ALA Editions Special Reports: Narratives of (Dis)enfranchisement: Reckoning with the History of Libraries and the Black and African American Experience

By Tracey Overbey and Amanda L. Folk. Chicago: ALA Editions, 2022.
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Tracey Overbey and Amanda L. Folk's work on Black American library experience is certainly one of the most significant contributions to the field of library science in the past decade. It is in some ways regrettable that, apart from few notable exceptions mentioned by the authors themselves, such an in-depth study has taken so long to be published. With that said, as a librarian of color working largely with communities of color, I am very grateful that the narratives and experiences of BIPOC patrons and users are finally being acknowledged and discussed.

Both past and present experience are of central concern for Overbey and Folk. As noted in the preface, the report has two purposes. The first is "to provide an overview of the historical exclusion and disenfranchisement of Black Americans from libraries" (p. 1), and the second is to explore how systematic racism and bias currently affect and influence the library profession. The catalysts for the report were the police killings of unarmed Black people in the mid-2010s and early 2020s and the protests that followed in the wake of these events.

The authors contend that the library sciences are not exempt from the same type of racial attitudes and problems that plague larger American society and that, furthermore, libraries themselves have a long history of racial exclusion. The consequences of this history of exclusion are seen in the current state of librarianship in the United States. Drawing on the work of Chris Bourg in his 2014 report entitled "The Unbearable Whiteness of Librarianship,"[1] the authors note that 88 percent of librarians are white and that Black librarians only make up 4 to 5 percent of the entire workforce of librarians in America. These statistics appear to be the most recent available (ALA's statistics provided on its website date from a 1998 study[2]), and for Overbey and Folk they are problematic, most notably because white librarians are often "unaware of their own biases and the way race affects people of color" (p. 2). As the authors bluntly put it, "we have no reason to believe that when BIPOC users pass through the doors of our buildings [libraries] and enter our virtual spaces that they suddenly enter a race-neutral zone" (p. 3).

The report begins by looking at the African roots of education and librarianship as a deliberate pushback against the "long history of ignoring the contributions of Africans and African Americans to the development of educational institutions" (p. 7) around the world. In the West, we are accustomed to highlighting the role of medieval European institutions such as Oxford and Heidelberg in creating the

modern educational system. Overbey and Folk note the little-known fact that the oldest continuous university in the world is located not in Europe, but in Africa: the University of Al-Karaouine in Morocco predates most European schools by several centuries.

The authors also emphasize the contributions of ancient Egypt, or Kemet, to modern education. In doing this, Overbey and Folk make the deliberate and somewhat controversial decision to identify ancient Egypt with Black Africa. In their explanation for this, the authors cite the work of I. M. Zulu,[3] who notes the historical tendency in academia to "take Egypt and Egyptian history out of Africa intellectually, and thus substitute a Euro-centric politicization of history that confirms the racist notion that Africa has no history of importance" (p. 8).

The report then transitions from ancient history to the modern era, looking at the interaction of Black Americans with three different types of libraries: public, school, and academic. Regarding public libraries, Overbey and Folk note that the phenomenon of private Black libraries in the early to mid-twentieth century arose in reaction to the exclusionary policies of American public libraries and the allocation of state and city funding to all-white libraries. Moreover, the authors argue that the American Library Association (ALA) itself was in many ways responsible for inequalities in the library system at this time. For example, the ALA created an initiative directed toward "Negro," or Black, patrons in 1921 that disbanded after only two years. Four years later, in 1925, ALA agreed to educate Black librarians but only for work in segregated libraries.

Overbey and Folk's treatment of the Black experience in public libraries is not limited solely to observations regarding inequality and discrimination. They also provide an excellent historical survey of Black librarianship highlighting such figures as W. E. B. DuBois and the success of the Tulsa library (destroyed in the 1921 Tulsa race riot). They also discuss the contributions of Black librarianship to the civil rights movement of the 1960s as seen with library "read-ins" (similar to sit-ins but directed at white-only libraries) and the establishment of "freedom libraries." The purpose of the latter was "to provide Black and African American citizens access to books, job training, cultural programming, political dialogue, and a place of community" (p. 14).

Overbey and Folk's historical survey continues to contemporary times with insights and statistics related to Black patrons and users in the last decade. Of note among these insights is that "Black and African Americans were more likely to ask for help from a librarian and use computers or the internet at libraries, but they were less likely to borrow books" (p. 16). Interestingly, response time for answering emails and requests from Black patrons by public librarians was 4 percent less than that for white ones, which Overbey and Folk attribute to the continued racial climate of public libraries even decades after the civil rights movement and its success in integrating libraries.

In contrast to their treatment of the history of public libraries, Overbey and Folk's discussion of Black American experience in school libraries is far less thorough and detailed. This is to some extent by their own admission. As they note at the beginning of this section, "we believe it is important to consider school libraries within the broader context of K–12 public education to gain a holistic view of Black and African American students' collective experience with schooling" (p. 20). Much of this section looks at the battle to desegregate American school systems in the 1960s and 1970s and at certain problems that persist into the twenty-first century.

