White spaces, Asian faces

Onboarding for racialized academic librarians

Ashley Manhas & Sabrina Wong
Politics of Libraries IV
April 1, 2022

We are speaking with you today from Capilano University's main campus on the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and Səl̓ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.
We acknowledge all the communities who have been on the lands that you are joining from, since time immemorial.
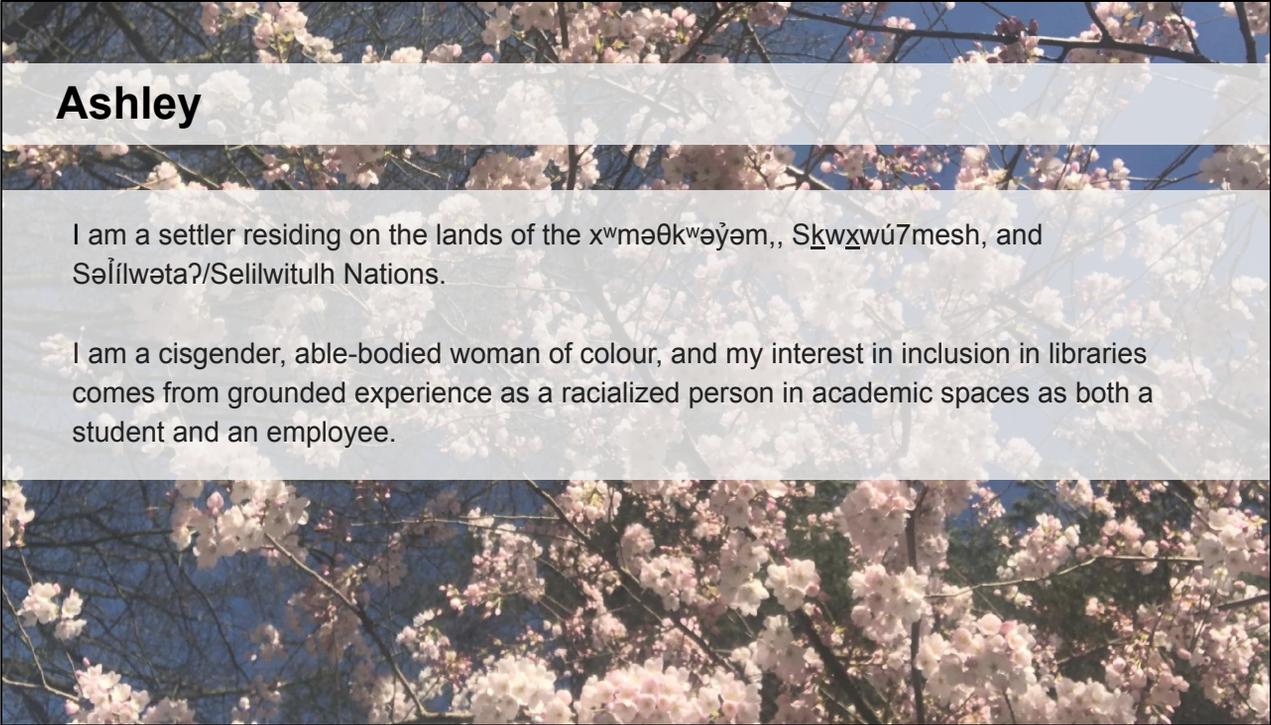
Sabrina

I am a settler residing on the lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and Səl̓ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh Nations.

My interest in equity, diversity and inclusion in libraries stems from my experiences and things I have witnessed at work. I am inspired by colleagues who push for transformation and change, and my hope is that equity, diversity and inclusion practices will guide our work in libraries.
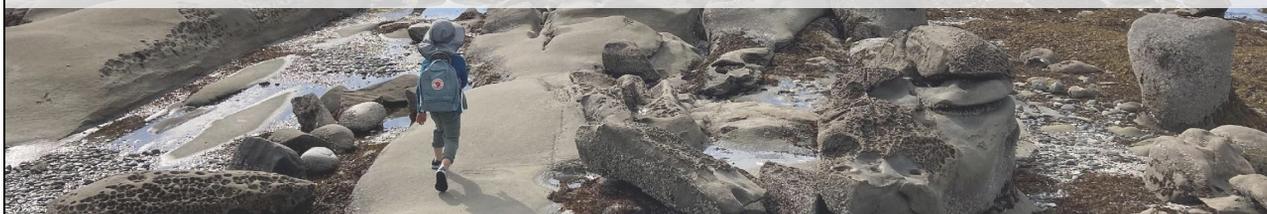
Ashley

I am a settler residing on the lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm,, Sk̲wx̲wú7mesh, and Səl̓ílwəta?/Selilwitulh Nations.

I am a cisgender, able-bodied woman of colour, and my interest in inclusion in libraries comes from grounded experience as a racialized person in academic spaces as both a student and an employee.

Our plan

Background

Three vignettes

- What happened
- Why it happened
- Harmful impacts

Recommendations

Feelings are great, but actions are better!

From Fobazi Ettarh's keynote we'd like to bring forward these words

Why are we doing this?

- Onboarding is a key part of retention, but we have found there is room to expand on this in librarianship.
- As the only racialized librarians at our institution, we've gained important insight on this topic.
- Our experiences indicate that applying an EDI lens to onboarding can make a difference in how racialized librarians experience a workplace and contribute towards retention and diversifying the field.

Our approach

- Our approach to this research has been guided by the thought: just because it doesn't happen to you doesn't mean it doesn't happen.
- This is a way for us to position the experiences we'll describe today as valued information that may not necessarily be described in the literature or experienced by all library workers.
- It's a form of counter storytelling, a way of giving voice to our grounded experience as two racialized librarians and treating it as valid.

