## Contents

Acknowledgments  xi

Introduction to Liberatory Librarianship
_by Brian W. Keith, Laurie Taylor, and Shamin Renwick_  xiii

### PART I: LIBERATORY LIBRARIANS

| 1 | Dr. Alma Jordan | SHAMIN RENWICK  
| 2 | Lillian Marrero | TANIA MARÍA RÍOS MARRERO  

_Sanctuary and Solidarity through Libraries_  

| 3 | Rosa Quintero Mesa | RICHARD PHILLIPS  
| 4 | Judith Rogers | LAURIE TAYLOR  

_Visionary and Organic Leader_  

### PART II: PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT LIBERATION

| 5 | Liberatory Librarianship in a Public Library | BRIAN BOIES  
| 6 | The KNOW Systemic Racism Project at Stanford University | FELICIA A. SMITH 
PART III: THE PERSONAL AS PROFESSIONAL

7 My Brother’s Keeper
TIFFANY J. GRANT, LAWANDA SINGLETON, AND CLEMENTINE ADEYEMI

8 Disabled in the Library
JJ PIONKE

PART IV: HISTORIES OF LIBERATION

9 Elevating Diverse Voices in Service of Liberatory Librarianship
WILLA LIBURD TAVERNIER, URSULA ROMERO, AND CHRISTINA JONES

10 Unsilced, Cross-Jurisdictional DEI
TIFFANY J. GRANT, MIKAILA CORDAY, MICHELLE MCKINNEY, MARGAUX PATEL, EIRA TANSEY, AND JUNE TAYLOR-SLAUGHTER

11 Hidden Histories and Radical Reading Lists
Restorative Justice at SOAS Library
FARZANA QURESHI AND LUDI PRICE

PART V: LIBERATORY INSTRUCTION AND TRAINING

12 “We Are . . . Library Users!”
Developing a Liberatory Library Instruction Program for College Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities
BERNADETTE A. LEAR

13 Critical Reflections on the University of Kentucky's Basic Archives Workshop
Status Quo or Transformation?
SARAH DORPINGHAUS AND RUTH E. BRYAN
PART VI: IMAGINING AND ENACTING LIBERATION TOGETHER

14 Empathy as Resistance?
The Concept of Empathy in Liberatory Librarianship
SABINE JEAN DANTUS 145

Appendix: Acronyms | 157
About the Editors and Contributors | 159
Index | 167
Introduction to Liberatory Librarianship

Brian W. Keith, Laurie Taylor, and Shamin Renwick

TERMS OF UPLIFT

What is liberatory librarianship? We use the term librarianship capaciously, to include all information professionals, including archivists, museum professionals, and others who may or may not identify as librarians. Liberatory means serving to liberate or set free.

Liberatory librarianship involves applying the skills, knowledge, abilities, professional ethics, and personal commitment—along with leveraging the systems and resources of libraries—to support the work of underrepresented, minoritized, or marginalized people to increase freedom, justice, community, and broader awareness.

How can librarianship be liberatory? How does librarianship help people to be free? How are library capacity and expertise used to increase freedom, justice, and community?

For liberatory librarianship, we can reference advances in the roles of archives. Writing in 2016, Jarret Drake defines “liberatory archives—which are a type of community archive—by focusing on two actions that these spaces have the potential to engineer: the action of belonging and the action of believing.” Similarly, Michelle Caswell explains that liberatory memory work requires recognition (representation and enabling people to see themselves in the archives, and the joy that comes from this) and a redistribution
of resources “toward community-based archives representing and serving minoritized communities” (Caswell 2021, 145–54). These authors have joined their voices with others in calling for decolonizing work, slow archives, emancipatory libraries, and more. These conversations respond to the fact that libraries have been instruments of the political and legal dominance of one culture over others. We follow Rapheal Randall’s (2018) description of “liberatory education” as “rooted in self-determination, derived from an understanding that all human beings have the right to participate in shaping a world that is constantly shaping them. Collective participation in governance amongst a community or people with shared interests is a mainstay of this concept.” This builds upon the work of Merlo-Vega and Chu, and Gomberg around the concept of contributive justice: achievement is what we give to others, and there is both a duty and an opportunity to contribute.

We came to questions of liberatory librarianship by working with the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC), with a generous community who showed us a different model, which we have called a “liberatory digital library” (Keith and Taylor 2021).

