

Will We Ever Learn?: The *Un*-Enlightenment of Selector Librarians

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ABSTRACT: This critical case study aims to explore the influences on the collection development procedures and practices of selector librarians to incorporate authentic voices and representation. At the time of this publication, there was limited literature on the role academic librarians play in the attainment of authentic representations of culturally diverse and inclusive materials. Incorporating results from a national-level survey and 19 follow-up interviews, *this study focuses on the major theme found: academic librarians are not being adequately trained in collection development during the pursuit of their accredited degrees.* When viewed through a lens of critical whiteness studies (CWS), an argument can be made that academia and librarianship are entrenched in whiteness, which perpetuates the silencing of “others.”

Keywords: academic library collections, collection development, authentic representation, authentic authorship, collection diversity, inclusive collections, selector librarians



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“All professions must live with their own mythologies as well as their own realities.”
(Atkinson, 1985, xxi)

Introduction

The evolving role of academic libraries reflects an ongoing commitment to facilitating scholarly research, furthering information literacy, and enhancing the overall learning experience in higher education. Library collections play an essential role in fulfilling an institution's fundamental mission, serving as the foundational cornerstone on which the purpose and objectives of the institution are constructed. As such, libraries continue to adapt to new challenges and opportunities in an effort to ensure that their collections remain relevant and supportive of research, teaching, and learning.

Academic librarians play a pivotal and multifaceted role in collection development to align the resources of the library with the institution's goals, values, and academic mission. Gorman (2015) asserts a librarian's purpose is to “preserve and disseminate the human record” (p. 12). The responsibilities of librarians generally encompass a wide range of tasks and decisions related to selecting, acquiring, and maintaining the institution's collection to meet the information needs of the academic community. Collection development involves not only acquiring new materials through selection and acquisition, but also removing items that no longer meet the needs of the community; these activities work in synergy – *and they are all equally important* – to achieve a high-quality collection (Olubiyo, 2023).

The role of librarians in collection development has also evolved, shaped by changes in technology, the nature of information, and the diverse needs of users. It has become less frequent in academic libraries to find librarians whose job duties are dedicated solely to selecting materials on a title-by-title basis; instead, many academic libraries have assigned liaison librarians to oversee material selection for their specific disciplines (England, 2023). Recently, many academic librarians find that collection development is a mere fraction of their overall job responsibilities (Evans & Greenwell, 2018). I use the term *selector librarian* within this paper to refer to these librarians who have collection development responsibilities – either as a fraction of their liaison duties or the whole of their job duties – and actively select materials to incorporate into the library's overall collection.

At the time of this publication, limited research was available on collection development procedures and policies (see Gao & Creelman, 2022; Levenson, 2019), underscoring the need for more empirical research in those areas. Snow (1996) has argued that collection development policies “represents librarianship's acceptance of unchallenged assumptions” (p. 191). Price (2022) furthers this by declaring that the priorities and focus of academic library collection development are barriers to an inclusive collection.

Rather, the literature surrounding collection development is focused on the financial constraints of academic libraries (see Abernethy, 2023; Ashikuzzaman, 2024; Bosch et al., 2020; Hulbert, 2023; Levenson & Hess, 2020) and the diversity of a collection (see Bledsoe et al., 2022; Monroe-Gulick & Morris, 2023; Price, 2022). However, an extended search produced no research specifically on the role of selector librarians in the acquisition of inclusive and diverse materials from authors of underrepresented groups. Therefore, *this research* explores the critical influences

on the collection development procedures and decisions of individual selector librarians, particularly their procedures and decisions related to culturally diverse and inclusive materials with authentic voices and representation. I use the term *authentic authorship* (Blume & Roylance, 2020) and *authentic voices* throughout this paper to refer to an author's authentic lens on a given subject, thus providing authentic representation.

Given that this paper describes a research study that is designed to highlight and resist systemic racism and sexism within academic library collections, I note my own whiteness, as well as the privilege and protections that come with it – and a reminder that 87% of my profession in the United States self-identify as white (American Library Association [ALA], 2017). As a white person with collection development responsibilities, it is crucial for me to remember that I have a say in whose stories are told – and thus, *whose voices are heard* – within my institution's collection.

Overview of the Literature

History of Whiteness in Library Foundations

From the founding of privatized libraries that excluded women and people of color to “free” public libraries that enforced segregation, the history of librarianship is heavily steeped in racism, elitism, and misogyny (Mehra & Gray, 2020; Peterson, 1996). Libraries throughout history have been based on white male Eurocentric ontologies and epistemologies, with embedded power to protect and maintain the status quo through hegemonic practices (Brook et al, 2015; Gibson et al., 2018; Hathcock, 2015; Honma, 2005; Stauffer, 2016).

Library collections contain scholarship based on the scientific methods and supporting evidence deemed appropriate by the white, middle-class, able-bodied male professionals who held privileged positions, and these positions allowed for the exclusion of other research approaches and ways of knowing (Irwin, 2022; Mehra & Gray, 2020). Moreover, the development of controlled vocabularies (Pawley, 2006) and information categorization and classification schemes used in libraries were based on roots in white European hegemony (Adler & Harper, 2018; Mehra & Gray, 2020). During the segregation of library education, this “white male hegemony imposed its definition of the profession and of education for that profession” on Black librarians as well, causing Black librarians to assimilate and maintain the status quo (Stauffer, 2020, p. 459). Therefore, an argument can be made that the *entire* profession of librarianship was intentionally constructed on the *white* Eurocentric ways of knowing and thinking.

Literature on Diversity, Inclusion, and Hegemonic Practices in Libraries

The research surrounding diversity and inclusion in academic libraries is primarily focused on diversity of personnel representation (see Kung et al., 2020; Le, 2021). This literature addresses the glaring whiteness of library personnel (see Galvan, 2015; Hathcock, 2015; Honma, 2005), as well as the recruitment and retention of people of color (see Brown et al., 2018; Hastings, 2015; Vinopal, 2016; Winston, 1998). More recent literature has shifted the focus to explicit and implicit barriers to success faced by librarians of color (see Cooke & Sweeney, 2019; Dalton & Villagran, 2018), racial microaggressions and discrimination (see Alabi, 2015; Prieto Gutiérrez &

Colmenero Ruiz, 2023; Scarletto & Robinson-Nkongola, 2023; Vraimaki et al., 2019), and strategies for inclusion and improving the racial climate within academic libraries (see Alabi, 2018; Mehra & Gray, 2020; Riley-Reid, 2017).

