

Segregated Libraries, Then and Now

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November 10, 2018

Segregation and Public Libraries Panel

Presiding

Akilah Nosakhere, Muncie Public Library

Circulating Whiteness: The Limited Public Library Movement in Birmingham, Alabama
Shane Hand, Mississippi College

Separate Places, Shared Spaces: Segregated Carnegie Libraries as Community Institutions in the Age of Jim Crow
Matthew Griffis, University of Southern Mississippi

The Segregated Library in Memphis and the Crump Machine
Steven A. Knowlton, Princeton University

Comments

Kerrie Cotten Williams, D.C. Public Library
Miriam E. Sweeney, University of Alabama

Response: Segregated Libraries, Then and Now

This panel explores the histories of segregated libraries, detailing three different facets of southern library development and use during the era of de jure segregation in the United States. These papers highlight the embeddedness of libraries in society, and as sites where racial politics, authority, and identity were continually asserted and contested. Though these papers take up different lenses of study, they all present nuanced pictures of the barriers that Black communities faced in terms of accessing library services and education, as well as the persistence and resilience of these same communities in working with and around systems rigged against them. Taken together, these papers underscore the pressing need to surface histories of racism and resistance as a way to make sense of the status and condition of libraries in the present moment.

Reading these papers I was reminded of Cheryl Harris's (1993) concept of *whiteness as property*, wherein whiteness acts as a kind of property right that forms the basis of privileged access to resources, opportunities, spaces, and legal protections. Libraries as civic institutions are recognized and claimed as property interests by white politicians, city officials, constituents, library directors, governing boards, librarians, and philanthropists who guard and hoard these resources possessively. (The very notion of tax-supported libraries feeds into this idea that the library and its collections are "owned" by communities, often imagined by white people as other white people.) The history of segregated libraries provides countless examples of where

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whiteness is understood as the predication for having robust library services, constructing dedicated library buildings, obtaining city permits, exerting authority over library collections, securing voting rights, and holding library board seats.

For example, Steven Knowlton documents the pressures that civic clubs exerted in denying a permit for the Howe branch, a move that protects civic institutions as white property. Similarly, library collections represent significant financial investments as a kind of communal property, which also generates a sense of possessive ownership over them. Shane Hand's work discusses the ways that white communities invested in their library collections, with books purchased and donated by civic groups that supported white ideologies. These books are also guarded as property, with white libraries hoarding privileged access to cultural and informational resources. In these formations, Black communities are positioned as threats, interlopers poised to take resources that are rightfully owned by white people and culture.

Matthew Griffis offers us a different glimpse of libraries as sites of racial identity and formation, this time charting the roles that segregated Carnegie libraries played in the lives of Black user communities. This view highlights the savvy mobilization of Black communities amidst structural inequality, showcasing the resistive potentials of segregated libraries in carving out enclaves of culture, community, and education. This perspective is valuable for surfacing counter-narratives, highlighting lived experiences, and challenging models of hegemony that deny agency and full humanity to individuals.

Finally, I am particularly interested in what these histories have to tell us about the present circumstances of libraries as sites of racial identity, power, and contestation. It has been fifty-five years since George Wallace's "stand in the schoolhouse door" at the University of Alabama, with Foster Auditorium not 1500 yards from where I teach library and information studies students. The racial animus that drove Wallace still undergirds the social and cultural fabric of the United States, albeit in ever-shifting ways.

De jure segregation has given way to new forms of segregation, insidiously enabled through colorblind policy-making that simultaneously denies and concretizes racial logics. I am reminded of a New York Time's article that was published a little over a year ago entitled "The Resegregation of Jefferson County". In this article, journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones details the attempts of Gardendale, Alabama, a suburb of Birmingham located approximately eleven miles north of where we sit today, to secede from its school district in favor of establishing its own smaller, more exclusive school district. The effect of these efforts—in this town and other communities in the region—effectually resegregate the school system, inducing demographic shifts (white flight) as white residents flock to these communities. No doubt, this consolidation of resources also results in the resegregation of libraries in these communities, with the outcome of racially disparate and uneven library services and access. The very definition of possessive investment of whiteness.

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My library students are predominately white, and many of them grew up in these formerly segregated and now re-segregated communities, or communities like them. Some currently work in libraries in these towns. As I discuss race and library history with my students, touching on aspects of the topics discussed today, I am always painfully reminded how these histories are allowed to hide in plain sight through the distorted narratives of whiteness that fuel both ignorance and prejudice. In many ways segregated society is viewed by my white students as a normalized feature of their environments, an unexceptional “fact” about the homogeneity of social circles, rather than as a carefully designed feature of urban development and social engineering that is steeped in centuries-old cultural ideologies about white superiority and the dangers of racial mixing.

I would like to suggest that the research presented today offers important tools for bridging some of these gaps by laying bare the numerous ways our cultural institutions are embedded with racial ideologies and politics, then and now.

Knowlton’s lessons from the Crump Machine’s contingent allotment of civic resources to Black communities helps us see the often precarious bargain of social inclusion for minority communities. (Social inclusion based on political allegiance is, of course, not inclusion at all so much as it is extortion.) Hand reminds us that library collections are themselves a racial project that are institutionally produced and reproduced, with implications for shaping patrons’ identity, worldviews, and informational opportunities. The tensions about integrating library collections are still felt today, as evidenced by white communities expressing anger over the presence of Black Lives Matters displays and programs centering Black authors and social issues outside of the month of February.

Lastly, Griffis demonstrates that top-down critiques of power often neglect marginalized and minority voices, which can serve to further erase and silence people of color from their own cultural histories. This message is critical not only to historians and scholars, but also to library and information professionals who often similarly marginalize or neglect communities of color through deficit-based models of library services, or adherence to colorblind policies and practices.

By understanding the historical context of segregated libraries as a sites of contested power, we can simultaneously explore hegemony and resistance, authority and agency, racism and anti-racist practices, social exclusion and community-resilience here in the present.

Works Cited

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