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Looking Through a Colored Lens: A Black Librarian's Narrative

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Chapter 6*

Looking through a Colored Lens

A Black Librarian's Narrative

La Loria Konata

Introduction

On November 4, 2008, around 11 p.m., I sat on the couch alone anxiously waiting to see if this country could elect a black man to the highest office of the land. After waiting a while, I saw Barack Obama's picture flash on the screen. He had indeed become the forty-fourth President and the first African American President of the United States of America. I was flabbergasted, to say the least. One of my first thoughts was that I needed to dream bigger. If only my mind had been freer, what could I have become? I didn't know it at the time, but that was the beginning of my life examination, especially as it relates to my professional career.

I was excited about the election of President Barack Obama, but I couldn't celebrate it in full. I was nervous. I was scared. I thought this event would be the impetus for a race war to break out in the streets. I knew symbolically what the election of President Obama meant. I felt racial pride. Like finally, here is the best proof that I am not inferior as a result of my race. But I also knew that not much in the way of day-to-day living would change for me or other minorities. I remember telling one of my coworkers that a lot of us are about to really suffer on our jobs. I believed that anyone who worked under a supervisor or management that felt that the election of President

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Obama was a slap in the face to white supremacy would experience some form of backlash.

I'm not always pessimistic, but I was born and raised in the Mississippi Delta. My hometown recently made national news because on May 13, 2016, the United States District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi ordered the junior/middle and high schools to integrate.¹ This comes more than fifty years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. I had a classmate experience the wrath and ignorance of the Ku Klux Klan because her family bought a house on the other side of the railroad tracks in the white neighborhood. The Klan burned down their house and left a burning cross in the yard. So I knew that the election of a man of color to the highest office in the land, leader of the free world, would bring Klan-like mentalities back to the surface where previously they lay dormant.

As you may have gathered, I do see the world through a “colored” lens. This is my narrative as a black librarian.

Avoiding Stereotypes

I began my library career as a library assistant at the tender age of twenty-three years old. Previously, I had worked only a couple of fast-food jobs, a seasonal job, and several office jobs through a temp agency. So being in a position of getting to know my coworkers was a new experience. I don't recall ever having any conversations at home about how to conduct yourself in a work environment, so this just may be a cultural norm. Something that is generally understood or simply a way of being. I started my library career treating it very much like the separation of church and state. For me, my work life and identity (state) and my personal life and identity (church) are separate. It didn't occur to me that the two should merge. Some of this can be traced back to the slave era, when slaves found it beneficial to act in a way that was appealing to their slave owners. They could not be themselves or express themselves freely without suffering severe repercussions. This still lingers today in what we call “code-switching.” Code-switching is best explained by this example:

So you're at work one day and you're talking to your colleagues in that professional, polite, kind of buttoned-up voice that people use when they're doing professional work stuff.

Your mom or your friend or your partner calls on the phone and you answer. And without thinking, you start talking to them in an entirely different voice—still distinctly *your voice*, but a certain kind of *your voice* less suited for the office. You drop the g's at the end of your verbs. Your previously undetectable accent—your easy Southern drawl or your sing-songy Caribbean lilt or your Spanish-inflected vowels or your New Yorker—is suddenly turned way, way up. You rush your mom or whomever off the phone in some less formal syntax (“Yo, I’mma holler at you later,”), hang up and get back to work.

Then you look up and you see your co-workers looking at you and wondering who the hell you'd morphed into for the last few minutes. That right there? That's what it means to code-switch.²

Because blacks often engage in code-switching in the workplace, it naturally follows that we will keep our personal selves and lives separate from our work life. But this puts us at a disadvantage. The white dominant culture in libraries follows the “good ole boy network.” That is, there is no separation between church and state. The after-work socialization with coworkers was new for me. I did not have an expectation of becoming friends with my coworkers. But that was exactly what was happening around me. The disadvantage for those of us who have a different view of what our work relationships should look like is that we miss out on information, which leads to missed opportunities. Opportunities and advancements are not based solely on performance or ability, but on a social relationship.

