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Fugitive Libraries

Public libraries may be a democratic commons, but they have often excluded Black voices and perspectives. Communities have responded by creating their own independent, itinerant libraries — spaces for learning together and building futures together.

SHANNON MATTERN

OCTOBER 2019

A "library-of-people": Chimurenga residency at the Performa arts festival, New York City, 2015. [Chimurenga]

In the past few years I've attended a number of symposia, summits, workshops, and other species of gathering to discuss the "future of libraries." These events — so common they've become an inside joke — tend to draw a mixed crowd: people who study and write about libraries, people who fund libraries, library designers, library directors, library advocates, and maybe a few on-the-ground librarians. Inevitably, someone will make the accurate observation that public libraries are among the last free, inclusive, "truly democratic" spaces in American cities and towns. In the fullest version of this reverie, libraries are imagined as civic spaces for ethical recalibration and political reconciliation, where we can talk out differences of opinion and steel our defenses against lies and manipulation.[1] It's not a completely unreasonable idea.

Then someone else — often a person of color — will share the equally accurate observation that libraries are not universally welcoming spaces. Consider this: At last count, 87 percent of American librarians were white.[2] Stories of patrons and librarians facing discrimination or hostility for their race, class, sexual identity, or disability are common.[3] And libraries reinforce conventions of cultural production rooted in colonialist, white supremacist, and heteronormative values — including classification systems and models of intellectual property birthed centuries ago. Melissa Adler, in her study of the politics of library classification, shows how "knowledge about, by, and for racialized subjects was organized through a white lens." African American subjects were filed as property or laboring bodies (i.e., as slaves), while Indigenous people were classified as historical artifacts and their stories as fairytales.[4]

The sociologist and historian W. E. B. Du Bois — himself a frequent advocate for libraries — wrote about the "double-consciousness" that results, the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[5] To this day, Adler notes, some of Du Bois's books are classified by the Library of Congress as a "special topic" or "special class" — an Other. And those deep biases are carried forward into search algorithms and the classifications that underlie machine vision. Scholars such as Joy Buolamwini, Timnit Gebru, and Safiya Noble have shown how historical library practices shape contemporary technologies.[6]

Still, many people are reluctant to denigrate libraries because they stand for so much that is good and wholesome. Fobazi Ettarh argues that "cultural representations of libraries as places of freedom (like freedom of access and intellectual freedom), education, and other democratic values" cultivate a mythos of the library as a sacred space, and of librarianship as a spiritual calling steeped in "vocational awe." All those noble associations, however, "do not elide libraries' white supremacy culture with its built-in disparity and oppression."[7]

BlackLivesMatter Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon, NYPL Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 2015. [Terrance Jennings]

Librarians generally are aware of these problems (they tend to be a self-critical lot), and the field's main institutions have launched programs to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion.[8] Some people are even starting to question the core professional value of *neutrality*, which has too often been used to justify "disengagement from crises in urban communities."[9] Libraries are embracing their role in creating sanctuary for the homeless, impoverished, and undocumented, and in providing safety from violence and oppression. And many librarians have aligned with activist movements.[10] Makiba Foster, at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, urges the use of the library to create "opportunities for historical literacy ... connecting contemporary events to historically relevant content," curating collections and public events that examine the parallels between, for example, the deaths of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin and other instances of "Black bodies transgressing White spaces with deadly consequences."[11]

Such efforts to position the American library as a democratic (or even radical) space have to acknowledge the institution's own deep history of racial inequity. And even as we celebrate the library as a public commons, we should recognize that not everyone participates in that space, or not in the same way. By choice or by necessity, many marginalized communities have established their own independent, itinerant, *fugitive* libraries, which respond to conditions of exclusion and oppression. Understanding the politics and practices of these fugitive libraries, and the conditions that have led to their emergence, would improve the discussions about "libraries of the future" that are happening in the halls of power and privilege. That doesn't mean public libraries should fold outsider projects into mainstream practice, though. Shining light on marginalized populations and informal spaces carries ethical obligations, and visibility sometimes yields vulnerability. In the second half of this article, we'll get to know some of these fugitive librarians. I've spoken with most of them personally so that they can tell their stories in their own words.[12]

At the NYPL Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the ashes of Langston Hughes lay beneath a cosmogram inscribed with lines from Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." [Matt Green]

The Rise of Black Libraries

In the 18th century, when slavery stretched across the Northern and Southern colonies, enslaved people were sometimes taught to read so they could learn the Gospel. But as abolitionist movements gained power, slaveholders began to see literacy as a threat and forbade the reading or possession of books.[13] In free states, African Americans who were barred from libraries and other educational spaces created their own institutions. Between 1828 and 1841, no fewer than nine Black literary societies and social libraries opened in Philadelphia, and there were dozens more throughout the North, dedicated to the "restoration" and the moral and intellectual "improvement" of Black communities. These spaces often combined reading, writing, and activism. The circulating library of the Garrison Literary and Benevolent Association, founded in 1834 in New York City, for example, included books about abolition and colonialism.[14] Historian Michelle Garfield has shown that spaces like these empowered Black women, in particular, to engage in political discussions about self-determination and freedom.[15] And some of these Black feminist activists later became public librarians. Ernestine Rose, appointed director of the New York Public Library's 135th Street branch in 1920, hired many pioneering female librarians of color — among them Catherine Allen Latimer, Nella Larsen, Regina Anderson Andrews, and Pura Belpré — and made the library into a hub for the Harlem Renaissance.[16]

Yet most public libraries remained indifferent or hostile to Black readers well into the 20th century. Resources were unevenly distributed, following patterns of residential segregation, and even some Northern library systems had "colored branches."[17] The physical spaces were often tacitly unwelcoming, with all-white staffs and classical or colonial architecture — and sometimes explicitly so. In the mid-1940s, the town library in Navesink, New Jersey, isolated African Americans in a small room at the back with a separate entrance and permitted them only six hours of service on Wednesdays.[18] Historians Wayne and Shirley Wiegand believe there are many more untold stories of library segregation in the North.[19]

Yet conditions were indeed worse below the Mason-Dixon line, where 89 percent of African Americans had no access to a library in 1932.[20] Racial segregation, enforced by Black Codes and Jim Crow laws, was affirmed by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which allowed states and municipalities to define their own standards for "separate but equal" public facilities. In the Progressive Era, many American cities built grand new public library buildings, and some Southern institutions — including libraries in Birmingham, Oklahoma City, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. — opened their doors to Black patrons, at least initially. But Birmingham's case is instructive: as soon as African Americans raised funds to put a library in a high school, city administrators barred them from the main public library building. A generation later, in 1918, the city finally opened the Booker T. Washington Branch Library, but then the Black community had to fundraise again to stock the building with reading material "by and for the colored people." Even the books were not allowed to mingle; the branch collection was segregated from the main library system, so that Black and white hands would not touch the same books.

Albemarle Regional Library Bookmobile, North Carolina. [North Carolina Digital Collections]

Similarly, in Carrollton, Georgia, librarian Edith Foster marked the spines of African-Americans' books with a triangle, so readers of all races would know which texts were meant for whom. Michael Fultz's research shows the many ways African Americans were denied equal access in the Jim Crow South. Some libraries had a "colored" table in the main reading room; others, a separate reading room; and still others allowed Black patrons to check out books but not read them on site, or to do so only under supervision in the librarian's office. Some libraries gave Black teachers and students special permission to use their collections, or set up "deposit stations" or "reading corners" in Black schools. Rare were the public libraries — like Covington, Kentucky, and El Paso, Texas — that offered "full service" to all readers.[21]

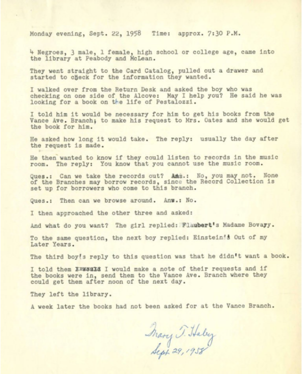
So African Americans "turned inward to craft their own institutions," which "enabled a degree of social authority and acknowledged intelligence and independence they could not enjoy in larger southern society."[22] Those gains, of course, involved significant concessions. In the 1880s, Black readers excluded from the public library in Macon, Georgia, patronized a 1,000-volume subscription library in a local clergyman's home. African Americans in Memphis opened a Lyceum frequented by the journalist Ida B. Wells. A generation later, the Sojourner Truth Club started a free library in Atlanta, following Du Bois's failed attempt to convince city officials to allow Black patrons to use the new Carnegie building. Around the same time, Louisville opened the first of two colored branches in its public library system, where Thomas Fountain Blue collected Black literature and hosted reading clubs, story hours, and classes for other Black librarians. He positioned the branch library as a "community center," a framing that still resonates today. Other efforts had a religious dimension. Black readers in Durham, North Carolina, organized a collection of 800 books in borrowed space at the White Rock Baptist Church. Later, Black educator Euriah Simpkins and white mill worker Willie Lee Buffington started more than one hundred Faith Cabin Libraries in South Carolina and Georgia. And, of course, educational institutions played a role. Black colleges, universities, and secondary schools allowed community members to access their collections, sometimes for free; and in 1950, Howard University's Delta Sigma Theta sorority raised money to buy a bookmobile that traveled around rural northwest Georgia. These projects can all be seen as precursors of today's fugitive libraries.[23] Black leaders "emphasized the need for libraries not so much as sites for preserving the past but as monuments for ensuring the future."[24]

