

IJIDI: Book Review

Chou, R. L., & Pho, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Pushing the margins: Women of color and intersectionality in LIS*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice. ISBN 9781634000529. 508 pp. \$35 US.

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In 2014, Fobazi Ettarh penned an article for the online publication *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* that called for greater attention to intersecting library identities, both in staff and users. She wrote, “Intersectionality is a tool for studying, understanding, and responding to the ways in which axes of identities intersect and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege.” (para. 2). The concept of *intersectionality*, first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991, references the consistent ineffectiveness of sweeping, generalized diversity statements and doctrines, which are often based on presumed mutually exclusive identities. Intersectionality acknowledges a complex reality in which identities are multi-faceted, varied, and falling along multiple axes within political and economic systems, not monolithic. Ettarh also penned the forward to *Pushing the Margins*, a book that provides, through narratives and research studies, a voice for those who live on these intersectional matrices. Editors Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho have gathered a collection of perspectives from across the cultural heritage and academic information sectors, none of which they have reduced down into compact identities, and turned them into a tool for the continued study of intersectionality in library information science (LIS). They accomplish this task by elevating the voices of people who intersect along the lines of work status, race, class, religion, and sexual identity.

Pushing the Margins contains 17 peer-reviewed articles, an index of terms, and a section about the contributors. The arrangement of the works is logical, beginning with an article highlighting key women of color (e.g., Nella Larson, Pura Belpré, and Audre Lorde, among others) throughout a few generations of LIS work, and moving through studies and personal experiences related to cultural taxation, vocational awe, micro-aggressions, exclusionary practices, and more. The book concludes with an in-depth conversation between Clara M. Chu and Todd Honma (the former a longtime scholar on the topic of information justice, the latter Dr. Chu’s former student and advisee) about the state of LIS criticism and reflection, broadly tying in the specifics of the previous articles.

The majority of the authors hail from community colleges, public and research libraries, and self-identify as current librarians, students, and/or scholars. Many also self-identify as mixed race, as a person of color, feminist, LGBTQIA+, multi-lingual, first generation, or as an immigrant. The academic nature of the content suggests the intended audience are those within the field of librarianship and archives, both in the academic and public spheres. Although much of the content speaks directly to underrepresented populations in LIS, the solutions and calls to action target LIS professionals in general.

Intersectionality frameworks act as the connective tissue between the articles with many varied experiences brought together under a shared sense of otherness in a historically oppressive field. Though many of the same themes, theories, and solutions arise across essays, the lens from which each piece derives is decidedly unique. This recognition of shared experience, while still remaining intersectional, is most directly pointed out in Chapter 4, as the librarians in conversation are recognized as the same under broad census distinctions (e.g., South Asian American), yet their experiences and self-descriptions are nuanced and ultimately different.

Various chapters explore, in depth, the paradox of invisibility as opposed to hypervisibility, or tokenism. Another common concept is diversity work as *performance* rather than action. For example, diversity residency programs (sometimes known as pipeline programs as they are expected to create a pipeline for underrepresented minorities to enter the LIS field) are critiqued for their short-term nature; their propensity to reinforce tokenism; and their misuse by administrators as representing authentic diversity work, when in fact, they are often anything but inclusive. Jennifer Brown and Sofia Leung discuss this at length in their article and highlight the unwillingness of national library organizations to denounce oppressive frameworks. Many of the authors attribute this to vocational awe (a term developed by Fobazi Ettarh), or the belief that LIS is inherently good and therefore free from critical analysis.

Many of the articles explore emotional labor, cultural taxation and the impact of micro-aggressions, especially in relation to experiences at the reference desk and in gaining tenure status. Tarida Anantachai and Camille Chelsey frame cultural taxation as using an employee's cultural background to justify using them as a representative of a whole population, and, in turn, adding more diversity-related work to their job description. This work is less valued in tenure rubrics and consequently, affects retention of underrepresented populations in LIS. Multiple articles make note of emotional labor as both self-imposed and institutionally imposed. Unspoken and unacknowledged expectations to perform a certain way, to align more deeply with diversity work than overrepresented colleagues, and to act complacent in the face of micro-aggressions are all added burdens that contribute to imposter syndrome and battle fatigue. Other important questions conveyed throughout the book include, how can privileged colleagues decenter their identities, and are they willing to do so? Are colleagues who fit easily into the default infrastructure, that is, white and heteronormative, really held to the same standards as those who undertake more diversity work and, thus, more emotional labor?

The mixture of qualitative and quantitative data to support the claims of the book make the overall impact effective. Additionally, there are a few pieces told from the first-person experience, highlighting just how complex an individual's experience can be in the library field, as opposed to representation in quantitative studies. By making space for the individual, *Pushing the Margins* opens up a way to emotionally and productively connect with the real reasons for lack of diversity in the field. It also reveals the need for more exploration of intersectional experiences. The studies range in methodology, but surveying is by far the most prominent throughout the book, at times using small population sizes. Each piece could further break out into a more substantial study, and this book seems to collate them based on the lack of research in the area, therefore more variation in methodology in those expansions would overall be beneficial. Additionally, the articles do less to scrutinize the myth of neutrality in LIS and intersectional user experiences. They do however, highlight positive solutions on the employer side including rewarding critique, embedding diversity work into tenure requirements, recognizing the emotional labor that goes into subverting a wholly oppressive infrastructure, mentoring each other (and promoting mentorship more deeply), creating authentic diversity measures (rather than performing diversity), and holding administrators and institutions

accountable.

References

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