Voices on the Margins: Libraries, Community Agency, and Black Public Spheres

Elizabeth Johnson
College of Southern Idaho
Donald Culverson
Governors State University

Abstract

Scholars of library and information sciences have addressed the critical roles of libraries in energizing the public sphere, or the social spaces in which ideas and opinions are exchanged. But seldom is the discussion of race, racism, and marginalization examined in public libraries. The concept of the public sphere represents a critical foundation for examining the roles libraries play in illuminating voices in the civic culture of a society. Who is the public, and why are their voices important? How can libraries respond to the reconfiguration of contemporary publics? How should libraries engage in the production, organization, and distribution of information access? Drawing from public sphere perspectives, this paper explores not just how libraries can be more responsive to the changing political, economic, social and educational climates of the 21st century, but also how expanded conceptualization of public roles might contribute to democratic revitalization.

Keywords: Public libraries, Dr. Elfreda Chatman, Black library professionals & patrons, and agency

In recent years scholars of library and information sciences have addressed the critical roles of libraries in maintaining and energizing the public sphere. While some of this work has been prompted by the urgency in keeping pace with technological developments of an information society, other parts of it have illuminated how political and economic transformations of the last few decades have ushered in performances of governing values and procedures that undermine meaningful democratic participation. These institutional alterations raise important questions about libraries as providers of critical skills in an environment that is

too often dominated by deference to market priorities. Who is the public, and why are their voices important? How can libraries respond to the reconfiguration of contemporary publics? How should libraries engage in the production, organization, and distribution of information access? Drawing from public sphere perspectives this paper explores, not just how libraries can be more responsive to the changing political, economic, social and educational climates of the 21st century, but also how expanded conceptualization of public roles might contribute to democratic revitalization.

Guided by the work of German social theorist Jurgen Habermas, John Buschman's (2003) *Dismantling the Public Sphere*, outlines how in recent decades market-oriented public policies have constrained libraries and their relationships to publics. Instead of legitimacy derived from providing beneficial information to a free and democratic society, library justification has come to rely on assessment of the high dividends it provides to the community. Buschman (2005) grounds his defense of libraries on the concept of the public sphere as a critical space where ideas and opinions exist, are developed outside of government, and remain free from private sector control. Public institutions such as libraries, schools, universities, and museums, reinforce the public sphere because the civic discourses taking place within them are essential toward energizing democracy.

The concept of the public sphere represents a critical foundation for examining the roles libraries play in illuminating voices in the civic culture of a society. Furthermore, critical examination of the concept strengthens understandings of contemporary challenges faced by public institutions during an era of ongoing efforts to legitimize the dominance of capital in the construction of public space and citizenship. For example, Fraser (1990) contends that Habermas' constructs 19th century European public spheres as elitist, male dominated enclaves (p. 60). The absence of women undermines universalist claims about the legitimacy of such imagined spheres.

Also, Fraser proposes expansion of the concept to multiple spheres instead of a singular one. Similarly, Houston A. Baker Jr. (1994) argues that such white male-dominated spheres in 19th and early 20th century Western societies cannot be separated from the broader context of slavery, colonial domination, and imperialism. He contends that the 1950s and 60s civil rights era constituted, not only challenges to the institution of segregation, but also to notions of what was the public sphere, and who should have access to it. While there are ongoing debates as to

148

the utility, form, or efficacy of a contemporary Black public sphere,[1] its role in changing the contours of American democracy is undeniable. It can be viewed as the underside, or ignored dimensions of established political discourses on democracy. From the colonial era to the present, African American group efforts to make sense of institutional political arrangements go hand-in-hand with construction of alternative visions of possibilities for the meaning and practice of American democracy (McHenry, 2002).

Recent work on the Black public sphere continues this trend of enlarging and refining critical perspectives for situating movements for racial equality into a broader context. Brenkman (1995) reiterates the importance of the Black public sphere as a potentially transformative space. The act of bringing issues to public spaces—forums, discussion groups, churches, artist collectives and other settings—creates opportunities to engage broad publics, and produce new grammars of political action and empowerment. He cites the experiences of Malcolm X as illustrating the value of using public space as a forum for engagement and refinement of individuals, as well as public communication capabilities. The interaction that Malcolm X enjoyed with audiences in the U. S., Britain, and the Middle East, contributed immeasurably to his legitimacy as a voice for change.

In a similar vein, civil rights and other activism of that era are best viewed as on-going efforts to work out ideas and strategies among varied publics, rather than presenting simple blueprints for change.[2] A critical distinction must be made here that a public sphere is not a movement, but refers to regularized citizen access to mechanisms that facilitate discourse on matters of importance to varied publics. The focus is on how voices arrive and circulate in public realms, more so than the resonance of those voices with current discourses.

Libraries can be viewed as one the foundations of Black public spheres in several ways suggestive of Habermas' 19th century European public spheres. They are open to all, with no group having priority in their usage. Finding spaces for creating formalized public libraries in

---

[1] Black Public Sphere Collective (1995), edited authors of *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture*, defines the Black public sphere as "a wider sphere of critical practice and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute a challenge of the exclusionary violence of much public space" (p. 3).
[2] Other dimensions of Black activism included: Black religious organizations, Black cultural revolution, Black nationalism, and Black artist movement all contributed to the progression of ideas about struggle.

Black communities in the South can be traced back to at least the late-19th century rise of Black training schools (Fultz, 2006, p. 339). During this era, philanthropists occasionally made donations to establish public libraries with the objective of empowering communities and potential workers. For example, Andrew Carnegie established many public libraries across the U.S., with some designated exclusively for white patrons, labeled "library grants" that often-required financial backing in each city to maintain the buildings[3] (Knott, 2015, p. 62). When the Western Colored Branch library initially opened in Louisville, Kentucky 1905, as seen in Photo 1, it consisted of three rented rooms in a private home (Newman, 2017).

