IMPROVING INCLUSIVITY WITH SPEECH ACT THEORY:
#BookfaceFriday as a Case Study in the Rhetorical Influence of Librarians

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INTRODUCTION

When we examine the cultural artifact of the American Librarian as represented in novels, TV, and film, it is possible to trace multiple instantiations. The dominant version, the “Mean Librarian” (recall Madam Pince from Harry Potter, the cruel librarian who prevented access to information under the pretense of its preservation) was joined and possibly superseded by the “Sexy Librarian” (consider Margot Robbie’s Saturday Night Live performance in “The Librarian”).¹ When analyzed rhetorically, these previous librarian tropes seem to give way to an emerging trope, one heavily treated by social media: “The New Librarian.”

Unlike previous types of librarians who were defined as gatekeepers to the knowledge that the library contained (or defined as transgressors of that knowledge), the “New Librarian” may be seen as a friendly advocate who works to further the social good. Though still most often gendered as female, she works against the longstanding “mean” and “sexy” types by facing the public both physically and virtually and supporting access to library materials and services. Her professional impulse may be summarized in reportage on the trend by The New York Times. Morgan Holzer, the librarian who first proposed the game #BookfaceFriday said, “I wanted to find something that wasn’t just us pushing content out into the world, but that other libraries could participate in.”² In other words, Ms. Holzer, by inviting librarians to play a game, is seeking to create in a community of librarians one of the stated learner dispositions as articulated in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy: “Learners who are developing their information literate abilities see themselves as contributors to the information marketplace rather than only consumers of it.”³ However, as we will argue, this idea that playing along with #BookfaceFriday aligns its librarians as contributors, and not consumers, is wrong.

In order to examine #BookFaceFriday as a current and dominant social media discursive practice we must (1) review the origins and development of #BookFaceFriday as a playful social media game intended to engage library patrons, (2) situate the media practice of #BookFaceFriday squarely in the tradition of speech act theory, and (3) analyze particular #BookFaceFriday posts in order to reveal how they both reflect current dominant racial, gender, and ableist ideologies and how they implicitly condone and expand the same.

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ORIGINS OF #BOOKFACEFRIDAY

#BookfaceFriday, a well-known example of librarian discourse, is a social media trend in which (typically) one librarian will interpose a book cover between a smartphone camera and another librarian or patron, creating the illusion of an uninterrupted image. The resulting collage—which fuses book marketing and ‘real life’ readers—gets uploaded to Facebook as a micro-testament to the library’s relevance in a digital age. #BookfaceFriday may be read as a form of digital Occidentalism because of the colonizing forces of social media platforms. To put it another way, within the binary images of book cover and matching subject, the cover (and thus its racial, gender, and ablest characteristics) remains consistent with dominant Western culture.

Examining the motivation of librarians to critically participate in #BookfaceFriday reveals how they may misunderstand both library outreach and the reading habits of their served populations. Central to the popularity of #BookfaceFriday is the apparently democratic, participatory, and fun nature of enlivening dusty books via social media distribution. The ubiquity of suitable book covers, the “free” nature of social media platforms, and the playful quality of creating what amounts to an analogue augmented reality all recommend the practice as a modern way that librarians may—through digital participation—further the goals of the library. In the words of another librarian, her participation in #BookfaceFriday exists in direct opposition to other, more “fun” media: her purpose is “to make books look cool again, because sometimes modern teenagers would rather just be glued to a game.” This sentiment contradicts research conducted by the Library Journal, which found that Gen Z and millennials are voracious readers who prefer printed books: “On average, millennial readers who had read at least one book for pleasure in the last year read nearly 11 books for pleasure in the previous 12 months.” Also surprising is that “Millennials reported the highest level of participation in book clubs across all the generation surveyed.” While social influences shape their choices, only 77 percent use librarian recommendations. Additionally, according to the most recent report from the Entertainment Software Association, the average age of a video game player in the US is between 35 and 44 years old. The notion that librarians must battle video games for the receding attention of technophile millennial non-readers proves a straw man; the need for such a device suggests a rhetoric of guilt—or at the very least, ambivalence—surrounding the practice of #BookfaceFridays.

