

# Memories of Public Libraries in Oral Histories of Accomplished Black Professionals: Methods of Finding the Library in the Life of the User

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**L**IBRARY HISTORIANS HAVE USED MANY METHODS TO seek to illuminate the library in the life of the user, hoping to understand what role libraries played in the day-to-day experiences of their patrons in the past.<sup>1</sup> For example, Frank Felsenstein and James J. Connolly analyzed the circulation records of the public library in Muncie, Indiana, to discern the reading habits of that town's populace.<sup>2</sup> Wayne Wiegand reviewed the collections of public libraries (with an emphasis on what was excluded) to reveal the social attitudes and pressures that would have influenced librarians' decisions about collection development.<sup>3</sup> Mike Selby interviewed users of the Freedom Libraries associated with the 1964 Freedom Summer voter registration drive in Mississippi to record their experiences and memories.<sup>4</sup> And Emily Spunaugle scrutinized the minutes of a private library society in eighteenth-century England to explore the reading interests of its members.<sup>5</sup>

The attempt to find the library in the life of the user is not well developed in the history of Black library use. The most prominent histories of library service to Black patrons have been largely institutional histories or biographies of Black librarians. While the work of Renate Chancellor, Aisha M. Johnson-Jones, Janet Sims-Wood, David M. Battles, and others provide valuable information on the development and progress of Black libraries, the voices of users are encountered less often in those works than are the views of administrators and librarians.<sup>6</sup>

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## ABSTRACT:

I mined 503 oral histories of prominent Black Americans for their memories of public libraries in the twentieth-century United States. I then analyzed testimonies to produce a “prosopography of sentiment”: aggregated data demonstrating how members of this demographic group *in general* felt about libraries. The most common themes were “reading as a pleasurable activity,” “library as a source to explore Black culture or develop Black pride,” and “library as a site for personal growth or maturation.” The most common theme with unpleasant emotional valence was “stories related to segregation or discrimination.” Most memories occurred during reporters’ childhoods or adolescences. The percentage of stories with unpleasant emotional valence declines significantly from the 1920s to the 1970s and as the population of the city increases. Within this demographic group, memories of the library often confirm the stereotypes that library advocates tend to promote.

## KEYWORDS:

public libraries, oral history, African Americans, Black Americans, United States, memory, library in the life of the user, qualitative data analysis

Among the prominent examples of scholarship in Black library history, only Selby's work includes a large sample of Black library patrons speaking of their memories and feelings about libraries. In a few histories, scattered voices of library users can be found. Elizabeth McHenry quotes a few public statements regarding the positive feelings of African American readers toward the private reading rooms they frequented in the North during the nineteenth century; they are culled from letters and articles published in the Black press of the time.<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Knott uncovers memories of library use by residents of Louisville, Kentucky; Washington, DC; and Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>8</sup> And there are memoirs, such as those of Pauli Murray, Maya Angelou, Ralph Ellison, Malcolm X, Evans Hopkins, Allegra Turner, and Barack Obama, in which the authors recall their experiences with public libraries.<sup>9</sup>

The literature concerning the desegregation of libraries often cites African American activists who stated their desires to have access to public libraries. The novelist Richard Wright's wish to read the works of H. L. Mencken and the subterfuge he used to check books out of the Cossitt Library in Memphis are well known. The "impulse to dream" that "surged up" upon his gaining access to Mencken's works was the impetus to his literary career.<sup>10</sup> Wayne Wiegand and Shirley Wiegand find a number of quotes from activists detailing what they hoped to experience by using the main public libraries in their towns (often in contrast to the poor conditions of their segregated libraries) in locales including Portsmouth, Petersburg, and Danville, Virginia; Greenville, South Carolina; Jackson and Hattiesburg, Mississippi; and Ouachita and Jackson Parishes, Louisiana.<sup>11</sup> Patterson Graham does the same for library users in Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama, as do Chris Barbuschak and Suzanne LaPierre for residents of northern Virginia.<sup>12</sup> The feelings of sit-in protesters in Memphis are summarized in my work elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

However, these works typically include a sentence or two rather than extended oral testimony. The memories are used to illustrate the larger historical narrative rather than serving as a subject of analysis. Moreover, the source material was produced with a focus on libraries; the questions asked centered around the library experiences of respondents. In examining materials produced by libraries or through inquiry directly about libraries, scholars are likely turning up evidence that places a greater emphasis on the importance and value of libraries than would be generated by a body of evidence that was less library-centric.

## A PROSOPOGRAPHY OF SENTIMENT

RATHER THAN ASKING DIRECTLY ABOUT USERS' INTERACTIONS WITH THE LIBRARY, ONE MAY learn more by seeking out evidence about libraries in materials that record users' whole lives. In this study, the materials of interest are oral histories that ask a subject to discuss their entire biography, from their family origins to their current activities. I gathered the discussions of libraries that were generated in the context of these oral histories and sorted them thematically, geographically, and chronologically to assess collective memories about public libraries, generated spontaneously in a context where the library is not the focus of discussion.

The result is a prosopography of sentiment about public libraries. Prosopography is the historical technique of investigating "characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives."<sup>14</sup> It has commonly been used to demonstrate patterns of behavior, lifestyle, and economic activity among a particular class of people,

such as ancient Roman senators, Baltimore laborers of the early nineteenth century, or members of the British House of Commons.<sup>15</sup>

By prosopography of sentiment, I refer to the fact that the aggregated data demonstrating users' feelings about public libraries may reveal how members of groups in general felt about libraries. Because the data can be sorted by sex of the storyteller, location of the library, and decade of the event being recalled, I could also examine how the overall feelings about libraries changed across sexes, over time, and through space. My source material concentrates on Black storytellers, so that variation by race cannot be examined.

## ORAL HISTORY AS A SOURCE FOR LIBRARY HISTORY

THE QUALITY OF A PROSOPOGRAPHY DEPENDS UPON THE RICHNESS OF DATA AVAILABLE. WHILE traditional documentary sources are sometimes useful for exploring the lives of the ruling class, they tend to have an emphasis on data such as genealogy, income or wealth, and public activities. To ascertain information about memories of personal affairs, relationships, and feelings, some historians turn to oral history. In library history, oral accounts can “produce a grass-roots account of the past which gives due emphasis to the lives of ordinary men and women.”<sup>16</sup>

Oral history is particularly important for historians of Black people's experiences in libraries and elsewhere. As Albert S. Broussard writes, oral histories can provide “an important corrective” to narratives dominated by institutional leaders and bring out experiences that have gone unrecorded in official documentation.<sup>17</sup> While oral histories call out the oppressions of Jim Crow, they also give light to the agency of the storytellers. We can learn what respondents “did and thought about their lives and their roles, the expectations placed upon them, and the aspirations they had for themselves,” as Anne Valk and Leslie Brown note.<sup>18</sup>

There is a convenient large collection of oral histories of professionally prominent Black Americans called *The HistoryMakers*. Since 1993 the staff of *The HistoryMakers* have conducted interviews with accomplished figures in fields ranging from politics to art to music to business. As of 2024 the collection contains more than twenty-seven hundred interviews. The database creators note that “rather than focus on one particular part of a person's life or a single subject, such as a career or participation in the civil rights movement, the interviews are life oral histories covering the person's entire span of memories as well as his or her own family's oral history.”<sup>19</sup> Access to *The HistoryMakers* database is through subscription, usually via a library. Each video interview is transcribed, and the transcripts are keyword searchable.

The ease of searching the transcripts within *The HistoryMakers* facilitated the assembly of a dataset. The dataset consists of statements about libraries made in the course of participating in a “life oral history.” Each statement is coded thematically, according to the methods outlined below.

## METHODS OF ASSEMBLING THE DATASET

EACH INTERVIEW IN *THE HISTORYMAKERS* IS DIVIDED INTO “STORIES,” WHICH ARE ROUGHLY two-to-four-minute segments of the interview that focus on a particular topic. I or a research assistant searched the database with the keyword string “librar\*.” I then reviewed the resulting stories for applicability to this study. I excluded references to school,

academic, private, or national libraries, as well as mentions of libraries as landmarks or discussions by librarians about their careers.