Southern Black libraries benefitted from Northern philanthropy and federal funding, which was to some degree paternalistic. Booker T. Washington, a particularly successful fundraiser, showed Northern elites that, with their help, this "bucolic, Christian, exotic black world in the distant south" could be lifted up to adopt a white "sense of high culture and service."[25] Between 1890 and 1919, Andrew Carnegie's grants supported Black college libraries and public library branches from Savannah, Georgia, to Houston, to Washington's own Tuskegee Institute. But although Carnegie did not hesitate to impose conditions about funding models and architectural styles, he deferred to local officials about racial restrictions.[26] Meanwhile, Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Company, funded the construction of roughly 5,000 schoolhouses in rural Black communities, and later provided support for library-training programs at Black colleges and book purchases and literacy initiatives in Black schools. His foundation launched a "demonstration" program that partly funded library services in local communities for five-year terms.[27] In the New Deal, the federal government started book repair and library service projects, developed county library systems (including some that perpetuated segregation), and built new reading rooms and branches for Black Southerners.[28]

Clockwise from top left: 135th Street Branch Library, New York, nd. [NYPL Digital Collections] Morgan Street School Branch Library, Charlotte, North Carolina, 1930. [North Carolina Digital Collections] Carver Branch Library, Austin, Texas. [Austin History Center] Western Colored Branch Library, Louisville, Kentucky, 1936. [University of Louisville Photographic Archives]

Black branches tended to look a lot like white ones, only smaller. Indeed, Carnegie's secretary, James Bertram, distributed "Notes on the Erection of Library Bildings" to ensure consistency in architectural form, program, and style.[29] While some cities delegated design decisions to branch librarians, so that they could respond to local needs, historian Cheryl Knott finds that Black branches were typically overseen by central library boards — along with banks and city officials (and, early on, Washington's "Tuskegee machine") — who were deeply involved in design and construction. "They negotiated building sites, architect selection, public and private funding, exterior and interior designs, and the ways in which the building's symbolic and literal value would be celebrated when construction began or ended"— as if they didn't trust local Black communities to handle such decisions themselves. Louisville's Western Colored Branch, the one-story Beaux Arts Carnegie library that Fountain turned into a community center, was designed by the white architecture firm McDonald and Dodd. Knott reports that "local black professionals and skilled workers received little or no benefit from these important building projects in their neighborhoods."[30] National funders tended to promote the same firms for multiple branches; and some cities, like Savannah, Georgia, explicitly mandated that the architects be white. In any case, there were relatively few Black architects to commission.[31]

Nevertheless, a Black community's branch library — even a collection censored by white officials, housed in a cramped building that reflected none of the vernacular architectural heritage — was of tremendous symbolic importance. The occupation of urban space by a building made of brick and stone conveyed stability and power. It meant the community could acquire funding and have its needs and aspirations legitimated (if begrudgingly) by the city at large. It provided a place for assembly outside of church. And it asserted "blacks' desire for intellectual stimulation, entertaining reading material, and educational opportunities for their children, who were relegated to separate and inferior public schools." Thus, Knott argues, branch libraries "encoded white fears and black hopes in structures of paradoxical proportions." Even as they empowered Black communities, they reinscribed and tacitly condoned patterns of segregation while "[protecting] white readers from the knowledge of black readers." It is indeed an irony that many of the first libraries to directly meet the needs of African Americans were built in the Jim Crow South, which lagged behind the rest of the country in library development.[32]



Monday evening, Sept. 22, 1958   Time: approx. 7:30 P.M.

4 Negroes, 3 male, 1 female, high school or college age, came into the library at Peabody and McLean.

They went straight to the Card Catalog, pulled out a drawer and started to check for the information they wanted.

I walked over from the Return Desk and asked the boy who was checking on one side of the Alcove: May I help you? He said he was looking for a book on the life of Pestalozzi.

I told him it would be necessary for him to get his books from the Vance Ave. Branch; to make his request to Mrs. Oates and she would get the book for him.

He asked how long it would take. The reply: usually the day after the request is made.

He then wanted to know if they could listen to records in the music room. The reply: You know that you cannot use the music room.

Ques.: Can we take the records out? Ans.: No, you may not. None of the Branches may borrow records, since the Record Collection is set up for borrowers who come to this branch.

Ques.: Then can we browse around. Ans.: No.

I then approached the other three and asked:

And what do you want? The girl replied: Flaubert's Madame Bovary.

To the same question, the next boy replied: Einstein's Out of my Later Years.

The third boy's reply to this question was that he didn't want a book.

I told them ~~would~~ I would make a note of their requests and if the books were in, send them to the Vance Ave. Branch where they could get them after noon of the next day.

They left the library.

A week later the books had not been asked for at the Vance Branch.

Mary T. Haley
Sept 29, 1958

Incident report filed by a librarian in 1958, as the Memphis Public Library was preparing to defend its segregation policies in court. [Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library & Information Center]

The Civil Rights movement confronted that paradox head on. After *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Civil Rights Act (1964), an important legal catalyst was the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Louisiana* (1966), which affirmed activists' right to silently protest segregation in a public library. The Court ruled that states could regulate the use of their libraries, but only in a "nondiscriminatory manner, equally applicable to all." By then, "African Americans had turned their attention from building *segregated* branches to *integrating* 'white' libraries through legal action and protest."[33] And public libraries, with their democratic symbolism and prominent downtown locations, were frequent targets for sit-ins, read-ins, and other forms of protest. Throughout the South in the early 1960s, activists (many from the North) opened dozens of Freedom Libraries in churches, rundown houses, and other ramshackle buildings, which brought donated reading material, educational courses, and voter registration drives to underserved Black communities. When some of these facilities were bombed or set ablaze by the Ku Klux Klan and Citizens' Council, civil rights organizations lent support while the American Library Association said nothing.[34]

Some cities, like Louisville, had willingly integrated their library services even before *Brown v. Louisiana.* Others were pushed to do so for financial reasons; studies in the 1930s and '40s noted the expense and inefficiency of maintaining "separate but equal" facilities.[35] And many cities that desegregated their libraries after *Brown* did so quietly, in part to avoid drawing attention to the fact that their swimming pools, buses, and housing were still segregated.[36] Public officials and activists alike seemed to calculate that "white attitudes about library integration were somewhat less strident than those concerning the integration of other public institutions."[37] Thus, libraries were "sites for trial-and-error desegregation efforts to see what worked, and what didn't."[38] Of course, racist obstructionists wanted to be sure *nothing* worked: the Klan showed up to protest integrated libraries, police harassed whites who visited formerly Black branches, and administrators closed white libraries rather than provide service to all. In a few cities, library officials ordered "stand-up integration," removing all tables and chairs to prevent interracial bodily encounters.[39]

That history resonates a half century later when branch libraries face closure or service cuts. Because of the racism embedded in urban planning and governance, those cuts are felt more intensely in neighborhoods that are already disenfranchised. Patterson Toby Graham, in his history of the struggle to integrate Alabama's libraries, asks questions that are still pertinent today: "What is the role of a library and a librarian in an intolerant and fearful society? Have librarians been active agents or just passive observers in the ebb and flow of social change and social conscience?"[40] In what ways do libraries act as "instruments of social control," and how could they be made into instruments of restoration, reparation, or transformation?

I have been an outsider in my own biography, in my country's history, in the world's terrifying possibilities.
DAMBUDZO MARECHERA

Quote by the Zimbabwean novelist Dambudzo Marechera, installed as part of a "library in residence" for Reading Zimbabwe at Wendy's Subway, New York City, 2018. [Black Chalk & Co.]

Fugitivity as Spatial Condition

Fortunately, there are many public libraries that *do* work as critical social infrastructures for an integrated public, and there are Black planners, designers, and librarians involved in building and maintaining those spaces. Black special collections and curatorial programs that focus explicitly on reparative justice carry forward the legacy of Black literary societies and branch libraries.[41] But institutional actors are only part of the story. Here I want to focus on the outsiders who are reviving more informal and itinerant modes of collecting and lending and reading in public.

