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A Critical Phenomenology of Whiteness in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

This exploratory qualitative study examines how whiteness functions in the field of library and information science (LIS) within higher education institutions. Utilizing a critical phenomenological approach, three questions guided the inquiry: (1) How is whiteness embodied by academic librarians, (2) What perceptions do academic librarians hold that contribute to the maintenance or disruption of habits of whiteness in libraries, and (3) How and where is whiteness embedded within academic library settings and the field of LIS?

The aim was to begin understanding whiteness in libraries as an experientially-grounded and systemically reproduced phenomena. Four academic librarians participated in semi-structured interviews that explored participant identity and experiences with race, specifically whiteness, in their professional lives. Data were analyzed using a cyclical coding approach resulting in six themes. This research may contribute to a better understanding of the way libraries function as racial projects and can assist librarians in seeing the importance of adopting critical reflexivity as a tool for recognizing and disrupting systemic habits of white normativity in libraries.

Keywords: whiteness in libraries, academic libraries, critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, critical phenomenology

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Libraries are often upheld as democratic institutions that manifest a strong social-justice orientation as egalitarian centers of intellectual and communal gathering and growth. However, like other social structures, libraries are not immune to racialized formations and the perpetuation of hegemony. While the field of library and information science (LIS) has begun to examine the ways that a racialized white normativity functions within libraries to replicate and perpetuate racist structures that exist across society, ongoing critical examinations of whiteness are necessary especially considering the history of overlooking whiteness as racialized. Therefore, libraries, librarians, and LIS scholars must continue to confront racism within our institutions, especially looking to the hidden yet pervasive habits of whiteness that the field functions within and working toward a critical dialogue on race.

The purpose of this critical phenomenological exploratory study is to generate initial knowledge about how whiteness functions in LIS in general and is experienced within academic libraries in particular from a small number of practicing librarians. Foundational in its goals, this exploratory approach will add to the emerging scholarship on the phenomenon of whiteness in higher education, assisting in the refinement of research questions and approaches to design needed to further understandings of how libraries and librarians conceptualize and experience race in LIS. In this research, we explore the following research questions: (1) How is whiteness embodied by academic librarians, (2) What perceptions do academic librarians hold that contribute to the maintenance or disruption of habits of whiteness in libraries, and (3) How and where is whiteness embedded within academic library settings and the field of LIS?

In this work we aim to expose hegemonic institutional habits and bring the invisibilized background to the surface (Ahmed, 2007). Despite the field's overwhelming representation of

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white bodies, both historically and presently, ongoing research is needed to unpack how white library practitioners understand the way race shows up in spaces, policies, procedures, behaviors, and habits. Through this examination, libraries and librarians can continue the critical work required to unpack tendencies to neutralize LIS and better understand the way libraries may function as racial projects (Honma, 2005).

Literature Review

The field of library and information science needs to continue to work toward a deeper understanding of whiteness as part of its own racialized history and to consider how this history manifests within the past and present orientation of the library as a social institution. Despite a self-positioning of libraries as democratic institutions that emphasize social justice, equitable access, and neutrality, libraries are embedded within the historically oppressive racial structures of American society and higher education (Brook et al., 2015). If we neglect to acknowledge this racial positioning, libraries may become inadvertent, yet complicit, agents in furthering a pervasive, destructive, white hegemony. In accordance with the critical phenomenological approach to our study of academic librarians' understandings and experiences of whiteness in library settings, we begin this review of the literature with a discussion of critical race theoretical frameworks, including critical whiteness. The literature review continues with a discussion of critiques of the racialized structures and systems of predominantly white institutions of higher education and the implications these critiques hold for defining and studying whiteness generally, and whiteness in LIS specifically.

Critical Whiteness Studies in Relation to Critical Race

Critical Race Theory (CRT) focuses on the centrality of race and racism in the United States. First applied to education by Ladson-Billings & Tate, (1995), CRT positions educational

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inequalities as a “logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continued to be muted and marginalized” (p. 47). Yosso (2005) defines CRT as “a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (p. 74). Critical race scholars often utilize specific tenets of CRT to inform their work. McCoy & Rodricks’ (2015) ASHE Higher Education Report provides a comprehensive description of these tenets, including (1) an acknowledgement of the permanence of racism in contemporary U.S. society; (2) the power and centering of the experiential knowledge of People of Color; (3) interest convergence—a theory that shows progress toward racial equity occurs when in convergence with those in power; (4) intersectionality of identities; (5) whiteness as property, where being white confers certain privileges and advantages that white people seek to protect; (6) a critique of liberalism, specifically the concepts of objectivity, color-blindness, and race-neutral meritocracy; and (7) a commitment to social justice.

Critical race challenges the concepts of neutrality, meritocracy, and color-blindness used by dominant groups to invisibilize and normalize racial stratification (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Important to note is that scholars have critiqued the use of the term ‘color-blindness’ as ableist. Annamma et al. (2017) suggest the term ‘color-evasiveness’ to avoid the metaphor of dis/ability and to highlight the purposeful, not passive, element of avoiding race. Critical whiteness studies (CWS), a branch in the family tree of critical race theory (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), also focuses on these concepts as it seeks to uncover where and how whiteness is operating, often invisibly to many, and how whiteness is socially constructed (Doane, 2003). Through this inquiry and analysis, critical whiteness work centers the problematizing of whiteness as an additional way to disrupt racism and “as a corrective to the traditional exclusive

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focus on the racialized ‘other’” (Applebaum, 2016, p. 2). Critical whiteness also focuses on white privilege, white supremacy, white discourse, and changing racial ideologies, such as the increased prevalence of color-evasiveness.

Critical race and critical whiteness theories can be impactful when utilized together, such as in Matias et al.’s (2014) examination of the white imaginations of white teacher candidates. The addition of a critical whiteness lens is useful in exploring racialized practice and policy within libraries, and together, critical race theory and critical whiteness studies provide a useful and necessary theoretical frame from which to illuminate practices and habits of whiteness. Through such an approach, LIS can better deconstruct the normativity of whiteness within its own structures, spaces, systems, people, and behaviors.

The Racialized Structures of Predominantly White Institutions

The invisibility of whiteness also contributes to the ongoing manifestation of racialized structures and spaces that persist despite declining overt racial prejudice at the individual level. Gusa's (2010) framework of white institutional presence (WIP) outlines four attributes of mainstream white cultural ideology that appear in institutions of higher education: white ascendancy, monoculturalism, white blindness (hereafter referred to as white evasiveness), and white estrangement. White ascendancy consists of white mainstream thought and behavior derived from historical positions of power. It manifests in feelings of white superiority, white entitlement over spaces, white authority over racial discourse, and white victimization (pp. 473-474). Monoculturalism, also based in beliefs of white culture’s superiority and normalcy, deals primarily with epistemology through the conception of one Eurocentric scholarly worldview and appears in organizational behavior that privileges rationality, objectivity, quantitative data and methods, and cognitive processes. Reliance on monoculturalism dictates what is considered

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scholarly, marginalizes voices that do not conform, and is seen in the built environment, as well as in policies and practices (pp. 474-477). White evasiveness stems from ‘color-blindness’ ideology that purports the absence of race in decision making and human interaction and accounts for the “failure to recognize White racial identity and ideology” (p. 478). White evasiveness literally ensures whiteness’s invisibility, and Gusa (2010) argues that it maintains WIP “not because of overt racist desires but, rather, because of White oversight and erroneous understanding of their racialized campus. Conversely, to acknowledge Whiteness is not to perpetuate it but it is the first step in uprooting it” (p. 478). The final attribute, white estrangement, consists of physical and social distancing of white people from people of color. This lifelong segregation leaves people unprepared for multicultural environments and cross-racial interactions, and in-turn leads to white anxiety at being seen as racist (pp. 478-479).

