

In Visibility: Race and Libraries

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“If the profession is serious about understanding race and racism as they relate specifically to librarianship, we would push them from the margins and into the center. Race studies would be accorded the respect for intellectual expertise we award to other areas, and not dismissed as a subject area that emanates from personal characteristic and experience. But acknowledging race studies, not as personal experience, but as the domain of scholars, where scholarly inquiry, intellectual rigor, integrity, and authority are assumed as the ability to be an expert, is a threat because this would supplant the white experience as the experience worth of scholarship. It is this arrogance, as well as ignorance, that hinders race studies from flourishing in librarianship.” (172-73)

Peterson, L. 1996. Alternatives perspectives in library and information science: Issues of race. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 37(2), 163-174.

Outline

- I. Theoretical Tools: Defining Race
- II. LIS & Racial Discourse: Lessons from History
- III. Positionalities: Situating Ourselves
- IV. What is to be done?

What is Race?

- “Race is a social construction”
 - But what does this mean?
- **RACE** is “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies”
 - How is race created? For what purpose?

Theory of Racial Formation

- **RACIAL FORMATION** is the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed
- **RACIAL FORMATION** is linked to the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled

Omi, M. & Winant, H. (1994). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge.

...so “race” is:

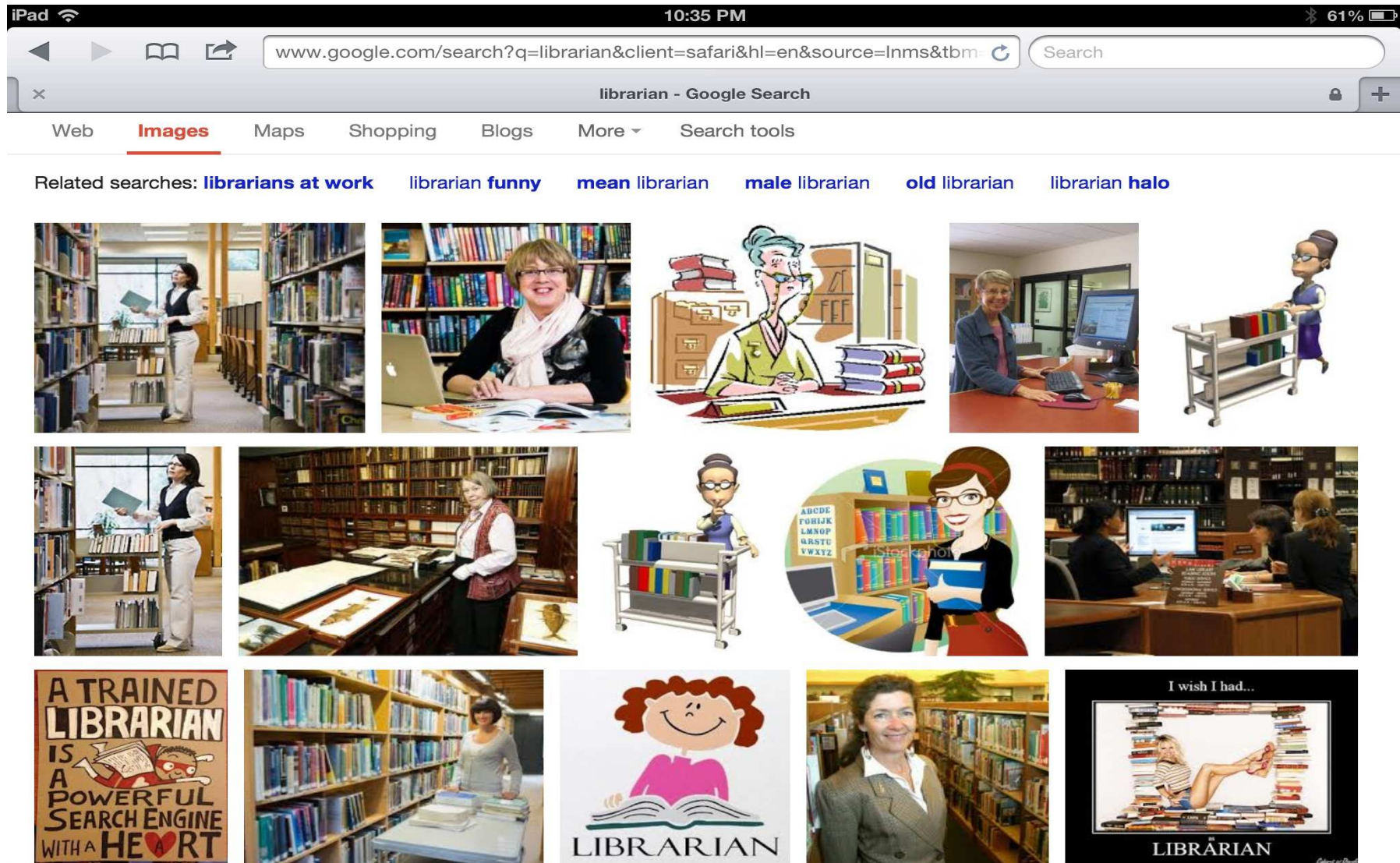
- Classification system
- Dynamic (not static)
- Contextual re: time and place (not universal or transhistoric)
- Operates at many level, including both personal *and* institutional
- Linked to issues of power and privilege
- Ideological

Race & The Power to Name

- Assertion vs. Ascription
- What are the stakes?
- Identity and Politics

So what would be the racial classification of
“librarians”?

