

Loyola Marymount University

From the Selected Works of Aisha Conner-Gaten

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**PLA 2018 Ten Essential Programs (Quick Reads
Series No. 6): ANTI-RACIST LIBRARIANSHIP
FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIANS**

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PROGRAMS

06

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *PLA 2018: Ten Essential Programs*, ten essays that cover programming that occurred during the Public Library Association's 2018 conference. Post-conference surveys showed that most PLA 2018 attendees left the conference feeling exhilarated and eager to share and implement all the ideas and information they learned. The goal of this book is to recapture a bit of that excitement and learning and share it widely.

While all of the programming at PLA 2018 was significant in one way or another, sadly, we could only fit ten articles within the confines of this book. The entries were selected based on criteria including reviews, subject matter, and of course the availability of the presenters to write an account of the program. I think you'll agree that we've compiled a wide-ranging and comprehensive overview of the PLA 2018 landscape.

Filled with instruction, advice, and knowledge from some of the field's most innovative thinkers, reading this book will be a vibrant reminder for those who attended the conference and a great opportunity to see what happens at PLA conferences for those who were unable to attend.

Here at PLA, we are in awe of our program presenters and admire and respect their contributions to the field. We also want to extend our appreciation to the presenters-turned-writers who devoted their time and shared their expertise in creating this outstanding compilation.

Kathleen M. Hughes
Public Library Association

ANTI-RACIST LIBRARIANSHIP FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIANS

This article is based on the PLA 2018 program, “Push Comes to Shove: Supporting Patrons of Color in Your Institution.”

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As the US minority population changes¹, information workers at every level must confront the ways in which their institutions may not be supporting patrons of color. We all want to believe that we provide a standard of service to all patrons. However, larger historical, economic, and social contexts impact how patrons of color view and are affected by the library. As we talk about these issues, we use the term “patrons of color” for non-white patrons.

While we use this term, patrons of color, in the text, we acknowledge that not all people of color are exactly alike and have the same information needs. Information workers at all institutions need to consider their particular community and its users. This is part of the labor of supporting patrons: understanding how the community operates to be a better community partner. Most libraries are staffed by white and white-identifying individuals who must make a personal commitment to actively work against racism and its effects. Anti-racist librarianship is the practice of LIS students and professionals actively working to dismantle white supremacy in libraries and other information centers while also being accountable to colleagues of color and the public they serve.^{2,3} Racial equity requires an ongoing education and commitment

to anti-racism in order to dismantle oppression without heavily leaning on the labor of our colleagues of color. So how can we get started? We first consider our role at the reference desk, then create and uphold policies, and finally plan and promote programming in the library space.

ANTI-RACISM AT THE REFERENCE DESK

“Microaggression,” “micro assaults,” and “cultural competency” are all buzzwords that point to a need to talk about racism in the field.⁴ Recognizing and managing assumptions regarding race and its intersections (class, education, gender, ability, age, etc.) are essential to an anti-racist reference desk.⁵ At the desk, you speak on behalf of the institution regarding policies, spaces, and resources available to patrons. As such, regardless of personnel level, you exert institutional power and determine cultural norms in library spaces. That means that patrons look to the reference desk to tell them what is acceptable in the library space. How you manage that power can either make or break a patron’s relationship with the library. In reference interactions, avoid interrogating the patron and their motives in the library space. Think about how your language, tone, and physical presence can be a sign of support for a patron of color unsure of the library environment.

Anti-racist librarianship at the reference desk also requires both reflexivity and accountability on the part of the information worker. As reflective practice, confronting and examining whiteness is necessary labor to push anti-racist practice. As you interact with patrons of color at the desk, question your role in the interaction, including:

- How much space, physically and verbally, am I taking up?
- Am I actively listening to this conversation or simply waiting to speak again?
- Am I leveraging my power as a member of this institution to support this patron? Or am I just saying “no” because I want to end this interaction as quickly as possible?

Again, these critical questions must be asked with simultaneous attention paid to patron care during this interaction. Care moves beyond physical well-being and considers the historical inequalities and power dynamics that impact how patrons see and value library spaces.⁶ In order to fully embrace anti-racism, you must hold yourself accountable to your community and work through discomfort during and after interactions with patrons of color to ensure equitable practice at the reference desk.

