

**Wayne State University**  
**DigitalCommons@WayneState**

---

School of Library and Information Science Faculty  
Research Publications

School of Library and Information Science

---

7-1-2013

# "The Library Is Like Her House": Reimagining Youth Of Color In LIS Discourses

Kafi D. Kumasi

Wayne State University, [ak4901@wayne.edu](mailto:ak4901@wayne.edu)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kumasi, K. (July 2013). "The library is like her house": Reimagining youth of color in LIS discourses. In Bernier, A. (Ed) Transforming Young Adult Services: A reader for our age (pp.103-113).  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/slisfrp/95>

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Library and Information Science at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Library and Information Science Faculty Research Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.



## 4

### **“The Library Is Like Her House”**

Reimagining Youth of Color in LIS Discourses

*Kafi D. Kumasi*

In the library and information science (LIS) field, scholarly discourses and practices tend to overlook or marginalize the unique backgrounds, identities, and literacy practices of youth of color, or youth from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds. In this chapter, I use some of the hallmark themes of critical race theory (CRT) to interrogate the ways in which the LIS field sees and positions youth of color against the backdrop of the mainstream white cultural norms and institutional practices. In keeping with the CRT theme *voice*, I argue that it is just as important for LIS scholars to understand how youth of color view and experience libraries and librarians as it is for LIS scholars to contemplate new ways of seeing and defining young adults. I conclude by offering a series of critical questions that might help LIS scholars move toward more culturally sensitive conceptualizations of youth.

If the charge of this volume is to examine the broad question of how the LIS field should define or envision young adults (YAs), then the specific goal of this chapter is to examine that query as it relates to youth of color. The repositioning of this question, I believe, helps place issues of race, power, and white privilege more squarely at the forefront of LIS scholarship, which to the present has not received such critical examinations

(Honma, 1995). One of the goals of this chapter is, therefore, to help LIS scholars develop a more critical, reflexive stance that would enable them to understand how whiteness and white privilege function in their own lives and ultimately how they envision youth of color in libraries. I contend that the current (and historical) vision of youth in libraries is one that has been framed primarily by Eurocentric cultural norms and aesthetics. Everything from collection development policies, rules of library usage, library programming, and hiring practices, to views about what constitutes literacy has been historically constructed by and for whites (Pawley, 1998).

Another goal of this work is to insert the voices and experiences of youth of color into the conversation, particularly as it relates to their experiences in libraries. Doing so will help offset an often one-sided conversation about what libraries can do for youth of color that does not include their own voices and experiences. Critical race theory (CRT) is a promising interpretive lens through which to examine this topic, because it holds whiteness and white privilege up to scrutiny while foregrounding the voices of people of color as a legitimate point of entry for examining these issues (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Therefore, in this chapter I use three hallmark themes of CRT—voice, interest convergence, and whiteness as property—to help frame a discussion about the ways in which libraries can better envision and define youth of color.

## Voice

*“The library is like her house.”*

—HOPE, 15-year-old African-American female

Sample evidence from my dissertation research with a diverse group of African-American youth confirms the notion that some youth of color experience feelings of cultural disconnect with their school and public libraries and librarians. The above quote was taken from a segment of transcript gathered during a book club conversation I helped to facilitate (Kumasi, 2008). The youth were being asked some preliminary questions about their library usage and reading habits. Hope’s statement that “the

library is like her house” seems to capture a certain view that some library spaces reflect the cultural norms and values of the librarians who operate them. Moreover, her choice of the word *house* is significant because it carries certain implicit references to words like *ownership*, *comfortability*, and *exclusivity*.

To further dissect Hope’s statement from a CRT perspective, one might ask questions such as the following: Would you ordinarily feel welcomed in her house? Are there any symbols or cultural things in her house that remind you of home? Do the rules that seem to govern her house seem similar to the rules your family keeps at home? Could your family afford a house like hers and do your neighbors look like you? Would living at her house enable you to attend a desirable school? And finally, do you think her house was ever been broken into? If so, how swift do you think the police would respond?

CRT provides the interpretive power to ask these kinds of provocative questions since it looks at the more systemic issues that underlie current racial inequalities. Through the construct of “voice,” CRT scholars recognize the centrality of the experiential knowledge of people of color and view this knowledge as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination. Therefore, from a CRT perspective, the statement that “the library is like her house” would not be dismissed simply as one person’s subjective opinion. Rather, as a CRT analysis it would acknowledge the ability of a person or a group to articulate experiences in ways that are unique to that person or group (Dixson and Rousseau, 2006). Through storytelling and counter-narratives, disenfranchised people are provided the intellectual space to name their own realities in areas such as academia, where they may have been previously marginalized.

