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Letter to New People of Color in LIS

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In Our Own Voices, Redux
The Faces of Librarianship Today



Edited by
Teresa Y. Neely and Jorge R. López-McKnight



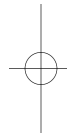
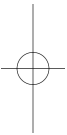
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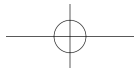
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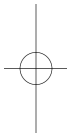
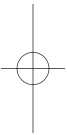


Chapter Twenty-Eight

Letter to New People of Color in LIS

Sofia Leung

Dear New Librarian, Library Worker, or Library Student of Color,



I'm writing this, not just for me, but for you, every one of you who has no idea or maybe some misconceptions about what you're about to encounter in this profession. This letter is the letter I wished I had received when I was in library school. When I started my first academic library job, I was hopeful and excited to be in what was then my dream job. I would get to create programs and events for undergraduates that would ease their entry into college and help them find and build community. Although it wasn't a part of the job description, I purposefully sought to create programs and spaces for students on the margins of campus: first-generation; low-income; students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, or asexual; and/or students of color. I wanted to be who I, and many others with marginalized voices, needed when I was younger. I still want to do that.

But first let me tell you who I am and why I needed this letter when I was in your shoes. I am the child of immigrants. In 1965, when he was fourteen or sixteen (no record of his birth), my father immigrated to New York City from Hong Kong by way of a small village in China. My mother, also Chinese, came to America from Indonesia for college. They each had to teach themselves a new language, a new culture, and acclimate to a new country. To give us a leg up, my two brothers and I were raised with English as our first language with minimal Cantonese. Neither my brothers nor I have a Cantonese accent when we speak English, although sometimes a Brooklyn accent might creep in. My parents did whatever they could to make sure we would benefit from them having figured out America and its White people to a certain extent. They had observed how White Americans confidently asserted their place in the world and taught me to speak up for myself, especially in instances of injustice. However, as newcomers to America, they did not

yet recognize how structural oppression operated in this country or could not fully express that to me. Thanks to microaggressions from classmates, teachers, and strangers, I learned how to fit in and tamp down or hide any tendencies that made me different. Even New York City, with its wealth of diversity, has its way of reminding you that you're still Other.

After graduating from Barnard College, I lived in San Francisco, California, and then Seattle, Washington, where I attended the University of Washington and earned two master's degrees, one in library and information science, and the other in public administration. I also spent a summer in Raleigh, North Carolina, as part of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Career Enhancement Program (CEP), a fellowship that no longer exists. Joining the ARL family of diversity programs introduced me to one of my mentors, Mark Puente, without whom I wouldn't be where I am today. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of finding your champions who will lift you up and recognize your value and labor. Find those people and support them when you can.

I was working as a temporary instruction librarian at a small, private college in Seattle when I was offered my first permanent position at a large public institution in the Midwest. I knew it was going to be tough to live in a small college town in the middle of the country, but really, I was not prepared for how tough. I don't want to scare anyone away from working in a place they never thought they'd ever be; I want you to *be prepared*. I honestly can't say I have any regrets from moving there; I met some of the best people I have ever known and learned so much more about myself and others. I grew as a woman of color and a leader, especially important in a predominantly White profession and institution.

To be fair, I don't think I was prepared for what I was to encounter, and some of the library administrators weren't prepared for me. In my interview, I didn't directly mention that social justice was the core value around which I practice librarianship. I mistakenly thought people who join this profession would feel the same way or, at least, respect the notion. Maybe I'm too naive or optimistic, but it still amazes me when I meet librarians or archivists who don't believe that social justice is the foundation of our work.

I don't need to tell you what tokenism feels like, but I have never experienced it as strongly as I have being the only person of color in my department. Growing up in New York City did not prepare me for the juxtaposition of color-blindness and invisibility at work with the blatant stares I received in public spaces. One of the disadvantages to moving to a new place (depending on how far away you end up) for a new job is the cultural shock of being in a different part of the country, away from anything or anyone familiar. However, if you're someone who is willing and able to move elsewhere for your career goals, this is something you'll be forced to do, especially if you want to stay in academia. Intellectually, I understood this; emotionally, I was not

anywhere near prepared for this. As an East Coaster, moving to the West Coast was already a bit of culture shock for me. Moving to the Midwest was almost like moving to another country or even another planet in some ways. I couldn't spend too much time outdoors without being eaten alive by the various bugs. People stared blatantly at me whenever I left the relatively "safe" environs of campus. The food culture was severely lacking. The town was way too small; I would run into people from work more often than not. And where were the people of color (POC)?!

In addition to these environmental distractions, I quickly discovered that my new position required me to be much more of a self-starter and self-learner than I originally anticipated. No one was going to tell me what was expected of me, set up introductions to external (to the library) partners, or give me guidance on the cultural norms and organizational culture. I was partially more adrift than other new librarians because I had an interim supervisor while a search was conducted for that position, and I was the only librarian located at my branch location. After much emotional labor, stress, and sometimes after getting into trouble, I figured things out for myself.

