

Diversity means Disruption

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Why hire First Nations people into your mostly white structure and expect/want/demand everything to remain basically the same?

Many libraries, archives and museums will talk about how they value diversity, and many individual institutions and professional organisations will have their own diversity and inclusion policies and initiatives. However, these are often shallow exercises as they are seldom created to challenge and disrupt whiteness within and outside the sector. We cannot change institutional racism without first changing institutions, and without disruption, nothing will change.

Why don't libraries, archives and museums challenge whiteness more? It could be argued it is because these organisations were not designed to, as they, particularly archives and museums, were established by settler states as tools of colonisation to maintain whiteness by proliferating colonial narratives and mythologies that have aided the legitimization of historic land theft, assimilation actions, over-policing and racial violence by the settler state. These narratives and mythologies are still in effect today, continuing the demonization of marginalised groups as means to protect whiteness.

Additionally, through the historical exclusion of non-white voices and bodies, libraries, archives and museums have centred white thought, whiteness created history, and white bodies which has solidified them as the default and neutral in mainstream society therefore framing non-white thought and bodies as the "other". This has helped make whiteness invisible, thus making it harder to challenge.

As result of the invisibility of whiteness, diversity initiatives are often about including diverse bodies into the mainstream without critically examining what that mainstream is. Kyra describes this: "When we talk about diversity and inclusion, we necessarily position marginalized groups as naturally needing to assimilate into dominant ones, rather than to undermine said structures of domination".¹ And because these structures are the default, undermining them is destabilizing aka "rocking the boat"

which is disapproved of.

It could be suggested that most diversity initiatives are what Poka Laenui called Accommodation/Tokenism, which is stage 5 of the process of colonization.² In this stage of colonization, whatever remnants of culture have survived the onslaught of the earlier steps are given surface accommodation. They are tolerated as an exhibition of the colonial regimes sense of leniency to the continuing ignorance of the natives. They are given token regard.

As a consequence, I have seen a high turnover of staff from marginalized communities, especially First Nations people, as well as general feelings of disenfranchisement. However, I think are some things we can do to improve diversity initiatives.

I. Don't let white fragility get in the way of change

“If you are lucky enough to be let in, don't have the bad manners to complain about the way you are treated”³

In my experience, many white people will often see discussions of racism in libraries, archives and museums as personal attacks against them and instead of reflecting on their own actions and complicity, they chose to disengage because what is been said made them uncomfortable or worse they gaslight and tone police the First Nations person bringing the issue up with statements like “you're always so negative”, “you're making a mountain out of a molehill”, “it's not that bad”, or “you're looking for racism”. Even accusations of reverse racism are issued to consciously or unconsciously defend whiteness. Consequently, this can make the person bringing up racism seem like a trouble maker.

There have been many times I've been told that I should be careful working with different First Nations people because “they are difficult to work with” or “bullies” only to find out what they meant is these First Nations people would not put up with racism. Ruby Hamad wrote about this and how the legitimate grievances of brown and black women were instead flipped into narratives of white women getting attacked, which helped white people avoid accountability and also makes people of color seem unreasonable and aggressive.⁴

As individuals in libraries, archives and museums we need to understand that our discomfort is temporary, oppression is not and as organisations we need to create more accountability. Racism is continuously swept under the carpet instead of confronted which is a loud statement to First Nations people that our concerns and by extension, we, are not important to you.

2. Treat lived experience as expertise

Often when discussing issues of colonialism in libraries, archives and museums, your voice can be easily perceived as being arbitrarily antagonistic because in a majority white organisation, you are being contrarian. Your view is seen as the opinion or preference of one person, not a critique based on your lived experience or the many conversations you have had with your family and fellow community members about structural issues that affect us. If I am disagreeing, it's not because I want to (it's heaps easier to agree). It's because it's necessary I do because I know that the issue could affect one of my loved ones' lives.

If you are seeking a First Nations perspective, respect it. If you only want a First Nations perspective to agree with you, that's disrespectful. Respect our input on topics that affect us because we live it. We know more than what you seen in media or the thesis you read. We bring many skills to the table, this includes our experiences as First Nations people in this country.

3. Support us

"It is frustrating being one of the only voices of colour in a sea of white talk."⁵

Being a First Nations person in a majority white organisation means a lot is asked of you that is not in your role description. This needs to be acknowledged. This acknowledgment needs to come with support such as additional First Nations staff which could help alleviate some of the of the issues that come with minority status. Also, the strength in numbers helps cut through a "sea of white talk".

Additionally, support should include providing First Nations only spaces when necessary as well as supporting staff with time and resources to connect with other First Nations staff in other organisations and to connect with different community members as part of our professional development.

4. Remember it ain't 9-5 for us

We don't finish being First Nations people when work finishes. Our work in these places has physical and metaphysical consequences for ourselves and our communities. As such the work we do has added responsibilities and our work extends outside these walls. Those who we are accountable to are not just inside these organisations. While many of us work so all stakeholders are happy, community comes first. This is something libraries, archives and museums must recognise.

5. Advocacy

Libraries, archives and museums should support and advocate (without centreing themselves) First Nations causes and grassroots initiatives. Especially ones that are deemed “political” or “controversial” as they are usually deemed that because they are addressing the most vicious and systemic oppression, such as black deaths in custody. Not doing so or “being neutral” in such contexts means lending support to those oppressive structures. In this complicity you are then also an oppressor.

In conclusion, I believe diversity initiatives from libraries, archives and museum are a concession and acknowledgment that things need to change. Nevertheless we cannot have change or meaningful diversity without disruption.

Further readings

April Hathcock, “White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS,” In the Library with a Lead Pipe, October 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity/>. Retrieved March 3, 2019.

Endnotes

1. Kyra. “How to Uphold White Supremacy by Focusing on Diversity and Inclusion” Model View Culture (2014.) <https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/how-to-uphold-white-supremacy-by-focusing-on-diversity-and-inclusion> Retrieved March 2, 2019.
2. Poka Laenui, “Processes of Decolonization.” Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision. Ed. Marie Battiste. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2000. 150-160.
3. Paraphrased from Cynthia Levine-Rasky. *Whiteness Fractured* (New York: Routledge, 2016): 159.
4. Ruby Hamad, “How White Women Use Strategic Tears to Silence Women of Colour;” *The Guardian*. May 7, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/08/how-white-women-use-strategic-tears-to-avoid-accountability> Retrieved March 3, 2019.
5. Paraphrased. George Yancy, *Look a White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012): 60.