## Interest Convergence

Interest convergence is another hallmark CRT theme that can help library scholars question the way they see (or don’t see) youth of color in libraries. Interest convergence is a thesis proposed by Derrick Bell that maintains the white majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when

it suits its interests to do so. This thesis plays out subtly, often requiring multiple theoretical tools to fully unpack. It has been used most notably by leading CRT scholar Bell to explain the real impetus behind the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Wright, 2005). Through his research, Bell found that the motivating factor behind the bill's passage was to protect the national reputation of the United States amid a tense political climate during the Cold War (Bell, 1980). The world was watching the United States, and leaders in the US government knew that they could not very well take a moral stand against other countries that were facing human rights dilemmas if their own country did not afford Black citizens basic equal rights. Therefore, the advancement of civil rights for African-Americans coincided with the dominant white political interest of the US government to be seen as a leader in the global political landscape. Without this convergence of interests, Bell and others argue that the so-called civil rights gains we now celebrate may not have occurred were they not also in the immediate interest of the dominant white political powers.

The question is, How does this understanding relate to the ways in which libraries envision youth of color? One way it relates is in how librarians conceptualize youth of color and their literate potential. For example, if librarians hold a cultural deficit perspective toward youth of color, they might only see their so-called problems without recognizing their unique talents and gifts. They may also hold stereotypical views toward youth of color based on representations they see in the mass media. If a librarian holds a cultural deficit perspective toward youth of color and masks this belief system, but at the same time capitalizes on efforts to promote diversity with youth of color, then that can be seen as interest convergence. Because of the liberal ideology within the LIS profession that uncritically celebrates diversity efforts (Balderrama, 2000), a librarian could benefit personally from implementing a diversity initiative with youth of color. On the other hand, no one might question how such initiatives position youth of color as objects of study and divert attention away from the role libraries and librarians play in maintaining the status quo of racial oppression through established institutional practices and belief systems.

The interest convergence principle can help librarians take a critical look at their own perspectives about youth of color. They might ask themselves questions like these: Do I capitalize on youth initiatives that

promote diversity and equality while subconsciously holding a cultural deficit perspective about youth of color themselves? Do I view youth of color as unfortunate victims in a fundamentally just society? Do I transfer the stereotypical images that play out in the media about youth of color onto those whom I might encounter in my library? Do I believe that *all* children can succeed provided the right support and opportunities?

The LIS field has traditionally taken a more pluralistic approach to diversity that avoids dealing directly with race and racial inequities. The problem with the more pluralistic or multicultural initiatives is that they seek to accommodate so many facets of diversity that they often wind up having little or no real impact on any particular group. CRT scholars have made similar critiques about the ineffectiveness of multicultural approaches. Ladson-Billings and Tate state:

*The multicultural paradigm functions in a manner similar to civil rights law. Instead of creating radically new paradigms which ensure justice, multicultural reforms are routinely, “sucked back into the system”; and just as traditional civil rights law is based on a foundation of human rights, the current multicultural paradigm is mired in a liberal ideology that offers no radical change in the current order. (quoted in Dixson and Rousseau, 2006: 25)*

Thus, from a CRT perspective it is important for librarians to not just study youth of color as objects under the gaze of a predominantly white librarian workforce. Rather, it is incumbent upon librarians to look reflexively at the library’s institutional policies and practices to see how they uphold certain cultural norms and worldviews that might marginalize the home and community literacy practices of many youth of color (e.g., rap, spoken word, code-switching, or tagging). Or, it might mean looking at how and why funding and other resources are disproportionately allocated to libraries in affluent (mostly white) suburban communities. A project such as this would not likely get agency funding, but these are the very deep-seated issues that need to be addressed if libraries and librarians are to move beyond a monolithic vision of youth of color that is based primarily on white cultural frames of reference that promote white self-interests.

## Whiteness as Property

Understanding the CRT concept of “whiteness as property” can help LIS scholars reframe any number of questions that are taken up in LIS by critically analyzing the way that whiteness has been framed as both the preferred and normal state of being. The principle of whiteness as property maintains that people with white skin have been afforded a set of unearned rights and privileges since the period of slavery. As the ultimate form of property, one who “possesses” whiteness can enjoy (1) the rights of disposition, (2) the right to use and enjoyment, (3) reputation and status property, and (4) the absolute right to exclude (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Thompson (2001) offers several methodological approaches for helping unmask whiteness in both professional and institutional discourses as well as on a personal level.

