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Libraries, Politics, and Communities

Inflection Points

Introduction

Libraries are bound by responsibilities to serve their communities. Part of serving a community is providing resources, including books and programming, aimed at producing informed and engaged community members (Lankes, 2016). This paper is an investigation into how one library, The Monterey Park Bruggemeyer Library, pushed back against "common sense" (Omi and Winant, 1994) after the Monterey Park City Council voted to disband their library board of trustees. In exploring this topic, an understanding of how the values of a political organization and the social norms of a community may or may not align with the values of libraries and librarians who, due to their professionalization around sensitivities of the constructedness of information, promote ideals of information access and literacy (Cooke, Sweeney, & Noble, 2016). Amid changing demographics and a hostile political climate, libraries serve as points of inflection, pushing up against and shaping normative forces in social, political, and technical systems.

Literature Review

In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant outline racial formation as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and

destroyed." Key to this formation is the concept of hegemony, borrowed from Antonio Gramsci, who argued that "hegemony was always constituted by a combination of coercion and consent." While rule can be obtained by force, it cannot be maintained without consent. This is achieved through developing "a popular system of ideas and practices … which he calls 'common sense.'" Thus, "common sense" is a system, reinforced by practices, that engenders a normative social landscape.

Gramsci notes that the ruling group, or the group who is enforcing the normative values, is in direct opposition to the subordinated group, or those whose values are not in line with the ruling group. The ruling group achieves consent by incorporating the values of the subordinated group once their value system has been normalized by coercion. According to Omi and Winant, racial formation has already occurred at a systematic level, employed through social tools of religion and philosophy and made real in political and social practice (1994).

George Lipsitz in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* calls out the whiteness of the social substrate that pervades throughout American and Western discourse and politics (1995). Lipsitz identifies several policies and practices that directly and disproportionately benefit white citizens while inversely marginalizing minority communities. In order to perpetuate this practice, Lipsitz notes the possessive investment in whiteness, or policies that are seemingly neutral but exclude minorities by design and further perpetuate the "White" substrate.

In Lipsitz's analysis, the "contrast between the black experiences and white opinions… cannot be attributed solely to ignorance or intolerance on the part of individuals but stems instead from the overdetermined inadequacy of the language of liberal individualism to describe collective experience. As long as we define social life as the sum total of conscious and deliberate individual activities, then only *individual* manifestations of personal prejudice and hostility will be seen as racist. Systemic, collective, and coordinated behavior disappears from sight" (Lipsitz, 1995). This analysis not only outlines how whiteness is perpetuated, but how, without language or framework with which to confront it, it's also rendered invisible.

When the whiteness of social fabric is exposed, whites generally become uncomfortable, defensive, angry, and silent, or dismiss themselves from the situation. Robin DiAngelo aptly names this phenomenon: White Fragility (2011). In *White Fragility* DiAngelo points out that one of the factors, among many, that inculcate White Fragility is that "whites are taught at the same time to see their perspectives as objective and representative of reality" while "they are also taught to value the individual and to see themselves as individuals rather than as part of a racially socialized group." This internal inconsistency "allows whites to view themselves as unique and original, outside of socialization and unaffected by the relentless racial messages in the culture" (DiAngelo, 2011).

Given the racial formation that has procured the whiteness which pervades throughout contemporary social fabric, the study of the events that unfolded between the city of Monterey Park and the Monterey Park Bruggemeyer Library in the 1980s offers a point of inquiry into this

hegemonic process. Libraries, as communal spaces that have at their core a value set driven by their communities and rights to information and knowledge creation (Lankes, 2016), are uniquely situated to call attention to these social practices. Whether the library practices critical information literacy (Elmborg, 2006) or queer theory (Drabinski, 2013), librarians and libraries are critically engaged with the knowledge organization systems they work within and teach about daily, enforcing and challenging the notions of information literacy and organizational structures that are prevalent within the library while at the same time critically engaging with those power systems extrinsic to the library.

The White substrate is evidenced in the events that transpired during the 1980s in Monterey Park where debates about social norms and rampant political positioning mirrored the national discourse of the same. Monterey Park explored several political maneuvers which, viewed through the lens of Whiteness, expose how the politics impacting the library and Monterey Park community fit within the hegemonic regime. Much like the low hanging overpasses built on Long Island in the 1920s through 1970s by Robert Moses, built to prevent buses from traveling beneath and by extension make it difficult for certain classes to move about the city (Langdon, 1986), city council members used infrastructural and political design to shape the agency of various communities within Monterey Park. Language featured prominently in these debates as a particular tool utilized to enforce Whiteness, extending from storefronts to the library. Due to the changing demographics of Monterey Park, the politics of the library and the city council intersected. This intersection will be explored throughout this article.