Even a casual viewing of the practice suggests an operational power dynamic in the choice of which covers librarians choose for #BookfaceFriday. As seen in “Oh, Those Clever Librarians,” an early piece of newspaper coverage about the trend, each book title featured in the article matched to a white subject. (Killing Time in Crystal City by Chris Lynch, It Will Come to Me by Emily Fox Gordon, and Hope: Entertainer of the Century by Richard Zoglin). Moreover, all authors and subjects referenced in the article are white: Lisa Jackson, Charlaine Harris, Sam Harris, Emily Fox Gordon, Richard Zoglin, Chris Lynch, Kate Middleton, John Lennon, Rob Lowe, Sam Harris, and Marcia Clark. The sole mention of content diversity comes in the form of praise for the librarian who matched Sam Harris’ cover of clouds to the sky. Thus, a practice praised by librarians as “a fabulous way to show how fun we are”—in this example at least—fails to notice that “fun” could be replaced by “white.”

Though the US is by demography a predominately white nation (approximately 77.1% identify as White), and though the publishing industry itself is 76% White, when it comes to librarianship and its social media practices, one can see a sharp rise in white representation: as given in Diversity Counts from the ALA Office of Research and Statistics, 85.2% of librarians are White. Moreover, in her stunning indictment of complicity White Fragility, author Robin DiAngelo unpacks “white supremacy” as a series of “structural power privileges” that include, among many others, “People who decide which books we read.” When one looks at books, the quality of Whiteness dominates representation, over and above the real-life proportion. Though it may be discordant to join simple Whiteness with White supremacy, the link between the two becomes apparent when one considers the innocent-seeming choice “playing the game” of #BookfaceFriday. As argued by DiAngelo, racist harm is not limited to bad people who do bad things; quite the opposite: “white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color.” When examined abstractly, we find that librarians select—by far—white faces and white bodies when assembling their #BookfaceFriday collage, which we argue may be read as the performance, in miniature, of racism: “[R]acism…occurs when a racial group’s prejudice is backed by legal authority and institutional control. This authority and control transforms individual prejudices into a far-reaching system that no longer depends on the good intentions of individual actors; it becomes the default of the society and is reproduced automatically.”
We know, publishers will argue by saying that they only are responding to market demand. However, as early as 1944 Adorno and Horkheimer articulate this form of backwards thinking: "Furthermore, it is claimed that [industry] standards were based in the first place on consumers’ needs, and for that reason were accepted with so little resistance. The result is the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger." Put another way, industry creates need; it does not satisfy need. Another objection from presumptive authorities locates blame on younger generations uninterested in reading or dissatisfied with diverse offerings. However, Christina Vercelletto argues that fault here lies not with the audience—in fact “60 percent of Gen Z readers are interested”; instead, her respondents note a lack of effective marketing of difference: “Stories about black girls like me aren’t promoted enough—you have to look.” Another source makes a similar argument about bodies: “If certain publishers say they can’t sell bigger heroines or heroes, or people of all genders, maybe that says more about their abilities to market nontraditional books than about whether there is an audience for those books.” Returning to Adorno and Horkeimer, what is the “unity of the system” here but the unity of a white, straight, cis, non-disabled publishing world?