I or a research assistant copied the text of each included story into a separate document. In a spreadsheet, we recorded the following data for each storyteller: interviewee's name, sex, year of birth, decade when events occurred, place where events occurred (city and state), region (as determined by the US Census Bureau's allocation of states into four regions), and interviewee's highest level of education. Because Brooklyn and Queens have their own library systems, I recorded these boroughs separately from the rest of New York City. We collected other data but did not use them in this study. For each story, I also recorded the population of the town or city using US Census Bureau data for the first year of the decade after the events (e.g., for an event that took place in 1965, I recorded the population from 1970).

In sixty-one cases, a single interviewee told more than one story about libraries. We collected a total of 503 stories and recorded the data for each story separately.

I then imported each story into the software QDA Miner Lite. QDA Miner Lite is a qualitative data analysis software that allows users to highlight sections of text and assign a thematic code. As I read each story I assigned it a code. Some stories expressed several themes. Upon further review, I grouped the codes into larger overall themes, which are discussed in the section "Themes in Stories About Public Libraries" below. This process of coding and then categorizing is informed by the method described by Johnny Saldaña.<sup>20</sup>

I exported data from QDA Miner Lite into a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet contained all of the demographic/geographic data, along with the text of the story and the code. Typically, I used applications in Excel spreadsheet software, such as sorting and chart-generating, to the data. For maps, I loaded data into the open access software Palladio. The resulting maps were captured using the Snipping Tool application.

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

WHEN CONSIDERING THE RESULTS OF THIS PROSOPOGRAPHY OF SENTIMENTS, THE READER should be aware of the characteristics of the people reporting their memories of public libraries. The sex ratio of respondents, location where events occurred, dates when events occurred, and size of the cities where respondents were living at the time of the events all should inform analysis of the sentiments expressed in the oral histories under consideration.

### *General Observations*

The criteria for deciding which individuals to interview for *The HistoryMakers* are determined by its publishers. In promotional material, they call the database "a virtual 'Who's Who' of the African American community."<sup>21</sup> (*Who's Who* is a reference work that provides biographical information about "the most notable living Americans . . . the men and women whose position or achievements make them of general interest.")<sup>22</sup> It is apparent that the focus of the database is on highly accomplished individuals, meaning that the interviewees have all achieved professional prominence, renown, wealth, or some of each. A measure of the unrepresentativeness of the sample may be seen by comparing levels of education among those whose stories are included in this study and the general population (table 1). Respondents in this study have a much greater average level of education than

**TABLE 1.** Highest level of education among storytellers compared to the general population

Highest level of education	Storytellers included in this study (%)	General US population (2000 census) (%)	General Black population (2000 census) (%)
Elementary school (through fifth grade)	0.6	19.6	27.74
High school	5.9	28.6	29.76
Some college	5.1	20.3	28.25
Completed bachelor’s degree	28.9	15.5	9.45
Completed graduate degree	59.5	8.9	4.80

Sources: US Census Bureau, “Educational Attainment: 2000,” August 2003, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/2000/briefs/c2kbr-24.pdf>; Social Explorer query, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/tables/C2000/R13811817>.

either the general US population or the general Black population, which may correlate to a higher level of interest in libraries, reading, and edification than would be found in a study whose population was of a representative sample of the general population.

Some of the “household names” whose stories are part of this study include the academics Molefi Kete Asante and Shelby Steele; actors Harry Belafonte, Ossie Davis, Whoopi Goldberg, and Jasmine Guy; authors Bebe Moore Campbell, Haki Madhubuti, Terry McMillan, Walter Dean Myers, and Sonia Sanchez; bibliophile Charles Blockson; chef Marcus Samuelsson; civil rights leaders Benjamin Chavis, Sherrilyn Ifill, and C. T. Vivian; elected officials Ron Kirk, John R. Lewis, Terri Sewell, and Wellington Webb; journalists Charles M. Blow, Ellis Cose, and Gwen Ifill; museum director Lonnie Bunch; and NFL linebacker Harry Carson.

In all, there are 503 stories collected from *The HistoryMakers* that are subject to this analysis. The stories in *The HistoryMakers* are far from a representative sample of Black experiences in the twentieth century, if only because the subjects of the interviews are not a random sampling of the population.

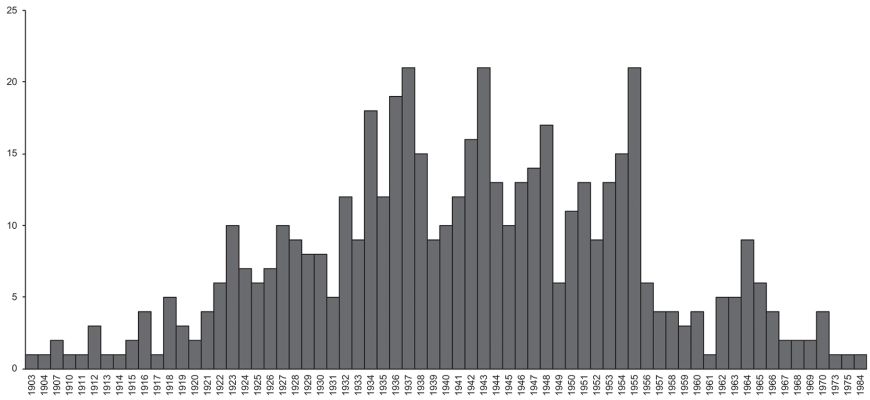
(As described above, some individuals told more than one story about the library. Each instance of a story is counted as a “storyteller” in the demographic discussion below, so that a given individual may be represented more than once. These instances are rare, however.)

*Specific Characteristics of the Pool of Respondents*

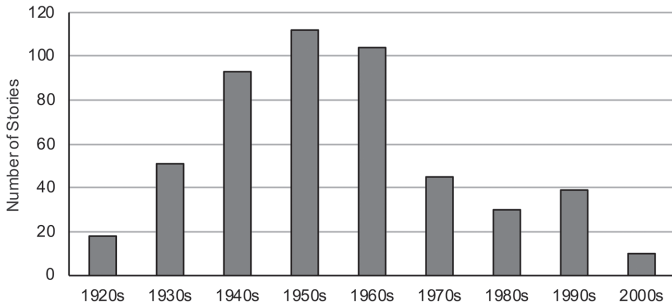
*Sex.* The storytellers were nearly evenly divided by sex, with 53 percent being male and 47 percent female.

*Dates of birth.* As may be expected of a group of prominent people interviewed in the 1990s and 2000s, the largest age cohort was born in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s (figure 1).

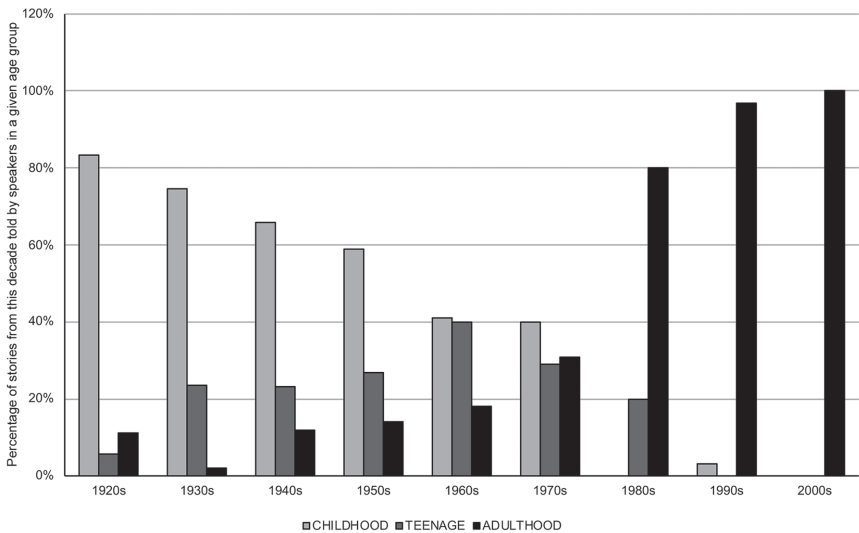
*Decades when events occurred and age at which events occurred.* The decades when stories occurred show a strong predominance of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (figure 2). As table 2 and figure 3 demonstrate, this predominance represents the fact that a very large



