

## BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

**Aboriginal and Visible Minority Librarians: Oral Histories from Canada.** Deborah Lee, Mahalakshmi Kumaran, editors. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; 2014. 231 p. ISBN 978-1442236813. Price: \$93.00. Available from: <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442236813/Aboriginal-and-Visible-Minority-Librarians-Oral-Histories-from-Canada>.

Those of us with an interest in the role race and ethnicity play in our workplaces and communities recognize that libraries have a problem with diversity. Most Canadian libraries are not diverse workplaces. The lack of diversity in libraries is recognized by many in our field. Individual librarians unhappy with the status quo have developed social media campaigns like #LibrariesSoWhite to draw attention to lack of diversity in the workplace and have written thoughtful blog posts [1] about the importance of diversity and non-white librarians. More importantly, workplaces have begun to utilize “diversity statements” designed to encourage applications from visible minorities, Aboriginal people, women, etc. However, little is being done at the pre-MLIS stage to engage so-called diverse students to library schools, and even less is being done to attract these students to specialized fields such as health librarianship.

Census data from 2006 build a devastating picture of diversity in Canadian libraries—at that time only 9.7% of librarians identified as being a visible minority [2]. In a 2014 survey of Canadian librarians, 12.1% of respondents reported identifying as either Aboriginal or as visible/racial minorities, still well below what might be expected based on national labour force statistics [3]. In spite of hard data, colloquial conversations, and social pressure surrounding these issues, there exists a paucity of literature addressing the role of race and ethnicity in Canadian libraries, likely due to the limited number of visible minority individuals employed in this field. Thus, *Aboriginal and Visible Minority Librarians: Oral Histories from Canada*, is well positioned as both a collection of personal histories and narratives, as well as a wonderful primer on the role of race and ethnicity in Canadian libraries.

Often, Indigenous and non-Western knowledges are seen as existing outside of the Eurocentric academy [4]. This collection, thoughtfully edited by Lee and Kumaran, both of the University of Saskatchewan, seeks to introduce readers to the experience of Canadian Aboriginal and visible minority librarians through the use of narrative storytelling. The diversity of experience shared in this text is its greatest asset. We hear from librarians like my own UBC colleague, Kim Lawson of Xwi7xwa Library. For those who work at a large academic research institution, Xwi7xwa Library “. . . is a place where people bring their questions about all things Aboriginal” (p. 157). To contrast the experience of urban, large-scale librarianship we hear from librarians like Mary Weasel Fat, who works for the Red Crow Community College Library on the Blood Reserve in Southern Alberta and calls for “an online [library technician or MLIS] program in Canada for First Nations people” (p. 47) as

many Aboriginal people cannot leave their communities for a myriad of reasons. As one might imagine, the experience of an Aboriginal librarian in a large, urban setting at a research university is fantastically different than that of an Aboriginal librarian in an Aboriginal community, despite both libraries purporting to serve similar groups. Throughout *Aboriginal and Visible Minority Librarians*, we are offered the opportunity to broaden our perception of what being Aboriginal or a visible minority means in our field.

This book’s 18 chapters share stories from nine Aboriginal librarians and nine librarians who identify as visible minorities. We hear from librarians of all spheres: special libraries, academic libraries, reserve libraries, public libraries, and more. These librarians “speak of their connections to their individual communities” identifying authors as Filipino, Cree, Metis, Indian, or Jamaican and a variety of Aboriginal groups (K. Lawson). This book benefits greatly through exploring what it means to be a visible minority librarian through the lens of different individual experiences, while highlighting the similarities of experience that exist for this group. For example, visible minority librarians have “often come from working-class backgrounds, have faced many socioeconomic barriers . . . and are often . . . the first university graduates in the family” (M. Weasel Fat). Even when entering the profession with relevant education, immigrant librarians struggle with acknowledgement of their international qualifications; Indian-educated librarian Ganga B. Dakshinamurti provided a very practical example of how visible minority and internationally trained information professionals can be disenfranchised in our current educational framework. I saw this particular story as a call to action for our discipline to find ways to recognize and value credentials and experience outside of the traditional ALA-accreditation framework. There are also broad lessons to be learned from these stories, one of which is that to encourage visible minority librarians to thrive, workplaces need to assist these librarians in finding mentors, associations, and relationships that create a sense of belonging—this is particularly important in libraries where little diversity currently exists.

Although each librarian shares their own story of their current and past work experience, what brings these stories together is the overwhelming theme of the need for a broad cultural shift in librarianship. Several authors encourage instruction in indigenous knowledges in MLIS education, including building critical awareness of how some indigenous worldviews are seen as inferior to the eurocentric model of the current Academy. Some authors also wrote about the importance of early- and mid-career mentorship from other minority librarians that they received. Finally, others also spoke of the great value of exposure to professional bodies (like the Visible Minority Librarians of Canada Network), which build confidence, capacity, and create resource networks.

This book shares an overwhelmingly positive message and has created a forum for the diversity of voices in

librarianship. That being said, one weakness in this text is that it lacks a traditionally organized structure. Authors were clearly free to write in their own style, format, and voice. Some may find this frustrating or disjointed, but it feels reflective of the multitude of lived personal experience of the many authors.

*Aboriginal and Visible Minority Librarians: Oral Histories from Canada* engages you in many examples of the diversity of experience of Canadian librarianship. Librarians and library administrations seeking to diversify their workplaces will find this collection of essays an excellent primer on the experience of visible minority librarians and will appreciate many of the “next steps” outlined to help retain and support these librarians once they have been hired.

Both campuses of the University of British Columbia sit on the traditional territory of Canada’s first peoples. In this place where librarians, students, faculty and staff converge, I wish to recognize the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy̓əm (Musqueam) and Okanagan people who hold ancestral claim to these lands. I also want to acknowledge the many privileges I have as a caucasian in the Academy.

## References

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