Related to discourses around youth in the LIS field, some questions that we might ask ourselves are the following: Do I participate in the “othering” of nonwhite youth by inadvertently assuming a white audience as the default norm in my various library practices (e.g., promotional signage, book displays, collection development, etc.)? Do the rules I support and enforce in the library primarily cater to the cultural and linguistic norms of whites (e.g., rules of noise levels, etc.)? Questions such as these help unmask whiteness as the invisible norm or reference point for thinking about any number of questions taken up in the LIS field.

The principle of whiteness as property can also be applied to examining how the concept of literacy is conceived in YA library discourses and the impact such a stance might have on how youth of color participate in and are viewed in libraries. The way literacy is conceived in the LIS field tends to privilege the literacy practices of white youth, which are often rooted in cognitive and autonomous forms of knowing. This conceptual stance often comes at the expense of supporting the literacy practices of nonwhite youth, which are rooted in sociocultural frameworks of understanding (Langer, 1991). The notion of whiteness itself has been linked to the development of scientific rationalist thinking, which privileges “mind over body, intellectual over experiential ways of knowing, mental abstractions over passion, bodily sensations, and tactile understanding” (Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Hinchey, 1999).

Information literacy, which is the intellectual domain of librarians, falls within this cognitive and positivist tradition of learning (Kapitzke, 2003). This approach begins from a standpoint that students come to the library with specific information problems that arise out of their personal, workplace, or academic concerns. The librarians' role is then to help these youth develop skills in solving these information problems by teaching them how to access the most current, reliable, and authentic information through the library's resources. Yet, this approach leaves librarians at the periphery of the learning experience and positions them more as resource providers than teachers. Thus, there is little room for librarians to help youth address anything other than mundane information problems rather than larger social and cultural concerns they may face (e.g., poverty, unemployment, racial discrimination, etc.) (Kumasi-Johnson, 2007).

Yet, unless the majority white librarian scholarly base is exposed to more expansive perspectives on literacy such as those that frame literacy as a social practice, then those newer approaches will remain on the periphery. Moreover, because there is not a critical mass of library scholars researching literacy from a sociocultural perspective, the dominant view of literacy as a cognitive skill is the only view that can take up "residence" in the LIS field—to use the metaphor of whiteness as property. This may seem like a tangential matter, but I would argue it is a very pressing issue that can have significant implications for how librarians view and engage youth of color. For example, if librarians were to expand how they define literacy to include home and community literacy perspectives, then library instruction might take on a very different form. Instead of doing activities centered on evaluating websites and other static exercises bounded to libraries, librarians might instead take up a more activist role and go into communities and help youth uncover what their real world information concerns are and encourage them to develop skills at posing questions and finding solutions to these real-life issues.

## A Note on Intersectionality

As a matter of disclosure, I write this chapter from a social location as a thirtysomething, upper-working-class Black female who is a fifth-generation



college graduate. Despite being both self-identified and outwardly labeled as Black, I have probably benefitted from and participated in whiteness in my daily life. The reason a person of color can participate in whiteness is because, as Thompson (2001) notes, “whiteness does not refer to a biological but to a socially constructed category” (under “Differences in Theoretical Focus and Approach”: para. 6). Thompson goes on to explain that Black or academics of color who internalize white-privileging institutional norms may be said to benefit from and participate in the promotion of institutional whiteness. Insofar as African-Americans, Latinos, and other nonwhites aspire to material privileges that are coded as white *and* insofar as they see material well-being as earned through individual merit (rather than through a system that excludes all but a few people of color), they may be said to participate in material whiteness. As a Black academic who aspires to achieve a level of success in higher education, I am somewhat caught up in the trappings of whiteness. I do not, however, ascribe to the myth of “Ameritocracy” (Akom, 2008), but rather I recognize that I am a fortunate exception to the implicit rule in higher education that says only so many people of color can gain access to higher-level positions at predominantly white institutions. While I do believe that I have *earned* the position I occupy, I recognize that there are many more people of color who are just as deserving but who will not be given this opportunity because there are so few spaces available for faculty of color in the academy.

Similarly, we are all privileged and oppressed to differing degrees. This is what CRT scholars describe as intersectionality, or interlocking systems of oppression. Thus, white librarians who read this should not come away with a sense of guilt or shame about benefiting from and participating in whiteness. By understanding each of our layers of privilege and penalty, we can begin to locate ourselves on the stratum of race, power, and privilege as a first step at being reflexive and self-aware, which can ultimately lead to social transformation.