Although academic institutions have attempted to combat systemic inequities and discrimination in hiring practices, the historical exclusion of women and people of color in higher education still have an effect on current hiring practices (Lundine et al., 2019). Hiring committees can be the gatekeepers of academia: they determine not only who is hired for tenure-track positions, but also shape the “demographic composition of departments, disciplines, and universities” (Rivera, 2017, p. 1112). Furthermore, academic organizations subscribe to the concept of “fit” within hiring practices that maintain employment disparities. This idea of “fit” is used to justify hiring formulaic and obvious hires that fit into the culture of the organization so as not to disrupt, rather than hiring the applicant most qualified and suited to the profession (Cunningham et al., 2019; White-Lewis, 2020, 2021); it is this practice that sanctions the exclusion of all who are different.

Additionally, research has shown that women and scholars of color in academia are denied professional advancement and achievements that their counterparts are awarded, including tenure and promotion (Misra et al., 2021; Weisshaar, 2017; Winslow & Davis, 2016). Gender and racial minorities are also overwhelmingly underrepresented in high status positions in academia and other organizations because of evaluation differences and cultural assumptions (Carnes et al., 2015; Monroe et al., 2015). Moreover, men predominantly hold the prestigious first-author positions on scholarly publications and produce more research output in general (West et al., 2013).

Collins (2018) has focused on the intersectionality of diversity issues and the power of institutional language. The institutional language of libraries, created by hegemonic power structures, creates both normative and nonnormative practices, which produce and reinforce institutional realities and oppressions. The conundrum is that in order to change these hegemonic norms, we have to have the words to name them, and it becomes exceedingly difficult to discuss the autocratic systems without unintentionally reinforcing them (Collins, 2018).

Other scholars have challenged the foundational principles and values of libraries to highlight how the ideas of neutrality and objectivity are false ideals of the profession, and the field of librarianship is deeply entrenched in vocational awe (Chiu et al., 2021; Ettarh, 2018), epistemic supremacy (Morales & Williams, 2021), and the erasure and suppression of nonwhite cultures and knowledge (Brook et al., 2015; Gusa, 2010). These authors challenge the Eurocentric dominant narratives, and the white hegemonic structures and systems that have been designed to “mirror the racist past and present” (Vázquez, 2021, p. 151) through collection development practices of librarians. The prioritization of written word over storytelling and other means of information sharing by selector librarians allows for the misrepresentation, invalidation, distortion, and suppression of historically marginalized and oppressed cultures and peoples (Chiu et al., 2021; Espinal et al., 2018).

Decolonization Attempts of Academic Library Collections

There is notable literature regarding decolonization attempts in academic library collections. The bulk of this research is focused on special collection materials and archives, particularly in the realm of Indigenous cultures and populations. Specifically, Indigenous communities are working

with museums and libraries, using their community voice and viewpoints, to represent their own culture and history, with the objective of reframing colonial narratives and ensuring authenticity (Onciul, 2015). This work challenges archival research, which has historically been created by white scholars, and has further perpetuated the vicious cycle of whites creating knowledge based on Eurocentric ideologies, and using that knowledge to further create and shape new knowledge. This standard practice has become so embedded into our society and culture that it has become invisible within the field of library sciences (Bowers et al., 2017; Crist & Clark/Keefe, 2022; Hurley et al., 2017; Joseph et al., 2017; Jules, 2016).

Attempts to transform technical services and Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) have also been addressed within the literature. Resources with connections to LGBTQIA+ studies have outdated and biased terminology that are being used as subject headings. Author bibliographic information within the record may have assigned deadnames or misgendering of authors, thereby making it difficult for researchers to find useful and relevant content (Howard & Knowlton, 2018; Wagner & Crowley, 2020). The Library of Congress recently rejected a second attempt to have “White privilege” as a subject heading. Instead, works about white privilege are still being assigned to “Race discrimination” and “Whites-Race identity,” a practice which further perpetuates systemic racism and hegemonic institutional whiteness (Espinal et al., 2018). The Library of Congress is the de facto national academic library; it sets the standards and classification systems for all academic libraries. If the Library of Congress is unwilling to make strides regarding diversity and inclusion, how does it stand to reason that academic library collections will ever provide underrepresented and marginalized scholars a sense of belonging and equal footing in their research?

Diversity in Academic Library Collections

Substantial research is being done on how librarians are recreating institutionally oppressive power structures and perpetuating whiteness (see Cline, 1999; England, 2023; Mehra & Gray, 2020). However, no research exists regarding the role of librarian selectors in the acquisition of inclusive and diverse materials from authors of underrepresented groups. Blume and Roylance (2020) created a workflow for library collection development that is based on incorporating relevant community members, collaborators, and allies, focusing on *authentic authorship* – a term used to refer to an author’s “genuine lens” on a particular subject. This collaborative-approach project was used to bolster the Pacific Islander (PI) collection at the University of Utah, and integrated concepts with a focus on community input to highlight gaps in the subject, illuminate titles in the native language, and discover PI authors, all while strengthening relationships within the library to garner support and ease the acquisition process in order for the *Authentic Authorship Workflow* to be successful (Blume & Roylance, 2020).

Emerging research published in very recent years has primarily focused on diversity audits, and the various assessment methodological tools libraries have incorporated into their collection assessment practices. Diversity audits are a tool used to analyze a given collection to measure the amount of disparate perspectives, experiences, and representations within a collection in order to better meet the needs of the populations they serve. Historically, these audits have focused on K-12 school libraries and public libraries; however, there has been an increase in diversity audits in academic libraries within the past three years (see Bradley-Ridout et al., 2023; Emerson & Leh-

man, 2022; Gates et al., 2022; Price, 2022; Shotick, 2024; Walters, 2023). Many of these methods focus on specific data points, such as material content or diverse characteristics of an author, to include race, gender, and sexuality to evaluate the strength of their collection. These assessments mainly entail reverse audits, where the presence of materials in a collection are checked against some form of authoritative list. Many libraries have used diversity award lists (see Kristick, 2020; Monroe-Gulick & Morris, 2023); a review of usage statistics (see Backowski & Mor-ton, 2019; Ciszek & Young, 2010); or a title comparison to peer institutions (see Emerson & Lehman, 2022; Proctor, 2020) to conduct reverse audits.

