

Countering Systemic Racism through Antiracist Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Racial discrimination continues to be a feature of American life. In his 1881 essay, “The Color Line,” Frederick Douglass describes the enduring strain of racial prejudice which he characterized as a “moral disorder” that “creates the conditions necessary to its own existence and fortifies itself by refusing all contradiction” (p. 567). W.E.B. Du Bois decried this moral disorder in *The Souls of Black Folk* where he famously asserted that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (n.p.). Despite the progress achieved through successive American racial justice movements (Abolitionism, Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement), the problematics of the color-line remain a defining feature of the twenty-first century American experience. The murder of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement in the summer of 2020 triggered mass outrage in communities across the U.S. (and the world) over the accretion of racially motivated acts of police brutality directed against individuals of African descent.

Regardless of movements for social change, the U.S. has maintained a durable institutionalized and systemic structure of racial inequality – a society characterized by structural racism. Structural systemic racism is “a system in which public policies, institutional practices,

cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity” (Aspen Institute, n.p.). Structural racism is maintained through institutions. Libraries, as educational and cultural institutions, have been implicated in their role in maintaining structural racism in American society (ALA 2020).

In the aftermath of the Floyd protests, the United Nations (U.N.) investigated police brutality and issued a report describing global human rights violations related to racism directed against people of African descent; they found systemic racism persisting in a culture of denial (Office of High Commissioner, United Nations Human Rights 2021). They made several recommendations to support transformative change: (1) ceasing denial of racism, (2) confronting past racist legacies, (3) dismantling systemically racist structures, and (4) attainment of reparatory justice. Library and Information Science associations have preemptively taken the first step recommended by the U.N., ceasing denial, and have issued various public statements admitting to their role in perpetuating racism (ALA 2020, PLA 2020); further actions by them leading to reparatory justice appear not to have been rigorously pursued. At the personal level and at the individual library level, more sustained work has been done.

Within this context, a project to capture how LIS has promoted racial justice was conceived. *Antiracist Library and Information Science: Racial Justice and Community* (2023), a volume of critical, scholarly and reflective perspectives on the theory, practice and progress made towards the actualization of antiracism, edited by Kimberly Black and Bharat Mehra was published (Emerald Publishing). The volume consists of twenty chapters describing the theoretical foundations of antiracism in LIS, a discussion of the manifestations of racism in LIS and communities and strategies for actualizing an antiracist LIS. Contributors to the volume consist of noted and emerging LIS educators and scholars, librarians, and students who have a stake in the enterprise of racial justice. The editors and contributors to this volume would like to convene a public conversation about antiracism in LIS through a panel presentation and discussion.

The goal of this proposed panel is to discuss the ideas presented in the book:

- ***Confrontation of past legacies*** – discussion of theoretical and philosophical foundations of antiracism in LIS
- ***Cessation of denial*** – discussion of the manifestations of racism in libraries, LIS associations and the profession itself
- ***Dismantling structures/pursuit of racial justice*** – conversation about strategies for achieving antiracism in LIS

The panel will consist of brief talks by authors about their chapters and breakout sessions designed to explore issues and develop solutions related to anti-racism in LIS. Kimberly Black will serve as panel moderator. The 90-minute session is organized as follows:

Activity	Duration
Introduction to the Project and Panelists	5 minutes
Discussion of Selected Chapters	40 minutes

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nicole A. Cooke & Lucy Santos Green - “Shutting Down the Tent Revival: The Call for Inclusive Leadership in LIS” - LaVerne Gray – “Unearthing Racism in the Soil: Developing Collective Anti-racist Consciousness in a Library and Information Science Classroom” - Mónica Colón-Aguirre – “Publishing While Latina: My Journey as an LIS Scholar in Search of the Academic Stool’s Third Leg” - Anders Tobiason – “Engaging Antiracist Conversations: Foregrounding Twitter Feeds in Library Guides as a Way to Critically Promote Discussions of Racial Justice” - Jennifer Elisa Chapman – “Slave Cases and Ingrained Racism in Legal Information Infrastructures” - Shalonda Capers – “With Head and Heart: Exploring Autoethnographic Antiracist Research in Pediatric Cancer Communities” - Baheya S. Jaber – “Immigrants in Alabama: Community-engaged Scholarship as a Lens for Racial Justice” - Bharat Mehra [co-authors Laurie Bonnici and Steven L. MacCall not on panel] – “Collegiality as a Weapon to Maintain Status Quo in a White-privileged and Entrenched LIS Academy” 	
Chapter Q&A	10 minutes
Breakout, Small Group Discussion Sessions	20 minutes
Debrief of Breakout Session and Conclusion	15 minutes

By the conclusion of the panel, participants should walk away with a clearer understanding of how systemic racism is manifested in LIS as well effective strategies to support and enact antiracist practices and create racially just communities.

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ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Community engagement; Critical librarianship; Social justice.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Antiracism; Racism; Community; Activism.

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