In some instances, these social relationships are difficult because of cultural differences. I thought it inappropriate to have an alcoholic drink with my supervisor after work. With my peers, I eventually went to a couple of after-work activities to try to fit in. But I decided not to continue because it was inconvenient for me. People tend to

engage in social activities relatively close to home. Because most of us live in neighborhoods where we are culturally comfortable, I've always lived in a predominantly black neighborhood. These social activities were never close to my home. At that time, I didn't feel comfortable making a suggestion on another location because, again, church and state should be separate. I didn't want my coworkers to know where I spent my private time. Plus code-switching can be exhausting. At the end of the day, I just want to relax and be myself.

During my early years working in libraries, when someone asked, "How was your weekend?" I thought that required nothing more than the usual response. "It was okay, and yours?" I was often surprised about the details I would get in response. I expected the cordiality of "It was fine." I was frankly annoyed that I had to hear all about someone's weekend. Soon, I started to respond, "It was okay." I think some were annoyed that I didn't ask in return.

These are just two examples. It took me quite some time to adjust to the norm of the white dominant culture. For the latter, I had to learn to give up something about myself. You have to do it in a way that doesn't violate you as a person. I shared my love of music and football. But not the things I deemed too personal. I felt a need to share a part of me when at that time, I did not want to. I don't think non-minorities feel the same pressure. I feel pressured to control the narrative all the time to avoid being stereotyped. In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Harris-Perry describes this as navigating a crooked room. "When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion."³ I had indeed tilted, but in a manner that I was comfortable with in my skin.

I developed a reputation for *hating* meetings. My department had a monthly meeting from 2:15 p.m. to 4 p.m. I thought some of those meetings were too long according to the content of the agenda. There were times when the meetings turned into gripe sessions. Other times, last-minute additions to the agenda turned into brainstorming sessions. We also had individual meetings with our supervisor and group

meetings, as well as the occasional meeting with the Collection Development manager. Too many damn meetings. But, instead of being labeled as someone who wanted to make efficient use of time, I was labeled as someone who just simply *hates* meetings. Even after more than ten years, I remember this label because of how it made me feel. It indirectly said that any time a black woman voices an objection, she is exemplifying the *angry black woman* stereotype. While I was making a plea that could have improved meetings, it was written off. But why?

The image and stereotype of black women as angry is so engrained in American culture that it has its own *Wikipedia* entry. The “Angry Black Woman” entry states that there are two other pervasive stereotypes given to black women that have been studied by scholars.⁴ But the angry black women trope has not been studied as much because scholars believe it to be true.⁵ A proven fact. Because of this deep belief, even First Lady Michelle Obama has navigated this crooked room. In her senior thesis at Princeton University, the then Michelle Robinson expressed how she felt like an outsider, a visitor on Princeton’s campus. The experience made her more aware of her *blackness*. When this became known to the public during the 2008 presidential election, she too was classified as an angry black woman.⁶ Further proof that the stereotypical image of a black woman as angry is so deeply engrained that it affects black women of all socioeconomic political statuses.

Management in Libraries

The manager does things right; the leader does the right thing.

—Warren Bennis⁷

I would like to see managers treat personnel differently. Now, I’m not advocating for unequal treatment in the workplace. But instead, a recognition of differences in personality traits, learning styles, and experiences. One of the recent trends in higher education has been

to teach students according to their learning preferences. To be an effective manager, you must also manage individuals according to their preferences. You can still be fair and equitable to all even when treating reports differently. The key is to be consistent regarding standards you expect from employees.

To do this, managers need to take the time to get to know their reports to find out their work preferences and motivation. I once had a supervisor who was an extrovert. Our conversations would go something like this:

Me: I thought you said we were going to do XYZ.

Supervisor with strange look on face: Yes, we were talking about that last time. I was talking about that with “Jane Doe,” and I think we should do ABC.

Me: But I’ve started working on XYZ.

Supervisor: We were just talking about it last time, I never said do XYZ.

Me: But you said XYZ would best solve 1, 2, 3.

