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The Jackie Robinson of Library Science: Twenty Years Later

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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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Chapter Nine

The Jackie Robinson of Library Science

Twenty Years Later

Teresa Y. Neely

> "As the sole African American librarian in my present place of employment, the fact that I am a Black woman has never been more apparent, if not to my colleagues then most certainly to me . . . the legacy of my birth is brought to fore every time I sit down in a meeting, [or] converse with a colleague"—Teresa Y. Neely, "The Jackie Robinson of Library Science"

In the twenty years since *IOOV* 1996 was published, my journey as an academic research librarian has taken some unexpected turns, geographically and otherwise. I successfully completed my comprehensive exams and defended my dissertation proposal in the fall of 1997 at the University of Pittsburgh's (Pitt) School of Library and Information Science. Upon returning to Colorado State University (CSU), the tenure-track clock that had been paused when I left in August of 1995 to pursue the doctorate started back up again. Between 1998 and 2001, I was the acting coordinator of reference services—instruction, outreach, and staff training. When the search for a permanent coordinator was held, I applied and was not granted an interview. It was then that Dr. Camila Alire, who had become dean of libraries at CSU while I was away at Pitt, advised me, "If you want to move up, then you will have to leave." It was sound advice that I took to heart.

In 2000, I completed the PhD degree and, shortly thereafter, left CSU for a position with more responsibility at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), just prior to September 11, 2001. My time at UMBC was not good for me, physically or mentally. I was the head of the reference department when two of the reference librarians were dealing with issues that significantly impacted their work lives. Supervising them soon consumed the

majority of each day. I was extremely unhappy in this position and was very close to burning out. I needed a fresh start. During the summer of 2004, the unexpected invitation to apply for a position that I did not know existed was exactly what I needed.

In 2005, I accepted the offer to be become the director of Zimmerman Library (Chapa 2015), the largest library on the main campus of the University of New Mexico (UNM) in Albuquerque. March 2017 marked my twelfth year of continuous employment at UNM.

During my academic career, I have worked at three institutions, two of which are predominantly White institutions (PWI) (Brown and Dancy 2010). My current institution, UNM, is an Hispanic-Serving Institution (U.S. Department of Education 2016); however, the demographics of the library faculty and staff of each of the libraries I have worked at were, and remain, primarily White, as are the demographics of the profession of librarianship overall (Godfrey and Tordella 2006; Davis and Hall 2007).

I have never held a post-MLS position at an institution that included another Black degreed librarian at similar rank in a faculty position during my entire career. Twenty-four years later, I am still the only one. And just to be clear, the only one means, the only Black faculty member and the only Black woman faculty member. The most recent *ARL Annual Salary Survey* (2015–2016) reported on sex and race demographics of ninety-nine Association of Research Libraries (ARL) libraries in the United States (Morris 2017). Responding libraries, including UNM, reported there were 1,328 (15 percent of 8,899) minority professional staff employed in university, law, and medical libraries (Morris 2017, 2–3).[1] For the time period covered, Caucasian/Other (85 percent) librarians made up the majority of those employed in ARL libraries, followed by Asian/Pacific Islanders at 7 percent, Black professionals at 5 percent, Hispanic professionals at 3 percent, and American Indian/Alaskan Natives at less than 1 percent (2017, 2). Based on these findings, if I want to continue to work in ARL libraries, at an institution with other Black librarians, I need to consider a position in the Middle Atlantic, East North Central, or South Atlantic where there are seventy-one Black librarians (237 total minority librarians), seventy-five Black librarians (203 total minority librarians), and 122 Black librarians (255 total minority librarians) employed respectively (2017, 3). Across ARL libraries in the United States and Canada, women outnumber men, nearly two (63.6 percent) to one (36.4 percent) (2017, 3). In ARL libraries in the United States, White women account for 62 percent of the total population (2017, 4).