**SPEECH ACT THEORY AND #BOOKFACEFRIDAY**

Writing in *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin outlines how saying a thing can make it so: “the three components of speech act theory are, the locutionary act the action of saying something…;the illocutionary action, the action performed in saying something…; and the perlocutionary act…the outcome or consequences of a communicative effort.” Put another way, within Speech Act Theory (SAT), a speaker is not merely speaking; she is performing an action. A common example in a library setting occurs when a patron approaches the circulation desk with a stack of books in hand. The librarian may say, “Do you have your library card?” Meaning, “Will you give me your library card?” This utterance conveys force, i.e. the locutionary act. The effect of this utterance, the illocutionary act, is the patron’s compliance to the request. The outcome of the communication is a completed circulation transaction. When the nature of the speech act is simple and straightforward, one needn’t look too closely at perlocutionary force.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Given the nature of language use, SAT could effectively be used to study any form of speech, and even a cursory survey of extant scholarship demonstrates this: from Yiddish signs, to social media posts, and online shopping forums, Speech Act Theory has received ample academic attention. The present analysis parallels and builds upon other work leveraging Speech Act Theory as a means of understanding unrecognized discourse. Maras, Gaiser, and Reershmius, for example, use SAT to disclose the multiple influences and “illocutionary functions” at work in the “linguistic landscape” of a Yiddish community in Manchester through their analysis of signage (Matras, Gaiser, Reershmius. In Loke and Golding’s analysis of professional role playing in virtual worlds, SAT proves helpful in understanding non-verbal, online actions. Ansari and Gupta use SAT to detect fraudulent reviews in the online marketplace. In Ludwig and Ruyster’s work, SAT is discussed as an analytical method useful in deconstructing “social media speak.” Though this research offers valuable insights in understanding how customers relate to one another in social media conversations regarding a specific product or service-- the research does not explore using SAT as a means to inform initial content.

**DISCUSSION**

A closer examination of the #BookfaceFriday phenomenon reveals, through Speech–Act Theory, some troubling aspects that suggest the undertheorized practice may not only fail at its obvious lighthearted mission of digital participation: SAT helps to understand how #BookfaceFriday and otherwise under examined social media practices can actually work against many of the 11 Core Values of Librarianship.
Consider this image, which shows a hand holding Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman, by Robert K. Massie, angled in such a way to match the face of a woman standing behind the book. In addition to the verbal content of this post, the language included in this Instagram post, “nypl #BookfaceFriday means it’s time for a great weekend” compromises the “locution” of the post; doubtless the illocutionary force presented here simply reproduces the game of posting a face that matches a book. In a generous reading, the illocutionary force may even rhyme with the end-of-the-workweek association of TGIF by mentioning the weekend, which has been introduced by #BookfaceFriday.  

What, if anything, is the perlocutionary effect presented by this particular social media post? Though the librarian who originally posted it may claim an intent to “increase interest” in the NYPL, we argue that the 1849 “likes” reveal a truer perlocutionary effect. Here, Instagram has paid for content in the coin of the realm: it has paid in “likes,” which is to say that it has paid in circulation. Social Media itself, lest anyone forget, operates by convincing users to forfeit their data, and then monetizing that data via advertising, analytics, and other forms of marketing. Though it may be tempting here for a hapless librarian to point to the 1849 likes as a sort of evidence that their illocutionary intent proved successful—after all, nearly 2,000 people both viewed and liked the post—the positivist mirage vanishes when one considers how the visual dominance of social media, itself founded on the sophomoric college “Face Book” of incoming freshman, requires that everything traveling within its domain, be visual.

By participating in “#BookfaceFriday” library personnel commit two errors without knowing either: the first concerns the type of books that gain circulation in these posts, and the second concerns a fractured illocutionary force. Remember that the game requires matching a face (or body) to a book; the direct consequence of this rule ensures that only titles that offer the possibility for “blending” in with the real world will be disseminated: book covers depicting animals, abstract art, pastorals, oceans—the totality of the non-human world—get precluded. Further, disabled, trans, and BIPOC representation open political hazards for this innocent “game”; what does not blend does not send. The tyranny of the visual—itself an expression of the commercial illocutionary of marketing—forces the book, which exists in the print medium, to “speak” first as a body, then as a post. When one considers that “Diversity” is listed as the fourth stated “Core Values of Librarianship”, the otherwise-innocent game can be seen as having a sinister (though unintentional) perlocutionary effect.  