**FIGURE 1.** Date of birth of storytellers. Figure by author.



**FIGURE 2.** Decade when story occurs. Figure by author.



**FIGURE 3.** Age of storyteller when story occurred, by decade. Figure by author.

**TABLE 2.** Age of storytellers when story occurred

Age when story occurred	Number of stories	Percentage of stories
Childhood	242	48
Teenage	125	25
Adulthood	135	27

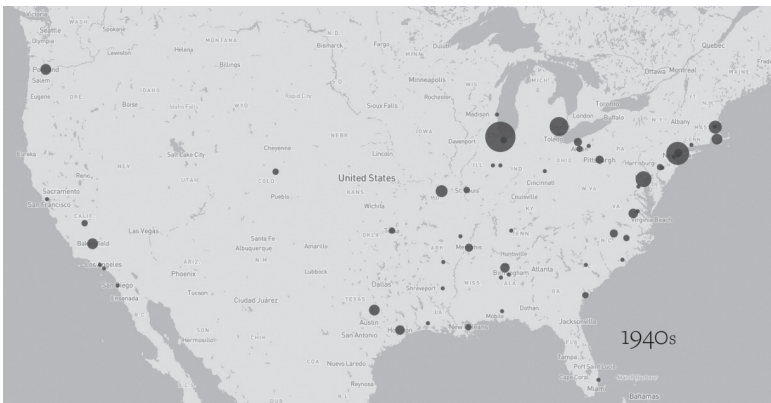
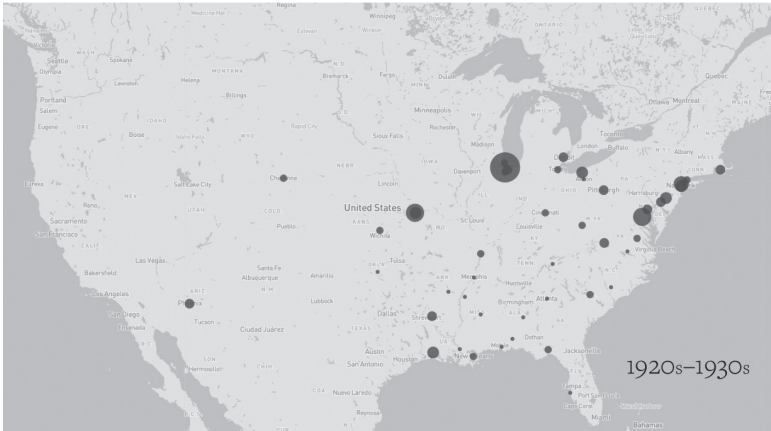
**TABLE 3.** Location of stories over time

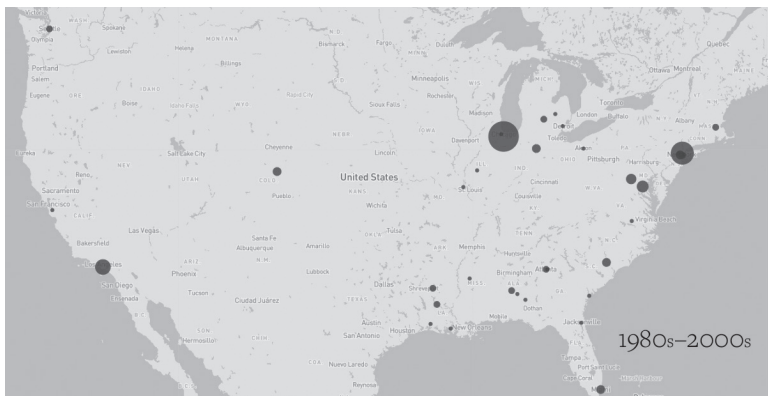
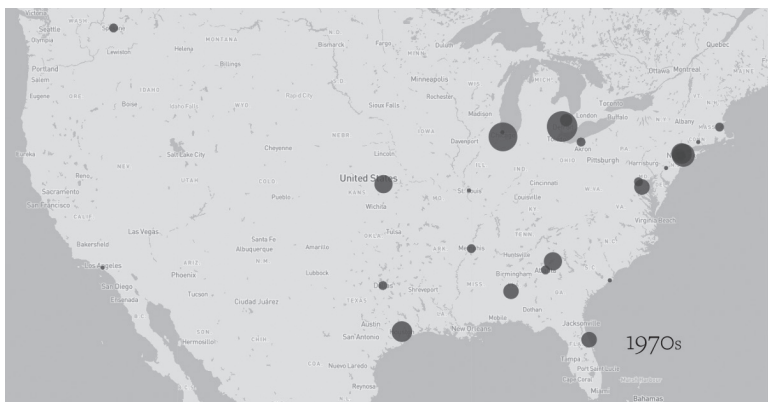
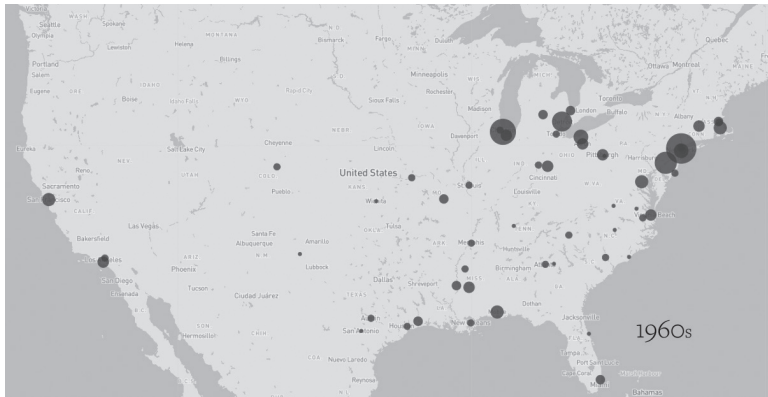
Decade	Percentage of stories occurring in each region			
	South	Northeast	Midwest	West
1920s	44	22	28	6
1930s	43	18	35	4
1940s	28	27	36	9
1950s	38	21	39	2
1960s	32	33	27	9
1970s	31	29	36	4
1980s	27	13	43	17
1990s	38	21	31	10
2000s	0	30	60	10%

majority of stories occurred in the storytellers’ childhoods and teenage years. Stories from more recent decades are likely to have occurred in storytellers’ adulthoods. Although library technology progressed incrementally between the 1940s and 1960s, most library operations were similar throughout this period. Computerized data storage and retrieval were not available to most public library users, and they would have relied upon print and microform resources.

*Location where events occurred.* The location of the stories reflects the Second Great Migration, the period between 1940 and 1970 when “some 4.5 million Black southerners left the South” and moved to the North and the West.<sup>23</sup> The percentage of stories occurring in the South trends lower over time, and the percentage occurring in the Northeast, Midwest, and West trends greater over time (table 3). Figure 4 shows the relative frequency of stories in each location over time. The larger the dot, the higher the share of stories from the time period that took place in the location.

*Size of cities where events occurred.* There is a notable distortion in the distribution of stories among the largest cities. As seen in table 4, Chicago far exceeds its expected place in the table of cities where stories occurred most frequently. It is likely that this is an effect of *The HistoryMakers* being headquartered in Chicago, so that subjects from the Windy City will have been more likely to be interviewed than subjects from other cities.





**FIGURE 4.** *Relative frequency of stories in each location. The larger the dot, the higher the share of stories from the time period that took place in the location. Figure by author.*

**TABLE 4.** Cities where stories most frequently occurred

Chicago	152
New York (Manhattan)	89
Detroit	51
Washington, DC	29
Cleveland	24
Philadelphia	23
Atlanta	20
Brooklyn	16
Kansas City, MO	14
Baltimore	13

## THEMES IN STORIES ABOUT PUBLIC LIBRARIES

THIS GROUP OF PROFESSIONALLY SUCCESSFUL BLACK AMERICANS, BORN MOSTLY BETWEEN 1930 and 1960, told stories about their experiences in public libraries around the country that mostly occurred between 1940 and 1970. Using social science research methods, we can attempt to glean an understanding of the themes that emerged most often.