In past publications, I have written at length about the lack of diversity in the profession, specifically in academic libraries; however, over time, the percentages quoted by myself and others have, at the very least, remained fairly consistent (Neely 1998, 1999; Neely and Peterson 2007; Cawthorne and Neely 2015). In "Diversity Counts," Davis and Hall (2007) reported that,

in all library types and positions (librarians, technicians, and assistants), across the board, the majority of librarians (credentialed and not credentialed) were White, female, aged 40–54, with no limiting disabilities (2007, 5). In the 2006 and 2009–2010 data sources analyzed, White women made up 73 percent of credentialed librarians. Based on these and other findings, the authors concluded that the profession is heading for "a proportionally less diverse library workforce" in the future (2007, 18).

In my *IOOV* 1996 chapter, when discussing my decision to move to Fort Collins, Colorado, despite the lack of Black people living there, thirty-year-old me wrote, "I was hesitant about moving to a place that was predominantly White and where I would have to board a plane each time I wanted to see a familiar face" (Neely 1996, 174). Not much has changed, except, on rare occasions, my people will board a plane to come and visit me, because, by choice, I moved to Colorado and New Mexico, two states with considerably less populations of people with African ancestry, to move up in my chosen profession. The demographics of my workplace did not change very much when I moved to Maryland to work at UMBC, and again, I was still the only credentialed one. It is unfortunate that there aren't more people in my profession or in my workplace(s) who look like me, and, honestly, I don't believe it will change any time soon. The struggle comes in learning how to live, thrive, and be successful within those systems "with people . . . who have learned to mistrust my kind or me," and where I often feel "isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared" (McIntosh 1986).

TRAUMA: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

Upon arriving at UNM in the spring of 2005, I decided to take each of my direct reports out to lunch for some one-on-one time to get to know them individually. One of my White colleagues who was reporting to me half-time informed me that, with the exception of my doctorate, he was more qualified than I was to hold the position of director of Zimmerman Library. This happened in my first week. I later found out he had applied for the position but had not been granted an interview.

Things were tense all around, and the massive reorganization that occurred in the summer of 2005 did not help. Departments were completely deconstructed, and some service desks disappeared. The four branch directors had more responsibility and authority than we previously had. Emotions ran high. By the time the entire library staff was brought together in a neutral, nonlibrary space to announce the new organizational structure, most of the people whose jobs had been directly affected had already been told, and what hadn't been said had fanned the rumor mills. People were stressed and on

edge. The announcement was devastating to some; people left that building in tears.

In January 2005, my father passed away at the age of sixty-six. A little more than a year after I started work at UNM, on Sunday, April 30, 2006, Zimmerman Library suffered a devastating fire in the basement that destroyed an estimated thirty thousand volumes of journals and other serial publications (Schultz and Neely 2010). Eight days later, in the midst of recovery and attempts to get services back online for students preparing for finals, I lost my oldest sister. She lived forty-three days after her forty-fifth birthday. In August 2007, eight days after her forty-fifth birthday, my maternal first cousin passed away suddenly, leaving her seven-year-old daughter motherless.

On Halloween 2007, Zimmerman Library's newly renovated basement flooded when the new riser room equipment failed (Castillo-Padilla et al. 2010). All total, between 2005 and 2007, including the cross-country move from Baltimore to Albuquerque, I experienced six traumatic life and work events. The American Psychiatric Association and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) define traumatic events as ones that "cause a lot of stress," and are "marked by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death. Traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers, and the friends and relatives of victims who have been involved. They may also have an impact on people who have seen the event firsthand or on television" (American Psychiatric Association 2017; Centers for Disease Control 2017). Although I have never been officially diagnosed with PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder)[2] or depression, during a routine doctor's visit, my primary care physician once asked, "Now what are we going to do about this depression?" Prior to that, I had never even given consideration that I might be depressed. However, reflecting on this period in my life now, I do not know how I made it through without some type of intervention—biologic or therapeutic.

