

# The Lack of African American Librarians in the United States

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## **Abstract**

In the United States, the field of Librarianship has historically been dominated by white individuals. Despite the significant contributions that African American librarians and other organizations have made to the profession, they have often faced discrimination and barriers to advancement. African American librarians have faced a major challenge of discrimination, funding for education, job representation, and mentorship. In many cases, African American librarians have been underrepresented in library administration and have had limited opportunities to advance to positions of power and influence within the profession. So much work needs to be done in the library industry to place more African Americans in the Librarian role. I will explore African American librarian struggles during the Jim Crow era, bookshelf diversity, and recent experience pursuing Librarianship. A big part of my research is interviewing two groups of librarians-3 white and 2 black librarians. All librarians were asked the following questions.

- 1) What made you enroll in the MLIS program?
- 2) How was your experience finding your first Librarian job after completing your MLIS degree?
  - 3) What are your thoughts on the lack of African American Librarians in this profession?
  - 4) In your role as a Librarian, how do you make sure literature written by POC is promoted to patrons?
  - 5) Do you have any ideas about how you and other Librarians can recruit more Librarians of color?
- 6) Lastly, how would you feel about Librarians offering mentorship program for students who are thinking about pursuing Librarianship? Instead of enrolling into the MLIS program and spending money on a graduate program that they are on the fence about.

African American Librarians in history have paved many paths for a society with more black people in Librarianship. The results from the interviews prove how white people are now advocating for more African American people in the field, and they strongly agree there is a lack of African Americans in Librarianship.

## **Key Terms and Definition**

- NTLTP- Negro Teacher librarian Training Program
- Jim Crow- Jim Crow was the name of the racial caste system which operated, but not exclusively in the United States' southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were second-class citizens (“What was Jim Crow, 2021). In addition, many ministers and theologians taught that whites were the Chosen people, Blacks were servants, and God supported segregation (“What was Jim Crow, 2021)
- HBCU-Historically black colleges and universities are institutions of higher education in the United States that were established before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with the intention of primarily serving the African American community. Wikipedia contributors. (2022, December 5)

ALA- American Library Association

NCLA- North Carolina Library Association

NCNLA- North Carolina Negro Library Association

MLIS- Master of Library and Information Science

WNDB- We need Diverse Books

## Chapter 1: Introduction

I have been a lover of literature all my life and viewed bookstores and libraries as a safe haven for a girl like me who could not keep her head out of a book. I wanted to be an elementary school librarian up until my sophomore year of college but changed my major because of the poor pay that Librarianship had to offer. Throughout my early education, I had terrific Librarians who guided me through the rows of adventure novels and scary stories; however, they never looked like me; they were older Caucasian women. As a young African American girl, I wondered why I had African American teachers in the classroom but never in the library. As an adult, I worked in a library for two years and first handily met and worked alongside African American Librarians. So much work needs to be done in the library industry to place more African Americans in the Librarian role. In my research, I will explore African American librarian struggles during the Jim Crow era, bookshelf diversity, and recent experience pursuing Librarianship.

In the United States, the field of Librarianship has historically been dominated by white individuals, and this has also been true for the subfield of African American librarians. Despite the significant contributions that African American librarians and other organizations have made to the profession, they have often faced discrimination and barriers to advancement. "The NCNLA's fight against racism involved founding and developing libraries, nurturing professional and personal networks, publishing, and prospective librarians." (Poole, p352, 2018) African American librarians have faced a major challenge: the lack of representation in leadership positions. In many cases, African American librarians have been underrepresented in library administration and have had limited opportunities to advance to positions of power and influence within the profession. Furthermore, African American librarians have often been

expected to serve predominantly African American communities and have had to navigate the challenges and stereotypes associated with serving these communities. The NCNLA joined NCLA in 1954 but then separated from the organization because of the unfairness and controlling decisions of NCLA. "Librarians potentially gained access to greater resources, but on the other no longer could the separate and unequal treatment of black and white library patrons be documented. Because whites retained control of NCLA's offices, they directed funds as they saw fit, African American librarians had little recourse." (Poole, pg. 366,2018) Dealing with patron prejudice and discrimination, as well as providing services and resources that meet the unique needs of these white communities.