   This was the nation's first full-service free public library open to and staffed by Blacks (Ryan, 2016). Three years later, 400 people attended the opening ceremony and toured this new facility that was funded with Carnegie financing as seen in Photo 2 (Louisville Western Library Branch, n.d.). Photo 3 is a 21st century image of the Louisville Western Branch Library (Newman, 2017). In 1908, Rev. Thomas Fountain Blue was the first head librarian at Louisville Western Branch Library, as seen in Photo 4 (Knott Malone, 1995, p. 162). His assistant, Rachel David Harris, succeeded him as the head librarian at his passing, as seen in Photo 5 (Knott Malone, 1995, p.162).

Photo 1 - unknown photographer. (1905).
Western Colored Branch Library at the
home of William M. Andrews.

---

[3] Cheryl Knott dedicates an entire chapter to the discussion of Carnegie public libraries and their impact on Blacks in *Not Free, Not for All: Public Libraries in the Age of Jim Crow*.

Photo 2 - unknown photographer. (1908).
New Western Colored Branch Library.

Photo 3 – Nyttend. (2012) *Front of the Louisville
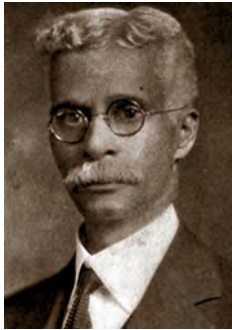Free Public Library*

Photo 4 - unknown photographer. (1922).
Thomas F. Blue. [Photograph].

Photo 5 - unknown photographer. (1935).
Rachel David Harris. [Photograph]

The historical role of freedom libraries, dating back to the early 20th century, was to assist and expand Black engagement in public discussions and political movements. Freedom libraries served as critical elements in Black public spheres. This was an era when many Blacks in the South were routinely beaten, arrested, and often lost their jobs for attempting to register for library cards (Wheeler et al., 2004). These projects may have been the impetus for freedom libraries in the region during the 1960s that evolved through efforts of working and middle-class Blacks. Furthermore, such efforts continue today.

Historically, there have been numerous efforts made by Black donors to assist in the spreading of social justice and Black public spheres by making not only monetary contributions, but also lending their legitimacy. In 2001, the Louisville Western Branch library sought contributions from philanthropists for the continuation of classes and services. And one

respondent was the musician Prince, who donated $12,000 anonymously, as seen in Photo 6.[4] While this was not made public until after Prince's passing, he and others of that stature have an established record of responding to needs within Black communities. The check in Photo 6 hangs on a wall in the Louisville Western Branch Library to serve as a teaching tool on library tours for the next generation.[5]
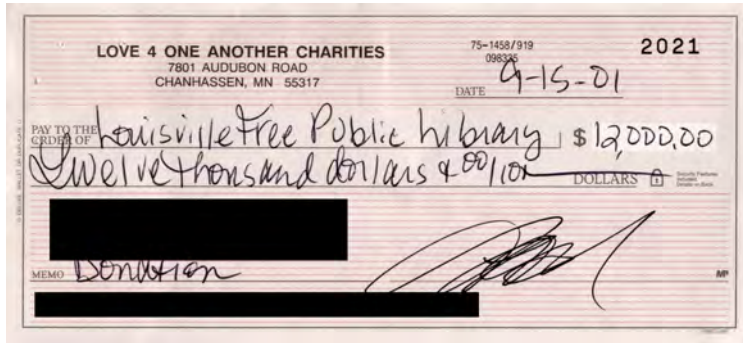

Photo 6 - unknown photographer. (2001). *Musician Prince donates $12,000 to Western Library*. [Photograph].

Intellectual property rights scholar Ben White (2012) wrote "Guaranteeing Access to Knowledge: The Role of Libraries." On the surface one might think that in 2012 White would have given a history of inequalities of access to libraries by people of color, because there was so much evidence of racial conflict in Black communities (e.g. inequality, health crises, educational disparities, mass incarceration, etc.), but such was not the case. He did however give a story of a boy in Malawi who checked out a book about windmills from his local library (White, 2012). White further explains, somewhat reflecting the Old South and boot-strap theory with a silver lining for the boy's find,

> On the strength of this experience he [William Kamkwamba] went on to study at a leading U.S. university. That one book not only changed his life; it also transformed the lives of those in his village community. Such stories explain why many countries are eager to ensure that libraries continue to provide access to knowledge, learning and ideas…

---

[4] Woods, N. Telephone interview. 26 Aug. 2021.
[5] Ibid.

>Libraries are synonymous with education and offer countless learning opportunities that can fuel economic, social and cultural development. (White, 2012)

While White's observation inspires confidence about the potential emanating from access to books, it may underestimate the damages from systematic denial of library services. For example, in 1937, 83% of Blacks nationwide were without library service of any kind (Selby, 2019, p.14). This continued in the early 1940s where 75% of Black in the south lacked any public library service (Jones, 2004, p. 21). By 1949, Blacks in many rural communities were still lacking services to any library (Selby, 2019, p.15). Part of the historical role of freedom libraries was to challenge these inequalities by expanding opportunities for Black engagement in public discussions and political movements. This is part of the discussion that White and others fail to discuss when exploring the history of library access.

Perhaps no place better illustrates how access to information altered the political landscape than in the South during the civil rights struggle. Selby's (2019) *Freedom Libraries*, illustrates the importance of informal libraries as critical agents of change in response to deficiencies in institutional mechanisms. Selby illuminates the rise of over 80 parallel libraries initiated and staffed by civil rights voter registration workers throughout the Deep South in the years between the *Brown v. Board of Education,* 1954 decision and the passage of the *Civil Rights Act*, 1964. Varying in size and quality, these projects created the first contact that many Blacks had with a library. Access to them became a catalyst for energizing efforts to end segregation, but also in changing how institutions respond to public needs.