In April 2008, just when I thought there had been a slight reprieve, both personally and professionally, we lost my father's older brother. Later in that year, my physical health began to decline, keeping pace with my mental health, no doubt. I had my first hip surgery in 2008. About a month after the first hip surgery, I thought I was recovering well, until I woke up in the middle of the night with both hands feeling as if they had been thrust into a furnace. Eventually, this resulted in a diagnosis of severe carpal tunnel syndrome in both hands. In 2010, I had a second surgery to remedy previously unknown issues revealed in the MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) of my hip. In early 2012, I realized the progress I was making physically with my hip wasn't really progress at all. In 2009, I had discovered antigravity yoga, and while I was amazing in the hammock, I couldn't walk worth a damn. Picture one of the Weebles roly-poly toys released by Hasbro's Playskool in

1971, recall the catchphrase, "Weebles wobble but they don't fall down," and you have the image of what I looked like walking (*Wikipedia*, "Weeble"). I finally decided to visit my primary care physician who agreed I was a little uneven and probably needed a chiropractic adjustment, and that an x-ray was in order. The results were astonishing. The image showed my left hip in perfect condition, smooth and beautiful. The right hip was several inches higher than the left and looked as if it had been beaten with a hammer. About an hour after I left the doctor's office, she called me with the results. "You don't need a chiropractor; you need a hip replacement." We ended the call, and she called back almost immediately with an appointment for a surgical consult the next morning at 8:00 a.m. Things were moving fast. According to his physician's assistant, the first surgeon had been in the military for twenty-six years. He looked at my x-rays for a long time and finally told me he did not know if he could fix it. He also noted the injury I had looked like the type of injury professional football players get. Note to self: Always get a second opinion. In August 2012, at the age of forty-five, I underwent a hip arthroplasty of my right hip, also known as a total hip replacement (THR). The surgery, although wildly successful in eliminating my pain and returning me to hopes of full and unfettered ambulatory mobility, triggered pulmonary embolisms, also known as blood clots in the lungs. Two years later, when I began my genealogy work on my family tree, I discovered that I was not alone with this particular condition. I just hadn't died yet.

Ancestors on both sides of my family (my paternal great-grandmother, paternal grandfather, maternal grandmother, and my maternal grandfather) all have similar causes of death listed, as do my two sisters and my maternal first cousin. I'm not sure what it is called when you think you are going to eventually die from what many others in your family have died from, but it is an extremely stressful reality.

WORKING WHILE BLACK: MICROAGGRESSIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Being the only person who looks like you and/or identifies the same way you do—in these states of an America, which are not particularly united in my view—contributes to the significant decline in one's mental health. You are perpetually unwell and emotionally unstable. I spend all day, every day, in an environment where I do not see anyone who looks like me until I look in a mirror. This takes a considerable toll. "Working while Black" in a predominantly White environment is akin to severe psychological trauma (Louie 2017; Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, and Felicié 2012; Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008; Constantine, Smith, Redington, and Owens 2008). In 2012, Donovan et al. found that the prevalence of perceived racial macroaggres-

sions (PRMa) and perceived racial microaggressions (PRMi) were "common occurrences for Black women and are associated with negative mental health outcomes, with PRMa being the less common but more detrimental of the two" (2012, 185–86). A 2014 blog post on the Crunk Feminist Collective website shares some of the microagressions experienced by Black people in the workplace. Dr. Robin M. Boylorn, a Black woman and tenured associate professor of interpersonal and intercultural communication at the University of Alabama, writes about her personal experiences, observations, and things that have happened to non-White people she knows and have communicated with. It is as affirming and comforting to read her post as it is horrifying to know that, even while successful, you remain a target for those who are less confident, threatened by your presence, ignorant, and hostile.

> Racial microaggressions are real and while they are sometimes felt and experienced tangentially, folk of color are marginalized in similar ways simply because they are of color. Prestige of position is not protection. (Boylorn 2014)

On Boylorn's Microaggression list, number two speaks loudly to me. It is the culmination of many of the things I have been told repeatedly throughout my career and are classic "go to" phrases that are often trotted out when the use of *angry Black woman* is not appropriate. It is perfectly acceptable to have hostile, aggressive, angry White people project that on you, but when you respond, you become the aggressor, the one harassing or bullying your colleague.

