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**Correction:**

Due to a digital process error (wherein a penultimate version was printed), a revised edition of *Library Trends* 64(4) was necessary. When quoting from this issue, the Project MUSE digital version should be considered the authoritative and archival edition, and any citations should refer to this version. We sincerely regret this error.

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# The Legacy of Lady Bountiful: White Women in the Library

GINA SCHLESSELMAN-TARANGO

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## ABSTRACT

White supremacy and patriarchy have acted upon and through the white female body, which has implications for library and information science (LIS), a white- and female-dominated field. Insisting that we investigate librarianship through a lens that does not consider gender alone, this paper draws on whiteness, critical race, and feminist theories to explore the formation and persistence of a particular mode of whiteness in LIS. Calling on the “Lady Bountiful” archetype, the paper interrogates the ways in which patriarchy, white supremacy, and notions of ideal femininity have worked together to craft a subject fit to perform the work of colonialism in its variegated and feminized forms. By exploring how the white woman was deemed an appropriate agent for the racial, missionary, and “civilizing” projects of early libraries, one can better locate her legacy in contemporary pedagogies, practices, and representations. The paper concludes with suggestions for addressing this undertheorized yet prevalent archetype in both LIS scholarship and teaching.

## INTRODUCTION

“Sexist discrimination has prevented white women from assuming the dominant role in the perpetuation of white racial imperialism, but it has not prevented white women from absorbing, supporting, and advocating racist ideology or acting individually as racist oppressors in various spheres of American life.”  
—bell hooks (1981, p. 124)

In an examination of the ways in which gender was employed to negotiate the meaning of the early public library, Eddy (2001, p. 155) asks: “What did the presence of ‘female’ signal in the library, a space at once public and private?” Here, I extend such an investigation toward an understand-

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ing of what the overwhelming presence of *white* women in librarianship signaled and continues to signal, exploring the ways in which both patriarchy and white supremacy have acted upon and worked through the white female body, and more specifically how such a subject has been made manifest and moved within LIS. Although interdisciplinary in nature, this paper is framed by whiteness studies in that it attempts to trace and interrogate the formation and persistence of a particular mode of whiteness in LIS. It also draws on critical race and feminist thought, beginning with the understanding that librarianship was not only birthed in but also remains engaged in both racism and sexism.

Calling on “Lady Bountiful” (Ford-Smith, 1997; Gerard, 1987; Harper, 2000; Harper & Cavanagh, 1994; Meiners, 2002) helps to illuminate white women’s particularities in our field. Lady Bountiful is not a specific historic figure but rather an archetype (that could also be understood as an icon or representation) that allows us to make sense of and speak to the ways in which white women have participated in various “civilizing” projects throughout history. For LIS, the Lady Bountiful archetype can be used as an investigative device to demonstrate that in librarianship as in larger society, gender does indeed “operate in relation to whiteness” (Espinal, 2001, p. 133), as it was the white female subject who was considered germane for the moralizing missionary projects meant to “civilize” early library users (Augst, 2001; Eddy, 2001; Garrison, 1979; Pawley, 2006; Rubin, 2010). In identifying Lady Bountiful’s origins, we can do the work of locating her in contemporary LIS practices and representations. Finally, by exposing her moves we might better work toward banishing her from the field.

In the spirit of transparency and reflexivity, I must note that I am a white female librarian. Most of the people engaged in U.S. librarianship look like me. This is a problem, and this realization, along with a desire to critically examine what my body might signal in the library, has led me to take an interest in this topic. This paper is not meant to be an exercise in white guilt, although the research has certainly allowed me to understand more deeply the ways in which I am implicated by and through my race. As someone who claims feminism as something that has usually and mostly been life-giving, I also recognize its shortsightedness. The paper is an attempt to apply an intersectional lens to discussions of women and librarianship that have been written about at length, oftentimes from a feminist, though limited, perspective.

Finally, it is necessary to note that there certainly have been and are male librarians and librarians of color, but when we look at the LIS professional as one who has performed a mediating function in systems of colonialism and has reinscribed white supremacy (which will later be discussed at length), we historically understand her as a white woman. And, despite the fact that libraries can be considered white institutions—meaning that

they serve to protect and promote white hegemony (Honma, 2005) and “contribute to ongoing colonization” (de Jesus, 2014a, “The Enlightenment as Ideology”)—there is no doubt that they can at the same time serve as sites of resistance to whiteness. To suggest otherwise would be to ignore the powerful and subversive work done in libraries and archives across the nation. However, I focus on Lady Bountiful in that I believe she is prevalent yet undertheorized in LIS, and I propose that her legacy continues to influence the field.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Whiteness in LIS*

More than a decade ago, Honma (2005, p. 5) declared that “theoretical investigation into histories of whiteness is a crucial intervention within the LIS field.” One might expect to find such an intervention in LIS diversity literature, and while there are some notable exceptions (for example, Brook, Ellenwood, & Lazzaro, 2016; Galvan, 2015; Hand, 2012; Hathcock, 2015; Ramirez, 2015), discussions of whiteness remain limited within this scholarship. Instead, conceptions of diversity continue to be largely rooted in notions of *racial difference*—a difference that is created through and defined by its deviation from whiteness (Hussey, 2010). Whiteness is thus considered the norm, or that which is “not different” (p. 6). In associating race with only those who are not white, LIS has largely failed to acknowledge that whiteness also is a feature—or as Michael Eric Dyson notes, something that can be understood as an “identity, . . . an ideology, and . . . an institution” (qtd. in Chennault, 1998, p. 300)—that functions to shape our profession.

