Professors 2000).

From the viewpoint of today, and our knowledge of social justice, the global village and the

Internet, it is evident that this expansion of the academy was an inevitable and affirmative step for universities.

So how has this affected North American academic libraries? When you examine the historical record, it is clear that these changes occurred fairly rapidly but that it has taken libraries some time to respond. For instance, in the area of collection development,

more often than not faculty members labored to expand the curriculum and offer new courses with scarcely a thought for the kinds of library materials required to support student research (McKinzie 1994).

Nonetheless the 1980s and 90s saw a number of library initiatives respond to multiculturalism in the academy. The Association of Research Libraries founded its Diversity Program in 1993 and many libraries set up in-house equity committees. Library associations for Black, first nations, gay/lesbian/transgender and Asian librarians, among others, were founded. 1999 saw the *Big 12 Plus Diversity Now: People, Collections and Services in Academic Libraries* conference held in Austin and this year (2001) IFLA hosts a satellite meeting

entitled *Globalization, Technology and Multicultural services in Libraries*.

Despite these good efforts, a current review reveals that North American academic libraries still have a significant ways to go on issues of diversity and inclusivity. This essay outlines some of the major challenges facing libraries in the areas of collection, services and cataloguing. In particular, the case of African studies (the study of the experiences and expressions of people of African descent) is utilized to suggest why and how libraries should continue to move beyond whiteness.

Collection challenges

Collections are a hot issue with patrons, often the first thing they consider when judging a library. Students examining gender, race, sexuality and class often experience frustration trying to find research materials in libraries. An article on multicultural collections notes

As librarians we increasingly deal with yes, diverse attitudes and behaviors in our patrons, but, more significantly, with requests for kinds of information and narrative we have not traditionally stocked (Blandy 1994).

Thus a lack of diverse materials may be partly because bibliographers are playing catch-up, since collecting documentation of the activities of white males has hundreds of years head start after all. Unfortunately the way libraries select materials can also be an impediment to building collections of breadth and depth in Africana and other diverse fields of interest.

One problem is that material by and about diverse people continues to suffer from invisibility in the publishing and bibliographic world. For instance, in a study of reference selection tools, a list of 148 African-American titles were searched in *CHOICE*, *Library Journal*, *Reference Quarterly* and several other prominent resources. The results found that *CHOICE* reviewed 76%, *Library Journal* 13% and *Reference Quarterly* only 3% of the titles on the list. In addition, a content analysis of the reviews found that compared with a list of general reference books "almost 3 times as many African-American reference books are likely to receive mixed reviews" (Wiessinger 1994).

This lack, and type, of coverage reflects that to some extent bibliographers replicate mainstream

socio-cultural biases. Barbara Ford, past president of the American Library Association, refers to this when she states "the profession has a long, long, long way to go ... there is probably unconscious racism in all of us" (St. Lifer, 1997). Invisibility is also a result of racism in the publishing industry and larger society (overall, white communities have more access to the leisure time and money needed to take up writing than communities of color) which negatively effects the amount of diverse materials available for review and/or purchase. An ongoing examination of the biases we bring with us when we select material, as well as an understanding of how racism operates in the publishing process, would help us address the problem of invisibility.

Another challenge is the heavy reliance on approval plans in most mid to large academic libraries. These plans allow a library to create a detailed profile of collection criteria (e.g. subject, price, and academic level) used by the vendor to select the books and/or slips sent to the library for consideration. Subject librarians review the books and slips choosing which to keep and which to reject. Approval plans do a good job of covering major and mainstream publishers but are not great for ferreting out materials off the beaten path. Eliot Clarke, an African-Canadian writer, recently compiled a comprehensive bibliography of works by African Canadian authors. In his introduction, Clarke (1996) notes that "African Canadian literature has been from its origins the work of political exiles and native dissidents." Diverse materials have a history of being on the margins, published by small independent presses and by non-profit organizations or self-published.

York University is an urban Canadian university serving over 38,000 students. It has a relatively strong focus in Africana studies with several programs and research centers on the topic. To assess the strength of the collection of the York University Libraries, I undertook a rough count of Eliot Clarke's bibliography, taking the first 12 items (except French language and juvenile literature) of every letter of the alphabet by author and checking if York University Libraries owned them. On average we had 7 out of 12 or 58% of the titles, which is a disappointing showing given that part of York's mandate is to collect as much Canadian material as possible. The kinds of items

that were missing were largely titles that would not be covered by blanket approval plans. [1] They also included titles, which may not always reach the quality bar set by many academic libraries (e.g. print quality may be poor, they may be short in length, or deemed too popular). If libraries want to further diversify their collections they may need to widen their lens both in terms of searching more outside of approval plans and accepting titles that don't always resemble traditional scholarly material.

