Collaborative Librarianship: A Minority Opinion

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As academic librarians of color, prevalence of the topic of librarianship and collaboration in the professional literature has not gone unnoticed. Numerous articles, blog postings and presentations tout the benefits of collaboration, describing libraries working with outside groups and initiatives, such as university presses, digital humanities, new and traditional media, etc. The precepts and outcomes in the literature are that collaboration is always beneficial, with little or no downside to the parties involved. But what does collaboration really mean?

Merriam Webster's dictionary defines the word "collaborate" three ways:

> 1: to work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor
>
> 2: to cooperate with or willingly assist an enemy of one's country and especially an occupying force
>
> 3: to cooperate with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected[1]

We would like to note that though the first definition describes a type of intellectual pursuit, subsequent definitions allude to a removal or even an opposition among the parties working together. Taking the three definitions as a whole, collaboration can be defined as a relationship that, although the push by the profession for collaborative alliances and initiatives underscores a dissonance many on the surface seems voluntary, can well be a complex dynamic with varying cultural and political hierarchies.

Collaboration and librarians have a long history together. One of a library's most basic services, interlibrary loan, is literally built on the idea of libraries sharing collections. More recently, rapidly changing technologies and content formats, along with budgetary pressures have sparked interest among librarians to explore innovative partnerships. Some are intrigued by ideas of expanding services or awareness about what we do via the establishment of relationships with entities outside our profession. We agree that for our profession to thrive, librarians and library professionals should seek out and nurture initiatives that depend upon cooperation and alliances.

But the push by the profession for collaborative alliances and initiatives underscores a dissonance many librarians of color feel when approaching the concept of collaboration. Much of what is written about librarianship and collaboration comes from the perspective of choice, be it for practical reasons (e.g., shrinking budgets, lack of staff, etc.) or for intellectual/theoretical reasons (e.g., critical theory, professional development, or even just the desire to play out an intellectual exercise). But for those who do not fit the current, overwhelming demographic of our profession (white and female)[2] collaboration is never about choice: it is about practicalities and survival.

Why? It is because those outside of this demographic consistently face situations where they are at odds with those around them in terms of background, culture and experience. What may seem like a simple, compassionate idea, like the recent trend of offering "safe spaces" to undocumented immigrants, can be fraught with questions and concerns to those who have first-hand experience with such issues: would my brother or sister feel comfortable approaching a librarian? Does it really make sense to an older Asian woman to ask for help or support from an institution that appears to be governmental? These are the kinds of questions we have, but are often hesitant to bring up, since in past experiences our voices sound to others unenthusiastic at best, or confrontational at worst. So we think and strategize, and come up with ways to work with those in power, or are at least part of the majority so that we can achieve goals in a way that makes sense to everyone. For us, collaboration is not a new concept.

In fact, for many people of color, our earliest memories are about acts of collaboration, some of which are not pleasant. We learned quickly when forced to negotiate the adult world on our parents' behalf due to their limited or lack of English-language speaking skills. Others learned when the realization set in that their family was not like the families of their peers, and that to be successful, or just to have friends, they adopted or mimicked the approaches, cultural tastes, and even the opinions of those around them. In short, what is considered collaboration is, for many of us, code switching, or to quote the National Public Radio's series "Code Switch", the "hop-scotching between different cultural and linguistic spaces and different parts of our own identities—sometimes within a single interaction."[3] Our collaborative efforts are shaped early and tempered by necessity. One of the first lessons we learn is: to exist within the dominant culture means working with the dominant cul-

ture, whether we agree or understand it. Collaboration is not so much an "intellectual endeavor" but a coping mechanism, a way to meet every day needs, the way we succeed and thrive in an environment that is not always accepting of our viewpoints.

