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Art Exhibit on Black Panther Challenges Library Patrons to Face Violence of Mass Incarceration

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Abstract

Although libraries are often regarded as spaces for inclusiveness, diversity, and democracy, this hasn't always been the case in the United States. Using historical examples this article explores the legacy of racism in the United States concerning library access to citizens. This article analyzes a social justice artistic collaboration between artist Jackie Sumell and New York Public Library concerning solitary confinement and the racial disparity of mass incarceration in the United States. Intersections between community education and library exhibits are also discussed.

Keywords: Black Panthers; Mass incarceration; Art exhibits; Criminal justice

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"The deeper they bury me, the louder my voice becomes." - Herman Wallace

Libraries are celebrated for serving the community, for being hubs for ideas, conversations and community gatherings. Libraries were born out of a desire to share resources for a collective use. But in the United States, the history of libraries is also intimately enmeshed with the history of racial segregation and white supremacy. Given this history, it was powerful when a recent art exhibit at the Brooklyn Public Library's Central Library pushed patrons to face the contemporary violence of racism and mass incarceration in the United States.

The art exhibit, "#76759: Featuring the House that Herman Built," was a collaboration between artist Jackie Sumell and the late Herman Wallace, with support from the Brooklyn Public Library's outreach services department.¹ Having finished its run at the Brooklyn library in June, the exhibit is now headed to the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, for a one-year show dedicated to illustrating stories of hope.



Image #1. Model of Prison Cell (Photo: Jackie Sumell)

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Image #2. Dream House Model (Photo: Jackie Sumell)

Library Exhibits Have Been Put in the Spotlight for Upholding Free Speech and Creating Conversations.

The origins of the artistic project began in 2003, when Sumell contacted Wallace, a Black Panther Party activist and member of the Angola Three (Herman Wallace, Albert Woodfox and Robert King Wilkerson), who was in solitary confinement for 30 years at the time. Sumell posed the question to Wallace, "What kind of house does a man who has lived in a 6-by-9-foot cell for over 30 years dream of?" Wallace and Sumell's correspondences blossomed into the project "The House That Herman Built," which is now an internationally recognized exhibition, book and film.^{2,3}

Nick Higgins, the Brooklyn Public Library's director of outreach services, said that despite the public conception of the library as a space for the free sharing of ideas and conversations, the exhibit provoked some controversy. Some patrons, he said, expressed concern that a library is a place for children and "children shouldn't be exposed to jails and prisons while coming in to study and read books."

"We also received feedback that protested BPL honoring the memory of a convicted murderer and for glamorizing jail and prison life," Higgins said. "These opinions are important contributions to the debate as well."

Reflecting on the feedback, Higgins said, "I think we did a pretty good job in staying as neutral as possible and presenting the public with an experience that allowed them to come up with their own opinions. I also disagree that children shouldn't be exposed to this issue. There are 2.7 million children in this country who have a parent in jail or prison as it is, so I imagine this isn't completely unfamiliar to many children already."

The History of Libraries in the Segregated US

While most people commonly view libraries as an epithet of inclusiveness and democracy, this wasn't always the case in the United States. When gazing back at the veneer of history, it is important to remember that advancements in civil and human rights have improved due to organization and resistance from marginalized populations demanding equality.

As noted by Peter Dobkin Hall, "the colonial elite" had their own private libraries; it was the



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"disempowered - artisans, farmers, and aspiring professionals, among whom the new social and economic forces were awakening desires for self-improvement, self-advancement, and political influence."⁴ Although debated, the first public library in the United States, the Library Company of Philadelphia, was founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin. In 1828, the Reading Room Society, the first social library for African Americans opened in Philadelphia, and in 1833, the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons was formed.^{5, 6}

In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision dismantled the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court ruling from 1896 that legalized segregation under the "separate but equal" doctrine. Despite the 1954 landmark ruling, libraries in the South still remained violently segregated. *The Right to Read*, by Patterson Toby Graham, tells the horrifying story of two African-American ministers, W.B. McClain and Quintus Reynolds, who were "knifed, chain-whipped, and savagely beaten" on the steps of the Carnegie Library in Anniston, Alabama, for trying to apply for a library membership in 1963. Despite the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned segregation in public places such as libraries, according to Graham, "the Alabama Library Association still excluded black librarians."

In 1960, 13 African-American high school students lead a direct action "read-in" protest at the segregated Danville Memorial Library in Virginia.⁷ The students filed a lawsuit in federal district court. Regarding the case, *Giles v. Library Advisory Committee of Danville, Virginia*, the judge ruled in the students' favor stating that library segregation was unlawful.⁸ According to Graham, "Danville's white citizens voted overwhelmingly in favor of closing the library to avoid integration." The 13 high school students paved the way for a string of "read-in" protests that made their way south to Mississippi and Alabama.