Because of its insistence on not naming itself, whiteness largely remains invisible (especially, it has been argued, to white subjects). Morrison (1992), in writing about U.S. literature, notes that in contrast to blackness, which has been bestowed with meaning, “whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtailed, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say” (p. 59). Due to its limited engagement with whiteness, LIS diversity literature also has rendered it implacable and without meaning, contributing to the silence that normalizes and subsequently reinforces and maintains it. Dyson points that when one does engage with or look at whiteness, it is an exercise in “reversing the terror of ethnography: of being the disciplined subject of an often intellectually poisonous white anthropological scrutiny” (qtd. in Chennault, 1998, p. 303). Turning our attention to and scrutinizing whiteness then not only allows us “to combat its invisibility and normative effects” (Honma, 2005, p. 5) but also presents an opportunity to turn the white gaze back on itself.

Expanding our considerations of race to include whiteness also enables us to address the dynamics of white subjectivity in LIS past and present,

and to illustrate the ways in which such dynamics have served the colonial state in fraught ways. This allows us to unpack particular white subjectivities and their relationship to structures of white supremacy, connections that are multiple and complex. Such relationships are perhaps implied though rarely addressed in LIS diversity literature. Ultimately, theorizing whiteness in LIS creates spaces for us to name and interrogate the ways in which white supremacy functions to shape our discipline, allowing us to examine the [dis]continuities between historical operations of whiteness and present-day ideologies, narratives, projects, and preoccupations.

Surely, whiteness intersects with a variety of identities, experiences, constructs, and structures, yet what is of interest within the limited scope of this paper is one particular mode of whiteness in one particular context: *white womanness* in LIS. The dynamics of white subjectivity are determined by any number of factors, rendering intersectional analysis necessary albeit messy work. Leonardo and Boas's (2013) call for an intersectional approach to the student–teacher relationship resonates with LIS, as the field of education shares similarities with librarianship: “White women’s particular role in the racial formation . . . becomes an important node of analysis, because it forms a basic architecture for the unique interaction between White women teachers and students of color of any gender . . . an ungendered analysis of whiteness and a White-absent, let alone colorblind, analysis of gender . . . will be limited in their scope and ability” (pp. 313–314). A useful tool for thinking about how race and gender intersect in librarianship is through the use of an archetype. Below, I will detail one such figure, Lady Bountiful, and in doing so point to the possibilities she presents for a deeper understanding of whiteness in the library.

### *Lady Bountiful*

Lately, there has been much discussion about the importance of looking at and disrupting stereotypes of libraries and librarianship, many of which no doubt rely upon the image of the white woman, as well as notions of unattractiveness, spinsterdom, coldness, and so on (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014b; Radford & Radford, 1997, 2003). However, I suggest that archetypes, or figures meant to represent the “inherited cumulation of the . . . experience of the past” (Carlsson, 1970, p. 32), provide us with a way of theorizing about specific elements of the stereotype mentioned above—in particular, simultaneous whiteness and womanness. Indeed, the experience of library past does point to a field composed of bodies that are predominantly white and female. As Charles Hanna explained in 1967, “an archetype is like an instinct, it is a certain form or pattern of behavior that one learns to expect” (qtd. in Carlsson, p. 33). For LIS, that the white and female librarian has become instinct suggests a “single pattern” (p. 33) and points to a truer, albeit no less harmful representation of our field than any stereotype. Stereotypes exaggerate characteristics,

but simultaneous whiteness and womanness are, for librarianship, no exaggeration; indeed, white women have settled and hardened within the LIS imagination for good reason: because they have for nearly a century comprised the vast majority of the field (Keer & Carlos, 2014).

Yet white womanness in itself means little until it has something—an ideology, a history, a system of power—to signify. In order to interrogate what this particular subject signifies for LIS, we will begin by excavating and dissecting Lady Bountiful. While this figure is no one in particular, she does provide insight into the civilizing role white women have played at various times and places, often in the service of the colonial state.