Another growing area within diversity audits is examining the close relationship that collections have with external selection tools and vendors. There is very limited research in this field, but Monroe-Gulick and Morris (2023) have shown that relying on external tools, such as Gobi and approval plans, resulted in a less diverse collection. This body of growing research is critical because selector librarians often rely on external tools and vendor selections to assist in collection development duties because of time constraints.

Building upon this paucity of previous research on the lack of authentic authorship and representation in academic library collections, this study aims to explore *the critical influences on selector librarians' collection development procedures, particularly those related to the attainment of culturally diverse and inclusive materials that embody authentic authorship*.

Research Design

Theoretical Perspective: Critical Whiteness Studies

Whiteness is a social construct rather than a universal truth. Henry and Tator (2006) asserted that the power of whiteness is manifested through – and transformed into – “social, political, economic, and cultural behavior. White culture, norms, and values in all these areas become normative natural. They become the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and usually found to be inferior” (pp. 46-47). Sleeter (2011) asserted that whiteness consists of three elements: we live in a racialized society, with white people in power and control; whiteness is a set of normative privileges that white people have internalized; and oppressive systems are invisible to those who hold power.

Critical whiteness studies (CWS) is a way of examining and deconstructing the ways in which whiteness is normalized and taken for granted in dominant discourse and institutions. CWS serves as a lens through which the world can be analyzed and understood, and offers a means to scrutinize socially situated narratives of knowledge (Applebaum, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Jupp, 2020; Nayak, 2007).

Critical whiteness studies is part of the broader interdisciplinary field of critical race theory (CRT), and although the frameworks share some common intellectual roots used to examine issues of power and privilege, they have slightly different focuses and approaches. CRT is primarily concerned with analyzing the institutional structures that perpetuate systems of inequality and oppression, with an emphasis on the perspectives and experiences of people of color and other historically and intentionally marginalized groups (Bell, 1992, 1993; Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical whiteness studies focuses on the invisible ways in which *whiteness* specifically operates as a system of power and privilege, shaping social and cultural norms, thereby upholding systemic inequalities. CWS is rooted in the belief that by understanding and challenging whiteness as a social construct, the dominant structures of power and privilege can be disrupted (Harris, 1993; Leonardo, 2004; McIntosh, 2020; Mills, 1997; Nayak, 2007). CWS is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship, used to explore how whiteness operates in various contexts, particularly education and the workplace. The field attempts to investigate how whiteness intersects with other forms of oppression, such as sexism, homophobia, and ableism (Ferber, 2007; Hayes, 2021; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Martin & Hartmann, 2022). CWS aims to contribute to the broader goal of creating a more just and equitable society by identifying the ways in which whiteness can be challenged and dismantled.

Despite critiques of critical whiteness studies, its use in this specific research is justifiable. Critics argue that CWS essentializes whiteness, and overlooks the diversity of experiences of white individuals (Bonnett, 1996; Ferber, 2007; Myslinska, 2014). These scholars argue that race cannot be understood without also looking at an individual's intersecting identities such as gender, sexuality, class, and ability, and that a primary focus on race overshadows other forms of oppression (Bailey & Zita, 2007; Ferber, 2007; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010).

Kendall (2012) argued the concept of the *white gaze* – the concept that whiteness dominates the norms and customs in society and that all white people share the same attitudes regarding racial issues – will only further essentialize whiteness. Scholars argue that this reductionism perpetuates racism by essentializing race and pushing white people to place an emphasis on their own individual identities (Blum, 2008; Satzewich, 2007). Leonardo (2004) argued that this focus on the attitudes and behaviors of individual whites “personalizes racism” and limits addressing the deep structural inequalities that underpin society.

Further, the notion of *white privilege* that falls under the CWS framework is considered problematic as it *re-centers* whiteness. Leonardo (2004) defined *privilege* as “the daily cognate of structural domination” (p.148). There is also the presumption that white people writing about their recognition of and experience with white privilege and white supremacy will only serve to preserve the power structure and imagined innocence they claim to be eschewing (Margolin, 2015). Margolin further asserted that a focus on white privilege not only diminishes the experiences and needs of people of color, but that “[...] the absurdity of believing that what matters most for the cause of black liberation and equality is what whites have to say about themselves” (2015, p. 7).

The justification for using critical whiteness studies for this research study, although contentious and complex, is two-fold. The political debates and divisive discourse surrounding critical race theory may alienate some selector librarians who may find critical whiteness studies more palatable because of the lack of rhetoric surrounding the field. More importantly though, the profession of librarianship is overwhelmingly white, with a staggering 87% of librarians self-identifying as white (American Library Association, 2017). Applying a critical whiteness studies lens – *a central focus on how whiteness and white privilege are connected to complicity in racism and maintaining systems of oppression* – to collection development practices, can help to identify biases in the selection of authors, subject areas, and formats. In this way, selector librarians can gain a

deeper understanding of how systemic racism operates in educational institutions.

Authentic representation is crucial to capturing underrepresented and culturally appreciative works of thought, ideologies, and perspectives that are not based on white epistemological “truths.” Therefore, it is important to critically examine the ways in which whiteness and white privilege may impact decisions of selector librarians in their collection development duties. By applying a CWS lens, this research set out to interrogate the underlying assumptions and biases that shape collection development practices and policies, to identify strategies to promote more equitable and inclusive collections and ultimately to *de-center* whiteness.

Critical whiteness studies can therefore be used to interrogate the ways in which whiteness operates in the collection development process specifically through selections and decisions by individual librarians, rather than focus on the institutional structures that perpetuate racism and discrimination. By focusing on whiteness, CWS allows for a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which white privilege can operate even in a context where there is an explicit commitment to diversity and inclusion as there is in the broader context of the library profession. Through ongoing self-reflection and critical inquiry, selector librarians can attempt to dismantle whiteness in collection development and center diverse, authentic voices. As Matias (2022) reminds us, “[...] because in the end, all we have in this struggle against White supremacy in academia is each other” (p. 700).

