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Multiracial Resources in a Monoracially-Organized Library World

by Helen Look, University of Michigan Library

Abstract

Mainstream library practices in organizing information generally reflects social norms in which white, as a racial group, is privileged and dominant and others are marginalized and frequently excluded. Multiracial/multi-ethnic people are growing in numbers and are increasingly unwilling to accept exclusion and invisibility. In a society that prefers the binary -- black/white, male/female, conservative/liberal -- fighting for anything else is a challenge. Researchers pursuing information about those standing outside of any racial binary typically struggle with poor classification in library catalogs and bibliographic databases, variable language with wildly different meanings depending on context, and offensive archaisms that may be their only entry to information resources. This paper outlines how an academic library organized a series of events to raise community awareness as well as provide better support for these and others that do not fit the easy categories of standardized classification.

Biography

Helen Look is the Collection Analyst for the University of Michigan Library. Throughout her career as a librarian, Helen has been committed to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. She draws from a wealth of experience with diversity program planning for local, regional, and national audiences.

Keywords: mixed race, multiracial, faculty panel, film series, programming, library events

In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau allowed people to start choosing more than one racial category to describe themselves. There were reportedly over 6 million multiracial individuals in this country and the population continues to steadily grow. Over a decade later, more than 9 million Americans self-identified as having two or more races which represents an estimated 2.1% of the adult population of this country. The 2015 Pew Research report on “Multiracial in America” suggests that the census’s estimate may have underreported the nation’s mixed-race population and that is closer to 6.9%. This growing multiracial population is becoming more apparent on our college campuses and is increasingly being reflected in the campus intellectual output. With this demographic shift, there continues to be a need for more inclusive research and teaching pedagogies that acknowledge intersecting identities. Academic librarians can play an important role in supporting and nurturing this growing pipeline of multiracial students, staff, faculty, and future scholars.

In the summer of 2014, a group of individuals from across the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor campus were brought together by librarian Karen Downing, Head of Social Sciences at the University of Michigan Library. There were discussions about the need for creating a community, sharing stories, and supporting scholarly efforts on multiracial issues. The library seemed like a natural campus resource with its subject specialists and its collection. A ten-person committee of librarians, faculty, and graduate student interns was formed. They met five times over the course of a year to discuss themes, desired outcomes, and programming ideas. As a result, the committee hosted a yearlong series of campus events that explored what it means to be multiracial in a mostly monoracially conceived world. This series of events took place during the academic year of 2015-2016.

The kickoff event was a faculty panel on *Multiracial in a Monoracial World: Interraciality Informing Academic Work*. The planning committee invited three University of Michigan faculty members representing different disciplines and perspectives. The first panelist was Edward West who is a Thurnau Professor at the School of Art and Design. He is a practicing artist for over 30 years and his most recent work entitled *So Called* focused on mixed ethnic communities. Professor West shared images of lives and experiences of multiracial people from around the world. The second panelist was Martha Jones who is the associate chair of the University of Michigan Department of Afroamerican and African Studies. She is also the co-director of the Michigan Law Program in Race, Law & History. Professor Jones shared her experience of writing about her family history and her racial ancestry. The third panelist was Mark Kamimura-Jimenez who is the Director of Graduate Student Success at the Rackham Graduate School. Dr. Kamimura-

Jimenez shared observations from his own research on the college experience of mixed-race people.

The faculty panel moderator Karen Downing provided opening remarks and information about the upcoming events planned for the series. The organizers shared handouts that highlighted multiracial resources in the library collection. Each of the three panelists was given 15-20 minutes. They were asked to present their life and academic experience while addresses several multiracial themes identified by the planning committee. After the presentations, there was an open discussion with the audience of over 52 people from the campus community. The questions and conversations continued long past the official end time for the event. The faculty panelists and the organizers were thanked for creating this space and increasing campus awareness. The event was reported on locally by the campus student newspaper and online with audience members using the hashtag #Multiracial to live tweet. The conversations continued and there was unexpected attention beyond the campus. The faculty panel and the moderator were interviewed for *The Mixed Experience* podcast hosted by Heidi Durrow, author of *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. The show was about how multiracialism informs academic work. The American Libraries Association Public Program Office contacted the organizers to share the program model so other libraries would be able to utilize it for developing their own series of events.