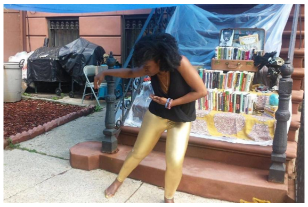
This work is necessarily spatial. As George Lipsitz has shown, race is spatialized by "housing and lending discrimination, by school district boundaries, by policing practices, by zoning regulations, and by the design of transit systems. The racial demography of the places where people live, work, play, shop, and travel exposes them to a socially-shared system of exclusion and inclusion. Race serves as a key variable in determining who has the ability to own homes that appreciate in value and can be passed down to subsequent generations; in deciding which children have access to education by experienced and credentialed teachers in safe buildings with adequate equipment; and in shaping differential exposure to polluted air, water, food, and land."[42] And because of the historically entangled politics of race and space, bell hooks says, "black folks equated freedom with the passage into a life where they would have the right to exercise control over space on their own behalf, where they would imagine, design, and create spaces that would respond to the needs of their lives, their communities, their families."[43] One response, Lipsitz suggests, is to "turn segregation into congregation." Communities of color "mobiliz[e] collectively for better city services," including libraries. "Black neighborhoods generate a spatial imaginary that favors public expenditures" — of money, time, effort, trust — "for public needs."[44]

In building their own libraries, Black communities have constructed what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten theorize as an "undercommons," a place allowing for "ongoing experiment" with informal ways of learning together, of building futures together.[45] Many of the historical examples discussed above — and the contemporary projects we turn to now — present alternatives to the official commons of the public library. These small, informal, mobile collections embody Moten's concept of "fugitivity," which he describes as "a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It's a desire for the outside."[46] In an introduction to this work, Jack Halberstam defines fugitivity as a mode of being that is *other* than settled, recognizing that "there are spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, the logistical, the housed and the positioned."[47]

Yet a fugitive *library* can't easily ignore logistics or position. All those books take up a lot of space.[48] In the 19th century, improvisational Black librarians pieced together their collections through donations and were sometimes forced to move as city officials impeded their activities. Today's outsider librarians are even more mobile, hauling around boxes of books, positioning themselves and their collections in varied temporary contexts. Fugitivity was the only option for many historical figures — as their own libraries were the only ones that would admit them — whereas today's self-identified fugitives install their collections alongside kindred institutions whose doors they can (usually) enter, but whose spaces and services and collections simply don't respond in the same way to "the needs of their lives, their communities, their families." Today's fugitive librarians are free to transgress institutional conventions, operating outside the demands placed on (or imposed by) state-supported and commercial institutions.

Current Practices

The Free Black Women's Library — New York City



The first incarnation of the Free Black

Women's Library, on a Brooklyn stoop, 2015. Librarian OlaRonke Akinmowo dances, in a photo taken by her daughter. [Ixe Akinmowo-Simon]

On the last Sunday of every month, OlaRonke Akinmowo lugs boxes and suitcases full of books — books written "by Black women, for and about everybody" — to a different part of New York City. Akinmowo, who works as an artist, set decorator, and yoga instructor, started the Free Black Women's Library on a stoop in Bedford-Stuyvesant four years ago, and since then her traveling collection has grown, through trade and donations, to more than 1,300 volumes. She's arranged her materials in churches, community gardens, galleries, museums, theaters, and festivals (I recently saw her at the New York Art Book Fair), and she has taken the library on the road, to Detroit, Chicago, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. She hosts authors' talks, workshops, performances, and public conversations "where black women can feel seen and heard" amidst the stacks, and she invites patrons to bring a book to trade. A couple hundred women typically pass through each day.[49]

Wherever Akinmowo's "fugitive radical biblio-installation" materializes, it "raises the voices of Black women in a world that often attempts to silence or censor them."[50] Recalling the decision to open a library, she wrote, "I was sick of seeing Black womanhood attached to struggle, pain, trauma, victimhood, criminality, violence, poverty, ugliness, incompetence. … Black women's words have saved my life, healed me, nurtured me … and I wanted to share that testimony."[51] Her collection includes the "classics" (Audre Lorde, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, bell hooks), as well as young-adult books, erotica, and science fiction, and she's seeking to include more authors from the Caribbean and Africa, as well as some non-circulating materials like "vintage stuff, first editions, and autographed copies." Whereas public libraries often program events around Black History Month, Akinmowo's collection "centers Black women's voices" consistently and without censorship. "We don't need to bite our tongues and speak pretty," she told me. Conversations on police brutality, domestic violence, capitalism, patriarchy, and racism can be frank and confrontational, because she does not rely on public funding. "We don't have to answer to anyone except ourselves." She noted that collective study has been an integral part of Black feminist practice, from Frances Harper to Ida B. Wells to the Combahee River Collective and beyond. It's about "the building of community through the sharing of ideas." Supporters in at least three other cities have followed Akinmowo's lead and set up their own branches.[52]

The Free Black Women's Library, 2018. [OlaRonke Akinmowo]

The Free Black Women's Library, installation at *CURRICULUM: spaces of learning and unlearning*, EFA Project Space, New York City, 2019. [OlaRonke Akinmowo]

The Free Black Women's Library, on a Brooklyn sidewalk, 2018. [OlaRonke Akinmowo]

The idea is to be "loud and unapologetically and fearlessly *taking up space*," she told an audience at the Museum of Modern Art. Itinerancy is central to that mission. One of the virtues of being mobile, she told me, is that you can "reach people who might not know about it. I love those natural moments when someone is walking to the laundromat or coming home from church, and they just happen upon the library, and they're like, 'Oh, what's this?!'" The library's fugitivity transforms the environment around it: "I can set it up anywhere, and it's kind of a chameleon; it just turns the place into a library wherever it is." In turn, the site conditions shape how the library materializes: how many books it can accommodate, and how conversation and activity flow around it. Akinmowo's first concern is that the space be free and accessible to different body types and abilities, with lots of ways to sit and chat and engage in activities. Formal spaces, like museums and art galleries, tend to generate more "cerebral" conversations, she said, "whereas if we're in a playground or barbershop, [the rapport] definitely feels more grassroots."

The library is thus a *designed* space that "responds to the needs of life," to reprise bell hooks. "I keep daydreaming about a tiny house," Akinmowo told *Oprah Magazine*. "It can be hitched to a car or a truck, and I'll drive it around that way."[53] Having everything in one place (or one mobile container) would allow her to focus on creating other parts of her vision: a website, a database, and a library card for folks to keep track of their reading. She told me that she wants everything "perfectly laid out, like a real library with a children's section and young adult section, comic books and science fiction." That's a loaded phrase: a *real library*. "I have so many ideas," she told me, "but I'm so busy moving these books around!" She wants her project "to feel more legitimate … like it's here to stay."

Fugitivity brings restrictions as well as freedoms. Escapist, transgressive, operating by its own vernacular organizational logic and architecture, the Free Black Women's Library is unhoused and unpositioned. Yet the *logistics* of fugitivity — the sole librarian, burdened with thousands of books, doing work that is often uncompensated — can be onerous. That precarity informs Akinmowo's desire for the library to feel more solid. Ultimately, the Free Black Women's Library's legitimacy will be defined not by its size or fixity, but through its success in generating the spatial and social conditions for a free exchange of ideas. Every time women of color meet to trade and talk about Black feminist books, Akinmowo's library has fulfilled its mission. It's a real library.

The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind — Durham, North Carolina

Alexis Pauline Gumbs with a book altar at the opening ceremony for the Black Feminist Bookmobile, Center for Documentary Studies, Durham, North Carolina, 2017. [Sangodare]

Alexis Pauline Gumbs's work — of reimagining Black feminist spaces of reading and gathering and learning — began in childhood. Her grandfather was raised in poverty but, after immigrating to the United States, was eventually able to buy out "most of a bookstore" and ship the stock back to Anguilla to seed the first library in his homeland. Gumbs grew up in the Atlanta area, browsing the shelves at Charis Books & More, a feminist and Black-owned bookstore that has been operating continuously for a half-century even as others around the country have closed. When Gumbs moved to North Carolina, she discovered the legacy of Black librarian Selena Warren Wheeler, who started her collection in a church basement, until it grew to fill "a wood-framed white building and then a beautiful brick building" in the center of a historic district. "Now it's a focused branch of the Durham Public Library System," Gumbs says, reverently.[54]