This research project was initially designed to examine the following central question: *What influences the collection development procedures and decisions of selector librarians, particularly those decisions related to culturally diverse and inclusive materials with authentic authorship and representation?* However, framed through a critical whiteness studies lens, this study evolved to investigate *the mechanisms* that sustain systemic oppression within the academic context, specifically concerning collection development practices.

Methodology: Critical Case Study

In this research, I apply a critical approach to a case study. Case study research is a versatile methodology that allows for an extensive, multi-faceted approach to understanding the complexities of a specific phenomenon or social system; it is a powerful tool that can be used to generate deep insights to explore a complex issue in its real-life context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Lichtman, 2014; Yin, 1984, 2018). Case study research provides a rich and holistic view of how various factors interact and influence outcomes of an actual situation. Across disciplines, the value of a case study approach informs professional practice and policy development (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Harrison et al., 2017). Such research is valuable for gaining deep insights into complex educational phenomena within their natural contexts, and often involves a combination of qualitative research methods, including interviews, focus groups, observations, and surveys (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The insights gained from educational case study research contribute to improvement at the classroom and institutional level, as well as policy development (Bird, 1989; Parker, 2009).

At the broader level, case study research is also used to investigate the implementation, interpretation, and impact of educational policies, reforms, and interventions at the institutional or system level (Gonzalez & Carney, 2014; Swanson, 2007). It can be used to delve into issues related

to diversity, equity, and inclusion, to guide researchers in creating strategies for building inclusive campus environments, addressing disparities, and promoting social justice and inclusivity (Holz & May, 2023; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000; Sefa Dei, 2005). Case studies can also be employed to evaluate the effectiveness of educational programs, interventions, and initiatives (Cobian et al., 2022; Stewart et al., 2006; Su et al., 2005).

Critical theory research methods are used to conduct research that aims to expose and critique how power is distributed, exercised, and negotiated within a given context. Critical theorists take the position that the socially constructed nature of the world is designed to maintain the oppression of marginalized groups (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). These critical perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of complex societal issues by transcending traditional approaches to qualitative research; they provide a lens from which to analyze and critique societal structures, ideologies, and domination in institutions to uncover hidden forms of oppression and inequality. Critical theory seeks to challenge the status quo and promote social justice, decolonization, and the politics of research by questioning and deconstructing societal norms and beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). These methods provide tools to identify and challenge hidden power structures and social hierarchies to empower marginalized voices and promote social liberation. By exposing unjust power dynamics and inequalities, critical genre qualitative research can contribute to social and political change, thereby fostering awareness and radical change.

Doolin (1998) has asserted that researchers can draw on critical perspectives to consider the broader social and political issues that have framed the phenomenon under study. Applying a critical lens to a case study methodology exposes a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics and social inequalities as well as uncovers hidden assumptions and biases, leading to a deeper understanding of the research study and its broader implications (Doolin, 1998). Case study research typically uses more than one data source and multiple methods of data collection to capture detailed information. In this way, researchers can delve deeply into the unique aspects and nuances to uncover the underlying mechanisms and dynamics at play. Data collection methods for this research were two-prong: a national survey of selector librarians and voluntary semi-structured interviews from the initial survey. This will be further discussed in the section below.

The Present Study

The following research project received IRB certification of exemption by the Office of Institutional Research at Washington State University (IRB#20171-001). Data collection methods for this research were two-prong: first, an anonymous national survey of selector librarians about equitable, diverse, and inclusive (EDI) collecting policies, procedures, and methods at the individual and institutional level (see Appendix A for survey questions). The second prong consisted of semi-structured interviews with selector librarians recruited from the initial national survey (see Appendix B for interview questions). This two-pronged approach aimed to recruit participants across a range of career-level, institutional affiliations, and overall librarian demographics.

The national-level Qualtrics-based survey in this research was deployed via the American Library Association and Association of College & Research Libraries professional listservs. Participants were screened for eligibility with two demographic screening questions. They had to currently be employed at an institution of higher education in the United States *and* they currently

had to have collection development responsibilities. The sample was created by voluntary responses. Of the 113 respondents who entered the survey, 21 did not fully complete the survey, nine (9) did not work in the United States, and one (1) did not have collection development duties; thus 82 participants (n=82) completed the survey, and their data were included in this study.

From the final question of the survey, 19 selector librarians volunteered to take part in a follow-up confidential 60-minute semi-structured interview (n=19). These librarians were then individually contacted to schedule a day and time that worked best with their schedule. The individual interviews were recorded via the Zoom platform of Washington State University. Since the aim of this research was to highlight the factors affecting collection development decisions by selector librarians, interviewees were asked to create relevant identifiers to maintain confidentiality: pseudonyms, unidentifiable preferred titles, a broad description of their institutional affiliations, and self-identifying information such as positionalities and preferred pronouns.

The interview questions provided insight into the personal selection criteria used by librarians regarding equity, diversity, and inclusion, as well as how/if they had considered ensuring authentic authorship of materials within their collection decisions. The interview questions were three-prong: a set of background information questions on each librarian; a set of questions on individual practices and thoughts/ideas on EDI and collection development practices; and a final set of questions on institutional policies regarding collection development and EDI.

Interviews began with *a priori* codes based on my research questions, and *in vivo* coding and descriptive coding were used during the interviews and analysis to identify recurring language and themes. Since there were 19 interviews, analytic memos were created immediately after each interview; further, an additional analytic memo was created after each corresponding interview, focusing on emerging (or novel) themes and categories from prior interviews. Interview recordings were transcribed via the analytic software Descript, and each interview transcript was reviewed for accuracy both by the participants and me. Interview transcripts were coded with Atlas.ti, and in order to generate themes, iterative cycles of analysis were performed as preliminary findings emerged.

For both the survey and interviews, years of service of the selector librarians were categorized according to the Association of College & Research Libraries' (ACRL) 2023 categories for conference scholarships:

- Early-Career Librarians: Fewer than six (6) years of post-MLIS professional experience in a librarian role;
- Mid-Career Librarians: More than six (6) years and fewer than 15 years of post-MLIS experience in a librarian role; and
- Career Librarian: More than 15 years of post-MLIS professional experience in a librarian role.