Furthermore, Selby documents the historical importance of access to books and libraries in the making of ideas that enlarged the parameters of democracy. Given Selby's focus on the historical importance of libraries as resources for change prompts us to ask whether those standards are being met today.[6] As alluded to earlier, for the last few decades libraries of all types have continually confronted budgetary challenges in a political and social climate that undercuts their broader public missions, while emphasizing the materialist implications of their multiple roles.

---

[6] The R. B. Annis Reading Room at the downtown Indianapolis Public Library offers an experience of connectedness and information gathering of renowned Indiana Blacks (Indianapolis Public Library, n.d.). One can access this Reading Room at the following website: https://www.indypl.org/locations/central-library/center-for-Black-literature-and-culture.

How might we begin to assess the role of library administrators that historically and presently block entry for Blacks into libraries? Examples include Black graduate library students who experience hostile treatment. In November 2018, library personnel at the West University branch of Harris County Public Library in Houston, Texas called the police on Ashly Horace to have her removed from the library (Simon, 2018). Horace, a graduate library science student was viewed suspiciously because she was observing the story time event for children, but did not have any children with her. She had applied to be a story assistant volunteer, so her name and was known to the staff (Simon, 2018). Horace told the manager, "If my skin wasn't brown, you wouldn't be doing this. And she kind of looked, like, shocked" (Kenney, 2018, para. 11). Horace wants the branch manager removed from her position because of such discriminatory practices (Simon, 2018).

A similar experience in 2018 occurred with graduate library student Juán-Pabló González having the police called on him while studying at the Catholic University of America's law library in Washington, D.C. (Waters, 2018). The six-minute video of his experience and his comments as to what it felt like during the encounter can be viewed at Michael Harriot's essay/video, "Librarian Calls Cops on Student for Brazen Attempt at #StudyingWhileBlack" (Harriot, 2018). In spite of such challenges, Gonzalez completed his MLIS degree and secured employment as a medical librarian at Howard University's Louis Stokes Health Sciences Library (Howard University - The Louis Stokes Health Science Library, 2019). His choice to share the video speaks to the problem of using the library while Black, which has been all too common in numerous venues.[7] Such venues were discussed in Jarrett Drapier's 2021 lecture "Let's Talk about Policing and Libraries." This lecture focused on Evanston and Skokie, Illinois libraries. The problem, as Drapier explained, is that often white women librarians are unfamiliar with Black men's expressions, and see them as threatening. This often results in Black people having the police – "armed forces" - called on them (Drapier, 2021). Drapier's lecture offers an understanding of how some staff and patrons conclude that Black men do not exhibit the requisite behavior of the library space based on how the Black men look, act, or sound; thus,

---

[7] These students shared similar library experiences as the Tougaloo Nine (Momodu, 2106). One may view the pictures and narrative of the Tougaloo Nine at the Black Past website https://www.Blackpast.org/african-american-history/groups-organizations-african-american-history/the-tougaloo-nine-1961/.

Black men don't get to enjoy the library spaces/public spaces free of threat (Drapier, 2021). Because of such problems, some patrons in Colorado and California have joined the police-free library movement that searches for more equitable treatment to all patrons, but more specifically BIPOC (Fassler & Ventura, 2021).

James R. Wright, who managed the Rochester (N.Y.) Public Library in the 1970s wrote the following thoughts during the "Me" era,[8]

> Today we need a public library which will provide for pluralism; which welcomes new ideas and approaches to the problem of services to minorities; which is aware that information, deprivation, for his segment of its public, is a serious matter. The library should recruit a new and different kind of librarian, who sees his role as an information specialist. It should let library education know clearly the type of person that is needed to do the job in the field... Most of them [Black students] enter library school socially committed and come out frustrated and with cramped spirits. (Wright, 1972, p. 224-225)

Not much has changed from Wright's insight about public libraries and library schools. Table 1 offers suggestions of what library professionals could do in changing such narratives.

While the challenges to Black patron usage of libraries is not universal, the absence of legitimacy afforded their presence has been reflected in the experiences of some Black library professional staff members. A recent study by Swanson et al. (2018) uncovered the range of lived experiences of academic librarians of color and documented those in supervisory positions in which their levels of competency were often questioned, and they faced microaggressions, and received unfair treatment. Their findings suggest that questioning of academic library professionals based solely on their race, should be challenged by professionals of all races. Alanna Aiko Moore, president of the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA) has made such a pledge, "I, am privileged to dismantle oppressive systems in our library institutions and the wider community. What will you do to actively work for racial justice and to support Black people" (Hall, 2020, para. 41)? Moore's ideas were echoed by Jina DuVernay (2019), an archivist at Emory University Libraries and member of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) by emphasizing how negative interactions with library professionals do nothing to inspire future librarians (pp. 6-7).

---

[8] Tom Wolfe coined the term, "The Me" decade, in his 1976 essay with same title in *New York* magazine (Wolfe, 2008).

Table 1

Recommendations for Library Administrators

Prevention of Access	Suggestions for Opening Access
Denial of physical access into the library	• Inviting community organizations to use libraries • Community outreach through other socio-cultural institutions
Questioning one's right to be in the library	• Recognize the history of libraries excluding patrons and considering not repeating the past. • Greet patrons as they enter to make a positive first impression.
Calling police to remove people	• Training security to work with patrons instead of against patrons. • Have staff consider being seen in neutral position when interacting with patrons as opposed to the governing officals.
Denying community access in using rooms/spaces in the library	• Promoting general health initiatives/forums • Forums that address specific community needs (e.g. courses on tax preparation, meal preparation)

Note. Table 1 offers suggestions of what library professionals could do in changing narratives that prevent all patrons from equal access to libraries as public spheres.