Defining and Studying Whiteness

Despite academic growth in critical race and critical whiteness theories, whiteness itself continues to evade definition (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2017). This resistance is perpetuated by whiteness’s ability to reform, proving flexible in both its contraction and expansion, consistently redefining itself to maintain dominance. For example, whiteness changed from including only the English to later including all European groups. Doane (2003) writes that the “difficult and contested nature of this process of boundary expansion was captured in the emergence of discourses of ethnicity and assimilation, discourses that reflected the continual re-formation of ‘whiteness’ amidst ongoing political struggle” (p. 10). Roediger (1998) discusses how Irish and southern and eastern immigrants arriving to the United States had to *learn* the racial divisions of America as they learned “two lies—that they were white and that America was” (p. 19).

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Through a phenomenology of whiteness, Ahmed (2007) explores the reality of whiteness, “consider[ing] whiteness as a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience, and how this disappearance makes whiteness ‘worldly’” (p. 150). Especially notable in Ahmed's (2007) exploration is the emphasis on whiteness's disappearance as an invisible act that paradoxically cements its presence and impact—its “worldliness.” This concept is further explored in the notion of how whiteness is maintained through habit.

The invisibility and evasiveness of whiteness is also at play in white racial identity formation—a process notably different from that of people of color. Tatum's (2017) foundational work on racial identity notes that white silence about race and being seen as the “societal norm” can result in white people reaching adulthood without consideration of themselves as having a racial identity (p. 186). This can in turn lead to frustration and disorientation when being seen as part of a racial group—something that Tatum (2017) argues is learned very early in life by people of color. Additional scholarship explores shared, group experiences of white racial identity, such as Hughey's (2010) work on hegemonic whiteness that uncovers surprisingly similar patterns of behavior and discourse in two ideologically disparate groups—white nationalists and white antiracists—and Thompson and Watson's (2016) chapter on the manifestations of white racial trauma.

Although the academic explosion of critical whiteness studies is relatively new, and despite recent discussions of the troubles in conceptualization and definition of whiteness, it should be noted that Black voices such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and James Baldwin spoke to white privilege and supremacy long before the emergence of academic critical whiteness studies. An excellent compilation of Black writers on whiteness can be found in Roediger's (1999) *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to be White*.

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The study of whiteness is not absent of risks, including furthering the very racial structures that the field seeks to decenter. Ahmed (2007) addresses centering inquiry within a critical whiteness approach and questions what it means for “a project of critique to be complicit with its object” (p. 149). This question is well worth asking, as any project that seeks to unpack and critique whiteness must by its very nature focus on and center this phenomenon. Scholars speak to the need for a “critical vigilance” within CWS to examine the potential complicity of these critiques; this vigilance in turn can result in one of CWS’s most important lessons (Applebaum, 2016, p. 3). Schlesselman-Tarango (2017) also cautions against operating from the assumption of being able to or having arrived to an anti-racist space and notes that “[r]emaining committed to criticality allows us to acknowledge these tensions and exploit them for their generative properties” (p. 21).

Current educational research is beginning to document findings from empirically grounded inquiries into whiteness. Matias et al. (2014) used CRT and CWS in their examination of white teacher candidates’ understandings of race dimensions and found that students lacked critical understanding of race, demonstrated an emotional disinvestment in racial issues, displayed white guilt, and reproduced white hegemony. Picower's (2009) grounded theory study explored pre-service teachers’ life experiences informing their conceptualizations of race and difference and found that they used emotional, ideological, and performative ‘tools of whiteness’ to actively protect and maintain white supremacy. Picower’s (2009) work also uses CRT as a framework to uncover “discourses that are seemingly race-neutral or color-blind” (p. 198). Teacher education, like librarianship, is a field dominated by white women, and the critical work occurring in teacher education around whiteness can be a worthwhile project for LIS to emulate.

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Whiteness in LIS

In a foundational critique pointing to race's invisibility within LIS, Honma (2005) argued that the racialization of the field remained undertheorized and that its failure to explore racial difference furthered conceptions of white perspectives, knowledge, and epistemologies as universal—unquestioned and unacknowledged. A growing body of important LIS work has begun this essential theorization, with increased attention to the impact of racism and whiteness on the history and present mission of libraries, as well as more targeted explorations into areas of institutional habits and practices, such as library staffing, spaces, and curriculum.

Examinations of the origins of librarianship unveil a history rooted simultaneously and paradoxically in the perpetuation of oppression as well as the sanctification of the institution and its practitioners. Ettarh (2018) coins such sanctification “vocational awe,” or “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique” (para. 3). Ettarh (2018) places this awe surrounding libraries and librarians as intertwined within an institutional mythology rooted in the religious past of the first Western librarians. Examinations of more modern conceptions of libraries and their missions in the United States reveal public libraries' complicity with early assimilationist work to help build a white American citizenry (Honma, 2005). Such assimilationist political and social projects resound throughout the early and mid-twentieth century as the dominant “white, Anglo-American blueprint for what ‘ought’ to happen” (Doane, 2003, p. 3). Librarianship carries elements of this history with its identity as an inherently ‘good’ field, at times considered beyond reproach, into the present day.

Critiques of the present mission of libraries further amplify the paradox of institutional sanctity that masks enduring oppressive undercurrents. Ettarh (2018) explores the dangers of

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seeing librarianship as sacred as opposed to a profession within a flawed institution. This vocational awe surfaces as a labor issue that disadvantages librarians in multiple ways, including martyrdom, burnout, under-compensation, and job creep. Importantly, Ettarh (2018) argues this in turn impacts who can become a librarian and that vocational awe concealing institutional failures results in the discounting or erasure of experiences of marginalized librarians. Combined, these aspects make diversification of the field increasingly difficult.