The survey received responses from 10 Early-Career Librarians, 39 Mid-Career Librarians, and

33 Career Librarians. The responses of six (6) librarians who worked at a public two-year institution, 51 librarians who worked in a public four-year institution, 24 librarians who worked in a private four-year institution, and one (1) who worked at a special focus institution were included in the survey.

Two (2) Early-Career Librarians, nine (9) Mid-Career Librarians, and eight (8) Career Librarians were interviewed. Of the 19 librarians, nine (9) worked at a public four-year institution, six (6) worked in a private four-year institution, three (3) worked at a public two-year institution, and one (1) who worked in a special focus institution. More specific information about each librarian's institutional profile is included in the section on findings below.

Case study research also has some limitations: its susceptibility to research bias, its limited generalizability, and challenges in replicating the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In order to disrupt research bias, individual interview participants were asked to check for transcription accuracy, providing feedback and clarification as necessary. In order to maintain complete anonymity, Zoom recordings were deleted after participants "signed off" on their transcripts, and all identifying information was redacted from transcripts. Once initial data analysis had been completed, feedback was once again solicited from interview participants to ensure accuracy and present an unskewed view of their input.

Findings

The major – and unexpected – finding to emerge from this research was that: *Selector librarians are not receiving the education and training necessary to ensure they are collecting authentically representative materials of historically underrepresented – and in some cases, silenced – communities.*

Three main themes emerged when the data were analyzed from the interviews and the survey.

1. Librarians do not receive adequate education or continued training to properly perform collection development duties.
2. Institutional limitations, such as time constraints and budgetary issues, impact collection development decisions.
3. A reliance on vendor-provided external tools and resources limits access to authentically representative materials that librarians have to select from.

The focus of this paper will be on exploring the first thematic finding: many academic librarians have received – at best – only minimal education and training regarding collection development, specifically of authentically representative and diverse materials.

The findings of this study make it clear: while the majority of librarians are white, their race is not the root cause of their failure to ensure authentic representation in collection development. Rather, the issue lies in their lack of even adequate education in collection development, and is a weakness that even affects collection development decisions made by librarians of color. This deficiency in education serves as a reflection of a much larger system of oppression. Librarian

education is nothing more than a cog in that machine, perpetuating the very inequities it should be working to dismantle.

Inconsistent Collection Development Training in Accredited Programs

A master's degree in library science, preferably one accredited through ALA, is required for most academic librarians in the United States. This accreditation indicates the program has "undergone an external review and meets the ALA Committee on Accreditation's Standards" ... which "evaluate a program's mission, goals, and objectives; *their curriculum*, faculty, and students [...]" (ALA, 2024, para. 4, emphasis added). Although curriculum receives a mention in the description of program evaluation, the survey and interviews in this research project show that currently many librarians received no formal training in collection development during the pursuit of their accredited degrees. Of the 82 survey respondents, 47 (57%) did not receive formal training in collection development during their education; nine (9) of the 19 interview respondents (47%) did not receive *any* formal training in collection development that they could remember.

Specifically, *Samantha* (white, cishet female Open Education Librarian at a medium public regional institution) did not receive any formal education regarding collection development while pursuing her MLIS. She asserts the topic of collection development may have been

touched on in a course or two, but we didn't have any formal "this is how you do it" sort of thing though. Everything else I feel like was really "on the job" training and was learned through that. I've always felt in both my jobs that collection development, it's my job but treated like it's an ancillary duty and I really don't need to know that much about it. **We might've touched on diversity in a reference class or whatever, but nothing that I would feel was really formal.** Most of my collection development work I have learned working with other librarians once I was hired. (personal communication, November 20, 2023, emphasis added)

Samantha is not alone in thinking that the education she received was restricted in scope and content with respect to diversity.

Santiago (Hispanic, queer male Collection Development Librarian at a community college) recalls that "If I did have any training, **it was brief.**" He went on to say that regarding the topic of diversity in library school, there was a mention of "the importance of diversity in the collection, **but not how to achieve it**" (personal communication, October 17, 2023, emphasis added).

For librarians who did have a course in collection development, many found it to be impractical and suboptimal.

Viking (white, cis, gay male Subject Librarian at an R1 land-grant university) disclosed the collection development course he took "... **wasn't that useful**, to be honest, but there was one course" (personal communication, November 16, 2023, emphasis added).

Furthermore, *Dave* (white, male Library Director at a private, non-profit religious-affiliated four-year institution) recalled his course to be "**really just about philosophy** ... from the collection side, it **didn't dig deep**" (personal communication, November 10, 2023, emphasis added).

Annie (white, cisgender female working at a public, doctoral-granting regional comprehensive institution) has been a librarian for 23 years, and has had collection development responsibilities for a total of 13 years throughout her career. She has been with her institution for over 20 years and has served in her current position as the Collection Development Coordinator for the past four (4) years – a position that primarily oversees the purchasing of monographs for her library.

Annie had one collection development class in school, but cannot recall the curriculum specifically pertaining to how to assess or analyze the collection in general, and does not recall content regarding diversity other than the “**broad statements** that we all [librarians as a profession] have always had – “we serve everybody” (personal communication, October 17, 2023, emphasis added). *Annie* also cannot recall anything in the collection development curriculum regarding authentic representation and voices within the collection.

Moreover, *S.* (white, female Assistant Library Director at a private four-year college) stated that she had “one single class” in collection development. However,

It was much more theoretical, and it was, I’m going to say, probably **a lot more focused on public librarianship than academic**. But that was 35 years ago. **Nothing on how to analyze a collection**. And really anything on purchasing, I learned at my prior institution. No training, **nothing in library school about diversity – that was not an issue**. And no training or library school on authentic representation and voices. (personal communication, October 26, 2023, emphasis added)

Although *S.* and *Annie* graduated from library school decades ago, there does not appear to have been a significant increase in the years since then in the number of MLIS graduates who received formal training in collection development. Of the 82 survey respondents, only three (3) of the ten Early-Career Librarians received formal training on collection development during library school. It stands to reason that if library schools are not requiring a course on how to develop a library collection, then the most recently trained librarians are not being systematically taught either the basic skills of collection development or the importance of integrating authentic voices and representation into a collection – a collection development course is where one would expect such information to be addressed.