Recent personnel trends in the library profession raise questions about its institutional capacity to respond to changes, especially in regard to racial and ethnic insensitivity. The 2020 U.S. labor statistics for library science occupations are noted in Table 2. It reflects the number and percentages of employees in various library professions, showing the gross racial disparities in the library science field. Not much has changed since 1922 when only one integrated library employed a sole Black librarian, and token representation of Black interests was the norm for the American Library Association (Jones, Jr., 2004, p. 19). Even in the 1970s, Louise Giles reported, "If library school graduates of the fifties and sixties could be selected from several job offers, the

situation is almost the exact opposite today. The job outlook is bleak for those entering the profession" (Giles, 1972, p. 258).

Table 2

Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey[9]*

	For 2020 – Number in thousands	Percentage of total employed	Percentage of total employed	Percentage of total employed	Percentage of total employed	Percentage of total employed
	Total Employed	Women	White	Black	Asian	Hispanic/ Latino
Total, 16 years old and over	147,795	46.8%	78.0%	12.1%	6.4%	17.6%
Education, training, and library occupations	8,902	73.5%	82.0%	10.0%	4.9%	10.9%
Librarians and media collections specialists	176	83.2%	83.1%	9.5%	3.5%	9.9%
Library technicians	34	-[10]	-	-	-	-
Other educational instruction	176	73.4%	86.5%	7.2%	4.0%	12.5%

[9] Source: United States Department of Labor 2021.

[10] The dash (-) indicates no data or data that do not meet publication criteria (values not shown where base is less than 50,000).

and library workers						
Library assistants, clerical	65	86.0%	82.8%	10.3%	5.7%	9.0%

* Estimates for the above race groups (White, Black or African American, and Asian) do not sum to totals because data are not presented for all races. Persons whose ethnicity is identified as Hispanic or Latino/a may be of any race.

Note. Table 2 reflects the number and percentages of employees in various library professions denoting racial disparities.

For many senior administrative positions in academic and public libraries, one of the following degrees is often required from an ALA accredited master's programs: Master of Library Science (MLS), Master of Arts, Master of Librarianship, Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS), and/or a Master of Science. In 2018, the percentage of minority women who completed the credential requirements of MLIS programs were: Black 7.4%, Hispanic/Latina 12.5%, and Asian/Pacific Islander 3.5%. Kirby McCurtis is changing the perception of credentialed library professionals in the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) as its 2020-2021 president. She serves as library manager at the Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon (Schulte-Cooper, 2019). McCurtis is very instrumental in promoting the power of fiction in helping people become antiracist, and the role of libraries in the Black Lives Matter movement by offering workshops and Black Storytime group at the Multnomah library (Novotny, 2020). In addition, McCurtis served as a moderator in 2017 for the Black Caucus of the American Library Association's annual conference where the topic focused on efforts librarians can make for more equitable and just services in programming impacting Black youth (The Black Caucus of American Library Association, 2017). While there and is no one-size-fits-all remedy, it is clear that the profession would be remiss if it ignored the data of small representation of BIPOC library professionals and their efforts to service BIPOC populations.
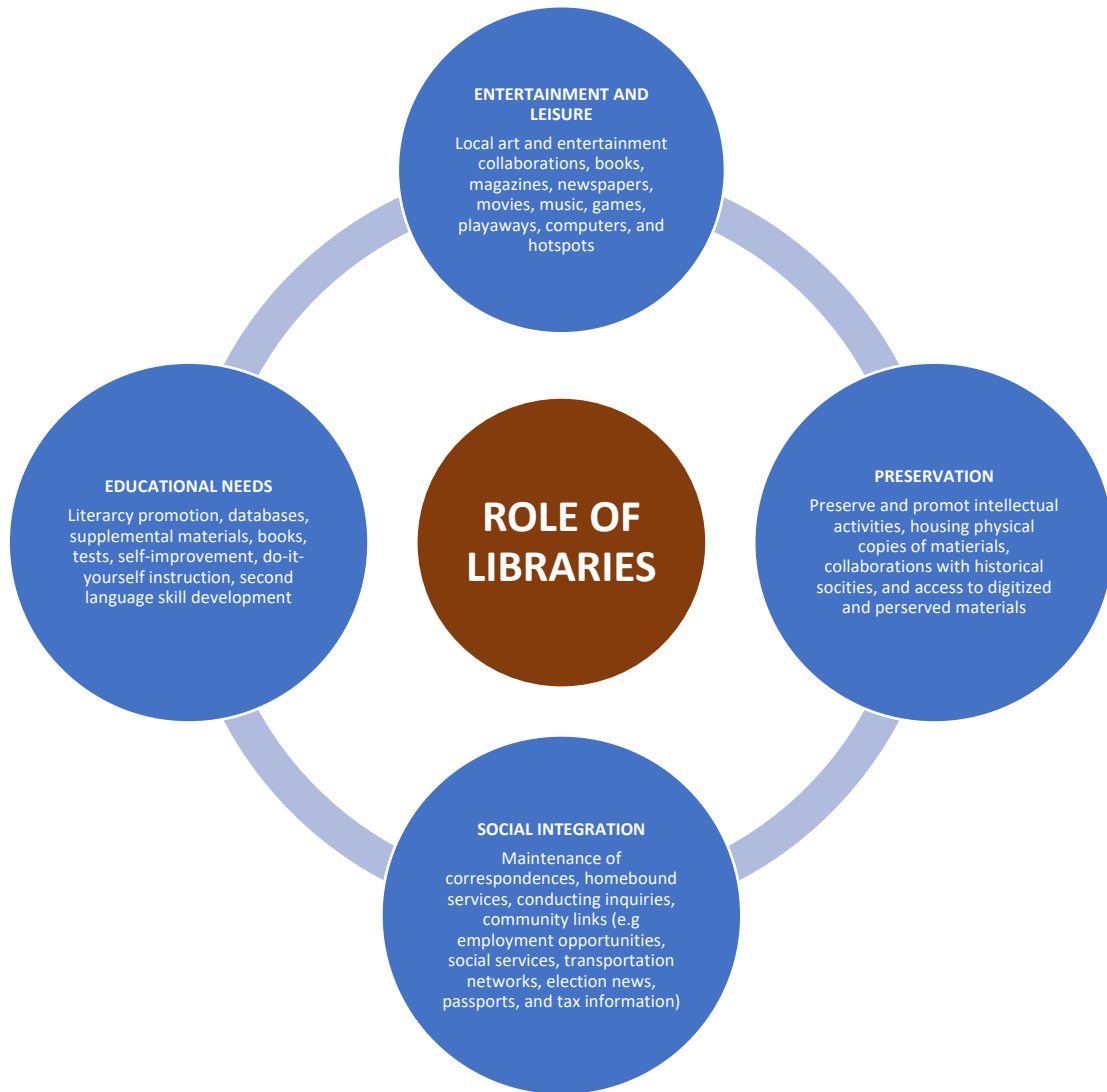
The profession can look within to appreciate the critical roles that Black librarians have played in expanding services to underserved communities, and ensuring that service levels