As discussed in the methods section, I coded each story in qualitative data analysis software. The code reflects the main topic of discussion. I then grouped codes into themes that show connections between several codes. For example, the codes “parental expectation to read” and “library visits as a family activity” are grouped in the theme “Library as a Place for Family Values to Be Cultivated.” Additionally, I assigned codes an “emotional valence”: The codes indicated either a “pleasant or neutral” memory about the library or an “unpleasant” memory. The emotional valence values were assigned based primarily on participants’ “moral language,” that is, the storytellers’ evaluation of their emotions and reactions when recounting their stories.<sup>24</sup> “Pleasant” and “neutral” are grouped together because many similar activities were recounted (e.g., “My parents took me to the library”), but in some cases the teller would exhibit enthusiasm about the memory, and in other cases there was no marker of affect.

The themes expressed in *The HistoryMakers* stories follow in descending order of frequency of occurrence (tables 3–12). I include relevant codes, with samples of the language used by storytellers. I selected these samples for their representativeness and vividness of expression. For considerations of space, I noted codes with fewer than ten occurrences, but I did not explain or provide examples.

The theme “reading as a pleasurable activity” was the most commonly encountered, and both the codes that fell under its heading had a pleasant or neutral emotional valence (table 5). Stories with this theme revolve around reading either as an enjoyable pastime in itself or as a means to learn more about topics the respondent was interested in.

The next most frequent theme was “library as a source to explore Black culture or develop Black pride.” All of the codes associated with this theme have an emotional valence that is pleasant or neutral (table 6). Stories with this theme feature a library’s holdings in Black history and culture as a tool by which the respondents were able to learn more

**TABLE 5.** Stories with the theme “reading as a pleasurable activity”

Code (and emotional valence)	Explanation	Number of stories	Examples
Enjoyed reading (pleasant or neutral)	Many storytellers expressed the pleasure they took in reading and the role the library played in providing reading material	127	“And I always liked to read books, so I was always going to the library.” <sup>1</sup> “So I was an insatiable reader, still am. And, you know, just, you know, seeking information. It didn’t matter to me whether it was a comic book I was reading or the encyclopedia. If it was there and I hadn’t read it, I wanted to read it.” <sup>2</sup>
Satisfied desire for information (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers related that they read not simply for entertainment but also because they had a strong desire to know things, but not with a practical purpose in mind	55	“I was taken to the library. I was exposed and I was hungry. I was—I had an insatiable interest and desire to learn about all kind of things—history. I used to read Will and Ariel Durant.” <sup>3</sup> “On the other hand, I was learning a lot that I was teaching myself. You know, I was constantly in the library. I spent more time in the Boston Public Library than anywhere else. But, and I was learning, but it wasn’t in school, I’ll tell you that.” <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yanick Rice-Lamb, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>2</sup> Chaka Fattah, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>3</sup> Dyana Williams, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin Hicks, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

**TABLE 6.** Stories with the theme “library as a source to explore Black culture or develop Black pride”

Code (and emotional valence)	Explanation	Number of stories	Examples
Learned about Black history (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers recalled their use of the library to learn Black history, often because it had not been taught in school	41	“By this time I’m in my mid-twenties and mid, late twenties and I realize that I had absolutely no grounding as an artist in the traditions and the culture and the visual culture of African Americans. So I went to the library and just did a lot of reading.” <sup>1</sup> “And my mother [Burnett Love] insisted that we get some books about black people at the library. So she said where are the books about George Washington Carver and all these kinds of people. So we started ordering them and then I read all those, you know. But that’s when I first read about black people doing things, you know, ‘cause you certainly had nothing at school, absolutely nothing.” <sup>2</sup>
Encountered Black role models (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers recount meeting Black librarians or reading about Black people in careers they wished to pursue	21	“There was a woman named Mrs. Willis, and she was the librarian, and the library was so wonderful. . . . [S]he did story hour, and . . . I remember sitting there saying you know when I grow up I can do that book. I can read stories like that dramatically.” <sup>3</sup> “So, I went to the library and I saw where a Ebony magazine issue had something about Tuskegee, Tuskegee Institute School of Veterinary Medicine [Tuskegee University College of Veterinary Medicine, Tuskegee, Alabama]. I said, “Whoa, there, there are black folks who are veterinarians.” <sup>4</sup>
Affirmed the value of Black culture for one’s self (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers discuss encountering works by Black creators and realizing their personal relevance	15	“That just spun my world around. I had never seen—I didn’t know black people could write like that. I didn’t know they could think like that. . . . It completely transformed me and it lifted my taste.” <sup>5</sup> “I was just shocked when I saw here’s this black face. . . . I see Frederick Douglass. I mean, I found out about Countee Cullen, et cetera. . . . I mean a black man’s face on a book, I was, like, ‘Whoa. Why don’t we get this in English class?’” <sup>6</sup>

Learned about admirable people to emulate (pleasant or neutral)	Discussion of learning about notable Black historical figures through library materials	14	<p>“I liked books that were adventurous, that dealt with conquering . . . where African or black people were involved and given the leadership. . . . I just got a lot of the classics, colorful and I got a lot out of reading Booker T. Washington’s story ‘Up From Slavery’ and George Washington Carver. I got a lot out of reading about the—it was <i>The Men of Morehouse</i>, Dr. Brawley, and some great black men who made their way.”<sup>7</sup></p> <p>“I liked reading biographies about people, and one of the books that I read was the life of Mary McLeod Bethune, and I liked her philosophy about education even as a little girl.”<sup>8</sup></p>
Learned family history (pleasant or neutral)	Stories about using the library to trace one’s ancestry and genealogy, often finding remarkable stories	13	<p>“And I knew our people had come from North Carolina in 1838. So I looked in the 1830 census, and to my amazement, I saw not only my ancestors there enumerated as free people, but also hundreds and hundreds of other free blacks.”<sup>9</sup></p> <p>“Not only are there stories passed down from Nanny Jack but I was fortunate to be blessed to walk into the library, talk to a knowledgeable person that was so excited about my genealogical quest that she picked up the phone, called someone that then led me to the family that my great-grandmother, Nanny Jack, used to sleep as a child on pallets on their bedroom floor.”<sup>10</sup></p>
Affirmed the value of Black culture for one’s children (pleasant or neutral)		7	
Encountered positive images of Black people in books (pleasant or neutral)		6	

<sup>1</sup> Johnny Coleman, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Love, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>3</sup> Glory Van Scott, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>4</sup> Glenn W. Cherry, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>5</sup> Shelby Steele, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>6</sup> Terry McMillan, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>7</sup> Kwame John Porter, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Edwards Maynor, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>9</sup> Roma Jones, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Merrill, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

**TABLE 7.** Stories with the theme “library as a site for personal growth or maturation”

Code (and emotional valence)	Explanation	Number of stories	Examples
Enjoyed personal independence (pleasant or neutral)	Stories of young people being able to exert their personal freedoms in the library	40	“And my sister would let me go to the library all of the time and I got to the point that at first someone had to go with me and then she found out that we’re just going to have to trust her to go to the Hall Branch Library at 48th and Michigan Avenue, on her own.” <sup>1</sup> “You got a library card that gives you a sense of, of I don’t if it’s adulthood, gives you a sense of responsibility.” <sup>2</sup>
Was rewarded for accomplishments (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers recall winning awards or special privileges for excelling at reading	28	“During the summer, we’d read as many books as we could and get the stickers, you know, so we’d participate in their summer competitions.” <sup>3</sup> “The library they told my mother, ‘Well, she should be in the young adult room but, you know, she really is already,’ you know, I wanted to read James Baldwin . . . and they said to my mother, ‘It’s actually okay.’” <sup>4</sup>
Encountered materials that changed one’s thoughts (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers recall reading something in the library that changed their preconceived notions or exposed them to new ideas	18	I got into reading Greek mythology. . . . I checked it out of [the] Toledo Public Library. . . . [T]hat’s where I really kind of latched onto reading in history and frankly, I think because of that book, that one book, I became enthralled with history and then ancient history as well.” <sup>5</sup> “Now I was—what—fourteen, fifteen years old, the first book I had read by a black person, and it did not change me, but it forced me to begin to question the world differently, and as a result of ‘Black Boy’ by Richard Wright, I began to check out other books that he had published.” <sup>6</sup>
Early work experience (pleasant or neutral)	Memories of teenage jobs at the library	17	“My job was to take all the books that were on the cart and then . . . re-fill all the books. . . . And I kept getting caught by the librarians reading the books.” <sup>7</sup> “I had worked part time in the library when I was in high school. And I really liked that.” <sup>8</sup>