Discussion

The Library

The Monterey Park Bruggemeyer Library was established in 1929 to "provide public library service for the people of Monterey Park" (History of the Library, 2019). As of 2019, the Monterey Park Bruggemeyer Library notes that its mission is to "meet the cultural, educational, and informational needs of residents of the City of Monterey Park by providing free and open access to its resources and services" (Monterey Park Bruggemeyer Library Strategic Plan 2015-2018, 2015), a mission that largely reflects the original mission statement of the library.

In living this mission, the Monterey Park Library provides a number of services and resources in support of the Monterey Park communities. In 1984, the library began its Literacy for All of Monterey Park (LAMP) program, providing adult and family literacy programs for members (History of the Library, 2019). Today the library has programs daily, including weekly literacy classes, bilingual, family, baby, and preschool storytimes, computer labs, and other community events. Library Signage is consistently trilingual in English, Spanish, and Mandarin. The library's holdings remain vastly multilingual and offer a newspaper room with material in Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese (Garcia, personal communication, 18 May, 2019).

Monterey Park Library's mission, familiar among librarians, is where a library and the communities it serves push up against the social norms embedded in political and technical structures. It may also, on the other hand, exist as an enforcement of hegemonic values depending on how it responds to external pressures and composes its resources. Pawley, also working with Gramsci's definition of hegemony, reminds us that "educational institutions are of central importance in the transmission of an effective dominant culture" (1998). Pawley continues, citing Raymond Williams, "'the process of education; the processes of a much wider social training within institutions like the family; the practical definitions and organization of work; the selective tradition as an intellectual and theoretical level: all these forces are involved in a continual making and remaking of an effective dominant culture…' To experience twentieth-century educational institutions -- schools, colleges, universities, and libraries -- is to experience the class system unobtrusively at work" (Pawley, 1998).

The City

Monterey Park is located directly east of Los Angeles City in San Gabriel Valley and has seen large demographic changes since its incorporation in 1916. As of July 2018, Monterey Park was 67.1% Asian or Asian American (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Monterey Park city, California, 2019), though as with any community, these numbers are always in flux. In 1970, the Asian population of Monterey Park was about 14%. In 1980, the United States Census reports that Other Races, Non-Hispanic (which includes those identifying themselves as "American Indian and Alaska Native alone", "Asian alone", "Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone", "some other race alone", or of more than one race) was 35.1%. This same population was

at 57.2% in 1990. Over the same time, the White, Non-Hispanic population went from 56% in 1970, 24.9% in 1980, and 11.8% in 1990 while the Total Hispanic population went from 30% in 1970. 38.8% in 1980, and 30.4% in 1990 (SOCDS Census Data Output: Monterey Park city, CA, 2019) (Monterey Park : Nation's 1st Suburban Chinatown, 1987b).

As a result of these shifting demographics, Monterey Park experienced a marked increase in reactionary policies and regressive social practices, largely fueled by conservative and neoliberal ideologies spearheaded by the Reagan administration and the reaction of globalization in the 1970s (Harvey, 2005). As a reaction to the increasing Asian population, and as an indicator of the White social substrate deeply ingrained in the politics of Monterey Park, several policies and outspoken citizens attempted to shape how the city grew.

Monterey Park became known as the "Nation's 1st Suburban Chinatown." In 1986 a decisive city council election was held with three candidates running on a platform of controlled growth of the city. These three council members won and immediately initiated a halt of all construction projects, effectively enacting a moratorium on new condominiums and apartment buildings in an effort to curtail further change to the community population (Monterey Park : Nation's 1st Suburban Chinatown, 1987b).

The new council pushed for English only signage, requiring the use of "English words" on storefronts with the stated reason that there was a "need for police and fire personnel to be able to readily identify the location of a business during an emergency" (Stronger Rules on English in

Signs Pushed by Council, 1985). However, city council members were quick to suggest that this ordinance was necessary to "emphasize that English is our unifying language" nodding to the recently failed measure to declare English the official language of the city. Interestingly, certain signs considered "universal", such as Shell gas station signs, were exempt from this ordinance (Chinese Only" Monterey Park Sees the Signs, 1985).