Gerard (1987) provides us with a clear picture of this archetype in describing women of the landed gentry in nineteenth-century England. While discussions of the “paternalistic benevolence” of that time typically focus on male landowners, women also played an important role (p. 183). Such ladies often visited the rural poor, offering them small gifts, food, medicine, and the like, and the women led educational efforts, such as clubs and mothers’ meetings. These women typified Lady Bountiful, whose alleged ability to reform others’ characters is attributed to her sex, and they thus carried a charge that was missionary in nature and emphasized “saving souls” (p. 194). Gerard connects this work to the *cult of true womanhood*, or what she describes as “the Victorian idealization of women’s nature and domestic roles.” Furthermore, “women were considered morally superior to men, more sensitive, emotional, and intuitive. Innately nurturant and maternal, they were expected to devote their lives to others, supervising, influencing, and guiding their families and servants” (p. 189). The cult of true womanhood in its U.S. form and the role of this idealized femininity in early librarianship will be discussed in more detail in the section that follows.

For Gerard, Lady Bountiful played a specific role within both the family and society. Because women engaged in acts of charity that were more “personal, generous, broad-ranging, time-consuming, and persistent than the male landowner,” such ladies were particularly “effective in implementing social control” (p. 209). Through not only their connection to patriarchal authority but also their giving, the women who embodied Lady Bountiful were able to maintain the deference required for social stability. In a discussion of Lady Bountiful’s motives, Gerard notes that most of these women were socially conservative and thus supported traditional social hierarchies. Further, “they consciously or unconsciously needed to justify their privileged social position and to strengthen the family’s power and control over the community” (p. 205). Many were motivated by religious ideologies and believed that as true women, they were entrusted with a “special mission” (p. 205). Gerard also writes that charity activity provided them with an escape from the confinement of domesticity, as well as an opportunity to engage in “independent action and [to practice]



unfettered power over the lives of others” (p. 206). Not surprisingly, some of these same motives surface in relation to women and early librarianship (Garrison, 1979, pp. 175–176, 203).

Others explore Lady Bountiful within the context of North American colonial education, and such analyses also can be applied to our examination of this archetype in librarianship. Harper and Cavanagh’s (1994) definition of this figure in the Canadian educational system is helpful, writing that

“Lady Bountiful” is a representation of the white lady missionary or white lady teacher that emerged during the time of British imperialism. . . . She was seen as having a unique duty to bring civilization to the “uncivilized.” In the early 1800s, her role was to educate British working-class women in religion, morality, and hygiene. Exported to the colonies, the ideal of femininity became the white woman, an embodiment of chastity and purity who acted as a “civilizing force.” (p. 28)

In specifically locating Lady Bountiful in the teacher, Harper (2000) notes that this white woman is a “spinster headmistress, intelligent but thwarted in her academic pursuits by her gender and possibly her social class, whose maternal instincts and academic interests have been directed towards her ‘Native’ charges” (p. 132). Thus we begin to see how the limits imposed by patriarchy (few educational and career opportunities or socially acceptable roles beyond that of mother) and the projects presented by empire (“civilizing”/assimilating the Indigenous) worked in tandem to produce a particular female subject.

In reference to Lady Bountiful’s role in the imperial project, Harper suggests that “embodied, she was the sponge or mediating agent between the subaltern and the colonial state. . . . In fact, the work of white women in the colonies generally served to reinscribe the values and beliefs that underlie . . . colonialism” (pp. 132, 137). As mediating agent, messenger, or ambassador, we can understand Lady Bountiful as one who performed a function distinct from that of white men “but whose allegiance to whiteness is not the question. With respect to White women,” Leonardo and Boas (2013) write, “although they may not call the shots, they often pull the trigger” (p. 315).

As we will see with librarianship, Lady Bountiful has found expression in contemporary projects as well. For example, “there is evidence that current multicultural educational policy and practices in Canada employ the same image of Lady Bountiful, demanding the teacher know and save hapless minority students while her own whiteness and white privilege remain unacknowledged” (Harper, 2000, p. 133). Such curriculum turns on colonial notions of white benevolence and does the work of exoticizing nondominant groups while normalizing whiteness, leaving us to conclude that “Lady Bountiful, in her more current-day representation, may not

overtly contain any colonizing aim or intent but the effect is nonetheless similar” (Harper & Cavanagh, 1994, p. 32).

Meiners (2002) locates Lady Bountiful in the present-day U.S. classroom also. She explains that in her teacher education program, this archetype “is a figure performatively invoked by the majority of my female students and perhaps all of our imaginations” (p. 89). Referring to not only a love of and natural proclivity for working with children and an understanding of teaching as a calling or vocation, Meiners notes that at times, “a redemptive narrative circulates: she has always had a desire to save underprivileged children” (p. 89). Leonardo and Boas (2013) also point to the salvific characteristic of white women’s work in the K-12 classroom, tracing this messianic yet imperialistic role to colonial projects. “White women,” they argue, “have been teachers in an ever developing education system that is, at base, a civilizing institution” (p. 322). Both Meiners and Leonardo and Boas locate a contemporary version of this figure in the 1995 film *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer, Simpson, & Smith, 1995). In the film, Ms. Johnson, played by blonde-haired, blue-eyed Michelle Pfeiffer, serves as an example of the benevolent teacher, co-constituted by her race and gender, who by the end of the film effectively “saves” rough-and-tumble students of color.

