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Libraries on the frontlines: neutrality and social justice

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine libraries' responsibility to engage with and support communities of color as they challenge systemic racism, engage in the political process, and exercise their right to free speech. Many libraries have ignored the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, citing the need to maintain neutrality. Despite extensive scholarship questioning the validity of this concept, the framing of library neutrality as nonpartisanship continues. This paper examines librarianship's engagement with, and disengagement from black communities through the lens of the BLM movement. It also explores the implications of education, engagement, and activism for people of color and libraries today.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors have engaged the topic from a critical race perspective as a practice in exercising voice – telling stories, presenting counterstories, and practicing advocacy (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Findings – The assertion that libraries have been socially and politically neutral organizations is ahistorical. When libraries decide not to address issues relevant to people of color, they are not embodying neutrality; they are actively electing not to support the information and service needs of a service population. In order for libraries to live up to their core values, they must engage actively with communities, especially when those communities are in crisis.

Originality/value – As a service field, librarianship has an ethos, values, and history that parallel those of many other service fields. This paper has implications for developing understanding of questions about equitable service provision.

Keywords Social justice, Libraries, Neutrality, Library as place, African Americans, Black Lives Matter

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

On September 14, 2016, Dr. Carla D. Hayden was the first woman and first African American to be sworn in as the 14th Librarian of Congress. Considering her achievement, it would not be implausible to think that the field of librarianship had succeeded in attaining equity in diversity, but just as the election of the first African American President of the USA did not signal a “post-racial” America, the appointment of Dr. Hayden does not signal a post-racial American library system and culture.

Libraries are organizations that present themselves as gateways to knowledge, providing access to information and services to all Americans, and although they are ubiquitous in most local communities in the USA, they are infrequently addressed in organizational science literature. The American Library Association (ALA), the professional organization that provides guidance for many types of libraries (e.g. public, academic, school), and lists democracy, access, diversity, social responsibility, and the public good among its core values (American Library Association, 2004). Taken together with various position statements concerning censorship and inclusivity (American Library Association, 2006), it is unsurprising that many librarians consider social justice work central to librarianship.

Unfortunately, many librarians operate within political and organizational structures that do not prioritize active anti-racism work among their core values. The construct of the library as a neutral entity limits the work that is necessary to truly provide responsive, equitable, and inclusive access to information, skill development (such as social media use, information creation, data, and media literacy), community conversations, and other library services for communities dealing with crises or social unrest. This construct (neutrality) limits libraries to a passive “diversity” designed to ensure (at best) basic universal access to already-existing space and resources (through collection development), and a path to librarianship for aspiring students of all backgrounds. It does not encourage the library to actively engage with community issues unless those issues are “apolitical,” and does not obligate the librarian to seek out and attempt to ameliorate conditions within local communities. While diversity (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Thomas and Ely, 1996) is important, and has framed much organizational work in useful ways, it manifests differently from antiracism, and anti-oppression work (such as that done by Black Lives Matter (BLM)) in libraries. An active, critical approach to engaging with community needs that explicitly acknowledges the influence of social, cultural, financial, and political power on information access and information behavior is necessary for librarianship to confront limitations

to freedom of speech and informed citizenship (especially in black communities). Trumpeting neutrality ignores the core values of librarianship, and allows inequality to persist as status quo (Jensen, 2008). This might explain why there have been few rigorous, systematic studies documenting libraries' anti-racism work in communities (Hudson, 2017), or interventions related to BLM (cf. Seale, 2016; Pagowsky and Wallace, 2015), despite an extensive body of work on general issues of "multiculturalism," "tolerance," and "diversity" in the collections and in library services (e.g. Bowker and Star, 1999; Honma, 2005; Olson, 2001).

The values and challenges of librarianship align with those of the BLM movement. The BLM movement affirms the value and dignity of black lives and works toward reversing the systematic devaluation of black lives (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). While there is a difference between the #BlackLivesMatter organization and the BLM movement (which lacks the same level of organizational structure), the two share broad goals. The #BlackLivesMatter organization has stated the goal of black affirmation and has framed the movement as an intentional intervention. The core values of librarianship – public good, social responsibility, and democracy – support these goals.