Imagined oneself in other places through reading (pleasant or neutral)	Remembering when library materials fired the imagination of the storytellers	12
Be part of a social trend (pleasant or neutral)		1
Experience peer pressure to disguise library visits (unpleasant)		1

“So I went to the library and I read everything that I could on France. . . . And when I went back to my elementary school I remembered standing up and telling people that I had been to Paris this summer.”<sup>9</sup>  
 “I remember reading books about being a detective, Encyclopedia Brown, making my own detective agency one summer modeled after him.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jorja Palmer, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond McGuire, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>3</sup> Avis LaVelle, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>4</sup> Thelma Golden, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>5</sup> Michael B. Coleman, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>6</sup> Haki Madhubuti, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Blackshear, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>8</sup> Bettiann Gardner, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>9</sup> Sylvia Cooke Martin, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Williams, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

**TABLE 8.** Stories with the theme “library as a source of practical information”

Code (and emotional valence)	Explanation	Number of stories	Examples
Read to advance one’s career (pleasant or neutral)	Stories about using library materials to perform job duties successfully, to learn a new trade, or to prepare for college studies	39	“I had been reading ahead and, and sort of trying to learn a little calculus from some college books that I had gotten out at the library.” <sup>1</sup> “I had to learn and understand the full food industry of Harlem. So I didn’t think I knew that just because I was a big time chef, so I learned that through New York City library and through speaking to people in the street, regular people.” <sup>2</sup>
Read to solve practical problems (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers discuss the use of library resources to learn how to address a pressing need	24	“I remember trying to draw comic book characters, and they never quite looked right. And then I picked up a book out of a library and realized what I didn’t really understand was proportion.” <sup>3</sup> “I said, ‘Oh, okay, I don’t have the money for [a model rocket]. Well, how do I make my own?’ And so I went to the library to find out about rockets and how they’re made, and . . . how you can make your own.” <sup>4</sup>
Read to explore careers (pleasant or neutral)		9	
Disappointment at lack of resources in the library (unpleasant)		8	
Got inspiration for creative activities (pleasant or neutral)		7	
Learned about colleges (pleasant or neutral)		7	
Used the library to complete school assignments (pleasant or neutral)		7	
Supplemented the college library (pleasant or neutral)		3	
Part-time employment as an adult (pleasant or neutral)		2	
Acquired information to assimilate into American culture (pleasant or neutral)		2	
Read to learn about a new community (pleasant or neutral)		1	

<sup>1</sup> Roscoe Giles, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Samuelsson, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>3</sup> William Massey, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Francisco, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

**TABLE 9.** Stories with the theme “library as a means for family values to be cultivated”

Code (and emotional valence)	Explanation	Number of stories	Examples
Parental expectation to read (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers recall that their parents expected them to be readers and use the library	48	“My mother just force-fed us reading. . . . I told you I loved to be outside, but a condition to that was my mother made us go to the library every Saturday morning and read for an hour or two.” <sup>1</sup> “You know, my parents really didn’t push me into sports, but they sure loved it when I went to the library.” <sup>2</sup>
Family activity (pleasant or neutral)	Memories of visiting the library with parents or siblings	39	“My mom liked to read too. And she would take me to the library. We had to take two buses to get to the library. . . . [T]hey wouldn’t let her get out but six books. So she got three for me and three for her.” <sup>3</sup> “And, if daddy couldn’t take us, mother couldn’t take us, then cousin Edith took us. . . . Or, cousin Helen took us, or cousin Jay took us down to the Hall Branch Library at 49th and Michigan.” <sup>4</sup>
Adults interfering with reading choices (unpleasant)		7	
Opportunities for one’s children to cultivate learning (pleasant or neutral)		4	
Read things that parents wouldn’t talk about (pleasant or neutral)		3	
Resentment at parental restrictions on visiting the library (unpleasant)		1	

<sup>1</sup> Ron Kirk, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher P. Reynolds, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Lawrence, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>4</sup> John Lassiter, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

**TABLE 10.** Stories with the theme “stories related to segregation or discrimination”

Code (and emotional valence)	Explanation	Number of stories	Examples
Was denied access to libraries (unpleasant)	Stories about being barred from libraries because of racist policies	39	“I used to be angry about not being able to go into the white Hattiesburg Public Library, because we had very few things to read.” <sup>1</sup> “My grandfather, John who was a minister, he—in addition . . . was a janitor in the Tuscaloosa County Library, which is a library that did not allow black folks; we could not go into the library, but he was a janitor.” <sup>2</sup>
Experienced unequal services offered in segregated Black libraries (unpleasant)	Storytellers recall that in segregated Black libraries, they did not experience the level of services that white patrons experienced at the main library	15	“If you wanted something that was over there, you had to request them to send it. And sometimes it came and sometimes it didn’t. And Ashville Colored Library, as it was called was pretty small. You know, it was a room as opposed to the general library which was stories and multiple rooms.” <sup>3</sup> “And our library was—the black library was at the school. And so, when the school closed at 3:00 o’clock, the library closed.” <sup>4</sup>
Discovered unequal facilities or collections within segregated Black libraries (unpleasant)	Stories about disappointment with the capital investment in segregated Black libraries compared to white libraries	14	“[The main library] was just a magnificent place. It had its wrought iron stairways and the little bannisters made of wrought iron, books all over the place, well lit, nice desk and chairs for you to sit in and read books, and you go back to the neighborhood library it was like somebody’s kitchen, just had some old chairs and desks and things that you could sit there.” <sup>5</sup> “And it wasn’t until I got to high school that I was exposed to what might be described as a library, which was very rudimentary. In the segregated system in the South, those kind of assets were not available to black people. I think in the city of Memphis, they had . . . one library. And in order to get there, you had to ride a bus. There was not a neighborhood library.” <sup>6</sup>

Encountered bias or discrimination by white library staff (unpleasant)	Storytellers recall being treated unfairly for racist reasons	12	<p>“They had a library in which we had to go in the back and ask for what we wanted. We couldn’t browse around and, you know, find something. If you didn’t know what was already there, you couldn’t even ask for it. You had to ask for it by name.”<sup>7</sup></p> <p>“One particular [white] family, one, that wielded a big stick down there, yeah, he’s the one. And I was scheduled to have a book signing in the library and he said no. That’s what the librarian said anyway, yeah.”<sup>8</sup></p>
Protested against segregation (unpleasant)	Recounting of sit-ins and other protests to try to desegregate libraries	10	<p>“They said, ‘We don’t have a colored library.’ And I said, ‘I don’t want one. I want to use your books, what you read. I’m a taxpayer. My parents pay taxes.’ . . . They threatened to call the cops. I said, ‘Well, you call them. Call them. I’m going to stay here and study.’ And that’s that.”<sup>9</sup></p> <p>“Medgar told us that there was going to be a sit-in at the public library. . . . [W]e said can we be in it? Can we join it? And he said yeah, you can. That’d be good. And then he said hm, let me think for a moment. He said no. He said I would never know how to explain to your mother why you got expelled from Jackson State. He said because just on a technicality alone they can expel you.”<sup>10</sup></p>
Encountered books with negative portrayals of Black people (unpleasant)		4	
Awareness of special privileges that defied segregation rules (unpleasant)		3	

<sup>1</sup> Joyce Ladner, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>2</sup> Les Payne, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Lawrence, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Bullard, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>5</sup> Chester Blair, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>6</sup> Claiborne Smith, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>7</sup> Alvin Boutte, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>8</sup> Chalmers Archer, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>9</sup> W. George Allen, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>10</sup> Joyce Ladner, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

