

# Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives

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## ABSTRACT

This article reflects on an exercise I developed to enable students to identify the ways in which white privilege is embedded in archival institutions and to collectively strategize concrete steps to dismantle white supremacy in their own archival practice. It argues that, in the face of disastrous political events—such as the election of an explicitly racist protofascist as US president—LIS faculty must intervene pedagogically to meet the needs of their most vulnerable students and to model behaviors of critique and resistance if we aim to train students who will disrupt the status quo of oppression as LIS professionals. The article includes printable graphics designed by Gracen Brilmyer and generated by the class exercise to serve as a visual reminder of our obligation to dismantle white supremacy in archival studies and archives more broadly.

It's the first 5 a.m. after the 2016 US presidential election, and my phone rings, ending a few hours of restless sleep. It's my best friend on the phone, an information studies (IS) faculty member at another university in a different time zone who is a gay immigrant of color, and he is sobbing, worried that under a Trump presidency his same-sex marriage will be annulled, his green card revoked, and his career in this country ended. I do my best to assure him this will not happen, that we will not let this happen, but I know full well that his worst fears are possible. I get ready for work and stumble into my previously scheduled meeting as part of my school's diversity and equity committee. I am early, and one of my students, a genderqueer student of color, walks in. They sit down next to me and burst into tears, telling me how terrified they are for their own safety under a Trump presidency. I listen and tell the student that I will do everything in my power to protect them, knowing that everything in my power might not be good enough. Throughout the meeting, students and colleagues openly sob, some worried that they and their families might be deported or forced to register, others accurately painting the Trump election as the logical conclusion of a 500-year history of white supremacy. It is clear we cannot—and should not—conduct business as usual between sobs.

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The author would like to thank Joyce Gabiola for research support in providing key definitions and citations and Gracen Brilmyer for graphic design expertise and enthusiasm.

*Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, vol. 87, no. 3, pp. 222–235. © 2017 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.  
0024-2519/2017/8703-0004\$10.00

As I hope these stories illustrate, these are not just issues of personal import (although, of course, they are very personal) but also professional issues that we must address as a profession. They affect us professionally, that is, as professionals; they interfere with our and our students' and our colleagues' ability to succeed, with our collective ability to build scholarship in LIS, and with the lives of the users we serve—and should be serving—as LIS professionals. A student who is worried about where to safely use the restroom or who is being harassed by the campus police or being raided by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement is less able to concentrate in class and hand in assignments on time. A research partner who spends energy worried about being deported has less energy to spend on scholarship. A field that is built solely by the most privileged within it suffers immeasurably. A failure to acknowledge and address white supremacy explains the paradox of a field that claims to value diversity but persists in replicating whiteness in demographics, values, and practices (Hathcock 2015; Hudson 2017).

This article argues that in the face of disastrous political events—such as the election of a white supremacist protofascist as US president—LIS faculty members must intervene pedagogically to respond to the needs of their most vulnerable students and to address issues of structural oppression in the classroom. In so arguing, I will reflect on an exercise I developed to enable students to identify the ways in which white privilege is embedded in archival institutions and to collectively strategize concrete steps to dismantle white supremacy in their own archival practice. As intellectual leaders in the field, faculty must model behaviors of critique and resistance if we aim to train students who will disrupt the status quo of oppression in their information institutions as LIS professionals.<sup>1</sup>

This article also includes a printable graphic created by University of California Los Angeles IS doctoral student Gracen Brilmyer, who participated in the class exercise. The accompanying graphic identifies concrete steps to take to dismantle white supremacy in archives. We hope archivists and archival educators print out this graphic and display it prominently to serve as a visual reminder of our obligation to dismantle white supremacy in archival studies and archives more broadly.