This brief review of the various forms of Lady Bountiful, from nineteenth-century rural England to contemporary North America, can provide us with a clearer understanding of the ways in which imperialism and paternalism, along with race, gender, and notions of ideal femininity, have labored together over time to craft a subject fit to perform the work of colonialism in its variegated and feminized forms. I will now move to an exploration of the ways in which the white female body, ostensibly endowed with qualities that made her fit for the roles previously described, was similarly called upon as the ideal subject for early librarianship, allowing for Lady Bountiful to infiltrate and soil the profession.

### LADY BOUNTIFUL IN LIS: ORIGINS

Just as white women were considered suitable subjects to fill the role of imperial teacher, they were also assumed to have the innate characteristics necessary to be effective library workers. These were the same qualities afforded to Lady Bountiful as described previously, all of which were shaped by Victorian conceptions of womanhood. Welter (1966) outlines four such virtues that were central to idealized womanhood in nineteenth-century America: piety; purity; submissiveness; and domesticity. Indeed, it was these virtues that together constituted *true woman*, the embodiment of traditional religious values that were at the time seemingly threatened by industrialization, materialism, and social change. While these virtues initially confined white women to the domestic sphere, the same assumed qualities were later used to justify women’s presence in the public arena.

A list of attributes valued in early nineteenth-century librarianship demonstrates that many if not all of these characteristics were derived from the conception of *true womanhood* (Garrison, 1972, 1979; Hildenbrand, 1996). These include

- the ability to elevate, influence, and morally and culturally uplift;
- the ability to exert domestic influence;
- hospitality and warmth;
- missionary-mindedness, servility, and altruism;
- sensitivity, kindness, sympathy, and delicacy;
- spiritual superiority and piety;
- the ability to oversee charity to the poor;
- the ability to educate; and
- the ability to work with children and to be maternal.

Women's entry into early public librarianship was justified and made acceptable to patriarchal authority by calling upon "a facilitating ideology that emphasized the inherent fitness of women for the new work." Like charity workers, "the librarian stressed the nonrevolutionary nature of their emergence into public life, reassuring their male leadership that feminization posed no real threat to male prerogatives or traditional sex-roles" (Garrison, 1979, p. 203). In addition, women made for cheap labor (Eddy, 2001; Garrison, 1972, 1979; Hildenbrand, 1996).

The facilitating ideology described above was one that called upon characteristics considered inherent to women. However, these characteristics, or what Welter (1966, p. 174) calls the "mystique," were only available or accessible to certain subjects. Lady Bountiful, an archetype that represents a particular mode of femininity and its supposed moral superiority, is specifically white, female, and middle or upper class. As we work to locate Lady Bountiful in LIS we can begin to see that it was the very qualities associated, not simply with gender, but also whiteness in feminine form that functioned to position her as the ideal library worker.

Welter gestures to *true woman's* whiteness in writing about her responsibility to "uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand" (p. 152). Early librarianship also turned to white women for their assumed moral superiority; as cultural guardians these women embodied the library's alleged social value as a civilizing institution and site of intellectual development, active citizenship, and democracy (Eddy, 2001, pp. 158–159). Indeed, an early criterion for admittance to professional library schooling included an evaluation of *personality*. Here, personality as a trait included "breeding and background" as well as "the missionary spirit, cultural strength . . . gentleness, and sense of literary values" (Garrison, 1979, p. 191). Certainly, breeding and background can be understood as whiteness, something that in female form went hand in hand with the other criteria listed above. A femininity of this flavor, available only to white

middle- and upper-class women, thus played a crucial role in maintaining racial homogeneity within librarianship. According to Garrison, “the emphasis upon ‘personality’ as a test for library fitness, not only in the library schools but in the profession at large, is reflected in the fact that by 1900 librarians ranked second only to government clerks as the occupation in which native white women of native parentage had attained the greatest prominence” (p. 192). It is no wonder then that many of today’s discussions surrounding stereotypes draw attention to the fact that the white woman is almost always evoked—history has made it so, and she has thus been branded into our professional memory.

Ideal womanhood within the Victorian framework was purely conditional in that it was made up of a set of traits available to the white female only. Just as whiteness continues to be “fetishized as the ideal expression of human identity” (Dyson, qtd. in Chennault, 1998, p. 307), the white female was and continues to be fetishized as the ideal woman. The passivity, purity, and innocence associated with the ideal were thus understood in contrast to working-class white women and women of color (Carby, 1997; Crenshaw, 1989; Higginbotham, 1982; hooks, 1981, 1998; Schneider, 2008). Although she frames this dynamic within the black/white binary, hooks’s (1998) insight is telling: “We have always known that the socially constructed image of innocent white womanhood relies on the continued production of the racist/sexist sexual myth that black women are not innocent and never can be” (p. 310). Thus an analysis of women in librarianship cannot focus solely on the assumed qualities and abilities that worked to make them the ideal subjects to perform low-paid library work; race also must be made a key mode of analysis. As de Jesus (2014b, n.p.) notes, “the race of these white women played a significant role in their ability to be professionalized. . . . Librarianship might be devalued because it is women’s work, but it is valued because it is *white* women’s work” (emphasis in original). A richer understanding of the role of race in librarianship can be gained when we know to whom the qualities of ideal womanhood were made available and to whom they were denied.