**TABLE 11.** Stories with the theme “library as a signal about the community”

Code (and emotional valence)	Explanation	Number of stories	Examples
Library as an amenity that signaled a prosperous environment (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers recall thinking that a well-run library meant that their city or town was a good place to live	24	“The public libraries in Chicago . . . I could go in there and find books on astronomy and physics and space flight and all those kinds of things that I didn’t have access to in the country.” <sup>1</sup> “I remember when Gary built a new, brand new downtown library, and I just thought it was the most fabulous place on earth. It was brand new and shiny and smelled good and all these books and glass and it was like Oz.” <sup>2</sup>
Library as an exemplar of state services to community (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers (often public servants) discuss library services in the context of their vision of the state’s provision of public resources	17	“That’s the type of independence that we talk about. I know that you must work with others to get these things, which I mentioned before, back to your district: the libraries, the swimming pools, the streets paved, the overpasses, etcetera.” <sup>3</sup> “We also began to look at what are the kind of programs that people would like. And so we concentrated to make sure our parks and our libraries were all upgraded and we ended up building a couple of parks and upgrading all of our libraries and building a new library.” <sup>4</sup>
Desired to have a library where none existed (unpleasant)	Storytellers recall wishing they had a library in their town or neighborhood	13	“There were no, there was no library, unfortunately. . . . [O]ne of the profound issues that made life rather challenging for someone who was ambitious or someone who had a desire to delve into as much information and gain as much knowledge as possible, books were limited.” <sup>5</sup> “We didn’t have a library in our neighborhood and we didn’t have a car so it was very seldom that we got to the library.” <sup>6</sup>
Desegregation of library seen as a sign of progress (pleasant or neutral)		8	

Enjoyed a bookmobile because no other access to books (pleasant or neutral)	6
Desegregated libraries seen as a pleasant contrast to segregated libraries encountered previously (pleasant or neutral)	4
Anger at library budget cuts (unpleasant)	1
Libraries as a symbol of freedom of expression (pleasant or neutral)	1

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<sup>1</sup> George Carruthers, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Britt, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Brookins, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Parks, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>5</sup> Claiborne Smith, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>6</sup> Frances Hooks, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

**TABLE 12.** Stories with the theme “the library as a place”

Code (and emotional valence)	Explanation	Number of stories	Examples
Library as a safe place (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers recall the library being a refuge when home or the neighborhood was uncomfortable	18	“There were many days where I, in order to avoid all of this, I would flee to the public library . . . and that would be my haven to stay out of this stuff and to you know read and write.” <sup>1</sup> “I only felt comfortable taking the bus to about two places, you know. [One was] the nearby district library section in Northland.” <sup>2</sup>
Enjoyed the library environment (pleasant or neutral)	Stories that recall taking pleasure in the physical environment of the library	12	“And in the spring, we would go . . . to the garden in the backyard of the library. And they would tell us stories back there, and it was beautiful.” <sup>3</sup> “And there was a library. . . I just liked the smell of that. . . I liked the card catalog and just all the books around. And there was a kind of quietude about the library, but a comfort that I really enjoyed.” <sup>4</sup>
Going to the library because of the lack of other activities (pleasant or neutral)	Recollections of going to the library because the storyteller couldn’t come up with another activity	12	“Many people did not want their . . . children to . . . play with me. And so no, I didn’t have . . . a lot of friends. And once I was able to get my library card at a public library, I could go to the library almost every day.” <sup>5</sup> “Regardless of what we did in school, we had to do something on Saturdays. Which means we had to go to Hall Branch Library.” <sup>6</sup>
Thrill of visiting the library (pleasant or neutral)		6	
Library as a place where one can concentrate (pleasant or neutral)		4	
Library as a place to pass time (pleasant or neutral)		3	
Library as a place to take one’s mind off troubles (pleasant or neutral)		3	
Discomfort in a library environment (unpleasant)		3	

<sup>1</sup> Hubie Jones, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>2</sup> Paula Hammond, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Mell, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>4</sup> Shirley Ann Jackson, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>5</sup> Fannie Rushing, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>6</sup> John Lassiter, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

**TABLE 13.** Stories with the theme “library experiences beyond books”

Code (and emotional valence)	Explanation	Number of stories	Examples
Attended educational programming at a library (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers recall coming to the library for programs	1	<p>“I went to two weeks of the ninth grade. . . . I said to my mom, ‘I, I just don’t think I can do this.’ She said, ‘Well, here’s what I want you to do. . . . [T]he New York Public Library has lectures, and, you know, [you] could do this for no money. You can go to these places and sit and get this information and sort of learn.”<sup>1</sup></p> <p>“And the other thing I liked about the library: When I was little, they did puppet shows, and they did readings to kids, so I became very drawn to [the] library.”<sup>2</sup></p>
Hosted educational programs at a library (pleasant or neutral)	Stories in which the library served as a place where the storyteller offered a program to the public	12	<p>“Our genealogical society was the first organization to have a program in the new library.”<sup>3</sup></p> <p>“The parks and libraries are in every neighborhood, and so if we want to extend the reach of our . . . programs into communities . . . we can take advantage of that and collaborate together.”<sup>4</sup></p>
Exhibited art or performed at a library (pleasant or neutral)	Recollections of exhibiting or performing at a library	12	<p>“I trucked in . . . some of my artwork and . . . I asked the post librarian . . . ‘Could I have a show?’ . . . And ‘course she . . . give me a dry, ‘Yes.’ ‘Yeah, okay.”<sup>5</sup></p> <p>“I found the Rose McClendon Players. It was situated at the 124th Street library in the basement. I walked in the door, entered the theater. . . . I had found the place that was gonna be my home, my career, and everything.”<sup>6</sup></p>
Attended an art exhibit or performance at a library (pleasant or neutral)		4	
Library as a place for community organizing (pleasant or neutral)		2	

Attended classes or lessons (not library programs) (pleasant or neutral)	1
Participated in community programs hosted at the library (pleasant or neutral)	1
Library as a place to hold organization meetings (pleasant or neutral)	1

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<sup>1</sup> Whoopi Goldberg, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>2</sup> Shirley Hughes, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Preston Burroughs, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Boone, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>5</sup> James Hiram Malone, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>6</sup> Ossie Davis, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

**TABLE 14.** Stories with the theme “library as a site of community formation”

Code (and emotional valence)	Explanation	Number of stories	Examples
Encountered friends or neighbors at the library (pleasant or neutral)	Storytellers recall meeting people they knew at the library	25	“You didn’t have to be supervised, you didn’t have all these strange people you know, predators; so we spent a lot of time at Tuley Park. . . . [I]t had a public library in the field house so you could get every—it was a place to hang out.” <sup>1</sup> “The library was nearby, so it was a community where you had the different strata of the black community all living together.” <sup>2</sup>
Experienced good service (pleasant or neutral)	Recollections of being impressed by the service offered by library staff	12	“And the librarian will welcome you with a smile and open arms if you go there, and you can do whatever it is that you wish. You can travel to San Salvador . . . or you can walk through the streets of Durban in South Africa all by opening a book. And there’s no one in that book who will tell you, black boy, you can’t read me.” <sup>3</sup> “They have a wonderful new county library, a spectacular library with a special room for . . . genealogy and South Carolina history. And the librarians there were very helpful. It’s quite a remarkable experience.” <sup>4</sup>
Encountered community members (pleasant or neutral)		6	
Volunteered at the library (pleasant or neutral)		3	
Encountered like-minded people (pleasant or neutral)		1	
Library as a place to meet others in public (pleasant or neutral)		1	
Library as a place to reach community members via bulletin boards (pleasant or neutral)		1	

<sup>1</sup> Lynn Carol Allen, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>2</sup> William Alexander Jackson Ross, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>3</sup> Walter J. Leonard, *The HistoryMakers* interview.

<sup>4</sup> James Lowell Gibbs Jr., *The HistoryMakers* interview.