Within one week, in July 2016, Delrawn Small, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile were killed by police officers (Tracy, 2016). While their deaths prompted an outrage across the country, a popular online community of librarians was conspicuously silent with respect to the pain, anxiety, and grief of the nation. Instead, many of the online posts focused on PokemonGo! and how libraries might capitalize on the traffic that the game generates. In that moment, the invisibility of librarians of color, our struggles, and our realities was made all too clear. However, this unfortunate illustration did provide the authors with an opportunity.

In August 2016, during the National Diversity in Librarianship Conference in Los Angeles, California, we engaged a group of our peers in a town hall discussion about the tensions facing libraries, and society. The town hall, called "*Caught in the Crossfire: A Conversation on Libraries and Communities in Distress*," began what we hope will be an ongoing discussion about the role of libraries in moving beyond abstract discussions on "diversity" into transformative action, affirming people of color in librarianship and library spaces. What follows in this paper is an in-depth treatment of the topics discussed in that session.

The authors have engaged this piece of scholarship from a critical race perspective – as a practice in exercising voice, telling stories, presenting counterstories, and practicing advocacy (Ladson-Billings, 1998) – that we hope will speak to researchers, practitioners, and students in library and information science (LIS), but also to other research and professional fields that serve various publics. Individually, each author addresses a different topic related to libraries and communities in distress. Collectively, we make a case against neutrality (defined as disengagement from issues relating to the black community) in LIS practice, research, and pedagogy; examine the historical and present costs, benefits, and complications of engaging in work that affirms the value of black lives; and offer strategies for researchers, instructors, and professionals engaged in this work.

2. The fallacy of neutrality

Neutrality is just being what the system asks us to be (Horton and Bell, 1990, p. 102).

Libraries are not, and have never been, socially or politically neutral institutions (Jaeger and Fleischmann, 2007; Jensen, 2004). As community anchors (Morales et al., 2014), libraries (and librarians) actively influence their communities, and are constantly making choices that shape

informed citizenship through public access to information. A large portion of LIS research and practice focus on deconstructing past information behavior in order to inform construction of new information spaces and systems. Embedded into those information spaces and systems are particular epistemological and ontological assumptions, personal and social values, and ways of knowing and being generated by researchers and practitioners (Brook et al., 2015). These embedded values influence how members of various publics can access and interact with library services and information systems. As a result, seemingly “neutral” libraries are often those that ignore the specific concerns of marginalized groups and address those of racial, social, and political majorities. The very question of access is a political one; the placement of library branches and allocation of resources, programming choices, and content of library collections all represent social and political interests (Iverson, 2008). As a field, LIS has acknowledged the power of the librarian as creator – literally and figuratively behind screens – building systems and nudging “users,” “patrons,” and now communities to action. The field has examined and affirmed its dedication to using this power for some conception of social good (American Library Association, 2004). Despite this, directly confronting racial oppression has, for a long time, presented special difficulty for LIS, as it has for other fields (Kumasi and Manlove, 2015; Gay, 2010).

Despite libraries’ continued popularity as important community institutions (Horrihan, 2016), American librarianship has long had a difficult relationship with actively engaging communities of color. In many ways, the social structure of racial tensions in librarianship have mirrored larger public battles over race and racism, with national governing bodies pushing local library systems to be more inclusive (Knott, 2015). While the ALA took public positions against racial segregation as early as 1936, local libraries in the Southern USA had official policies against Q4 serving black patrons well into the late twentieth century (Crosswell, 1996). This was library neutrality in action; by following local and federal law, local libraries chose to deny service to millions of black Americans. It is not clear how much the field has progressed in this regard. At last count, almost 90 percent of librarians in the USA were white (American Library Association, 2013), and still, LIS struggles to address issues of diversity, inclusion, or social justice in consistent ways (Subramaniam and Jaeger, 2010).

Many individual librarians and LIS researchers have begun to promote transformative social justice and to challenge the concept of neutrality, positioning it as a practice in embedded whiteness (e.g. Bourg, 2014; Hathcock, 2015; Vinopal, 2016), despite reticence (within many institutions) to openly address structural racism in LIS (e.g. in admissions, hiring, tenure, library placement, and library behavioral policies). This paper frames neutrality as a practice in structural oppression of marginalized groups, as it is characterized by disengagement from (as opposed to active engagement with) crises within communities of color. When libraries frame disengagement as neutrality, they excuse themselves from engaging with social movements like BLM. From this perspective, choosing neutrality (or disengagement) in time of conflict is choosing to maintain status quo at the expense of one portion of a community.