Together with her partner Sangodare, Gumbs has built a lending and reference library of Black feminist texts in her home. Home has a "subversive value" for African Americans, according to bell hooks, as a "private space where we do not directly encounter white racist aggression." As hooks observes, "Domestic space has been a crucial site for organizing, for forming political solidarity." Black women, in particular, have "resisted by making homes where all people could strive to be subjects, not objects … where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world."[55] Invoking the history of maroon communities of fugitive slaves, Gumbs says she aims to show that Black people "do not need to wait for or pander to foundation funding or a corporately validated organizational structure to create what we need." The state, and particularly the current federal government, isn't "necessarily accountable to Black people or to Feminists, or LGBTQ folks," she says — and thus "autonomy is important to us." In a magazine interview, Gumbs described the moment of realizing "I could use what I had, like my own living room, to create the intellectual, political, and creative spaces that I needed." She was inspired by women like Barbara Smith, of the Black feminist lesbian Combahee River Collective, who helped start a radical publishing house, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Black women know that their resources and selfhood are not necessarily "marketable," Gumbs told me. And so "we have to cherish and nurture a mission that says (in the words of CRC) that we are 'inherently valuable.'"[56]

This living-room library forms the intellectual core of the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind, which Gumbs describes as "a multifaceted educational project, a tiny Black feminist University with infinite schools." She has declared herself the "prophetic provost" of this university, and she keeps inventing more departments, like The School of Our Lorde (honoring Audre Lorde), The Juneteenth Freedom

Academy (after June Jordan), and the Lucille Clifton Shapeshifter Survivor School. “Our programming is intentionally intergenerational,” she told me, “and centers” —speaking of Kitchen Tables — “around literally eating together and feeding each other. Since we still use and have evolved from home spaces, they are still the most conducive to educational and textual experiences that include babies, parents, elders, students, folks of every age and attention span. We see the books and all other forms of media that we use as technologies to help us be more present to ourselves and each other.”[57]

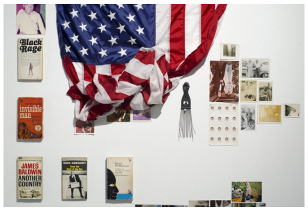
Top left: Sangodare, Eden Segbefia, Mariel Eaves, Courtney Woods, Michelle Lanier, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs at a Sunday dinner event at the Eternal Summer Living Room Library. [Sangodare] Bottom left: Sangodare, author Alexis De Veaux, and photographer Sokari Ekine, at the Durham LGBTQ Pride Parade, where they handed out copies of the Combahee River Collective Statement. [Eric Darnell Pritchard] Right: Books from the collection of Kai L. Barrow laid out on the driveway of her temporary storage space when she was being displaced. [Sangodare]

Brilliance Remastered, another arm of the project, extends Eternal Summer to communities around the world, through webinars and occasional retreats. Gumbs and Sangodare have also taken their work on the road, as Mobile Homecoming, “an intergenerational experiential archive,” for which they traveled across the United States in a 1988 Winnebago named Sojourner the RV (for “Revolutionary Vehicle”), while “interviewing, honoring, and hosting intergenerational retreats for and as Black LGBTQ feminists.” Through such travels, their project opens out from the living room to confront the racialized spatial politics of a larger world. Gumbs says that as she and Sangodare met with elders “facing housing insecurity or other transitions,” they came to see displacement as the “ongoing context of being in community as queer black feminists who want to change the world and have to also live inside of change.” They were reminded that their “work is accountable to a community that is itinerant and fugitive in [both] glamorous and unglamorous ways.”

Many people living amidst instability have donated their own book and artifact collections to the Eternal Summer library, which is physically accessible only to readers who come to Durham. That’s a problem, as Gumbs acknowledged in an interview with the local alt-weekly: “We want to honor the fact that Black Feminist brilliance is a shared, shareable and renewable community resource, not private property. We realized that we had to take a big shift to make sure that this collection which is community sourced could also be truly available to the community.”[58] Being available, for her, means being both rooted *and* mobile. To that end, she has founded the Mobile Homecoming Living Library Archive and Trust, which seeks to buy land and “build a physical archival repository, retreat center and (ultimately) an all ages independent and assisted living center where we can keep being libraries and experiential archives for each other.” Gumbs and Sangodare are also going back on the road, with collaborator Courtney Reid-Eaton, in a school bus filled with their collections, the Black Feminist Bookmobile.[59]

Between these various projects, Gumbs and her collaborators are building collections and communities in forms both physical and virtual, housed and unhoused, settled and unsettled, rooted and fugitive. “It is important that we be in multiple spaces, able to move, able to provide housing and respite, able to revolutionize and transform what it means to be at home, what elder care looks like, all of those things,” Gumbs explains, “because it is the reality of the communities we center and belong to.”[60]

Kameelah Janan Rasheed — New York City



Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *No Instructions for*

Assembly (Activation I), installation shot, 2013. [Kameelah Janan Rasheed]

Educator, curriculum designer, artist, and self-described “learner” Kameelah Janan Rasheed is also interested in what it means to create archives and libraries from a fugitive position of displacement. She grew up in East Palo Alto, California, where her elementary school hosted a publication center. She published ring-bound Xeroxed books, which she cataloged and shelved at home and checked out to family members. In 1998, as the dot-com boom put unsustainable pressure on housing in Silicon Valley, her family was evicted. She was twelve years old. As her family moved between shelters and motel rooms, Rasheed began collecting material “artifacts of the trauma of displacement,” and over the years she has amassed thousands of photographs of Black families, sermon pamphlets, advertisements, textual fragments, orphaned audio, and found objects that speak to that trauma.[61]

Her project explicitly rejects library classification systems that conceptualize African Americans as laboring bodies. “Some people and narratives,” she says, “live (or are forced to live) outside the collection scope and policies of libraries and other institutions.” So Rasheed rakes the margins and footnotes of history. “Why do you need to archive a slave?” she asks, when there is no record of their existence, aside from a bill of sale. How can Black Americana be preserved? In seeking an answer to such questions, she makes a connection between archival invisibility and the contemporary political context, “under a presidency that maintains that certain people don’t deserve to exist.” As she told *Guernica*, “we need to have a source of information that not only testifies to our existence but to our persistence against all threats.” (In conversation with me, she emphasized that those threats, and her work’s engagement with them, precede Trump.)[62]

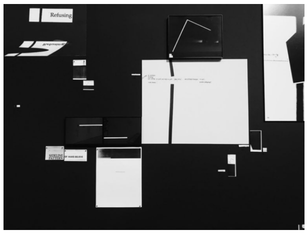
Rasheed builds her collection by consulting with traditional institutions but also by mining flea markets, dumpsters, eBay, and other marginal sites. “This is a form of important research that’s not bound by having access to an institution,” she said. “You don’t have to have a university login or … the right permissions to get into a particular archive. … I’m invested in validating all forms of research.”[63] She has also taught herself how to preserve the materials in her collection. “I’m learning both about the ways that [archiving is] done professionally and about the way that black families have done it for centuries, just to hold onto things.”

> I’m trying to figure out what’s the best middle ground between the institutional questions and the ways that grandmothers and aunts put stuff in plastic bags underneath their beds, or organized photo albums, or sewed things into socks. There are all of these different ways that black folks have been archiving for centuries because we’ve been very much aware of the possibility of someone saying that we never existed.[64]

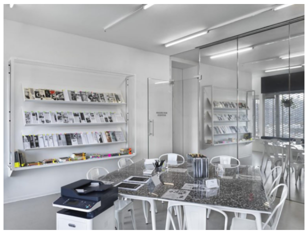
The questions about validation and legitimacy, visibility and invisibility, inside and outside, that we’ve seen in Akinmowo’s and Gumbs’s projects also manifest in Rasheed’s artwork. Her installation *No Instructions for Assembly*, drawn from objects in her archival collection, has appeared in multiple iterations over the years, in locations varying from art galleries to public housing. Each time it is presented, she organizes it differently, to “choreograph new narrative possibilities, to reveal temporal glitches, and to explore new ways of reading, writing, and troubling histories.” At the debut in 2012, Rasheed “arrived at something that felt like a domestic space but also like a library that had been exploded onto the wall.”[65]

POST-RACIAL PUSS
POST-RACIAL PUSS
POST-RACIAL PUSS
POST-RACIAL PUSS
POST-RACIAL PUSS
POST-RACIAL PUSS
Accrued Suffering
This is a stout truth.
THE NEW YORKER
THE WORLD OF MAKE-BELIEVE

Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *No Instructions for Assembly (Activation VII)*, installation shot, 2015. [Kameelah Janan Rasheed]



Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *A Supple Perimeter (Activation II)*, installation shot, 2017. [Kameelah Janan Rasheed]



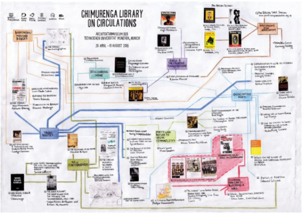
Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *ECOSYSTEMS*, installation shot, New Museum, 2018. [EPW Studio]