It took me a while to decipher that he was actually just brainstorming when speaking. As an introvert, I thought those spoken comments were indeed our plan of action. This happened quite some time before the Susan Cains and Jennifer Kahnweilers informed us how introverts and extroverts should work together. Or before I was aware of them.

After that scenario happened a few more times, I asked my supervisor if there were any signs or verbal cues that I should look for so I could know when a decision was made and the brainstorming was over. Would you be surprised to learn that I was called belligerent for that line of questioning? If I told you that this supervisor was a white male and I a black female, are you still surprised? For me, being called belligerent for asking for clarification reminded me of the baggage that black women have to face, not only in the workplace, but in most of our encounters with those who have stereotypical views of black women. He probably didn’t mean it that way, but from my point of view, he pretty much called me a *black bitch*, i.e., an *angry black*

woman. It's the notion that all black women are inherently angry and can communicate only via aggression. Consequently, for me, all issues have to be examined based on the color of my skin first. I don't have the luxury to think otherwise.

No Emotions Allowed

The entire 2008 presidential campaign with Obama running, including the Democratic primaries, was extremely uncomfortable. The assumption that I as a black person would automatically vote for Barack Obama was insulting. I must say that I really try not to engage in religious or political discussions at work. But if I'm feeling comfortable within a group and the topic comes up, I may discuss it as neutrally as I can. Nonetheless, in this case, it was always assumed that I would vote for Barack Obama. Now, for those who assume that most in libraries are liberal Democrats, this may make sense for the presidential election between the Democrat and Republican nominees. But what about the Democratic primary race? Why not assume I would vote for Hillary since I'm a woman? That's also insulting, by the way. This invalidates me as a thoughtful and intelligent voter who votes on the issues. Not all black people voted for Barack Obama. Some of us are actually capable of looking beyond race to make informed decisions.

These assumptions are nothing more than microaggressions. Ronald Wheeler defines three types of microaggressions. "Microassaults are 'attacks meant to harm the victim,' thus they are fairly easy to identify."⁸ Microinsults are "behaviors that are insensitive, rude, or inconsiderate of a person's identity."⁹ "Microinvalidations 'are characterized by behavior that minimizes the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of targets.'"¹⁰ The assumptions I experienced lie somewhere between being a microinsult and a microinvalidation since these two are usually unintentional and hard to identify because of the subtlety involved.

I took a vacation day for November 4, 2008, and the rest of the week. I had learned from the aftermath of the O. J. Simpson trial that it is not good to be at work on those days that are powered with racial tension. Up until the "Trial of the Century," it appeared that an over-

whelming number of those who work in libraries were pretty liberal. The O. J. Simpson verdict opened my eyes to the contrary. I no longer felt like one of the group. It was like Tupac's "All Eyez on Me," with everyone waiting and watching to see how I would react. Would I have a slight curl in my lips like Mona Lisa, secretly celebrating the fact that a black man of some wealth and privilege may have experienced some of the same privileges of his white counterpart? Or would I be as outraged as most of them were? I knew I didn't want to be at work the day of and the day after the election of President Barack Obama. Being the only or one of two blacks, I didn't feel like I had the freedom to just be. Part of being the only black professional is the burden of trying to be neutral when others don't have to be.

#BlackLibrariansMatter

The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and movement were formed in response to the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner. All were black men killed by white men, with the latter two being killed by police officers. Since the hashtag's origin, other black men and women, such as Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, and Alton Sterling, have been murdered by police. While not as dire as #BlackLivesMatter, #BlackLibrariansMatter also. Here's why:

America reached an important milestone in 2011. That occurred when, for the first time in the history of the country, more minority babies than white babies were born in a year. Soon, most children will be racial minorities: Hispanics, blacks, Asians, and other nonwhite races. And, in about three decades, whites will constitute a minority of all Americans (see figure 1-1).¹¹

The racial makeup of librarians should mirror the communities they serve. This doesn't mean that white librarians aren't capable of working with minorities. It's just that people of color are more comfortable seeking help from someone who looks like them. As Malcolm X stated in his autobiography, "Where true brotherhood existed among all colors, where no one felt segregated, where there was no 'superiority' complex, no 'inferiority' complex—then voluntarily,

naturally, people of the same kind felt drawn together by that which they had in common.”¹²