Paid PD time

LED US HERE
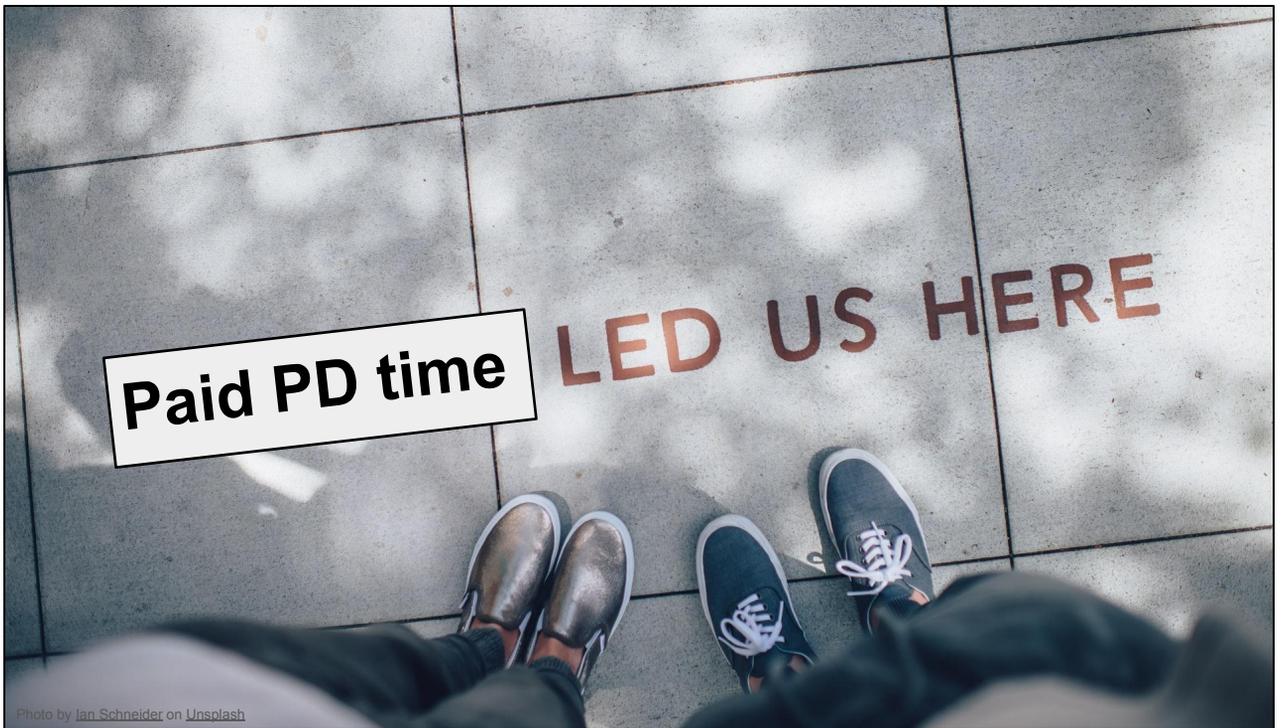
- The theme that has been interrogated in this conference series is vocational awe.
- Vocational awe creates this expectation that passion leads people to library work.
- Though we are deeply invested in today's topic, we are privileged to have paid professional development time to work through this issue and present today.
- Our starting point is examining the role of vocational awe on onboarding practices.
- From Fobazi Ettarh, we know that there is the idea that libraries are inherently good in nature and that librarians carry out this good work, which then, as Ettarh describes: "sets up an expectation that any failure of libraries is largely the fault of individuals failing to live up to the ideals of the profession, rather than understanding that the library as an institution is fundamentally flawed."

On vocational awe and onboarding

"...because vocational awe refuses to acknowledge the library as a flawed institution, when people of color and other marginalized librarians speak out, their accounts are often discounted or erased."

(Ettarh, 2018, Diversity)

Photo by Edwin Andrade on Unsplash

- Under vocational awe, the library is an institution without flaws, and as Ettarh notes: when racialized or marginalized librarians identify and speak to flaws, "their accounts are often discounted or erased."
- We believe that vocational awe causes harm in the onboarding stage, particularly for racialized librarians, in that, when a racialized librarian is onboarded in the way that's always been done--without identifying gaps, or developing a meaningful plan--the responsibility to succeed in this stage is placed solely on the new librarian.
- Ultimately, vocational awe plays out when we fail to recognize the onboarding process *as flawed*–by trusting it as "inherently good".
- This--combined with less safety for a racialized librarian to speak out about challenges experienced at this stage, can lead to deficiencies that are perceived to be the new racialized librarian's alone, which makes the onboarding experience a critical site for retention where inclusive practices are necessary.
- However, we've found that onboarding practices could better reflect library values of equity, diversity and inclusion because without critique and improvement, onboarding will fail racialized librarians, both new and experienced in the profession.
- In librarian onboarding, we witness the inconsistencies between the fields' values and practices

The onboarding experience for racialized librarians is an inherently flawed checklist that — with some reimagining — can become a practice to intentionally retain BIPOC librarians.

- Through this lens of vocational awe, our experiences indicate that the onboarding experience for racialized librarians is an inherently flawed checklist that, with some reimagining, can become a practice to intentionally retain BIPOC librarians.
- The vignettes we discuss today illustrate these flaws and inform our recommendations.

1.
The EDI question

- In this first vignette, we are going to address the interview and expectations set during the recruitment phase. The interview is often the first encounter between the librarian and potential employer. It is a space for each party to gauge the other and can provide an opportunity for a library to declare their fluency in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (or EDI).
- I think for many of us in this space today, we've either asked or been asked "the EDI question" in interviews. By this, we mean some variation of "how have you demonstrated EDI in your work?" or "what does EDI mean to you?"
- As a candidate of colour, when you are asked this question by an all-white panel, it can feel performative because you do not know whose perspective you're supposed to speak from – yours or theirs?
- In Ozlem Sensoy & Robin DiAngelo's 2017 article on faculty hiring committees, they name that "these questions proceed from the unmarked norm of Whiteness. They do so through their presumption that the White candidate is neutral, that diversity exists outside of oneself, and that difference is something that should or could be controlled and managed" (p. 570). Some racialized candidates may feel that they need to counteract the "advantage" of being able to name a difference from this "norm of Whiteness" that they minimize this difference, so not as to seem ungrateful for having a visible membership in an equity-seeking group. Or calling back to vocational awe and the uncriticizable institution, they may feel unsure about sharing any criticism they might have about libraries.