Liberatory librarianship goes beyond decolonizing, which has been the dominant diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) model for librarianship. We define liberatory librarianship as work that uses library capacity and expertise to uplift the spirit of freedom, justice, and community through shared contributions and collective benefits, and as work that supports the ability for minoritized and oppressed people to—with the collective support of the community—be better positioned.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

We became very interested in editing a book focused on liberatory librarianship, to bring together stories of liberatory librarianship from and about those working in libraries including archivists, curators, and technical experts, and that would cover all types of libraries and other information systems. This work parallels recent scholarship on liberatory archives and libraries, known by those and other terms. In this edited volume, we seek to define, recognize, and foster liberatory librarianship by bringing together many voices who share their stories about this work. We feel this is particularly timely, as many
Librarians are seeking to translate their DEIJ passion and awareness into their professional contributions.

These are practical stories that can inspire us to think about our work. They are not opinion pieces, and this collection is not a sounding board. It is based on information professionals doing something tangible. Some of the authors contribute their own stories, and some share the stories of others. While the entries in this work are almost entirely in English, the stories depict work undertaken in other languages as well. This book is meaning-making for the term **liberatory librarianship** and provides a platform for stories of this work and the workers involved in it.

In compiling this book, we have been inspired by Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize acceptance lecture. In that address, she talks to us about language: “Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas.” As an alternative, Morrison puts forward, “Word-work is sublime . . . because it is generative; it makes meaning.” We seek to generate and make meaning in defining library practices using the term liberatory librarianship. We share this book filled with the joy that comes from knowing the many successes and failures in collaborative efforts in which we were involved to further librarianship in service to justice. We hope that these stories inform and inspire, and that there will be more volumes to come.

**OUR STORIES**

We came together for this edited volume based on our connections with the Digital Library of the Caribbean, or dLOC. This is an open-access digital library of Caribbean and circum-Caribbean resources. dLOC was born out of ACURIL, the Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries. ACURIL was founded in 1969, amidst fights and wins for independence by Caribbean peoples. A group of libraries created ACURIL, recognizing that people need access to their shared experiences and pasts through media, and that creating, disseminating, and preserving culture and information should be done by the people—not the former colonizers.

ACURIL is important because experts in the Caribbean created that association for their needs. ACURIL identifies the Caribbean as any area washed by
the Caribbean Sea and includes the Caribbean diaspora. One example of the latter is Jamaica, which has an estimated population of nearly 3 million people. Jamaica’s diaspora includes an estimate of more than 2 million additional people. Similarly, Puerto Rico’s population on the island itself is estimated to be over 3 million people, with nearly 6 million more in the diaspora.

In the 2000s, Judith Rogers led ACURIL’s Information Technology Special Interest Group. Rogers, who was then the director of the University of the Virgin Islands Libraries, led the drive to create dLOC. As the libraries’ director, she was responsible for supporting her students, with campus locations on three islands (St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John) where transport is either by commuting or seaplane or by ferry for St. Thomas and St. John.

Rogers and the team at ACURIL recognized that many of our core communities span vast geographic areas and that the internet, if wielded by community stakeholders for our needs with a platform designed by us, had the potential to better support both immediate local needs and the important needs of broader communities. At the same time, partners throughout the region recognized that accessing each other’s collections was and would continue to be difficult. We all faced problems with preserving our materials because of our region’s tropical climate. We also recognized that we all needed to work together to identify, share, and preserve materials. Judith Rogers and the other founding partner representatives recognized that a technological system using the internet had to have and be part of a community, and that we had to develop this so that we could all support each other and grow together.

In 2004, several ACURIL members founded dLOC. Early partners included the Archives Nationale d’Haïti; the Caribbean Community Secretariat; the National Library of Jamaica; La Fundación Global Democracia y Desarrollo; the Universidad de Oriente, Venezuela; the University of Puerto Rico; the University of the Virgin Islands; Florida International University; the University of Central Florida; and the University of Florida. Leaders from these different institutions were drawn together for a collective purpose.

Over time, we have told versions of dLOC’s story by focusing on different theoretical and practical aspects including appropriate technology, innovation, community of practice, the impact of open access, and more. We have talked less frequently about Rogers’s role in weaving together rich
understandings of technology and community to create dLOC. In this work, among the stories we share about liberatory librarians is a short chapter on Judith Rogers.