remain as high as possible in those settings. As a trailblazer, Carrie C. Robinson served as a school librarian in South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Alabama from 1940 to 1960 (Wiegand, 2020). Robinson spent a great deal of her work history in Alabama, where she experienced Jim Crow practices on jobs and in various organizations. In her reflections of the Alabama Library Association, she said,

> So incensed with their bigotry, insensitivity, and indeed their feelings that any Black librarian stood to gain anything more than personal and professional degradation by joining such an organization, I was compelled to so inform them. I vividly recall the expeditious adjournment of that meeting. (Barrett & Bishop, 1998, p.149)

Further detailed research by Wayne Wiegand shows that Robinson sued the Alabama Department of Education, won the settlement, was promoted, and eventually became the director of the library media program at Auburn University (Weigand, 2020). Robinson challenged her employer and professional organizations biases, revealing how they were not fighting for the rights of all (West, 2021, p.7). Figure 1 offers an understanding of the varying roles that libraries play.

A more recent innovator was university library professor Elfreda Chatman (1999), who conducted extensive research on understudied and minority groups, to illuminate the multi-dimensionality of discrimination as regards access to information. Chatman contributed to broadening public comprehension of the effects of racism, while revealing an array of personal resources, sensibilities and skills mobilized by people living on the margins. What Chatman investigated and theorized over four decades ago still resonates with challenges faced by the library and information sciences. Essayist-poet and the president of the Mellon Foundation, Elizabeth Alexander, emphasizes that since citizens of the U.S. are still learning who we are as a nation, we must confront racism by telling the stories of those who are seldom heard, using them to call this process into account (Alexander, 2020). She argues that library professionals must respond to this challenge, not just in preparing new generations of professionals, but also in deepening our understanding of history and calling into question institutional practices that maintain exclusion (Alexander et al., 2021). Furthermore, Alexander wants library professionals to be concerned, and ask questions such as: Whose stories are remembered, and who tells those stories? How are those stories contextualized and shared? What implications arise from these stories and for whom (Alexander et al., 2021).

Figure 1

Role of Libraries

ENTERTAINMENT AND LEISURE

Local art and entertainment collaborations, books, magazines, newspapers, movies, music, games, playaways, computers, and hotspots

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Literarcy promotion, databases, supplemental materials, books, tests, self-improvement, do-it-yourself instruction, second language skill development

ROLE OF LIBRARIES

PRESERVATION

Preserve and promot intellectual activities, housing physical copies of matierials, collaborations with historical socities, and access to digitized and perserved materials

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Maintenance of correspondences, homebound services, conducting inquiries, community links (e.g employment opportunities, social services, transportation networks, election news, passports, and tax information)

Note. Figure 1 denotes four varying roles that libraries play in meeting the needs of patrons: educational needs, entertainment and leisure, preservation of material, and social integration.

Chatman's research and adaptation of theories speak to the concerns that Alexander et al. raise. Chatman's background was social world focused and led her to a B.S. in education from Youngstown State University, an M.S.L.S. from Case Western Reserve University, and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley (Fulton, 2010, p. 239). She won the Association of

College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Best Book Award in 1995 for *The Information World of Retired Women*, and the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Best Book Award for *The Information World of Retired Women* (Fulton, 2010, p. 243). She published numerous articles and was the recipient of many additional prestigious awards. From 1998 until her passing in 2002, Chatman was Professor at the School of Information Studies at the Florida State University, Tallahassee (Fulton, 2010, p. 241). As explained by her contemporaries in the Library Research Round Table, Chatman used innovative qualitative methodologies and refined theoretical constructs, which yielded path-breaking insights from her research (American Library Association, 2002).

Research by Chatman (1999) can also be appreciated for shedding light on how libraries can expand contributions to develop healthy public spheres. For example, her ethnographic studies focused on ways to spread information, thereby enlarging the ability to participate in previously restricted arenas. It demonstrated how such barriers are sometimes institutionalized in the library sciences – from the physical institutions that house the information, to the library professionals who dispense or restrict the information, and the administrators who can act as gatekeepers, or gate openers with policies and procedures.