## Teaching to Disrupt

The Monday after the election I am scheduled to teach a session in my introductory archives course, “Archives, Records, and Memory,” on collective memory and forgetting. Five days after the election, students—particularly students of color, LGBTQ students, and disabled students, and especially those who inhabit more than one of those identities—are still weeping in the hallways and at office hours; many are angry and scared and ready to talk about their grief and anger and fear. I want to give them a space to express this, but I also want to move through

1. This assertion builds on important work about teaching social justice in LIS classrooms, most (but not all of which) was created by students and junior faculty (Gilliland 2011; Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group 2011; Caswell et al. 2012; Cooke, Sweeny, and Noble 2016; Gabiola 2016; Roberts and Noble 2016).

despair, to channel it into political action through their professional practice as archivists. I want to do this despite my own personal condition of hopelessness, to move toward what Verne Harris (2017) calls “a praxis beyond hope.” It is clear as class nears that I cannot—should not—continue with my previously scheduled lecture. Instead, I print out 28 copies of the two-page handout based on Peggy McIntosh’s (1990) “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” grab a handful of markers and some giant Post-it notes, and head to class. If white supremacy is the underlying cause of a Trump presidency, as many have convincingly argued, I want to do everything in my power to dismantle it in the small space and time I have.<sup>2</sup> I also know that, as a white woman, I have a responsibility to use my privilege to dismantle white supremacy and that I can model white antiracist behavior for the white students in my class.

I begin class by telling the students that I think we have a deep-seated white supremacy problem in the United States, as shown by the election results. Instead of the regularly scheduled lecture, we are going to discuss white privilege and white supremacy and then do a brainstorming exercise in which we first identify areas of white privilege in archives and then strategize concrete plans of action for dismantling those privileges through our professional practice as archivists. Students get quiet and tense; I have their attention. I make a joke about how you know I mean business when I have giant Post-it notes, and off we go.

I start off by defining *white supremacy* as “a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (Ansley 1989, 993). White supremacy is closely related to white privilege, but white supremacy “more precisely describes and locates white racial domination by underscoring the material production and violence of racial structures and the hegemony of whiteness in settler societies. The concept of white supremacy forcefully calls attention to the brutality and dehumanization of racial exploitation and domination that emerges from settler colonial societies” (Bonds and Inwood 2015, 2). I discuss how white supremacy is a structural problem and stress that it is not a matter of individual choice, that racist structures exist and that white people benefit from these structures despite their individual choices and attitudes. Taking Peggy McIntosh’s (1990) cue, I then describe white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets” enjoyed by white people in the United States whether they want to choose it or not. I ask for volunteers to collectively read aloud McIntosh’s insightful list of 50 white privileges, such as “I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented,” “I do not have to educate my children to be aware of sys-

2. Asserting that white supremacy is the underlying cause of the election results is not to discredit the role of misogyny but rather to argue that those two factors—race and gender—interact in complex ways. It bears repeating that the majority of white women voted for Trump. For more information on white supremacy as the cause of Trump’s election, see Cox (2016), Huber (2016), Krell (2016), and Dyson (2017).

temic racism for their own daily physical protection,” and “I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.” When we are done, I ask for reactions. A student of color, seemingly incredulous, asks, “Do white people really feel that way? Do you really get to do all of that?” As a white person, I nod, and some of the white students in the room nod in agreement. One white student asks, “I know all these things are true and I feel bad about them, but what am I supposed to do about it?” I respond that part of oppressive structures is that they are totalizing, that they make people think there is no way out of them. But people create structures, people enable structures, and people can also disrupt and dismantle them. They must be actively committed to doing so, to intervening to dismantle those structures in concrete ways, which we would soon be talking about.

I then shift gears, honing in on archives, because this is an archival studies course and the students are training to be archivists. (I know this is only a small slice of the world, but it is my sliver, the one in which I have the most influence.) I tell the students we are going to use our giant Post-it notes do the following:

- List examples of white privilege and white supremacy in archives inspired by McIntosh’s (1990) list.
- For each point listed, ask and answer the following questions: What would liberation look like?<sup>3</sup> How do we get there? What concrete steps can we take to dismantle each privilege as humans and archivists?