It is important to tell stories of liberatory librarianship’s work and impact on the world because these are the stories that feed dreams, inspire hope, and change reality. These stories describe librarians’ experiences in addressing challenges, inequities, and injustices. These stories illuminate the past, present, and possible future, informing trajectories for new work by liberatory librarians with us now and those to come.

**REVIEW OF CONTENTS**

In light of events in 2020 in the United States, the chapters in this volume address the imperative need for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), reflecting a greater openness to and awareness of the need to share stories about work for social justice in the United States, both recent and for the longer history of libraries as part of justice struggles. The experiences recounted in these chapters are generally more recent, with important initiatives and programs, and they are also deeply rooted in institutional and community histories.

After this introduction, *Liberatory Librarianship* opens with several short chapters, the first four of which are focused on specific liberatory librarians: Dr. Alma Jordan, Lillian Marrero, Rosa Quintero Mesa, and Judith Rogers. In sharing stories about these librarians, the chapter authors contribute new entries to extant lists of exemplary library leaders, adding these important figures who have worked toward liberation through their work in libraries.

Following this first part are two chapters on programs that support liberation, undertaken by libraries and archives in the United States. Brian Boies looks at programs in the Oakland Public Library, while Felicia A. Smith explores Stanford University’s KNOW Systemic Racism project.

In the book’s next part, collaborators Tiffany Grant, LaWanda Singleton, and Clementine Adeyemi share the personal and professional nature of DEI work. Similarly, JJ Pionke explains using the personal as professional in his chapter, “Disabled in the Library.”

In the next part, three collaboratively authored chapters address long histories and changes for liberation. Willa Liburd Tavernier, Ursula Romero, and
Christina Jones’s chapter shares a case study of the Land, Wealth, and Liberation critical digital collection that provides research and primary sources as a counter to forces suppressing stories of Black communities. In “Unsilenced, Cross-Jurisdictional DEI,” Tiffany J. Grant, Mikaila Corday, Michelle McKinney, Margaux Patel, Eira Tansey, and June Taylor-Slaughter provide another study, where they explain the importance of cross-cutting efforts across traditional silos in order to advance DEI across large, distributed organizations. Closing this section, Farzana Qureshi and Ludi Price share the story of decolonization initiatives within their library.

After these chapters, Bernadette A. Lear provides a case study of a liberatory library instruction program for users, which is followed by Sarah Dorpinghaus and Ruth E. Bryan’s case study of a liberatory archival training program. The volume concludes with Sabine Jean Dantus’s chapter, which explores the radical and liberatory power of empathy in librarianship, for both our patrons and our world. In this final chapter, we hear the call and the opportunity to imagine and enact liberation together through empathy.

Through these chapters, the authors explore positive and productive ways to build power as part of the struggle for liberation and justice. Because the personal is also political and communal, these stories are rooted in institutions, places, and lived experiences as these intertwine in the work for liberation.

**NOTE ON STYLE**

Please note that the style used in this volume is in flux. As we write this, ALA Editions recommends capitalizing Black but not white, which is the style we have followed. This has changed rapidly in recent years, with the *Chicago Manual of Style* recommending capitalization of both. In addition to normalizing for style, the editors took a light approach to editing to allow the diversity of voices and perspectives to speak clearly and strongly, as each author tells their story of liberatory librarianship.
REFERENCES


Appendix

Acronyms

ACURIL  Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries
ADA  Americans with Disabilities Act
ALA  American Library Association
BIPOC  Black, Indigenous, and people of color
CoP  Community of practice
CV  Curriculum vitae
DEI  Diversity, equity, and inclusion
DEIAJ  Diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and justice
DEIJ  Diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice
dLOC  Digital Library of the Caribbean
DLS  Doctorate of library science
ERGs  Employee resource groups
HBCUs  Historically Black colleges and universities
ICTA  Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture
JEDI  Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion
KSR  KNOW Systemic Racism
LATT  Library Association of Trinidad and Tobago
LDC  Library Director’s Council
LEI CoP  Library Equity and Inclusion Community of Practice
LIS  Library and information science
LoC  Library of Congress
LWL  Land, Wealth, Liberation
MHI  Master of health informatics
PoS  Port of Spain
RESPECT  Racial Equity Support & Programming to Educate the Community Team
SAHM  South Asian Heritage Month
SALALM  Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials
SCANAS  Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics & Native Americans in Science
SOAS  School of Oriental and African Studies
STEM  Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
UCL  University of Cincinnati Libraries
UCWI  University College of the West Indies
UF  University of Florida
UK  United Kingdom
UKL  University of Kentucky Libraries
UL  University librarian
UNICA  Association of Caribbean Universities
UPRISE  Undergraduates Pursuing Research in Science & Engineering
U.S.  United States
UVI  University of the Virgin Islands
UWI  University of the West Indies
VR  Virtual reality
About the Editors and Contributors