The Trial

In 1987 the city council voted 3-2 to disband the library's board and instate a commision, giving the city absolute power over all library decisions (In Monterey Park : Council Sued in Takeover of Library, 1988). Librarians and ex-board members feared that the stated purpose of this action, controlling the library's finances, was a red herring and ultimately an effort to politicize the library, pulling it into the racist discourse the city was experiencing. Librarians also cited fears of book bannings, a trend prevalent nationwide (Court Decision Reinstating Library Board, 1989).

There are several social and political factors, both local and national, to consider when exploring the tension between the Monterey Park Library and the city of Monterey Park. From national conversations of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005) and a slew of book bannings and ensuing court cases (in particular the 1982 the Supreme Court ruling in *Board of Education v. Pico* (Lam, 2011)), to the push to make English the official language of Monterey Park and resulting ordinances for English signage (Stronger Rules on English in Signs Pushed by Council, 1985) to the bumper sticker on the mayor Barry Hatch's car proclaiming "Control Immigration Now!"

(Controversy Is OK With Him : New Monterey Park Mayor's Views Stir Up the Residents, 1988), Monterey Park was at the cross section of White Fragility and Racial Formation.

Interesting developments relevant to the court case include the city's concern of the library's bank accounts not in purview of the city. One of these accounts had recently spent $18,000 on their Asian Book collection (Monterey Park : City Takes Over Library, 1987a). In that vein, librarians voiced concern of the possibility of book bannings, citing a recent rash of bannings nationwide (In Monterey Park : Council Sued in Takeover of Library, 1988). A prior board member of Friends of the Library noted that disbanding the board "opened the door to politicizing the library" (In Monterey Park : Council Sued in Takeover of Library, 1988). This comment begs the question of whether the library is indeed political, a question that scholars and academics now largely consider put to rest, as libraries and knowledge organization systems generally function as structures of power (Drabinski, 2013). In the case of the Monterey Park Library, the fact that the city council found it necessary to dissolve the library board indicates that, to them, the library was clearly political. In the case of Monterey Park, the politics of the library was community engagement, inclusion, literacy, and making information resources accessible to different audiences, politics captured in the library's mission statement.

Given these politics, in 1988 the Friends of the Library of Monterey Park and ex-board members brought a lawsuit against the city claiming that the dissolution of the board was unlawful in a case known as *Friends of the Library of Monterey Park v. City of Monterey Park* (Court Decision Reinstating Library Board, 1989). The plaintiff, Friends of the Library, won the case

and the library board was reinstated, setting a precedent in California for similar future cases and causing interest among cities and libraries nationwide (Monterey Park Library Litigation, 2012).

Conclusion

The tension between the City of Monterey Park and the Monterey Park Library and the ensuing legal battle exemplifies how libraries exist as inflection points, pushing up against and in a dialectic with established normative hegemonic values. The conflict that played out in California courts in the late 1980s serves as an example of these same conversations occurring historically and contemporarily between the values of libraries and those normative values that constitute the White Substrate prevalent in the United States. These library values are not neutral, however, and efforts to provide information resources to communities inherently shape individuals and communities according to those values. In the case of Monterey Park, the inclusivity of programming and book holdings is both a desire to serve the community and also an effort to incorporate the community into a value set driven by the library's choices.

The events that transpired in Monterey Park reflects how certain individuals in alliance with the White substrate and consequently in positions of power, fight against demographic and social change and exert their power in the name of maintaining the status quo. This phenomenon, aptly described as White Fragility, gives evidence of the individualistic attitudes of race and repression, and fails to acknowledge the invisible systemic nature of racial formation. In Monterey Park, racial formation was propagated via the use of and policies around language. Understanding the events that transpired in Monterey Park as individual choices of a few bad

actors risks missing the point of the substrate that not only allows these choices to occur, but flourish. On the other hand, the library, with its investment in multilingual literacy programming and Chinese reading materias, also understood how language was wielded as a weapon to reinforce the White substrate. Through the commitment to multiple epistemic communities, the library functions as a space where the subversion of this Whiteness can take place.

Librarians can look to what happened in Monterey Park as a model for how to navigate changing communities as well as external pressures impacting their ability to navigate according to their information professional value set. Librarians must be careful to incorporate the values of marginalized communities while at the same time avoid pulling those marginalized communities into a homogenized culture of Whiteness. As part of this professionalization, librarians must be sensitive to this White Substrate and know how to hedge White Fragility, achievable through incorporating critical notions of values and communities in their librarianship training (Cooke, Sweeney, & Noble, 2016).

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