I hang up five giant Post-it notes at the front of the room and write an area of archival praxis at the top of each one: appraisal, description, access and use, professional life, and archival education. For each category, I ask the students to collectively generate statements of white privilege. Students start shouting out contributions to my giant Post-it notes. I write them down as fast as I can. Together, we generate a list (which I subsequently supplemented and edited), as visualized in the accompanying poster (figs. 1 and 2) by Gracen Brilmyer, a student in the course.<sup>4</sup>

## Reflection

I cannot claim that all students were fully engaged and on board with this exercise, but I can report that much of the classroom seemed energized, that students who had not previously

3. I have since become aware of a visioning exercise Melina Abdullah does with her students. She asks them to meditate on what freedom would be like, what it looks like, feels like, and smells like, and then asks them to describe what they envisioned with words or drawings (Melina Abdullah, “Information, Access, and Activism,” UCLA Information Studies Diversity Council event, Los Angeles, February 9, 2017). There is also fantastic work on imagining as an IS methodology in Duarte and Belarde-Lewis (2015).

4. Figure 1 presents the full poster, and figure 2 splits it into six sections. Color versions of both can be downloaded online, with accompanying assembly instructions included for figure 2.

**Identifying & Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives**  
An Incomplete List of White Privileges in Archives and Action Items for Dismantling Them\*

Content produced in Michelle Caswell's *Archives, Records, and Memory* class, Fall 2018, UCLA  
Poster design by Gracen Brilmyer

\*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 see collections created by people of color.
- Institute participatory appraisal models that show 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. Communicate 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.

### ACCESS/USE

**PRIVILEGE**  
I can use an archives without eliciting surveillance.

**ACTION**

- Fight the hell to maintain the privacy of users.
- Do not collect data that identifies users.
- Do not require users to show an ID to access and check out materials.
- Do not treat users as thieves.

**PRIVILEGE**  
When I go to the archives, I can be relatively sure that I will see someone 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 program.

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

**ACTION**

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

### PROFESSIONAL LIFE

**PRIVILEGE**  
People assume I'm unbiased because of my race.

**ACTION**

- De-center whiteness in archival practice. Name 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 professionalizing. Think critically about when those assumptions mask white supremacist values.
- Interrupt collegial and in-situ when they say racist things.
- Pre-empt a phrase to live in your back pocket (such as "that's racist" or "would you or 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**

- Privatize and decenter 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**

- Recruit more 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.

Figure 1. "Identifying and Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives" poster designed by Gracen Brilmyer. Printer-friendly color version available as an online enhancement.

spoken in class actively contributed, and that some students of color and LGBTQ students expressed appreciation for the exercise after class. For white students, having to confront their own privilege can be an uncomfortable exercise that can result in defensive reactions or worse; this heightened state of "white fragility" is a component of white supremacy, as Robin DiAngelo has written about extensively.<sup>5</sup> In fact, I did receive a complaint about the exercise from a white student after class, but I think we as faculty—particularly white faculty, whose

5. DiAngelo (2011) writes, "White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium" (6).

# Identifying & Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives

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

Content produced in Michelle Caswell's *Archives,  
Records, and Memory* class, Fall 2016, UCLA  
Poster design by Gracen Brilmeyer

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

Figure 2. Detail of figure 1. For the downloadable posters, see the online version of this article.