3. BLM and so does free speech

History despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived but if faced with courage, need not be lived again (Maya Angelou).

Throughout the US history, free speech has represented both the protections enshrined by the First Amendment of the United States (n.d.) and the larger ethos of free expression that pervades

the American culture. It has played a major role in every successful push by marginalized groups to have a voice in the struggle to secure civil rights, fight against prejudice, and move toward greater equality (Stauss, 2004). Since its adoption into the US law in 1791, the amendment, which prohibits Congress from making laws “respecting an establishment of religion, prohibiting the free exercise of religion, infringing on the freedom of speech and infringing on the freedom of the press” (US Const. amend. I), has strived to guarantee the basic freedoms of American citizens and has seemingly served as a hallmark for an open society. Without free speech, the efficacy of social movements like BLM would be undermined. To fully understand the intersection of BLM and the freedom of speech as it relates to LIS, it is first important to examine it within the broader historical context of civil rights in America.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is arguably one of the greatest social movements in American history (Alexander, 2011; Lawson, 1996). The movement had as its origins nearly 300 years of slavery, segregation, and discrimination experienced by black people in the USA (Franklin and Moss, 2000). Slavery was largely outlawed after the Civil War, and equal rights for black Americans were seemingly guaranteed by the ratification of the 13th amendment. However, there was an exception to the amendment that allowed for slavery to continue as punishment for those who were convicted of crimes (Franklin and Moss, 2000). Nonetheless, discrimination, harassment, lack of opportunity, and poverty after the civil rights movement had a perennial effect on African Americans continuing into the twenty-first century.

Reconstruction laws, which were implemented as part of the reorganization of the Post-Civil War south, attempted to define the conditions under which white southerners (who had largely favored secession) and black Americans (who were newly recognized as citizens) would coexist, and the degree to which they could participate in social and political processes (Smith, 2014). With the overwhelming rejection of reconstruction by white Americans, social, political, and economic conflicts between the two groups intensified. The Anti-black legislation enacted in 1880 legalized segregation through Jim Crow Laws, mandating that business owners and public institutions keep black and white clientele separated. *Plessy vs Ferguson* (1896) codified race relations by providing legal justification for a country (and a library) that was “separate but equal.” It was not until nearly 60 years later in 1954, that *Brown vs Board of Education* set a precedent for widespread integration (Figa and MacPherson, 2005). Still, libraries remained segregated.

Despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, discrimination in public spaces (including libraries) continued. This presented a problem for the ALA, as a national association that prided itself on promoting the core principles of democracy. Several southern library associations refused membership to black Americans until activist librarian E.J. Josey forced the ALA to stand by its stated values by successfully passing a resolution that led to the integration of southern chapters of the ALA (Chancellor, 2011). Josey described it as “the beginning of a revolution in the ALA to make the association responsive to all its members” (Josey, 1970, p. 17).

Now, in the twenty-first century, we still wrestle with the same civil rights issues as generations past. African Americans are still being racially profiled, efforts to restrict voting are ongoing, and incarceration rates for African Americans are still high. According to the National Prisoner Statistics Program, 745,000 black men were either in federal prison or in local jails in 2013 (Porter, 2015). This is characterized by Michelle Alexander (2011) as the New Jim Crow. Alexander contends that by targeting black men (most recently through the War on Drugs), the US criminal justice system has become a modern system of racial control akin to Jim Crow. It

follows that the BLM movement is an extension of the American Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. BLM protests of police brutality against unarmed African Americans are modern examples of citizens exercising their right to free speech and assembly.

Public and academic libraries have also found themselves at the center of questions about free speech in library spaces. News stories about students using library space for protest and organizing at Dartmouth College (Favors, 2015) and the University of Houston (Dwyer, 2016) have reignited debates about the appropriate role of the library as a space for exercising free speech.

