Identifying & Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives

An Incomplete List of White Privileges in Archives and Action Items for Dismantling Them*

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*All of the following call for nuance, context, and an awareness that oppression is structural.

Appraisal

Privilege
I can be sure I can find materials representing people of my race/created by people of my race.

Action
- Implement policies to collect materials representing and created by people of color. Note that it will take time to build trust and change racist trajectories.
- Contact archivists at your local repository and tell them you want to use collections created by people of color.
- Institute participatory appraisal models that share appraisal decision-making power with communities of color.

Privilege
The objects I feel are valuable for my culture are also deemed valuable in archives.

Action
- Expand our cultural values to value materials created by communities of color.
- Educate yourself (continually, constantly) about what specific communities of color value. Don’t expect communities of color to do the work for you.
- Work collaboratively with communities of color as equal partners in appraisal decisions. Compensate them for their labor.

Privilege
I can assume archives will be committed to the preservation of materials from my community.

Action
- Educate yourself about what specific communities of color value.
- Demonstrate commitment to those communities through relationship building and power sharing over time.
- Learn and honor culturally specific protocols for what should be preserved or destroyed.
- Train and hire archivists of color so they are making appraisal decisions.

Description

Privilege
When I look for materials from my community in archives, they will be described in the finding aid and catalog records using language we use to describe ourselves.

Action
- Train all archivists to have cultural humility and describe materials using anti-oppressive language.
- Educate yourself continually and constantly.
- Hire more archivists of color to describe materials.
- Engage communities to ask how they wish to describe themselves. Compensate them for their labor.

Privilege
When I look at descriptions of archival materials, I am not always bombarded by/reminded of my otherness.

Action
- Hire more archivists of color to describe materials.
- Update finding aids that use outdated white supremacist language. Keep a note of your changes so that users can examine the history of the finding aid as an artifact.
- Engage communities to ask how they wish to describe themselves. Compensate them for their labor.

Privilege
Materials are described using my native language.

Action
- Hire multilingual people as archivists and translators and translate finding aids into appropriate languages.
- Encourage, value, and give credit for language courses in MLIS programs and in continuing education.

Access/Use

Privilege
I can use an archives without eliciting surveillance.

Action
- Fight like hell to maintain the privacy of users.
- Do not collect data that identifies users.
- Do not require users to show an ID to access collections.
- Do not treat users as thieves.

Privilege
When I go to the archives, I can be relatively sure that I will see the value of my race behind the reference desk.

Action
- Hire more archivists of color.
- Recruit more undergraduate students of color into MLIS programs to train to be archivists.
- Provide financial and moral support for MLIS students of color so that they complete their programs.

Privilege
When I go into an archive, no one questions why I am there.

Action
- Train staff at all levels to identify and disrupt white supremacist assumptions.
- Foster a nurturing environment for people of color in the reading room. Create displays and outreach materials that show your archives values communities of color.

Professional Life

Privilege
People assume I’m unbiased because of my race.

Action
- Be center whiteness in archival practice (and resist it). Uncover it. Discuss it. Address it.
- Intervene when you see whiteness perpetuated as a neutral default or assumption.
- Make your anti-racist values known and hold institutions accountable for the white supremacist values they perpetuate.
- Stop perpetuating the myth of archival neutrality.

Privilege
People assume I behave “professionally” because of my race.

Action
- Question assumptions about professionalism. Think critically about when those assumptions mask white supremacist values.
- Interrupt colleagues and users when they say racist things.
- Practice a phrase to have in your back pocket (such as “that’s racist!” or “would you say that about a white person?”) to disrupt racist comments.

Privilege
I can be sure funders will see the value of my collections rather than designate them as “niche.”

Action
- Communicate to funding agencies and allocators that their funding priorities often favor whiteness at the expense of people of color.
- Disrupt white supremacist thinking when you serve on review panels and making budgetary decisions.
- Uncover the whiteness of supposedly “universal” projects that do get funding. Name it. Discuss it. Address it.

Education

Privilege
I can be sure that archival practices and concepts from my culture will be represented in my education.

Action
- Promote and decolonize archival education.
- Create syllabi that reflect authors and communities of color.
- Read and assign and cite scholars of color. Amplify their voices.
- Hold your professors accountable for disrupting white supremacy in the classroom.

Privilege
I can assume that when I attend an archival outreach or classroom instruction session, materials created by my community will be represented.

Action
- Use materials created by communities of color in educational outreach activities.
- Create assignments based on them.
- Disrupt whiteness as a default or “neutral” category.
- Don’t assume users are not capable of understanding nuance and complexity about race. Address white supremacy in your instruction sessions.

Privilege
I can be sure there will be other students of my race in my classes. I can be sure there will be instructors of my race.

Action
- Acculturate undergraduate students of color into MLIS programs to train to be archivists.
- Encourage students of color to pursue PhDs and become archival studies faculty.
- Provide financial and moral support for MLIS & PhD students of color so that they complete their programs.
- Hire archival studies faculty of color.