The white woman, when allowed into the nineteenth-century public library, not only gained entry into a white male space but was also able to retain “claims to typically female space within genteel middle-class society” (Eddy, 2001, p. 157). Because she had access to *true womanhood* she was able to successfully navigate librarianship and assume the role of Lady Bountiful. No such opportunities would exist for women of color, who were long denied access to the Victorian versions of womanhood and white female spaces required for entry into librarianship (Keer & Carlos, 2014).

### *Reproducing Whiteness*

Just as the institution of education has been instrumental in racial-colonial projects, the library too has been shown to be “complicit in the produc-

tion and maintenance of white racial privilege” (Honma, 2005, p. 1). Specifically, turn-of-the-century U.S. public libraries participated in selective immigrant assimilation and Americanization programs, projects “whose purpose was to inculcate European ethnics into whiteness” (p. 6). Those for whom citizenship was denied—including the colonized Indigenous, “the enslaved of African descent, and . . . Asian immigrant labor” (p. 7)—were thus also denied incorporation into the country’s citizenry and access to its accompanying rights and privileges.

A component of this assimilation project was work with children (Garrison, 1979). Such work was deemed effective because “through the child, the elusive adult could be indirectly influenced” (p. 215). This included the creation of distinctly children’s spaces in public libraries and the provision of hands-on activities, poetry readings, and celebrations (Eddy, 2001, p. 163). Storytelling also was considered an “effective method of Americanizing the foreigner, improving language, softening voices, teaching punctuality, and inculcating courtesy, honesty, neatness, industry, obedience, and gentle manners” (Garrison, 1979, p. 209). Not surprisingly, given the ostensibly “natural” mothering abilities of women, storytelling was seen as a milieu appropriate for the female library worker. Although some were wary of the detrimental effects that too much feminine influence on (male) children might have, Eddy (2001, p. 163) writes that “all agreed that women were the logical choice to supervise children in [the] public space of the library, just as they did in the private space of the home.” Tellingly, children’s librarians during the Progressive era allowed only books that represented authority in a positive light (Garrison, 1979). In addition, “boys were to be denied fiction that led them to feel discontent with meager salaries or a soberly traditional life-style, [and] girls [were] forbidden books that encouraged them to break away from domesticity” (p. 212). Here, we see *Lady Bountiful* as one who, when understood as an ambassador of the state, not only performed the work of assimilating and Americanizing those of European ethnicities, but through her civilizing and educating work with children also functioned to sanction capitalism, enforce traditional gender roles, and encourage deference to authority.

Thus we can see how the set of characteristics that comprised a select femininity reserved for white women (including the assumed ability to educate and work with children) was leveraged for their participation in racial projects. In this particular instance, we can understand the white woman as one who was “drafted to carry out the reproductive work of whiteness” (Leonardo & Boas, 2013, p. 315). Indeed, she is guilty of participating in exclusionary Americanization and assimilation projects, reproducing citizens allegiant to white American ideologies regarding capitalism, gender, and authority. Carmichael (1992) adds an additional layer to this analysis, which allows us to consider this woman in regional form. Until the 1920s,

students at the Library School of the Carnegie Library of Atlanta were “treasured if they could muster the ability to tell Uncle Remus stories in authentic ‘darky’ dialect at storybook hour” (p. 177). Students successful in portraying such caricatures were thought to be promising ambassadors of Southern culture to cities in the North.

### LADY BOUNTIFUL IN LIS: PRESENT

Ware (1992, p. 43) writes that “there would not be much point in understanding how the category of white femininity was constructed through history if this information was not used to engage with contemporary ideologies of domination.” In order to locate evidence of and engage with such ideologies, one can point to Pawley’s (2006) analysis of models that dominate contemporary LIS teaching and research. These frameworks call upon specific notions: namely, conceptions of the library as an institution with a mission; faith in the library as an educative and civilizing site; adherence to ideologies of cultural uplift and citizenship; and a spirit that postulates library patrons, especially patrons of color, “as deficient and in need of remediation by (normally white) librarians” (p. 159). These same notions are historically linked to the white female librarian because they were the very values that her work was inspired by and meant to reinscribe. Indeed, it was her assumed ability to morally and culturally uplift, her mission-mindedness, and her proclivity for educating and mothering (read another way, for reproducing white citizens) that were called upon to justify her presence in the early public library. If, as Pawley argues, we have inherited models that are heavy with the weight of “racialized thinking” (p. 158), and if we understand these paradigms as historically tied to the work of white women, then we must ask ourselves whether—and if so, in which ways—Lady Bountiful’s legacy continues to work in LIS.