**TABLE 15.** Most commonly expressed codes

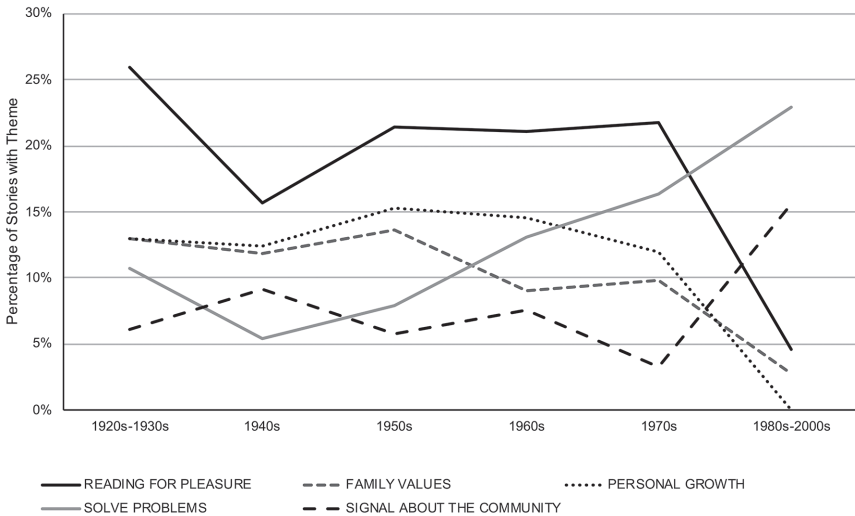
Code	Theme	Number of stories
Enjoyed reading*	Reading for pleasure	127
Satisfied desire for information*	Reading for pleasure	55
Parental expectation to read*	Family values	48
Learned about Black history*	Black culture / Black pride	41
Enjoyed personal independence	Personal growth	40
Family activity	Family values	39
Read to advance one's career*	Practical information	39
<i>Was denied access to libraries</i>	Segregation and discrimination	39
Was rewarded for accomplishments	Personal growth	28
Encountered friends or neighbors at the library	Community formation	25
Library as an amenity that signaled a prosperous environment	Signal about community	24
Read to solve practical problems*	Practical information	24
Encountered Black role models	Black culture / Black pride	21
Encountered materials that changed one's thoughts*	Personal growth	18
Library as a safe place	Library as a place	18
Attended educational programming at a library	Beyond books	17
Early work experience	Personal growth	17
Library as a symbol of state services to community	Signal about community	17
Affirmed the value of Black culture for one's self*	Black culture / Black pride	15
<i>Experienced unequal services offered in segregated Black libraries</i>	Segregation and discrimination	15
Total of codes that involve reading (marked with asterisks above)		367
Total of codes addressing other aspects of library memories		300

*Note:* Codes with “unpleasant” aspect in italics.

**TABLE 16.** Most commonly expressed codes by sex of storyteller

Stories told by women		Stories told by men	
Code	Number of stories	Code	Number of stories
Enjoyed reading	74	Enjoyed reading	53
Parental expectation to read	31	Satisfied desire for information	41
Family activity	27	Read to advance one's career	26
Enjoyed personal independence	26	Learned about Black history	25
Was rewarded for accomplishments	20	<i>Was denied access to libraries</i>	20
<i>Was denied access to libraries</i>	19	Parental expectation to read	17
Encountered friends or neighbors at the library	17	Read to solve practical problems	17
Learned about Black history	16	Enjoyed personal independence	14
Satisfied desire for information	14	Encountered materials that changed one's thoughts	13
Library as an amenity that signaled a prosperous environment	13	Family activity	12
Read to advance one's career	13	Library as an exemplar of state services to community	12
Attended educational programming at a library	12	Affirmed the value of Black culture for one's self	11

Note: Codes with "unpleasant" aspect in italics.



**FIGURE 5.** Representation of themes in stories about public libraries. Figure by author.

**TABLE 17.** Most commonly expressed codes by stage of life

Childhood stories		Teenage stories		Adulthood stories	
Code	Number of stories	Code	Number of stories	Code	Number of stories
Enjoyed reading	102	Satisfied desire for information	22	Read to advance one's career	21
Family activity	39	Read to advance one's career	18	Learned about Black history	18
Parental expectation to read	39	Early work experience	17	Library as an exemplar of state services to community	17
Satisfied desire for information	31	Enjoyed reading	17	Learned family history	13
Enjoyed personal independence	29	<i>Was denied access to libraries</i>	16	Hosted educational programs at a library	12
Was rewarded for accomplishments	28	Enjoyed personal independence	11	Exhibited art or performed at a library	11
Encountered friends or neighbors at the library	22	Encountered materials that changed one's thoughts	9	Read to solve practical problems	9
<i>Was denied access to libraries</i>	21	Parental expectation to read	9	Read to explore careers	9
Library as an amenity that signaled a prosperous environment	16	Read to explore careers	9	<i>Discovered unequal facilities or collections within segregated Black libraries</i>	8
Encountered Black role models	15	<i>Discovered unequal facilities or collections within segregated Black libraries</i>	8	Learned about Black history	8
Learned about Black history	15	Learned about Black history	8	Library as an amenity that signaled a prosperous environment	8
Library as a safe place	15	Library as an amenity that signaled a prosperous environment	8	<i>Disappointment at lack of resources in the library</i>	7
				Experienced good service	7

Note: Codes with "unpleasant" aspect in italics.

**TABLE 18A.** Most commonly expressed codes by decade (1920s–1950s)

1920s–1930s		1940s		1950s	
Code	Number of stories	Code	Number of stories	Code	Number of stories
Enjoyed reading	26	Enjoyed reading	22	Enjoyed reading	40
<i>Was denied access to libraries</i>	10	Family activity	10	Parental expectation to read	17
Enjoyed personal independence	9	<i>Was denied access to libraries</i>	10	Enjoyed personal independence	14
Satisfied desire for information	8	Encountered Black role models	9	<i>Was denied access to libraries</i>	14
Family activity	6	Learned about Black history	9	Family activity	13
Read to solve practical problems	6	Library as an amenity that signaled a prosperous environment	9	Satisfied desire for information	12
<i>Desired to have a library where none existed</i>	5	Parental expectation to read	9	Encountered friends or neighbors at the library	10
Encountered friends or neighbors at the library	5	Library as a safe place	8	Was rewarded for accomplishments	10
Parental expectation to read	5	Was rewarded for accomplishments	8	Encountered materials that changed one's thoughts	6
<i>Adults interfering with reading choices</i>	3	Library as something to do in face of lack of other activities	7	Library as a safe place	6
<i>Encountered bias or discrimination by white library staff</i>	3	Satisfied desire for information	7	<i>Protested against segregation</i>	6
<i>Experienced unequal services offered in segregated Black libraries</i>	3	Enjoyed personal independence	6	Enjoyed a bookmobile because no other access to books	5

Note: Codes with “unpleasant” aspect in italics.

**TABLE 18B.** Most commonly expressed codes by decade (1960s–2000s)

1960s		1970s		1980s–2000s	
Code	Number of stories	Code	Number of stories	Code	Number of stories
Enjoyed reading	22	Enjoyed reading	14	Library as an exemplar of state services to community	14
Satisfied desire for information	20	Learned about Black history	8	Read to advance one's career	13
Parental expectation to read	11	Read to advance one's career	7	Hosted educational programs at a library	10
Read to advance one's career	11	Parental expectation to read	6	Learned family history	9
Early work experience	9	Satisfied desire for information	6	Learned about Black history	7
Learned about Black history	9	Affirmed the value of Black culture for one's self	4	<i>Disappointment at lack of resources in the library</i>	6
Library as an amenity that signaled a prosperous environment	9	Enjoyed personal independence	4	Exhibited art or performed at a library	4
Enjoyed personal independence	7	Exhibited art or performed at a library	4	Experienced good service	4
Family activity	7	Encountered Black role models	3	Affirmed the value of Black culture for one's children	3
Affirmed the value of Black culture for one's self	6	Enjoyed the library environment	3	Encountered community members	3
Read to solve practical problems	6	Family activity	3	Enjoyed reading	3
<i>Discovered unequal facilities or collections within segregated Black libraries</i>	5	Early work experience	2	Opportunities for one's children to cultivate learning	3

Note: Codes with “unpleasant” aspect in italics.

about what they perceived as their cultural heritage or to inculcate a sense of esteem for Blackness (in contrast to the messages about Blackness expressed in mainstream white sources).

Almost all of the codes for the theme “library as a site for personal growth or maturation” were pleasant or neutral in emotional valence, with a single exception (table 7). In these stories, visits to the library occasioned opportunities to gain emotional or intellectual capability through independent behaviors.