The second objection to social media posting games such as #BookfaceFriday is that they reveal a fractured illocutionary force. Contrasted with the in-library sign—written with a specific audience of patrons in mind and posted in a particular library by a unique librarian in response to a contextual exigence; in other words, a locution with a clear illocutionary force and expected perlocutionary effect—when locutions turn digital, they can become their own justifications and lose the name of action. Put another way, if a librarian just wants to participate in #BookfaceFriday then they surrender an intent that would otherwise assert itself. This fractured illocutionary force at best postulates a sort of ends-justify-the-means argument that it is better to be on social media than not. In evidence of this point, observe the upper-right corner of the post: This image did not originate in the New York Public Library but instead is a re-post from another, unrelated library system, the Spokane...
Public Library. A cover is not a person, a post is not innocent, and Spokane is not New York. Given such a scenario, the best course is to ask as the Romans did, Cui bono? (Who benefits?). In the case of #BookfaceFriday, clearly social media wins, with a close second taken by the sponsored book. Book marketers win, and given the bias for White, non-disabled bodies, diversity loses. We argue that whenever librarian authorship runs into such a fracture, it is helpful to return to the Core Values of Librarianship as a guide for intention.

We argue that #BookfaceFriday shows the damage that can happen when the illocutionary force is fractured by the particularities of the medium (and the subsequent forfeiture of authorial/illocutionary intent by the library personnel). When librarians surrender to the demands of a particular medium, even when well-intentioned, the results can directly contradict their own mission.

Virility in the Internet Age proves a whimsical and ephemeral quality that almost always points to success: popularity, measured in page views, indexes monetization on multiple platforms such that Kylie Jenner was recently understood to be paid $1,000,000 for a single Instagram post. Aside from strict monetary success, though, there is currency in determining what gets posted, what finds digital circulation, at all, especially when it comes to the printed book. Though the stakes appear to be much lower—a successful #BookfaceFriday post from your local library may receive a few dozen likes—in essence the stakes are much higher, as they speak to the perlocutionary force of modern librarianship.

Of course, more research is needed to more fully investigate both #BookFaceFriday in particular and social media practice in general for its rhetorical impact on the constituents it purports to serve; indeed, given the internet’s quick rise and easy adoption as a suitable platform for communication, in many ways we find ourselves in the infancy of critical media rhetoricity, especially as it concerns niche professional discourses like librarianship.

CONCLUSION

This analysis reveals the multiple and unrecognized ways librarians, through their acritical practice of participating in #BookFaceFriday, actually enact white solidarity and support the perpetuation of white supremacy, all in the name of fulfilling ALA Core Values like “Diversity.” However, in revealing the enormous amount of rhetorical influence that librarians exert on their local communities, we call on librarians to reconfigure their professional communication practices around rhetoric itself by harnessing intentionality and seeing their speech (social media posts such as #BookFaceFriday, but also the creation of library signage, educational materials, and the like) as acts.

After reviewing the number of diverse book sources available in this country, the enormous reach and potential for positive perlocutionary effects by US librarians becomes plain. According to recent data by ALA, the US currently has 117,341 libraries: public, academic, school, military, and special collections, which provide free access to abundant and diverse content. Each day, librarians across the country wield enormous sway over what books get purchased, featured, checked-out, advertised, and discussed. Through the simple act of selection their hands carry the imprimatur of what is worth reading. The clarity of their signage will aid or deter a research essay; their ability to quickly and efficiently answer a research question will mean the difference between passing or failing a university course; their choice to highlight the art of community children may increase patronage; and their seemingly “fun” #BookfaceFriday post may tacitly whisper—in the rhetorical language no one speaks but all seem to understand: “You belong here.”

Information has value. And we need to understand the value of our rhetorical decisions not only on library patrons, but on the publishing industry. To work within the power structure is not to condone the power structure. Librarians have collectivity. #Bookfacefriday spoke to the collectivity of the profession, but we all joined it without intention, much as one joins any game. Now that we are all doing it, let’s pause and examine the effects of our doing it. Does participating in this game support our core values? Or rather, does it miss the mark in harnessing the power of the collectivity it so expertly summoned?
NOTES


7. Witteveen: 19.


27. New York Public Library (NYPL) and Spokane Public Library (spokanepubliclibrary), “#BookfaceFriday Means It’s Time for a Great Weekend!” Instagram, February 22, 2019.

28. Admin, “Core Values of Librarianship.”

29. New York Public Library (NYPL) and Spokane Public Library (spokanepubliclibrary), “#BookfaceFriday Means It’s Time for a Great Weekend!”


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