Some diverse material originates in other countries and ordering foreign titles comes with its own attendant problems. Chief among these of course is cost since distribution and currency conversion drive up prices. Ordering from the *two-thirds* world (a term I choose to use to refer to the so-called Third world since I think it provides a more accurate geographic and population picture) requires even more perseverance. The economic reality in many of these countries is such that publishers may not have steady access to the necessary raw materials of their trade: paper, electricity, printing supplies and binding materials. The book business is an expensive endeavor in any country (no one enters into it to get rich!) but in the two-thirds world the lack of basic needs make books truly a luxury item. Hence local publishing industries tend to be very underdeveloped with little or no government and infrastructure support. Despite these obstacles there are numerous indigenous publishing houses that offer us a different and wonderful perspective on the world. They typically have very small print runs of their titles and issues of cost and quality are prohibitive. And of course, one has to ferret out these potential treasures without glossy publishers' catalogues or marketing campaigns, which also makes them expensive to acquire in terms of staff time.

Clearly, these barriers mean that libraries committed to diversifying their collections need to be willing to assign additional resources, both in staff time and money, towards reaching that goal. As an inspiring example consider Penn State University where in the mid 1990s they appointed an ethnic studies librarian and initiated an innovative coding project. The project had all of their bibliographers code material they selected using a diversity code chart (e.g. items were labeled Black studies, women's studies,

gay/lesbian studies, disability studies). This allowed them to track how much of their budget exactly was going to these types of materials as well as to make bibliographers more conscious about the kinds of materials they were purchasing (Astroff et al. 2000). As you can imagine this project took a lot of effort, staff training, technological support and money to initiate but the rewards were considered well worth the costs.

The human angle

Up until very recently university culture was predominantly white, male and middle-class and the vestiges of this are still very present. For instance, one who is not a white male may have trouble feeling at home with the typical communication style at my institution. I find it very devoid of emotion, personal experience, colorful language and any kind of give and take rhythm, which I attribute to cultural differences.

Knowing our institutions are at heart a web of people and relationships, it is crucial to consider how patrons, and librarians, from various communities feel about their experiences in the library. People from non-mainstream cultures have a juggling act to understand and exist in the dominant culture while still needing to be able to slip back into their own home cultures. For example, for black university students,

The multiplicity of cultural objects means they must live in and adapt to a culture that is not theirs, while keeping in touch with and maintaining appreciation for black history and culture ... this is an amphibious existence where one must be able to adapt and cope successfully in one or the other environment depending on demand (Segal 1987).

This experience of being a semi-outsider can affect how comfortable, or not, students feel about approaching library staff. For instance, Steele talks about the stereotype threat, which he defines as "being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group" (Steele 1995). So while all students typically fear looking stupid when asking questions at the reference desk, students of color may feel an added burden of being representative of their community.

And it is safe to assume that some patrons have felt the sting of racism in the public arena

and may therefore adopt a suspicious demeanor as a defense tactic.

Recent studies have shown that in the United States today, for example, black customers receive worse overall service in businesses than do white customers. Students of color, who may have experienced discrimination in business settings are sensitive to the service they receive in the library (Papangelis 2000).

Similar studies in Canada have also demonstrated racism at work in housing, education and employment (Cannon 1995). Sensitivity training for public service workers often focuses on simplistic or descriptive cross-cultural issues (e.g. X community tends to act like this) rather than analytically “unpacking white privilege”, to borrow a phrase from Peggy McIntosh’s classic article on the subject (McIntosh 2000). Anti-racism training would provide a more solid basis for understanding and responding to some of the unique needs of patrons of color. While libraries are frequently willing to pay for expensive training on issues like leadership, teamwork and communication they often turn to cheaper, in-house solutions when seeking out race awareness training. Good anti-racism training is expensive, but one gets what one pays for – experience, depth and quality in considering a very complex phenomenon.

Switching to the other side of the reference desk, we know that having staff that reflects the multiracial, multiethnic backgrounds of the patrons we serve sends an important signal about valuing diversity. This is an obvious and accepted mantra and yet many libraries have not yet reached the goal of a truly diverse professional staff. Again York University Libraries is a case in point here: approximately 12% of our librarians are of color, while the student body we serve is more than 30% of color. York Libraries are working with our faculty union and appointed affirmative action representative to address this problem. This lack of diversity is especially reflected in the upper echelons of our profession – a count of associate and university librarians of color would surely be depressing. Interestingly there seems to be a difference of opinion about the severity of racism in the library field between librarians of color and white librarians. When 400 librarians (with equal numbers of white, Black, Asian and Latino representatives) were asked if white li-

brarians have better career opportunities, 63% of minority librarians replied yes compared to only 32% of their white colleagues (St. Lifer 1997). Still affirmative action programs are now considered best practice and the American Library Association and the Association of Research Libraries have a number of internship and scholarship opportunities for librarians of color. In an article detailing the history of diversity initiatives in libraries, the importance of affirmative action is stressed:

Libraries are including diversity efforts in strategic organizational development activities, with specific goals and measurable results Efforts to ensure equity consider laws and social barriers that limit or deny group access to educational and career opportunities. One of the merits of affirmative action, then, is that it focuses more directly on issues of individual and group equity because its very existence stems from the realization that legalized barriers have created disparity among groups. (Jones 2001)

In addition, there have been other creative attempts to deal with the lack of ethnic representation. Some libraries have initiated peer information programs where multi-ethnic undergraduate students are trained to provide basic reference service and refer more in-depth questions to librarians.

