

NARRATIVES OF (DIS)ENFRANCHISEMENT

**Reckoning with the History of Libraries
and the Black and African American Experience**

**TRACEY OVERBEY AND
AMANDA L. FOLK**

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PREFACE

*"Being American is more than a pride we inherit, it's the past we step into
and how we repair it."*—Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*

"I can't breathe."—Eric Garner

"Mama."—George Floyd

We believe it's important to place this book within our country's broader racial context, as it is this context that has inspired us to write this book and encourage our profession to consider what it means to confront racism in our libraries and communities and develop actionable antiracist agendas. We began this project in earnest in 2017. According to #Say Their Names (<https://sayevery.name>), eight Black and African American children and adults in six different states ranging in age from 15 to 66 were murdered by law enforcement or died in police custody that year. Damon Grimes. James Lacy. Charleena Lyles. Mikel McIntyre. Jordan Edwards. Timothy Caughman. Alteria Woods. Desmond Phillips. In 2018 that number almost doubled. Fourteen Black and African American children and adults in eight states ranging in age from 17 to 45 were murdered by law enforcement or died in police custody. Aleah Jenkins. Emantic Bradford Jr. Jemel Robinson. Charles Roundtree Jr. Botham Jean. Harith Augustus. Jason Washington. Antwon Rose Jr. Robert White. Earl McNeil. Marcus-David Peters. Danny Ray Thomas. Stephon Clark. Ronell Foster. In 2019 eleven Black and African American adults in seven different states ranging in age from 21 to 56 were murdered by law enforcement or died in police custody. John Neville. Michael Dean. Atatiana Jeff-

erson. Byron Williams. Elijah McClain. Jaleel Murdock. Dominique Clayton. Pamela Turner. Ronald Greene. Sterling Higgins. Bradley Blackshire. In 2019 a 66-year-old Atlanta librarian was pulled over in North Carolina for going 10 miles per hour over the speed limit. She did not realize that the police were attempting to pull her over, and they interpreted this as her attempting to run from them. When she realized what was happening and pulled over, officers pulled her out of her vehicle by her hair and threw her to the ground with their guns drawn on the side of the highway. All of this was caught on body camera video. At one point, one of the officers can be heard saying, "That's good police work, baby." So good that Ms. Bottom suffered a dislocated shoulder and torn rotator cuff that required surgery. At the time of writing, Ms. Bottom has filed a lawsuit against Salisbury (NC) City Police.

We decided to develop a book proposal to submit to ALA Editions in the summer of 2020. As we witnessed yet another unarmed Black man murdered by the police—George Floyd—and how the ensuing protests were met with militarized police forces across the country, we decided that writing this book was one small step that we could take in the fight for racial justice. Indeed, in Columbus, Ohio, we watched video footage of our own Black elected

officials, including Congresswoman Joyce Beatty and City Council President Shannon Hardin, being pepper sprayed by the Columbus Division of Police as they exercised their First Amendment rights on public sidewalks downtown. Furthermore, we were in the midst of a global pandemic that was disproportionately affecting Black and African American communities. Due to a variety of factors, such as continued unequal access to health care, implicit bias in the provision of health care, and their overrepresentation in jobs considered to be essential, Black Americans and African Americans were 2.4 times more likely than White Americans to die as a result of COVID-19, according to an article published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in July 2020 (Frueh, 2020).

As 2020 continued to unfold, the picture did not become more positive. Thirty-one Black and African American adults in 19 different states ranging in age from 18 to 60 were murdered by law enforcement or died in police custody. Bennie Edwards. Casey Goodson Jr. Kevin Peterson. Walter Wallace Jr. Jonathan Price. Kurt Reinhold. Dijon Kizzee. Damian Daniels. Anthony McClain. Julian Lewis. Maurice Abisdid-Wagner. Rayshard Brooks. Priscilla Slater. Kamal Flowers. Jamel Floyd. David McAtee. Calvin Horton Jr. Tony McDade. Dion Johnson. George Floyd. Maurice Gordon. Steven Taylor. Daniel Prude. Breonna Taylor. Barry Gedeus. Manuel Ellis. Lionel Morris. Jaquyn O'Neill Light. William Green. Darius Tarver. Miciah Lee. This list does not include Ahmaud Arbery, who was followed and murdered by White men in Georgia while he was out for a run. It took 74 days for an arrest to be made despite video evidence. This list also does not include Andre Hill, who was murdered by a Columbus (OH) police officer in his own driveway near the end of 2020. In between those two murders, a grand jury failed to indict the police officer who murdered Breonna Taylor as she slept in her own home.