In order to locate her legacy today, we can look to popular media. In “Librarians and Party Girls: Cultural Studies and the Meaning of the Librarian,” Radford and Radford (2003) examine the film *Party Girl* (von Scherler Mayer, 1995). Debuting the same year as *Dangerous Minds*, this film tells the story of Mary (played by Parker Posey), who over the course of ninety-four minutes transforms from reckless girl to respectable library lady. In looking specifically at moments that demonstrate this transformation, Radford and Radford point to a scene in which Mary uses the Dewey decimal system to organize her friend Leo’s record collection. In discussing his dismay at Mary’s actions, the authors write:

Mary patiently explains the system to Leo, as if to a small child. Here, we see another aspect of the stereotype. The librarian (Mary) has created a complex system that is not intuitive for the user (Leo). When the user is unable to fathom the system, the librarian asserts that it is “easy” and explains it in a condescending tone, implying that the

user is intellectually inferior to the librarian. Mary has also created a situation in which Leo will be forced to be dependent on her in the future. (pp. 64–65)

We can read this scene as one in which Mary, who at this point is still growing into and practicing *Lady Bountiful*, showcases her ability to educate, uplift, and save the “Other.” Mary’s intrusion into her friend’s life is reinforced in another scene in which she, again uninvited, joins Leo (played by Guillermo Díaz) in the shower. Imposing her schema on his prized possessions and invading his most private of space, both of these moments signal the imposition of the white female librarian into the life of a person of color. Surely, Mary does not display the delicacy or piety expected of early librarians, but her aims nevertheless reflect the logics that constitute *Lady Bountiful*. These scenes thus problematize her unsolicited benevolence, leading us to question the assumptions and narratives that propel it.

In another scene, we see Mary “save” a second person of color. This time she locates information on teaching certification for her Lebanese love interest Mustafa (played by Omar Townsend). Here, Mary plays a vital role in Mustafa’s assimilation into the productive citizenry in capitalist U.S. society; in fact, her role in reproducing citizens is multigenerational, as it is through Mary’s assistance that Mustafa will be absorbed into the field of teaching and thus come to play a role in producing citizens loyal to the state. Mustafa later reassures viewers that Mary’s work is important and necessary, and he downplays his own abilities when he explains that “I would never get all this for myself.” In reference to the United States, Mary coyly commands of Mustafa: “Don’t knock it baby, it’s the land of milk and honey.” Although he does later correct her, stating that Yemen is in fact the land of milk and honey, we can again interpret Mary’s endorsement of the state as a contemporary display of *Lady Bountiful*.

It is apparent that when the hedonistic Mary begins work at the library, she replaces her old pursuits with a number of “missions” to help others. As Radford and Radford (2003) note, her transformation is complete when, at a birthday party, she shares that she does in fact intend to become a librarian. This public declaration heralds her allegiance to the *Lady Bountiful* archetype and commitment to the missionary spirit. Mary’s Aunt Judy, also a librarian, initially challenges Mary, who is able to eventually convince her aunt of the seriousness of her decision by pointing to the number of missions she has completed, including organizing Leo’s record collection and locating teaching information for Mustafa. This decision to become a librarian pleases the aunt and provides closure for viewers. Thus Mary’s culminating embrace of librarianship, evidenced through her mission-mindedness, signals the permanent arrival of *Lady Bountiful*.

Revisiting Radford and Radford’s initial reading reveals that *Lady Bountiful* today finds expression in ways that perhaps complicate though do not

significantly alter her benevolence. In the past, one of the ways in which room was created for Lady Bountiful was by replicating or extending the mother-child relationship within the library walls. In the film, however, it is the heterosexual relationship that facilitates the lady's presence (as signaled in the shower scene with Leo and later through Mary's interactions with Mustafa—they do in fact have sex in the library). Here, as in the past, Lady Bountiful's presence is contingent on not only her whiteness but also her womanness; while initially her womanness relegated her to work with children, in the film it is her claim to heterosexual femininity that gives her intimate access to the Other. In both cases, we see that together her whiteness and womanness endow her with the ability to educate, to civilize, and to save, regardless of the form the specific relationship between woman and patron takes.<sup>1</sup>

*On the Lookout for Lady Bountiful*

While it is likely that heterosexual tension and relations are overemphasized in the film, it is worth exploring new or different types of library or librarian-patron interactions to map how Lady Bountiful might manifest in new or different ways. Surely, this lady has long been identified as a teaching figure that can easily be traced to those areas of librarianship in which one directly interacts with patrons, such as reference and instruction. However, her legacy is perhaps complicated in other areas of library work, such as cataloging, collection development, the management of repositories and electronic resources, and so on. Additionally, as new projects and services begin to take precedence in the profession, we must ask whether and how the lady's legacy is perpetuated through such work. In thinking about the ways in which contemporary librarianship might continue to make room for Lady Bountiful, even as its preoccupations shift, I was struck by Florida's Electronic Library's 2012 "Ask a Librarian" superheroes marketing campaign. Superheroes—the country's beloved moral and benevolent protectors—fight to preserve culture, civilization, and order; they are in the business of saving. The campaign's materials communicate this sentiment: standing above what appears to be a city skyline and overlooking the comings and goings of everyday people, a librarian (material featuring either a male or a female librarian is available) is paired with text that reads: "We are librarians. . . . We know the answers to questions you didn't even know to ask" (AskALibrarian.org, 2015). Here, those they save are considered to be so ignorant that they do not even know they need saving. I could not help but notice, along with a print book, a tablet in the hand of these librarian superheroes. Within the framework of Lady Bountiful's legacy, what role might technology play in "saving" patrons or users? Is the missionary spirit one that conceives of technology as a gift to bestow upon the Other, gift that will civilize? In doing the work of educating, civilizing, uplifting, and the like, it is perhaps