Understanding one’s layers of privilege can also be useful in disrupting negative stereotypes about nonwhite people. One of the first things to recognize when it comes to youth of color is that their racial identity is only *one* facet of their identity and it may *not* be the primary lens through which they view and experience the world. Still, I would argue that taking a “colorblind” stance toward seeing youth of color is not helpful. Most youth

of color are aware of the way society views them and how people of color are positioned in the social stratification of society in the United States. To ignore race or to create an atmosphere in libraries that seems to minimize cultural differences and aim for a more colorblind goal could be just as damaging on a subconscious level for some youth of color. It is important to celebrate cultural differences and maintain a healthy balance between promoting mainstream colorblind perspectives and race-conscious worldviews in our work with young adults (Carter and Kumasi, 2011).

## Conclusion

The question at the heart of this chapter is, How might the LIS field better imagine youth of color in order to embrace their situated identities, their culturally based literacy practices, and their unique social histories? The answer, I believe, lies in looking reflexively at how whiteness functions in the library and scrutinizing how it is operationalized through certain institutional policies and personal belief systems. This work must occur on both the conceptual and the structural levels. Conceptually, the librarian workforce must engage in the messy and tenuous work of holding up to scrutiny our own beliefs, practices, and worldviews about people of color to see how these constructs might privilege white ways of knowing and being. Structurally, we must look at the ways libraries historically (and still today) upheld whiteness through various institutional practices and policies, such as collection development, resource allocation, training, staffing, and so on. Finally, we might all benefit from keeping several questions at the forefront of our minds as we strive for a more culturally inclusive vision of youth in LIS. Some of those questions might include the following: How might I disrupt static and binary conceptualizations of youth that position white youth as the default normative cultural frame of reference? How might I avoid “othering” nonwhite youth by making them objects of study only in the context of “special” projects (e.g., closing the black-white achievement gap)? How might I help examine and transform the institutional practices of libraries that uphold racism in a profession that prides itself on being colorblind and accessible to all people? We might also direct some of our questions toward youth of color themselves and ask them:

- What would your ideal library look like?
- How would you feel when you entered it?
- What might you see and what kind of rules would you want enforced?
- What are the ways you think libraries have been organized with the needs of white youth in mind?
- What are some of the needs you see that black youth have that could be better met by libraries or librarians?

## References

- Akom, Antwi A. 2008. "Ameritocracy and Infra-racial Racism: Racializing Social and Cultural Reproduction Theory in the Twenty-first Century." *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 11, no. 3: 205–230.
- Balderrama, Sandra Rios. 2000. "This Trend Called Diversity." *Library Trends* 49, no. 1: 194–214.
- Bell, Derrick. 1980. "*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest Convergence Dilemma." *Harvard Law Review* 93: 518–533.
- Carter, Stephanie, and Kafi Kumasi. 2011. "Double Reading: Young Black Scholars Responding to Whiteness in a Community Literacy Program." In *Urban Literacies: Critical Perspectives on Language, Learning, and Community*, edited by V. Kinlock, 72–90. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. 2001. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Dixson, Adrienne D., and Celia K. Rousseau. 2006. *Critical Race Theory in Education: All God's Children Got a Song*. New York: Routledge.
- Honma, Todd. 1995. "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: 1–28.
- Kapitzke, Cushla. 2003. "Information Literacy: A Positivist Epistemology and a Politics of Outformation." *Educational Theory* 53, no. 1: 37–52.
- Kincheloe, Joe, Shirley Steinberg, and Patricia Hinchey, eds. 1999. *The Post-formal Reader: Cognition and Education*. New York: Falmer.
- Kumasi, Kafi. 2008. *Seeing White in Black: Examining Racial Identity among African American Adolescents in a Culturally Centered Book Club*. Ann Arbor, MI: Proquest.
- Kumasi-Johnson, Kafi. 2007. "Critical Inquiry: Library Media Specialists as Change Agents." *School Library Media Activities Monthly* 28, no. 9: 42–45.

- Ladson-Billings, Gloria, and William F. Tate. 1995. "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education." *Teachers College Record* 97: 47–68.
- Langer, Judith. 1991. "Literacy and Schooling: A Sociocognitive Perspective." In *Literacy for a Diverse Society: Perspectives, Practices, and Policies*, edited by E. Hiebert. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Pawley, Christine. 1998. "Hegemony's Handmaid? The Library and Information Science Curriculum from a Class Perspective." *The Library Quarterly* 68, no. 2: 123–144.
- Thompson, Audrey. 2001. "Summary of Whiteness Theory." Whiteness in Cross-Race Classroom Relationships, University of Utah, Spring 2008. Accessed December 8, 2011. <http://www.pauahtun.org/Whiteness-Summary-1.html>.
- Wright, Susan. 2005. *The Civil Rights Act of 1964: Landmark Antidiscrimination Legislation*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group.