

Book Review: *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*

Reviewed by Linda C. K. Crook

Modern library and information science (LIS) believes in its own neutrality, and can be oblivious to its history of racial segregation and to its current and ongoing whiteness. *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, edited by California State University San Bernardino librarian Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, “seeks to locate and problematize how whiteness operates” in LIS (p.1). As the first monograph bringing whiteness studies to LIS (p.3), this anthology presents a survey of the landscape, surfacing tensions rather than attempting to find resolution, and providing readers with tools to identify, name, and problematize whiteness (p.2). Schlesselman-Tarango’s introduction provides an overview of critical whiteness studies and their history, as well as presenting the debates and criticisms regarding use of this framework. Whiteness studies came to the LIS field around 2001, with articles by Jody Nyasha Warner and Isabel Espinosa. This volume explores the existing landscape of research since that time as well as breaking new ground.

Topographies of Whiteness brings together work by scholars and practitioners representing a diversity of perspectives, including a preface by Todd Honma and a chapter co-authored by April Hathcock, both prominent scholars of whiteness in LIS. The book is organized into three sections; the first examines the history of whiteness in LIS, the second explores the contemporary landscape of whiteness in LIS, and the third imagines possible ways of challenging and disrupting whiteness in LIS, culminating with recommendations for engagement in an anti-racist praxis.

Many chapters bring critical theory to the examination of whiteness, especially critical race theory and intersectional feminism. In all cases, a good foundation to understand the theory is provided, making it accessible to readers. This much theory may come as a shock to those familiar with the literature of LIS, where there can be an overwhelming focus on the practical. For practitioners unsure if a largely theoretical work will be of use to them, this book offers the chapter, “The Whiteness of Practicality,” by David James Hudson, which takes stock of the ways in which this focus on practice, and a reliance on plain language, helps white supremacy to go unchallenged in LIS. This volume is not all theory, however, and several of the authors represented in this work provide narratives of their experiences. Counterstories are an important element of Critical Race Theory, and those in this volume, such as, “My Librarianship is Not for You,” by Jorge R. Lopez-McKnight, provide intimate glimpses of how it feels to move through a profession dominated by whiteness as a library worker of color.

Topographies of Whiteness takes a prominent place in the literature of anti-racism in LIS. It will appeal to whiteness scholars as well as to a broad range of library workers, with sections devoted to areas of practice including archives, reference work, and LIS instruction. Although academic and public libraries are the most prominent focus, the contents of this work are pertinent to library spaces of all kinds. The (often extensive) bibliographies accompanying each chapter together provide a thorough coverage of whiteness and anti-racist works in LIS. The emphasis on theory does not necessarily sacrifice practicality, and the final chapter provides actionable steps LIS workers can pursue to de-center whiteness in libraries and archives.

Despite the attempts to make the theory accessible, however, parts of this anthology may be overwhelming for some readers. The index to the volume is focused on the issues of

whiteness and racism in libraries, and practitioners trying to identify sections pertinent to their areas of practice may not be well served. Although it is obviously impossible to cover the full scope of whiteness in LIS in a single volume, library technical services, such as collection development, acquisitions and cataloging, are conspicuous by their absence. For many libraries, the collections - especially those for children - are the site of a push against whiteness, with libraries increasingly emphasizing the acquisition of “own voices” texts (materials written both by and about members of minoritized groups, and therefore reflecting authentic lived experience). Library cataloging practice is one of the slowest-changing areas of LIS, and librarians such as Howard University’s Dorothy Porter (Nunes, 2018) have been working to decolonize the organization of information for much of the past century, and there is still a long way to go to de-center whiteness in the subject headings and classification systems. Apart from these omissions, this volume does an admirable job of providing widespread coverage of whiteness in LIS.

Topographies of Whiteness is particularly timely now, as libraries have been struggling with their role as “neutral” spaces in the wake of a 2018 controversy, when the American Library Association Meeting Room policy was amended to explicitly permit hate groups to use library meeting rooms (Fister, 2018). Although the amendment was revoked the following month, LIS practitioners are newly reminded of the paradox intrinsic to intellectual freedom – that welcoming all viewpoints can make libraries unwelcoming to some. Growing social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter also challenge libraries to take a more active role in supporting their minoritized populations, and to turn their backs on the supposed “neutrality” of the field. *Topographies of Whiteness* will be a crucial tool as libraries explore ways to disrupt the entrenched whiteness of the field and help ensure that all library users are better served. Recommended for all libraries.

References

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