Despite these challenges, African American librarians have made significant contributions to the field. Many have worked to promote diversity and inclusion within the profession and have played a crucial role in providing African American communities access to information and resources. The pioneer Augusta Baker's long-term effect on many librarians, even librarians outside of the African American race. Baker saw the issue that affected the black community and took action by changing the books that were put on the shelves that betrayed a negative image of African American people. Baker wrote in 1975, "these children's books seemed to foster prejudice by planting false images in the minds of children" (Baker,1975, p 11). Admittedly when reading these articles on the history of African American Librarians, there were many lows, but we had to go through the trenches to get to where we are now. Roberta Kemp, an African American woman, shares her experience pursuing a career in Librarianship and enrolling in the LIS graduate program. I found her experience in the article realistic, addressing the hesitation and doubt going into this career. Kemp shares, "I looked at career aspects of the two types of positions (both positive and negative) and the two systems

organizational ways of dealing with patrons and location." (Kemp, 1994, p5) Similar to my recent experience weighing the pros and cons of searching for an affordable ALA-credited graduate program and the employment opportunities available to me.

After completing my interviews with a three Caucasian and two black Librarians I found many comparisons on ways to better and diversify librarianship. I believe the interviews really brought my research to modern day and what changes have been implemented and what the future may look like with the help of Librarians like them.

### **History: The Development of Black Librarians**

In history there is always a first. Melville Dewey who invented the Dewey decimal system also founded the first library school in 1887. (Sutton,2005, para 7) It wasn't until 1925 when the first African American library school opened called Hamptons School of Library service. Allison Sutton (2005) discusses the start of library education programs at four historically Black colleges during the Jim Crow period. The four HBCU schools were Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University), Fisk University, Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University), and Prairie View Normal and Industrial College (now Prairie View A&M University).

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Before the first African American Librarian Edward C Williams who is believed to be the first professional trained African American Librarian. (Sutton,2015, para,7) Florence R. Curtis a

white woman who graduated from the first library school-Dewey Library school and was appointed as Supervisor of the NTLP. (Sutton, 2015, para,7) It is interesting to learn that a white man and women played a huge part in educating future African American Librarians.

Unfortunately, the divide happened after the Plessy v Ferguson was passed. The Plessy v. Ferguson verdict enshrined the doctrine of “separate but equal” as a constitutional justification for segregation, ensuring the survival of the Jim Crow South for the next half-century. (Plessy v. Ferguson, 2022).

Since this court ruling included public libraries and schools, African American lost the privilege to study at Dewey’s library school. Another pioneer Thomas Fountain Blue an African American librarian directed the first branch for Blacks in Louisville he also created training class for African American who missed the opportunity to study in library schools (Sutton, 2015, para, 8) His success and leadership lead him to be the first African American to participate in an ALA program. Blue addressed the need for African American trained Librarians to the ALA. In 1922 Blue was part of the roundtable conducting a study on library services to African Americans and “the demand for properly trained colored librarians is increasing, and that demand will have to be met with well qualified professional workers” (Sutton, 2015, para 8)

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In my Literature review I go over many facts and important events on African American Librarians in chronological order. Researching who the first black librarian was and where they studied was helpful in learning about other black librarian associations. Overall, my research is about the lack of African American Librarians in the United States and to find out the reasons why, I review articles on how to recruit African American students into the MLIS program which is required to become a librarian in most states. Lastly, I researched librarianships future in diversifying our libraries with people of color and literature written by POC.

### **Educating Black Librarians**

Allison Sutton (2005) discusses the start of library education programs at four historically Black colleges during the Jim Crow period. The four HBCU schools were Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University), Fisk University, Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University), and Prairie View Normal and Industrial College (now Prairie View A&M University). Jim Crow was the name of the racial caste system which operated, but not exclusively in the United States' southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were second-class citizens (“What was Jim Crow, 2021). In addition, many ministers and theologians taught that whites were the Chosen people, Blacks were servants, and God supported segregation (What was Jim Crow, 2021). This article (Sutton, 2005) contributes to the literature placing the start of educating African American librarians. The events that I cited led to the ALA investigating and the creating the Board of Education for Librarianship who then provided grants to fund the National Teacher Librarian Training Program.



Poole (2018) discusses in *“Could My Dark Hands Break through the Dark Shadow?”* Gender, Jim Crow, and Librarianship During the Long Freedom Struggle, 1935-1955, the struggle and success of African American librarians during the civil rights movement, especially females. Poole writes about the different organizations created because North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) denied Blacks enrollment and entry to the organization and meetings. Because of this resistance and restriction, NCNLA was created in 1935. According to Poole (2018), the organization's first meeting in 1937 brought speakers like W E.B DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, John Hope Franklin, and Langston Hughes. This turnout was more successful than the NCLA organization.