Another work, *On Refusal*, explores her family's rejection of Christianity *and* Rasheed's own refusal to make her story — or the media forms she marshals to tell it — easily legible. Text fragments, fading photographs, glitchy scans, blurry archival reproductions, and monoprints resembling faulty photocopies are pinned to the wall, joined by video and audio of street sermons. As Steph Rodney described it, "Everything here … is piecemeal, fugitive, partially articulated, trying to come to the surface."[66] While much of the struggle for inclusion and integration has emphasized the representation and *visibility* of marginalized populations, Rasheed celebrates illegibility: "A lot of the radical work done in movements prior to our generation was not necessarily done through hyper-visibility. People covertly published things, and covertly educated people, and covertly got training." Like many fugitive Black readers and writers and librarians over the centuries, Rasheed adopts a strategy of "strategic opacity." Rather than focusing on "helping white people understand something," she celebrates "all the different colors and permutations of blackness," so that Black people are "able to see themselves, as a reminder of our volume" — rather than as a "performance for other audiences."[67]

These traditions of fugitive reading and learning — "the pasts and futures of Black critical pedagogies" — informed a 2018 collaboration with the New Museum.[68] Inspired by the Freedom Schools and the Black Panthers' Liberation Schools, Rasheed worked with the museum's education department to frame education itself as a radical aesthetic and political practice. The installation *ECOSYSTEMS*, arranged around a central (kitchen) table, presented her archive of materials on Black histories of self-publishing and independent schools, which were made available for public perusal and photocopying, and as conversation starters for on-site potluck dinners. Black space was structured as a space of community, conversation, knowledge-making, and cultural production.

Here, too, we see a refusal to conform to institutional boundaries — including the distinction between archives (which typically hold unique primary documents) and libraries (which hold published materials that can be accessed more freely). For people oppressed by colonialism and slavery and other forms of state violence, denied the ability to cultivate their own archival record or access their own books, these rigid administrative categories hold little value.[69] Black feminist fugitive librarians' work transgresses "proper" institutional architectures, and exists outside bureaucratic structures that weren't made for it. Rasheed explains that fugitive librarians need to be clear about their intentions when they do choose to work with formal cultural or knowledge institutions: "My actual goal is not to continue to intervene in [existing] institutions, but to create my own institution."[70] Collaborations that expose her to the conventions of libraries, archives, museums, and schools act as "training wheels," she says, as she figures out her own way to ride. Wheels: another metaphor of mobility.

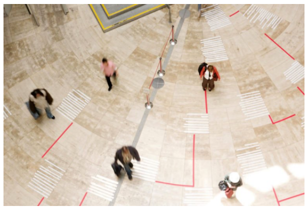
Global Collections



Chimurenga Library on Circulations, part of the exhibition *African Mobilities* at the Architekturmuseum, Technical University of Munich, 2018. [Chimurenga]

There are countless fugitive libraries around the world, along the pathways of the African diaspora, and comparing a few of these can help us see how the model translates across geographic, cultural, and political contexts. Chimurenga Library, based in Capetown, is an effort to "map 'routes' that link ideas with people, writing, research, music, publications," and other cultural forms. We can imagine such routes connecting kindred, distributed libraries, too. Chimurenga is a hybrid publisher, broadcaster, workplace, and editorial and curatorial platform that started an online collection of pan-African print periodicals in 2009. The scope was later expanded to include media forms and knowledge objects that are not always recognized by traditional libraries, including "stories and anecdotes, digital copies of documents, images, sound and film footage" — and "ghosts, allegorical or otherwise." Recognizing "people as knowledge and memory as the art of the stateless," the library explores "how we forge communities, produce and circulate knowledge and operate in border zones between informal / formal, licit / illicit, chaotic / ordered, etc."[71]

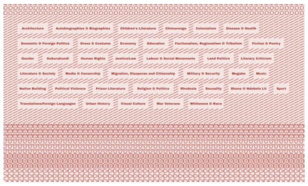
Their itinerant library shows up at exhibitions (or "interventions") around the world. At the Kallio Library in Helsinki, Chimurenga manifested as the "Pan African Space Station," incorporating musical performances, conversations, and a live broadcast. In New York, at the Performa art festival, it appeared as a "library-of-people," a collection of "bodies of knowledge." And when Chimurenga staged an exhibit at the Showroom gallery in London, they stipulated that the "library had to be built from available resources," so the gallery's curators mined local lending libraries, university libraries, and the personal collections of friends and family. Elsewhere, the Chimurenga collective has proposed that we "take seriously food as knowledge" and has examined the *shebeen* (an illegal drinking tavern) as a "college of music."[72] It's "an interesting model for a public library," Avery Gordon argues, "because it differs so radically from the conventional state- or council-run public library that is public in name only." There, the public is a user; here, the public is "part of producing the form and content of the library."[73]



Citational map installed by Chimurenga on the floor of the San Francisco Public Library for the exhibition *Public Intimacy*, curated by the SFMOMA and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2014. [Chimurenga]

Chimurenga says its exhibitions "embody the proposition [of] *finding oneself* … on library shelves and in communities," referencing the title of an album by the jazz pianist Moses Molelekwa. Self-discovery is facilitated by "quietly encroaching upon existing classification systems" and "proposing a navigation system, clearly subjective and affective," for the materials held at the host institution and in Chimurenga's own collection, which may involve very different politics, epistemologies, and ontologies.[74] At public libraries in Cape Town and San Francisco, Chimurenga used the floor as a citational map, inviting visitors to trace routes between materials and even enact those links with their bodies. (Rasheed, citing Octavia Butler, refers to practices like this as "primitive hypertext.")[75] By creating a navigational structure that materializes the gaps and the connections between different knowledge systems, Chimurenga denaturalizes standardized classification schemes and creates space for visitors to "appropriate, interpret, reconfigure, and interrogate" — to move *outside* the "logical" and the "proper," to be unsettled.[76]

Similarly, Reading Zimbabwe creates navigational aids for a diasporic literary community. Last year I met the directors, Tinashe Mushakavanhu and Nontsikelelo Mutiti, at a conference on "ways of knowing cities." Their project suggests that we know a place through its literature: "Who gets to tell or write a country's stories?" A generation ago, the answer to that question would be found in Harare, which Mushakavanhu and Mutiti call "the Holy Grail for African literature lovers." After Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, the capital had a strong publishing scene, including an annual book fair, but as the country declined politically and economically, bookstores closed and public libraries were defunded. Now much of the national literature is out of print and hard to find domestically. A lot of writing *about* Zimbabwe happens outside its borders, and those publications are geographically scattered; there's more material on Zimbabwe in the New York Public Library, they say, than in Harare's and Bulawayo's libraries. This is a fugitive literature. The country's younger generations have been "systematically disenfranchised from their own histories." Mushakavanhu and Mutiti want to reclaim those histories and connect them to "new narratives" — "the idea, the imaginary, the place, the people" of Zimbabwe past, present, and future.[77]


Architecture
Autobiographies & Biographies
Children's Literature
Chimurenga
Colonialism
Disease & Health
Domestic & Foreign Politics
Dress & Costume
Economy
Education
Factionalism, Regionalism & Tribalism
Fiction & Poetry
Gender
Gukurahundi
Human Rights
Justice/Law
Labour & Social Movements
Land Politics
Literary Criticism
Literature & Society
Media & Censorship
Migration, Diasporas and Citizenship
Military & Security
Mugabe
Music
Nation Building
Political Violence
Prison Literature
Religion & Politics
Rhodesia
Sexuality
Shona & Ndebele Lit
Sport
Translations/Foreign Languages
Urban History
Visual Culture
War Veterans
Whiteness & Race

Screenshot from the online database at Reading Zimbabwe.

Reading Zimbabwe co-founder Tinashe Mushakavanhu works on the installation at Wendy's Subway, New York City, 2018. [Black Chalk & Co.]

So they built a digital database to recover, catalog, and preserve — to virtually repatriate — that literary heritage. As of this writing, Reading Zimbawe contains records of 2,115 books (in English, Shona, and Ndebele), written by 1,275 authors, published in 114 cities. Legally, Mushakavanhu and Mutiti cannot provide direct access to digital copies of these publications; instead, they encourage folks to "do more research, go on scavenger hunts, find out how these books circulate in the world and inform how we read ourselves, and also how others read us." They aim to show "where knowledge production about Zimbabwe is happening," and to connect writers with readers and scholars. It's not just a repository, the founders assert, but a "platform, a library, a community." They've even created a playlist of Zimbabwean music, "a soundtrack to the content in the books … because musicians are also philosophers and social commentators." Yet access to this virtual community within Zimbabwe is stymied by unreliable electricity and expensive internet connections. What's more, many of the books in the database, and particularly the books in indigenous languages, are hard to find *anywhere*.[78]

So the next incarnation of their project will be a brick-and-mortar People's Library in Harare. Mushakavanhu and Mutiti hope it will "complement" the country's underfunded libraries and be a "community center and literary hub."[79] They plan to collect physical copies of most of the titles in the Reading Zimbabwe database, and to activate those books with workshops, lectures, readings, concerts, and exhibitions; they described their work to me as a "carnival of experiences." As we've seen time and again, when a community's capacity to document, read, and archive its own history has historically been challenged, the opportunity to finally draw together a library and engage with it as a community is not a staid matter of institutional "collection development"; it's an act of reverence and celebration. And those books aren't inert objects; they're active, generative forces.