worth investigating the ways in which Lady Bountiful calls upon technology or narratives of innovation as a vehicle to do her work. Related questions might explore whether technology perhaps limits the ways in which she manifests, and if so, which logics or ideologies supplement her work or take its place.

To be sure, one cannot count on Lady Bountiful to always or easily conform to her earlier iterations because this civilizing figure is the product of various systems of power in addition to white supremacy and patriarchy, and she likely works in particular ways depending on context, shaping and being shaped by her specific social and cultural milieu. Indeed, which subjects are Othered or worthy of being saved, the scope of her mission, what it means to educate, the composition of her femininity, who can inhabit or “pass” as this lady are all socially and historically contingent, affected by a myriad of forces. It would thus behoove us to remain diligent in our attempts to locate her, even in unlikely places. Meiners (2002), in writing of Lady Bountiful within the cultural imagination, warns us that while not all of her students work to reproduce this lady, she “will be the most readily available representation in popular culture and in the cultural memory of our new, freshly minted teacher. This is the most easily acquired narrative” (p. 90). I argue that given the history of our profession and the persistence of the LIS paradigms previously described, Lady Bountiful also remains a readily available representation for the field. Interestingly, Wilkins-Jordan and Hussey (2014) note that of twenty-one pop-cultural librarian images, 18.4 percent of LIS student respondents indicated that *Party Girl’s* Mary helped them to learn about library science. (The authors did not report the respondents’ race, but 87.1 percent of them were female.)

If Lady Bountiful with her accompanying framework is indeed the most readily available icon, even if or when she does not materialize as a cisgender, heterosexual white woman,<sup>2</sup> we must ask how the availability of this archetype works in LIS and whether it performs a regulatory function for those hoping to enter the field. Put another way, through the lady’s presence or the presence of the ideologies she has long reinscribed, are we preventing certain bodies from entering the profession, and in the same vein, policing the bodies already in it? Meiners (2002), who writes of Lady Bountiful’s persistence in teacher education, notes that “for a man to want to embody her would directly call into question his masculinity” (p. 90). Related questions might be posed in light of Lady Bountiful’s legacy in LIS: if the ideal library worker, understood as Lady Bountiful, is not simply white, female, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle or upper class, but also subscribes to a specific type of benevolence, what sort of role does she play in regulating the types of people who desire to enter the library workforce today? Does she inform our ideas surrounding what constitutes “fitness for the position”? Does she stunt our ability to imagine a new type of subject or new types of ideologies in LIS,

and does she perhaps limit the possibilities of what a librarian or library could be?

In addition to critically examining the ways in which Lady Bountiful acts as a gatekeeper to the profession, we must ask whether she plays a part in regulating the ways in which librarians interact with users. Does this figure somehow influence librarians, archivists, library workers, and LIS students to conceive of those who benefit from our services; in particular, those who have historically been or are presently Othered as being deficient, inherently needy, or in need of saving? Such questions demand that we interrogate her benevolence, revealing the ways in which its assumptions and logics work to quell aspirations of a more reciprocal, respectful, and responsible relationship with users.

### BIDDING THE LADY FAREWELL

If one accepts that Lady Bountiful haunts our field, what are we to make of this? How do we resist an archetype that appears to be so engrained in our disciplinary machinery and at the same time surfaces and is thus reinforced in popular culture? A first step consists of continuing to locate this figure in our history and charting the ways in which she still works in the field. A crucial component of this is being clear about the subjects we talk about when we discuss early librarianship. Scholarship in LIS has been effective in dissecting the ways in which our profession has come to be a feminized, and our field also has been analyzed through a variety of feminist lenses. While this is important and intriguing work, intersectional frameworks have been lacking, specifically when it comes to race. We must be clear that when we talk about early librarians, the people we are likely referring to are white women. In specifically naming these subjects, we allow ourselves to identify and interrogate the complex relationship between white womanness and the operations of white supremacy.

At the same time, we must avoid writing library history in which “the white American woman’s experience is made synonymous with *the American woman’s experience*” (hooks, 1981, p. 137; emphasis in original). Following the Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies Colloquium in October 2014, de Jesus (2014b) voiced similar concerns, putting forth “a plea (an echo really, of past generations) for these white women to remember that they are not the default librarian. That their experiences within the field (especially in a historical context) are *not* universal and that treating them as such erases the reality and lives lived by women of colour” (n.p.; emphasis in original). Thus naming race as well as class and other facets of experience will serve to make apparent the oft-ignored “interlocking systems of oppression and the intersections within the field of LIS” (Honma, 2005, p. 20), specifically allowing us to trouble the ways in which such systems create space for and center particular subjects.