Both Early-Career Librarians interviewed had formal collection development training in library school. However, the content of the curriculum is still inconsistent across accredited programs and regarded as impractical for academic librarians.

K. (white, cisgender female Public Services Librarian working at a large public doctoral-granting institution) graduated from library school less than a year ago. *K.* had one required collection development course that

talked intellectually about how you would [assess the diversity of a collection] but **didn’t have practical things** on what you would do if the collection you’re assessing is three (3) million volumes. There were tangential references to some current blogs that were talking about diversity, but they’re **more useful resources for public and school librarians than for academics**. And part of my issue is that what the collection I do is also very,

very, very subject-specific. So, most of the mainstream library sources, **it's totally irrelevant for me to know what's going on with picture books. It's cool, but it doesn't help me at all.** (personal communication, November 8, 2023, emphasis added)

Anne (white, cishet female History Librarian at an R1 flagship university) graduated from library school in 2020. She had one required core class on collection development that addressed practicalities of collection development such as “analysis of the collection, developing a collection development policy, assessing your community to see what they need” and “some talk about [diversity]. I remember we had some readings looking at that, and at the time I took it, **I was working as a paraprofessional in an urban [public] library**, so we used my library as the example” for projects related to community assessment (personal communication, October 26, 2023, emphasis added). But since shifting gears into academia, *Anne* has realized that

DEI is not really a topic I've seen addressed as much in terms of academic collections, which is probably a real gap that needs to be filled. Especially since it can be challenging at times to find when you're purchasing for an academic collection – you are dealing with academics who do tend to skew very much white male. Now, **when I worked for the public library, there was a little bit more training** that I saw and attended in regard to that just because that was something we were very focused on. (personal communication, October 26, 2023, emphasis added)

A critical whiteness studies perspective underscores the troubling impracticality – and more egregiously, the outright absence – of collection development training in accredited degree programs. This gap in education exposes the deep complicity of academic institutions in upholding whiteness as the unchallenged normative standard and serves to reinforce the dominance of whiteness within academic institutions.

Impractical Professional Development Opportunities

With a lack of formal education on collection development throughout library school, many librarians seek out professional development opportunities on collection development on their own. But those opportunities seem scarce.

Joe (white, cishet male Science Librarian at a small private liberal arts college) attended ACRL Annual Conference in March 2023. Using the program guide filters to find sessions pertaining to collection development and diversity, he states there were

something like a hundred, they had a lot of sessions on diversity, something like 150. It was wild. And then you look up collection management and it's four (4) or five (5). **Like big segments of what we do is [collection development] work, [but it] was more or less ignored.** Yeah, I think the opportunities are out there. Maybe I'm forgetting sessions, but I'll stick with that answer. (personal communication, October 19, 2023, emphasis added)

Not only are conference sessions on the topic of ensuring diversity in collection development procedures scarce, but the professional development that can be found is impractical and not focused on implementation strategies – just like formal training in library school.

S. states that she has

tried to find [education] on my own, but **there's not a lot**. When I go to library conferences, I pay attention. At ACRL this past year, I believe there were programs. **And frankly, it's a lot of, "we all should be doing this." And it's like, "yeah, that's really nice, now how do we do it?" It's mostly the benefits of a diverse collection.** I'm like, "yeah, that's really great. I don't have time to sit and go look at the author of every single work." (personal communication, October 26, 2023, emphasis added)

Not only are conference sessions on the topic of ensuring diversity in collection development procedures scarce and impractical for academic librarians, but other forms of professional development are not specific to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within academic library collections. Rather, the focus of the content is geared mostly towards public librarians and school librarians – just like formal training in library school.

Annie has sought out trainings and webinars on collection assessment and evaluation on her own, primarily from professional library organizations and “those sort of paid-for-opportunities online courses that typically tend to be three or four weeks” (personal communication, October 17, 2023). *Annie* asserts,

I got things from it, but they were **designed for public libraries and school libraries mostly** and there were other academic librarians in the course with me, but ... the majority were public librarians and school librarians who have been doing this as part of their job for longer than at least I've been paying – really intentionally – close attention to it.

Sometimes **it's been hard to find training specifically for academic librarians** on it, outside of like I said a few kind of webinars here and there, but that doesn't keep me from going because I can always pick things up, you can get ideas, somebody might do something in a public library, but I can say, “**oh I could potentially adapt that, or do part of that piece here**” or something like that. (personal communication, October 17, 2023, emphasis added)

Last summer, *K.* also attended a paid-for training course through *Library Journal*. In the same vein as *Annie*, she states,

There was a group of us from our library that did a diversifying your collection [course], kind of a multi-week thing that talked more in-depth about how to do assessments. Although their practices were also **not super relevant** for a three (3) million item collection. And again, **even though they said it was geared towards everybody, a lot of the actual content was more school and public [libraries]**. (personal communication, November 8, 2023, emphasis added)

Even if we begrudgingly overlook the lack of systematic collection development training in library schools, professional development opportunities remain largely irrelevant and impractical for academic librarians. These opportunities are inherently self-replicating in nature as they depend on librarians – *often without formal collection development training themselves* – to share

insights based solely on their own limited experiences. This flawed system not only perpetuates the inadequate integration of authentically representative materials but actively sustains the dominance of whiteness in academic institutions.

Inadequate Professional Library Organizations

And then there are some academic librarians who find the field of professional development for academic librarians to be downright futile and not of value; that the intention may be there, but it is still paltry and meager.

Samantha finds professional development on collection development – as well as support from professional library organizations – severely inadequate in helping academic librarians with ensuring authentic representation and diversity in collection development.

As an academic librarian, **I don't feel like there is strong professional development support from ALA or from state-affiliated organizations for things like collection development.** We are expected to find that through ACRL or other job-specific organizations/conferences like NASIG or ER&L. ACRL definitely tries to do things with diversity in collection development, but ... **is it practical? Nope. It's mostly just theoretical bullshit.** (personal communication, November 20, 2023, emphasis added)

Once again, the criticism underscores a significant absence of systematic support, with the guidance provided being not only impractical and overly theoretical, but also fundamentally unimplementable for academic librarians.