Throughout the American history, black people have challenged the infrastructures at the nuclei of their oppression by claiming the constitutional right to free speech, even when de jure recognition of that right was not granted by American law. This promise of free speech provided an often-restricted gateway to political action, but black Americans continued to protest for racial justice, even as efforts to claim their constitutional rights were repressed. Libraries have an ongoing responsibility to help educate their communities, and serve as defenders of intellectual freedom and free expression. Without the exercise of free speech, there would be few opportunities to bring attention to the most critical issues facing the American society in the twenty-first century. Systemic and institutional racism are defining civil rights and social justice issues of our time. We have come to understand that to be silent about the violence and threats to lives and well-being of black people is to be complicit in that violence and those threats” (Cohen and Greenfield, 2016).

4. From rhetoric to reality: the public library as safe space

Traditionally, public libraries have presented themselves as safe spaces for civil engagement and public discourse. Drawing on Habermas (1989), Alstad and Curry (2014, p. 11) concludes that “as a physical place, the public library exemplifies the public sphere.” These public spaces continue to serve as settings “for debate, the exercise of rights as citizens, and a place where people of diverse backgrounds can meet as a community” (Staheli and Thompson 1997, pp. 29-30). However, for many individuals, the public library as a physical space has been more:

A public library is free, non-judgmental, and safe. It has open evenings and weekends, centrally located, open to all ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, political and sexual orientations, and interests. It is a true public space and an ideal setting for expression of diverse opinions on political and social issues (Colleen Alstad, 2014, p. 17).

This perception of the library as a physical space that remains open for all members of the community, in times of turmoil, reflects a broader understanding of the library as fulfilling its social responsibility through protection of equal physical and intellectual access to information. Here, neutrality is framed as disengagement from community crises, and is defined in opposition to active engagement with community in times of crisis. This differs from a concept of neutrality that is defined in opposition to partisanship (or preferences for one group over another). In choosing to remain open and actively supporting the community with space and information through crisis (rather than closing and avoiding conflict altogether), a library may choose to remain non-partisan, but to actively engage with the community during difficult times. An excellent example of this is evident in Archie Dick’s (2007) analysis of the role libraries played during South Africa’s struggle to end apartheid. Contrary to the belief that public libraries on the Cape Flats were “inadequate, passive, and politically indifferent to social change in South Africa in the 1980s,” township libraries were, in fact, “places for ideas and debate, spaces [emphasis added] in working-class areas with low levels of literacy where the books, as props, supported

oral discourse” (Dick, 2007, p. 710). They facilitated meetings, covert actions, and became safe places for political education and meetings in addition to providing traditional library services. The residents used these libraries “and invested them with meaning and identity to cope with memories of forced removals, to confront state-imposed violence, and to foster a sense of community” (Dick, 2007, p. 710). As a result, these public libraries became shared, though contested, safe spaces.

This was also true of the Ferguson Municipal Public Library (FMLP) following the police shooting death of an unarmed African-American teenager, Michael Brown. During the weeks-long protests and civil unrest that ensued, FMLP stayed open (Berry, 2015). When the grand jury failed to indict the white police officer that shot Brown, the series of (sometimes violent) protests that followed increased demands on the library. In response, FMPL did not simply increase its services, but specifically tailored these to meet the immediate needs of the community. In addition to programs and entertainment for children, the library provided space for students when schools delayed fall openings; services for local businesses needing government aid; as well as emotional healing materials that included information on civil rights and mental health services. The Director Scott Bonner said the library became a safe haven for all (Berry, 2015). See Foster and Evans (2016) for library projects related to Ferguson.

On April 19, 2015, Freddie Gray died from injuries sustained while in the custody of Baltimore police. A series of protests against police brutality followed with several erupting in violence. Carla Hayden, then CEO of the Pratt Library, decided to keep the libraries open. The decision of whether or not to open the Pennsylvania Avenue branch was left to the discretion of the Director, Melanie Townsend-Diggs, with the understanding that they would lock the doors if in the event of potential danger to staff and patrons. They would, nonetheless, allow patrons to remain in the library for safety. When the community and the police clashed violently following Gray’s funeral, the library stayed open, even as the CVS pharmacy across the street burned. The Pratt Library followed the FMPL service model.