### **Achievements**

Dawson's (2000) article confronts the positive achievements of African Americans librarians. The article documents African American Librarians' successes. In addition, Dawson (2000) emphasized the many Black scholars who addressed issues surrounding librarianship, for example, in the Dunn dissertation “Early Training of Black Librarians in the U.S.A.: A History Of The Hampton Institute Library School and the Establishment of the Atlanta University School of Library Service” (Gunn, 1986, as cited in Dawson, 2000, para. 9) From this article I choose Augusta Baker, Thomas Fountain Blue and Mollie Lee Huston who I have mentioned throughout my Literature Review.

### **The Fight to Recruit and Keep Our Black Librarians**

Ana Ndumu’s (2021) uses years of data for a study about Black enrollment in the Library and Information Science (LIS) programs. Still, the data shows a lack of African Americans in Librarianship. She speaks on the effort to recruit and focus on inclusion in the Librarianship

workforce. Ndumu focuses on the subject of critical race theory (CRT), which affects these three groups middle-class Blacks, higher-education Blacks, and non-US-born Blacks.

Erika Long (2021) shares the reason she decided to change careers. Long's passion for helping students develop the skills to conduct research and provide them with the necessary information to succeed in their studies drove her to the decision to enroll in the LIS graduate program to become a Librarian. Long also shares her experience as a Black librarian navigating white spaces and expressing her fear of planning author visits for the students with low library funds.

### **Future of Black Librarians and Black Literature**

Tolson's (1998) article 'Making Books Available: The Role of Early Libraries, Librarians, and Booksellers in the Promotion of African American Children's Literature' writes about the benefits of having African American librarians and the fact that they have book selections with a more positive image of African American people. Tolson's introduces Augusta Baker of the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. She created a campaign that would provide books for African American children written by African American people.

The We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) campaign, tries to encourage diversity in children's books, and investigates how critical race theory is used. The report attempts to give LIS professionals a more transparent comprehension of the WNDB campaign's goals. In addition, the report aims to urge the members of the LIS community to take a deeper look at the campaign's goals and realize the power of CRT. There has always been a need for diverse children's literature.

In the article "The Secrets of My Success an African American Librarian," Roberta Kemp (1994) shares her experience deciding to become a librarian. Kemp does not shy away

from her internal thoughts on the process and the discouragement that she experiences. Kemp shares how she researched the different libraries that she was interested in working in and what positions they had available for her to apply for. Kemp shares how she did not have a Master's degree in Library Science but understood that she needed to work hard to succeed in her goal. Kemp addresses the process of funding graduate school and finding a school that offers a library program. Kemp shares the dilemma of finding scholarships available and what she needed to do to qualify for the scholarships. Kemp allows her readers to follow her from day one, discovering her dream of becoming a librarian to her first day enrolled in the librarian graduate program.

## Chapter 3: Methods

In my systematic literature search, I focused on peer-reviewed articles in chronological order. All the articles I picked in my qualitative research thoroughly go over periods that reflect the hardships of African American men and women pursuing a career that wasn't welcoming to people of color. When I started conducting my research, I used the Purchase Library catalog, which I am familiar with since I have used it for most of my past research assignments. The website layout was easy to navigate between Journals A-Z, the Library database, and the Interlibrary loan option. My preferred search database to use is JSTOR. On JSTOR, I use the advanced search feature that allows you to add more details to your search. To narrow the search, you can choose from articles, reviews, books, and research reports. I used keywords like African American Librarians, First African American Librarian, and diverse books in the library. Once I found articles that connected to any of my subheadings, I highlighted the lines I felt would be essential to cite in my paper.

For over a year, I worked as a Library Clerk at my local library, Thrall Library in Middletown, NY. While there, I developed relationships with librarians from different backgrounds, but all agreed that I should pursue a career in Librarianship. With the permission of the Librarians, I will interview African American librarians and white librarians. I want to ask the following six questions:

- 1) What made you enroll in the MLIS program?
- 2) How was your experience finding your first Librarian job after completing your MLIS degree?
- 3) What are your thoughts on the lack of African American Librarians in this profession?

4) In your role as a Librarian, how do you make sure literature written by POC is promoted to patrons?