Scholars also point to the field's too-frequent reliance on issues of multiculturalism and diversity as the unilateral approach to acknowledging and celebrating difference. Referring to this approach as a "double omission," Honma (2005) argues that the absence of race in this discourse and action not only separates these terms "from the distinct power relations of their racialized meanings" but also results in the inability to identify the discriminatory structures that led the field to attempt an engagement with these topics to begin with (p. 10). Similarly, Hudson (2017) criticizes the focus on diversity and inclusivity as the main anti-racism work in LIS, noting that such a focus detracts from analyses of systemic oppression and is "based on a simplistic equation of racism with exclusion" (p. 13). Brook et al., (2015) note that the primary focus on multiculturalism and diversity in the field can actually serve to recenter whiteness by showcasing non-whiteness as different and other from the norm, by obscuring real racism, and by failing to address power imbalance (p. 247). Despite these critiques, addressing racism in practice remains fraught and inconsistent.

Color evasiveness and avoidance of acknowledging and addressing racism is evident in the LIS field's institutional policy and practice. For example, in 2015, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) released the profession's guiding document for information literacy instruction, the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. Though it

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moved away from prior competency-based standards and emphasized the active roles learners assume in their information environments, the document fails to mention race or racial oppression in its entirety (Rapchak, 2019). Rapchak (2019) argues that absence of race is particularly salient in the document's frames that require understanding and acknowledgement of systemic racial oppression to be fully realized. The Framework's "silence on race perpetuates a culture of avoiding discussions of racism, which protects white people from racial discomfort and maintains white supremacy" (Rapchak, 2019, p. 174).

Critical LIS scholars and practitioners are working to shift the missions of libraries away from neutrality and traps of vocational awe toward deconstructions of foundational framing and policy discourses as well as studies of institutional applications of anti-racist practice. Such critiques can engage analysis of what Hudson (2017) argues is missing from much diversity literature:

the ways in which race serves as a mode of structuring physical and intellectual space, not only through the management of access, but also through the configuration of relations of power and assignments of value within the space; the exclusions through which the very parameters of the space are drawn; and the political, economic, and cultural interests ultimately served by the existence of the space (and indeed by its discourses of inclusion) to begin with. (p. 13)

In particular, critical race and critical whiteness frameworks for studying structural impacts of racism are gaining traction in LIS literature in recent years. Two particularly important edited collections include Leung and López-McKnight's (2021) *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory* and Schlesselman-Tarango's (2017) *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*. Leung and

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McKnight's (2021) collection is the first book length work to apply critical race theory as the central theoretical framework to examine LIS academically, professionally, and institutionally. Such an application calls LIS to look beyond individual choices and actions to the deeper systemic and structural impacts of white supremacy on the field. Schlesselman-Tarango's (2017) *Topographies of Whiteness*, another first book-length work to explore whiteness in LIS, surveys the ways that whiteness functions in LIS historically and contemporarily, as well as "imagining new cartographies" or exploring ways to disrupt these past and present formations (p. 5).

Additional deconstructive work continues to scrutinize the field, homing in on more granular areas of library practice, such as staffing, space, and curriculum. For example, Brook et al.'s (2015) critical discourse analysis situates its methodology to "denaturalize whiteness" within professional standards and library scholarship. Using Gusa's (2010) theory of white institutional presence, the authors examine whiteness and suggest anti-racist actions in three areas of academic libraries: racialized spaces, staffing, and reference work. Hathcock (2015) also examines the practices of whiteness that permeate librarianship, even in initiatives such as recruitment processes for diversity programs. In research on staffing in libraries, Garnar's (2021) dissertation utilizes CRT to explore the factors that contribute to librarians of color deciding to leave or remain in the profession, and Alabi (2015) found that minority librarians experience and observe microaggressions in the workplace at a greater rate than their non-minority colleagues, revealing a disconnect in perception between white librarians and librarians of color.

Through a case study of Columbia University's Butler Library, Beilin (2017) focuses on racial dimensions of space, particularly library architecture and aesthetics. Such work is useful to demonstrate that even if the profession remedied the whiteness problem of library workers, "we would still find ourselves in spaces of whiteness and spaces that reproduce whiteness" (pp. 81-

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82). Such considerations of space invoke Ahmed's (2007) discussion of the body in space which addresses both how spaces take shape around the bodies that inhabit them, and how this shaping is the result of an orientation towards certain (i.e., white) bodies and not others (i.e., non-white). Through this shaping, we may describe institutions as “being white,” and that in order to enter these spaces, even non-white bodies “have to inhabit whiteness, if they are to get ‘in’” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 158).

Critical LIS work has also focused on the curriculum and pedagogy of LIS graduate programs. For example, Gibson et al. (2018) conducted a content analysis of the reading lists in the top 20 LIS programs in the USA to determine the extent of student exposure to critical race theory or related theoretical concepts. They found that the vast majority of foundational courses did not include any readings on CRT, which they argued does not prepare students to have a critical awareness of race when they enter the profession.

Despite increasing research and theorizing on the impact of race in academic libraries, not enough empirical research has sought to understand the multidimensional nature of whiteness and its role in furthering white normativity and dominant color-evasive ideology. Doane (2003) identifies the lack of empirical grounding as a shortcoming in critical literature on whiteness. This applies to the literature in LIS as well. Through exploring the ways in which whiteness is experienced in academic libraries, this study seeks to help fill that gap.

Methodology: Critical Phenomenology

In order to explore the experience of whiteness and its constitutive elements within academic libraries, we employed a qualitative research tradition, specifically critical phenomenology (Guenther, 2019). Through exploring the common experiences of individuals, phenomenological studies seek to capture the ‘essence’ of a shared phenomenon of interest

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(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2014). Importantly, phenomenology focuses less on individual, unique experiences, instead focusing on “uncovering an essential structure of a particular phenomenon that resonates with many individuals” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 91). Through a focus on lived, embodied experience, classical phenomenology “lights up the transcendental structures that we rely upon to make sense of things but which we routinely fail to acknowledge” (Guenther, 2019, 11-12). A phenomenological approach is thus a useful method to explore a phenomenon such as whiteness, that is simultaneously pervasive yet under-examined within LIS.

The potential of phenomenology as a *critical project* is especially important to consider in this study’s application. Classical phenomenology fails to account for the impact of historical and social structures in our experiences. However, awareness of these structures is crucial to experiential and embodied representations of whiteness in social institutions. Guenther (2019) notes that:

Structures like patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity permeate, organize, and reproduce the natural attitude in ways that go beyond any particular object of thought. These are not things to be seen but rather ways of seeing, and even ways of making the world that go unnoticed without a sustained practice of critical reflection. (p. 12)

Guenther (2019) continues to explain that these structures:

are both ‘out there’ in the world, in the document patterns and examples of hetero-patriarchal racist domination, and they are also intrinsic to subjectivity and intersubjectivity, shaping the way we perceive ourselves, others, and the world. In other words, they are both the patterns that we see when we study something like incarceration rates, and also the patterns according to which we see. (p. 15-16)

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Critical phenomenology seeks not only to bring these structures and their impact on experience to the forefront for interpretation but also in doing so to provoke change. It is with this methodological intent that we examine whiteness within the historical and social fabric of LIS.

