Critical Whiteness Studies & Academic Librarianship:

Problems & Possibilities

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What is Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS)?

- *McIntosh, 1988 (white privilege) & Morrison, 1992 (Playing in the Dark)*
- Aim: Make visible that which is invisible
- Whiteness is:

Debates in the Field

- Abolitionism
  - "Race traitor" (Ignatiev et al.)

    vs

- Reconstructionism (Giroux, et al.)
  - Reinventing whiteness

"Missing is an argument that not only includes participation by people of color, but begs the question of how they are affected by a nearly all-White strategy. Arguably staying with what they know best, Whiteness Studies educators speak to their own racial formation as Whites. But this is incomplete at best and reinforces the invisibility of people of color at worst." (Leonardo, 2013, p. 110)

Debates in the Field

- Particularities of whiteness
  - How whiteness intersects with class, gender, age, etc.
  - "White trash," minoritized or disadvantaged whites

- Critique
  - Divests whites of responsibility or complicity
  - "Appropriates language of racial oppression" (Nguyen, 1998)

Criticisms of CWS

- What's new about it?
- Centering of whiteness
- Prevalence of personal testimony

"White liberal guilt at its most performative has the…effect of diverting attention from the facts of white racism and oppression to how badly the Enlightened White Liberal feels about it." (López, 2005, p. 23)

- What about racism? What about people of color?

Whiteness in LIS Literature

- Espinal, 2001: calls for application of whiteness theory

- Whiteness in LIS History
  - Public libraries & racial projects (Honma, 2005)
  - Enlightenment values and white supremacy (de jesus, 2014)
  - White women librarians as colonizing agents (Schlesselman-Tarango, under review)
  - Children's lit and white supremacy in the US South (Hand, 2012)
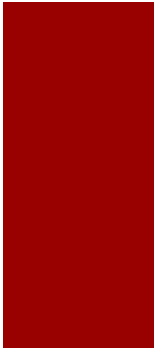
Whiteness in LIS Literature

- Whiteness in contemporary libraries/LIS
  - White privilege (Berry, 2004)
  - White awareness of racism in LIS (St. Lifer & Nelson,1997; Alabi, 2015)
  - LIS epistemology (Honma, 2005)
  - Exnomination of whiteness (Hussey, 2010)
  - LIS education (Pawley, 2006)

Additional Areas of Exploration

- Contemporary postcolonial, neocolonial, neoliberal projects & **white savior complex**
- Prevalence of **white women** in the field: How is femininity used to attempt to neutralize the violence of white supremacy?
- Whiteness in **information description & organization**
- How is whiteness invested in and protected at expense of people of color: **higher education, institutional racism**
- How do whites **preserve and rationalize** their power?
- White **behaviors, actions** in academic libraries
- LIS **curricula, language, mission** of academic libraries
- **Spaces and places** (physical & virtual)
- What does whiteness look like in **all-white settings**?

Suggestions Moving Forward

- Maintain a critical approach
  - Expose connections between whiteness and racism, injustice

- Do not fetishize whiteness
  - Trouble it

- Remain engaged with & aware of tensions
  - Ask the difficult questions

- Don't rely on CWS in isolation
  - Womanism, feminism, queer and disability theory, etc.

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