One thing to be aware of, and it still surprises me that I have to warn you of this, is colleagues who will want to take advantage of your newness and your initial eagerness to be liked and useful as a new employee. On the very rare occasion that you encounter a person like this, you may be *volun-told* that they've been "waiting for you" in order to hand off certain projects. If this strikes you as weird because your supervisor told you nothing of the sort, listen to that instinct! You will need to set boundaries and protect your time, especially if you're in a new position within the library that you get to create. Don't get caught up in their false sense of urgency. Your colleagues should be making time and space for you as a new employee to get acclimated before giving you projects, especially in your first week! Of course, if that does happen, go to your supervisor immediately. If your supervisor doesn't step in to protect you, you'll know there's a side relationship between the supervisor and that colleague—one that you shouldn't trust—and you'll also know that you should stay far away from that colleague. That's office politics in a nutshell.

I probably don't need to tell you that you will encounter microaggressions and just straight-up racist bullshit from colleagues, supervisors, and superiors at work. But just in case you didn't think that was possible in a so-called values-based profession, librarians of color continue to experience microaggressions from the best of the well-meaning White folks (Alabi 2015, 2015a). So refreshing.

As a new librarian, it's super important to have a supervisor who advocates for you and protects you from administrative bullshit, especially as a person of color. Mediocre White people with insecurities will always be looking for ways to diminish us and our work. They will feel intimidated by

our sheer work ethic, instilled in us by the fact that we had to work twice as hard to get to the same place. In some cases, it ends up being your supervisor or administrator who feels threatened by you. Instead of supporting you or lifting you up, they may bully you in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Pay attention to changes in their behavior and reach out to a mentor to help you navigate those pitfalls.

A FEW LESSONS

One of my favorite faculty members, Shannon Portillo,¹ a badass woman of color who earned tenure before she turned thirty, shared a valuable piece of advice from her mentor: save the best of yourself for yourself. The only person looking out for you is *you*. I still have a hard time taking that advice myself, but I recognize the value in it. DeEtta Jones² gave my Minnesota Institute³ cohort some wisdom that really complements what I learned from Shannon: the only person your anger hurts is you. I have to tell myself that over and over almost daily. It's a really difficult realization to come to terms with because that kind of anger can feel so good. DeEtta told us to redirect that energy into something more productive; otherwise, it will just feel like repeatedly hitting a brick wall, which is just more frustrating. This is a lesson I have had to learn over and over again. Kathryn Deiss,⁴ DeEtta's cofacilitator at the Minnesota Institute, did warn me that it would take practice, one step at a time.

Many librarians of color find themselves being asked to join, lead, or create their library's diversity committee or they find themselves bringing up "the diversity question/issue" more often than their White colleagues. Many folks of color already know that it's important to make changes in order to improve things for those who come after us. We say to ourselves, "Be the person you needed when you were younger and the person you need now." For a lot of us, to *not* make social justice a part of our daily work would be worse than doing it and suffering for it.

I am not saying do not take on the "diversity work" of educating your colleagues and your institution. What I am saying is to understand the risks of that work and to be strategic when you do it. While it may not seem like it sometimes, recognize that this is a choice that comes with many risks to our career and our mental health. First, you're putting yourself in a vulnerable position by "standing out" and gaining recognition, whether it be positive or negative, from colleagues, managers, and administrators. It's possible that it'll paint a target on your back. On the other hand, you could still garner unwanted attention by being told you're "doing too much," if your contributions to the profession threaten the insecurities of your supervisor or administrators. At the same time, you will not be getting recognition for the difficult

work of educating your peers and the emotional labor you're putting in. You will be expected to shoulder that burden, as if it *is* your work and no one else's. Your managers and administrators won't actually listen to anything you have to say. However, your administrators will happily take credit for your unpaid labor, especially when it makes the library look good.

HOW TO SURVIVE

Hope is not at the expense of struggle but animates a struggle; hope gives us a sense that there is a point to working things out, working things through. Hope does not only or always point toward the future, but carries us through when the terrain is difficult, when the path we follow makes it harder to proceed. Hope is behind us when we have to work for something to be possible.

—Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

Living and working in this environment, as you may imagine, was detrimental to both my mental and physical health. To help prevent a similar cycle of negativity and despair from happening to you, I am offering up some tips and advice on how to survive if you find yourself in such a situation. Obviously, these may not all work for you, but I hope you are able to find solace in one of these or through one of your own forms of self-care.

1. First and most important, find your community—outside of the library, if necessary. *You are not alone*. It's a sad, depressing, but hopeful truth—POC in this profession and higher education share many of the same experiences of tokenism, microaggressions, and the backlash attributed to White fragility.⁵ You will need to create what Nicole Cooke (2014) calls “counter-spaces,” a term she borrows from Daniel Solórzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso, where you can be your whole self and not have to submerge your racial identity. Reach out to library school students of color and other librarians of color to support and co-mentor one another. Connecting with faculty, students, and other staff of color on your campus can also be a source of refuge and comfort. The relationships that I've built just from shared experiences with other POC have sustained me and given me the strength to continue in this field.