We began a semester-long research leave to focus our energies on writing this book in January 2021, and 2021 seems to have been a continuation of 2020 in many ways. On the same day that Andre Hill was laid to rest—January 5, 2021—the Kenosha County (WI) District Attorney announced that they would not file

charges against the officer who murdered Jacob Blake. The following day crowds of Trump supporters, who are predominantly White, began to gather at the Capitol in Washington, DC, to protest the certification of the presidential election results. Even though there was advance warning of protests, the footage showed very little law enforcement present, a remarkable contrast to protests across the country in support of Black lives and racial justice, which were often met with scores of police in riot gear and occasionally the National Guard. A failed insurrection at the Capitol ensued. On April 20, 2021, the officer who murdered George Floyd was found guilty on three counts—second-degree unintentional murder, second-degree manslaughter, and third-degree manslaughter. Even though this verdict could not bring George Floyd back to life, many celebrated the fact that a police officer was finally being held to account for murdering a Black man. This celebration was short-lived, as a Columbus (OH) police officer killed 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant while she was in an altercation that included a knife. Just hours following her death, there was video footage of other Columbus (OH) police officers telling neighborhood residents that blue lives matter. While there has been controversy about whether or not her death was warranted (it was not), because she had a knife, it stands in stark contrast to a long list of White men who have committed mass murders and were peacefully taken into custody even while heavily armed. The day after that, Andre Brown Jr. was killed by police officers in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, while sitting in his vehicle in his driveway with his hands on the steering wheel. At the time of writing, 10 additional Black and African American adults in eight different states ranging in age from 18 to 52 have already been murdered by law enforcement or died in police custody. Matthew “Zadok” Williams. Daunte Wright. James Lionel Johnson. Dominique Williams. Marvin Scott III. Jenoah Donald. Patrick Warren. Xzavier Hill. Robert Howard. Vincent Belmonte.

Through our complementary special reports, the one that follows and *Narratives of (Dis)Engagement: Exploring Black and African American Students' Experiences in Libraries*, we hope to demonstrate the ways in

which both systemic racism and implicit bias affect our profession. Many like to tout libraries as neutral spaces because we uphold the ideals of democracy and provide free access to all. However, libraries are not neutral spaces, and the reproduction of that narrative results in unequal service to different user populations. As is explained in more depth in this special report, libraries and the institutions with which they are associated have a long history of racial exclusion. Furthermore, as we discuss in *Narratives of (Dis) Engagement*, few studies have explored the ways in which the legacy of that exclusion manifests in

contemporary libraries for those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). These complementary special reports are an initial attempt at filling that gap, beginning a conversation, and creating a call to action.

One of the authors, Tracey, once heard a trainer offering an equity, diversity, and inclusion workshop say something like, “Who owns the earth? We all have to breathe.” As a profession, we need to make sure that we are providing environments that offer for all of our diverse user populations and professional colleagues the space to breathe and to thrive.

INTRODUCTION

In this report, we provide an overview of the historical exclusion and disenfranchisement of Black Americans and African Americans from libraries and educational institutions in the United States and explore the ways in which the legacy of this exclusion is manifest in our contemporary context. This overview is not meant to be comprehensive, definitive, or authoritative. Rather, we hope that this overview serves as the beginning of many conversations in which our profession reckons with our racist past to create a more equitable, antiracist future. In our complementary report, *Narratives of (Dis)Engagement: Exploring Black and African American Students' Experiences in Libraries*, we introduce the findings of a research study that highlights the public, school, and academic library experiences of Black and African American college students. We examine the role that race has played in their library experiences to identify potential opportunities for libraries to better meet the needs of these users whose voices and experiences are not often represented in our professional literature. Although we hope both special reports are read together, we have written each report such that they can also stand alone.

THE OVERWHELMING WHITENESS OF LIBRARIANSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES

This section's heading is a play on a well-known blog post from Chris Bourg, Director of Libraries at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), titled "The Unbearable Whiteness of Librarianship" (Bourg, 2014). In this post, Bourg compares the demographics of the profession to that of the US population using the 2010 ALA Diversity Counts data and 2013 US census data. Not surprisingly, she found significant differences in terms of racial representation. According to the census data, about 63 percent of the population was White in 2013. However, the ALA data indicated that 88 percent of librarians at that time were White. Furthermore, Black Americans and African Americans comprised 15 percent of the population but only 5 percent of librarians. At that time, Bourg writes that the profession would need more than 11,000 Black or African American librarians to bring the profession to representational parity with the population of the United States. In 2018–19, just under 6,700 master's degrees in library and information science (LIS) were awarded (ALISE, 2020). Even if every new LIS graduate were Black or African American, it would still take two years for the profession to reach representational parity with the overall population.