> You are routinely accused of being hostile, aggressive, difficult and/or angry. You are told that your colleagues/students/co-workers/customers are intimidated by you and are afraid to approach you. You are encouraged in evaluations to "smile more," and "be more friendly." You practice a fake ass smile in the mirror on your way out the door and practice all the way to work. You fear that your resting face pose makes people think you are mean. (Boylorn 2014)

Several years ago, in a faculty meeting of mostly White colleagues, I responded to a White male untenured colleague, defending myself and my position in the discussion. Afterward, the interim dean, who was White, male, and gay, told me that he had heard from my colleagues who were concerned that I, a tenured faculty member, was publicly bullying an untenured junior faculty member. I stumbled out of his office barely able to conceal my tears. I could not believe the accusation. Were they in the same meeting? Did they hear how he had spoken to me? Did they see the look on his face? His body posture? On multiple occasions, I have been verbally abused by White male colleagues I still have to work with on a daily basis. The one I allegedly bullied actually tried to apologize, on two occasions, for the aforementioned event and another outburst aimed at me, but I ignored his

attempts because he wanted to absolve himself by admitting his wrongdoing while no one else was around. I wasn't having it.

To be fair, I recognize that not all my White faculty colleagues are racist; however, I feel fairly confident in labeling their utterances, silences, and behavior as ignorant, insensitive, and uninformed. McIntosh cautions that her White Privilege Papers[3] are about her experiences and "not about the experiences of all White people in all times and places and circumstances" (McIntosh 1988, 15). Her clarifications notwithstanding, McIntosh's words speak loudly to many of us. In his 2012 history thesis from Georgia State University, Jacob Bennett explored the history of the concept "White privilege." Prior to McIntosh's White Privilege Papers, the terminology was used "to describe the structural and governmentally organized systems of discrimination perpetuated under segregation in the United States. The spike [increase in use of White privilege as a concept in American literature] in the 1980s corresponds directly with McIntosh's publication of her hypothesis about psychological privilege being perpetuated unconsciously in American society" (Bennett 2012, 3).

In her original 1988 work, from which "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" was excerpted, McIntosh listed forty-six realizations in an effort to identify some of the ways White privilege affected her personally on a daily basis (McIntosh 1988). Most of the use of her work has been limited to the twenty-six realizations that were included in the 1989 excerpt. In 2017, as I write this, and keeping my perspective on my personal journey, I am not surprised at how relevant McIntosh's realizations are to me. What follows are my responses to a few of her experiences, in the place that I work, primarily with faculty interaction.

- "I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time." Where I work now, and in my two previous professional library positions, this could never happen.
- "I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me." Although I have not been trained to mistrust people, I cannot ever avoid spending time with people whom I've learned to mistrust through their words and actions toward me.
- "I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented." The people are minimally visible and the majority of those are not positively represented. "In too many places, Black boys and Black men, and Latino boys and Latino men, experience being treated different under the law" (Obama 2015). This is "a definitive record of people killed by police in the U.S." In 2015, nearly 30 percent of the people killed by the police were Black, and many of those deaths were captured on video, shared across social

media platforms, and played in grisly detail, over and over, on the international news. In 2016, nearly a quarter of people killed by the police were Black (*Guardian* 2015, 2016).

- "When I am told about our national heritage or about 'civilization,' I am shown that people of my color made it what it is." This has never happened, unless the "founding fathers" were "enslaved immigrants"[4] (Lartey 2017). Recently released movies that document the contributions black people made to the space program (*Hidden Figures*, 2017) and to medical research (*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, 2017), and the contributions of other impactful Black people are rarely used as examples. More common is someone screaming at you to "go back to Africa," enthusiastically proposing how to "Make America Great Again," telling you we need to keep "America first," and/or pushing a White nationalist agenda (Yan, Sayers, and Almasy 2017; *Wikipedia*, "Unite the Right Rally").
- "I can be fairly sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race." I have had my ideas and suggestions ignored and essentially dismissed, and then appropriated and attributed to someone else in the same meeting. And no one ever bothers to correct the mistake or even noticed that it had occurred. The terms *manterrupted* and *bropropriating* appeared several years ago to define what happens to [White] women in the workplace dominated by men. I am not sure what it is called when White women treat non-White women the way men treat them.
- "I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial." I couldn't even type this with a straight face, because any speaking out at all to a White male colleague gives me a lifelong membership to the angry Black woman's club. I mean, currently I am the president, CEO, and only member up in here.
- "I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race." Thirty-year-old me wrote, "I would be foolish to believe that I was hired to satisfy affirmative action quotas. The rigorous lengthy interview process that one must endure in academia is not something that you can just wing with a smile and a face of color" (Neely 1996, 178).
- "If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones." Please. This happens on the daily. See the section "Working while Black" earlier in this chapter. All negative situations and episodes do not have racial overtones, but it is taxing to feel the need to have to figure that out, each and every time—particularly when that person(s) has made inappropriate statements before.
- "I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race." So many inappropriate things I can say about this one. However, Black