- When I was asked the EDI question during my interview, I paid careful attention to the reception of my answer.
- I gauged the committee members' reactions and felt safe enough to return the question to them and ask about the library's EDI work, and I felt satisfied by their answers and factored this into my acceptance of the job.
- I felt that there was an implied safety as we–me as an applicant, and the interview committee representing the library–shared the same language for and commitments to equity and inclusion.
- But, upon being hired, it quickly became clear that the EDI engagement that was spoken of in my interview, had not been incorporated into the onboarding process.
- After receiving the basics on the morning of my first day–equipment, email access–I was left alone to navigate the bureaucracies that I sensed dictated my work, but that I had no vocabulary to name.
- I felt this viscerally--my stomach dropped and my anxiety heightened--at the realization that the inclusion I had been expecting would not be gained through formal onboarding.
- Where I had hoped for support and welcoming plan, there was nothing more than a standard checklist.

"Everyone is happy to hire you, they checked off a box. But no one thinks about retention. There is no effort to understand you, your culture, or how you may react to things differently than other people. You have to just fit in and just do it."
(Aiko Moore & Estellado, 2018, p. 382)

- Reflecting on this, I realize I built expectations in the interview that were not met during the onboarding process, and I find relevance in this thought expressed by a racialized library worker in Aiko Moore and Estallado's research:
- "Everyone is happy to hire you, they checked off a box. But no one thinks about retention. There is no effort to understand you, your culture, or how you may react to things differently than other people. You have to just fit in and just do it."
- As a new librarian eager to make a positive impression, this quote resonates with me. I knew that without equitable onboarding I would have to orient myself so that I could express confidence and competence navigating institutional norms.
- I knew that I had to conform to the unnamed but existing practices with or without support to create a bridge to that next goal: retention.

Can we answer
the EDI question?

- When I was initially hired, there was a question about supporting under-represented students but none about more broadly elevating EDI work at the Library or university.
- Since then, the Librarian team has changed its interview process to include questions about Indigenization, decolonization, and EDI, with a great deal of discussion among our group about how we should ask these questions and what a good answer might sound like.
- During one of these meetings, I recall our colleague saying that a candidate would likely turn around and ask us the same EDI question -- Are we prepared to answer it?
- No, we have not yet fully asked ourselves what these concepts would look like across all of our practices.
- Baharak Yousefi wrote about her realization that "…in libraries the presence of one or two librarians of color is the full extent of our commitment to 'diversity and inclusion'" and added that this presence "… is not a signal that we are all here to do the work of unlearning and undoing that is necessary for substantive, structural change." (p. 103)
- So where is the turning point for an institution in making these substantive changes? Is there a turning point? How do we know when we've reached that point?
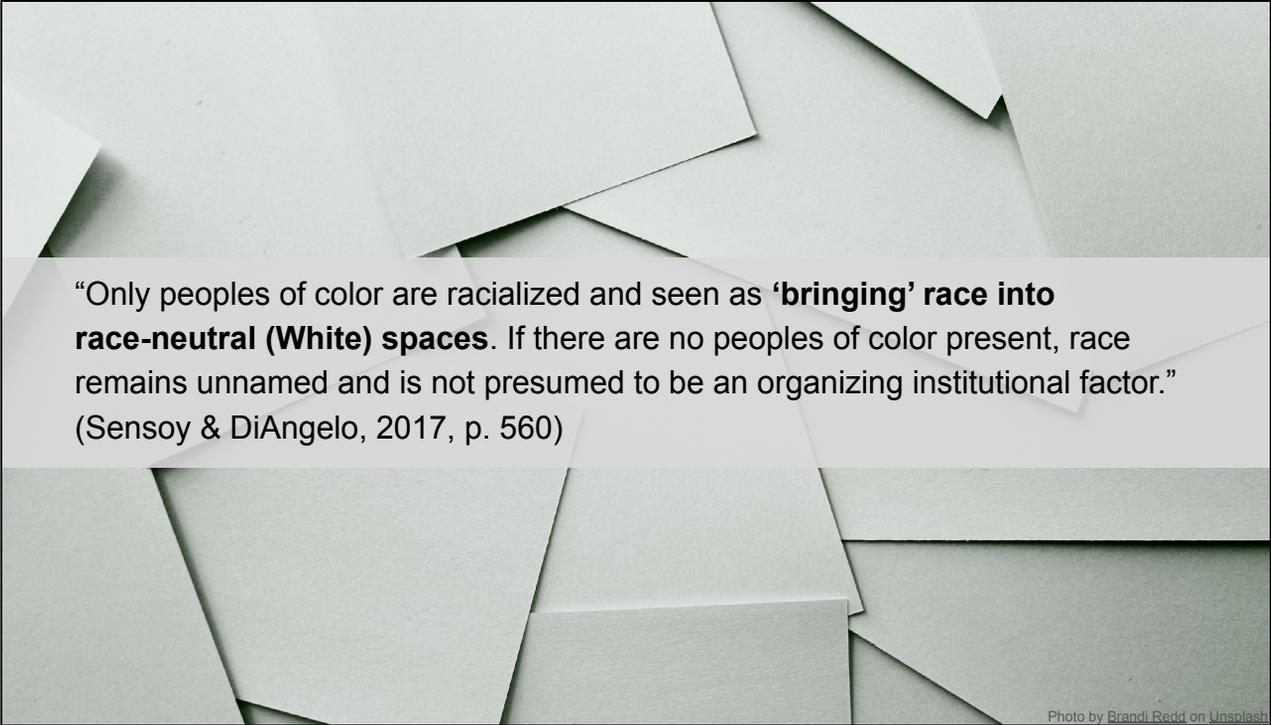
"Only peoples of color are racialized and seen as **'bringing' race into race-neutral (White) spaces**. If there are no peoples of color present, race remains unnamed and is not presumed to be an organizing institutional factor." (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 560)

- The work to integrate EDI into the hiring process – or to bring race into race-neutral (White) spaces as described by this quote – can be challenging. In libraries we're overly concerned with being seen to make visible changes, rather than invisible shifts in thinking. It's great to have workshops and dedicated PD days, but if that work isn't carried beyond the workshop into the day-to-day work, it doesn't help anyone.
- Sensoy & DiAngelo recognize that this labour has multiple dimensions: POC need to not only do the diversity work, but "also navigate the emotional landmines of White fragility so often triggered in response" to this work (p. 561)
- When I'm invited to share these things within the institution, it can sometimes feel extractive: like my experiences and perspectives are a natural resource that the institution can remove and refine into something that suits their needs.
- This circles back to Yousefi's point about visibility not being a substantive change.