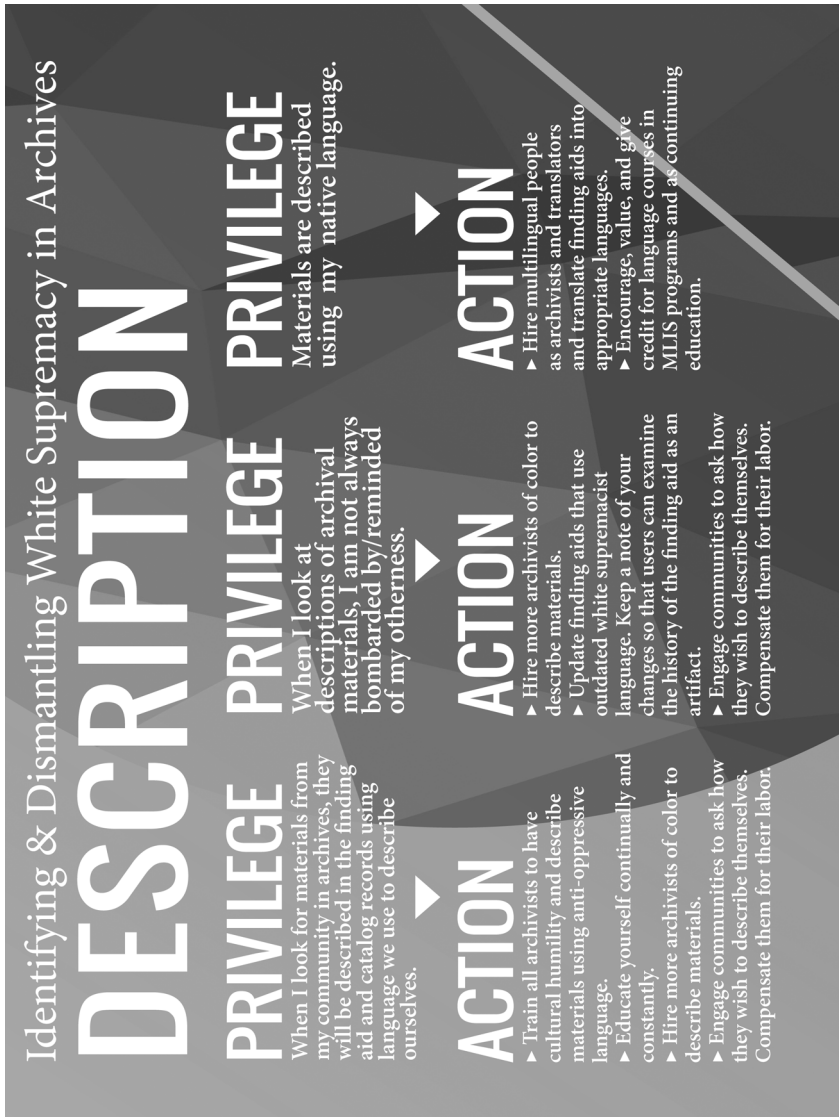


Figure 2. (Continued)



## Identifying & Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives

# APPRAISAL

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### ACTION

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- Contact archivists at your local repository and tell them you want to use collections created by people of color.
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### PRIVILEGE

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



### ACTION

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- 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.
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Figure 2. (Continued)





Figure 2. (Continued)

