

# Guest editorial: Anti-racist scholarship and practice in library and information science

*Note to readers: We offer a conversational editorial, which is emblematic of the deep collaboration required for a special issue on the topic of anti-racist action in libraries. This editorial is written first from Special Issues Editor Jim Hahn's recollections of the Reference Services Review Editorial Team meetings at the end of 2020, when we discussed a special issue on anti-racism in libraries. We invited Mark Puente, the Associate Dean for Organizational Development, Inclusion and Diversity at Purdue University as a guest editor for this issue. Mark discusses the nature of selecting abstracts and the content and themes within this special issue, both novel and established.*

*Part 1. Jim Hahn, the Head of Metadata Research at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries and Reference Services Review Special Issues Editor*

In December 2020, the editorial team at *Reference Services Review* began to brainstorm a special issue related to diversity, equity and inclusion. At the time, there were several special issue calls for submissions from library and information science journals. The editorial team wanted to publish a special issue that would not only stand out among the many new calls for diversity, equity and inclusion manuscripts but would also be novel for the field of librarianship. At that time, like now, we were in the throes of a global pandemic and the long overdue racial reckoning that seemed to accompany the pandemic was unshakable. As I observed in our call for papers to the special issue, "These events have highlighted what marginalized groups have long understood about racial disparities exposed by the coronavirus: that minoritized populations are disproportionately and negatively impacted by inequities that are imbedded in every system that we have in the United States. These inequities are the root cause of barriers to access to life, liberty, and happiness for so many in the United States."

The editorial team invited Mark Puente, the Associate Dean for Organizational Development, Inclusion and Diversity at Purdue University to guest edit the special issue. Mark's background and expertise are in the areas of equity and inclusion in libraries, and these qualities spoke to the desired depth of scholarship we hoped to attract and advance in this issue. His research in the field is well regarded, and he is a sought-after facilitator for library diversity training, practices and cultures. Mark's professional network was instrumental in recruiting diverse peer reviewers into the article review process, as the journal editors sought to pair both seasoned reviewers from the journal's existing pool with professionals who could bring expertise in the domain area of anti-racism practices in libraries.

The editorial team was surprised by the response to the call for papers. We had over 30 abstracts submitted to the special issue. I thought at the time that there was enough interest from the library community to do two special issues on the topic. As Mark and I met virtually in the summer of 2021 with those who were selected to write for the issue, we found interest from the authors in an ongoing commitment to this topic from scholars, practitioners and stakeholders.

A note on the process before Mark takes us into the evaluation of abstracts – both Mark and I scored a first pass of blinded abstracts. Once we had our top scores, we met virtually to work out and discuss any outliers in our respective process. We were able to read



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positionality statements as a part of our abstract evaluation before making selections and subsequently reaching out to authors with an invitation to submit a finished paper to the special issue.

*Part 2. Mark Puente, the Associate Dean for Organizational Development, Inclusion and Diversity, Purdue University, Guest Editor for Anti-Racist Action in Libraries Reference Services Review Special Issue*

Selecting the topics for acceptance into the special issue was a challenge on many fronts. The broad range of proposals included angles to the topic of anti-racism that were both familiar and new. We recognized the value of presenting case studies, and we were intentional about including articles from both academic libraries doing exemplary work in this space, as well as work being organized and implemented from the perspective of LIS educators. The emphasis on autoethnographic study may not be novel for the topic of anti-racism in general, but it may be an unfamiliar approach for some in library and information science. Further, we felt it was important to ensure that authors represented a range of institution types, including public libraries (or scholars working in that space) and community college libraries.

Many common themes are threaded throughout the content of the issue. At the core of many of the articles is the attention to “white supremacy” or “white supremacy culture.” Either phrase often can be a trigger that may set someone unfamiliar with the terms into a “fight or flight” mode or a defensive posture. The reader is cautioned not to think of this framing as related only to extremist behaviors and events, but as something that is deeply embedded in the fabric of our society and in the systems and norms of our daily lives. Furthermore, many of the authors in this special issue reinforce the stance that it is limiting to think of white supremacy culture as related only to personal bias, prejudice or behavioral transactions. We must think of this issue as systemic, that is, intertwined with larger systems where libraries are situated or on which they are dependent. This includes higher education, K-12 education, civic government, our economic systems and even criminal justice. The latter two topics being foci that have largely been absent from the discourse, but that are represented eloquently in two of the articles within this issue. To be sure, focusing on white supremacy culture and its intersection with LIS will take many to an uncomfortable, but necessary space in the quest to reenvision and rebuild systems that will result in greater equity, especially for communities of color. This collection of articles, though challenging, offers proximity to the challenge of racial inequity and provides valuable insights for addressing these critical issues and for initiating change that is desperately needed within our profession and in our society.

Two final reflections are offered: In a number of articles in this issue, indeed, throughout the field of anti-racism work, one will see and hear a seminal piece of literature cited from Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun’s “Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture.” It is widely available in many publication forms. In the process of editing the manuscripts for this special issue, a new website surfaced from one of the original authors, Tema Okun, who has created an accessible and comprehensive guide for those wanting to contribute to the anti-racism movement. She cautions the reader that she and the late Kenneth Jones never envisioned the original article to be a “stand-alone” resource, only that it would live within the broader context of resources and tools to help dismantle white supremacy culture. She goes on to say that, unfortunately, even those who are dedicated to the work of anti-racism may become confused about the difference between a tool and a weapon. She cautions readers not to use the work as a weapon, but as a guide to achieving a desired future.

Second, and in closing, and notwithstanding the incredibly challenging times in which we are living, we must maintain a sense of hope that works like this that our profession can make a difference. In the final paragraph in “How to Be an Antiracist” (Kendi, 2019), the author

bears his soul revealing doubts that we will ever live in a world where racism is eradicated. But, he continues, if we do lose hope, then we are certain to lose. But, if “we ignore the odds and fight to create an antiracist world,” then we stand a chance to create a better world and future. (p. 238).

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**Reference**

Kendi, I.X. (2019), *How to Be an Antiracist*, One World, New York, NY.