people are not the only ones who are perpetually late. I will just leave that right here for now.

- "I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race." The art in my workplace generally sticks to offending other people who are not White. My race is generally not represented, considered, or discussed unless it is from a more global perspective, coupled with another groups' experience in the diaspora.

LOOKING FORWARD

When I came to UNM in the spring of 2005, I was hired at the rank of associate professor with tenure. In the fall of 2016, I submitted my dossier for consideration for promotion from associate professor to [full] professor. My dossier, a fifty-eight-page distillation of my twenty-three-year career as an academic research librarian, only reveals the part of my story that can be documented and reviewed for academic promotion purposes. The remaining part *could* have been documented with grievances, and allegations of violations of academic freedom or discrimination; however, the culmination of actions and verbalizations by my colleagues of what I can now name as microagressions, ultimately, do not collectively constitute a hostile work environment, at least that's what I've been told. Although most days feel pretty hostile to me.

In June 2017, I achieved the rank of full professor; increasing the number of Black full professors at UNM to four (OIA 2016). Upon reflecting on my career, I concluded that the things that have always mattered and continue to matter to me are "diversity of people, recruitment to the profession, developing leaders within the profession, an information literate citizenry, and library as place—virtual and physical."[5] Thirty-year-old me wrote, "I have made a personal commitment to recruit as many ethnically diverse persons as possible to the profession" (Neely 1996, 66). I didn't recall writing that way back when, but I am glad I somehow managed to stay on that path.

In October 2016, I turned fifty years old, a significant milestone for me. I do not know what the future holds for me in this profession or personally. At one point in my journey, I was happy to tell anyone who listened that I would never get a PhD, likewise for an administrative position. I try to be careful about absolutes when thinking about where my next position will take me. I remain single and unencumbered and have always had plans to move closer to my family. That hasn't changed; I just haven't figured out when that will be, where I will go, or what I will be doing. In my current position as assessment librarian, I am learning a lot, and I am excited about the opportunity and the possibilities. When I first started at UNM, I would work late into the night e-mailing and communicating. I always volunteered to take notes or

to chair this group or that one. Then reality set in: there was a fire, I lost a lot of people, there was a lot of water inside the building, then I had a new hip, and I realized that, if something happened to me, it would be relatively easy for me to be replaced at work. I needed to adopt a more Teresa-centric mentality. I needed to move through these spaces and this world at my own pace, on my own terms, and I needed to own my accomplishments, my successes and failures, equally. I think I've done that, and for now, I'm good. I'm still here and it's all good.

NOTES

1. On professional staff, the Association of Research Libraries notes, "Since the criteria for determining professional status vary among libraries, there is no attempt to define the term 'professional.' Each library should report those staff members it considers professional, including, when appropriate, staff who are not librarians in the strict sense of the term, for example, computer experts, systems analysts, or budget officers" (Association of Research Libraries 2015).

2. Posttraumatic stress disorder is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as "a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault" (American Psychiatric Association 2017).

3. Peggy McIntosh's White Privilege Papers are discussed at the National SEED Project, https://nationalseedproject.org/about-us/white-privilege.

4. In March 2017, Ben Carson, a Black man and housing and urban development secretary, referred to African slaves as "other immigrants who came here in the bottom of slave ships and worked even longer, even harder for less" (Lartey 2017).

5. Teresa Neely's "Statement of Librarianship," submitted as part of the requirements for full professorship at the University of New Mexico, 2016.