Unfortunately, there has not been much progress in recruiting and retaining Black and African American librarians (or BIPOC librarians more generally) in the past decade. The American Library Association (ALA) conducted a membership survey in 2017, and about 75 percent of members responded. In both 2014 and 2017, the percentage of White librarians remained steady at about 87 percent, and Black and African American librarians comprised just over 4 percent of the membership in those years (Rosa & Henke, 2017). More recent data from the Department for Professional Employees (2020) of the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) shows a slight decrease in the number of White librarians (83 percent), but the percentage of Black and African American librarians remained relatively static at 5 percent. Indeed, the most recent Statistical Report from the Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALISE, 2020) indicates that current enrollment in ALA-accredited master of library science programs will continue to reproduce these same demographics. In 2019 the enrollment percentage of Black and African American students mirrored that of the profession at approximately 5 percent. However, White students comprised just 62 percent of students enrolled in these programs. Their overall representation in master's programs being lower than in the workforce is likely due to the presence of international students (4 percent) and students whose race or ethnicity is unknown (13 percent), rather than a dramatic shift in overall demographics of emerging professionals.

You might be questioning why these demographics matter if we, as library professionals and paraprofessionals, have made the commitment to serve all the members of our communities regardless of race or ethnicity. Although this commitment might be genuine, many White librarians are likely unaware of their own implicit and learned biases, the ways in which race affects the daily lives of BIPOC, and may not feel the need to acknowledge or address the legacies of our profession's historical racial exclusion and disenfranchisement of Black and African American communities. Many White people in the United States currently take a color-blind or color-evasive approach to

race, meaning that they think it is better (or more polite or comfortable) to avoid acknowledging race. This approach might be deployed with good intentions, but it ends up maintaining White supremacy and toxicity in the long term. We discuss this more in the sections that follow.

CONFRONTING WHITENESS IN LIBRARIES

We have written this book with all librarians and library staff in mind. However, we believe that there will be different key takeaways for the reader based on their race or ethnicity. In this book, we are attempting to balance a desire to educate and inform a predominantly White profession about the racialized realities that many of our BIPOC colleagues and users have faced and still face in libraries, as well as in the educational institutions with which they are associated, with our desire to empower, reaffirm, and validate the experiences of our BIPOC colleagues and users. The former goal, to educate and inform, may result in a rehashing of what is likely a tired refrain that our BIPOC colleagues know all too well—that BIPOC students, particularly Black and African American students, face a variety of challenges throughout their educational experiences that result in persistent equity gaps. However, many White readers might be unaware of and shocked by the extent to which the legacy of our country's racialized past is present today and the ways in which this past continues to disenfranchise and oppress BIPOC. Our goal is not to approach BIPOC communities from a deficit frame. Rather, we intend to uncover how this is a failure of the institutions, which were built on the foundation of White supremacy over several centuries, and not a failure of BIPOC students, their families, and their communities. In the chapters that follow, we intend to demonstrate how our institutions were never built as environments in which BIPOC students were meant to thrive, and the legacy of these foundations built on intentional and systemic racism is still present today and urgently needs to be addressed by everyone, but especially by White people who hold significant power and privilege. Although we have written this book with all librarians and library staff in mind, we hope that our White readers will find this to

be a compelling call to action to identify and dismantle manifestations of White supremacy in their libraries and in their individual practice.

Tracie D. Hall, who is the current executive director of ALA, once wrote, “the library and information science field has seemingly slapped itself with a gag order [about race and racism]. While the discussion of diversity in libraries has proliferated over the past few decades, meaningful dialogue around race has been eviscerated or altogether evaded” (Hall, 2012, p. 198). With these words in mind, we contend that our profession has not directly confronted the racialized histories of libraries, including the educational institutions with which they are associated, to explore and uncover how race continues to shape the experiences of our contemporary library users. This evasion is likely a result of the overwhelming Whiteness of the profession. Race remains largely invisible to most White people because they do not go through the same process of racial identity formation that BIPOC do due to the cultural normalization of Whiteness (Tatum, 2017). Because of this, issues related to race and the manifestation of Whiteness and White supremacy in all facets of the lives of BIPOC, including their work (library) lives, remain invisible to most White people. In addition, the United States remains highly racially segregated, even today. Most White people do not have meaningful interactions with BIPOC on a regular basis, which has an impact on their ability to relate to BIPOC (Feagin, 2020). This creates uncomfortable interactions, and the discomfort is only heightened when the topic of the interactions includes race. As White people become more aware of the presence of White supremacy and toxicity and their complicity in it, common reactions include shutting down and avoiding the topic to maintain comfort; dismissing it as irrelevant or learned victimization; reverting to phrases like “I don’t see color,” “I’m not a racist,” or “You misunderstood. I’m a good person”; or becoming paralyzed by guilt (Tatum, 2017). None of these reactions are productive in terms of dismantling White supremacy and toxicity and moving toward a more equitable and just world.