If libraries are to continue to actively engage and support their communities in times of crisis, then we must train future librarians to respond to these needs. It is simply not enough to tell them to hope for the best while preparing for the worst. They need to know, ahead of time, how to foster a safe physical environment during emergencies and times of immediate turmoil, but also how to address the longer-term information and service needs of a community in crisis.

These types of courses are not typically offered in LIS programs. Nevertheless, many LIS programs currently offer courses in which facets of this topic could be constructively incorporated. For example, foundations courses, which often discuss the role of the library in local communities, should explore the notion of the library as safe space, what this means in the BLM era, and how to move this from rhetoric to reality (drawing examples from Ferguson and other libraries that have exemplified this ideal). Many programs have at least one course that addresses information services to culturally diverse communities. Within this course, students could explore how human spatial relations and perceptions are influenced and shaped by culture, how different cultural groups relate to the library space, and how this knowledge might be used to meet community needs and enhance user experiences in times of crises. In a young adult services course, students could explore the design of library spaces that meet the needs of teens, and function as safe spaces for teens in times of crises.

Communities experience crises, whether libraries and librarians are prepared or not. Hayden warns, “You may not be fighting, but you’re in the fight” (Cottrell, 2015b, para. 13). If we want to arm our students to support their communities, we can no longer overlook their training.

5. Reading and teaching for racial justice: a classroom narrative

In the USA, the majority of white and black people do not have close friends outside of their race (Cox et al., 2016). Literature is one way to close this social distance. For example, graphic novelist Gene Luen Yang (2016) communicated (in his “Glare of Disdain” comic) that reading about people whose experiences differ from our own – reading through windows – can help us understand each other. The growth of the BLM movement, and increased awareness about racial violence against black people in the USA has encouraged more libraries and librarians to include BLM in library discourse (Eckert, 2016) and in library work (Parrott, 2016).[1]

LIS faculty are responsible for ensuring that students understand the relevance of social movements like BLM. Faculty have begun to publish more on pedagogy that explicitly addresses social justice, civil rights, and inclusion from an active (rather than historical) perspective (e.g. Cooke and Sweeney, 2016; Mehra and Rioux, 2016). This has prompted a slow shift toward explicit discussion of these issues in the classroom, but the continued development of pedagogy related to anti-racism in librarianship is largely done ad hoc by few professors, at few institutions. The extent to which these teaching strategies work, and to which library students and librarians are willing or able to facilitate these types of discussions in their communities, remains to be seen.

Students in Children’s and Young Adult librarianship courses (who go on to work with children and youth) are expected to master competencies set by the Association for Library Service to Children and the Young Adult Library Service Association in areas such as literacy, selection and promotion of materials, and community outreach. During the 2017 panel, Dahlen described the efforts made over two semesters to develop and refine BLM-related course assignments. In the spring of 2016, she assigned Reynolds and Kiely’s (2015) award-winning young adult novel, *All American Boys: A Novel*, as required reading for a course in Services for Children and Young Adults (which focuses on serving children, young adults, and their families in public libraries). *All American Boys* addresses race and police brutality from the perspectives of two characters (one black, and one white). Readers engage with both perspectives, and are confronted by the complexities of the larger social context within which the story occurs. Students were asked to read the novel and do their own research to develop an understanding of the cultural, economic, and institutional context of the novel. They would use this knowledge of context to develop culturally relevant library programming (as they would in a community or library setting). Despite their research training, several students had trouble finding resources and planning library programming that would facilitate conversations around the issues presented in the text. Dahlen repeated the assignment in the 2016 Fall semester with her Library Materials for Children course, but sought institutional support in developing the course. This time, she assigned *Black Lives Matter* (Edwards and Harris, 2016), a non-fiction children’s book addressing the historical and contemporary aspects of the BLM movement, along with a few chapters from *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota* (Shin, 2016). Dahlen also arranged (with institutional support) a guest lecture by Harris (who is a Legal Scholar, Professor, and Chair of American Studies at Macalester College). Students responded positively. One student said Dr. Harris’ talk gave them “a much longer view of current events.” Others shared that they had suggested their institutions to purchase *Black Lives Matter* for their students.