Onboarding as a process should build trust and psychological safety
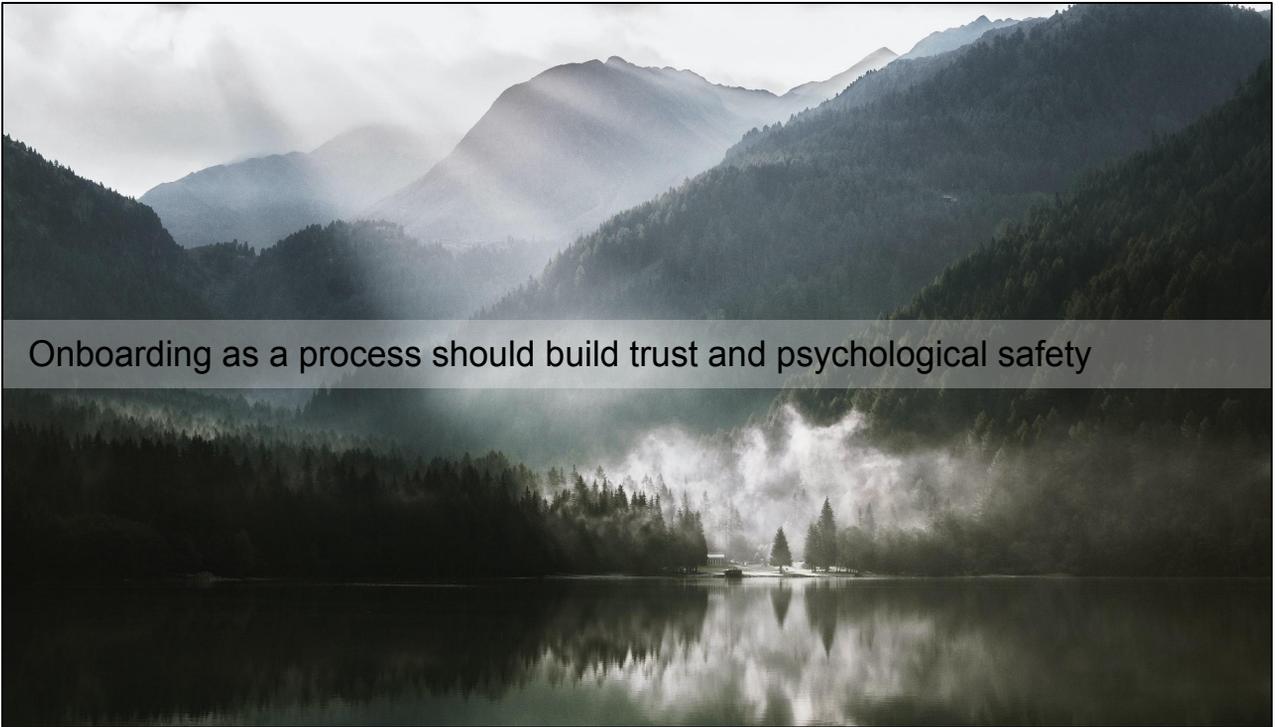
- To make substantive change, we cannot lose sight of the forest for the trees: we focus so much on small things, like the right words to use in the job description, that we lose sight of the other parts of the hiring and onboarding process that could be made more equitable. That is not to say that a job description is unimportant, but not the only thing that needs work.
- Onboarding as a process should build trust and psychological safety. Instead, what I experienced in trying to assimilate was the disconnect between values and practices.

2.
Nice white meetings

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● One of our first shared experiences was a librarian faculty meeting.

Present but
Not a participant.

- As library workers, we highly value equitable information sharing and transparency and it is something that can be expected in a library setting based on the profession's values.
- However, we don't always find transparency within our internal practices, such as meetings.
- By being an attendee of the meeting, there was an appearance of transparency--when in reality, a decision that directly affected me had already been made in a separate setting and was now being discussed in front of me, but without me. Here, I was present in the meeting but not a participant in the conversation.

"Nice white meetings":
Unpacking absurd library bureaucracy
through a critical race theory lens