According to Google images:



Theorizing Whiteness

- Whiteness: “location of structural advantage in societies structured in racial dominance” (Frankenberg, 2001, 76)
- “an unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (Lipsitz, 1998, 1)
- In other words, whiteness becomes ***normative***

Frankenberg, R. (2001). The mirage of an unmarked whiteness. In *The making and unmaking of whiteness* (pp. 72-96). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lipsitz, G. (1998). *The possessive investment in whiteness: How white people benefit from identity politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

In Visibility

- Normativity renders certain issues invisible (“naturalized”)
- What forms of difference are visible? Not visible?

Revisiting Google images:


iPad 10:35 PM 61%

www.google.com/search?q=librarian&client=safari&hl=en&source=lnms&tbm= Search

librarian - Google Search

Web **Images** Maps Shopping Blogs More Search tools

Related searches: [librarians at work](#) [librarian funny](#) [mean librarian](#) [male librarian](#) [old librarian](#) [librarian halo](#)



The image grid contains 15 items:

- 1. A woman in a library aisle holding a book.
- 2. A woman sitting at a desk with a laptop in a library.
- 3. A cartoon illustration of a woman with glasses and a green shirt at a desk with stacks of books.
- 4. A woman sitting at a desk with a computer monitor.
- 5. A cartoon illustration of a woman pushing a cart full of books.
- 6. A woman in a library aisle holding a book.
- 7. A woman in a library aisle looking at books on a shelf.
- 8. A cartoon illustration of a woman pushing a cart full of books.
- 9. A circular cartoon illustration of a woman with glasses holding a book, with a bookshelf in the background labeled with letters.
- 10. A woman sitting at a desk with a computer monitor.
- 11. A sign that reads "A TRAINED LIBRARIAN IS A POWERFUL SEARCH ENGINE WITH A HEART".
- 12. A woman in a library aisle looking at books on a shelf.
- 13. A cartoon illustration of a woman with red hair sitting at a desk with an open book, with the word "LIBRARIAN" below.
- 14. A woman in a library aisle smiling.
- 15. A meme with the text "I wish I had..." above a woman lying on a stack of books, and "LIBRARIAN" below.

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” - Audre Lorde

- Intersectionality: cannot theorize race without taking into account other issues such as class, sex, gender, sexuality, citizenship, nationality, etc.
- These categories mutually constitute each other (i.e., when we talk about race, we are always already talking about other things)

II. LIS & Racial Discourse: Some Lessons from History

I. The American Public Library as a 19th Century Racial Project

- Mission to “assimilate” the masses (immigrants) into U.S. society
- Americanization project: two-part process of English instruction and preparation for citizenship
- Who is included/excluded? What are the racial implications?
- Assimilation into “Angloconformity” (P.A. Jones)
- Complicity in the construction of the United States as a white republic

II. Multiculturalism & Diversity

- Celebratory discourse vs. Critical discourse
- “Making room at the table” → But whose table?
And do we really want an invitation?
- “A multiculturalism that does not acknowledge the political character of culture will not, I am sure, lead toward the dismantling of racist, sexist, homophobic, economically exploitative institutions.” - Angela Davis

The Problem with “Diversity”

- Where is “race” and how is it being talked about?
- Where is power? What is the relationship between “diversity” and social/institutional structures of discrimination that create the conditions under which “diversity” becomes an issue?

“Librarians use the term [multicultural] in many ways, and from our literature one cannot tell whether multicultural refers to racial minorities, concerns marginalization and equity, or merely celebrates differences as exotic. This careless language shapes a library policy weak on equity. Even worse, the universal application of “multicultural” to any type of difference trivializes injustice experienced by the oppressed. Librarians should clarify what they mean by “multicultural” before continuing with diversity plans and programs.” -L. Peterson

Peterson, L. (1995). Multiculturalism: Affirmative or Negative Action? *Library Journal*, 120, 30-33.

The Problem with “Diversity”

- Where is “race” and how is it being talked about?
- Where is power? What is the relationship between “diversity” and social/institutional structures of discrimination that create the conditions under which “diversity” becomes an issue?
- Importance of **language** in framing the discourse (how we talk about race)

The Racial Politics of “Good Intentions”

- Two historical examples illustrate:
 - Unintentionality has racial consequences
 - We don't intend to be racists, but...
 - Complicity with the status quo

“The processes of racial formation that we encounter today, the racial projects large and small which structure U.S. society in so many ways, are merely the present-day outcomes of a complex historical evolution” (Omi & Winant, 61)

Transformative Information Services

- Conceptualizing information as “a discourse of power...[and] shows the role of libraries and librarians as both supporting racism and in fighting for not only racial but social justice”
- “My call is for a social and color consciousness in our field in order to account for racist and other oppressive practices and the experience of disenfranchised people.”

Chu, C. (1999). Transformative information services: Uprooting race politics. *Proceedings of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association Conference, 19th-22nd July 1999*, 1-8.

Race & Libraries

- What is the role of race in libraries and information services?
 - Insertion of bodies of color into already existing structures/institutions?
 - Transformation of the institution/profession?
- “Diversity” as epistemological necessity:

“If social groups who are likely to have the most critical perspectives on the dominant belief systems are systematically excluded from and devalued in research communities through formal and/or informal processes, the alternative problematics, hypotheses, concepts, and evidence that will be the most critical of the beliefs represented in the scientific community will not be voiced at all” (Harding, 13)

Harding, S. (1987). Taking responsibility for our own gender, race, class: Transforming science and the social studies of science. *Rethinking Marxism*, 2(3), 8-19.

III. Positionalities: Situating Ourselves (small group discussions)

IV. What is to be done?
(full group discussion)