**Managing Without Capitalism: Transforming Library Leadership in Service of Anti-Racism, Inclusion, and Equity**

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**Introduction**

What is the role of any library leader? Isn’t it to make the places we work in better? Better is always subjective, but in recent years there has been broad agreement that a better library will be more diverse, more equitable, and actively anti-racist.

Despite this recognition, many white library leaders have struggled to know what to do beyond creating anti-racist resource guides[[1]](#footnote-0) and anti-racist posting on social media[[2]](#footnote-1). This struggle is because the next steps on what to do were never taught in library school or in any leadership training. What if, in fact, the leadership principles library leaders have been taught actively harm our ability to be diverse, equitable, and anti-racist?

The following is the distillation of introductory concepts, resources, and actions that a library leader committed to racial equity and institutional change should be familiar with. Each footnote is essential reading, providing specific context and knowledge. Step through this slowly and deliberately, as this is more a toolkit than it is a paper.

**Why are library leaders struggling to create anti-racist libraries?**

Library leaders at all levels, both formal and informal, are grappling with how to address institutional racism. Despite years of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) interventions and a recognition of the overwhelming whiteness of libraries, the profession is not a better or safer place for library workers of color, people from other marginalized communities, or anyone who has had to endure the normalized toxic library work environment (e.g. passive-aggressiveness, gossiping, withholding information, favoritism).

Leaders are stuck and previous interventions have failed primarily due to two factors:

* Modern libraries (and the institutions that hold them) were constructed as tools of white supremacy[[3]](#footnote-2).
* Library leadership and management concepts/practices are rooted in capitalism.

Numerous authors have detailed the history of white supremacist structures and ideas in the formation and continuation of modern libraries. Some have recognized how modern libraries support capitalism. Much has also been written about the toxic library work environment, which is a symptom of these systemic issues. However, there has not been an investigation about how library management and leadership concepts and practices further the work of both white supremacy and capitalism, and is a barrier to any DEIA effort.

Historians of slavery and capitalism have made a compelling case for the centrality of slavery to the development of American capitalism and the US economy (of which libraries are a part). Capitalism is so inextricably linked with white supremacy that Cedric J. Robinson developed the concept of “racial capitalism” to describe how capitalism survives by subjugating people through racialization. Caitlin Rosenthal’s *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* details how modern business practices were developed under slavery*.* Since modern business ideas and practices were created and nurtured by those who enslaved others, fully embracing these practices reinforces racial capitalism, white supremacy, and institutional racism. How can anyone succeed at uncovering and resisting institutional racism if they aren’t simultaneously uncovering and resisting racial capitalism?

Rather than the “business as usual” approach (following the ideas of business leaders whose work furthers racial capitalism), library leaders must learn to be anti-racist and anti-capitalist.

This paper gives practical guidance for individuals at institutions of any size/at any level to learn how to see the issues, diagnose problems, and transform themselves so that they may transform their organization. This will be accomplished by:

* Discussing the characteristics of Tema Okun’s White Supremacy Culture and how they show up in the workplace
* Recognizing the differences between being an actor, ally, or accomplice
* Detailing values, practices, and tools of community organizers and activists who embody leadership through facilitation rather than intimidation
* Reframing how library leaders approach work, success, and leadership

Our colleagues of color from We Here at ACRL 2021’s *Systemic Oppression Requires Systemic Change* urged library leaders to “break up with capitalism and white supremacy.[[4]](#footnote-3)” Instead of continuing toxic racial capitalist leadership concepts/practices, library leaders must embrace anti-racist/anti-capitalist values and practices to fulfill our DEIA promises and create systemic change in our libraries.

**About the author**

I am a cisgender, queer, white woman, from working-class suburban Chicago, a first-generation college student, and a practitioner in libraries rather than an academic. I’ve been involved in a few anarchist collectives before I became a librarian, but have kept those experiences separate from my work life until recently. I have worked exclusively in North American academic and museum libraries, having held library director positions for the past 10 years. I began my current position at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland in 2016, the year after the Freddie Gray uprisings. I write this not to center myself, but to position myself in this work so I do not go unmarked. Many great teachers I’ve had in my anti-racism education[[5]](#footnote-4) as well as authors in library literature[[6]](#footnote-5) have said how crucial it is for white people to use their power and privilege to educate other white people and challenge institutional whiteness. I am not an expert on racism, capitalism, libraries, or history. I share this work as an offering in hopes that more white library workers can become actively anti-racist and build a better future.