Site and Participant Selection

This exploratory study consists of interviews with librarians currently working in academic libraries at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in the United States. PWIs were selected specifically to explore both local and national contexts that may contribute to common experiences, and PWI status was determined by institutional demographic information where a majority of the student body identified as white. We, the authors, experience this ourselves, as we live and work in [geographic information and related census data redacted for blind review] (US Census Bureau, 2019). Our personal experiences with this context further fuel the political stance that undergirds our critical phenomenological approach, adding the possibility for identifying oppressive practices and concrete strategies for change while inquiring alongside active library professionals at PWIs.

Participants for this study were selected on the basis of two main criteria, including currently working in academic libraries in the United States and identifying as racially white or partially white. Recruitment involved contacting professional colleagues working in various size academic library settings, introducing them to the study, and requesting their assistance in identifying possible participants. Initial contact with potential participants was made via email, and included a research information sheet that detailed the study's details and researcher contact information. In total, we recruited four librarians, Adam, Thomas, Jamie, and Lily, from a mix of differently-sized academic institutions (two from mid-sized public institutions, and two from small, private, liberal arts institutions). Adam identifies as a queer, white male, Thomas as a

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heterosexual, white male, Jamie as a queer, white woman, and Lily as female, half white and half Asian and from a “less advantaged economical background.” Lily did not comment on her sexuality, and the first three participants did not comment on their economic status as a marker of identity. All four participants have been in the field for over 10 years. The number of participants was determined at the outset to be limited to four. Given the exploratory goals of the study, it was decided that thoughtful engagement with four participants would provide the desired depth of opportunity to interact while remaining within the perimeters of limited resources. We also anticipated that our exploratory methodological interests would be best served by limiting participants to four, which would provide space and flexibility for further refinement of research questions and methods for future full-scale research.

As this study utilized phenomenology, it was integral to have participants who intensely experience the phenomenon under investigation. As discussions around race can be fraught and white participants can shut down due to white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), it was particularly important to ensure participants of their confidentiality. To de-identify participants, we utilized pseudonyms and removed any additional identifying language. Before data collection began, the research was approved by the ethics board at the authors’ affiliated institution.

Data Collection

Interviews are a prime data collection method for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2014); thus, a semi-structured interview (Appendix A) was completed with each participant. Interviews were conducted and recorded over Google Meets and ranged from 30-45 minutes in length. Open-ended questions were employed “so as to enable participants to describe their experiences of the phenomenon and the meanings they make” (Jones, et al., 2014, p. 91). Interviews began with questions that situated participants as experiential experts in

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both library work and identity formation (i.e. *Walk me through your history of library work.*

And, What identities do you hold?) This was especially beneficial for establishing rapport and for easing into what we anticipated being potentially higher risk and/or more complex questions that asked them to reflect on possible linkages between racial subjectivity, professional practice, and institutional strategies and structures related to diversity, equity and inclusion (i.e. *Have you ever thought about your own racial identity in your work as an academic librarian?*). In an effort to ensure data collection aligned with our critical phenomenological aims, the final part of the interview protocol asked participants to consider macro level issues of, for example, ways that power and privilege function within LIS.

It is widely understood that in qualitative research, researchers are not neutral bystanders, capable of collecting and analyzing data from others at an objective distance. Mechanisms such as memoing are standard practice in phenomenological and other types of qualitative research, and are used for routinely reflecting on the intersections between the researcher and the researched. In our project, memoing provided an ongoing opportunity to monitor and critically reflect on research procedures and how our roles as researchers were interacting and influencing relations with study participants. Memos were recorded in a research journal consistently throughout the study period, including during analysis.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of all interviews, verbatim transcriptions were created by the first author. Introductory codes consisted of a combination of a priori and inductive codes. A priori codes included Gusa's (2010) characteristics of white institutional presence (white ascendancy, monoculturalism, white evasiveness, and white estrangement) and Ettarh's (2018) "vocational

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awe.” Inductive codes were derived directly from the interviews. After introductory coding, another round of memoing occurred to capture first impressions of the coding process.

Next, we returned to all data transcripts to identify significant statements from the interviews. This process is unique to phenomenology and involves deriving verbatim statements from the participants that especially illuminate how they experience the phenomenon under examination. These statements are then listed, given equal worth, and condensed to avoid overlap (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 201). These significant statements were then grouped into thematic clusters. Finally, the themes and the significant statements were used to create three detailed levels of description: textural, structural, and composite (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Textural and structural descriptions for this study focus on ‘what was experienced’ and ‘how it was experienced,’ respectively. Together, these descriptions resulted in a composite description that represents the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon of whiteness in the field of LIS within higher education institutions as experienced by the participants in this study. Importantly for our project, these traditional steps to phenomenological data analysis listed above, as informed by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Miles et al. (2014), were combined with critical phenomenological analysis which requires of us to look into and beyond the experiences themselves to “map and describe the structures that make these accounts possible, to analyze the way they function, and to open up new possibilities for reimagining and reclaiming the commons” (Guenther, 2019, p. 15).

Trustworthiness and Limitations

Several strategies for ensuring trustworthiness of this research should be noted (Shenton, 2004). Participants were recruited from different sizes and types of institutions (mid-size and small; public and private), allowing for comparison and contrast of their experiences.

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Participants were given the option to participate and could choose to not answer a question or to stop participating at any point—elements that increase participant honesty. We engaged in memoing, reflective commentary, and detailed our own subjectivity, which is included below. We have also sought to include sufficient detail of the study's method and analysis to enable readers to determine the dependability of findings and to reproduce the study.

The goal for this study was exploratory and is therefore inherently limited in scope, sample size, and in the conceptual or practical reach of any concluding insights. Exploratory status notwithstanding, it should be noted that qualitative studies generally, and phenomenological projects in particular, feature in-depth explorations of the complexity within and across experiences for small groups of individuals who share particular attributes of or experiences with often complex, hard to describe, or under articulated phenomena. Emphasis on depth over breadth can help to expose subtle yet potentially significant patterns in an individual's thinking and actions. While certain aspects of, for example, the structural pervasiveness of whiteness, may be resonant with patterns of action (or inaction) in other academic library settings, findings from this and other phenomenological studies will always be limited in their generalizability. Further, both authors identify as racially white, a shared racial identity held by participants. This reality combined with researchers' and participants' professional positionality at PWIs (discussed in more detail below) creates the potential for power relations to circulate in ways that certainly could be different had any member of the research team identified as BIPOC. Even with consistent efforts to engage in critical reflexive practices, our analysis is unavoidably impacted by the study activities being steeped in white normative culture and by our white racialized epistemes. While we did not explore this point directly, it is important to acknowledge that racialized positionalities and structures are an important and potentially limiting aspect of

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this study, including our having overlooked important dynamics and details. As we continue to work toward anti-racist practice, we hope that increased vigilance and criticality will help to identify our own limitations in this regard.