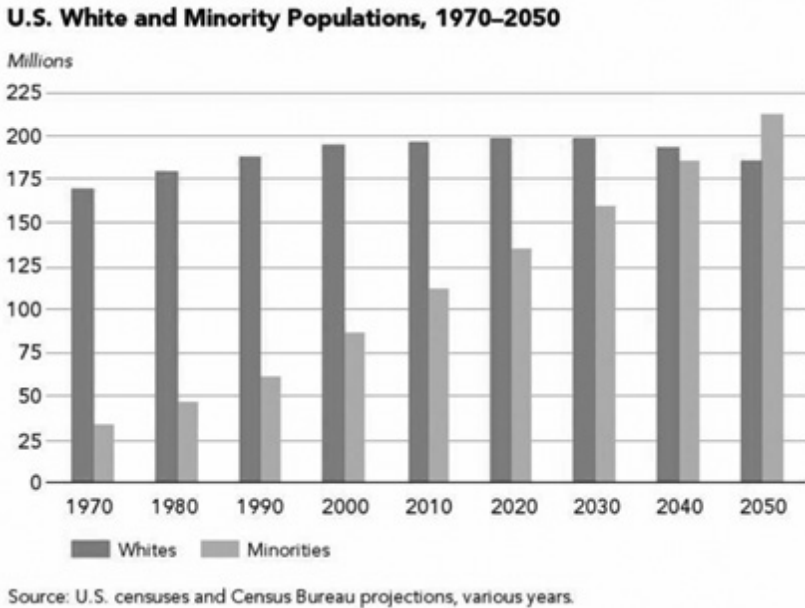


Figure 6.1

US white and minority populations, 1970–2050 (Source: William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion* [Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014], figure 1-1).

I can't count the number of times a student has approached me mainly because I looked like them. I know this to be true because there's a certain look that I can recognize from a black student. A look that asks the initial question of "Does she really see me?" or a look that says "Cool, I feel comfortable asking her." Just a little over a year ago, after working with a black male student at the reference desk, he pulled me aside and asked how I got away with wearing Adidas to work. Not sure if the New Yorker in him thought a southerner like myself wouldn't dare to have dreadlocks and rock Adidas as a librarian. Or maybe he had a stereotypical view of all librarians. But I am sure that he felt more comfortable asking help from someone who looked like him and strongly identified with his culture, hip-hop culture, that is. You are not prejudiced because you are naturally

drawn to those who look like you. It becomes racist when you are in an institution governed by laws such as a work environment when you do not take steps to address this natural inclination.

While I do advocate for more people of color in the profession, I don't want that person to be just like me or any other non-minority person. What I would like to see is true diversity in every sense of the word. Not all blacks or whites think exactly alike. So let's not hire the same prototype over and over again. Real creativity and progressive solutions come from a place of "tension" or "uncomfortableness." Differences of opinion by those who share a racial, gender, or sexual orientation category, for example, are a great way to foster true diversity.

It is not enough to just get black librarians and other minorities in the building. When we are in the building, we want to be valued and recognized for our contributions. I want to have job satisfaction in my performance, as well as opportunities for leadership. "A diversity report by the American Library Association, showed that among a total credentialed library population of 118,666, only 6,160 are black and 3,661 are Latino.... Among library directors, there are 138 African-American active directors in the entire nation, according to a University of Kentucky library report."¹³

How does this relate to recruiting more people of color to the profession? In 2003, Zou and I wrote, "Although there is still a need for recruiting and retaining minorities to the profession of librarianship, emphasis should also be placed on developing these librarians to become leaders in the profession.... An organization with a strong commitment to diversity management and an inclusive environment could very well be the most effective tool for attracting and retaining high potential employees."¹⁴ In 2008, Epps wrote, "Maurice Wheeler argues that libraries are experiencing a leadership crisis with regard to Black librarians. He contends that the lack of a sufficient number of minorities in leadership positions in the library profession is a critical issue. Most of the effort has gone into recruiting minorities into the profession rather than identifying and developing minorities as leaders."¹⁵ Because there doesn't seem to be a commitment to develop minorities for leadership positions in libraries, it is difficult for me to recommend this profession to other minorities. I will never discour-

age someone from pursuing their dreams and goals, but I'm usually conflicted when asked about the profession.