In the same way in which our research agenda must be expanded to

make room for intersectional analyses, so must our teaching. In a 1994 address to the Association for Library and Information Science Education, Hannigan insisted that “the effort to develop inclusive curricula in a profession that primarily consists of females must begin with gender” (p. 297). However, the reality is that our profession primarily consists of *white* women; therefore addressing gender in LIS education must include discussions, activities, and crucial interrogations into the ways in which it is shaped by white supremacy. Leonardo and Boas (2013) provide suggestions for working with teacher candidates that might be used within the LIS teaching context as well. They encourage students to “critically reflect on racialized and gendered histories and how you are implicated in them,” noting that we ought to “work to understand and teach race not as a personal crusade but as a socio-historical construct through which we are all (unequally) produced” (p. 322). This work means that for white women students, one should not remain paralyzed by white guilt but instead acknowledge the systems, structures, and histories that continue to provide her access to an idealized femininity, regardless of whether this is the type of femininity that she consciously or eagerly embraces or embodies.

Finally, LIS education provides us with the opportunity to resist the continuing influence of Lady Bountiful, and the classroom can be treated not only as a site in which this archetype can be challenged but also one in which alternatives can be explored. As we begin to think about how LIS educators might expose and challenge this lady, we must keep in mind that she is a figure whose benevolence has for so long been fundamental to what libraries do and how they do it. To actively distance ourselves from her will require creativity and boldness, as “teaching into or towards a paradigm of estrangement is not easy, nor is it the dominant framework within Western schools” (Meiners, 2002, p. 93). When they choose to engage in this task, LIS educators must do so knowing that they will likely encounter resistance in the classroom and beyond.

I am not original in suggesting that multiculturalism, as it exists today, falls short of critically examining the role that race, and whiteness specifically, plays in shaping our discipline, practices, and institutions (Honma, 2005; Pawley, 2006; Peterson, 1996). Indeed, the unrelenting fixation on the Other that is prevalent in multicultural education models does the work of keeping invisible white supremacy (Harper & Cavanagh, 1994). I echo the calls that others have put forth for a shift toward antiracist and feminist approaches in LIS that address the ways in which “practices, histories, and identities are produced and translated into the everyday” (p. 27). This means that we not posit early (white women) librarians merely as victims in a patriarchal landscape but work toward understanding their place in our disciplinary history as much more complex than that. In the same vein, I contend that in both our research and educational efforts

we must make explicit the relationship between white subjects and white supremacy, interrogating the connections between individual subjects and the larger structures of power.

## CONCLUSION

Accounting for the ways in which white supremacy and patriarchy have worked to produce a particular subject in librarianship, we can better understand “the role that White women have played in enabling racism, even as oppressed members of a gender group” (Leonardo & Boas, 2013, p. 323). Further, and because I am not entirely pessimistic, I hope that the conversations that emerge will act as sites for those in librarianship to reflect on the forces that have shaped their roles in the profession and ultimately to resist the Lady Bountiful archetype and narratives that impel it. In reference to those subjects to whom the lady perhaps most loudly beckons, Frankenberg (1993) puts it well when she suggests that white women’s lives can be understood “as sites both for the reproduction of racism and for challenges to it” (p. 1).

Although intersectional, this paper is limited in scope in that it does not thoroughly account for class, nor does it address at length other modes Lady Bountiful mandates, including cisgender performance and heterosexuality. Future research might explore this archetype through these lenses, which will no doubt provide additional evidence of her presence both in the field and contemporary culture. Additionally, while analyses of Lady Bountiful in other feminized professions can be easily mapped to librarianship, we must take care to consider how LIS complicates or alters this figure. For example, how are her moves similar to or different from the ways in which she functions in the K-12 environment? Does she recruit her subjects in the same way? How does she call upon gender and race to do her work, and as mentioned previously, how might a field invested in innovation and technology affect the way in which she operates? Finally, Lady Bountiful has found expression in a variety of contexts throughout time, and no doubt there are many who have actively problematized, challenged, and subverted this archetype. Tracing these resistances, however small, would provide evidence of how her legacy can continue to be negotiated today.

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## NOTES

1. Attending to relationships, however, is essential to intersectional analysis. For example, while throughout the film we see Mary behaving in ways that rightfully can be read as culturally insensitive, intrusive, and in the service of whiteness, we also encounter her as

a woman forced to navigate and survive patriarchy. Nigel (played by Liev Schreiber), a white British man with whom we are made to understand that Mary has had a previous relationship, sexually assaults her at the end of the film. Although this is but a short scene in the larger narrative, it is critical to the development of a nuanced understanding of the racial, gender, and sexual dynamics that simultaneously are operating to shape the white female subject.

2. New, "hip" representations of librarians still tend to call on white subjects (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014a; Pho & Masland, 2014).

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