EDITORS

Brian W. Keith, MLIS and MBA, is a professor and the dean of library services at Eastern Illinois University. Previously, he was associate dean and the university librarian at the University of Florida. Brian has envisioned and shaped libraries in terms of spaces, services, collections, and partnerships. He has an extensive record of professional accomplishment and national and international scholarship and service focusing on DEAIJ. He is a past recipient of the SirsiDynix—American Library Association & Allied Professional Association’s Award for Outstanding Achievement in Promoting Salaries and Status for Library Workers, and he was an Association of Research Libraries Leadership Fellow.

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Brian Boies has been a public librarian for over twenty years in New York and California. He developed the Oakland Public Library’s Instagram account (@oaklandhas-jobs) to post at least six local, entry-level job openings and training resources six days a week to more than 8,100 followers. This was a helpful way to inform patrons of the changing employment and social services landscape as COVID-19 developed. Brian is also a father, husband, and writer living with his family in Sacramento, California. He is looking to continue to utilize his passion and experience to best serve his new home as a librarian at the Sacramento Public Library.

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Index

#
10/2 instructional method, 72
19-Day Self-Education Challenge, 89

A
AB-392 (Stephon Clark Law), 38, 40
academic libraries
  accessibility of, 56–62
  comprehensive transition programs at, 118–127
  DEI groups in, 79–98
  jurisdictions of, 80–86f, 91–98
  race and gender inequity in, 61–62, 65–66
  student employment at, 66–69, 70–72, 75
accessibility issues, 56–62
activism
  archival, 136–138
  as beginning at home, 104
  displays about, 111
  resistance as a form of, 151
  self-identification and, 137
  by students, 108, 139
"Activism in Hong Kong" display, 111
Ad Hoc DEI group, 83–85, 95
Adewumi, Clementine, 51–52, 160
affinity groups, 79–98
Africa, higher education in, 68
African Americans
  COVID-19’s impact on, 47–49, 53–54
  Du Bois on two-ness of, 47, 48
  as librarians (see BIPOC librarians)
    programs for, 31–32, 33–43, 131–139
Ahuja, Sparsh, 104
All Library Faculty Bargaining Unit, 81–82
Alma Jordan Library, 13
American history textbooks, 69–70, 71
American Library Association (ALA), 60–61, 121
Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), 56–60
archival activism, 136–138
archives, liberatory, xiii–xiv, 129–139
Armstrong, Helen Jane, 22
Asians, British, 104–106
Assembly Bill 392, 38, 40
Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL), xv–xvi, 4, 10–11, 15, 25, 26
Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), 121, 123
Association of Specialized Government and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASGCLA), 121

B
Baschiera, Angelica, 103
Basic Archives workshops, 129–139
bathrooms, accessibility of, 55–56, 59–60
Bay Area, KSR project in, 35–42
Bell, Lee Anne, 70
Biblioteca Lillian Marrero, 20
BIPOC librarians
  biographies of, 3–15, 19–20, 21–22, 25–26
  increased hiring of, 145
BIPOC librarians (cont.)
  as needing allies in resistance, 154
  stories from, 33–43, 47–54, 145–155
  See also African Americans
Black authors, inequity for, 35
Black Iranians, collective for, 106
  “Black is Beautiful” chant, 106
  “Black Lives and COVID-19” (Grant), 49
Black Lives Matter, 33, 139
Boies, Brian, 31–32, 160
book bans, 65
Bouck, Emily C., 119
Braga Brothers, 21–22
Brereton, Bridget, 6, 8, 13
British South Asians, 104–106
Browder, Diane M., 122–123
Bryan, Ruth E., 129–139, 160
buildings, accessibility of, 56–62

