

The Legacy of Black Women in Librarianship: When They Dared to Be Powerful, Nicole A. Cooke (ed.), ALA Neal-Schuman, 2025. 232pp. Softcover, \$59.99, 9798892553261.



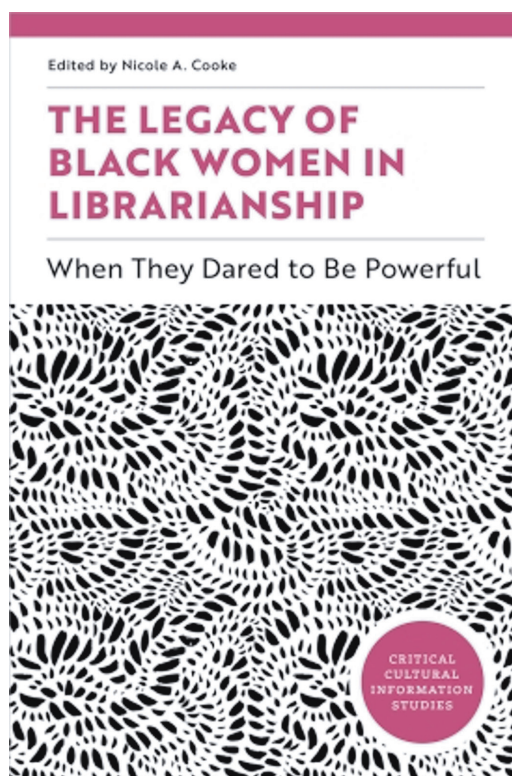
This book grew out of Nicole A. Cooke's reflections on the Black librarians of the past, whom she calls her "Black library ancestors," whose labor, resilience, and persistence paved the way for her and other librarians in the profession. In exploring this history, Cooke examines the experiences of 30 students of color who attended the University of Illinois's library school between 1970 and 1972 and went on to make significant contributions to the profession.

When Cooke became the 2019 Augusta Baker Endowed Chair at the University of South Carolina, she continued researching people of color whose work shaped the library profession and, through this work, came across 16 trailblazing Black women librarians. Recognizing their contributions, she felt a responsibility to bring greater visibility to these women who paved the way for her and other professionals. The result is a collection of chapters written by librarians, educators, archivists, and other information professionals, each highlighting the historical significance and professional impact of the 16 Black women at the center of this volume.

The prologue and opening chapter focus on Augusta Baker, a pioneering Black librarian whose work shaped children's literature and representation for decades. Baker became one of the earliest advocates for positive and authentic depictions of Black children in books and played a crucial role in building the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection at the New York Public Library during the 1960s. She challenged publishers who perpetuated stereotypes of Black children and created a bibliography highlighting Pan-African perspectives, Black history, and affirming representation.

The prologue features a poem by Jennifer Bartell Boykin, Poet Laureate of the City of Columbia, South Carolina, who reflects Baker's advocacy, powerful storytelling, and lasting influence. Through Boykin's words, readers can feel the deep appreciation for Baker and recognize the profound impact Black women librarians have on children, shaping their imaginations, identities, and sense of belonging.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its multifaceted storytelling. Each contributor presents the lives of these 16 librarians; many came from humble beginnings and faced systemic adversity, yet they developed creative solutions that benefited both the library profession and the African American communities they served. Chapter 15, which focuses on Lucille C. Thomas, offers a compelling example. Thomas's journey begins in her childhood in Dunn, North Carolina, and extends to her becoming the first African American president of the New York City School Librarians Association from 1970 to 1972, as



well as holding leadership roles in other local organizations. Her 1983 petition to the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, calling for more diverse and culturally reflective library materials, illustrates her forward-thinking leadership style. Thomas's story, like many in this volume, shows how these librarians pushed against racism while uplifting their communities, and advocating for equitable representations in library collections.

Throughout the book, recurring themes of emotional labor, resilience, and resistance reveal the challenges Black women navigated in librarianship from the 1920s through the 1990s. Their stories show not only their determination to enter and remain in the profession, but also their efforts to challenge racist narratives embedded in library materials and media. Several contributors connect these historical struggles to their own experiences, emphasizing how the legacy of these women continues to inspire today's information professionals.

As a Black woman entering a growing area of librarianship that intersects cataloging and publishing library data on the web through linked data, I felt especially connected to Chapter 4, "Doris Hargrett Clark: Pioneer, Activist, and Educator." Clark transformed cataloging practices during a pivotal period of change, advocating for updated Library of Congress Subject Headings in Black studies and championing accessible authority control practices. Her 1990 book, *Authority Control: Principles, Applications, and Instructions*, became foundational for catalogers. Clark also served on committees that shaped cataloging standards, including the development of AACR2 (Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, Second Edition), which many catalogers still recognize today, even as the field has shifted toward RDA (Resource Description and Access) and MARC (Machine-Readable Cataloging)-based systems. Her pioneering contributions inspire me as I navigate linked data and work to expand cataloging beyond traditional databases into the broader web.

If this book has a limitation, it is that readers are left wanting more. The lives of the 16 women featured here represent only a portion of the many Black women whose contributions remain underrepresented in library and information scholarship. Future volumes could highlight additional historical figures or incorporate the voices of Black women shaping the field today, helping to address longstanding gaps in documentation.

Overall, the book offers a thoughtful balance of storytelling, historical context, and scholarly reflection. By situating these women's lives within major events such as the Great Depression and the Civil Rights Movement, the authors illuminate not only the oppression these librarians faced but also the broader systems that shaped the lives of African Americans. The volume also connects past struggles to ongoing efforts toward diversity, inclusion, and equitable representation in collections. Reading this book will inspire library workers and leaders to advocate for social justice, advance inclusive materials, and engage in meaningful community outreach across local, state, and national platforms.

This book is essential reading for library professionals, scholars, and archivists, especially women in leadership, as it highlights the emotional labor, resilience, and resistance required to navigate the profession and effect meaningful change. — *Tomeka Jackson, Linked Data Librarian, Middle Tennessee State University*