5) Do you have any ideas about how you and other Librarians can recruit more Librarians of color?

6) Lastly, how would you feel about Librarians offering mentorship program for students who are thinking about pursuing Librarianship? Instead of enrolling into the MLIS program and spending money on a graduate program that they are on the fence about.

The answers will be identical and different in many ways but may open discussion to more topics within Librarianship that I haven't discovered. Before conducting this interview, I have to submit my questions to The Purchase College Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once I receive approval, I can then conduct my interview. For whatever reason, IRB doesn't approve my request, I will brainstorm and research another subtopic to address.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Some limitations include the time I had to commit to this research project and the many articles available that touch on African American librarian's experiences from different regions of America. I decided to focus on the southern region because of the many HBCU schools in that region. Secondly, the article written by Roberta Kemp, the African American Librarian enrolled in the LIS program. It would have been amazing to get an updated article once she completed the program to see her experience working in a library as an official Librarian. I wanted to know if her experience as a librarian was much more stressful. Before working in a library, I thought it would be quiet, and I could talk books all day. After working there, it was not the case. The goal of public libraries is community activities and community assistance heavy. It would have been interesting to see if her thoughts about working in the library changed after graduate school.

## Chapter 4: Findings

I could have found hundreds of scholarly articles on the topic of African American Librarianship and dug through the years of systematic racism preventing black people from landing a role as librarians.

### **African American Librarianship History: Then and Now**

Before the first African American Librarian Edward C Williams who is believed to be the first professional trained African American Librarian. (Sutton, 2005, para,7) Florence R. Curtis a white woman who graduated from the first library school-Dewey Library school and was appointed as Supervisor of the NTLP. (Sutton, 2005, para,7) It is interesting to learn that a white man and women played a huge part in educating future African American Librarians.

Unfortunately, the divide happened after the Plessy v Ferguson was passed. The Plessy v. Ferguson verdict enshrined the doctrine of “separate but equal” as a constitutional justification for segregation, ensuring the survival of the Jim Crow South for the next half-century. (Plessy v. Ferguson, 2022) Since this court ruling included public libraries and schools, African American lost the privilege to study at Dewey’s library school.

Another pioneer Thomas Fountain Blue an African American librarian directed the first branch for Blacks in Louisville he also created training class for African American who missed the opportunity to study in library schools (Sutton, 2005, para, 8) His success and leadership lead him to be the first African American to participate in an ALA program. Blue addressed the need for African American trained Librarians to the ALA. In 1922 Blue was part of the roundtable conducting a study on library services to African Americans and “the demand for properly trained colored librarians is increasing, and that demand will have to be met with well qualified professional workers” (Sutton, 2005, para 8)

Ndumu (2021) discusses the inaccessibility of librarianship for Blacks due to “social barriers that impede job prospects” (p. 140). Historically, job trajectories may be limited to the labor sector for African Americans (Ndumu, 2021). Due to the connection between enslavement and agricultural work, African Americans’ trajectory and higher education attainment were slow (Ndumu, 2021). Many African Americans pursued a college degree in a non-technical career but were encouraged to select “respectable” book professions (Anderson, 1988; Franklin & Moss, 2009; Frazier, 1957; Josey, 1970, 1994, as cited in Ndumu, 2021). At the beginning of the twentieth century, 53.4% of Black college graduates were teachers (Ndumu, 2021).

A survey by Ndumu (2021) focused on collecting data about African American librarians' professional lives. Three hundred currently employed African American librarians received a questionnaire. According to the survey, roughly half of them work for public libraries. Within six months, most African American librarians who participated in the poll were able to land their first professional job. In addition, after leaving school, many received at least one promotion. However, the survey also found that the most common challenge to employees' job happiness is a lack of praise and acknowledgment from the public library (Ndumu 2021).

Poole (2018) recounts W.E.B. DuBois’s description of his visit to the Richard B. Harris Public Library in Raleigh, North Carolina, established in 1935. DuBois observed an African American girl consulting a dictionary, “What pleased me infinitely...was that no one disturbed her, no one asked her what she was doing nor why; she was a privileged user of the Richard B. Harrison Public Library” (Poole, 2018, p. 349). In my personal experience working in a public Library, I have seen how important they are for every community. I have seen first handily how Librarians have a duty to serve their communities and that’s what Mollie Huston Lee did for North Carolina in 1935. Lee dealt with the double jeopardy of being an educated African

American, Woman during an era of segregation and gender stereotypes in 1930's. Lee is another pioneer who created a library safe for African American people in her community, as Dubois said Lee "provides a tireless promoter of racial uplift and community building" (Poole, 2018, p 349).