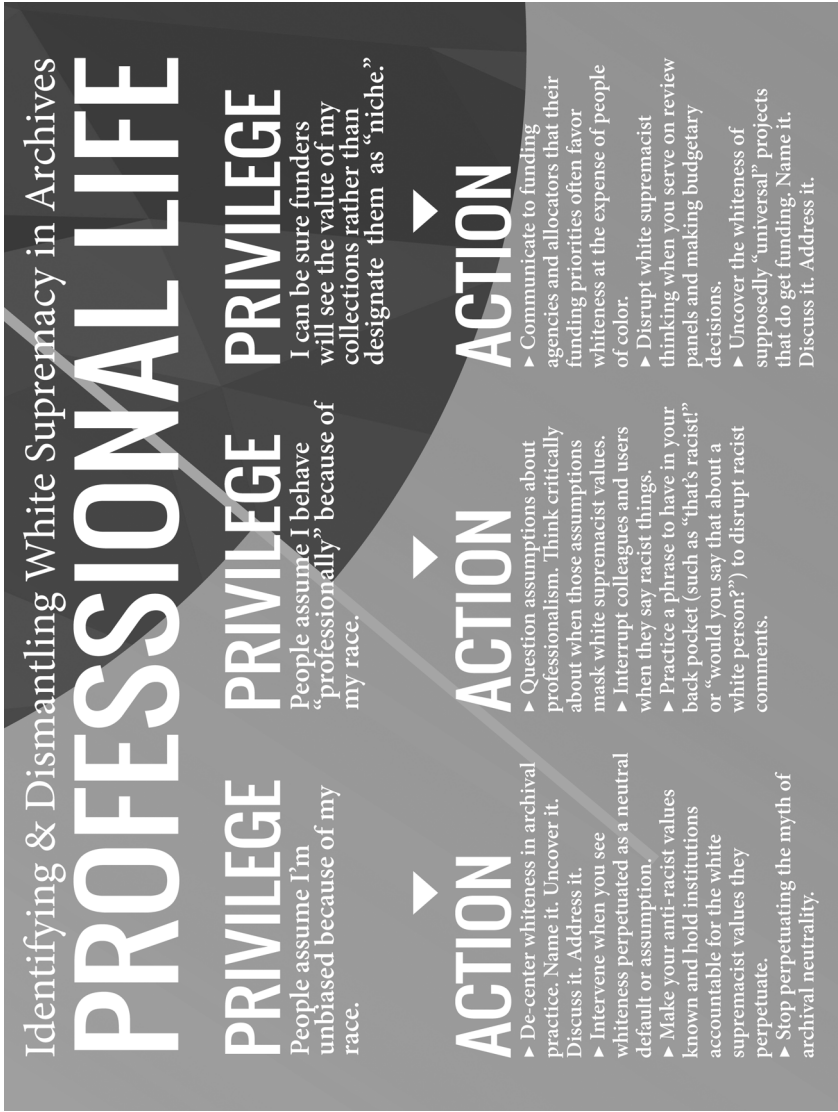


Figure 2. (Continued)

## Identifying & Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives

# EDUCATION

### PRIVILEGE

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

### ACTION

- Pluralize 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.

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### ACTION

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- Disrupt whiteness as a default or “neutral” category.
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### 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

- Recruit more 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.

Figure 2. (Continued)

racial privilege partially insulates us from the consequences of critique—are going to have to learn to live with that discomfort and cast aside our (gendered) expectations of wanting to please everyone if we are to create real change in the classroom and the world.<sup>6</sup>

I want to openly acknowledge the risks associated with discussing issues of racial oppression in class, especially for untenured faculty and for faculty of color. It is not easy, especially when many of us are ill trained and uneducated about these issues ourselves, when many of our students and colleagues may themselves be hostile to addressing them, and when we have few models of more experienced faculty leading the way. But I also want to assert that the risk of not addressing white supremacy, of modeling allegedly neutral behavior to students who will soon graduate and shape the profession, is also a risk—a risk of furthering white supremacy, a risk of maintaining the racial status quo, a risk that I am not willing to take for myself or for the field (Roberts 2015). Carrying on business as usual in the classroom when the world is on fire is a form of culturally and politically irrelevant pedagogy. It is uninspired, uninspiring, *bad* teaching. If we cannot transform the discourse in our own classrooms, how do we expect the students to change the field as new professionals or to change the world as humans?

## Conclusion

In the months since the election, the grief and anger have only intensified in the classroom. Students are still openly sobbing. One of my students, on learning about a new executive order that expands police powers, asked the class through tears, “So does this mean my whole community is fucked?” I did not then and do not now have a hopeful answer for her, but turning that rage into action is perhaps our only chance at collectively generating a different future for ourselves. We cannot let the current political climate take away our ability to imagine otherwise, even as our rights are being stripped away. We cannot let white supremacy steal our imaginations.

The exercise described here is a first step, the start of a conversation, and not an end in and of itself. I hope all LIS educators reading this article—particularly white faculty members—will educate themselves about white supremacy and adapt this exercise to their own classrooms. I hope LIS student groups and professional associations adapt it and enact it and build on it. I hope each archival educator, student, and practitioner prints out the graphic and posts it prominently as a reminder of the importance of our own actions in dismantling white supremacy in our classrooms and our archives. I hope that the action items here become dated over time as we work to dismantle white supremacy, and I hope that archivists generate their own lists that respond to ever-changing immediate needs. Over the next 4 years, each of us will have our moral compasses

6. I want to acknowledge the racialized and gendered consequences of bad student evaluations, which disproportionately affect faculty members who are women of color (Pittman 2010, Lilienfeld 2016).

tested. May this exercise and the visual accompanying it serve as a reminder of where we stand and of our personal and professional ethical obligations to dismantle white supremacy.

In the wake of the disastrous election of Trump, the standard answers to the questions of archival activism—document social movements as they happen, build participatory systems that empower marginalized communities, expand representational practices, encourage use of materials to inspire contemporary activism (all of which I have spent the past decade making a case for)—seem weak or ineffectual. We need more radical archival interventions on the past—and the future—to build liberatory archival imaginaries (Caswell 2014). What those will look like will take time to formulate, but they begin with students and faculty members and professionals who can think critically about white supremacy, with white people acknowledging their own roles in promulgating it, and with all of us imagining ways out of it through concrete action. We get the world we make, we get the classrooms we make, we get the archives we make. Let's all work to make them more just.

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