

NARRATIVES OF (DIS)ENGAGEMENT

**Exploring Black and African American Students'
Experiences in Libraries**

**AMANDA L. FOLK AND
TRACEY OVERBEY**

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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. Jenaoah Donald. Patrick Warren. Xzavier Hill. Robert Howard. Vincent Belmonte.

Through our complementary special reports, the one that follows and *Narratives of (Dis)Enfranchisement: Reckoning with the History of Libraries and the Black and African American Experience*, 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 our companion report, *Narratives of (Dis)Enfranchisement*, libraries and the institutions with which they are associated have a long history of racial exclusion. Furthermore, as we discuss in this report, 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.

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INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGIN STORY

Within a couple of months of arriving at Ohio State, Amanda attended her first Focusing on the First Year Conference offered by the university's First Year Experience unit. The first breakout session that she attended was a panel about stigmas related to Black males and masculinity called "Narratives of Black Undergraduate Men: Manhood, Masculinities, and the First-Year Experience," which was organized by Mr. Tai Cornute and Dr. Christopher S. Travers.¹ After providing an overview of research and scholarship related to this topic, four Black male Ohio State students spoke honestly and bravely about how they wrestle with stigmas related to Black masculinity as college students. One of the topics addressed was seeking help and how it is stigmatized as a weakness, not a strength. Having staffed a reference desk for many years prior to coming to Ohio State, Amanda found that this discussion caused her to think about how the reference desk and research consultations might be inaccessible to Black male students, something that she, as a White woman, had not previously considered. In addition, Amanda started to think about how this may be compounded by the fact that academic librarianship, as a profession, is predominantly White and female. How then can we, as a profession and as individual librarians, serve Black and African American library users whose identities are disturbingly underrepresented among our ranks and who may view reaching out to library employees for help as showing signs of weakness?

Not too long after this, we (Amanda and Tracey) had our first onboarding meeting, as we were both new to our positions, to University Libraries, and to Ohio State. Tracey shared some of her research interests related to Black youth, incarceration, rehabilitation, and recidivism. Prior to coming to Ohio State, Tracey worked at the Cleveland Public Library system as a paraprofessional for five years and then became a professional youth and educational librarian, serving in that role for 10 years. As a public librarian, Tracey developed programming related to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) to expose marginalized students to these career options, hands-on experiments, and a chance to meet real-life scientists who looked a lot like the youth who participated in the library STEM programming. Tracey cotaught extensive courses on General Education Development (GED) with Mr. Elliot Huff to ex-offenders and other underserved patrons wanting to pursue their education. Like many Black students interviewed in this study, Tracey, being a Black woman and a librarian within a predominantly White profession, has experienced discrimination, has worked doubly

hard to make an impact within the communities she has served, and has been overlooked for professional leadership positions. What has kept Tracey going within the profession is a commitment to bringing awareness of information literacy to communities that are marginalized and advocating for equity, diversity, and inclusion in our profession.

During this conversation, Amanda brought up some of the questions that she had been wrestling with after attending the panel to see if Tracey might be interested in working together on a research study. As a White woman, Amanda knew that she did not have the lived experiences or perspectives to do a study like this responsibly on her own. However, she did have the research training and experience to help in the design and analysis processes. Tracey has the lived experience of being a Black woman in the United States, as well as experience with living, working, and servicing the Black and African American populations as a Black librarian, and she brings these experiences and perspectives to the study. As an untenured Black librarian, Tracey knew that there was a lot at stake for her to participate in such a study. Would her predominantly White, tenured colleagues find this to be a provocative or controversial study, and how would this affect her when colleagues vote on her own tenure and promotion case in a few years? After taking some time to think about it and speaking to tenured colleagues whom she trusted, Tracey felt comfortable moving forward, and we designed a study that explores Black and African American college students' experiences with libraries before and during college. This study forms the basis of this report. As we discuss in our companion report, *Narratives of (Dis)Enfranchisement: Reckoning with the History of Libraries and the Black and African American Experience*, research and scholarship about Black and African American library users are largely absent from the library and information science (LIS) literature, despite our profession's declared values related to equity, diversity, inclusivity, and social justice.

RACE AND THE LIS PROFESSION

The LIS profession is overwhelmingly White, and current statistics indicate that the overall demographics

of the profession are not shifting toward diversity. According to 2010 ALA Counts data, 88 percent of librarians were White, even though White people made up only 63 percent of the US population around the same time (Bourg, 2014). At that same time, only 5 percent of librarians were Black or African American. More recent demographic data indicates that this percentage has remained static (Department for Professional Employees, 2020; Rosa & Henke, 2017), and recent statistics about library school enrollment indicate that it will continue to remain static (ALISE, 2020).