**The Modern Library Origin Story: White Supremacy and Capitalism**

First, I believe that librarians must be aware of and understand the racist, colonial, and capitalist underpinnings of libraries before it is possible to see where racist/colonialist practices show up and how to change them.

While the entire book *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science[[7]](#footnote-6)* is related to whiteness in libraries, there are a few chapters that are particularly important to read.

* The first section, *Early Formations: Tracing the Historical Operations of Whiteness,* has three chapters that, though specific, give a great overview of how whiteness is infused to the very core of all libraries and archives.
* Megan Watson’s *White Feminism and Distributions of Power in Academic Libraries* is a helpful introduction to the concept of white feminism and how it creates a racist environment in libraries. She rightfully points to black feminist practices as a necessary alternative to embrace and learn from.

Understanding that the library’s purpose was to support colonialism and capitalism is key to creating a better future for libraries, library workers, and our communities.

* nina de jesus’s article *Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression[[8]](#footnote-7)* connects the purpose of libraries with furthering white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism.
* *The Legacy of Lady Bountiful: White women in the Library[[9]](#footnote-8)* by Gina Schlesselman-Tarango explores the archetype of middle/upper-class white women who serve colonialism and capitalism through “benevolent” deeds. Considering how white women overwhelmingly dominate the profession, it is clear that librarianship becoming the domain of white women was not an accident.

*Academic Libraries and Toxic Leadership[[10]](#footnote-9)* by Alma C. Ortega is a slim and helpful read which gives a thorough literature review and practical guidance towards dealing with toxic leadership. However, one glaring omission of note: racism and white supremacy culture are not referenced in this work. Toxic behaviors in libraries are driven by the cis white heteropatriarchy; however, these are often treated as separate issues in the literature. There is a need to better connect the toxic library leadership and environment literature with the studies on whiteness and white supremacy in libraries.

**Business and Management Practices: Lawful Evil**

The second thing to recognize is the inherent racism in capitalism and in almost all business, leadership, and management training.

Cedric J. Robinson’s concept of racial capitalism has been extensively debated and is an important concept to be familiarized with. Rather than read any number of peer-reviewed debates on this subject, I recommend reading Robin D.G. Kelley’s short article in the Boston Review which warmly discusses Robinson’s important and overlooked research into leadership and what he meant by racial capitalism[[11]](#footnote-10).

If anyone is unconvinced about how racism and capitalism go hand in hand, Caitlin Rosenthal’s *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management[[12]](#footnote-11)* is a painstakingly researched and revelatory history about how modern business practices were developed under slavery*.* While the brutality faced by enslaved people may not have crossed over into modern management, there is a clear through line to today's practices of control, surveillance, and accounting. A reader will be convinced quickly through her preface and introduction, but the final chapter, conclusion, and post-script help underscore how much of modern management practices stem from slavery.

Finally, management and organization scholars Sadhvi Dar, Helena Liu, and Angela Martinez Dy drafted an academic call to action “The Business School is Racist: Act Up!” in the journal, *Organization*[[13]](#footnote-12). The authors fully dissect how capitalism is racist and business schools perpetuate these ideas. They also explore how business schools de-value BI+POC knowledge and experiences and that this must change. While they were writing about business schools in general, their conclusions are relevant to all of academia and institutions, like libraries, that promote transfers of knowledge.

**Unlearning White Supremacy**

Generous authors in libraries have written and spoken at considerable length diagnosing the issue of white supremacy in libraries or providing some thoughts as to what can be done[[14]](#footnote-13). I could never list every example of this, and believe it is the job of white people committed to anti-racist pratice to do their own research, but some key examples are Vocational‌ ‌Awe‌ ‌by‌ ‌Fobazi‌ ‌Ettarh[[15]](#footnote-14),‌ ‌panels‌ ‌from‌ ‌library‌ ‌workers‌ ‌involved‌ ‌in‌ ‌We‌ ‌Here (referenced above),‌ ‌or‌ ‌the‌ ‌recent‌ ‌‌*Statement‌ ‌Against‌ ‌White‌ ‌Appropriation‌ ‌of‌ ‌Black,‌ ‌Indigenous,‌ ‌and‌ ‌People‌ ‌of‌ ‌Color’s‌ ‌Labor‌‌* ‌‌on‌ ‌the‌ ‌WOC‌ ‌+‌ ‌LIB‌ ‌website[[16]](#footnote-15). Unfortunately most white leaders (formal or informal) have not engaged with these or similar works, or they have not done personal anti-racism training to bridge theory and practice. If this is you, here is a place to begin.