Although there has been some research exploring the experiences of Black and African American library

users, which we discuss in the coming chapters, there is a lack of research that explores how race affects their experiences in libraries. This is critical given the overwhelming Whiteness of librarianship previously discussed. BIPOC experience racism and discrimination on a regular and frequent basis as they attempt to live their lives. We have no reason to believe that when BIPOC users pass through the doors of our buildings or enter our virtual spaces that they suddenly enter a race-neutral zone. Furthermore, BIPOC users do not shed their racialized identities when they are in our spaces; they bring their whole selves to the library, including the racism and discrimination that they experience with regularity in nonlibrary spaces. We cannot expect that they perceive a White person at the reference or circulation desk differently because they are in a library space. Because we do not have a basic understanding of how race affects library users’ experiences, our profession is maintaining White supremacy while also espousing values related to diversity, inclusivity, equity, and social justice. The late Maya Angelou once said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” We hope that this special report provides an opportunity for our profession to know better and do better by our BIPOC users, colleagues, and communities.

RACE AND RACISM IN THE UNITED STATES

For centuries, racial categories were treated as if they were a biological or scientific reality. On the one hand, this likely makes sense to many people, as we are able to see clear physical differences among people of different races, such as skin color or hair texture. However, race is a social construct and is not a biological reality. Indeed, “genetic variation within so-called racial groups is much greater than the variation between them” (Goodman, 2008, p. 6). Instead, racial categories were created by Europeans during the age of exploration and colonization to justify, both morally and scientifically, the subjugation of those whom they were colonizing (Feagin, 2020; Kendi, 2019). These categorizations eventually evolved into a “great chain of being,” or a racial hierarchy that put White men at the top and BIPOC at the bottom (Feagin, 2020).

Feagin (2020) writes, “In this framework a natural order is mapped onto a moral order. Persisting social inequalities are viewed as natural and legitimate” (p. 53). It was this hierarchical racial categorization that enabled chattel slavery and land theft, as well as Jim Crow laws and customs. It bears repeating, however, that this kind of categorization has no scientific backing. It is not a biological reality.

Before discussing how racism manifests in the United States today and what that means for our profession, it is necessary for us to articulate how we define racism. Oluo (2019) provides an excellent starting point: “A prejudice against someone based on race, when those prejudices are reinforced by systems of power” (p. 27). There are two important elements to this definition—an individual element and a systemic element—both of which are harmful and insidious. All people, regardless of their race, hold prejudices and biases, which can manifest regularly, intentionally or not. These can be overt, such as using a racial slur or committing an act of violence. They can also be subtle, such as giving a backhanded compliment (e.g., telling a Black person how articulate they are as if you did not expect that) or asking an ignorant question (e.g., asking an Asian American person what country they are from). Sometimes the offender is completely unaware that they are being offensive, though the result for the receiver is the same regardless of intent. However, it is the “reinforced by systems of power” element that really gives racism its teeth. This means that racial oppression is built into key institutions of our country, including education, government, law enforcement and criminal justice, banking, and health care. This kind of racism advantages White people, especially White people of particular social classes, and disadvantages BIPOC. Systemic racism is why our neighborhoods and cities continue to remain racially segregated; why Black women are more likely to die during childbirth; why White children are more likely to attend and graduate from college; why Black men are more likely to receive harsher sentences than White men for the same crime; why White people are more likely to accumulate generational wealth; and why police officers can murder

unarmed Black people and not be held accountable. Identifying and acknowledging the systemic nature of racism that upholds White privilege and power is critical in determining an antiracist agenda. There are many White people who do not hold explicit racist views, do not use racial slurs, and believe in the values of diversity and inclusivity. However, if those same White people do not actively fight to dismantle oppressive systems of racial power, then they are complicit in upholding White supremacy and toxicity. This is how it is possible to have racism without racists (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Oluo, 2019).