The last section of this historical overview, dealing with Black experience in academic libraries, looks at the legacy of segregation and discrimination in American academia. Overbey and Folk examine the rise of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as a response to Black exclusion from predominantly white universities (PWIs). They again highlight the significance of DuBois, first mentioned in the discussion of public libraries, this time in relation to the tensions between him and another prominent Black thinker, Booker T. Washington. Whereas the former wanted to mirror the classically inspired education of PWIs, the latter focused on vocational skills. This would have lasting influence in the formation of Black academic libraries and their respective emphases.

Overbey and Folk make several observations in this section about the current state of academic libraries as they relate to Black American students in higher education. For example, they write that "Black and African American students seem to be better represented in the academic libraries literature relative to other library types," though they also note that "their voices are still mostly absent" (p. 40). More significantly, Overbey and Folk cite a study done in the 1980s showing a direct correlation between studying in the library and retention of Black students. The study concluded that academic libraries were an essential component to Black student success. At the same time, the authors point out that Black students felt that academic libraries were spaces that "represented Whiteness and that reference interactions could be perceived as condescending" (p. 40).

The closing chapter of the report highlights the continued need to explore the experiences of BIPOC library users outside of the closed surveys frequently cited in the report itself. Interestingly, the report does not suggest that white librarians are unable to support the needs of Black patrons but does recommend that non-BIPOC librarians do more research and assessment to aid them in working with communities of color. Overbey and Folk conclude that while libraries are currently negligent in acknowledging the needs of Black American patrons, this can be remedied by addressing the following questions:

- How are we acknowledging that BIPOC regularly experience racism as they navigate their daily lives? Have the white collaborators (librarians, allies, etc.) accepted this to be true?

- How are we centering, elevating, and honoring the voices and experiences of our BIPOC participants?
- Are we providing a safe space for our BIPOC participants to tell their stories?
- How are we accounting for the multiple aspects of our participants' identities, such as gender, religious affiliation, sexuality, or (dis)ability?
- How do we intend to use what we learn to transform our services, programs, policies, spaces, collections and resources, or organizational culture to be more just, equitable, and antiracist?
- How do we hold one another accountable for doing this work, and are we ready to make a commitment to having difficult conversations with one another (p. 55)?

As a librarian of color myself, I felt deeply impacted by Overbey and Folk's work in this report. One area where I thought the report was lacking was in providing information on the experience of Black librarians such as myself. Does statistical or survey data exist that suggests that Black librarians may or may not face the same type of issues that Black patrons encounter? It should be noted that Overbey and Folk briefly mention this at the close of the report in talking about microaggressions and the prevalent view that Black librarians are less qualified than white ones.

I am also curious as to how historical issues related to the Black experience with libraries may affect or influence other subfields within library sciences. To use my situation as an example, my own background and training is in archival studies. Does subconscious neglect of BIPOC concerns possibly extend to the focus and emphases of my subfield, and if so in what ways? It should be noted that other researchers have indeed addressed this question in recent years, most notably Alex H. Poole in his work on the Black archivist Harold T. Pinkett and Rabia Gibbs in her treatment of the history of Black archives. Overbey and Folk do mention instances of discrimination regarding reference librarianship and reference librarian interaction with Black patrons, but I would have appreciated their insights in regard to other departments and fields as well.

I was especially drawn to the question raised in the closing section of the report as to which framework should be used in examining the relationship between race and libraries. Overbey and Folk propose two specific frameworks: whiteness and critical race theory (CRT). Given the controversy over the latter, I had some concerns as to whether those most in need of understanding this dynamic (e.g., white librarians) might unduly reject such a framework. I am surprised that Overbey and Folk did not propose or create their own framework in this regard, and I wonder why they did not.

In conclusion, this report on the experience of Black Americans in libraries is a highly praiseworthy effort. As a Black librarian myself, it inspired considerable introspection. In what ways might I unconsciously maintain systems of discrimination

and exclusion in the context of my own library, not only in my interactions with other people of color but in the very content and materials maintained by the library? Overbey and Folk's work here is a must-read and will surely be a valuable resource for many years to come.

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Notes

1. Chris Bourg, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Librarianship," *Feral Librarian* (blog), March 3, 2014, https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2014/03/03/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-librarianship.
2. "Librarianship & Library Staff Statistics," American Library Association, https://www.ala.org/tools/research/librarystaffstats.
3. I. M. Zulu, "The Ancient Kemetic Roots of Library and Information Science," in *Culture Keepers: Enlightening and Empowering Our Communities: Proceedings of the First National Conference of African American Librarians, September 4–6, 1992, Columbus, OH*, ed. Stanton F. Biddle and the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (Westwood, MA, 1993), 246–66.
4. Alex H. Poole, "Harold T. Pinkett and the Lonely Crusade of African American Archivists in the Twentieth Century," *American Archivist* 80, no. 2 (2017): 296–335, https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-80.2.296; Rabia Gibbs, "The Heart of the Matter: The Developmental History of African American Archives," *American Archivist* 75, no. 1 (2012): 196–204, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.75.1.n1612w0214242080.