I should note that there is not much out there about library leadership and management’s role in DEIA efforts. What little there is focuses on library leaders from large and well-resourced institutions[[17]](#footnote-16). It is important to recognize that leadership can be found everywhere, in any person, at any level, in any library, big or small.

**White Supremacy Culture**

Tema Okun’s articulation of White Supremacy Culture[[18]](#footnote-17) is the first helpful frame that must be fully ingested by anyone hoping to create an anti-racist environment. The characteristics are elements of white culture that are automatically and subconsciously forced upon all people in the culture even though they are harmful practices and ideologies.

They are:

* Fear
* One Right Way (including perfectionism, paternalism, objectivity, and qualified)
* Either/or & the Binary
* Denial & Defensiveness
* Right to Comfort & Fear of Conflict
* Individualism
* Progress is More & Quantity over Quality
* Worship of the Written Word
* Urgency

Many of these, if not all of them, are endemic in libraries and must be problematized and rooted out in order to create a healthy work environment.

Think about a typical library work environment. People:

* Don’t speak up about issues
* Call each other out on the most minor of mistakes
* Are passive aggressive or withhold information
* Want greater numbers of questions/programs/circulation over the quality of those interactions
* Only accept cited information
* Want everything done now rather than spending the time to figure out how it really impacts the community

This describes every library I’ve worked in and likely describes your library as well. It's important to see these issues, how they connect with white supremacy culture, and actively work against them. Working through Tema Okun’s website with a trusted group slowly over time is truly the best way to begin to root these out.

One thing to note, as Okun notes herself: some may see “perfectionism,” “objectivity,” or “worship of the written word” and think that it is saying that BI+POC can’t be excellent, level-headed, good writers. But perfectionism is not excellence (Perfect to who? We are already born perfect.), objectivity doesn’t allow for subjectivity (which is how we truly encounter each other and the world), and worshiping the written word means how “white supremacy culture requires things to be written down, on its own terms, in order to preserve power” like how peer review sources are the only legitimate sources rather than indigenous voices.

**Moving through Activism**

One trait of white supremacy culture, urgency, can get in the way of the actual process of learning how to move into activist spaces. White people can take up space in a way that’s inappropriate or harmful.

It is important for white people to learn how to move away from being a bystander and into more active roles:

* Actor: giving passive support to anti-racism
* Ally: doing active anti-racism work
* Accomplice: putting yourself on the line for anti-racism efforts

Jonathan Osler provides a useful guide of how these look different and how one can move to do more[[19]](#footnote-18). However, It is usually difficult and potentially harmful to jump from actor to accomplice for many things. It is harmful and dangerous for BI+POC when white people go into BI+POC activist spaces or protest without a lot of work to get there and coordination with BI+POC groups.

This is also important to keep in mind when trying to lean people towards anti-racist practices. You are not going to move an opponent of racism to be anti-racist accomplice. There are different tactics to help move people closer to being an active accomplice depending on where one is on the ‘social barometer for change,” created by Katrina Shields for her book in the *Tiger’s Mouth: an Empowerment Guide for Social Action[[20]](#footnote-19)*.

On the far left of the barometer are “leading activists” and on the far right are “leading opponents.” So, for example, a goal to use against a leading opponent to anti-racism is to reveal their motives while those in the middle of the barometer, “oblivious neutrals”, are the people you want to better inform, win over, and develop a relationship with to move them into anti-racism.

No one changes over night.

Finally, it is important to be aware that being an ally or accomplice are not nouns, but verbs. White people can try to do do anti-racist actions every day, but white supremacy culture is so strong, and change is not linear, that there are any number of things that we can do that cause a detour from our anti-racist journeys. It is key to become familiar with these tendencies. jona olsson’s “Detour-spotting for white anti-racists” is a good place to begin[[21]](#footnote-20). Because there is no one right way to help create a racial equity culture, there are many contradictions for white people in racial justice work. This is also important for white people to keep in the front of our minds as we continue our journeys[[22]](#footnote-21).

**Leading through facilitation (not intimidation)**

Cedric J. Robinson recognized that a better society is not made by developing better leaders as the top-down, visionary leader who makes things better is fiction. So what is actually helpful? People working together in a collective to make things better.