One reason for examining past practices and limited access to libraries is to show how they often overlapped with community members using them on a frequent and daily basis as part of their ongoing need to expand access to information unavailable through other channels. In addition, the history of employment of Blacks in libraries has at times been the most controversial, and research has documented exclusionary practices. For example, in Mississippi, Blacks were not allowed employment as librarians at public facilities where the patrons where predominately white until 1967 (Cook, 2013, p.150). This endurance in maintaining segregation reflected the prevailing social realities of de jure and de facto segregation that existed throughout the U.S. in the 20th century. In the 21st century there has been a pseudo post-racial posturing in the field that imagines movement past the long history of active discrimination. But Chatman (1999), through the construction and evolution of theoretical perspectives, holds libraries as socio-cultural institutions to task that such injustices cannot simply be forgotten. Through conscious construction of her ethnographic populations, Chatman's work holds the mirror to library professionals of all races to understand that their mission goes beyond passing out of

books. It should be anchored in expanding patron access to knowledge and ideas that disrupt existing states of affairs.

One of Chatman's (1986) ethnographic studies involved a population of 50 unemployed women who were the sole financial support for their families, and enrolled in a job-training program (pp. 379-80). Chatman was curious about the role libraries play in people's information-gathering behavior and thus determines how they become aware, use, and diffuse new information (Chatman, 1986, p. 377). This might be connected to the way that a library markets its services. Her concerns centered on the means of how empowered library professionals engage in knowledge sharing, while at the same time were selfless collaborators directing library clients towards autonomy (Harony, 2009, p. 41). For example, in 2010 with the U.S. economy in deep recession, more Americans were using the library at least once a week for a broad range of services: seeking career information, complete job applications, apply for unemployment, and seeking public assistance information, attending meetings and community events, participating in professional/career development trainings, and checking out books and DVDs (De Rosa et al., 2011, pp. 23-26). Chatman's work applies to contemporary library practices that are more covertly discriminatory in limiting patron's access to information if the library staff is of the belief that the patron is not a worthy applicant.

Chatman was a pioneer in library and information science theory and challenged libraries to develop information services to facilitate all groups (Fulton, 2010, p. 242). Chatman's foundation was social justice, which was evident in her writing and personal achievements, as she expressed in 1999,

> In my world, my self is shaped by a worldview, which accepts certain ways in which to speak, behave, and accept or reject information…
>
> It is a world in which there is a collective awareness about who is important and who is not; which ideas are relevant and which are trivial; whom to trust and whom to avoid. In its truest form, a small world is a community of like-minded individuals who share co-ownership of social reality. (Chatman, 1999, p. 211 & 213)

In fighting for social justice as more than mere words, libraries across the nation should also work to transform their cultures, change policies that disproportionately affect low-income patrons, and make equity and inclusion part of library systems' core values and mission (Contreras, 2021).

Conclusion

The preceding pages have explored the intersection of three challenges facing American society, (a) the role of libraries, (b) historical and recent evidence of institutionalized racial discrimination in libraries, and (c) the vitality of public spheres in democratic society. It is easy to focus on them separately, but their configuration offers a broader view of the role of the library as social, not just physical space. van Melik and Merry (2021) contend that the library represents a "diagnostic window" to society. Looking through that window enables us to see how well citizen have access to resources and perspectives essential to thriving in society, an index of how societal diversity is processed and institutionalized, and a measure of direct and indirect support for access to third spaces, those venues relatively independent of governmental and private sector control, that are vital for cultivating civil discourse in democratic societies.

Third spaces are not controlled by government or private sector, as seen in the three room library that emerged in 1905 in Louisville, Kentucky. Libraries constitute spaces where people can reflect, imagine, and engage in a democratic society. This is not reflected in how Horace and González were treated while working on their graduate library degrees. They should be a reflection of the society and that is a problem throughout America, but seen so clearly in the low percentage of BIPOC administrators and staff in libraries.

The American Library Association outlined the importance of libraries embracing social responsibility to facilitate the conversation and flow of perspectives among its constituents (American Library Association, n.d.). Addressing these intersections is urgent given the current deficits in numerous dimensions of American society. Intersections are not new, but part of the historical fabric of efforts that expanded the contours of American democracy. This sentiment was encouraged by Ann Knight Randall in the 1970s when she wrote,

> Too often, librarians are hemmed in by tradition and outmoded policies. Frequently, sparks to the imagination and allies must be found elsewhere. Experimentation and change is in the air. It is the task of librarians to seek out ways to meet the changing needs of their individual clientele. This is the reality and the professional dream. It is especially crucial to Black people that we provide easy access to the information that they need to survive, in education, employment and daily life. (Knight Randall, 1972, p. 301)

To execute this charge, Julius C. Jefferson, Jr., president of the ALA urged its members in 2020 to value diversity, equity, and inclusion at their libraries and communities by saying,

"We must move the needle of equity and justice in our Association and in the libraries where we work and the communities we serve" (Jefferson, Jr., 2020, p. 4). Racism in libraries is not just a BIPOC[11] problem. It is a societal challenge that keeps library professionals from fulfilling the mission and vision of the ALA. By not opening doors to our diverse patrons, we are holding our nation back from realizing its full potential (Harris, 2021).

Future research should focus on the response of libraries to the current national climate. For example, some libraries chose to be creative in promoting Black Lives Matter, and acknowledging the role of violence in our society. But many have gone beyond that, in their own ways, to show a since of solidary that will reach beyond episodic involvement. This goes hand-in-hand with mission, character, and role of freedom libraries in the 1960s. All can learn from the self-sacrificing initiatives of those who ran and supported freedom libraries seeing beyond their personal interests to the greater good of communities.

In addition, future research may also include diversity plans that have increased in many libraries since 2020 that ask the professionals to remember these questions when performing their duties: who is the public that I am serving, and why are their voices important? How can I, as a library professional, respond to the reconfiguration of contemporary publics? How should I, a library professional, most effectively engage in the production, organization, and distribution of information access on a daily basis? When these questions become even more personal, libraires may be more called to include active and on-going diversity in their year-long programming, as opposed to just various "months" because their actions will fulfill their vision and mission statements. Such diversity plans must go hand-in-hand with programs, collections, and policies that open doors to a world of information and education, giving the library a voice to its community.

