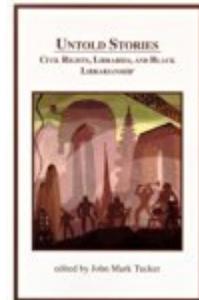


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Mark Tucker, ed. *Untold Stories: Civil Rights, Libraries, and Black Librarianship*. Champaign, Ill.: Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1998. 210 pp. \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87845-104-3.

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As a collection of fifteen articles representing research, personal narrative, and bibliography, *Untold Stories* is a significant contribution to the literature of the Black American experience and librarianship. The fifteen articles are divided by three sections: “Legacies of Black Librarianship,” “Chronicles from the Civil Rights Movement,” and “Resources for Library Personnel, Services and Collections.” Each has excellent essays, containing high-quality research and writing. This review concentrates on the most impressionable of these essays—not meaning to rank the unselected as lesser, but rather to amplify the range of discoveries *Untold Stories* offers, in the hope authors’ voices will be heard and the book will receive the wide readership it deserves.

Marilyn Pettit’s lead piece “Liberty & Literacy: Sunday Schools & Reading for African-American Females in New York City, 1799-1826” bridges race, gender, and class politics in an exploration of Sunday schools as the common school for the most marginalized of early nineteenth-century New York City residents, Black girls. In analytic and unsentimental language, Pettit reconstructs the development and decline of this ignored “matrix for the acquisition of literacy and for the use of libraries and books, particularly for African-American females” (p. 11). Based on dissertation work, the research is thorough, meticulous, and a model of scholarship. Pettit consulted church records, city council minutes, and letters, and she has framed this evidence with a solid consultation of the secondary literature on free Blacks, Sunday schools, and literacy, thereby turning information into knowledge. Pettit’s conclusion is particularly meaningful to librarians and one those in library education must take to heart. That is, as librarians we must take into custody the records of neglected groups so their histo-

ries can be written, and library educators must educate professionals who “are alive to the research potential of such records” (p. 20).

The gift of an historical narrative is that its story piques certain curiosities, thereby leading to new discoveries. Rosie Albritton uncovers in “The Founding & Prevalence of African-American Social Libraries & Historical Societies, 1828-1918” that the accepted, or designated, expert chroniclers of North American social libraries gave scant recognition to the existence of African-American social libraries and to the early work by Black historians who documented their existence. Albritton presents the story told, but not heard, and through her extensive bibliography reveals a lost history of the nineteenth-century African-American literary societies and social libraries. She integrates literature on Black and White social libraries with that of literary society history, to place the African-American experience in the context of American library history. Her appendix continues the work of Dorothy Porter and other Black library scholars, giving a useful foundation for further research.

The history of a single library helps us gain greater understanding of the public library in a social context. Andrea L. Williams illustrates the effect of segregation and its dismantling, in presenting the history of the Holland Public Library, Wichita Falls, Texas, 1934-1968. Under Jim Crow, the library was a testament to Black self-determination. Founded, funded, managed, and cared for by Black leadership for Blacks, the library held little interest among Whites. In integration, the library became of interest to Whites because of its status as a city employer, thereby offering a good salary (p. 71). Here we see at least two outcomes of community inter-

est in a library: as a place for education and inspiration, and as an institution which provides secure employment. This reader was struck by this because, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the question of the library as a marginal institution appears in Williams's work. For example, the closing of Holland Public Library in 1968 stirred no controversy, although the closing of Booker T. Washington High School resulted in much protest. Williams concludes with this poignant quote regarding the public library's demise:

We saw it as inevitable and necessary for it to close; it was a remnant of a separate but unequal age, that no one ever pretended was o.k. Keeping it open with all its inadequacies would be extending another remnant of a part of our history we were trying to dismantle (p. 75).

Yet this would be true of the school, and still its closing generated community protest. The library's role in society is paradoxical in that citizens see its importance and dedicate resources, no matter how scarce, to its establishment. But at other times the library seems to have an inconsequential role. Marginal or essential? Which is the library in society and from what viewpoint should it be studied?