C
California, KSR project in, 35–42
Career Studies Program (CSP), 118–127
CAREN Act, 40
Caribbean libraries and collections, xv–xvi, 3–15,
  21–22, 25–26
CARINDEX, 14
Caswell, Michelle, xiii–xiv
Center for Research Libraries, 22
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 60
Child of Empire (film), 105
Chinese community theatre, 107–108
Chu, Clara M., xiv
Cifor, Marika, 137
Clark, Stephon, 37–38, 40
Collective for Black Iranians, 106
colleage libraries. See academic libraries
Commissiong, Barbara, 7.
  communities of practice, 91–98
  community archives, xiii–xiv, 133–139
  comprehensive transition programs (CTPs), 118–127
  contributive justice, xiv, 26
  cooperation and collaboration
  through ACURIL, xv–xvi, 4, 10–11, 15
  Dr. Jordan’s fostering of, 3–15
  through LEI CoP, 91–98
  at Penn State University, 118–127
  silos as barriers to, 52, 80, 82
Corday, Mikaila, 79–98, 160–161
Creal, Kyle, 132
criminal justice, as problematic term, 36
Cuban collections, 21–22
cue-do-review method, 123

D
Dantus, Sabine Jean, 145–155, 161
databases
  for KNOW Systemic Racism (KSR) project, 35–42
  reconsidering the value of, 122
Decker, Bailee, 132
decolonization initiatives, xiv, 101–111
Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC), xv–xvii, 21, 25–26
disabilities, people with, 55–62, 117–127
discrimination. See racism
displays and exhibitions, 110–111
diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)
  creating spaces for, 151–155
  through elevating diverse voices, 65–75, 107, 145–147, 152
  employee resource groups for, 79–95
    “good trouble” and, 49–50
  programming for, 86–89, 95–96, 102–111
  retention of minorities and, 61–62, 79
  silos as barriers to, 52, 80
  See also justice
Documenting the Now, 139
Doña Rosa, 21–22
Dorpinghaus, Sarah, 129–139, 161
Drake, Jarret, xiii
Du Bois, W. E. B., 47, 48, 54
Dutt, Kuheli, 98

E
Electronic Frontier Foundation, 38, 42
  empathy, as a form of resistance, 145–155
employee resource groups (ERGs)
  about, 79–83
  Ad Hoc DEI group, 83–85, 95
  LEI CoP group, 91–95, 96–98
  RESPECT group, 85–91, 95–98
The English-Speaking Caribbean (Jordan and Commissiong), 14
equity, diversity, and inclusion (DEI). See
diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)
Eritrean community, 31–32
Ethiopian community, 31–32
ethnomusicology, 110–111

F
faculty
  in ERGs (see employee resource groups)
  jurisdictions of, 81–82
Index | 169

Ferguson, Stephney, 3
Florida, University of, 9, 21–22
Floyd, George, 42, 48, 83
focused inquiry approach, 72
force, police use of, 36, 37–38, 40, 42, 48–49
Free Library of Philadelphia, 19

G
Galvan, Angela, 67, 68
Gargiulo, Richard M., 119
gender equity, 61, 145–146
Gibbs, Rabia, 138–139
Giles, Yvonne, 131
Gocking, William E., 4, 5
Gomberg, Paul, xiv
“good trouble,” 49–50
Gordon, Zahra, 15
graduate student hiring, 66–67. See also students
Grant, Tiffany J., 47–54, 79–98, 161
Grolier Club, 73
groups, employee resource (ERGs), 79–98

H
Hathcock, April, 67, 68
“The Heart of the Matter” (Gibbs), 138–139
heirs’ property, 40–41
Hidden Histories series, 102–111
Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), 118
historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), 25, 36, 42
"History Allies" workshops, 129–139
Hong Kong, activism in, 111
hooks, bell, 69, 70
housing, systemic racism in, 34, 36, 37, 39, 40, 42
Howard University, 36

I
illegal aliens, as offensive term, 108–109
Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (ICTA), 6–7
inclusivity. See diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)
Indiana University Bloomington Libraries, 65
information literacy, 33–34
institutional discrimination. See racism
instruction and training, 117–127, 129–139
intellectual and developmental disabilities (I&DD), 117–127
International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), 10, 12
international librarians, 11–12
International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), 127
Iranians, Black, 106