References

Alexander, E. (2020, June 15). The Trayvon generation. *The New Yorker*.
    www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/the-trayvon-generation
Alexander, E., Hayden, C., Lytle Hernandez, K., & Draker, J. M. (2021, February 10).

---

[11] BIPOC is the acronym for Black, Indigenous, people of color and has become popular since 2013 (Garcia, 2020).

Storytelling for justice: How libraries and archives hold history to account. Mellon
Foundation.
https://mellon.org/news-blog/articles/storytelling-justice-how-libraries-and-archives-
hold-history-account/

American Library Association. (2006, November 29). *Library research round table honors the
contributions of Dr. Elfreda A. Chatman.* Library Research Round Table (LRRT).
https://www.ala.org/rt/lrrt/popularresources/tributes/tributetochatman/tributedrelfreda

American Library Association. (n.d.). Social role of the library. Economic Impact.
https://www.ala.org/tools/research/librariesmatter/category/social-role-library

Baker, Jr., H. A. (1994). Critical memory and the Black public sphere. *Public Culture*, *7*(1),
3-33.

Barrett, K., & Bishop B.A. (1998). Integration and the Alabama Library Association: Not
so Black and white. *Libraries & Culture 33*(2), 141-61.

Brenkman, J. (1995). Race publics: Civic liberalism, or race after Reagan. *Transition*, *66*(36),
4.

Buschman, J. E. (2003). *Dismantling the public sphere: Situating and sustaining librarianship in
the age of the new public philosophy*. Libraries Unlimited.

Buschman, J.E. (2005). On libraries and the public sphere. *Library Philosophy and
Practice 7*(2), 1-9.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/11

Chatman, E.A.(1999). A theory of life in the round. *Journal of the American Society for
Information Science*, *50*(3), 207-17.

Chatman, E.A. (1986). Diffusion theory: A review and test of a conceptual model in information
diffusion. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, *37*(6), 377-86.

Contreras, N. E. (2021, August 12). *Must reflect the communities we serve: The critical role
that Black librarians play.* Indystar.
https://www.indystar.com/story/news/local/indianapolis/2021/08/12/indianapolis-library-
Black-librarians-play-critical-role-community/8091776002/

Cook, K. (2013). "Struggles within: Lura G. Currier, the Mississippi library commission, and
library services to African Americans. *Information & Culture*, *48*(1), 134-56.
doi:10.7560/IC48108

De Rosa, C., Cantrell, J., Carlson, M., Gallagher, P., Hawk, J., & Sturtz, C. (2011). *Perceptions of libraries, 2010: Context and community*. Dublin, Ohio: OCLC. https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/reports/2010perceptions/2010perceptions_all_singlepage.pdf

Draper, J. (2021, November 18). Let's talk about policing and libraries. In *University of South Carolina Baker Lecture Critical Conversations in LIS*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yngwIPApxM&t=8s

DuVernay, J. (2019). Living our mission. *American Libraries 50*(3/4), 6-7.

Fassler, E., & Ventura, A. (2021, February 3). Police in libraries: What the cop-free library movement wants. *Teen Vogue*. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/police-public-libraries

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, *25/26,* 56-80. doi:10.2307/466240

Fulton, C. (2010). An ordinary life in the round: Elfreda Annmary Chatman. *Libraries & the Cultural Record*, *45*(2), 238-59.

Fultz, M. (2006). Black public libraries in the south in the era of de jure segregation. *Libraries & the Cultural Record*, *41*(3), 337-59.

Garcia, S. E. (2020, June 17). Where did BIPOC come from. *New York Times*. www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-bipoc.html

Giles, L. (1972). The Black librarian as change agent. In E. J. Josey (Ed.), *What Black librarians are saying* (pp. 256-267). The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

Hall, T. D. (2020, June 5). Reflections on race and racism. *American Libraries Online*. https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/reflections-on-race-and-racism/

Harony, N. (2009). Librarians' attitudes towards marketing library services. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, *41*(1), pp. 39-50.

Harriot, M. (2018, October 23). Librarian calls cops on student for brazen attempt at #StudyingWhileBlack. *The Root.* https://www.theroot.com/video-librarian-calls-cops-on-student-for-brazen-attem-1829940301

Harris, K. (2021, April 21). *Remarks by Vice President Harris on the verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial for the death of George Floyd.* The White House. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/21/remarks-by-

vice-president-harris-on-the-verdict-in-the-derek-chauvin-trial-for-the-death-of-george-
floyd/

Howard University - The Louis Stokes Health Science Library. (2019). *Juan-Pablo González,
MSLIS.*

https://wn1designs.com/Health-Sciences-Library/staff-profile.html

Indianapolis Public Library. (n.d.). Center for Black Literature & Culture (CBLC).
Indianapolis Public Library: Central Library. https://www.indypl.org/locations/central-
library/center-for-Black-literature-and-culture

Jefferson, Jr., J. C. (2020) Black lives matter. *American Libraries*, *51*(7/8), 4.
https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2020/07/01/presidents-message-Black-lives-
matter/

Jones, Jr., P.A. (2004). *Still struggling for equality: American public libraries services with
minorities*. Libraries Unlimited.

Kenney, T. (2018, November 21). West University place says officer response to woman
kicked out of city facility was appropriate. *Atlanta Black Star.*
https://atlantaBlackstar.com/2018/11/21/Black-houston-graduate-student-kicked-out-of-
library-by-police-over-unwritten-rule/

Knight Randall, A. (1972). Dreams, reality, and tailor-made service. In E. J. Josey (Ed.), *What
Black librarians are saying* (pp. 288-302). The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

Knott, C. (2015). *Not free, not for all: Public libraries in the age of Jim Crow*.
University of Massachusetts Press.

Knott Malone, C. (1995). Louisville Free Public Library's Racially Segregated Branches,
1905-35. *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, *93*(2), 159-179.

