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

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Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, ed. *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*. **Sacramento, Calif.: Library Juice Press, 2017.**

The seeming ordinariness of library and information science (LIS) belies an invisible and intractable thread woven into its foundation—the normativity of whiteness and its lasting effects on both the professionals in its employ and the communities within its reach. In LIS, "whiteness" is the standard of professional expectations centered on attitudes, behaviors, presentations of the self, and privileges that both provides and denies access to knowledge and data. It is the deeply ingrained, disciplinary practices and traditions of a profession currently at odds with its own practices of inclusion and exclusion. These and other discussions form the basis of Gina Schlesselman-Tarango's edited work, *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, which seeks to break open the foundational underpinnings of LIS by picking at the cracks of a broken system.

Topographies is the second in a series on critical race studies and multiculturalism in LIS published by Library Juice Press. Individual chapters in this volume consider the "hidden ways that whiteness operates at different strata within LIS" (ix). Chapter authors describe settings and situations familiar to library and archives professionals—but through critical lenses that recognize whiteness as a core problem of LIS. The text also addresses the sociological and geographical impact of whiteness and provides a lens into the emotional and theoretical weightiness of its unpacking. *Topographies* is not light reading for a quiet afternoon at work; it is a volume worthy of close reading, reflection, and discussion.

In the introduction, Schlesselman-Tarango readily acknowledges that efforts to define something as ubiquitous as whiteness—and subsequently discuss the enormity of its presence within LIS—are untenable. As such, the volume attempts to create a "survey" of how whiteness impacts LIS (2). Thus, the topography: a closer look at the structural elements of whiteness in librarianship and the ways these components map our perceptions of the professional landscape. Fourteen chapters are divided into three sections that address the historical ("Early Formations: Tracing the Historical Operations of Whiteness"), contemporary ("Present Topographies: Surveying Whiteness in Contemporary LIS"), and continuing effects of whiteness ("Fissures: Imagining New Cartographies") as a disciplinary frame for LIS. Although the authors' writing styles are fairly consistent throughout the text, their theoretical frameworks vary across chapters. Most authors refer to critical race theory, black feminist thought, masculinity studies, and other closely related approaches to race, gender, privilege, and authority; the remainder rely on more narrative structures, such as case studies and autoethnographies. But while these differences may suggest an unevenness to the text, there is balance in the overall tone. The chapters are easily accessible as both individual essays and as an edited book. The personal complements the professional, and the two combine to form the basis of this work. Perhaps that is the underlying theme of the text—that LIS professionals can work together to identify and upend systemic power structures that stem from embedded whiteness.

Select chapters provide more succinct frameworks for challenging the reading audience's thinking about embedded whiteness in both libraries and archival institutions. Chapter 2, "Interrogating Whiteness in College and University Archival Spaces at Predominately White

Institutions," conceptualizes whiteness, who and what it encompasses, and the ways it can be "dismantled" to effect necessary changes, particularly as related to the historical record (70). Chapter 7, "White Feminism and Distributions of Power in Academic Libraries," includes a much-needed snapshot of intersectionality, even though the author, Megan Watson, neglects to use that term. Regardless, Watson draws attention to the roles of both dominant and non-dominant women in opposing structural racism and working toward establishing new norms. Chapter 9, "The Whiteness of Practicality," encourages a shift away from models of applied theory to more practical experiences that challenge how LIS professionals think about librarianship. But in doing so, the author, David James Hudson, reminds readers that such shifts have often been used as "dualisms onto structures of power" to differentiate between dominant ("thinking") and non-dominant ("doing") groups (224).

As with all edited works, some chapters may be less applicable to broader audiences—especially those who approach the text in anticipation of finding immediate solutions for longstanding problems. This is the case with at least three chapters: "The Weight of Being a Mirror: A Librarian's Short Autobiography," "Mapping Whiteness at the Reference Desk," and "My Librarianship Is Not for You." Even though these chapters consider how structural racism in LIS affects both individuals and groups, the authors tend to steer away from the identification of sustained patterns of implicit whiteness in their attempts to explore deeply personal experiences. At times, readers may find themselves thinking, "But, not all . . . !" And, while it is true that not all people share or witness these experiences, the authors do make it possible to empathize with their respective plights and better understand how certain individuals have had to navigate the profession.

The final chapter, "Disrupting Whiteness: Three Perspectives on White Anti-Racist Librarianship," is the most significant. The authors, Melissa Kalpin Prescott, Kristyn Caragher, and Katie Dover-Taylor, clearly articulate the ways white librarians can effect change without centering "the Other" to do so. Although the writing style is somewhat pedestrian at times, the chapter is easy to follow, which makes it easy to apply. In particular, "develop[ing] a critical consciousness" (296), "hav[ing] conversations about racism in predominantly white spaces and communities" (299), and "acknowledging that we as individuals cannot 'solve' racism" (303) serve as a basic roadmap for actionable items individuals privileged by their whiteness can use to move beyond theoretical musings and work toward applied models of creating and sustaining systemic change.

All chapters include extensive footnotes and bibliographies, which readers can reference for additional material on this and related topics. But while cited references suggest that the scholarly literature is replete with discussions of race and power in librarianship, *Topographies* proves that there is still much to consider regarding the continuing impact of race, ethnicity, and privilege in LIS. Of utmost importance to readers of this text is the question of how this information can be used and applied to their own environments. Although *Topographies* offers only limited solutions for its reading audience, it does provide well-constructed approaches for understanding the inherent problem of systemic whiteness: identifying the obstacle, addressing the situation, and working toward establishing new norms that question the hegemonic dynamics of library and information science.