J
Jackson, Jesse, 60
Jim Crow era, 40–41, 42
Joffrion, Christopher, 47–50
Jones, Christina, 65–75, 161–162
Jordan, Alma, 3–15
Jordan, Lennox, 7
Juneteenth, 88
jurisdictions, academic, 80–86; 91–98
justice
contributive, xiv, 26
restorative, 101–111
social, 33–43, 60, 70, 83, 136–138, 147–148, 151–155
See also diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)

K
Keith, Brian W., xiii–xviii, 159
Kelleher, Christian, 130
King, Dr. Martin Luther, 150
KNOW Systemic Racism (KSR) Project, 33–43
knowledge graphs, 41–42
Ku Klux Klan, 74

L
Land, Wealth, Liberation (LWL) collection, 65–75
Latin American collections, 11–12, 21–22
law enforcement, systemic racism in, 34, 36, 37–42
leadership by example, 4
Lear, Bernadette A., 117–127, 162
legal system, systemic racism in, 36, 39–42
LEI CoP group, 91–98
letter-writing campaigns, 89–90
Liberated Archive Forum, 130, 136
liberatory librarianship
defined, xiii–xiv, 147–148
histories and changes for, 65–75, 79–98, 101–111
instruction and training in, 117–127, 129–139
librarians who’ve contributed to, 3–15, 19–20, 21–22, 25–26
personal and professional nature of, 47–54, 55–62
power of empathy in, 145–155
programs that support, 31–32, 33–43
LibGuides, 42, 84, 123
Index

librarians
biographies of, 3–15, 19–20, 21–22, 25–26
BIPOC (see BIPOC librarians) with disabilities, 60–61
power of empathy in, 145–155

libraries
accessibility of, 56–62
as beige or neutral spaces, 97, 145
as instruments of dominance, xiv
race and gender inequity in, 61–62, 65–66
student employment in, 66–69, 70–72, 75

Library Association of Trinidad and Tobago (LATT), 9
Library Director’s Council (LDC), 81–82, 97
Library Equity and Inclusion Community of Practice (LEI CoP), 91–98
library instruction, 117–127, 129–139
library tours, 124, 125
Library Trends, 61
life skills, 119
Lillian Marrero Library, 19
London, SOAS programs in, 101–111
Lulat, Y. G.-M., 68

M
Madlyn L. Hanes Library, 120
The Maintainers, 136
marginalized people, service to. See liberatory librarianship
Marian Spencer Equity Ambassador Award, 53
Marley, Bob, 11
Marrero, Lillian, 19–20
McKinney, Michelle, 79–98, 162
Meléndez, Laura Cuevas, 132
Mellon Foundation, 26
Merlo-Vega, José Antonio, xiv
Merriam-Webster, 80
Mesa, Rosa Quintero, 21–22
Microsoft Sway, 89
Microsoft Teams, 97
migrants, undocumented, 108–110
Miles, Sandra, 90
minoritized people, service to. See liberatory librarianship
Morrison, Robert, 102
Morrison, Toni, xv
Mottley, Mia, 11
murders, by police, 37–38, 40, 42, 48–49
music, displays on, 110–111
“My Brother’s Keeper” (Grant), 47–54

N
Nabahe, Hanni, 68

O
Oakland Public Library, 31–32
Occupational Outlook Handbook, 122, 123–124, 125
One Hundred Books Famous in English Literature (Grolier Club), 73

P
PA Forward, 121
Partition, 104–106
partnerships. See cooperation and collaboration
Patel, Margaux, 79–98, 162
Patterson, Orlando, 68
peace-building forums, 104–106
Penn State University, 118–127
PennLive Jobs, 122, 123–124, 125
Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA), 121
Permanent Legacy Foundation, 139
Philadelphia, Free Library of, 19
Phillips, Richard, 21–22, 162
Pionke, JJ, 55–62, 163
Playback Theatre, 107–108
poets, undocumented, 108–110
Poku, Amma, 103
police
murders by, 37–38, 40, 42, 48–49
systemic racism and, 34, 36, 37–42
training manuals for, 36, 38
Poole, Alex H., 130
post-custodial paradigm, 134–136
Powell, Enoch, 101
Powell, Katy, 132
PressReader, 122, 125
Price, Ludi, 101–111, 163
primary sources
dominance of whiteness in, 73
in Land, Wealth, Liberation (LWL) collection, 65, 71–75
Primus, Simone, 15
Priority Africa Network, 31–32
programming, for DEI, 86–89, 95–96, 102–111
Project Dastaan, 104–105
Project STAND, 139
property rights, 40–41
public library programs, 31–32
Puerto Rican librarians, 19–20