The theme of “library as a source of practical information” also covered codes with pleasant or neutral emotional valences (table 8). Stories with this theme revolve around using library materials to address immediate or long-term needs, including career preparation and learning skills.

“Library as a means for family values to be cultivated” was a theme with a mixture of pleasant or neutral and unpleasant emotional valences; this likely reflects the respondents’ relationships with their families as much as their memories of libraries per se (table 9). In these stories, respondents recall visits to the library with family members (typically parents) or conversations about expectations around library use.

The only theme universally associated with unpleasant emotional valences was “stories related to segregation or discrimination” (table 10). These include encounters with both personal prejudice exhibited by library workers and racist institutional policies.

The theme “library as a signal about the community” had a mixture of pleasant or neutral and unpleasant emotional valences (table 11). In these stories, respondents reflect upon their impressions of libraries and their personal beliefs connecting the presence and quality of libraries to other aspects of their communities.

Discussions of “the library as a place” all have pleasant or neutral emotional valences (table 12). In stories with this theme, respondents consider library buildings per se and reflect on how they felt about being in the library. Memories of using the library for purposes other than reading, which is the theme “library experiences beyond books,” all were coded with pleasant or neutral emotional valences (table 13). Pleasant or neutral emotional valences are also associated with the theme “library as a site of community formation” (table 14). Stories with this theme involve respondents recalling how the library was a site for encountering others who lived near them and forming connections with them.

## COMMONLY EXPRESSED MEMORIES ABOUT LIBRARIES

ACROSS ALL THEMES, WE FIND THE TWENTY MOST COMMONLY EXPRESSED CODES IN TABLE 15. Eighteen of the twenty have a pleasant or neutral emotional valence; the two with unpleasant emotional valences are recollections of segregation or discrimination.

Of the top twenty, eight revolve around reading. The others involve the library as a place for family, community, and personal development through visiting the library, experiencing library programs, or working in a library. However, the total number of stories about reading outnumber stories about other aspects of libraries, and the stories about “enjoying reading” outnumber any other code by a factor of 3:2.

When the top codes are listed according to the sex of the storyteller (table 16) we see that stories told by women have a greater emphasis on the role of parents and family in their memories of public libraries, while stories told by men show a greater emphasis on the library’s role in addressing practical problems.

Codes may also be examined by the stage of life in which the story took place (table 17). As the stories progress through the tellers' lives, codes about the library as a site of pleasure (reading, family activities, or personal growth) declines in prominence, and codes about practical uses of the library come to dominate in stories told about adulthood interactions with libraries.

When codes are examined across the decades in which the stories took place, several trends become apparent (tables 18a and 18b). The pleasure found in reading and in the library as a place for family and for personal growth tends to remain among the mostly commonly expressed memories across time; the exception is the period from the 1980s to the 2000s, when most of the stories took place in the tellers' adulthoods—then, practical or political concerns dominate the stories (figure 5). There is a strong downward trend across time in stories about segregation and discrimination at the library, and there is a strong upward trend in stories about using the library to cultivate Black pride and an understanding of Black culture.

### EMOTIONAL VALENCES OF MEMORIES ABOUT PUBLIC LIBRARIES

EACH CODE WAS ASSIGNED AN “EMOTIONAL VALENCE” MARKER INDICATING HOW THE STORYTELLER FELT ABOUT THE EVENT (see the discussion in the section “Themes in Stories About Public Libraries” above). Overall, 86 percent of the memories were “pleasant or neutral.”

When examined in detail, the “unpleasant” codes almost all deal with experiences of racism, whether systemic or interpersonal, at a library (table 19). The only unpleasant code dealing with library buildings per se was “discomfort in a library environment”—this code was assigned to stories in which the teller remarked that they found libraries too

**TABLE 19.** Codes for unpleasant memories

Code	Number of stories
Was denied access to libraries	39
Experienced unequal services offered in segregated Black libraries	15
Discovered unequal facilities or collections within segregated Black libraries	14
Desired to have a library where none existed	13
Encountered bias or discrimination by white library staff	12
Protested against segregation	10
Disappointment at lack of resources in the library	8
Adults interfering with reading choices	7
Encountered books with negative portrayals of Black people	4
Awareness of special privileges that defy segregation rules	3
Discomfort in a library environment	3
Experience peer pressure to disguise library visits	1
Resentment at parental restrictions on visiting the library	1

**TABLE 20.** Distribution of stories by emotional valence at different stages of life

Stage of life	Percentage of stories that are pleasant or neutral	Percentage of stories that are unpleasant
Childhood	88	12
Teenage	83	17
Adulthood	87	13

**TABLE 21.** Percentage of unpleasant stories over time

Time period	Percentage of stories that are unpleasant
1920s	23
1940s	16
1950s	15
1960s	9
1970s	4
1980s–2000s	10

**TABLE 22.** Unpleasant stories by region

Region	Percentage of stories in the region that are unpleasant	Percentage of all unpleasant stories that take place in the region	Percentage of all stories that take place in the region
Midwest	7	18	37
Northeast	3	5	24
South	31	75	33
West	3	2	7

quiet for their liking. The codes “desired to have a library where none existed” and “disappointment at lack of resources in the library” are related to funding of public services, which may be but is not necessarily a function of systemic racism. Other less used codes relate to family or community relations. It should be noted that the absence of stories about disliking libraries may constitute a form of bias: Perhaps those who didn’t like libraries simply didn’t visit them and therefore had few memories of them to relate.

Broken down by age, the largest percentage of “unpleasant” stories occurred in storytellers’ teenage years (table 20).

Over time, the trend is for the percentage of unpleasant stories to decrease (table 21).

Geographically, unpleasant stories are distributed throughout the country but are concentrated in the South (table 22).

**TABLE 23.** Percentage of stories that are pleasant by population of city

City or town population	Percentage of stories that are pleasant
Under 10,000	56
10,001 to 50,000	76
50,001 to 100,000	89
100,001 to 500,000	84
500,001 to 1 million	93
Over 1 million	96

A correlation can also be found between pleasant or neutral stories and the size of the city in which the story took place (table 23). It may be that several types of memories that are coded as “unpleasant” relate to the absence of robust public services, which is a characteristic of many small towns (and, vice versa, large cities have the opportunity to take advantage of economies of scale in creating library systems with many branches and robust collections). As well, the dominance of the South as a setting for unpleasant stories means that many of those stories took place in smaller towns, as the South has always been less urbanized than other regions.

## WHAT THESE ORAL HISTORIES SHOW ABOUT THE LIBRARY IN THE LIFE OF THESE USERS

FOR THE 503 STORYTELLERS IN THIS STUDY—ALL SUCCESSFUL BLACK PROFESSIONALS, MOST of them born in the early middle years of the twentieth century—memories of the library often confirm the stereotypes that library advocates tend to promote. Libraries were places where children learned to love reading, bonded with their families, encountered new ideas, and grew into mature adults. Significantly, adult library users didn’t use the library the same way; for them, it was a place to find information to address practical needs.

Two themes stand out as uniquely salient for Black library users. The first is the very frequent mention of experiencing racism at libraries. As has been well documented, libraries in the United States were sites of segregation and often locales where activism for desegregation occurred. The second is the use of libraries to develop an understanding of Black culture and Black pride that was not provided by the schools the storytellers attended. The frequency with which stories having that theme occurred in the 1960s and 1970s reflects both demand from readers as the broader Black culture was encouraging Black pride and supply as a surge of Black material was being published and reprinted in facsimile in the period.

The data gathered for this study are available for other scholars to examine and interpret (see the author declaration for details). There may be other lessons to learn from the memories of library use contained within *The HistoryMakers*, and I invite my fellow historians to explore the dataset.

## NOTES

Author declaration: I served on *The HistoryMakers* Higher Education Advisory Board in 2017, and I conceived this project in response to a request from *The HistoryMakers* president, Julieanna L. Richardson, for academic studies that utilize the database.

Emily McGinn offered advice about digital humanities tools and approaches. Frelicia Tucker, Zhamoyani McMillan, and Reginald Quartey helped gather data for this project. Ofira Schwartz, Seth Porter, and Joann Donatello offered technical assistance with the software.

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The data used in this project may be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.34770/6eZZ-nn81>. Interested parties are welcome to perform their own analyses of the data.

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