Overall Findings

Formal training in collection development is not a uniform requirement of the American Library Association for an accredited degree. For those librarians who received any collection development training in library school, the education was woefully inadequate, glaringly deficient in practical guidance, and left them ill-equipped to effectively implement actionable strategies. Interview participants found the professional development opportunities they had taken to be limited, scarce, and hard to locate. These furthering education opportunities are reported as brief (conference sessions or webinars) or short-term (paid-for training opportunities that last a few weeks). The participants found these professional development opportunities to be impractical given their focus on public and K-12 school libraries – just as any formal training in library school had been.

Participants reported that formal training of any type for academic librarians – accredited programs with collection development courses in library school or professional development opportunities – is not addressing the importance of authentic authorship or authentic representation during collection development.

Although this is one case study and replication and generalization may not be feasible, I hope this research raises an awareness of a professional issue: *the training that selector librarians have received to collect materials directly impacts the authenticity and authentic representation of communities found within an academic library's collection.*

Discussion

Although the population of librarians interviewed in this study lacks significant diversity – reflecting a broader trend within the field – each expressed concern about the lack of authentic representation in collection development, as well as the insufficient training and professional development opportunities available for academic librarians. This highlights the core issue lies within the system itself: the inadequate, unfocused, and impractical education in collection development provided during formal librarian training.

The findings point to a long-standing pattern of lack of attention to DEI in the selection of materials, a lack that serves as a bellwether pointing to the embedding of whiteness that masks and reinforces the racism, elitism, and misogyny in the training that modern academic librarians receive in collection development courses in their professional training. As part of the larger neoliberal academy, academic libraries are not neutral spaces, as many of the participants in this research found. Adler and Harper (2018) state, “[...] [not only is neutrality impossible to uphold, but in many situations, it is an inappropriate ideal to strive for” (p. 57). The pervasiveness of whiteness in higher education is perpetuated through the “dominant narratives [that] are repeated, mirrored, and ultimately become the norms by which a society operates” (Cooke, 2016, p. 332).

Susan (female Electronic Resources & User Access Librarian at a private M1 institution) recognizes this perpetuation of whiteness in our collections. She states,

I think that most collections in academic libraries are still [...] this is [...] the sad thing is, I don't think that they're modern, and they're old collections, and who makes up the most, who's written most of our collection? **It's white men – white, cisgender men primarily.** That's who is occupying our shelves right now. And sadly, that's whose voice is really being heard. I think if you actually look at the collection dates of publication, you're not going to see the most up-to-date. You're actually going to see a lot of old books on that shelf.

And that's whose voices we, as women – a feminized profession – that's what we're collecting. And so, I think if you really look at it, it has so many problems because **we're almost continuing that cycle of socialization that men's voices are the most important and not only men's voices, but white men's voices, white cisgender men's voices are important.** And I think that's to not only the detriment of our collection, but it's to the detriment of society as well. (personal communication, October 17, 2023, emphasis added)

In the same vein as their parent institutions, library and information science (LIS) curriculum is designed to maintain the racist status quo of the profession *and the academy*. Ultimately the reported lack of required training – and availability of continued training – to develop diverse library collections by participants maintains this status quo. Pawley (2006) and Stauffer (2020) assert it is imperative that LIS educators recognize the roots of racialized thinking in librarianship *as well as* the ways in which it is still visible and present in contemporary curriculum. Furthermore, Stauffer (2020) argues we must also consider who the curriculum was originally designed

for, as well as how whiteness has influenced accreditation standards and the historical development of the overall LIS curriculum.

Research has been conducted on the importance of diversity in LIS education (see Cooke, 2016; Cooke et al, 2016; De La Rosa, et al., 2021; Jaeger et al., 2011; Subramaniam & Jaeger, 2011). The bulk of this research is focused on required readings or projects assigned in class that are designed to raise students' awareness of their own privilege. Cooke et al. (2016) maintains that these readings need to be "palatable and broad enough to be considered relevant and important to a wide range of students who differ in backgrounds, understanding, and professional goals" (p. 116). Without having the type of library in the forefront, these readings provide nothing more than "cursory lessons" on diversity or social justice (Adler & Harper, 2018, p. 56). Given that more than half (57%) of the survey respondents and almost half (47%) of the interview participants *did not* have any formal training on collection development in library school – and those that did describe it as more "theoretical" – it is unclear if there is *any* existing roadmap to achieve authentic authorship in *academic* library collections.

Gibson et al. (2018) examined the reading lists required of foundational LIS courses at the top-20 ALA-accredited LIS programs and found that the majority of courses did not expose students to any form of critical theory. The authors further noted the variance in foundational course requirements across the institutions, as well as the varying number of required foundational courses. Given the findings of this research and the existing literature, the question is unavoidable: *With such variance and inconsistency across LIS institutions, exactly what is ALA accrediting regarding the curriculum?*

Where it is even mentioned, the term *diversity* is amorphous and not well articulated in the overall library profession. Adopted by the American Library Association Council in 2017 on the recommendation of the ALA Task Force on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, *diversity* is defined as:

[...] the sum of the ways that people are both alike and different. Visible diversity is generally those attributes or characteristics that are external. However, diversity goes beyond the external to internal characteristics that we choose to define as 'invisible' diversity. Invisible diversity includes those characteristics and attributes that are not readily seen. (p. 2)

Based on this nebulous definition, would selector librarians even recognize materials that reflect authentic authorship? And who is determining what is diverse? Again, there is no defining measure or practical guidance included as to how a selector librarian would achieve adding authentically diverse materials to an academic library collection.