Q
Queens Public Library, 60
questions, for communities of practice, 94
Qureshi, Farzana, 101–111, 163
Index | 171

R
Racial Equity Support & Programming to Educate the Community Team (RESPECT), 85–91, 95–98

racism
bell hooks on, 69
book bans and, 65
collection development as tool against, 65–75
DEI initiatives against, 79–98
KNOW Systemic Racism (KSR) project on, 33–43
in language, xv, 42
rare books and, 72–75
Ramirez, Mario H., 133–134
Randall, Raphael, xiv
rare book collections, 72–75
reading lists, 111
"Redemption Song" (Marley), 11
redlining, 37, 39
refugees, activism for, 104
Renwick, Shamin, xiii–xviii, 3–15, 159
representation, as essential, 50
resistance, empathy as, 145–155
RESPECT group, 85–91, 95–98
restorative justice, 101–111
Ríos Marrero, Tania María, 19–20, 163
Rogers, Judith, xvi–xvii, 25–26
Romero, Ursula, 65–75, 163–164
Rosa, Doña, 21–22

S
San Francisco, KSR project in, 85–42
"Say Their Names - No More Names" exhibit, 33, 37–38, 43
S.B. 978, 38
scholarly communication librarianship, 65–67
School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), 101–111
segregation, 37, 39, 40, 41, 60, 150
self-determination, xiv, 119
Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM), 11–12, 14, 22
Sherlock, Phillip, 9, 10
signage, inadequate, 56
silos, as barriers, 52, 80, 82
Singleton, LaWanda, 50–51, 164
"Siyah Zibast" chant, 106
Smith, Felicia A., 33–43, 164
SOAS Library, 101–111
Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics & Native Americans in Science (SACNAS), 53
Society of American Archivists, 130, 136
South Asian Heritage Month (SAHM), 105
South Asians, British, 104–106
Spanish translations, 132
staff, in DEI groups, 81–82, 85–98
Stanford University, 33–43
STEM, people of color in, 50–53
Stephon Clark Law, 38, 40
students
activism by, 108, 139
career programs for, 118–127
with disabilities, 56–57, 58, 61, 117–127
employment of, 66–69, 70–72, 75
sundown towns, 41
surveys, from RESPECT, 85–87
systemic racism. See racism

T
Tansey, Eira, 79–98, 164
Tavernier, Willa Liburd, 65–75, 164–165
Taylor, Breonna, 40, 83
Taylor, Laurie, xiii–xviii, 25–26, 160
Taylor-Slaughter, June, 79–98, 165
teachers, whiteness of, 69, 70
teaching, in library instruction, 121–127
testimony exclusion laws, 40
textbooks, American history, 69–70, 71
theater programs, 107–108
"Thinking Through Music" display, 110–111
Thiong’o, Ngũgĩ wa, 101
training and instruction, 117–127, 129–139
Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. Jordan in, 5–13
True Heart Theatre, 107–108
Tyack, David, 71

U
undergraduates, as student workers, 68, 70–72
Undergraduates Pursuing Research in Science & Engineering (UPRISE), 53
underrepresented people, service to. See liberatory librarianship
Undocupoets, 108–110
UNICA, 9–10
United Kingdom, SOAS programs in, 101–111
University College of the West Indies (UCWI), 4, 6–7
university libraries. See academic libraries
University of Cincinnati (UC), 52, 53
University of Florida (UF), 9, 21–22
University of Kentucky Libraries (UKL), 129–139
University of the Virgin Islands (UVI), xvi, 25–26
University of the West Indies (UWI), 3, 5, 6–9, 12–13

V
virtual reality (VR) technology, 104
vision disabilities, 58–59

W
Webb, Kristine W., 119
Wehmeyer, Michael L., 119
Wetli, Autumn, 130
wheelchair users, 56–60
white supremacy, 34, 69–70, 87. See also racism
  whiteness
    of American history textbooks, 69–70, 71
    as an archival imperative, 133–134
as centered by structural mechanisms, 79
performance of, 68
of rare book collections, 73
of teachers in the U.S., 69, 70
Wikidata, 42
workshops
  on archives management, 129–139
  on library instruction, 122, 123, 124–126, 127

Y
“yes,” saying, 152