The second section, "Chronicles from the Civil Rights Movement," explores the structural barriers of law and social custom specifically related to librarianship. Dan Lee in "From Segregation to Integration: Library Services for Blacks in South Carolina, 1923-1962" skillfully uses correspondence from the Carnegie Corporation, annual reports and minutes of the South Carolina State Library Board, newspaper articles, census statistics, charters, and other primary sources to demonstrate resistance to library service to Blacks in South Carolina. For example, the Charleston Library Society turned down Carnegie assistance in 1905 "out of fear that acceptance of such funding would commit the staff to serving the general public, and therefore blacks" (p. 94). Lee also chronicles the attempt in 1921 to secure a Carnegie library for Blacks in Charleston which was ultimately unsuccessful. From 1928 to 1931, to meet the library needs of Blacks in Charleston, African-American Susan Dart Butler, the daughter of a minister, developed and ran a library at her own expense until it was made a branch of the county system (p. 95). Thorough, meticulous research by Lee shows how libraries were made separate and certainly were not equal, and how Blacks challenged, sacrificed, and by determination made sure the public library was a part of their community.

In "Reading for Liberation," Don Davis and Cheryl

Knott Malone reconstruct the role of libraries in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964. The story of library planning, book donation, maintenance and legacy is a fresh look at the role of libraries in civil rights. This article focuses on the writings of James Farmer, founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, whose papers were acquired by the University of Texas. In fact, it was the acquisition of this collection and the discovery that establishing libraries was part of the Freedom Summer, which inspired the 1994 American Library Association Library History Round Table program and resulted in this book. This is a moving piece which presents the optimism of our profession, the faith in books as instruments of liberation, and the desire of people to have or withhold libraries in communities. In some cases, the Freedom libraries were all that a community had; in the end, some fell prey to arson, others merged with newly integrated libraries (p. 119). How many libraries were there? This is difficult to determine and is one minor flaw of imprecision in this work, where the authors refer to "15 or 20 [libraries] of the more than 40 centers" (p. 111).

The final section, "Resources for Library Personnel, Services, & Collections," pulls together issues involving biography, bibliography and collection building. Its concluding bibliographic essay by Edward Goedeken is ambitious in its attempt to bring together a forty-year literature of civil rights, libraries, and Black librarianship. This reader was curious as to the rationale of organization and the selection process of including works, and therefore wished for an introductory paragraph specifying how the multi-disciplinary approach was applied. Also, the pathfinder approach of starting with general sources outside of library science somehow does not seem appropriate for the readership of this volume. And oddly, the title demarcates at 1994 a 1996 article by Glendora Johnson-Cooper from a collection in which a piece on Dorothy Porter is included.[1] Without knowing the selection criteria, for example, why was the fine biography of Nella Larsen, published in 1994, omitted? [2] This bibliographic essay nonetheless is a good start for the beginning researcher and the suggestions for further research is a thoughtful contribution.

In reading a collection, too often one finds that the diversity of voices contributes to an unevenness of tone and tenuous relationship of content. The skillful and careful editing of *Untold Stories* makes this the rare collection that does not suffer from unevenness and is thus enjoyable to read. But for me, there was a subtle and troubling aspect of the book that is marked by the epithet selected by the editor. It reads:

The civil rights movement did not grow out of the dream of any one man, or woman ... The people who made up the Movement were almost as diverse as America itself. [It] was carried out by a tiny percentage of all those who could have taken part. And yet this small group was able to generate a wave that washed over the entire nation, that spawned similar movements in a dozen fields. (Powledge, 1991, pp. xi, xii [p. 1])

The Black American demand for humane treatment, for the full rights of citizenship, for liberty and justice is first, a Black story. Whites who fought Whites in the struggle for Black civil rights should be acknowledged. But there must be a way to do it that does not make the sympathetic white person the hero, or diminishes the courage of the oppressed by immediately acknowledging diversity. The use of white journalist Fred Powledge's quote stripped the strength, determination and power of Blacks who resisted and successfully fought White law and social custom of segregation, thereby muting these powerful stories. To talk about race and the legacy of racism is an unpleasant, hurtful task—so to sugarcoat it is tempting. To resist this temptation requires a will and re-

sponsibility necessary to the scholarly integrity in studying race and racism.

Unquestionably, *Untold Stories* is a remarkable collection and one that should enjoy a large and diverse readership.

Notes

[1]. G.J. Cooper, "African-American historical continuity: Jean Blackwell Hutson and the Schomburg Center for research in black culture," in S. Hildenbrand, ed., *Reclaiming the American Library Past: Writing the Women In*, pp. 27-51 (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1996). See also in the same collection: H.H. Britton, "Dorothy Porter Wesley: Bibliographer, Curator and Scholar," pp. 163-86.

[2]. Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994).

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