Cataloging the newspaper archives at McMillan Memorial Library, Nairobi. [Paul Munee / Book Bunk]

Kenyan publisher Angela Wachuka and author Wanjiru Koinange, know well that public libraries are more than repositories. They founded Book Bunk to turn the country's old colonial libraries into sites of "knowledge production, shared experiences, cultural leadership … information exchange … heritage, public art, and memory." The most prominent of these is the McMillan Memorial Library in downtown Nairobi, a neoclassical, Carnegie-funded institution that opened in 1931. The building is a shrine to colonialism, with parquet floors, elephant tusk ornaments, period furniture, marble statues, paintings in gilded frames (including a portrait of Andrew Carnegie), a William Northrup McMillan bust over a fake fireplace, and two stone lions flanking the entrance. The 400,000-item collection includes first-edition books, Kenyan newspapers, and parliamentary proceedings that represent life in colonial Africa (and in the U.S. and U.K.) mostly through the eyes of white people.[80]

Here, those who were once marginalized are claiming a place at the center. In 1962, the library was turned over to the city and made "free to all," but little was done to update the collection, and it has been hard to find materials, since there is no comprehensive catalog. So Book Bunk is raising money and recruiting volunteers to catalog the library's resources, while adding more African voices, contemporary fiction, and children's titles. "Access, for us, is not just about people coming in through the doors," Wachuka said, "it is also about democratizing the collection that is here." Koinange explained that they want to keep the colonial material, "because it is important — the building wouldn't be here if it was not for McMillan — but also mix it with our history." Multimedia collections and podcasts will allow Nairobi's residents to "tell and share their own stories," and increase the volume of homegrown narratives in circulation. Wachuka and Koinange also aspire to modernize the McMillan building and two branch libraries, which will be reconfigured to serve children and teenagers. "I refuse to live in a city where children can actually grow up having never entered a library," Koinange said.[81]

Meet Book Bunk

An introduction to Book Bunk's effort to restore Nairobi's public libraries.

But as we've seen, generations of Black children, in the United States and around the world, grew up without access to a library, because a book in Black hands was a threat to power. Today's public libraries may indeed be among the last "democratic" spaces in American communities, but they have only begun the work of making amends for their part in furthering white supremacy and colonialism. A painful legacy endures, in the homogeneity of library staffs and spaces, the bigotry coded into classification and planning systems, and the cultural inflections of literary and architectural canons. Those same injustices have been met with tremendous creativity and resourcefulness in the rise of fugitive libraries. As I wrote in an earlier article on the rise of "little library" projects, the existence of fugitive collections does not absolve institutional libraries of their responsibility to grapple with their troubled histories and to become more equitable, just, and inclusive.[82]

The Black fugitive and transgressive librarians featured in this article all express a debt to the library-proper — to its logics and logistics, and to specific administrative, architectural, and aesthetic practices. Yet they are also committed to working outside the constraints of the traditional library, which too often limit or invalidate Black voices and perspectives. Now the challenge — for librarians, planners, and architects, both formal and fugitive — is to celebrate and support spaces of exception while allowing them to remain separate, and refusing to colonize or fetishize the necessary work they do. At the same time, the brilliance enacted at the Garrison Literary and Benevolent Association, the NYPL 135th Street Branch, the Faith Cabin Libraries, and Louisville's Western Colored Branch, and by the Free Black Women's Library, the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Chimurenga, Reading Zimbabwe, and Book Bunk[83] can inspire leaders of more privileged institutions to reimagine their own systems and spaces — and to be responsible allies to their fugitive kin.

BLACK QUANTUM FUTURISM—Collectively Envisioning a Future for North Philadelphia

from **A Blade of Grass**

05:11

Several of the librarians interviewed for this article noted the influence of Camae Ayewa's and Rasheedah Phillips's Black Quantum Futurism

Collective. The Community Futures Lab, first staged in 2016 in North Philadelphia and revived in 2019 at the Chicago Architecture Biennial, is a gallery, a resource library, a workshop space, an art-making space, or "whatever the person who stepped in need[s] at the moment."

P

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Civic Lab at the public library in Skokie, Illinois. For more on libraries as civic infrastructure, read Denise E. Agosto, Ed., *Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News* (Libraries Unlimited, 2018); Liz Farmer, "How Libraries Are Fighting Fake News," *Governing,* February 28, 2017; Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (Crown, 2018); Shannon Mattern, "Library as Infrastructure," *Places Journal*, June 2014, https://doi.org/10.22269/140609; Shannon Mattern, "Public In/Formation," *Places Journal*, November 2016, https://doi.org/10.22269/161115; Shannon Mattern, "Stacks, Platforms, Interfaces: A Field Guide to Information Spaces," Association of College and Research Libraries Conference, Baltimore, March 23, 2017; and Shannon Mattern, *The New Downtown Library* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007). See also the Knight Foundation's work with libraries. ↩
2. Kathy Rosa and Kelsey Henke, "2017 ALA Demographic Study," American Library Association Office for Research and Statistics [PDF]. See also Chris Bourg, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Librarianship," *Feral Librarian*, March 3, 2014; Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, Eds., *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* (Library Juice Press, 2018); American Library Association, "Diversity Counts"; Rebecca Hankins and Miguel Juárez, Eds., *Where Are All the Librarians of Color?* (Library Juice Press, 2016); and April Hathcock, "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 7, 2015. ↩
3. Erica Barnett, "People of Color, Especially Children, Most Likely to Be Asked to Leave Seattle Libraries," *South East Emerald*, August 22, 2018; Meredith Farkas, "When Values Collide," *American Libraries*, November 1, 2018; Lindsay McKenzie, "Racism and the American Library Association," *Inside Higher Ed*, February 1, 2019); and Chou and Pho. And just a few weeks ago, we saw a major new library project open with accessibility issues; see Elizabeth Kim, "The New $41 Million Hunters Point Library Has One Major Flaw," *Gothamist*, October 3, 2019. ↩
4. Melissa Adler, "Classification Along the Color Line: Excavating Racism in the Stacks," *Journal of Critical Librarianship and Information Studies* 1:1 (2017), 26, https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.17; and Sydney Worth, "This Library Takes an Indigenous Approach to Categorizing Books," *Yes!*, March 22, 2019. See also Melissa Adler, *Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge* (Fordham University Press, 2017); Emily Drabinski, "Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction," *The Library Quarterly* 83:2 (2013), 94-111, https://doi.org/10.1086/669547; Martin Fredriksson, "Authors, Inventors and Entrepreneurs: Intellectual Property and Actors of Extraction," *Open Cultural Studies* 2 (2018), 319-29, https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0029; "Indigenous Knowledge Organization" Special Issue, *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 53:5-6 (2015); and Nina de Jesus, "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, September 24, 2014. ↩
5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (A. C. McClurg, 1903). ↩
6. See Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru, "Gender Shades: Intersectional Accuracy Disparities in Commercial Gender Classification," *Proceedings of Machine Learning Research* 81 (2018), 1-15 [PDF], and their online research portal, Gender Shades; and Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (NYU Press, 2018). See also Sarah Myers West, Meredith Whittaker, and Kate Crawford, *Discriminating Systems: Gender, Race, and Power in AI* (AI Now Institute, 2019). ↩
7. Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship," *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018. See also George M. Eberhart, "Why Being Bad Is Good," *American Libraries*, April 13, 2019; Fobazi Ettarh, "Black Face — White Space," *What Is a Radical Librarian, Anyway?*, May 2, 2018; and Sam Popowich, *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship: A Marxist Approach* (Library Juice Press, 2019). I also reference Ettarh's work in Shannon Mattern, "Maintenance and Care," *Places Journal*, November 2018, https://doi.org/10.22269/181120. ↩
8. The American Library Association's Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services and various other councils and committees focus on equity, diversity, inclusion; and its Spectrum Scholarship Program recruits people of color into the profession. Similarly, the Association of Research Libraries offers diversity-focused fellowships, scholarships, "career enhancement" programs, and symposia. The Public Library Association, too, has charged a task force on equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice; and conducts webinars and hosts gatherings. For critiques of these programs, see April Hathcock, "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS," *In the Library With the Lead Pipe* (October 7, 2015); and Shannon D. Jones and Beverly Murphy, *Diversity and Inclusion in Libraries: A Call to Action and Strategies for Success* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). ↩
9. Renate L. Chancellor, "Communities in the Crossfire: Models for Public Library Action," *Collaborative Librarianship* 11:1 (2019). ↩
10. Myron M. Beasley, "Performing Refuge/Restoration: The Role of Libraries in the African American Community — Ferguson, Baltimore, Dorchester," *Performance Research* 22:1 (2017), 75-81, https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1285568; Makiba J. Foster, "Navigating Library Collections, Black Culture, and Current Events," *Library Trends* 67:1 (Summer 2018), 8-22, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0022; Harmony Holiday, "Black Libraries Matter: No Whispering. Food, Drink, & Dancing, Shouting, & Singing Encouraged," *Harriet,* July 22, 2016; Lisa Peet, "Public Librarians Launch Libraries4BlackLives," *Library Journal*, August 10, 2016; and Amy Sonnie, *Advancing Racial Equity in Public Libraries: Case Studies from the Field* (Government Alliance on Race and Equity, 2018). ↩
11. Foster, 9, 12. ↩
12. I've spoken with organizers of five of the six projects featured here; the exception is Chimurenga, which has a substantial public presence and has