Lee and her colleagues saw the importance of community and black literature written by Blacks to be on the shelves in Richard B Harrison Public Library by "providing library services for blacks and proselytized for their use, ensured works by and about blacks were included in library collections, purged stereotypes from literature, and combated racism in the ALA. (as cited in Smith, 1998). Lee's strong connection with her community and commitment Librarianship she was heavily part of the development of NCNLA. Alongside Lee another group called the Female Talented Tenth who "fought for whites to treat blacks as equal citizens" (as cited in Gaines 1996; Fairclough 2009; Woodley 2009). This group was "committed to racial uplift" (Poole, 2018, p 350)

Dawson (2000) lists scholarships and awards presented during the midwinter ALA annual conference. These awards are mainly for Librarians who have impacted their library and community. The DEMCO/ALA Black Caucus Award for Excellence in Librarianship is an annual award of \$500 presented to the librarian who has made significant contributions to promoting the status of African Americans in the library profession. Contributions like recruitment, research and professional development. The Trailblazer's Award is the highest award given by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. Given every five years recognizing an individual for outstanding and unique pioneering contributions, and whose efforts have "blazed a trail" in the profession. The E.J. Josey Scholarship are two unrestricted grants of



\$2000 awarded annually to African American students enrolled in, or accepted by, ALA-accredited programs.

Augusta Baker was a Librarian who worked at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. She created a campaign that would provide books for African American children written by African American people. In Baker's campaign, she removed many books that portrayed African American people as lazy, unsuccessful, and speaking with thick, difficult-to-interpret dialects (Tolson 1998). Baker also worked hard to get the children of Harlem into the libraries and exposed them to many different authors, poets, and African American actors who played at American Negro theaters. Baker's legacy continues, and many librarians all around the U.S. followed her in providing appropriate literature for African American children.

Librarians like Baker are working hard to provide diverse literature for all ages in their communities. I believe interviewing Librarians would paint a clearer picture of how libraries can be more diverse.

### **New Data: Interviews with Librarians**

I wanted to ask Librarians their opinion. I reached out to Five librarians. One of them has not earned an MLIS, but based on her responsibilities in the library, she is a Librarian in my eyes. Three out of the five Librarians identify as Caucasian, and two out of the five Librarians identify as African American. The idea was to ask all librarians the same six questions, examine the answers, review the similarities and differences, and connect them to my research articles. As I mentioned in my Intro, African American Librarians in history have paved many paths for a society with more black people in Librarianship. The results from the interviews prove how white people are now advocating for more African American people in the field, and they strongly agree there is a lack of African Americans in Librarianship. Below you will find all six

questions broken up into two groups with a color indicator for each group. Starting with question one, I will state the question and then group the answers under **White Librarian 1, White**

**Librarian 2, and White Librarian w/o MLIS Degree** (Master of Library and Information Science)

Next group will be labeled as **Black Librarian 1, and Black Librarian 2.**

**Question 1) What made you enroll in the MLIS program?**

**White Librarian #1**

I was a teaching assistant and ran the library at an alternative high school. Since I loved what I was doing, enrolling in an MLIS program made sense. Unfortunately, there were few places to attend. So, I chose the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's online program.

**White Librarian #2**

I was very interested in libraries and felt like it would be a good career move I worked at my library and it was obvious that the only way to move up was to get a degree.

**White Librarian w/o MLIS**

I haven't completed (or even fully decided) if I'm going to pursue my MLIS yet because I hear so much mixed feedback about its usefulness to frontline librarians. At my current library, a degree would not benefit me financially since a MLIS degree is only required for the director position, which I do not intend on pursuing. Despite knowing this, I still sometimes worry that there are things I should know to better serve and support my community that I would have learned in library school.

**African American Librarian #1**

I was working for the library at the time and I was really interested in working in teen services. I was really passionate about the community, the services, and the collection. At the time, I could only officially work in that position with an MLIS so I decided to apply to my local university.

## **African American Librarian #2**

I have my Master's in Curriculum and Instruction. I entered a school librarian certification program at Texas Woman's University because I was looking to leave teaching but still spread my love for reading.