Scholarship about race in the United States from various disciplines, including sociology, political science, education, and economics, has identified a shift in how racism manifests in our society since the Civil Rights era. As many readers likely know, prior to the Civil Rights era in the 1960s, racism against Black and African American citizens was overt, direct, and typically violent, including enslavement, segregation, and lynching. However, many scholars believe that we have shifted to a new racism since the 1960s, a more subtle and coded form of racism that is predicated on a color-blind ideology. While the predominant phrase used in the scholarship on this topic is *color-blind ideology*, we use the phrase *color-evasive ideology* for two reasons. First, the term *color-blind ideology* is ableist and “equates blindness with ignorance” (Annamma et al., 2017, p. 154). Second, “colorblindness implies passivity,” which “allows for a justification of inaction that propels the system of racial inequities forward” (p. 154). A color-evasive ideology is one that espouses the belief that race is no longer relevant to understanding society or that it is somehow racist to be aware of and acknowledge race. This latter point may even seem virtuous, in that one may believe that choosing not to acknowledge race somehow results in equality. However, the reason why color-evasive ideologies are harmful is that they often serve as “an assertion of equal opportunity that minimizes the reality of racism in favor of individual or cultural explanations of reality” (Burke, 2019, p. 2). In other words, it denies both the racialized experiences that BIPOC have with prejudiced individuals as well as

the very existence of systemic racism, shifting the blame to BIPOC for perceived (and inaccurate) cultural deficits.

Public opinion research has demonstrated gaps in how White Americans and Black Americans/African Americans perceive the prevalence of racism in the United States. A Pew Research Center survey found a 15 percent difference between White and Black participants in response to the statement “race relations in the U.S. are generally bad,” with 56 percent of White people agreeing and 71 percent of Black people agreeing (Horowitz et al., 2019). However, 50 percent of White respondents indicated that they believed too much attention is given to race, a belief that only 12 percent of Black respondents shared. Furthermore, 52 percent of White respondents believed that people see racial discrimination where it does not exist. Despite this, 54 percent of White respondents believed that racial discrimination was a major reason why Black people have a hard time getting ahead, although a more common reason was less access to good schools (60 percent). Fifty-nine percent of White respondents believed that focusing on what all races have in common improved race relations compared to just 44 percent of Black respondents. These troubling statistics provide some evidence for the prevalence of a color-evasive ideology.

The LIS profession has been critiqued for its race-evasive approach to diversity, equity, and inclusivity, as alluded to in the earlier quote from Hall (2012). Pawley (2006) concurs, arguing that “substituting multiculturalism and diversity for race allows the library community to evade confronting racism as—still—a defining dimension of American society and, in this way, helps perpetuate it” (p. 153). Over a decade later, Hudson (2017) penned a critique on the continued focus on diversity, particularly representational diversity, at the expense of “meaningful inclusion” (p. 10). Rather than interrogating the ways in which systemic racism and White supremacy continue to manifest in libraries, our profession has focused primarily on cultural competence training, which encourages individuals to work together respectfully and harmoniously. The development of

cultural competence, although important, is not enough to combat racism in our profession. Furthermore, there have been critiques that the LIS profession has participated in performative antiracist politics in response to the continued and frequent incidents of police brutality and murder of Black Americans and African Americans in the United States. Mehra (2021) discusses how these antiracist performances appear to be inauthentic and insincere because the profession has largely ignored its own racist history, preferring a sanitized version of library history that does not include the perpetuation of White supremacy.

STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

In the chapters that follow, we intend to provide an overview of libraries’ historical complicity with racial exclusion and disenfranchisement of Black Americans and African Americans in the United States and discuss the contemporary legacies of these exclusionary practices. Furthermore, we discuss contemporary scholarship related to Black and African American users’ experiences with libraries. We intend for the following chapters to provide a historical and contemporary contextualization of the research findings that we present in *Narratives of (Dis) Engagement*. In addition, we do not intend for these overviews to be comprehensive or definitive, as this is outside the scope of these special reports. We hope that this report will help the LIS profession reckon with its racist past and the implications for how we meet the needs of diverse user communities today and in the future. In other words, we intend for this report to be a conversation starter, in terms of both our professional practice (e.g., building collections, developing programming, and helping patrons with their information needs) and also our scholarship, assessment, and evaluation practices.

We begin this overview with a chapter that describes the hidden history of Africa’s contributions to libraries and educational institutions. These contributions, more often than not, are omitted from our K–12, higher education, and library school curricula. We then proceed with overviews of three different library types—public, school (K–12), and academic

libraries. These chapters are followed by a discussion about frameworks and theories that can help us to identify and unpack the role of race in our profession and our users' experiences. The concluding chapter discusses some practical takeaways based on the preceding chapters.

RECOMMENDED READING

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