Researcher Identity

Qualitative research acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher, and we believe it is important to situate and reflect on our positionalities both to push us toward critical reflexivity, and so that our audience may consider the impact of our identities in our work. We, the researchers, hold several shared identities: we are cisgender, white, female, and we work in higher education in the [state redacted for blind peer review]. Certainly, the differences *within* the identity categories we share are numerous, shaping the variability with which we enter into and conduct this and other work. Yet, as we mention in the Limitations section above, even with this variability, the fact remains that had a more heterogeneous group of participants or researchers, especially with respect to racial identity, been involved in this study, it would quite likely have influenced how interviews were conducted, what kinds of information were shared, and much more.

Author 1, the director of the library at a small, private college, joins this work with the belief that libraries and librarians too often operate from a position of neutrality. This stance has led to a focus on critical librarianship and an aim to counter white supremacy's normativity in higher education and the field of academic librarianship through both research and practice. Author 2, a faculty member in an education department of a mid-sized public university, joins this work through her research in epistemic injustice and the embodiment of educational subjectivity. Her work in these areas, and her teaching of critical approaches to qualitative

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inquiry, provides consistent motivation to studying the ways that social inequities, normative knowledge production practices in higher education, and researcher agency touch.

Findings

Data analysis resulted in six key themes related to the participants' experience of whiteness in academic libraries. The librarians had (1) an understanding of whiteness as socially constructed and fluid; (2) differing levels of identity salience; (3) changing individual racial subjectivities and (4) specific reactions to diversity, equity, and inclusion work. They also experienced (5) maintenance of the status quo; and (6) recreations of hegemonic whiteness.

Understanding Whiteness as a Social Construct and as Fluid

Participants defined their understanding of whiteness as socially constructed, noting it as systemic, entangled with power relations, and as a construct that changes over time. With less focus on skin color, participants placed more emphasis on conceptual manifestations of whiteness. Thomas described whiteness as “so intertwined, intertwined with privilege,” and Adam noted how it “comes with a certain amount of power. Whiteness comes with being, you know, seen as, well historically as you know, the superior race.” Jamie also referenced the privilege that comes with whiteness and suggested that many white people do not think of themselves as belonging to a racial group, something that she considered problematic: “...the invisibility of whiteness, is normalizing whiteness, right, rather than saying it’s something that we’ve constructed, and that we carry around, and that carries a lot of privilege. It’s just... ‘no I’m not anything.’ Well, you are.” Interestingly, Lily—the only participant who did not identify solely as white—spent the least amount of time defining whiteness and much more time discussing the changing manifestation of her own racial subjectivity. Nevertheless, when prompted to define the term, she too discussed whiteness as a cultural “feature” that shaped

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access to power and created affordances such as increased ease of “get[ting] things done” and positional mobility:

I understand it as a predominant feature of this culture. This particular American culture, obviously not true in other parts of the world. And I understand it as, it can be a means to power, a path to power. Because it is the predominant feature, appearance-wise anyway. If you look white, it's, I believe, and this may quickly be changing, but it does seem easier to get things done, and to move into positions of power.

In acknowledging whiteness as a construct, participants referred to its historical creation.

Jamie noted:

I see whiteness as a construct; it's a thing we've made up. Who we get to define as white has changed over time, and it is about maintaining power and access. In our country the people who are white hold the keys and have for many years.

Adam also pointed to the shifting definition of whiteness to demonstrate race's social construction, explaining that different ethnicities were considered more or less white over time. He noted, “If you were from Italy, you weren't seen as being as white as if you were from England. So whiteness, all race, is a social construct.” Thomas spoke to the growing realization of whiteness as a relatively recent phenomenon and the discomfort that may come with that understanding:

Right now I think we're in a time where whiteness and privilege, people are pointing out the ties between the two, and it's a very interesting time in which we live in that like people are finally teasing those apart and shining a light on them. And, that makes, it's very uncomfortable. And it's very uncomfortable for a lot of people, and they don't like it, and it's asking people to at least acknowledge that the power dynamic exists.

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In the above quotes, all participants showed fluency in racial discourse and intellectual conversations around race. Participants' narratives also reflected understandings of whiteness as consisting of historically situated yet enduring unearned privileges. As Jamie puts it: "people who are white hold the keys and have for many years." While variably expressed, discussions of racial privilege by each of the participants not only reflected awareness of society's role in racial formations of whiteness, but also the discomfort that can and often does accompany awareness. This theme of discomfort is further developed in the section that follows. We spotlight discomfort's emergence here to emphasize ways that questions about definitions of what whiteness means also gave rise, productively in our view, to participants' expressions of what social constructions of whiteness activate in terms of self-consciousness. As critical whiteness scholars, Matias et al. (2014) insist, while important to understand the historical constructions of race, overemphasizing history can also serve to relegate racial formations as things that have already happened from which we now passively receive benefit, rather than something in which we actively continue to participate.

"Embracing Something That's Troublesome:" Differing Levels of Identity Salience

When asked to define their identities, participants demonstrated some unfamiliarity with the topic, with one noting it was "a really good question," and another referring to a class he recently took where they had to create ten "I am" statements, noting "I'm trying to like remember what all those were..." Thomas noted the discomfort that can come with such realization and acknowledgement: "I've certainly been put on like awkward positions in front of classes having to describe my whiteness or my identity in a very, very awkward way, and I've also had much better interactions with that, too..." Thomas's expression of awkwardness when

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put in a position to describe his whiteness and Adam's struggle to remember his "I am" statements reveal an unpracticed and mixed emotional response with engaging identity work.

Participants all identified as white or partially white, with Lily additionally identifying as Asian. But in their work, participants generally saw greater prominence in their other identities, especially gender. Jamie referenced librarianship as "such a gendered profession," and the identity most evident to her was "being a woman and being a woman in a profession that traditionally views it as being a female profession but has a lot of issues about promoting women, women in leadership, that have not been resolved." Adam also cited gender as his most prominent identity due to being the only male employee at his library. Similarly, Lily initially commented that she thought about her gender slightly more than her race, especially in relation to being a female manager. However, later in the interview she began to comment on her economic status as an identity marker, and how this aspect of identity stood out the most in juxtaposition to the primarily wealthy student body at her institution. Ultimately she ranked her associations: "so I guess maybe most often I think about economic identity, and identity being not like generations of wealth, and then I think about female, and then I think about race."

Other participants spoke of the discomfort that came with understanding the legacy of whiteness they carry. Jamie pointed out the difference in engaging with a dominant versus a subordinate identity, noting identification with a dominant identity was harder "because it becomes the de facto, and to remember that you need to articulate what that is, and question what that is, just as you do your other identities." This difficulty came in "embracing something that's troublesome rather than embracing something that you're running towards." Jamie spoke to her experience as a white woman specifically, suggesting that "white women in particular get a walk, and that's like really sort of, really disheartening to realize in that way." She referred to the

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“trope of defending white womanhood” as a tool for violence and noted “that’s a lot to carry around, like, and to realize that like, oh, this is a terrible legacy to have.”