Nataraj, Hampton, Matlin & Meulemans
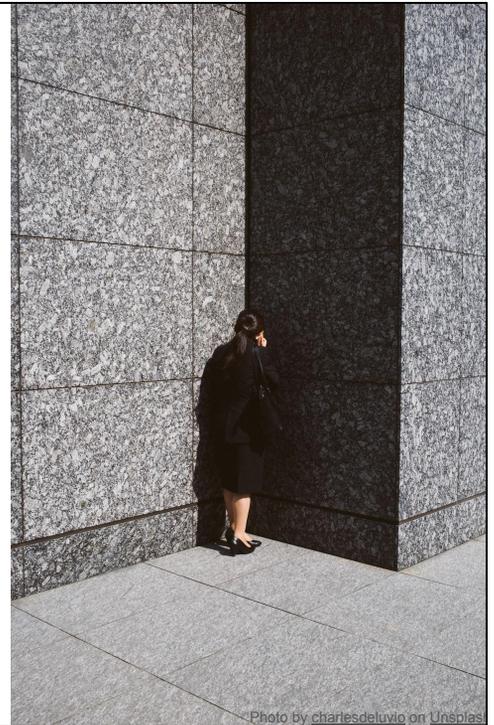
- As a participant at the meeting, I was wondering what was going on, unsure about speaking up, and not knowing what had previously been discussed by the hiring committee and leadership, I lacked context for the discussion.
- I want to highlight that this problematic lack of transparency is not a fault of a single individual, but rather a structural failure.
- When we first talked about this experience, the first reference that came to mind was: "'Nice White Meetings': Unpacking absurd library bureaucracy through a Critical Race Theory lens." In this article, Nataraj, Hampton, Matlin & Meulemans name the library meeting as one example of a bureaucratic activity where supposed transparency and unspoken knowledge co-exist, and BIPOC library workers are forced to navigate a minefield of interpretive labour
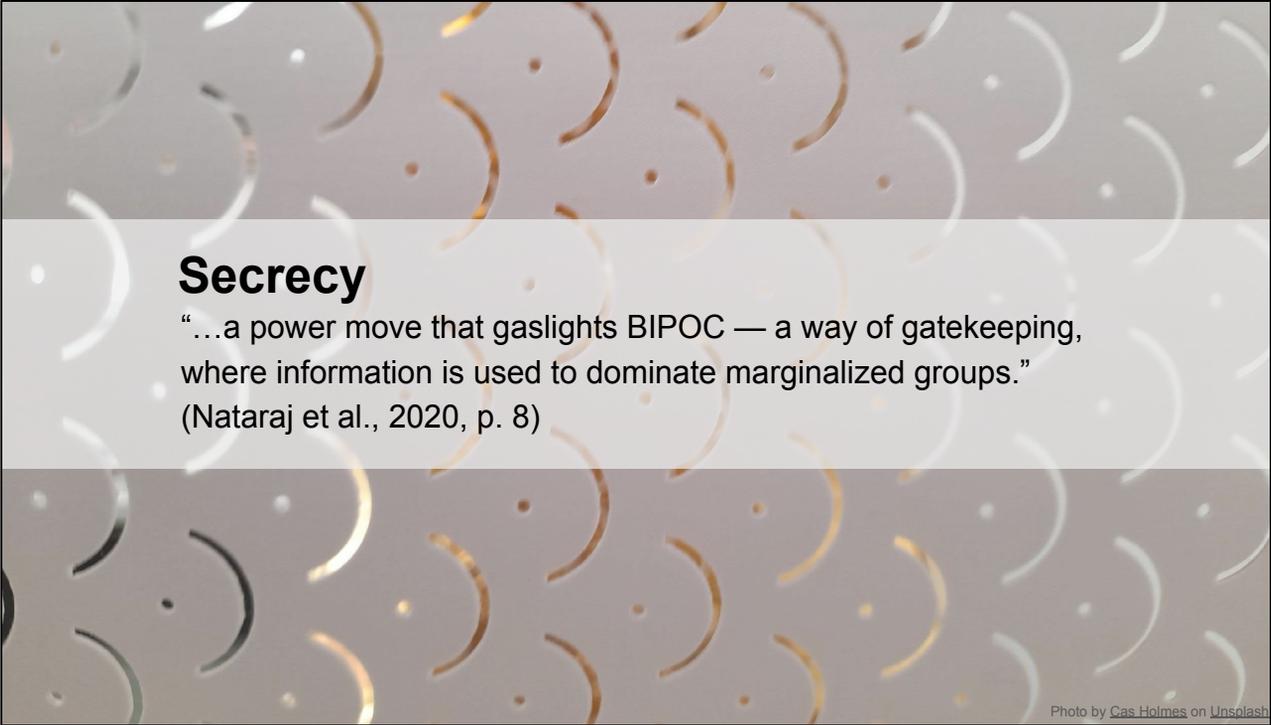
Secrecy
"…a power move that gaslights BIPOC — a way of gatekeeping,
where information is used to dominate marginalized groups."
(Nataraj et al., 2020, p. 8)

- A lack of transparency can signal to a new librarian that there is an existing and inequitable communication practice, and that the bureaucratic practice of withholding information goes unquestioned.
- It is like trying to interpret an unspoken process from the outside, looking in, which unfortunately breeds worried thoughts: what else am I not being told?
- A perceived secrecy can be understood as "…a power move that gaslights BIPOC—a way of gatekeeping, where information is used to dominate marginalized groups." (Nataraj et al., 2020, p. 8)

"It is not surprising, then, that BIPOC … may have a harder time recognizing the inherent absurdity of situations **masquerading as initiatives of efficiency**."
(Nataraj et al., 2020, p. 9)

- In later reflections, the words of this quote jumped out at me: "masquerading as initiatives of efficiency." (Nataraj et al., 2020, p. 9).
- In academic libraries, it can feel like the norm to be in a rush to finish something so that we can get to the next thing because we're all so busy all the time.
- However, Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones warn us that urgency is an element of white supremacy culture that "perpetuate[s] power imbalance while disconnecting us from our need to breathe and pause and reflect." They outline antidotes to urgency that include collective and personal practices – but it is clear changing our thinking and actions needs to be an intentional practice. Until we identify the things that we do under the guise of urgency we cannot change them

"it is by intentional design that BIPOC are silenced by bureaucratic structures, thereby maintaining the hegemonic power structures of the organizations that employ them—even if these organizations position themselves as social justice–oriented." (Nataraj et al., 2020, p. 11)

- Nataraj et al. (2020) note that much of silencing BIPOC workers is by "design", which helps maintain the "power structures of the organizations that employ them—even if these organizations position themselves as social justice–oriented.", like libraries (p. 11)
- A lack of agency can result from information being withheld, meaning a lack of transparency is harmful—it disrupts trust.
- Yet it's made acceptable through the bureaucratic meeting process, which BIPOC workers must try and interpret.
- The requirement to engage in such processes where BIPOC library workers are silenced, doubted, and left unconsidered has a lasting impact that can crop up in a variety of ways.