2. Look beyond your institution for professional development opportunities in the form of service committees and publishing and presenting opportunities. If you have the time or it's part of your job description, get your name out there by volunteering for various professional organizations, submitting proposals to conferences or for articles and chapters, joining the editorial board of a journal, or becoming a peer reviewer. There are so many opportunities to do all of that. There are also quite a few leadership programs and scholarships out there for early-career librarians, less so for mid-career folks, so get them in while you can. Another mentor of mine emphasized the

importance of name recognition for POC in this profession and, honestly, it's so true.

3. Motivate yourself by envisioning an outrageous goal. If work life is a struggle, get inspiration from this almost unattainable goal to help you find the desire to get out of bed every day. This piece of wisdom came from the wonderful, inspirational DeEtta Jones. For example, my career goal used to be going into library administration as a dean or director of a research library. But after learning from DeEtta, I decided that wasn't enough. It didn't mean anything for me to be a dean without my fellow POC beside me. Once I made that decision, I made lifting up other POC in the profession a part of my goals. Not once have I regretted that decision, and every win for another POC is a win for all of us. Every time I'm able to lift another one of us up, I feel more fulfilled and motivated to stay in this profession.

4. Recognize your self-worth and value, not just to the institution but also to students, faculty, and staff. It's important to remember that as POC, we have already had a harder time, in varying degrees, than White people in these same spaces, but this isn't the Oppression Olympics. We have had to work twice as hard, if not more, to get to the same place as many of these White people. We deserve to be here. In a presentation at ACRL 2017, Dr. Nicole Cooke noted that "although the profession is eighty-seven percent White, most of the communities we serve are not" (Cooke 2017). By being ourselves and having our lived experiences, we are already valuable to the library profession, more so than our White colleagues would like to admit. When a student of color sees you and sees themselves in you, you've already made a difference, just by being there.

5. Many of the suggestions above are forms of self-care, but the following are activities rather than strategies.

- Get a therapist, if you're able to afford it, or get it from your health insurance. Work is giving you mental health issues; work should pay for it. Obviously, this is not an affordable choice if your insurance doesn't cover it. But talking with others about what's happening to you, whether it's with family or friends or colleagues in other departments or institutions, can be a form of therapy as well. I found it less helpful to talk to White colleagues who didn't get it, because then I had to explain why I found my experiences difficult.
- Listen to podcasts⁶ or watch TV shows⁷ that speak directly to the experiences you're having. I found it incredibly helpful to listen to podcasts where race was discussed regularly. It helped me to feel as though I wasn't imagining my experiences; that women of color in all professions have similar struggles.
- Take a vacation or mental health day. I was reminded by a good friend of mine, another POC survivor in higher education, that we become so trau-

matized by White spaces that our bodies react viscerally to returning to those spaces. So give yourself a break from those White spaces!

- Exercise and/or meditate regularly. Both activities helped to clear my mind and make me feel physically and mentally stronger.
- Read to liberate. I did so much reading in and around critical theory, particularly critical race theory, to teach myself the language to explain what I was experiencing. Over and over, I heard and read how important it is to be able to name the thing that’s happening to you and others, so that you can call attention to it and do something about it. Some readings that resonated with me include Ahmed’s *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), Cooke’s “Pushing Back from the Table: Fighting to Maintain My Voice as a Pre-Tenure Minority Female in the White Academy” (2014), Crenshaw’s “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (1991), and hooks’s *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994).

Good luck and stay strong. We need all of us in this fight. But if you find yourself really unhappy with no end in sight or no motivation to stay, then maybe it’s time to think about leaving this profession. We’ll miss you, but you’ll always be a part of this family.

NOTES

1. Shannon Portillo, PhD, is an associate professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration at the University of Kansas.

2. DeEtta Jones is the founder and principal at DeEtta Jones and Associates (DJA) Consulting: Next Generation Leadership. See www.deettajones.com.

3. See Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians, <https://www.lib.umn.edu/sed/institute..>

4. Kathryn Deiss is senior facilitator and consultant at DeEtta Jones and Associates (DJA) Consulting: Next Generation Leadership. See www.deettajones.com.

5. *White fragility*, a term coined by Dr. Robin DiAngelo, a consultant and trainer on issues of race and social justice, is defined as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.” See <http://robindiangelo.com/about-me/>.

6. Some podcasts I recommend (in no particular order) are *Another Round*, *Still Processing*, *The Mash-Up Americans*, *Code Switch*, *Politically Re-Active with W. Kamau Bell & Hari Kondabolu*, *2 Dope Queens*, *Sooo Many White Guys*, and *Otherhood*.

7. Some TV shows I would recommend (also in no particular order) include *Being Mary Jane*, *Jane the Virgin*, *Insecure*, *The Mindy Project* (specifically the episode “Mindy Lahiri Is a White Man”), *The Crown* (I acknowledge that this show is problematic because it’s about a white woman who continues to enable white supremacy and colonialism, but many of the struggles she faces are very relatable and it’s still interesting to see what strategies she employs to deal with them).