Participants’ toggling between their personalization of identity discourse and understanding ‘whiteness’ and ‘gender,’ for example, intellectually, led us to wonder about the extent to which libraries are or could be spaces for increased dialogue about intersectional experiences that explicitly incorporate whiteness and other racial formations. While we did hear participants’ efforts to think and speak through an intersectional lens, efforts to incorporate that understanding seemed at times strained as participants noticed and spoke of the effect of their gender with far more saliency than their race. Intersectionality, and how it shows up (or not) in the identity discourse of LIS practitioners will be further explored in the discussion section.

“Now It Has Suddenly Become More Public:” Changing Racial Subjectivities

Though several participants spoke to changes in their individual racial subjectivity, nowhere was this more prominent than in the interview with Lily. Lily spoke primarily to the change in her racial expression and public self-location, a change that has resulted in her recently moving away from describing herself by her ethnic and geographic roots to the racial description of being half white and half Asian. When asked about this change in self-description she explained: “I think it’s just because there is so much more talk about race, and so I’ve thought more about the terminology that other people will understand or, not understand, but sort of relate to.” Another contributing factor of Lily’s changing discourse was a Black colleague who knew Lily’s racial background and invited her to campus events for students, faculty, and staff of color. Lily attributed her attendance at these events to this colleague’s presence in her life and the beginning of her changing subjectivity, which she placed approximately four years prior. This, along with demographic changes at her institution, led her to think about race more often.

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She noted that this was “also around when admissions and the hiring practices started to make a visible difference on campus, so somehow seeing the diversity made me think about it more.”

She continued, noting her own change in experience as a librarian and educator:

So seeing and learning. I did a lot of writing on my own. And so that made me think more about representation...The seeing; it's easier to imagine yourself in a place if you see other people like you there. Or you see evidence of some sort of, you know, similarities.

The external articulation of Lily's identity has changed, which she largely attributes to institutional influences and climate. Lily also spoke to changes in her internalized conception of identity, though with ambivalence. This may have been in part due to discomfort in discussing what she considered to be a private aspect of her life. She spoke several times to this discomfort, noting “I'm just generally not a very public person. Like I don't, I, you know, I don't enjoy being in the spotlight and so somehow pulling out that part of myself and putting it in the spotlight is very uncomfortable...”

Though not to the same extent as Lily, additional participants noted a growing and changing awareness of their whiteness. Jamie explained:

I increasingly am very aware as I think more and more, many people are, of being white in our profession. The library in which I work is almost exclusively white and that has become glaringly noticeable, and myself being white has become very, very noticeable to me and something that I'm learning to recognize as part of my identity rather than as just something that is.

Thomas spoke to his own process of racial awareness and attributed much of it to his librarian liaison work with a diverse student body. Thomas spoke about this at length: “I certainly have

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learned so much from the students with whom I've interacted. I've been forced to challenge myself by them, and that's really, it's great. Like it's forced me to learn a lot." He spoke in particular of one student, a Black man, with whom he had multiple research consultations. Thomas explained, "it has been a process for me to realize that my experience is not his experience, and that's been learning for me, I think, like over the last five years." Through these conversations, Thomas came to understand that he and the student had drastically different life experiences, despite living within the same community—learning that he valued and that "stuck with him." He also noted the pain that came with this learning, calling the realization "really disappointing...but something probably I need to hear." Lily and Thomas' awareness of their racial identities was, in part, owing to interpersonal relationships with colleagues and students of color, whose presence and willingness to engage in conversations about racial differences and the affordances or disadvantages those differences give rise to helped Lily and Thomas to enter what Bailey (2021) terms the "weighty conversation" of whiteness. Bailey's (2021) work, which is further explored in the discussion, provides a particularly relevant frame from which to analyze practices of avoiding racial awareness and paths to changing racial subjectivity.

"Committees Being Formed and Documents Being Drafted:" Reactions to Diversity Work

All participants spoke of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work occurring across their campuses and libraries, though these mentions generally were accompanied by an acknowledgement that more should be done. These mentions also carried an air of frustration in work they believed was necessary but that also might not lead to direct action. "That's what I see," said Thomas:

I see those groups being formed and messages being drafted. I'm, yeah, I'm trying to think of the way in which we can put that into practice [pauses]...But right now we are at

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the point at which we are still at committee and drafting documents. None of which will be useful at all without any sort of meaningful action or follow-up. I think that there's a lot of opportunity.

Across many of the participants' narratives, perceptions of "opportunity" to address problems associated with the ways libraries function as racial projects were coupled with uncertainty and feeling stymied over not knowing specific actions to meaningfully address the problem. While Adam's university had engaged in campus-wide reflection and reading groups in response to racist incidents on campus, he still experienced it as "a checking a box kind of reaction" with opportunities to engage in learning having since ceased. Adam showed skepticism when speaking of the national profession's response to diversity and a focus on hiring: "...because it's one thing to say we need to hire more diverse populations, but it's another thing to do it, and to you know, make a difference." Jamie saw professional engagement throughout the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd and the growing Black Lives Matter movement. She noted, "academic librarians were pretty much all over that, but translating that into action at one's institution is where the rubber hits the road, and that's the piece that is a lot harder." Throughout this study, the authors detected participants' genuine desire for change to be enacted yet befuddlement around what specific steps should be taken to challenge racism in LIS, a point we return to in the discussion.

Though they did not hesitate from pointing out that more work could and should be done, participants did display elements of vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018) through an articulation of libraries and librarians as *good*. Adam spoke of his own interactions with patrons, explaining that he "tr[ies] to treat every patron that comes in the same," though he was quick to point out that he wasn't trying to "pull that whole like I don't see race thing because obviously that's not, that's

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not a thing. Like you can't ignore race." This tension between acknowledging systemic problems yet not seeing these problems surfacing in our own or others' behaviors also appeared in Thomas's interview. He believed librarians were interested in the field due to their curiosity and desire to work with others, noting:

I don't think, I'll just say generally I think it's less personality-based in our field than it is systemic. But again I'm very aware that I'm saying this as a white person, so it could be the case that you know many patrons would point to the relationships they've seen or the librarians they've encountered and disagree with that, and say like 'no it is there.'

Similarly, Lily suggested that practitioners of librarianship were more "receptive" to criticism of cultural and racial hegemony than the general population. She explained:

By more receptive I mean we're more likely to, like, hear it. And engage with it. And say 'oh, I guess I should do something different...' We're a little more inclined to be more receptive than in general the rest of this country. Just because of our ideals of education and sharing.

Some participants did speak to feelings of pride around certain DEI actions such as showcasing specific collections, seeing ACRL bringing more diverse people into activities and governance, and bringing diverse speakers and topics into national conferences. Yet, some of these actions were perceived by participants as doing little to change the actual practices within the field. Thomas pointed to the challenge in this: "I think our collections and our interactions with the campus, we're doing a very good job, but I think that's also easier to do than it is talking about things like practices and communication within our own structure." One major impediment to these examinations of structure that Thomas mentions may be the white estrangement encountered in the communities and spaces of PWIs, as explored in the next theme.