Low morale and academic librarians

- It's essential to mention Kaetrena Davis Kendrick's work on low morale and academic librarians here. Her approach to this topic highlights the physiological, emotional and cognitive effects of low morale on BIPOC library workers at all stages of their careers.
- This links so well to vocational awe and what Fobazi Ettarh spoke about in the keynote to this series: "being seen in the building is paramount"--being seen to do the work is paramount. Here, the functioning of this bureaucracy is placed above any library workers' needs or lives
- When the onboarding process does not factor in the new librarian as a whole person, it can cause direct harm and trigger a low morale event that then impedes an individual's success at this important stage.
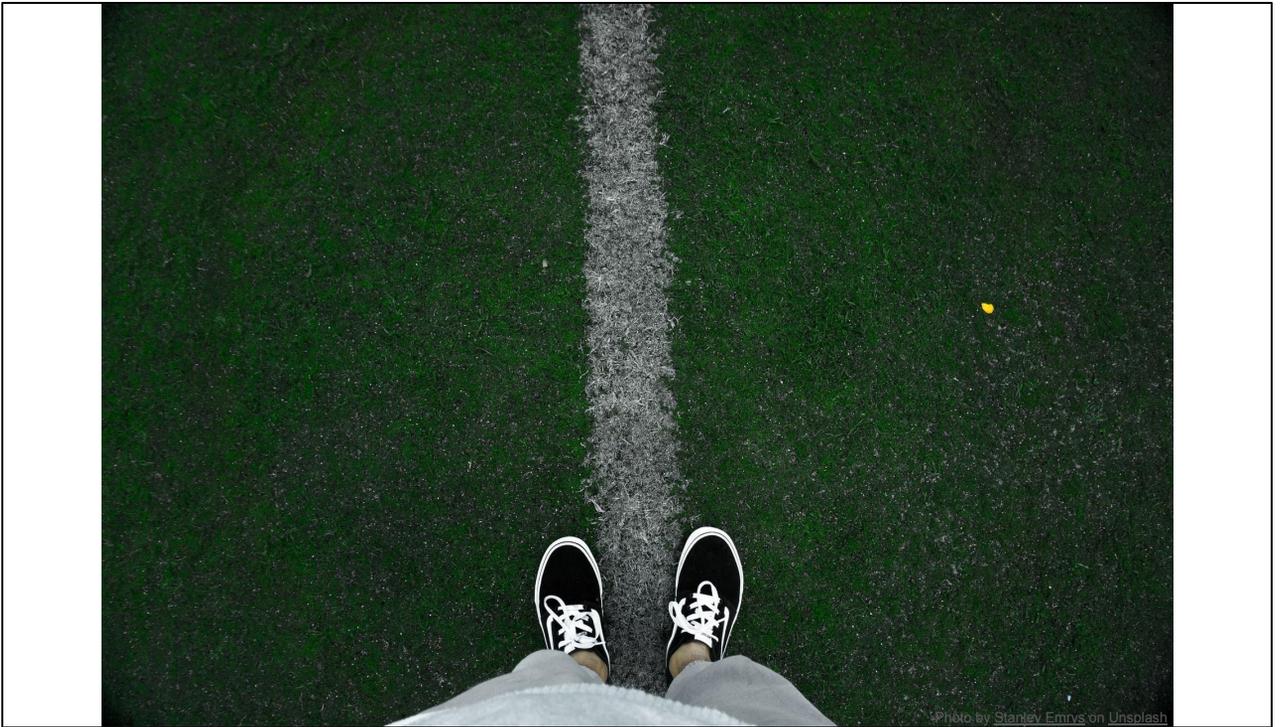
- After my first day, there was very little offered in the ways of an ongoing check in--meaning, the onboarding process started and ended with the checklist.
- Because of this, I had no formal or casual opportunity to check in, but I needed to talk with someone.

3.
Gossip

- So, how do we take care of each other and ourselves when we exist in this environment where so much is unspoken?
- We can't wait for the institution to change. Our final vignette describes a tactic that helps BIPOC library workers to navigate and find safety in predominantly white workplaces

And it is not necessarily for our own benefit that we tell tales; we can help others by talking as well. **By telling our stories, we may help reduce the epistemic doubt of others.**"

(Yousefi, 2017, p. 98)

- For some of us to find safety we might engage in gossip. Baharak Yousefi names gossip as a tool for information sharing and subverting established norms, procedures, and assumptions. She writes "And it is not necessarily for our own benefit that we tell tales; we can help others by talking as well. By telling our stories, we may help reduce the epistemic doubt of others." (Yousefi, 2017, p. 98)
- For us, we had to leave the physical space of the library building to feel secure and able to speak more freely. We started a lunchtime walk which we made a regular practice during her first few months

- Viewing onboarding as a checklist does not allow us to ask questions and share our stories. Yet confiding in Sabrina during our walks was the most critical aspect of my onboarding.
- As I talked through the gaps and challenges that I was experiencing as a new hire, Sabrina listened, answered, empathized, and validated.
- Still, as a WOC, I was aware that she was not being compensated for this work and that it would go unrecognized, but, her institutional knowledge was the missing piece.
- It's worth noting that even both being WOC, a sense of trust needs to be developed. For us, bonding over our shared enthusiasm for the *Pushing the Margins* text was a signal to me that it was safe to speak openly about my experiences. Having a trusted colleague hold space for these conversations was not found on my new-hire checklist, but it was the key piece that helped me move forward as a new librarian to overcome the barrier of adapting to work in a predominantly white institution.