### **Question #1 Evaluation and Discussion**

All four librarians shared a passion or love for libraries and sought to enroll in the MLIS program to be considered for the role of Librarian. Interestingly, the White Librarian w/o the MLIS response is similar to Roberta Kemp's thoughts in the article "The Secrets of My Success an African American Librarian. Both Librarians wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about librarianship. They contemplated pursuing the degree for different reasons like cost or qualifying for a higher library role. After reading the Librarian w/o MLIS degree response, I shared with her the ALA scholarships mentioned in Dawson's (2000) article in my literature review. So many scholarships are available for African American students, and anyone interested in pursuing an MLIS.

### **Question 2: How was your experience finding your first Librarian job after completing your MLIS degree?**

#### **White Librarian #1**

I found a job in a library first to gain experience. When the opportunity presented, I applied for a librarian position. It was only about one year after I completed the MLIS.

#### **White Librarian #2**

So, I already have my current library job before I started my degree it has made getting promoted easier.

### **White Librarian w/o MLIS degree**

Could not answer due to not completing program.

### **Black Librarian #1**

I was blessed enough that I already was working for a library at the time, so I didn't have to look for a job, but I had to wait a little while before I was able to move up to a "professional" classification.

### **Black Librarian #2**

Horrible! I was desperate to be a librarian and took the first job that was offered to me. I did not research the school. It ended up being a low performing school where the administrators did not care about having a library program. I learned from that experience to pray about where I am going and research the school and principal. I also learned to ask questions at the interview. I know ask questions about how they would want their library program to look. I listen closely to see if they know anything about what a librarian does. I also ask questions to see how many extra duties they will be assigning or if I would be required to substitute for classes.

### **Question #2: Evaluation and Discussion**

The experience of finding a librarian role for the white Librarians is obviously easy and not stressful. The white librarians applied for Librarian jobs at the library where they worked at currently and were accepted. However, the attitude and response of the Black Librarians is the opposite. Black Librarian #1 states, "She was blessed enough," which is connected to knowing how difficult it is to search for a role, get an interview, and be offered a Librarian role. Blessed enough can also mean she knows her search could have gone either way. I sensed no confidence or sureness of landing a job. Black Librarian #2 shares that her experience was "Horrible" and to "pray."

**Question 3: What are your thoughts on the lack of African American Librarians in this profession?**

**White Librarian #1**

Lack of diversity has negative implications for the profession. The profession will remain homogeneous without staff diversity. Underrepresented groups may not use libraries because of the lack of diversity. I believe the lack of college programs for Library and Information Science at historically Black colleges plays a part in the lack of diversity. I researched if HBC offered an MLIS degree and found only two programs, not at an HBC.

**White Librarian #2**

I see it as being a collection of several different things, there is obviously a connection to being poor and racial inequality. When you require a degree which cost thousands of dollars only to pay a small amount, libraries are basically saying that they don't want poor people working next to them because of income disparity being connected to racial equality that unfortunately means we have less diversity. In my opinion in a fair world, MLIS degrees would be free.

**White Librarian w/o MLIS degree**

I know that librarianship is overwhelmingly white and feel that it's a disservice to the profession and communities. From a population perspective, it doesn't make sense that librarianship is not more diverse, so, while I don't know a lot about the history of librarianship, I assume at least (or even most) of the disparity is due to systemic racism, as well as racism at a local level. Because librarianship has been so white for so long, racism is also baked into policies and procedures of public libraries, which often disadvantages people of color within our communities and, understandably, discourages their use of the library. And, even with the best intentions, as a non-African American librarian, I will never be as aware and responsive to the experiences specific to

being an African American person as an African American librarian from our community would be. Depending on a patron's needs, there's also chance a patron would be more comfortable speaking with and seeking help from an African American librarian, too. At the end of the day, it will always be better to have more voices and experiences informing how a library serves its community and that can't happen if everyone is white.

### **Black Librarian #1**

To be honest, I feel like libraries and library programs present certain barriers for Black individuals interested in the profession. When I first started, I worked with predominately White women who had their degree. I didn't feel comfortable talking to them about advancement in the profession because I didn't feel like we would have many shared experiences. It was an isolating time for me where most of my fellow classmates were also White. It wasn't until I was able to network a little more that I was able to connect with more Black librarians.