One may wonder why the demographics of the profession matter if LIS professionals have made a commitment to serve their diverse user communities. Although this commitment might be genuine, many White librarians are likely unaware of their own implicit and learned biases, as well as 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. 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 (Annamma et al., 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Burke, 2019). This approach might be deployed with good intentions, but it ends up maintaining White supremacy and toxicity in the long term. 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, they deny 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.

Many have argued that the LIS profession has indeed taken a color-evasive or race-neutral approach.

Tracie D. Hall (2012), who is the current executive director of the American Library Association, 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” (p. 198). Instead, the profession has focused more broadly on diversity and multiculturalism (Hudson, 2017; Pawley, 2006). Diversity and multiculturalism are important, but focusing just on these will not move the profession toward inclusivity, equity, and justice.

Although some research explores the experiences of Black and African American library users, as discussed in *Narratives of (Dis)Enfranchisement*, 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.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

In the chapters that follow, we dive into the library experiences that the 15 Black and African American

students who participated in our study shared with us. In *Narratives of (Dis)Enfranchisement*, we contextualized these experiences by describing the racialized histories of our institutions, as well as the contemporary legacies of that history. In designing this study and conducting research for this book, we were disturbed at the exclusion of Black and African American library users’ voices from our profession’s literature. Until relatively recently, very little contemporary research or scholarship has focused specifically on the library experiences of this user population. Given the race-evasive nature of our profession, perhaps this should not be surprising. If we are truly committed to serving the Black and African American users who come through our doors, we must explore their experiences with libraries, including their needs and expectations. Although a single exploratory study such as this one cannot accomplish this task fully, we believe it is a start.

Critical race theory (CRT) did not explicitly inform the design of our study, but we believe that this study is aligned with CRT. CRT provides a theoretical foundation for exploring the ways in which BIPOC experience oppression while also considering other facets of their identity (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, (dis)ability, etc.). Although scholars have articulated the core tenets of CRT in various ways, some of the commonly identified tenets include the acknowledgment that race and racism play central roles in the daily lives of BIPOC, the fact that color-evasive ideologies maintain the status quo, and the importance of counternarratives that elevate and honor the voices and lived experiences of BIPOC in moving toward a more just society. In particular, we intend for our study to elevate the voices and experiences of library users from whom we rarely hear. We hope that this study will be a conversation starter for considering how we can ensure that we are providing equitable and welcoming environments for our Black and African American library users, as well as meeting their needs and expectations.

Some of our White readers might find themselves feeling angry, frustrated, defensive, guilty, or upset when reading particular portions of this report and might be tempted to stop reading. It is possible that

you have already experienced these emotions reading this introduction. We encourage you to take a moment to identify what caused the reaction or emotion, temporarily set it aside, continue reading, and then return to that reaction or emotion for some reflection. These feelings are part of a normal reaction to feeling racial discomfort (Tatum, 2017). Our goal is to be direct about how racism manifests in our libraries, schools, universities, and society. That is a difficult pill for many White people to swallow, especially when dominant narratives about race falsely state that racism is a thing of the past and that current disparities in economic status or educational outcomes are a result of deficient cultural values rather than race (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). If you are a White colleague, we hope that you are reading this book because you are committed to being antiracist, both personally and professionally. If you are in the early stages of this journey, please know that being uncomfortable is part of this journey, as antiracist work forces one to consider one's own role in maintaining the oppression of BIPOC.

STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

In the chapters that follow, we share the library experiences of the 15 Black and African American undergraduate students who participated in our study. Immediately following this introduction is a short chapter that describes our study, including how it was designed and how we collected and analyzed data. We then dedicate one chapter each to the students' experiences with public, school (K–12), and academic libraries. Before concluding, we take an in-depth look at the role(s) race played in the students' library experiences, including both the positive and the negative. In the final chapter, we offer reflections and recommendations for our White library peers, such as guidance for developing an antiracist mindset and more equitable service provision.

NOTE

1. At the time, Mr. Cornute was the program coordinator for the Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at The Ohio State University. Dr. Travers was the graduate administrative associate at the Student Life Multicultural Center and a doctoral student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program at The Ohio State University. He has since completed his doctoral work and earned his PhD.

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