When minor feelings are finally externalized, they are interpreted as hostile, ungrateful, jealous, depressing, and belligerent, affects ascribed to racialized behavior that whites consider *out of line*. (Hong, 2020, p. 57)

- Having experienced the privilege and joy of having a colleague of colour in a previous workplace, these conversations and walks that we've shared over the past months have been meaningful to me and how I see my work.
- It's sparked a renewed passion to push for change and speak our gossip out loud. I'm inspired by Cathy Park Hong who wrote about *Minor Feelings* as "the emotions we are accused of having when we decide to *be* difficult – in other words, when we decide to be honest. When minor feelings are finally externalized, they are interpreted as hostile, ungrateful, jealous, depressing, and belligerent, affects ascribed to racialized behavior that whites consider *out of line*." (p. 57)
- We also took inspiration from Sara Ahmed's new book *Complaint!*, which explores the nature and treatment of complaint in academic environments, and has offered a reframe for speaking up and speaking out.
- In seeing my experiences reflected in works by these authors, through the lens of vocational awe, it made me realize that there is no need to withhold these "minor" feelings or complaints and that they can in fact be constructive in shaping the change that we wish to see in our workplaces

"Ultimately, the emotional and interpretive labour of working in such gendered, raced, and classed environments takes so much effort that it leaves no space for women, especially those who identify as BIPOC, to think about their own perspective or how to voice perspectives that may deviate from what is considered and accepted as the norm; in this respect, they are left to engage in absurd practices in ways that are guided by and satisfy those in management." (Nataraj et al., 2020, p. 10).

- Adapting as a racialized hire is adjusting to unspoken practices because much of onboarding work assumes that new colleagues come to the institution equipped not only with the requisite MLIS and work experience, but also the required knowledge to navigate white spaces.
- This reality may also be invisible or forgotten by librarians who experienced onboarding years ago.
- The expectation of conformity in librarianship puts unseen work on the racialized individual to interpret the existing norms, or for colleagues who will also perceive this work, to do uncompensated and additional labour to help their new colleague adjust.

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Recommendations

- To help us all make our libraries better places for racialized librarians, we put together some recommendations. We want to be clear that this is not a one-size-fits-all checklist that allows institutions to "accomplish" EDI nor do these recommendations apply to every diverse person. Rather, these are themes for further exploration in your own institutional context as you consider what gaps you have.

1. Turn your critical eye inwards

What secrets does your institution have?

What is not spoken about?

Photo by Wayan Aditya on Unsplash

- Our first recommendation to start by turning a critical eye inwards: examine your own institution to investigate where onboarding gaps may exist. An example of how this might play out is addressing secrecy around established institutional practices:
  - mannerisms
  - jargon and acronyms
  - meetings
  - email and communication
  - relationships between different units and people on campus and the Library
  - And in the Library, relationships between employees in different union groups and with management
- who can say what and to whom
- and things that are not spoken about EVER.
- The disparity between what we say and what we do in libraries, identified by library workers like Baharak Yousefi, is a known issue in libraries, so pausing to review our practices before onboarding is essential. "Because it's the way we've always done it" can no longer be a sufficient rationale for practices that are actively harmful.
- And yes, this does take time and resources. However, Sensoy and DiAngelo remind us that while a "need for support is often positioned as a deficit of candidates of color" – we should "consider all the resources put into diversity workshops for White staff." (p. 576). We put our resources and focus where we think it's important and needed.

2. Center the new hire

"Imagine if we listened to the experiences of people from underrepresented communities, set concrete goals for increasing equity and inclusivity on their terms, and bench-marked progress against their expectations, not those of the majority culture." (Alburo et al., 2020, p.105)

Photo by AllGo - An App For Plus Size People on Unsplash

- Build the onboarding process around the new hire, rather than fit them into a checklist: actively center them in the process.
- To do so, have conversations to determine the new hire's needs and hear about their individual strengths.
- Just as community needs and inclusion are assessed and designed for in library programs and services, we suggest consulting and listening to the new hire to design a plan, and as this quote about retention points to—bring marginalized hires in and set "concrete goals for increasing equity and inclusivity on their terms, and bench- mark progress against their expectations, not those of the majority culture." (Alburo et al., 2020, p. 105)
- Calling back to the dissonance between the experience of "the EDI question" during the interview, and subsequent lack of EDI-focused support during onboarding, centering the new hire offers an inclusive path forward.

3. Support system: Mentorship

"A mentor who provides guidance, shares resources, and understands the organizational culture can be the "lifeline" for library employees of color when facing barriers to their retention and career growth."
(Alburo et al., 2020, p. 100)

- Our third recommendation is mentorship–and the critical role this plays cannot be stressed enough.
- Mentors offer guidance and when they understand those unspoken practices, mentors can really be that lifeline to overcoming barriers new racialized librarians experience so that they can continue on in the profession
- This said, mentorship is not a one-size-fits-all situation. Racialized scholars have noted that "When developing mentorship opportunities for librarians of color, libraries must also bear in mind the implications of doing so in such a homogeneous, white environment, which can have the " unintended consequence of pushing librarians of color to assimilate into the whiteness of librarianship, alienating those at the margins even further " (Brown, Ferretti, Leung, & Mendez-Brady, 2018 , p. 173, as cited in Alburo et al., 2020, p. 100)
- Mentorship should be recognized as labour with appropriate compensation and the understanding that to do this work properly it has to be set as a priority within the library.

4. Support system: Community participation

- The sharing with and caring for one another that mentorship provides can happen in external channels as well. Our next recommendation is to include community participation in the onboarding process.
- Not every librarian has a support network, so something a workplace can actively do is provide paid time and cover membership fees to support a racialized librarian in forming these relationships. Here are some of the LIS-focused organizations we've had personal experience with:
  - ViMLoC mentorship program in Canada
  - APALA, which is a group supporting Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander library workers that is affiliated with the American Library Association
  - We Here, an organization that provides a safe and supportive community for BIPOC in LIS professions
  - There are so many more organizations out there doing this essential work. If you're a part of a supportive community group, we invite you to share the name of the group in the chat.
  - The research that we have examined describes these activities as "gossip," "talk" or "validating experiences," but the consistent theme is community and care.