I wish this meant that those in formal positions of power, like mine, could just give up these roles and solely engage in collective decision-making. Doing that wouldn’t take into account that most people are not used to working in a collective. It’s hard, slow, messy, means putting the group above the self, and requires the individuals to be actively interrogating and working against their internalized racism and white supremacy culture. Even when this magical mix of people is together, they’re still existing in a capitalist context which means collectives will be thwarted or undermined by people with more power.

For now, formal and informal leaders should have that vision in their brain and develop their skills in facilitation, collective action, and committing to personal and organizational change so that we can have libraries that function without hierarchies. Besides doing the personal anti-racism work above, the best way I know of to learn about, embrace, and enact this hopeful future is adrienne maree brown’s *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds[[23]](#footnote-22)*. To me, this should be the required text of any library leadership program, not anything from the Harvard Business Review.

This book has several concepts, inspired by the visionary works of Black Science Fiction author Octavia Butler:

* Fractal (how you are in the small is how we are in the large)
* Intentional adaptation (how we change)
* Interdependence and decentralization (who we are and how we share)
* Nonlinear and iterative (the pace and pathways of change)
* Resilience (how we recover and transform)
* and creating more possibilities (how we move towards life).

Together, these concepts help committed people lead collective change. Again, not lead in a hierarchical way, but facilitating the voices of everyone towards a collective future. In short, brown is reminding people that:

* If we want large-scale change, then we must approach small moments and decisions in the way we want things to be.
* We make the world better by having an aim and purpose while accepting that things might throw us off our course.
* We work together in a distributed manner with not just one person holding the power.
* That transformation is cyclical and what we call “failures” are really moments of learning.
* How we can learn from pain but also not push that pain onto others.
* Activism makes science fiction a reality.

brown writes:

*What we are all really asking–what Octavia was asking–is how do we, who know the world needs to change, begin to practice being different? How do we have to be for justice truly be transformative? Not them, that massive amorphous “them” that is also us, in our heads and hearts, or that loves us, or that is tired of this shit but is family to us… Not them, because maybe they don’t recognize yet that these changes are the key to human survival. But us, us who are awake and awakening. How do we need to be for Black lives to matter? What do we need to heal in ourselves in order to offer a future of any real peace? Or to become the protagonists of this human story–and earn the flip of the page of all the sentient life in the universe? To claim the future as a compelling place for our miracles?”* [[24]](#footnote-23)

Deep engagement with this foundational work, I hope, will lead people to a new path and inspire them to change how they approach life.

**Reframing how library leaders approach work, success, and leadership**

By rejecting capitalism and white supremacy culture and embracing facilitation over currently normalized leadership roles, there may be times when you are working in conflict with what your workplace wants you to do. Going against what is normative can be hard emotionally and it can be challenging at times to feel like you are on the right path. Also, many people who you thought would be on board with racial equity work, emergent strategy, and collective decision making will not be. Racial equity work will definitely put you in conflict with people around you who do not want the white supremacy culture to go away. Leading in a different way that goes against the white cis heteropatriarchy is not really accepted, even with those who say they want that. Everyone is so used to what leadership “should look like” i.e. cis and white and male that they will think you have abdicated your leadership duties even as you are trying to create a new culture that embraces BI+POC.

Therefore, you need to redefine what success looks like. Success is being in alignment with your values, racial justice, emergent strategy, and collective prtiacces. It means seeing what in your library supports capitalism, racism, and colonialism. For example, your library may use the words “customer engagement”. It is important to engage our communities, not customers, in a way that is not transactional. Or, perhaps your library uses the concept of ROI (return on investment). Librarians have struggled for decades to quantify what we do, but community and conversations are not quantifiable. While counting can be an activist practice to illustrate patterns of problems or changes, it isn’t a way to measure our worth. We should engage only with efforts that can make us better at facilitating conversations in our communities and creating a race equity culture.

Finally, make sure you have accomplices in your work, continuously learn, and as you begin to get comfortable with anti-racism work make yourself uncomfortable again. Do not let those who stand in the way of a racial equity culture win.

**Implications and Conclusion**

While this work can help individual people on the path to anti-racist leadership pratices, there is much work to be done in overturning current business-oriented leadership education in library and information studies.

This can begin by creating new avenues of leadership and accomplice training specifically for the field. There was a promising model created by the Arts Administrators of Color Network (AAC) for an Accomplices Leadership Institute, that seems to have been sidelined by the COVID-19 pandemic[[25]](#footnote-24). Something like this, with a bigger emphasis on activist resources, should be embraced by libraries. Of note: any newly developed training should not go on a CV/resume as their intent is to make space and provide support for BI+POC colleagues, not add credentials to white people.