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“I’m a White Person in a Place Where People Don’t Talk About Race”: Maintaining Status Quo

Both white estrangement and white evasiveness (Gusa, 2010) were evident in statements surrounding the predominantly white institutions and libraries in which the participants worked. Not only did the demographic makeup of the institution result in physical and social distancing of white people and people of color, but it also frequently resulted in the absence of discussions of race. Jamie noted “I’m a de facto member of a community of white people, but I don’t talk about that with people very much, whereas other communities of which I am a member I might talk about.” She went on, noting the homogeneity of her institution, stating “it’s often this sort of invisible thing we don’t talk about. We talk about gender. We talk about diversity, but it’s more a conceptual thing often.” Adam, speaking of his own understandings of race and racism, discussed the white estrangement that he experienced growing up in New England:

We’re in an area of our country where we see ourselves as being very liberal, very open-minded, but the reality is that growing up and during college, and now, my community, my community of peers, my community of co-workers, my community of fellow classmates back when I was in school was predominantly white, and so having to think about the topics of race and racism, I feel like it’s tough to do that, and I feel like a lot of people don’t do that if it’s not a reality, if it’s not the reality you’re living. So you know, I don’t, I hadn’t really thought about how race played a role in my work in particular because, I mean, there, it just hadn’t come up...there’s so many academic libraries where it is predominantly white that you know, thinking about your whiteness and what that means to be a librarian, you’re just not going to do it because the community you’re in is, there isn’t any diversity.

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Jamie and Adam both point to their inclusion in white communities, and their resulting white estrangement, as a barrier to an understanding of their race. The invisibility of whiteness to white people contrasts starkly with the intimate knowledge of whiteness that people of color may have. Roediger (1998) explains that the study and deep, nuanced understanding of white behavior and consciousness have been tools of survival and reaction to a history of terror for African Americans. Yet, white communities have been able to ignore their race, asking to be unseen both by themselves as well as by others.

Despite Thomas's earlier discussion of the experiences of the students he worked with forcing him into racial self-reflection, he also noted the variability of this level of attention, explaining that in courses with less prevalence of identity topics, he became less self-aware, even though he "shouldn't be." He also noted the increasing "spotlight shown" on the linking of whiteness, privilege, and power met with some student resistance:

It can also make for really uncomfortable moments in the classroom. I haven't had that yet, but I know some folks that have, and have students who *do not* want to go there. Do not want to talk about it. And I know it's happening across our university.

Thomas's depiction of students' white victimization and desired control over racial dialogue are prime examples of white ascendancy, a core component of white institutional presence (Gusa, 2010).

"Systems We Create Privilege White People": (Re)creating Hegemonic Whiteness

Participants did not struggle with identifying systemic issues of power, privilege, and oppression within library and information systems. They pointed especially to issues of access, which ironically all had initially defined as a value of libraries. Adam succinctly pointed to this paradox, noting, "In libraries we like to say free access to information for everybody, but that's

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not necessarily true. It's access to those who are able to come in and, you know, say what they need." Thomas also spoke to issues of access, stating that "the ways in which we provide access or don't provide access are so incredibly weighted and fraught with privilege." He pointed out the importance of open access and the far reaching effects of institutional paywalls from the lack of access to scientific information in the Global South to the local public school educator who cannot access educational research published by their colleagues at the local university. Thomas called this information inequity "shameful" and stated "we should be doing better."

Description and categorization also came up. Jamie commented on the ubiquity of information systems that prioritized white history and ideology:

If you think about how we catalog things, everything that is about African Americans is cataloged about being about African Americans. Ok, that has to be labeled and yes, that makes it easier to find but...it's never marked about being about white people.

Holding up *Algorithms of Oppression* by Safiya Noble, she continued, "When you run searches, assumptions are made, and things are pushed to the front, and usually it's people who are dominant." Lily's comments reflected similar themes, noting that power, privilege and oppression showed up in librarians':

decisions about what we do in very general terms, and what we do meaning what we purchase and how we describe it, and how we teach, all of that has evolved or has been shaped by the predominant cultural identity of the field.

Participants also spoke of the work necessary to break these systems. Adam spoke of his learning around white privilege and the power that came with that privilege: "It's important to use your privilege, your white privilege, to make these changes...it's not just up to the Black community to educate people about racial injustice...it's everybody's responsibility...we need to

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use that power to make that change.” Yet, “that power” does not necessarily translate to action. He went on to explain that DEI work in his library had stalled, despite his chairing the local committee:

A lot of our work has kind of come to a standstill mostly just because of the current COVID crisis we don't have, you know we're not focusing on programming, we're just focusing on getting by right now, so we've put it on the backburner for now, it's not forgotten.

Similarly, when asked about the current DEI work of her institution, Lily mentioned the barriers of reduced budgets and staffing as stalling progress. Discussing being down staff members, Lily said “...naturally I could suggest more outreach, and I would, but right now I'm not.”

In closing, Jamie spoke to the need to make the profession “bigger”:

If we truly want to be democratic, we have to be making our profession much less white...bring people into the profession...Make sure that we are learning and growing and moving away from a status quo that keeps people from being leaders, ideas being acknowledged, yeah. And we're not there. Like we're really not there. I think we're really trying.

Through their emphasis on issues of access, oppressive systems of classification, and lack of diversification within the profession, participants made clear that the field is “not there,” even though they may want to be, and that specific actions to disrupt habits of whiteness in LIS were vague at best.

Discussion

In this study, participants experienced whiteness as an intellectual and conceptual phenomenon, and they demonstrated a fluency in racial discourse, describing whiteness as a

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socially constructed phenomenon rooted in privilege, power, and oppression. They also identified systemic forms of oppression within LIS, such as issues of access, description, and lack of diversity in the profession. Attributes of white institutional presence (Gusa, 2010) affected participants' experience of the (re)creation of whiteness, especially white evasiveness and white estrangement in their predominantly white institutional and community settings. Though the librarians did identify structural systems of oppression within LIS, they did not always translate the manifestations of white dominance and oppression to their localized environments. This finding contrasts to that of Garnar's (2021) exploration of the experiences of librarians of color who reported that "[t]heir encounters with whiteness in academic librarianship were a defining factor in how they experience the profession" (p. 189).

An intersectional lens is helpful when analyzing participants' less practiced yet nonetheless present attempts at grappling with the racialized impacts of their white identity in current library work. While aware of their own and others' whiteness, they noted greater salience to their other identities, especially to their gender. Such a focus on gender is explored by Schlesselman-Tarango (2016), who critiques the tendency of LIS scholarship to investigate feminisation within librarianship while failing to apply important intersectional analysis that centers race. Using the archetype of Lady Bountiful, she considers the white female body and its primacy in the field, both historically and presently, noting that "[i]n associating race with only those who are not white, LIS has largely failed to acknowledge that whiteness is also a feature..." (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016, p. 669). Schlesselman-Tarango (2016) draws useful parallels to the similar dominant and sanctifying representations of the white female in education. In both LIS and education, the white female as represented in Lady Bountiful serves as the civilizing, colonizing subject, embodying qualities of saviorism, piety, and purity.