5. Self care

- Our final recommendation is to advocate for a new racialized librarian to care for themselves in the onboarding process. From Aiko Moore and Estrellado's research, in *Pushing the Margins,* one woman said: "Self-care is the core foundation of things that we, as women of color librarians should learn how to implement first and foremost. Without self-care everybody else gets nothing from us. We need to replenish".
- Underscoring this recommendation is that institutions do not provide care, and burnout is a real consequence of low morale, as addressed in Kendrick's research.
- In onboarding practice, this might look like encouraging healthy breaks and boundaries, or alerting new hires to meaningful wellness opportunities, like personal relationship building.
- Most importantly, understand and normalize that care is needed in these situations as adjusting to a new role and environment is incredibly challenging, and the less visible work we have spoken about today makes it even more critical for new racialized librarians to perform acts of self preservation

Does your onboarding checklist reflect the values and practice of equity, diversity, and inclusion?
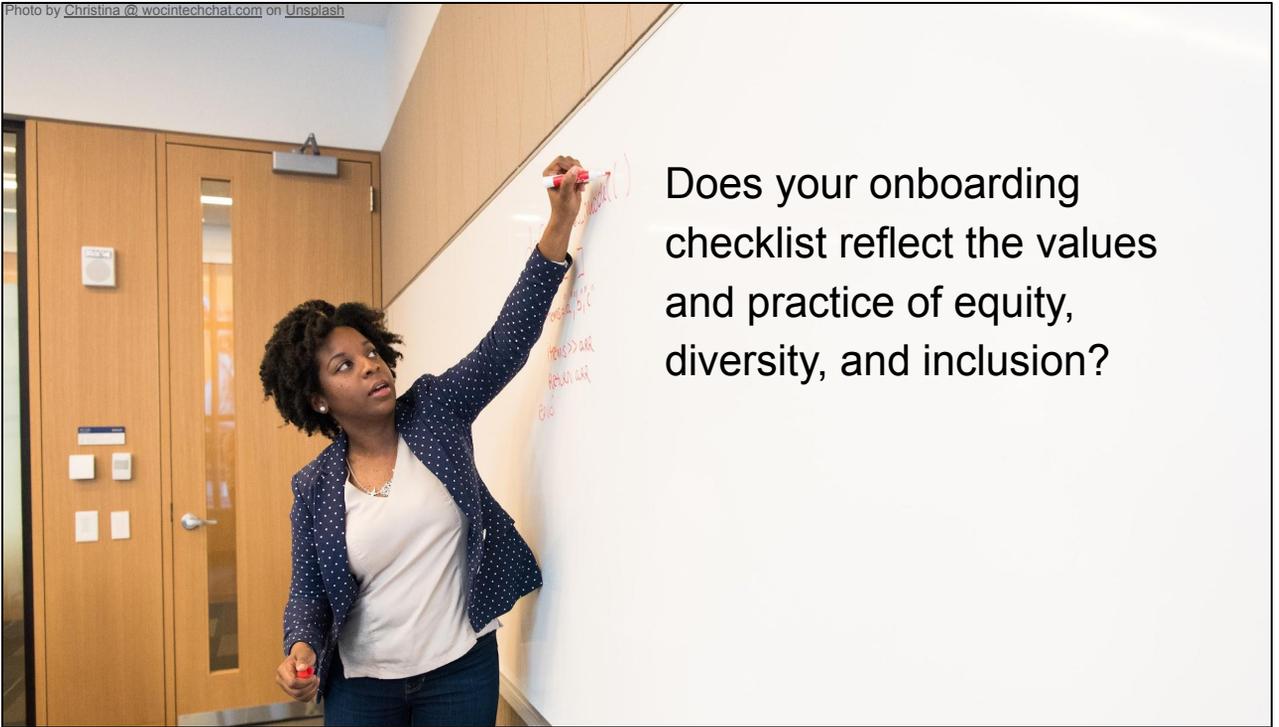
- Ultimately, if we value these things they should be included in an onboarding checklist. Because checklists contain the things that are important to us. To put these thoughts into actionable reflections, ask yourself: does your onboarding checklist or process reflect the values and practice of equity, diversity, and inclusion?
- To re-center this question on people, we can ask questions posed by Jennifer Ferretti in her 2020 article about building a critical culture:
    - "Are we treating our colleagues with the same critical care as we strive to provide our students/patrons?
    - Are we as reflective of our behavior in the workplace as we are instructors in the classroom?"
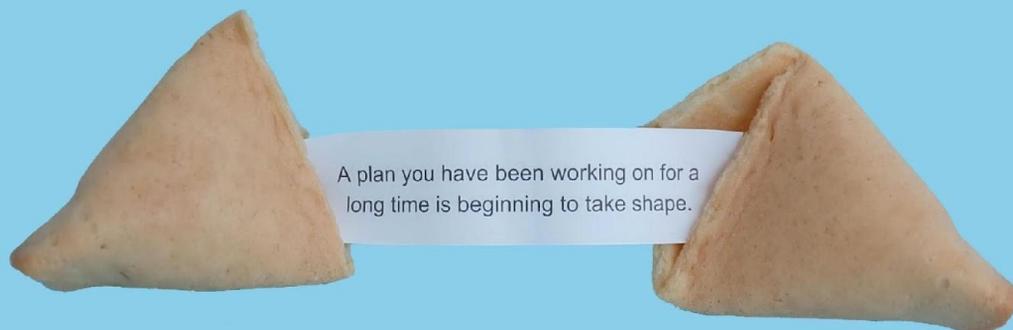
How do we take this forward?

A plan you have been working on for a long time is beginning to take shape.

Photo by Elena Koycheva on Unsplash

- BIPOC library researchers show us that inequity is pervasive through library policies and practices. Today we have used vignettes to illustrate the gaps in existing onboarding processes and how these institutional failures cause harm to both new and existing employees. While libraries and librarians have made commitments to diversifying the field and decolonizing their teaching and external-facing practices, this attention has not been extended to inward-facing library policies and practices and we have attempted to shine a light on how this is harmful in the onboarding process.
- Our work today only addresses one small part of the larger problem, and through one aspect of our multifaceted identities but we hope that it will encourage you to make it an intentional practice to apply an EDI lens to different elements of your work.

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- We hope that the work of these scholars will affirm your experiences or provide you with insight onto others' experiences

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