While including the history of management/leadership in relevant courses and workshops will remain useful to contextualize our workplaces, the content should be revised to problematize business practices and support facilitation-based leadership. In general, there should be a more thorough investigation about how library management and leadership concepts/practices further the work of both white supremacy and capitalism and create a barrier to any DEIA effort.

I’ve unfortunately already seen people in formal and informal positions of power co-opt some of these ideas in ways that support white supremacy culture. For example, some people have paid lip service to flattening hierarchies while actually consolidating their power. We have to be wary of those who say they want a more just world but are fully living out the values of white supremacy culture. While people are always imperfect, it is important to recognize white people’s tendencies to default to the normalized practices of white supremacy culture.

While leaders and managers have been rightly called in to change, the current world of leadership and management is taken as a given and not problematized enough. We truly need to destabilize the entire field of leadership and management in libraries if we are to ever achieve a race equity culture. Likewise, we need to help library workers, particularly white people, heal themselves of white supremacy culture. Those truly resistant to change create a hostile workplace for BI+POC and those with formal leadership power should work to make that an untenable position in their libraries and organizations.

So what do I think is the role of a library leader? To recognize that any one can lead, engage in anti-racist training, find ways to distribute their power, learn how to facilitate conversations, actively create a space and a future that does not accept white supremacy culture, and continue to make themselves uncomfortable to benefit BI+POC. In this way, change can happen and libraries have a chance to divorce themselves from white supremacy and capitalism. It is only by completely transforming the idea and practice of leadership that we can have anti-racist, inclusive, and equitable libraries.

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2. Phillips, H. (2020, June 4). *Performative Allyship is deadly (here's what to do instead)*. Medium. Retrieved October 4, 2021, from https://forge.medium.com/performative-allyship-is-deadly-c900645d9f1f. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. When I say white supremacy, I mean the ideology of white settler colonists that their culture and being is superior to that of BI+POC. This ideology was written into the laws and cultural fabric of the United States and continues through today. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Watch the ACRL panel here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OYLUnt6vhk [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. The three most useful trainings I’ve done is the Allyship training by Whitney Parnell of Service Never Sleeps, <https://serviceneversleeps.org/> ; a local one-off anti-racist affinity group run by Restorative Response Baltimore <https://www.restorativeresponse.org/> ; and Whiteness at Work by the Adaway Group, <https://whitenessatwork.com/> . I recommend Whitney Parnell and Desiree Adaway’s trainings, especially if you have trouble finding something like this locally. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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9. Schlesselman-Tarango, G. (2016). *The legacy of Lady Bountiful: White Women in the library*. Library Trends, 64(4), 667–686. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0015 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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12. Rosenthal, C. (2019). *Accounting for slavery: Masters and management*. Harvard University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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14. Such as Figueroa, M., Bardeen, A., Berkowitz, J., Diesenhaus, D., Gregory, L., Griffin, S., Ruth, L., Shawgo, K., Whiteside, A., &amp; Estorino, M. (2021, September 0). *21-day Racial Equity Challenge*. University Libraries 21-Day Racial Equity Challenge Syllabus. Retrieved October 4, 2021, from https://library.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/21-Day\_Racial\_Equity\_Challenge.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3Rwi91QzEmMI-oPZwkNmcNtzhr\_cMnhsD12rlHOtGD2cimxWrn5AKn2ok. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Ettarh, F. (2018). *Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves*. In the Library with the Lead Pipe. Retrieved October 4, 2021, from https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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17. Examples of this are from both from academic libraries <https://www.choice360.org/tie-post/white-academic-library-leaders-commitment-to-maintaining-racial-justice-activism/> and public libraries <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/it-isnt-enough-to-not-be-racist-ulc-and-gale-call-on-library-executives-to-actively-embrace-anti-racisms-leadership-imperative-301271833.html> It seems that the focus on large research institutions in library literature may be due to a number of factors including the publishing requirements needed for faculty status at these institutions, the lack of publishing required in smaller libraries or when achieving formal positions of power, the silo-ing of types of libraries, elitist attitudes from large research institutions, the need to wear many hats at a smaller institution, and the required literature review which can be difficult to accomplish without access to resources. The need to think and discuss outside of “elite” institutions is so needed. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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24. brown p.144 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Arts Administrators of Color Network (AAC) Accomplices Leadership Institute https://youtu.be/K70JD\_EFTLE [↑](#footnote-ref-24)