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Importantly, this historical analysis moves into the present to question how this archetype continues to discourage other bodies from entering or staying within the field as well as how it may impact practitioner interactions with library users.

Across participants' narratives there was a noticeable difference between phrases about what whiteness is and has come to mean socially, and expressions about whiteness as an experiential category. For us, this suggested a fissure or gap needing to be traversed between intellectual and personal conceptions of whiteness. There seemed to be tension when participants were faced with questions asking them to bridge their clear intellectual familiarity with and criticism of whiteness with their knowledge of and direct experiences with confronting it in daily practice. Scholars exploring the embodied weight of whiteness, white supremacy, and trauma can help to illuminate and make meaning from this type of emotional wrangling. Resmaa Menakem (2017) uses the term "white-body supremacy" to center the fact that white supremacy is not just an ideology—something that exists in our heads—but an active, living presence within the body. Bailey (2021) notes that "[w]hite supremacy can't be dismantled by retreating to our heads because racism lives in our bodies" (p. 96).

In *The Weight of Whiteness: A Feminist Engagement with Privilege, Race, and Ignorance*, Alison Bailey (2021) draws attention to two types of white dominance—the "overexposed" side which emphasizes making visible the invisible unearned powers and privileges that come with whiteness and the "underexposed" side, or "the one white people would rather not reckon with because feeling that weight requires a radical vulnerability that is too painful for most of us to bear" (p. 79). Bailey invites her reader to wade into this weighty side of whiteness, a side that we have learned to "anesthetize" in order to avoid the knowing and feeling that comes with acknowledging the costs of whiteness to our very humanity:

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Anesthesia can be broadly understood as anything that allows white folks to look away, stop listening, disconnect, dissociate, distract ourselves, or otherwise break the connections we have with one another. Most white people are so hooked in our whiteness that we don't know how to live in our white bodies without anesthesia. (Bailey, 2021, p. 98)

By turning our attention to the underexposed side of white dominance, we enter the “the weighty conversation,” a process that “begins when white people find the courage to embrace the profound discomfort we feel in response to the invitation” (Bailey, 2021, p. 85).

Participants in this study noted an increasing awareness of their racial identity through their engagement with others, self-education, and a growing national attention to race. However, this awareness was variable and shifting, depending on the context, and they had the ability to slip in and out of their racial awareness. Considered alongside Bailey's (2021) work, this tactic might be seen as slipping in and out of the anesthetizing qualities of racial avoidance, a strategy that contrasts sharply with the weight of whiteness felt everyday by people of color. Bailey (2021) discusses Menakem's (2017) notion of the “clean pain” that “exposes us to felt knowledge” and that “wakes us up” (p. 113). She invokes Sandra Kim's comparison of this type of clean pain to the feeling when your foot has fallen asleep, noting that we can either recontort our bodies in an attempt to postpone the pain that comes with the returning blood flow, or we can slowly and painfully cope with the temporary but intense pain that comes in tandem with the return of feeling. Examining the embodied aspects of racism in the way that Bailey and other critical race scholars do is one critical component, among others, of social justice work. In particular, it can help to disrupt the anesthetizing effects of whiteness, alerting us to feelings of conflict and pain that can encourage mobilization, connection, and sustenance in antiracist work.

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The participants in this study demonstrated genuine care and desire for the field to improve. Though participants noted the need to disrupt oppressive systems in place, their narratives also revealed the reflexive ambiguity and emotional discomfort that can accompany racial consciousness, making it less clear how they might contribute to actions that would disrupt the white normativity within themselves and within the profession. Jamie, for example, spoke about the up-tick she witnessed in professional engagement as an outgrowth of the growing Black Lives Matter movement. As noted earlier in the Findings, Jamie referenced the catalyzing effect of the movement on the field, noting, “academic librarians were pretty much all over that, but translating that into action at one’s institution is where the rubber hits the road, and that’s the piece that is a lot harder.” That anti-racist action was needed was, among all participants, never in question. Yet the salience with which uncertainty and skepticism surrounded participants’ references to tangible institutional change points to one of the key arguments from anti-racist scholars about behaviors of tokenism and white saviorism signaling performative allyship or what Layla Saad (2020) calls “optical allyship.” Optical allyship is committed by people with white privilege and is especially prevalent in PWIs. This form of allyship, according to Saad, is evidenced, for example, by an action that “creates the look of diversity and inclusion but does not come with any change at a deeper level through policy change, commitment to antiracism education, transfer of benefits or privilege, etc.” (157-158). In our own experience as white academics researching whiteness at PWIs, we can attest to the sense of frustration that accompanies increased consciousness of the permanence of racism without clear paths for collectively determining and demanding a course of meaningful action for upending systemic causes of racism and policy change that translates to mitigating white supremacy’s further harms.

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LIS can benefit from considering the major themes explored in this discussion: first, a greater analysis of intersectionality and, second, combining critical reflexivity with feeling, rather than continuing to anesthetize the pain that comes when engaging with the weight of whiteness and its trauma in the body. Bailey (2021) notes that despite its discomfort this pain is generative as it “forces you to stop, observe, breathe, and settle. It teaches you to hold space with what you’ve been taught not to feel” (p. 113).

Recommendations

Not enough research has begun to look at the racialized past and present of academic libraries and LIS. While this study is a step in that direction, more work is necessary to help librarians, and researchers, build a critical inquiry into whiteness and race. As an exploratory study, this study had a small number of participants, and more work should be done to expand these questions and compare the findings across larger numbers of academic librarians. While this study deliberately recruited librarians from PWIs, additional research might look at librarians practicing in more diverse spaces, such as HBCUs, to see where experiences coalesce and diverge. Further, LIS would benefit from more work on white institutional spaces and how libraries replicate and potentially resist the effects of such spaces on the people operating within them. Studies such as this can move the field toward exploration into how a library perpetuates and reproduces oppressive racial structures through the invisibility and normativity of whiteness. Such examinations can help librarians explore opportunities for resistance and begin the ongoing work of replacing habits of white normativity in libraries.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The interviews will be semi-structured. Therefore, not all of these questions may be asked, or they may be asked in a different order. Other questions may also emerge through the discussion. Questions will, however, be focused on similar areas as those included below.

1. Walk me through your history of library work.
2. How would you define the core values of libraries? Which of these are most important to you?
3. What identities do you hold?
4. Which of your identities are most salient to you in your work in academic libraries?
5. Which of your identities are the least salient in your work in academic libraries?
6. Have you ever thought about your own racial identity in your work as an academic librarian? If no, why do you think this hasn't come up for you? If yes, in what ways do you think about it?
7. Have you thought about the racial identity of others in academic libraries (students /colleagues/administrators)?
8. How do you experience the DE&I work happening in your library? In the state? In the national profession?
9. How do you understand whiteness as a racial and/or cultural category, generally?
10. How do you believe power, privilege, or oppression exist within library and information systems?