Although some of the focus regarding the topic of diversity is viewed as something seen (e.g.,: picture books or representation in library personnel), it is typically regarded as an attitude or outlook in the profession. With a genuine desire to incorporate authentically representative diverse materials into collections and a lack of concrete guidelines, it is no wonder that academic librarians have become disillusioned with the way the profession has approached diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Martin (white, cis male Education & Children's Studies Librarian at a public comprehensive university) proclaims that he gets

a little bit uneasy sometimes about some of the ways we [librarians as a profession] talk about EDI because I wonder if sometimes, **I think we're trying to find a quick solution for something that won't be solved quickly**. I know that everyone's intentions in addressing authenticity have been motivated by a desire for good outcomes, but we are turning to things like #OwnVoices where I understand from pieces I read online by writers and illustrators of color that it was doing a lot of unintended damage to marginalized creators. **I'm concerned about the ways we aren't reflective enough or don't listen closely enough, as we pick up "solutions" that don't "solve" as much as we expect them to.** (professional communication, October 25, 2023, emphasis added)

Rose (queer pansexual Collection Development & Technical Services Supervisor at a community college) believes

[...] there can be a lot more done. Like I said, I think that the **DEI stuff is just a head nod or checkmark**, and people aren't actually acting on it. But actually planning out, like **making sure that there's different voices that are heard, making sure that there's workshops, making sure that things are available to people that need them – I don't think that's been as a high of a priority** as say, "Oh, we have a committee that's a diversity and inclusion committee, so that means that we are diverse and inclusive." (personal communication, October 16, 2023, emphasis added)

When viewed through the lens of critical whiteness studies, whiteness has been so normalized in academia that even professions that have historically proclaimed to value diversity and inclusion – *such as librarianship* – have been indoctrinated to perpetuate the racist status quo of the system that it is a part of. Because of this "historically embedded racialized thinking in LIS through the acceptance of normalized white, anglophone collections and professional practices" (Pawley, 2006, p. 159), it is the normative practice for librarians to *not* be trained in collecting works containing authentic voices and representations – that is, *those materials that do not perpetuate whiteness*. Instead, voices of color and "others" continue to be erased. It is exactly as the system was designed to do from the beginning, ensuring the cycle of erasure continues.

Conclusion

This research highlights the need for academic librarians to be trained in collection development during their accredited degrees – especially how to incorporate authentic authorship and representation. These authentic viewpoints and realities challenge the dominant narrative by providing holistic narratives. Applying a critical whiteness studies lens to this study reaffirms that the lack of collection development in formal training in accredited degree curriculum allows the pervasive whiteness normativity of academic institutions to continue.

It stands to reason that if hiring practices in the academy benefit white male academics, *and* white male academics are producing more research output for the tenure and promotion process, then the majority perspective in academic library collections is that of white male Eurocentric voices.

Joe insists,

You have a whiteness problem in academics, and that's a class problem. And race and class are pretty harmoniously united here in the United States. You have fewer Black scholars because of structural racism, you have fewer Latinx scholars because of structural racism, fewer Native American scholars and writers getting published. **So, there's like racism in the schools, racism in society, racism in the academy, racism in editing, racism in publishing.** And so after somebody's dodged all these things, I don't think the librarians should add to this problem, but it's [...] **we're not creating a system where it's predominantly white people writing and being published, but that's the situation that we have to select from.** (personal communication, October 19, 2023, emphasis added)

This research demonstrates that individuals are making significant efforts, and these efforts are occurring on a relatively large scale. The issue does not stem from a deficiency in the goodwill or dedication of librarians, but rather from the absence of structured, systematic support. In order to break this vicious cycle of erasure, formal training during accredited degrees and professional development opportunities for academic librarians *must* incorporate practical, implementable, high-quality information regarding authentic representation and authorship. Peterson (1996) reminds us, “Our institutions by their collections should be represented by many opinions, languages, nations, cultures – what are we embracing with this term ‘multicultural,’ and what are we teaching future librarians?” (p. 172).

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Mainly, the opportunity to participate in this research study could not potentially reach all academic librarians who have collection development responsibilities in the United States. The survey distribution was through the American Library Association (ALA) and Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) listservs. These organizations have a substantial annual membership fee. Additionally, in order to be a member of ACRL, individuals must also be paid members of the parenting organization, ALA. At the time of this publication, the cost to be a member of both organizations was \$201. As *Dave* acknowledges, “I’m a member of ALA and ACRL as the director, but we don’t have institutional memberships ... it’s a little too pricey (personal communication, November 10, 2023). Therefore, not all academic librarians in the overall profession would have access to the call for participation because of limited access to membership listservs.

Once again, libraries become associated with elitism – if you cannot pay, you are not worthy of access or knowledge.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. Are you a librarian working at an institution in the United States?

2. Do you have collection development responsibilities?

3. What type of institution are you affiliated with?

Public 2-year institution | Public 4-year institution | Private 4-year | For-profit institution |
Other (fill in the blank)

4. How many years have you been a librarian? (fill in the blank)

5. How long have you been in your current position? (fill in the blank)

6. What is your role in your library? (fill in the blank)

7. What areas/disciplines do you select materials for your institution's collection?

Humanities | Social Sciences | Sciences

8. How long have you had collection development responsibilities?

0-3 years | 4-6 years | 7-10 years | 11-15 years | 15-20 years | 20+ years
0-4

9. Have you had any formal training in collection development?

If yes, please list (fill in the blank)

If no, move on to next question

10. How much time do you spend per month on collection development? (fill in the blank)

11. What tools and resources do you use when selecting materials? Check all that apply:

Gobi | Amazon | CHOICE cards | other (fill in the blank)

12. How do you ensure that you are capturing authentic voices and representation when selecting materials? (fill in the blank)

Appendix B

Interview Questions

For all interviewees, the first question will be to describe how they identify themselves and their positionalities.

1. Has your role in your library changed?
2. Have the areas/disciplines you select materials for your institution's collection changed?
3. Has the amount of time you spend per month on collection development changed?
4. Did you have formal training in collection development during library school?
5. Tell me about any education, workshop, or trainings that you have attended regarding collection development practices during your career.
6. What qualities do you think make for a worthy addition to your institution's collection?
7. Tell me about the tools and resources you use when selecting materials.
8. Walk me through the steps you take when selecting materials to add to your institution's collection.
9. In your opinion, what do you think the terms "equity, diversity, & inclusion" means regarding academic library collections. Is this something that your institution has addressed?
10. Tell me about any professional trainings you've had specifically related to EDI initiatives.
11. What is your perception of diversity and inclusion within academic library collections?
12. Do you perceive a lack of diversity within your own institution's collection? If so, can you explain what that lack looks like?
 - a. Are you happy with the way your institution has addressed this gap?
13. What policies does your institution have in place to ensure collection development practices incorporate authentic authorship and a variety of voices from marginalized communities and culturally responsible materials? How could this be improved?
14. How accessible would you say your library's collection is?
15. What strategies do you personally have in place to ensure that you are selecting materials with authentic representation and voices? How important is doing this?