Louisville Free Public Library. (1905). Western Colored branch library.
www.lfpl.org/separateFlame/timeline.html

---.   (2018, October 25). *LFPL: A history of pride and
resourcefulness.*
https://www.lfpl.org/lfpl-history.htm

Louisville Western Library Branch. (n.d.). *A separate flame Western Branch: The first African
American public library.* Timeline.
https://www.lfpl.org/separateFlame/timeline.html

McHenry, E. (2002). *Forbidden readers: Recovering the lost history of African American literary societies*. Duke University Press.

Momodu, S. (2019, October 06). *The Tougaloo Nine (1961)*. BlackPast.org. https://www.Blackpast.org/african-american-history/groups-organizations-african-american-history/the-tougaloo-nine-1961/

Newman, A. (2017, July 16). *Louisville Western Branch Library (1905-)*. BlackPast.org. https://www.Blackpast.org/african-american-history/louisville-western-branch-library-1905/

Novotny, T. (August 5, 2020). *Library manager shares tips for building an antiracist reading list.* Oregon Public Broadcasting. https://www.opb.org/article/2020/08/05/library-manager-shares-tips-for-building-an-antiracist-reading-list/

Nyttend. (2012). *Front of the Louisville Free Public Library, Western Colored Branch. Private collection.* commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Louisville_Free_Public_Library,_Western_Colored_Branch.jpg

Ryan, J. (2016, April 12). *Prince once gave Louisville's Western Library $12,000.* 89.3 WFPL News Louisville. https://wfpl.org/prince-once-gave-louisville-western-library-12000/

Schulte-Cooper, L. (2019, April 11). *McCurtis elected ALSC 2020-2021 president.* American Library Association (ALA). http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2019/04/mccurtis-elected-alsc-2020-2021-president

Selby, M. (2019). *Freedom libraries: The untold story of libraries for African Americans in the south*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Simon, E. (2018, November 15). *Woman says she was unfairly targeted: Kicked out of West U Library.* ABC13 Eyewitness News. https://abc13.com/west-university-place-texas-ashly-horace-librarians-call-police-on-Black-woman-library-kicks-out/4689993/

Swanson, J., Tanaka, A., & Gonzalez-Smith, I. (2018). Lived experience of academic

librarians of color. *College & Research Libraries*, *79*(7), 876-94, doi:10.5860/crl.79.7.876

The Black Caucus of American Library Association, Inc. (2017, August 12). Libraries, literacy, and African American youth: Research and practice. In *National Conference of African American Librarians*. https://ncaal.bcala.org/event/ATmC/libraries-literacy-and-african-american-youth-research-and-practice

The Black Public Sphere Collective. (1995). Preface. In The Black Public Sphere Collective (Ed.), *The Black public sphere: A public culture book* (pp. 1-3). University of Chicago Press.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, January 21). *Labor force statistics from the current population survey.* https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm

unknown photographer. (1905). *Western Colored Branch Library at the home of William M. Andrews.* [Photograph]. Louisville, KY; Louisville Western Library Branch. https://www.lfpl.org/separateFlame/timeline.html

unknown photographer. (1908). *New Western Colored Branch Library*. [Photograph]. Louisville, KY; Louisville Western Library Branch. https://www.lfpl.org/separateFlame/timeline.html

unknown photographer. (1922). *Thomas F. Blue*. [Photograph]. Louisville, KY; Louisville Western Library Branch. https://www.lfpl.org/separateFlame/timeline.html

unknown photographer. (1935). *Rachel D. Harris*. [Photograph]. Louisville, KY; Louisville Western Library Branch. https://www.lfpl.org/separateFlame/timeline.html

unknown photographer. (2001). *Musician Prince donates $12,000 to Western Library*. [Photograph]. Louisville, KY; Louisville Western Library Branch. https://www.lfpl.org/separateFlame/timeline.html

van Melik, R., & Merry, M.S. (2021). Retooling the public library as social infrastructure: A Dutch illustration. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 10.1080/14649365.2021.1965195

Waters, L. (2018, October 30). *White woman calls the police on a Black man for asking to use a library.* Indy100. https://www.indy100.com/discover/ white-woman-calls-police-Black-library-juan-pablo-gonzalez-8608381

West, S. (2021). Uncovering a hidden figure in library history. *American Libraries*, *52*(1), 7.

Wheeler, M., Johnson-Houston, D., &Walker, B.E. (2004). A brief history of library service to African Americans. *American Libraries*, *35*(2), 42-45.

White, B. (2012, August). Guaranteeing access to knowledge: The role of libraries. *World Intellectual Property Organization*. https://www.wipo.int/wipo_magazine/en/2012/04/article_0004.html

Wiegand, W. A. (2020, October 6). Separate—and Unequal. *American Libraries Online*. https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2020/10/06/separate-and-unequal-carrie-c-robinson-librarian-challenging-racism/

Wolfe, T. (2008, April 8). The "Me" decade and the third great awakening. *New York Times*. https://nymag.com/news/features/45938/

Wright, J. R. (1972). The public library and the Black experience. In E. J. Josey (Ed.), *What Black librarians are saying* (pp. 220-226). The Scarecrow Press.

Author Biographies

Elizabeth Johnson (Bowling Green State University, Ph.D.) is the Library Director at the College of Southern Idaho and in St. Catherine University Master of Library and Information Science program. She is the author of *Resistance and Empowerment in Black Women's Hair Styling*.

Donald Culverson (University of California, Santa Barbara, Ph.D.) is Professor of Political Science and Justice Studies at Governors State University in University Park, IL. He has published articles in journals such as *Race and Class*, *TransAfrica Forum*, and *Political Science Quarterly*, and is the author of *Contesting Apartheid: U. S. Activism, 1960-1987*.