The next phase of the yearlong series consisted of film screenings on multiracial topics. There was a subcommittee of four librarians: the collections librarian for the media library; two librarians who have published about on screen representations of multiracial identities; and an international studies librarian. The anticipated primary audience for the film screenings was students and the selections were intended to appeal to that part of the campus population. Since no funding was secured for the film series, the group limited its selections to films for which the library already secured public performance rights. As a result, many of our selections were non-fiction works and not commercial feature films.

The first set of screenings highlighted the work of independent filmmaker Jeff Chiba Stearns. He incorporates animation into his documentary filmmaking and brings humor to his exploration of his mixed race identity. The two featured works were *One Big Hapa Family* (2010) and *What Are You Anyways?* (2005). The organizers contacted the filmmaker about the yearlong series and he generously agreed to grant public screening permission for these two works to be shown as part of the film series. *What Are You Anyways?* is a short animated film about growing up “half Japanese, half Euro Mutt” in rural Canada. It spans from his childhood to

adulthood, and eventually touches upon romantic relationships. *One Big Hapa Family* is a feature length documentary with some animation. It builds upon similar themes of mixed race identities. The film documents Stearns exploration into the high interracial marriage rate of Japanese-Canadian after Japanese-Canadian Internment during WWII. The documentary explores different perspectives about interracial marriages and how the next generation of Stearns's extended family perceives their multiracial identities. Both screenings were well attended. Although a discussion was not planned, some audience members felt the need to stay after the screening to further converse about the topic.

The next and final set of film screening took place during the week of MLK Day. The University of Michigan coordinates an annual Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Symposium which is one of the largest celebrations of the life and legacy of MLK sponsored by colleges and universities in the nation. Throughout the entire month of January, the MLK Symposium provides the community with over 40 events centered on a common theme with relevance to current social justice issues and the teachings of Dr. King. The 2016 MLK Symposium Theme was #WhoWillBeNext. For the first time, the UM Symposium encouraged people to bring together groups of friends, colleagues, and neighbors to host watch parties to explore issues that matter to them. The goal was to identify ways to work together and effect positive change. One of the screenings was publicized as one of several opportunities to participate in a campus watch party.

The first screening that week was for *Chasing Daybreak: A Film about Mixed Race in America* (2006). It took place the day after MLK Day. The feature length documentary was produced by the MAVIN Foundation, the nation's largest mixed race organization. It documented the story of five multiracial/multiethnic young adults as they travelled across the country as part of the Generation MIX National Awareness Tour. One of the individuals was a University of Michigan student from Ann Arbor which the subcommittee thought would appeal to the students in the audience. The crew met with hundreds of people across the country including U.S. Senator Barack Obama. Their mission was to raise awareness and discuss issues relevant to the next generation of mixed race Americans. Information about the film screening and watch party discussion was widely disseminated as part of the overall marketing for the UM MLK Symposium. Although classes were back in session that day, the midday screening of this documentary had an audience comparable in size to the faculty panel event. The audience was prepared to actively engage on the topic and to discuss the change that they would like to see.

Two days later, there was a screening of the full-length documentary *Crossing the Line: Multiracial Comedians* (2007). It analyzed how mixed-race comedians attempted to balance their multiracial identities and humor in a racially divided world. The documentary featured the experiences, perspectives, and performances of American comedians of more than one racial ancestry. It award winning documentary was produced by professors of ethnic studies Teja Arboleda and Darcy Li Po Price. Professor Arboleda was the keynote speaker and performer for the 2016 Business & Finance UM MLK Convocation. This connection added richness to the experience for audience members who were able to attend the convocation early that week. This final screening for our film screening was not advertised as having a discussion but once again audience members felt the need to continue the conversation.

Evaluations were emailed to audience participants to solicit feedback about the screenings and suggestions for next steps. From the final two film screenings, there was a strong interest from the audience for identifying resources and support for multiracial students on campus. A few graduate students volunteered to be part of a future student panel where they could discuss their experience and their own research. The library was identified as a potential ally for facilitating further student conversations.

From our yearlong exploration, the organizers have only begun to scratch the surface of creating a community and sharing stories about multiracial issues for our campus. The next steps are to follow up on the student interest in organizing a student panel that mirrors the successful faculty panel. There may be more film screenings or facilitated discussions. The planning committee is engaged in securing funds to bring to campus a performance artist that would highlight her mixed-race experience. These activities will require a greater commitment of time and resources. The planning committee will continue to create more opportunities to move forward the campus conversation on this important topic and to identify resources to support the growing needs.

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