In recent years, I have been asked for two recommendation letters for library school from former staff colleagues who are black. I agreed to write the letters, but only after a very frank conversation. In those conversations I noted the unofficial requirement to have an additional advanced degree for certain positions; limited opportunities for advancement if management is a goal; and the demands of the service and scholarship requirements that are not worth the efforts financially, especially if you're in a non-tenure-track position. Just to be fair, I did have good things to say. This can be a rewarding career. You get to do a variety of things internally, as well as external campus activities, and work with bright-eyed students to assist in their academic success. If I want to help change the landscape of the profession, I should assist in recruiting other minorities to the profession. But to do so may require me to exaggerate the positives by downplaying the negatives. Therein lies the conflict. Is my allegiance to the profession or to those that look like me?

It's a catch-22 for libraries as well. ALA has tried for some time to recruit minorities to the profession, offering a scholarship to do so. But in order to recruit more minorities, you need more minorities in the profession. I was recruited by another black librarian in the library where I worked as a library assistant. As a new librarian, I would have welcomed the opportunity to be an ambassador of sorts for ALA and go to career fairs at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to recruit others to the profession. You also need more minorities in leadership positions to not only help with recruitment, but also help with retention. Carla Hayden, a black librarian, has been nominated by President Obama to be the fourteenth Librarian of Congress. That's huge! As a result of the nomination, Carla Hayden is already exposing minorities to the profession as she was associated with another hashtag and movement, #BlackGirlsRock, which is a nonprofit organization that mentors and empowers youth. A black woman will possibly have the most distinguished position in all libraries. I hope this is seen and used as an opportunity to recruit minorities to the profession.

Conclusion

Forging the path for true diversity in libraries will not come easily if it does ever come. After all, this has been a discussion not only in libraries, but in this country, since before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Our work environments mirror the larger society, after all. And with the political landscape the way it is, with our presidential candidates sinking to new lows and state legislatures passing discrimination bills, it is easy to be pessimistic about the future. However, the two-term presidency of President Obama should at the very least serve as a symbolic hope of attaining the impossible. The very nomination of a black woman to serve as Librarian of Congress is another. Just a little more than a decade ago, both were not expected to happen in our lifetime.

Regardless of the difficulty and challenges faced, what I know for sure is that we have to keep trying. The first step is talking about the issues to bring them to the surface. Although writing this has been very cathartic for me, my goal was not to simply whine and play the race card. In a small way, I hope my narrative gives someone food for thought to dare to begin the conversation in their library. There are answers and ways to make a difference for those who *dare greatly*.

Notes

1. Christine Hauser, "Mississippi District Ordered to Desegregate Its Schools," *New York Times*, May 17, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/18/us/cleveland-mississippi-school-district-desegregate.html>.
2. Gene Demby, "How Code-Switching Explains the World," *Code Switch*, National Public Radio, April 8, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/04/08/176064688/how-code-switching-explains-the-world>, italics in the original.
3. Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 29.
4. *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Angry Black Woman," accessed July 6, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Angry_Black_Woman.
5. Marcyliena Morgan and Dionne Bennett, "Getting Off Black Women's Backs: Love Her or Leave Her Alone," *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 2 (September 2006): 490, doi:10.1017/S1742058X06060334.

6. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 275.
7. Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1989), 45.
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9. *Ibid.*, 324.
10. *Ibid.*, 325.
11. William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014), 1–2.
12. Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 375.
13. Shahid Abdul-Karim, "New Haven's Rare Black Librarian Keeps Mission in Mind," *New Haven Register*, March 29, 2015, <http://www.nhregister.com/lifestyle/20150329/new-havens-rare-black-librarian-keeps-mission-in-mind>.
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15. Sharon K. Epps, "African American Women Leaders in Academic Research Libraries," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 8, no. 3 (2008): 257, doi: 10.1353/pla.0.0001.

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