How is collaboration shaped for us? It is a complex social and cultural negotiation, an intricate dance with not only those on the outside our cultural group, but among those who are from the inside of it as well. For immigrants, it generally begins by seeking out the "experts" within their own community: those who have forged the way for others, the ones who explain the intricacies of applying for driver licenses or discovered the best places to buy food from home. It's making use of offered kindnesses and transactional opportunities provided by those who came before. When one of the author's parents came to this country, with very little money and connections, it was the Filipino immigrant community who helped find a room for rent in a family home. The family were also Filipino immigrants to the United States, arriving decades earlier, helping other families and cementing their own economic survival by providing shelter in exchange for rent.

It's also about teaching those who are new in the ways of dealing with different expectations, norms, ways of being, which are almost always unspoken and unwritten. It can be as innocuous as a kid learning the glories of Star Wars and cold cereal from her Americanized immigrant friends or as overwhelming as navigating insurance and legal issues after a car accident.

In the workplace, collaboration becomes subtler, more nuanced. At times it involves evaluating and rehearsing one's thoughts and ideas before speaking. Or it's taking an internal measure of one's experience when colleagues propose services for those they perceive as disadvantaged or disenfranchised. Often these ideas have theoretical underpinnings, frames of references

where it's obvious the person has never dealt firsthand with racism or multilingualism. A good example is the #critlib movement, a laudable and overdue take on libraries and critical theory, with a nod towards social justice. It's an active and vibrant discussion, but for many of us, we cannot help but notice that talk of Marx and Foucault from librarians who come from backgrounds of white privilege gets far more attention than the day-to-day experiences of librarians of color. Our approach is not as much intellectual as it is lived: we have been there--are there. It's in our bones.

Life in the margins is the lens through which we see our existence, whether the professional and public or the private and personal aspects of our lives. While we do agree that intellectual and theoretical perspectives are important ways for everyone to understand life from the other side, personal experience cannot be overlooked. When applying the lens of intersectional existence, the picture refracts even more. The roles of women of color, for instance, in the development of economic, cultural, and social lives of communities cannot be overestimated. Similarly, the uncompensated, unsung contributions of women of color in ensuring the mentoring, caring, and memory-keeping at our places of work--the emotional labor--create the cultural and social characteristics that make such places welcoming, habitable, and distinctive.

So once again, we stare at the gulf between those whose approach to our everyday experiences is from an intellectual stance. This is not surprising in that the library as an institution and as a profession is not impervious to the social and cultural tensions we experience elsewhere in society. But how do we, as people of color, bridge this gap? How do we bring our views and experiences to the discussion? By participating in the movement, even though there may be profound differences in perspectives and understanding. We make sure our voices are heard and incorporated despite the deep divide in experience and culture. In other words, we collaborate.

Librarians of color bring a unique viewpoint to collaborative librarianship. We listen, we speak, and we negotiate. But we keep in mind the importance of the other, the ones who have spent their lives creating a sense of place and belonging within the dominant culture. Now more than ever, our voices need to be heard if we are to bridge the gap between the have and the have-nots.

Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to point out that even in a profession that is decidedly white, most librarians within the larger culture are in the same predicament. Because our work culture is female-dominated, we function in a society that doesn't--or won't--understand what we do or why we exist. It is no surprise to any of us that our work is consistently devalued and that we have to at times fight to be seen and heard. To survive, librarians have turned themselves into inadvertent code-switchers, constantly assessing and navigating social and cultural terrains that are not always friendly or understanding.

Librarian collaboration is about survival: survival of not only our profession, but educational and cultural survival of the people we serve or hope to serve. In these days of rapid technological change and an information infrastructure that morphs with this change, librarians will need to become comfortable with being the other--to develop the ability to not only work in the in-between spaces on behalf of those who depend upon us, but to understand them.

Endnotes

1 "Collaborate." Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 10 Jan. 2017.

2 "The Unbearable Whiteness of Librarianship," Feral Librarian, March 4, 2014, accessed January 10, 2017, https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2014/03/03/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-librarianship/.

3 "How Code-Switching Explains the World," Code Switch: Race and Identity, Remixed, April 8, 2013, accessed January 10, 2017, http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/04/08/176064688/how-code-switching-explains-the-world.