ANTI-RACIST POLICY IN THE LIBRARY

There are multiple levels of policy that impact library governance, including U.S. Code, state and municipal statutes, and the library's own set of policies. However, it is the people working in the library who play a central role in the delivery of services and “thus play a key role in the policy-implementation process, exerting great influence in how policies are actually carried out and experienced by citizens.”⁷ One of the key ways in which library staff, particularly white staff, exert great influence over the policy-implementation process is through their ability to act on their prejudices and biases against patrons of color and therefore contribute to the criminalization of patrons of color through the utilization of security staff and the police. Since policies reinforce reliance on security and law enforcement to control patrons whose behaviors are deemed inappropriate, the actions of staff to call security or the police are often deemed appropriate.⁸ Therefore, when we discuss anti-racist solutions to library policies, we need to consider that individual acts of prejudice, for example, the call to security or police that is itself a result of bias—are reinforced by a racist system—policy and laws that rely on law enforcement, who disproportionately target and criminalize people of color.⁹

Knowing that libraries are overwhelmingly staffed by white people, library administration that enable and encourage library staff to call

security first for any issue, including benign infringements, such as sleeping at a computer, risk creating a hostile environment to patrons of color. They also risk emboldening security and police staff to use excessive force.¹⁰ A starting point to combat the criminalization of patrons of color in the library is a racial equity audit of policy and procedures accompanied by extensive training for library staff,¹¹ with specific attention paid to the intersection of staff, security, and the police.

Participation from the community and specifically communities of color are crucial to these processes. The Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) recently published “Advancing Racial Equity in Public Libraries,” a report that serves as a great starting point for libraries committed to racial equity and offers both case studies of public libraries who are already working toward racial equity as well as discusses the GARE Equity Framework that library staff can apply to their own institutions.¹² While this report does not focus specifically on security and police, it does focus on policy and staff training. Change will not happen overnight, but it is up to us to put the work in to create institutions that are truly committed to providing equitable access and service to patrons of color, not in theory but in actual practice.

ANTI-RACIST PROGRAMMING IN LIBRARIES

On Mother’s Day, organizations across the country have partnered to bail mothers out of jail to be with their families.¹³ This effort to reunite families and address their needs restores social justice and liberation work being done to disrupt structural and institutional racism. This optimism for creating positive institutional change also extends to libraries. Librarians must become advocates for communities of color and can address oppressive behavior through programs. Note that programs are *not* the way to end racist practice in libraries. It is one of many tools we can use.

In practice, libraries play a crucial role in interrupting oppression and systemic racism. Programs can address the reentry and recidivism rates in marginalized communities while partnering with organizations like Chicago's Westside Justice Center and Moms United Against Violence and Incarceration. These organizations use a holistic approach, considering both the family and community. Embedded librarians can also provide information resources to underserved populations from within the organization itself. For example, a library can create a noncirculating collection housed within the Westside Justice Center and provide a donation of children's books to Moms United Against Violence and Incarceration.

To get started, we must ask ourselves this question: how can we use programming to advocate for marginalized groups? This conversation begins with asking the community what they want and need and, in turn, identifying the ways in which the library can help. For instance, instead of asking for random book donations, let the organization inform the library about what content and formats are needed. Remember, the community should be speaking for themselves and prioritized in these partnerships. Every community is different, so as an advocate and librarian it is our job to plan programming around our specific community needs. Some tips to consider when developing programs to support patrons of color in your area include:

- Have community members identify their needs and create pathways for communication.
- Partner with community organizations, churches, and individuals working on specific concerns.
- Be intentional about the types of programs offered and ensure that programming meets the community's needs.
- Create sustainable long-term programs with measurable outcomes.
- Be visible in the community and meet people where they are.

CONCLUSION

Anti-racist librarianship can be applied to all aspects of the library: at the reference desk, in our policies and procedures, and in our programming. Our hope is to offer library staff members insight into the issues libraries are facing in regards to supporting patrons of color in the library and tangible steps for challenging our institutions and colleagues to put racial equity into practice.¹⁴

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