THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
INFORMATION, DIVERSITY, & INCLUSION

History Erased: Missing Stories of Racism in Librarianship

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Abstract

Library science historian, Dr. Wayne A. Wiegand, examines the profession's longstanding failure to acknowledge or address racism within its institutions and history. Despite the American Library Association's 1939 Library Bill of Rights asserting commitments to intellectual freedom and non-discrimination, the library and information science (LIS) community has remained silent during pivotal moments of racial injustice, including the Alexandria Library sit-in, the aftermath of Brown v. Board of Education, and the targeting of Black librarians like Autherine Lucy and Ernestine Denham Talbert. Wiegand details how this silence extended into professional literature and conferences, leaving segregated libraries and acts of racial violence unexamined. Wiegand argues that librarianship's culture of "politeness" and avoidance has led to collective historical amnesia, perpetuating myths of an unblemished profession. He calls for libraries to reckon with this erased history, integrate it into collective memory, and confront the ongoing implications of systemic racism.

Keywords: history; librarianship; professional silence; racism; United States

Publication Type: viewpoint article

Introduction

When the American Library Association (ALA) adopted a Library Bill of Rights (LBR) in the summer of 1939, it made librarianship's responsibility to fight censorship and defend intellectual freedom a professional imperative. Books "should be chosen because of value and interest to the people of the community," it read. Also, selections "should" not be "influenced by the race or nationality or the political views of the writers," opinions on all sides of an issue "should be represented fairly and adequately," and library building meeting rooms "should" be open to all groups engaged in "socially useful and cultural activities." The title parroted the force of law, but the language adopted in its principles was riddled with "should" statements that brought no penalties for violations.

Although the ALA was proud it had publicly taken a stand against censorship and for intellectual freedom, two months after adopting the LBR, five young Black men conducted a sit-in at the all-white Alexandria (Virginia) Library; they were arrested and later jailed. The incident made national news, but neither the library press nor any library association—including the ALA-commented on the incident. Thus, despite the fact that by their very existence, segregated public libraries directly violated several of the major LBR principles, the profession remained silent.

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court issued its Brown v. Board of Education decision, which determined that segregated public schools were separate, but certainly not

ISSN 2574-3430, https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijidi
DOI: 10.33137/ijidi.v9i1/2.45745
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equal. For more than a decade thereafter ALA and its divisional American Association of School Librarians (AASL)—whose membership included librarians working in segregated public schools, school library supervisors working in states supporting segregated public education systems, and faculty members teaching in ALA-accredited library school programs at segregated public universities—took no action to support or endorse Brown, or to oppose racially segregated public school libraries visibly. Although racially segregated public and public-school libraries may have been discussed in muted conversations in the profession's conference cloakrooms and hallways, the subject found no home in its public discourse.

Nor did the library community discuss school segregation as an issue in its publications. Between 1954 and 1968, *Library Literature,* the profession's main index at the time, had no entries for the 1954 Brown decision. Before 1969, under the subject heading "Negro and the Library," *Library Literature* had a "School Libraries (Negro)" subheading, and beneath it listed scores of master's theses on Black public- and public-school libraries authored by Black library school students at the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University). During this entire period, *Library Literature* had no entry for the heading "segregated school libraries" listed under the authorized heading of "American Association of School Librarians." Thus, except for Atlanta University students, librarianship, its personnel, its research community, and its professional associations—including ALA and AASL—ignored the subject of racially segregated libraries during the Second Civil Rights Movement.

Part of the reason for this willful blindness can be traced to the traditions of a professional discourse. In general, library historian Christine Jenkins observes in her 1995 University of Wisconsin-Madison dissertation, twentieth-century youth services librarians—almost all of whom were white middle-class females, "used words [that] were often mild, deferential, agreeable, optimistic, and relentlessly positive" … thus, they "did not confront directly or antagonize unnecessarily, but instead sought a path around possible obstacles" (p. 34). In *Bookwomen: Creating an Empire in Children's Book Publishing, 1919-1939* (2006), historian Jacalyn Eddy identifies early twentieth century communications between youth services librarians and children's book publishers as a "gender[ed] discourse of politeness" (p. 9) existing in a "closed world" (p. 11) that manifested an "unwillingness to take risks" (p. 164) or confront controversial subjects. "Harshness had no place," (p. 124) she notes.

Examples of the legacy of this professional propensity to avoid conversations about controversial issues—and particularly those related to matters of race—abound. When Autherine Lucy (1929-2022) enrolled as a library science student at the University of Alabama, she became the first Black student admitted to that previously all-white institution. But once she arrived on campus in early January 1956, her presence quickly occasioned riots that threatened her life and those around her. Even though she was legally represented by the Honorable Thurgood Marshall and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the university expelled Lucy less than two months after she matriculated. Although events surrounding her efforts to get a library science degree were widely covered in the national media that spring, the nation's library community said and did nothing.

