

Whiteness as Collections

By Sofia Leung

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I had this interesting mini-eureka moment a few weeks ago that I wanted to share for a few reasons. One, I don't usually reflect on the connections that help me understand how I learn something new or what goes into coming up with some new concept. Most of the time, the connections aren't clear to me. Two, I like to show students that inspiration for new "research" or "scholarly" ideas doesn't have to come from only "scholarly" publications. Three, I need to write it out to fully understand how I came to this conclusion and to really understand what this conclusion means!

1. [Marie Kondo](#) has been in the zeitgeist for awhile, but especially now that she has a Netflix series. I saw the first episode awhile back and it reminded me of how having a space clean of clutter and mess really helps the mind feel clearer. Marie Kondo's spiritual approach to objects also made me reflect upon our relationships with objects and why we feel so much attachment to inanimate things. Why can't we just let those things go?
2. Then I listened to this [Still Processing podcast episode](#) (if you don't listen to SP, you're missing out) where Jenna and Wesley talk about Marie Kondo and got really deep about it, as they usually do. They get into legacy and ask what does what we leave behind say about us? They remark on how American materialism is, connect the Kondo-Mari method to [Shinto](#), and introduce (to me) Swedish death cleaning, a practice in which people who recognize they are nearing death start cleaning out their things so that their friends and family don't have to after they pass away.
3. I recently facilitated an instruction session for a Reading and Writing Autobiography course where I used Marie Kondo and the Still Processing episode in an example of mind-mapping. The students were going to write a personal investigative essay so I wanted to show them how they might brainstorm their topic using something from my own life. The mind-mapping I did on the board with them definitely sparked something as my brain clearly continued to ruminate.
4. In 2017 (yea this goes way back), for a white AF conference, I shared an AirBnB with Vani Natarajan, an amazing librarian of color whose thinking continues to push me and who I respect and admire so much (she was able to convince her library to send their student workers to the [Joint Council of Librarians of Color conference](#) - she's a real one), and we had some really interesting discussions where I learned a lot. One of the mind-blowing things she shared was this idea of how our library collections, because they are written mostly by straight white men, are a physical manifestation of white men ideas taking up all the space in our library stacks. Pause here and think about this.

5. If you don't already know, "whiteness as property," is a seminal Critical Race Theory (CRT) concept first introduced by Cheryl I. Harris in her [1993 Harvard Law Review article by the same name](#). She writes, "slavery as a system of property facilitated the merger of white identity and property" (p. 1721) and the formation of whiteness as property required the erasure of Native peoples. Basically, white people want to stay being white because of the privilege and protection whiteness affords under the law that they created. Harris also makes this really good point, "whiteness and property share a common premise -- a conceptual nucleus -- of a right to exclude" (1714). Bam! That really hits it on the head.
6. As I'm collaborating on this book about CRT in Library and Information Studies (LIS), I've been having lots of discussions on these topics with some really smart folx. I had a call with Jorge (my co-editor) and Shaundra Walker (one of the OG CRT in LIS scholars) about Shaundra's chapter, which is (obviously) going to be fire. Listening to her talk about her ideas connected some dots for me and I made the final jump to whiteness as property as collections.

Let me now try to connect all these dots in a coherent way. As others have written ([Fobazi Ettarh](#), [Todd Honma](#), [Gina Schlessman-Tarango](#), etc.), libraries and librarians have a long history of keeping People of Color out. They continue to do so, which you can read more about [here](#) and from the others I mentioned above. Legal and societal standards revolve around whiteness and libraries are no different.

If you look at any United States library's collection, especially those in higher education institutions, most of the collections (books, journals, archival papers, other media, etc.) are written by white dudes writing about white ideas, white things, or ideas, people, and things they stole from POC and then claimed as white property with all of the "rights to use and enjoyment of" that Harris describes in her article. When most of our collections filled with this so-called "knowledge," it continues to validate only white voices and perspectives and erases the voices of people of color. Collections are representations of what librarians (or faculty) deem to be authoritative knowledge and as we know, this field and educational institutions, historically, and currently, have been sites of whiteness.

Library collections continue to promote and proliferate whiteness with their very existence and the fact that they are physically taking up space in our libraries. They are paid for using money that was usually ill-gotten and at the cost of black and brown lives via the prison industrial complex, the spoils of war, etc. Libraries filled with mostly white collections indicates that we don't care about what POC think, we don't care to hear from POC themselves, we don't consider POC to be scholars, we don't think POC are as valuable, knowledgeable, or as important as white people. To return to the Harris quote from above, library collections and spaces have historically kept out Black, Indigenous, People of Color as they were meant to do and continue to do. One only has to look at the [most recent incident](#) at the library of my alma

mater, Barnard College, where several security guards tried to kick out a Black Columbia student for being Black.

I still have some thinking to do around this topic, but curious to hear what others think. I'm less interested in hearing that you don't buy it, so don't bother with those types of comments.

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