exhaustively documented its work online. ↩

13. Jennifer Monaghan, "Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free: Reflections on Liberty and Literacy," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 108 (1998): 326. [Ed. Note: The first sentence in this section was changed after publication to refer to "enslaved people," rather than "slaves," which can be a dehumanizing term.] ↩
14. On the discourse of "restoration" and "improvement," see Rosie Albritton, "The Founding & Prevalence of African-American Social Libraries & Historical Societies, 1828, 1918," in John Mark Tucker, ed., *Untold Stories: Civil Rights, Libraries, and Black Librarianship* (University of Illinois Press, 1998); and Beasley, "Performing Refuge/Restoration." On Philadelphia's Black literary societies and social libraries: Valerie M. Joyce, "Creating a Living Historiography: Tracing the Outlines of Philadelphia's Antebellum African American Women and Mapping Memory onto the Body," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 80:3 (2013), 430, https://doi.org/10.5325/pennhistory.80.3.0420. The Garrison Literary and Benevolent Association is discussed in Wayne A. Wiegand and Shirley A. Wiegand, *The Desegregation of Public Libraries in the Jim Crow South* (Louisiana State University Press, 2018), 18. See also Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander, Eds., *'We Shall Independent Be': African American Place-Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States* (University of Colorado Press, 2008); and the work of Dorothy Porter. ↩
15. Michelle N. Garfield, "Literary Societies: The Work of Self-Improvement and Racial Uplift," in Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, eds., *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (University of Vermont Press, 2007), 113-28. ↩
16. See Caitlin M.J. Pollack and Shelley P. Haley, "'When I Enter': Black Women and Disruption of the White, Heteronormative Narrative of Librarianship," in Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, Eds., *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* (Library Juice Press, 2018), 15-59; Karin Roffman, "Nella Larsen, Librarian at 135th Street," *Modern Fiction Studies* 53:5 (2007), 752-87, https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2008.0014; and Etheline Whitmire, *Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* (University of Illinois Press, 2014). As Pollack and Haley argue, these women "combine[d] the politics of respectability and revolution" (22). See also Avril Johnson Madison and Dorothy Porter Wesley, "Dorothy Burnett Porter Wesley: Enterprising Steward of Black Culture," *The Public Historian* 17:1 (1995), 15-40, https://doi.org/10.2307/3378349. Etheline Whitmire argues that Andrews's mission was to transform the library — which made space for artists to work, launched theatrical troupes, and hosted talks about a range of timely topics — "from a space for the consumption of cultural production into a space for the creation of cultural production," a space that recognized knowledge not only in the form of books, but also "as drama, public performances, and a return to an oral tradition"; see Etheline Whitmire, *Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* (University of Illinois Press, 2014), 26-27. The 135th Street branch was reincarnated in the early 1970s as the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. ↩
17. Cheryl Knott, *Not Free, Not for All: Public Libraries in the Age of Jim Crow* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 14; see also Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Harvard University Press, 1988). ↩
18. Cynthia R. Greenlee, "On the Battle to Desegregate the Nation's Libraries," *LitHub*, July 5, 2016. ↩
19. Wiegand and Wiegand, 15. ↩
20. Wiegand and Wiegand, 25. ↩
21. Examples throughout this section are drawn from Michael Fultz, "Black Public Libraries in the South in the Era of De Jure Segregation," *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 41:3 (2006), 337-59; Knott, 139; and Wiegand and Wiegand, 21-44. See also Eliza Atkins Gleason, *The Southern Negro and the Public Library: A Study of the Government and Administration of Public Library Services to Negroes in the South* (University of Chicago Press, 1941). ↩
22. Wiegand and Wiegand, 18. I changed the verb tense in this quotation for flow. The original reads, "As late-nineteenth century Jim Crow practices spreading across the South choked their economic opportunities and limited their access to education, blacks turned inward to craft their own institutions, all providing some shelter from the often violent and constant indignities racism brought, all enabling a degree of social authority and acknowledging intelligence and independence they could not enjoy in larger southern society." ↩
23. Examples in this section are drawn from David M. Battles, *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans in the South: Or, Leaving Behind the Plow* (Scarecrow Press, 2009), 30; Dan R. Lee, "Faith Cabin Libraries: A Study of an Alternative Library Service in the Segregated South, 1932-1960," *Libraries & Culture* 26 (1991), 169-82; Fultz, 337-59; and Wiegand and Wiegand, 20-40. ↩
24. Knott, 58. ↩
25. Michael Bieze, "Booker T. Washington: Philanthropy and Aesthetics," in Marybeth Gasman and Katherine V. Sedgwick, *Uplifting a People: African American Philanthropy and Education* (Peter Lang, 2005), 50-51. ↩
26. Wiegand and Wiegand, 21; Knott, 40. ↩
27. Fultz, 344; Aisha M. Johnson-Jones, *The African American Struggle for Library Equality: The Untold Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund Library Program* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Knott, 89, 126; Louis R. Wilson and Edward A. Wright, *County Library Service in the South: A Study of the Rosenwald County Library Demonstration* (University of Chicago Press, 1935), vi. ↩
28. Knott, 103, 124, 127-28. ↩
29. See Abigail Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890–1920* (University of Chicago Press, 1995). The alternate spelling, "bilding," is Bertram's. ↩
30. Knott, 154, 157. ↩
31. Washington's Tuskegee Institute was the only Black college in the United States where students could earn a certificate in architecture until 1911,

when Howard University launched its own bachelor's degree. Some Black architects were also educated at integrated universities, including Robert Robinson Taylor, who graduated from MIT in 1888 and designed many campus buildings at Tuskegee. Mary N. Woods, *From Craft to Profession: The Practice of Architecture in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of California Press, 1999): 206-07, n. 102. See also the bibliography that accompanies the symposium "Shifting the Landscape: Black Architects and Planners, 1968 to Now," Smithsonian Institution (2018); and Victoria Kaplan, *Structural Inequality: Black Architects in the United States* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). Kaplan and some other sources date the beginning of Howard's architecture program to 1919, when the degree moved from the School of Manual Arts and Applied Sciences to the College of Applied Sciences. ↩

