

San Jose State University

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[Review of] *Not Free, Not for All: Public Libraries in the Age of Jim Crow*

Anthony Bernier, *San Jose State University*



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Book Review:

C. Knott, **Not Free, Not for All: Public Libraries in the Age of Jim Crow**. By Cheryl Knott. Pp. 312, ill. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 2015.

\$28.95. ISBN: 978-1-62534-178-5 (PB)

Contested Aspirations

Not Free, Not for All arrives at an auspicious, if not ironic, moment in the history of public libraries in the United States – contrasting centennial celebrations of the very Carnegie buildings that excluded many in the American South between the late 19th century and the 1960s while also elevating the first African American (first woman and public librarian) as Librarian of Congress; in it, Cheryl Knott, (Information School, University of Arizona), presents the mature social history to which library and information studies must aspire to advance its historiography beyond self-congratulatory exceptionalism.

Knott forcefully writes, “It is fantasy to believe that the public library was one of the few institutions not implicated in a system of racism or that separate public libraries for African Americans were just an unfortunate exception to the public library’s true democratic nature.” The narrative subtly pursues the different experiences and meanings of libraries for African Americans as well as how they ultimately resisted race-based restrictions and achieved full racial integration. But unlike so many library histories, this one also addresses how whites, local officials, library professionals, even the American Library Association (ALA) instituted, colluded in, and defended segregation.

As a quality social history, *Not Free, Not for All* charts different courses for diverse groups of actors. Knott expertly examines founding documents and policies of new libraries, circulation and holdings records, secondary accounts created during the period, and archival records connecting administrative regimes to the segregationist policy called “Jim Crow.”

Knott’s critique of the public library’s lingering legacies and self-styled myths of democratic access – exposes just how broadly exclusionary policy existed throughout the South, how deeply ingrained were the many interests and strategies to defend it, and how conventional library history “whitewashed” the story. Librarians, especially white middle-class women, so often imagined as magnanimous cultural apostles, prove explicit proponents and defenders of segregation. And while not Knott’s focus, ALA’s complicity in segregation also plays a significant role. Southern whites preferred to close down libraries rather than share them with African American citizens.

Beyond the stories of institutional exclusion, however, Knott’s key contribution resides in African American resistance and persistence toward equitable access to entitled public resources of the library’s collections, services, and spaces. As with similar struggles against “American Apartheid,” for access to public swimming pools, parks, and many other municipal resources, significant progress toward racially integrated libraries did not occur until the 1940s and 50s, not until after the post-World War II era articulated rising aspirations in the budding revolution we now call the Civil Rights Movement. Knott features the collective agency and volition of the oppressed through the measures, strategies, and resources they mobilized. Even through the 1960s, however, southern libraries extended integrated services only haltingly, incrementally, and frequently, as Knott points out, “dismally.”

While delivering an unusually strong and much-needed social history critique of the public library's "free to all" myth, this approach to history also comes freighted with its own liabilities. In focusing on the story's "end" (integration) a teleological overlay lingers, rather obliging everything happening before it to serve only as preview of the inevitable. History is more contingent than that. While historians argue about this approach, it rather assumes that as Jim Crow receded, integration would just sparkle in the sun. When social phenomena are defined as narrowly it's easier to declare it in "the past."

Knott's examination of library history under racial segregationist policy in the southern states builds profitably upon two previous works: Patterson Graham's *A Right to Read* on African American exclusion from Alabama's libraries during this same period; and Wayne Wiegand's more recent and broader celebration of the public library in American culture, *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library*.

In addition to unequal access of northern libraries, however, other flavors of segregationist and white supremacist policies continued on long after the 1960s, such as "Jaime Crow" in the Southwest, against Latinos and immigrants. The field, too, awaits a social history of youth services, for example, one already hinting of *de facto* erasure, especially young males of color ("Jim Crow Junior"), from being envisioned as fully entitled to libraries - ironic, too, that young people figured so significantly, as Knott teaches, in the struggle for racial equality, especially in the South.

It is not fair, however, to hold a book, especially one so essential as this, accountable for research agendas of the future. Knott tells a long-overdue story of broad African American resilience and struggle to obtain recognition as municipal citizens, even against one of the culture's putatively most democratic institutions. It also tells a story perhaps even more necessary - about how public libraries are not the reputed Shining City on the Hill, but are as much a part of their times as any other civic institution.