Human service issues present another area libraries need to be willing to put resources if they are truly committed to diversity. From a hiring point of view this might mean paying a little more money to hire a person of color whose credentials are slightly higher than what we were looking for, or setting aside a little more staff time to train a person of color whose credentials were slightly lower than what we were looking for. It could include mentorship programs or promotion opportunities for librarians from diverse communities. And on-going anti-racist training (as well as other oppression awareness workshops) is beneficial in improving the quality of our relationships with patrons and colleagues.

Cataloguing conundrums

Cataloguing is another area that at times is in tension with diversity goals. Clearly the Library of Congress (LC) has to achieve a certain amount of stability and sense in their classification sys-

tem and yet the world and people in it are constantly evolving. The resulting slowness of change in subject headings for example, can lead to the use of outdated and racist terms to refer to certain communities. In 1971 Sanford Berman, a pioneer in critically challenging librarians to consider the social implications of subject headings, wrote to LC about the use of the term “Yellow Peril” to refer to the Asian community noting “It is not only an affront to the people so labeled but also demeans the user” (Berman 2000). This term was finally erased from the books in 1989 – 18 years later! Current examples of problematic language include Eskimo, who prefer Inuit, Gypsies that should be The Roma, and Transvestites for Drag Queens (inaccurate). Choosing subject headings is undoubtedly complex since language depends on one’s cultural reference points and tensions inevitably arise when there are conflicting value systems at play. For instance, what responsibility does the profession have to uphold universally accepted human rights (i.e. UN) when juxtaposed with a community’s own views? Nonetheless the major problem here is that Western, white, male, heterosexual and middle class views of the world are still too often taken as the norm and center when constructing classification schemes.

The boundaries of subject headings are also tightly policed at the local level making it difficult to bring about changes in individual libraries. Recently, a colleague at another institution wanted to use Queer studies as a heading for a list of electronic journals. This was rejected in-house since it was not a proper LC term even though the word has been widely used in popular culture, has a very particular and positive political meaning and is used at her institution. In relation to Africana studies, bias has been described in the following way,

There is a colonial orientation in Western classification schemes. Most African and Caribbean history schedules reflect the European presence and activities on the continent and not the culture and deeds of African people themselves. (Bethel 1994)

Bethel conducted an exercise with a group of minority freshmen where each received a book jacket for black studies titles and were asked to draw up a list of subject headings. She found their terminology “right on the money” and also found that little of it matched the current LC

headings (Bethel 1994). Berman points out a perfect example of Eurocentric bias under the heading GOD. God is listed in conjunction with most of the world’s religions (at least those with written theology) excepting Christianity. The implicit message here of course is that apparently the Christian god is the only one who is truly omnipresent (Berman 2000)!

At the heart of these issues is naming – consulting with communities to see how they like to name and describe themselves and their experiences, rather than assuming the colonial role of “discovering” and “labeling” others. A more consultative process would allow libraries to explore the cultural implications of choosing one term over another and allow communities the opportunity to have meaningful input. LC does show signs of grappling with these challenging diversity issues. For instance, a group of librarians from the Black caucus of the American Library Association recently met with LC staff to discuss possible improvements to current African-American subject headings. They had an 85-page document to discuss! And they are trying to diversify their cadre of cataloguers through affirmative action plans. Still it is important to continue asking questions about the use of language in subject headings and how terms chosen may, or may not, further diversity goals.

Conclusion

Overall academic libraries have made important steps in responding to changes that have occurred in the academy in terms of diversity. There are many programs, chapters and policies in place to address multiculturalism and racism. However, we still have a ways to go in becoming truly culturally inclusive institutions and it is important to recognize that working towards this is challenging. Librarians, particularly those in management positions, must be willing to make money and time resources available to move beyond whiteness. Any kind of change means stretching in a different direction and while some initial roadblocks may be encountered, in the end, it should be well worth the effort. Indeed,

Multiculturalism demands that we re-educate ourselves. Our reeducation must begin with the proposition that all humans have contributed to world development and the

flow of knowledge and information and that most human achievements are the result of mutually interactive international effort. As repositories for history, information and knowledge, few institutions stand as readily equipped as libraries to become proponents of racial diversity.... Libraries can no afford to sit on the sidelines uninvolved in the critical discussions of race, for they can and do make a difference through their collection, staff, exhibits and programs" (Johnson-Cooper 1994).

Note

1. Few examples of some of the missing titles, with the type of publisher denoted, are:
The Window of Our Memories (1981) History of Blacks in Alberta – BCR Society of Alberta (non-profit)
Selected Poems (1983) – Poetry of Miss Lou or Louise Bennett – Sangster's Book Stores (foreign)
The Black Canadians: their history and contributions (1993) – Reidmore Books (small)
Telling the Truth : Reflections : Segregated Schools in Nova Scotia (1995) – Lancelot Press (small)
Dialect and/or Cultural Interference in Language Arts (1993) – educational study – Learning Improvement Centre (nonprofit)
Caribana: African Roots and Continuities: Race, Space and the Poetics of Moving (1996) – long essay – Poui Publications (small)

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