These two exercises demonstrated the need for LIS instructors to abandon the assumption that strong research skills are enough for students (and librarians) to educate themselves on issues of

social justice. Social justice work is not always intuitive, and it is sometimes necessary to give students additional context and guidance as they explore issues that might be new to them.

Additionally, recognition and acknowledgment of local context matters. Incorporating *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota* into the second assignment highlighted local issues, and helped students connect the text to their own communities. Two black men (Jamar Clark and Philando Castile) had recently been killed in the Twin Cities area. At the time, the state of Minnesota was considered (by at least one ranking) the second worst state in the USA for black residents (The Huffington Post, 2016). Librarians in Minnesota (and elsewhere) needed to understand contextual factors in order to provide local communities with resources for learning and spaces for programming and discussions.

In the aftermath of the murder of Trayvon Martin, Elliott (2012) criticized the publishing industry for failing to publish books that depict young black men as fully human. She quoted Brent Staples, who wrote “Society’s message to Black boys – ‘we fear you and view you as dangerous’ – is constantly reinforced.” Elliott (2012) concluded that “Trayvon Martin was killed by a very old idea that will likely take generations and an enormous cultural transformation to dislodge”. LIS faculty have the responsibility to train future librarians how to select and promote literature that shows the full humanity of black people, rather than the often-limited portrayals seen and read in much of today’s media.

6. Choosing battles and self-care

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare (Audre Lorde).

Activism is collective, but it is also personal. Librarians, instructors, researchers, practitioners, students, and community members all need to decide, for themselves, what battles to take on, and how to engage in those battles. There must be room for creativity, individuality, and self-care within activism.

Differences in context – social, cultural, and institutional variations – matter when making decisions about engaging in activism (Jennings and Andersen 2003). Social norms differ among communities, and assessments of effectiveness and risk should be made with thorough understandings of local contexts. For example, on the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign campus, physical marching and boycotting are the norm for activism, and are rewarded through formalized award programs (Cooke, 2014). At some universities, physical marching is frowned upon, and the expectation is that activists contact local government officials directly, organize their communities, and engage in more cerebral activities. From an institutional perspective, it is important to note that these norms and implicit rules of engagement can alienate people whose preferred modes of engagement do not match local culture. From a personal perspective, it is important that we participate the ways that best suit us personally – physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

In addition to the contextual and personal considerations that accompany advocacy and activism, there are numerous practical considerations. During stalled contract negotiations in 2016, librarians and faculty at Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus, were locked out of their offices by university administration. Before these professionals could stage a protest and walk the picket line, they first had to secure a permit to use a bullhorn (Drabinski, 2016). Although it seems like a minute detail, failure to secure this permit could have resulted in citations or other sanctions, and detracted from the work at hand. Responsive teaching and

research also require attention to mundane practicalities. Responding to current events through new course development or research requires awareness of course approval and human subjects requirements. Keeping tabs on practical lessons is useful for replicating activist work. As a result of practical lessons learned from various protests, the American Civil Liberties Union (2016) and other organizations have developed apps and lists of best practices to assist protesters in asserting and protecting their rights. Social media has proved a powerful tool for activism – even for those who cannot walk a picket line. This list could go on indefinitely, but the takeaway here is that activists should be smart and plan ahead. Forethought and planning are also important tools for action.

Stress, racial battle fatigue, and deleterious health effects are always dangers when protesting and advocating for racial justice. The authors of this paper all work in higher education, have teaching responsibilities, and deeply and frequently consider issues of racial equity in their workplaces and in their classrooms. Discussing these topics in the workplace can cause tension, isolation, and can unearth cognitive dissonance, resistance, and resentment, especially in groups of people from different cultures and belief systems. The constant energy spent trying to promote equality can result in racial battle fatigue, which can be encapsulated by the following anecdote:

If you can think of the mind as having 100 ergs of energy, and the average man uses 50 percent of this energy dealing with the everyday problems of the world – just general kinds of things – then he has 50 percent more to do creative kinds of things that he wants to do. Now, that's a White person. Now, a Black person also has 100 ergs. He uses 50 percent the same way a White man does, dealing with what the White man has [to deal with], so he has 50 percent left. But he uses 25 percent fighting being Black, [with] all the problems being Black and what it means (Senior Black Male Professor, as quoted in Smith, 2004, p. 171).