32. Knott, viii, 3, 168. ↩
33. Patterson Toby Graham, *A Right to Read: Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama's Public Libraries, 1900–1965* (University of Alabama Press, 2002), 2. Italics added. ↩
34. Battles, 135; Frederick W. Heinze, "The Freedom Libraries: A Wedge in the Closed Society," *School Library Journal* (April 1965), 37-9; "The Mississippi Freedom Summer and Voting Rights," Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center Library, November 3, 2016; Mike Selby, *Freedom Libraries: The Untold Story of Libraries for African Americans in the South* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Wiegand and Wiegand, 13-14, 157. Some sources claim there were 25 Freedom Libraries, while others claim 50. ↩
35. Knott, 42-46. ↩
36. Wiegand and Wiegand, 57. ↩
37. Fultz, 348. ↩
38. Wiegand and Wiegand, 205. ↩
39. Graham, 3. ↩
40. Graham, 4. ↩
41. We witnessed such efforts in Ferguson and Baltimore, where libraries were activated as safe spaces for supporters of the Movement for Black Lives, and we see them in institutions like the NYPL's Schomburg Center (whose Harlem home was recently renovated by Marble Fairbanks), the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library's Auburn Avenue Research Library for African American Culture and History, and Denver's Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library. Black architects known for their branch library designs include David Adjaye and the late Phil Freelon. ↩
42. George Lipsitz, "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 26 (2007), 12. See also Jonathan Massey, Meredith TenHoor, and Sben Korsh, "Introduction: Black Lives Matter," *Aggregate* 2 (March 2015); Andrea Roberts, "Homeplace: Planning and African American Communities" Reading List, *Places Journal*. ↩
43. bell hooks, "Black Vernacular: Architecture as Cultural Practice," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New Press, 1995), 147. ↩
44. Lipsitz, 14. ↩
45. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 74-75, 110. ↩
46. Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Duke University Press, 2018), ↩
47. Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons" in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013): 11. ↩
48. Shannon Mattern, "Middlewhere: Landscapes of Library Logistics," *Urban Omnibus*, June 24, 2015. ↩
49. See the Free Black Women's Library pages on Facebook, Instagram, and Patreon; and Tara Jefferson, "The Free Black Women's Library Is a National Movement Uplifting Black Female Authors," Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards blog, July 21, 2019. Quotes throughout this section that are not otherwise attributed are from my email correspondence with Akinmowo in August 2019. ↩
50. OlaRonke Akinmowo, "The Free Black Women's Library," MoMA Research and Development *Salon 21: Silence,* December 4, 2017. ↩
51. The Free Black Women's Library, Instagram post, June 28, 2019. ↩
52. There are branches of the Free Black Women's Library in Atlanta, Detroit, and Los Angeles, and Akinmowo told me that organizers are interested in Baltimore and D.C. as well. For more on Black women building community through collective study, see Lynn Neary, "The Rise of the Well-Read Black Girl Book Club," NPR Weekend Edition, November 10, 2018; and the website for Well-Read Black Girl. ↩
53. Char Adams, "This Traveling Library Is Making Sure 'Black Women's Literature Has the Place It Deserves,' *Oprah*, May 1, 2019. ↩
54. Quotes throughout this section that are not otherwise unattributed are from my email correspondence with Gumbs in August 2019. ↩
55. bell hooks, "Homeplace (a site of resistance)," *Yearning* (South End Press, 1990), 384, 388. ↩
56. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert," *The Scholar & Feminist Online* 8:3 (Summer 2010); Janell Hobson, "Black Feminist in Public: Alexis Pauline Gumbs," *Ms.*, January 1, 2019. Gumbs states in an interview with Heather Laine Talley, "As many people know, black lesbian poet warrior mother Audre Lorde said, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.' However, what many people don't know or remember is that immediately after that she said, 'This fact is only threatening to those who still define the master's house as their only source of support.'" "Brilliance Remastered: An Interview with Alexis Pauline Gumbs," *Feminist Teacher* 22:2 (2012), 165-67, https://doi.org/10.5406/femteacher.22.2.0165. See also Gumbs's books *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (Duke University Press, 2016) and *M Archive: After the End of the World* (Duke University Press, 2018), which address themes central to this article. For more on Barbara Smith, see Barbara Smith, "A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 10:3 (1989), 11-13,

https://doi.org/10.2307/3346433; and Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Jade Brooks, "Book Brilliance & Collaborative Love: Alexis Pauline Gumbs on Continuing the Legacy of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press," *City Lights*, June 12, 2012. ↩

57. Email correspondence, August 2019. ↩
58. Sarah Willets, "Black Feminist Bookmobile Coming to Durham," *INDY Week,* November 24, 2017. ↩
59. See "We Intend," *Mobile Homecoming*. ↩
60. Email correspondence, August 2019. ↩
61. Jacquelyn Gleisner, "The Archives of Kameelah Rasheed," *Art21 Magazine*, April 15, 2015. ↩
62. Quoted in Imani Roach, "Kameelah Rasheed: Who Will Survive in America?" *Guernica*, March 6, 2017; Kameelah Janan Rasheed, "Other Histories: An Interview with Kameelah Janan Rasheed," *Paper Journal,* June 20, 2013; email correspondence with me, August 2019. ↩
63. Kameelah Janan Rasheed, in conversation with Brandon Stosuy, "Kameelah Janan Rasheed on Research and Archiving," *Creative Independent*, January 6, 2017. ↩
64. Quoted in Roach. ↩
65. Quoted in Gleisner; and Kameelah Janan Rasheed, "Artist Statement," A.I.R. Gallery. ↩
66. Steph Rodney, "A Black American Artist Explores Her Refusal of Christianity," *Hyperallergic,* May 18, 2019. ↩
67. Quotes in this section are from Roach; Rasheed, in conversation with Stosuy; and my email correspondence with Rasheed. See also Mira Dayal, "On Refusal: Kameelah Janan Rasheed," *Voices in Contemporary Art*, December 2, 2016. ↩
68. Much of the following is drawn from "The Black School x Kameelah Janan Rasheed," New Museum, May 23–September 16, 2018, and my attendance at "Space for Learning: Within and Beyond Walls," New Museum July 26, 2018, [video]. ↩
69. See Jarrett M. Drake, "RadTech Meets RadArch: Towards a New Principle for Archives and Archival Description," *On Archivy*, April 6, 2016. ↩
70. "Code, Craft & Catalogues: Arts in the Libraries," Metropolitan New York Library Council, March 9, 2019. ↩
71. Chimurenga Library about page. ↩
72. See Chimurenga, "Shebeen as a school/ 'Angazi, but I'm sure,'" April 3–May 26 2017. This project asked: "What if maps were made by Africans for their own use, to understand and make visible their own realities and imaginaries? What could the curriculum be — if it was designed by the people who dropped out of school so that they could breathe?" See also pages documenting the events at Kallio Library (2016) and Performa (2015). ↩
73. Kodwo Eshun, Avery F. Gordon, and Emily Pethick, "Navigating Pan-Africanisms; On the Chimurenga Library," *Afterall* 43 (Spring/Summer 2017), https://doi.org/10.1086/692557. ↩
74. Chimurenga Library about page. ↩
75. See "Kameelah Janan Rasheed: Scoring the Stacks," Brooklyn Public Library, January 11–April 7, 2019. The concept of "primitive hypertext" was central to this exhibition, which I had the pleasure of experiencing in person. The exhibition focused on "a series of scores, or language-based artworks drawing on the traditions of musical notation, conceptual art, and constrained writing techniques. Rasheed's scores invite participants to widely interpret a set of instructions as they roam the library space." ↩
76. African Mobilities, Chimurenga Library. ↩
77. Reading Zimbabwe, Kickstarter; "Memory, Erasure and Virtual Repatriation: The Zimbabwean Case," CUNY Graduate Center, February 21, 2018; and my correspondence with Tinashe Mushakavanhu and Nontsikelelo Mutiti, August 2019. They told me they drew inspiration from Arturo Schomburg, namesake of the NYPL's Schomburg library; Zimbabwean writer Stanlake Samkange; and South African poet Guy Butler. Their influences also include platforms that "experiment with performance and publishing, and move between analog and digital": the African Record Center in Brooklyn, Keleketla! Library in Johannesburg, The Black Archives in Amsterdam, and Black Cultural Archives in London. ↩
78. Tadiwa Madenga, "Q&A: Tinashe Mushakavanhu on Reading Zimbabwe from Kampala," *Africa in Words,* October 28, 2018; Reading Zimbabwe, Soundcloud; and my correspondence. ↩
79. "Curating Zim's Intellectual Record," *The Herald*, August 21, 2017. Tinashe Mushakavanhu and Nontsikelelo Mutiti, personal communication, August 14, 2019. ↩
80. See AFP, "Two Kenyan Women Lead the Revival of the Faded Iconic Library in Nairobi," *Daily Nation*, August 11, 2018; Douglas Kiereini, "McMillan Library Is Treasure chest of Knowledge Built from Labor of Love," *Business Daily*, March 10, 2016; "The Library That Was and Continues to Be," *Paukwa*, April 24, 2019; Rupi Mangat, "Slow Death of Library that McMillan Built," *The East African*, May 3, 2010; and Oyebanke Oyeyinka and Abigail Abilla, "Access and 'Public' Amenities," *CoLab Radio*, February 25, 2015. ↩
81. AFP, "Two Kenyan Women"; and Book Bunk Trust, "Restoring Nairobi's Iconic Public Libraries," *Global Giving* ↩
82. Shannon Mattern, "Marginalia: Little Libraries in the Urban Margins," *Places Journal*, May 2012, https://doi.org/10.22269/120522. ↩

83. Of course, brilliance is enacted at many more sites. Several of the librarians interviewed for this article identified Camae Ayewa's and Rasheedah Phillips's Black Quantum Futurism Collective as an inspiration and a peer. Among their many projects are the Black Woman Temporal Portal toolkit and the Community Futures Lab, a "collaborative art and ethnographic research project exploring the impact of redevelopment, gentrification, and displacement in North Philadelphia through the themes of oral histories, memories, alternative temporalities, and futures." Phillips has described

the lab as a gallery, a resource library, a workshop space, an art-making space, or "whatever the person who stepped in need[s] at the moment." ↩

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