### **Black Librarian #2**

This is a good question. I think the number of Black Librarians is growing especially on the school librarian side. I think being a librarian was gatekept for a long time. All we saw on TV was old white women as librarians. They were the only ones that society deemed fit to be the keepers of knowledge. The librarians I had in school were white, so I never thought about becoming one. I think Black women have woken up and found their confidence and have realized that they are just as smart as anyone else. We no longer can be held back and I going for the positions that were helped by a certain demographic for a long time. We want to see a change in the Black stories and history that are taught to Black children, so now we are writers, authors, and librarians. We are starting the revolution.

### **Question #3: Evaluation and Discussion**

I first want to focus on how the White Librarians are allies for change to diversify libraries. It's amazing how the white librarian w/o an MLIS degree mentions, "patron would be more comfortable speaking with and seeking help from an African American librarian." and the Black Librarian #1 shares, "I worked with predominately White women who had their degree. I didn't feel comfortable talking to them about advancement in the profession because I didn't feel like we would have many shared experiences." The lack of African American Librarians doesn't only affect the patrons but also the people interested in pursuing the librarian role. Libraries are vital and connected to the community and should reflect the community by being diverse. I share info about Mollie Huston Lee in my literature review that is similar to what these two librarians think. "Lee provides a tireless promoter of racial uplift and community building."

### **Question 4) In your role as a Librarian, how do you make sure literature written by POC is promoted to patrons?**

#### **White Librarian #1**

My role is to secure materials requested by patrons. Evaluating what type of literature patrons need is different from what I do as a librarian in my position.

#### **White Librarian #2**

I curate the professional collection (where we pick the books that we read for story times) I have a whole spreadsheet where I make sure that we have a certain percentage of books written by BIPOC authors. I also make sure that if I see a book that I think looks good that has been written by a BIPOC author I will have the collection developer order it for their collection so the public can check it out as well.

### **White Librarian w/o MLIS degree**

While I do refer to SLJ, Booklist, Publishers Weekly, etc when ordering, I usually start by looking through the seasonal publisher catalogs because I know that review outlets don't review every book. During this process I'm bookmarking titles I'd like to buy based upon their descriptions, themes, representation, our collection needs, etc, but I also look for the agent, editor, and blurb contributors to get a better understanding of the book. There are editors and agents in publishing who are people of color publishing and uplifting amazing work by POC authors, so I've learned to consider those details – who helped shape the book - when doing collection development, too. At the library, I work to make sure that displayed books represent many experiences, voices, and styles and have trained my staff to do the same. I also make sure that a diverse variety of books are read at Storytime and selected as book club reads.

### **Black Librarian #1**

I currently work in collection development with a sole focus on youth collections. Every month I do a new release list that specifically focuses on DEI content. It's often a great way for me to expose our patrons to books written by BIPOC individuals. My goal when I order is to make sure all of my purchasing carts are at least 50% diverse.

### **Black Librarian #2**

I make sure they are purchased when I create my book orders every year. I like to create book displays that feature books with POC. I also include those books in my story time.

### **Question #4 Evaluation and Discussion**

These librarians make sure to have books ordered and on the shelves for the patrons and include them in story time for children. I firmly believe this should be done in every library because of



the recent rise of banned books written by POC being removed from school's curriculum and shelves.

**Question 5) Do you have any ideas about how you and other Librarians can recruit more**

**Librarians of color?**

**White Librarian #1**

The recruiting needs to be at the college level. An internship or mentor program, like the education preservice students experience, would be helpful. Before considering the degree, students can decide to take on the MLIS. Candidates are interviewed based on their qualifications.

**White Librarian #2**

I think we need to have a much loser approach when it comes to MLIS. Maybe hiring people and then expecting them to get their master's after we hire them.

**White Librarian w/o MLIS**

I think the first step is making sure that people of color within our communities feel welcome at their libraries and believe the space and resources within belong to them, too. In libraries where the staff is largely (or completely) white, that will mean going outside the library and asking those that are not currently being served what they need and want from their library – and then doing that. In my current position, I'm always seeking feedback from my community. I also feel actively recruiting librarians of color (and being ready to show candidates that their voice and perspective will be respected and valued) is important.

**Black Librarian #1**

NETWORK! And do more outreach! People don't often know that we exist until they meet us. A lot of times people have these archaic perspectives of what libraries do and what librarians look

like. I encounter people who are shocked when I tell them that yes, a Black woman with tattoos and locs can be a librarian.