Battle fatigue can also result from microaggressions that are experienced in everyday life. Microaggressions, which are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271), can affect students of color (Harwood et al., 2015; Harwood et al., 2012) and faculty of color (Closson et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2009). The cumulative effects of physical stress, battle fatigue, and microaggressions can have serious implications on our mental health (Gutiérrez et al., 2012; Mereish et al., 2012; Nadal and Haynes, 2012; Ong et al., 2013). The fifth edition of the Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders has expanded its discussion and diagnosis criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder to factor in the cumulative effects of racism and race-based trauma (Williams, 2013).

Developing, maintaining, and using personal voice is important, as is respecting one's own preferences for community advocacy. While there are several general resources for self-care for librarians (e.g. 5 min Librarian; Barrientos, 2016), there is little research or writing specifically focused on the intense stress than can result from racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004) in what is a largely monocultural field (Brook et al., 2015). Learning to incorporate self-care and balance and the pros and cons of tackling tough and taboo topics in the classroom takes a great deal of internal and external work. It takes introspection and reflection, and building a collaborative network of people with similar goals and sensibilities. This process also requires the development of physical and mental safe spaces (Alfred, 2001) in order to have the “freedom to think out loud” (Fries-Britt and Kelly, 2005, p. 238) and have the ability to be vulnerable with like-minded friends and colleagues.

This section began with a quote by Poet, Activist, and Librarian Audre Lorde, who told us that the “personal is political.” It ends with another statement that demonstrated her understanding of the issues and environments with which we struggle, even decades later. She stated, “You cannot, you cannot use someone else’s fire. You can only use your own. And in order to do that, you must first be willing to believe that you have it” (Lorde in Byrd et al., 2009, p. 3). We have it. Let us use it.

7. Conclusion

Since the conception of the modern American public library, librarianship has struggled with consistently standing against racial injustice (Tucker, 1998). Instead, libraries have clung to a color-blind philosophy of neutrality that has allowed for disengagement from communities of color. Over the past 30-40 years, the field has made efforts to improve responsiveness to these issues. We note similar trends in the broader field of organizational science (Plaut et al., 2009) and other professional service fields such as education (Diem and Carpenter, 2012; Gillborn, 2006), medicine (Burgess et al. 2007; Kumagai and Lypson 2009), nursing (Boutain, 2005), and social work (Vera and Speight, 2003). But there is more to do.

Librarians and others in the field have begun to engage in public and private debates about the role of libraries as community organizations in responding to events that cause community crises (e.g. McLain, 2016), asking whether libraries should continue to aim for “neutrality” in issues involving civil rights, and what neutrality means for the library and the community. We propose that neutrality is not an option. Ignoring racial context glosses over the history of racial injustice in the USA and in American libraries, and dooms us to repeat the mistakes of the past. Openly addressing the BLM movement by hosting community forums, invited speakers, displays, and programming can help community members understand the issues involved, and give them a larger context for understanding citizens’ rights, and the role and history of protest in the US. Libraries can provide spaces for discussion, investigation, and activism as part of promotion of informed citizenship.

As a field that claims to hold social responsibility, public good, diversity, and democracy at its core (American Library Association, 2004), librarianship has a moral responsibility to address the needs of communities. We can do this by educating ourselves about historical and current social contexts, by doing the extra work required to engage our students with social justice in the classroom, engaging with communities in library spaces during times of crisis, and by taking and teaching the practical steps needed for activism on behalf of our communities. In the short term, avoidance of discussions about racism and police brutality might seem to be the best way to manage potentially explosive community tensions, but this runs counter to the values of the field. This avoidance de-prioritizes the safety and rights of people of color. If librarianship supports the intellectual growth of the public, and upholding an informed democracy, then libraries’ refusal to stand for black lives is participation in the maintenance of a second class. This is not neutrality, and history will not judge it kindly. If libraries are to remain relevant in the next century, cowardice is a luxury we cannot afford.

Note

1. In the aftermath of Philando Castile’s murder in July of 2016, Hennepin County Librarian Chelsea Couillard-Smith developed three BLM reading lists.

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