Fed up with paying a poll tax for seven years and still not being allowed to register to vote, in early April of 1962, rural Mississippi Black school librarian Ernestine Denham Talbert (1929-2000), her husband, and two other Black couples entered the courthouse in George County (where she lived) and demanded of the registrar that they be given the test to register to vote. They were allowed to take the test but were refused permission to vote. On April 16, the United States

ISSN 2574-3430, jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijidi/index
DOI: 10.33137/ijidi.v9i1/2.45745
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Department of Justice (DOJ) filed suit to require George County to register Talbert. Nine days after that the Board of Education of Greene County (where Talbert worked as a teacher-librarian at the Negro Greene County Vocational High School) held a special meeting, at which the white superintendent overruled the Black assistant superintendent's recommendation to renew Talbert's contract because it was "in the school's best interest to do so" (Wiegand, 2024, p. 126). The board unanimously supported the superintendent. That same day, Talbert was notified that her contract would not be renewed for the 1962-1963 academic year. In response, the DOJ filed suit against the board on Talbert's behalf on June 16. The board's action was "without justification," DOJ argued, "and was an attempt to intimidate, threaten, and coerce" Talbert and other Black citizens (p. 126).

Despite all the publicity her case generated as it worked its way through federal courts between 1962 and 1964 (she ultimately lost in the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals), the nation's library press took no note. *Library Literature* never cited her name. No one from the nation's library community came to her defense, and no library journal published any letter to the editor decrying Talbert's treatment. And what happened to Lucy and Talbert was not an isolated instance. Between 1954 and 1974, no one emerged from the library profession's leadership to publicly say anything about segregated public school libraries; and, as I've lamented throughout my career, "This is wrong, and as a profession we need to do something about it" (Wiegand, 2024, p. 6).

Unfortunately, because librarianship was willfully blind to the racism evidenced in the examples cited above at the time they occurred, it left no record of these events in its professional literature that would have helped process them into the profession's collective memory. And absent this memory, subsequent generations of librarians have consistently crafted historically inaccurate and untrue statements. For example, for the past several years ALA had been attaching this statement to press releases: "*For more than 140 years, the ALA has been the trusted voice for academic, public, school, government, and special libraries, advocating for the profession and the library's role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all.*" On November 14, 2024, that statement was featured in a press release announcing the recruitment of a new ALA Executive Director. On December 9, it appeared in one press release about ALA Treasurer candidates, and in another announcing a significant gift to ALA. One week later, it was featured in a press release about ALA Council candidates, and on December 26, it concluded another address, nominating ALA's "I Love My Librarian" awards. (I'm happy to report ALA no longer uses that statement.)

Besides issuing historically inaccurate statements--and despite the efforts of organizations like the Joint Council of Librarians of Color (JCLC)--the silence or indifference to the profession's history of racism continues. To cite one example, last December, the Library of Congress authored and the ALA published *The Civil Rights Movement*, an effort to provide classroom-ready materials for teachers, librarians, and home educators working with grades 6–12 to help them prepare for Black History Month. None of the people or events mentioned in this essay made it into the book's pages, nor did the Reverends R. B. McClain and Quintus Reynolds, who were beaten, kicked, and shot at by white racists for attempting to desegregate the Anniston (Alabama) Public Library on September 15, 1963, nor the Albany (Georgia) teenagers arrested on August 2, 1962, outside a locked-up white public library while CBS recorded--and later broadcast--police carrying them into police vans, nor the "Tougaloo Nine"--local HBCU college students trained by Medgar Evers who were arrested for a sit-in at the Jackson (Mississippi) Public Library March 27, 1961. As the Tougaloo Nine were marched into the courthouse several days

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DOI: 10.33137/ijidi.v9i1/2.45745
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later, police set upon a crowd assembled to support them with dogs and beat them with clubs and pistols. Like the Anniston and Albany events, the Jackson incidents also drew the nation's media attention.

"History is not there for you to like or dislike. It is there for you to learn from it," reads a July 3, 2025, Black History Studies Facebook posting. "And if it offends you, even better. Because then you are less likely to repeat it. It's not yours to erase. It belongs to all of us." Much of the historical evidence I cite in this essay is drawn from my latest book, *In Silence or Indifference: Racism and Jim Crow Segregated Public School Libraries*, published in September 2024. Despite invitations to the profession's prominent media editors and major association officers to comment on my findings both immediately before and after its publication, none have chosen to write essays or plan conference programs addressing my conclusions. For the most part, the book has been greeted with silence or indifference.

By remaining silent or indifferent to these darker parts of its history, by ignoring the entreaties of organizations like JCLC, the nation's library community for the most part continues to insult the memory of librarians and library users who in the past 140 years have experienced racism, sexism, and homophobia (to name but a few), and for whom the vast majority of librarians and their professional associations at the time offered no support, vocal or otherwise. It's long past time for librarianship to engage with and reflect on its own historical amnesia, and to process the missing information into its collective memory so the profession no longer perpetuates self-serving historical myths.

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ISSN 2574-3430, jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijidi/index
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ISSN 2574-3430, jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijidi/index
DOI: 10.33137/ijidi.v9i1/2.45745