### **Black Librarian #2**

Social media helps a lot. I am always posting so people can see that we (Black librarians) are here and are doing great things. I have been approached by two teachers at my school about being a librarian. I make sure to help them as much as I can by answering all questions and recommending great school librarian programs.

### **Question #5 Evaluation and Discussion**

Compared to my research and a survey that Ana Ndumu did, the numbers are much better. More Black students are enrolling in the MLIS program and “landing a library job after six months” These librarians make an excellent point addressing the lack of MLIS programs in HBC and removing some of the hurdles to gaining an MLIS degree. Also, networking and social media are mentioned, which is extremely helpful in determining whether one should pursue the career.

**Question 6) Lastly, how would you feel about Librarians offering mentorship program for students who are thinking about pursuing Librarianship? Instead of enrolling into the MLIS program and spending money on a graduate program that they are on the fence about.**

### **White Librarian #1**

Mentorships and internships are essential. First, however, the student must consider whether they desire to be a librarian. Second, a mentorship/internship will allow the student to see that the position is not just a reader advisory but much more. The student would know that information science is a significant part of the position. The Library of Congress does have an HBC Library

Alliance Summer Intern Program, but then again, for the six-week program, you may get paid but need to find housing in Washington, D. C.

### **White Librarian #2**

That would be amazing! I think people would get a lot out of that.

### **White Librarian w/o MLIS**

I think this is a great idea and am all for making librarianship as a profession accessible to more people! I'm somewhat biased of course, since I don't have my MLIS degree, and I do believe that there needs to be some standardization so libraries can work together, but we know that there are systemic issues that continue to disproportionately affect would-be librarians of color. We're overdue to reimagine and redesign the path to librarianship.

### **Black Librarian #1**

I love this idea whether people are going to get their MLIS or not. Mentorship is a great way to open doors for people from any background perusing any career; however, I feel like it's vital for this to exist in the Black community. As our ancestors used to say, "each one teach one."

### **Black Librarian #2**

I think that would be wonderful. That would be another way to increase the number of Black women as librarians. This would be great for even high school students to learn about librarianship as well. Honestly, I think some of the classes I took in my school librarian program were useless. I only remember one because I had to retake it. It showed us how to place a book order. I think that one was kind of pointless because the book company representative can build a list of books for you to pick from once you specify your needs and budget. It really saves time.

### **Question #6 Evaluation and Discussion**

Mentorship can solve the lack of African American librarians. All of the librarians agreed that this exposure would be helpful for a student financially and mentally. The librarian job is a role that requires you to wear many hats. One needs to have the passion to help people of all backgrounds and the drive to solve any and many problems for members of the community.

Based on the results in light of the literature and interviews, our librarians agree there is a lack of African American Librarians and they all support recruiting, mentorship and promoting literature written by African Americans on the shelves for the community. Based on my research findings there was a divide between white librarians and black librarians that has now gotten smaller. However, we are not completely united. The divide is still present in the lack of black students enrolling into the MLIS program and black librarians being sort after and hired.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

As a result of my research, I have found that the reasons there are so few African American librarians because of discrimination, funding for education, job representation, and mentorship. These are important results because they point the way to solving the problem of low representation in our nation's libraries. Some possible solutions are new funding sources for MA programs, some of which are already begun like the DEMCO/ALA Black Caucus Award and The Trailblazer's Award. Mentorship and representation were cited by all the interviewees as a highly successful way to develop both future librarians and others. These solutions would go a long way in remedying the low levels of African American employment in our libraries. This issue takes on a new urgency in the face of nationwide efforts to remove children's books that "discuss race" from schools and libraries, a thinly veiled excuse to exclude authors of color.

In conclusion, the history of African American librarians reflects the broader systemic issues of discrimination and inequality that have plagued the profession. While progress has been made in recent years, there is still much work to be done to ensure that African American librarians have equal opportunities and support within the profession. We are in a better situation than in the Jim Crow era and dealing with restrictions from the Library Association in the early 90s. I believe I have covered the historical timeline of African American history in Librarianship and mentioned many pioneers who started the trend of black people serving the community in the library.

Research and surveys must be done to show experience from all races and work with the American Library Association to make more modernized changes. The requirements are very similar to the early 90s and must be evaluated. I hope to see research also done on African American librarians who have been underpaid compared to their white counterparts and

experienced fewer opportunities for professional development and training. This data would force the hands of the Library Association to sit at the table with African American Librarians and create a program that is welcoming and rewarding for everyone passionate about Librarianship.

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