

Why Aren't There More Black Librarians?

Though they account for less than 10% of the industry, Black librarians serve a crucial role in our society.

by Maya Pottiger WORDINBLACK.COM
February 11, 2022

(WIB) – Librarians have superpowers. It was true in the late '90s when Marvel's original Spider-Woman was a [Black librarian named Valerie](#) — and it was true in 1905 when the son of two formerly enslaved Black people opened the [first library in the United States](#) that served and was fully staffed by Black Americans, bringing new resources and opportunities to the community.

And it's true now, as Black librarians across the country go into work every day, either at public libraries or school libraries. Books that tell the truth about America's history of racism — or that are written by Black folks — are being [forced off the shelves](#).

The whole idea of limiting who has access to reading material is typically and particularly something that a Black librarian has to mobilize against. TRACIE HALL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

The restriction of literacy is a painful part of Black history in this country, and it's a critical piece of history for Black librarians in understanding their roles, says Tracie Hall, the executive director of the American Library Association. Before Emancipation, Black people in most Southern states were severely punished (fingers or toes chopped off, for example) for reading or teaching others to read, and white people could be fined, whipped, or imprisoned for giving them books.

“The whole idea of limiting who has access to reading material is typically and particularly something that a Black librarian has to mobilize against. We have to,” Hall says. “That has to be part of our work in the field to protect the right to read.”

Why We Need Black Librarians

Representation matters, period. But civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis once [said](#) that internet access would be the civil rights issue of the 21st century. A 2016 [Pew Research Center](#) survey on library usage found that “library users who take advantage of libraries’ computers and internet connections are more likely to be young, black, female, and lower income,” with 42% of Black library users accessing those resources.

As a librarian, Hall believes Lewis was “really honing in on” information access in general.

It’s about sharing power. It’s about the positive information to create shared power. I think that’s what our role is as Black librarians.

TRACIE HALL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

A key part of the job for Black librarians is to open “lots of gates” to information. During the pandemic, Hall says, we’ve learned that libraries and digital access are critical for three reasons: access to education, access to employment, and access to public health.

“What we have seen, and I think what’s so important, is that information access is going to be one of the main doors that is going to open lifetime opportunities for people,” Hall says. “It’s about sharing power. It’s about the positive information to create shared power. I think that’s what our role is as Black librarians.”

While reinforcing that idea of the role may seem like a heavy lift to some, Hall says she’s noticed that younger Black people are “finding a break from this idea of the librarian as the shushing, quiet, retreating person who just loves, loves books.” Instead, they’re already understanding the role as a way to convert information access into application “to support and provide opportunities for Black lives in this country.”

Librarians Are — Still — Mostly White

As of 2021, only 7.1% of librarians are Black, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This is just below the 10-year average, which is 7.4%. In 2021, roughly 87% of librarians were white people, which has been the average since 2013. In fact, Black, Asian, and Hispanic people have only ever crossed the 10% line twice — Black

librarians accounted for 10.1% of the industry in 2011, and Hispanic librarians made up 10.4% in 2017.

“We are still in an era where upwards of 80% of the professional public librarians are white. In order to remain relevant as a field, let alone relevant with the information needs of our community, we have to become much more diverse,” Hall says. “That’s not an altruistic argument or effort. That is necessary in terms of the preservation of libraries and the sustainability of libraries.

While white representation in the librarian field has been very consistent, the rate of Black librarians has varied over the years. There were huge spikes in 2015 and 2020, which were both followed by sharp drops. Interestingly, both of those years were high profile for the Black Lives Matter movement, following the killings of Freddie Gray and George Floyd.

However, it’s unlikely the two increases are directly correlated with the highly publicized deaths. In order to be a librarian, you need to get a master’s degree in library and information science from an ALA-accredited school, which can take a year or two to earn, Hall says.

“We can’t say that one spike in a year is any trend,” Hall says. “What I do know is that there has been a history, and it’s growing, especially in terms of digital assets, of communities, especially Black people, seeing themselves as activists, or scholars, or creatives — being able to see very legibly the cultural intellectual productions of Black libraries and its occupants.”

Recruitment is a huge part of building the pipeline for Black librarians, and Hall says the ALA is doing the work to create it. Since it first began in 1998, ALA’s [Spectrum Scholarship](#) has helped more than 1,300 people of color achieve the required schooling. There are other national organizations helping to build pipelines of Black librarians, like the Black Caucus of the American Library Association’s [national forum](#).

Networks Are Key for Black Librarians

As Black people start to see themselves more in this role, it’s essential to build connections and networks with fellow Black librarians. Enter [Black Librarians](#), an

Instagram account with more than 33,000 followers that started in early 2018 as a way to highlight Black librarians and the work they do.

Shannon Bland, who created the page, is the branch manager of a public library in Charles County, Maryland. After scrolling through the accounts she followed — profiles that focus on Black hair, Black love, Black swimmers, Black gardeners — she wanted to create a digital space to highlight her own passion: Black librarians.

The page quickly gained traction and helped form a community. Bland says she started with meetups and games over Instagram Live, and then people began asking about mentorships. Since April 2019, Bland has helped cultivate around 10 mentor/mentee relationships.

“It’s all about building community,” Bland says.

In addition to supporting one another, Bland says the community shares resources. As books are being challenged and banned, it can be difficult to speak up, especially if you’re the only Black person in the room.

“The other thing that we don’t talk about as much are the microaggressions,” Hall says. “The fear of reprisal that many library professionals face when they are advocating either for certain materials or for the community that are sometimes left out or locked outside of information assets.”

In some cases, people have direct messaged Bland on Instagram about the joy of seeing other Black librarians because they’re the only one in their library system.

“Whether that community is online or offline or in real life, it’s all about building communities so that we can support each other and encourage each other so that everybody knows that they’re not out there alone.”

https://sacobserver.com/2022/02/why-arent-there-more-black-librarians/?utm_source=Social&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Check%20Your%20Shelf%202021822&utm_term=BookRiot_CheckYourShelf_DormantSuppress