Regarding protests in Mississippi to desegregate libraries, in her article titled, "Struggles Within: Lura G. Currier, the Mississippi Library Commission, and Library Services to African Americans," Karen Cook notes, "There was fierce resistance from white supremacists, and many

"Solitary confinement, or criminal justice, is not a controversial topic in itself. It's much more controversial that it doesn't get talked about."

public libraries in the state remained segregated in defiance of federal law well after adoption of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.⁹ Cook emphasizes that the American Library Association (ALA) "did not speak out against racial discrimination within the association until the mid-1960s," but the ALA did amend the Library Bill of Rights in 1961, adding that "the rights of an individual to the use of a library should not be denied or abridged because of his race, religion, national origins, or political views."¹⁰

While it is evident that some libraries kowtowed to white supremacists and upheld racist policies by not challenging dominant ideologies, it is also evident that libraries have been at the forefront of controversy, free speech and fostering a dialogue of equality. Throughout the years, library displays and exhibits have been put in the spotlight for upholding free speech and creating conversations. For example, in 1978, Library Journal published an article titled "Massacre exhibit sparks controversy at UC," detailing how Turkish and Armenian students at the University of California, Berkeley, complained about the library exhibit and its graphic content. Following complaints, the exhibit was censored by removing "inflammatory" materials, but after protests, the exhibit was returned to its original layout.¹¹

In 1995, an exhibit on slavery at the Library of Congress was postponed after "objections from some African-American staff members" stated that the exhibit lacked "historical context" and held "a very narrow approach to the kind of architecture and culture of plantation life without taking the horrors of slavery into account."¹² Another example can be seen in Linda Alexander's article "[Gay Display Controversy: A Threat to Intellectual Freedom](#)." Alexander explained how in 2005, a library employee made a display of 20 books on "gay themes for teens" at the West Gate Library in Tampa, Florida.¹³ After



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two complaints from patrons, the chief librarian from the county inspected the display and told the staff it needed to be taken down. After complaints, the display was put back up near the adult fiction section and contained books involving gay themes for adults.

Thanks to the work of activists over the course of library history in the United States - activists who challenged power with protests and occupied spaces through actions like the Danville Public Library sit-in - libraries were eventually desegregated and literacy as a civil right was acknowledged. As noted by Patterson Toby Graham, considering that white administrators in Birmingham, Alabama, had a policy that "determined that once black hands had touched a book it could not return to general circulation," much has changed over the years that has allowed for a greater dialogue of justice to take place in libraries.

Bringing the Story of Herman Wallace Into the Library

Just as protesters occupied public libraries to raise awareness, art exhibits that occupy public space in libraries provide a similar opportunity. The story of Herman Wallace builds a much-needed bridge between the roots of US racism and the ongoing violence of structural, systemic, institutional and explicit racism in the United States.

Wallace began his time in the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola in 1971 after being convicted of armed robbery. Angola Prison's history dates back to 1880, when Samuel James, a former Confederate major, purchased an antebellum plantation called Angola (due to the fact that the majority of the former slaves came from the African country) and kept prisoners in "Old Slave Quarters."¹⁴ The prisoners were forced to (and still do work) in the sugarcane fields.

Scholar Dennis Childs' reports in his book *Slaves of the State* that "75 percent to 80 percent" of the prison population in Angola is African American. Some 85 percent of all prisoners die in Angola - most of them were worked to death in the prison's beginnings, circa 1900.^{15, 16} According to

current estimates by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), "Because of harsh sentencing laws, about 95 percent of the 5,225 people imprisoned at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola will die there. Louisiana is the state with the highest number of prisoners serving life without parole for nonviolent offenses in the United States, with 429 such prisoners, 91 percent of whom are Black."¹⁷

As noted in a chapter by Dennis Childs in the book *Violence and the Body*, Angola Penitentiary seems to be stuck in time. The prison "stands as a *living monument* to the timelessness of racial subjection in the United States." Childs cites an example from the 1998 documentary *The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison*. A 22-year-old African-American prisoner George Crawford "is one of a large group of black male prisoners bent over picking one of the prison's many crops (which still include cotton) while a white guard, dressed in camouflage and armed with a double barreled shotgun sits on horseback monitoring their every move."

Exhibits and Displays in Public Spaces Have the Opportunity to Break Us Out of Our Ideological Box.

In 1971, Wallace and Woodfox established the Black Panther Party at Angola. Scott Fleming explained in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party* that the Angola Panthers "risked their lives to protect younger and weaker inmates from the rape, prostitution, and sex slavery that pervaded prison life." Fleming explained that the Panthers sought to unify Black and white prisoners to fight for better conditions in the prison, noting that this was a tough task "considering that the prisoner housing, dining halls, and worksites were still racially segregated, with privileged living arrangements and work assignments going to white prisoners." Woodfox and Wallace were well aware they were being targeted for their activism inside the prison.

Wallace's 41 years of solitary confinement began in May 1972, when he and three other prisoners



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were charged with the murder of a white guard, Brent Miller. The trial has been scrutinized since its inception. Riddled with inadequacies, racial bias in the trial (an all white jury), corruption and lack of evidence, Wallace fought for appeals for decades. For example, Andrew Cohen from *The Atlantic* reported, "Bloody fingerprints and a knife were found at the crime scene, but none of the prints belonged to Wallace or any of his co-defendants."¹⁸ In addition, seven prisoners testified that Wallace could not have been near the scene of the murder, and other testimonies by prisoners contradicted each other. Wallace was convicted for the murder in 1974, and it took 16 years to appeal the case. It was later revealed that prisoner Hezekiah Brown was receiving favors from the then-warden Murray Henderson for being a witness against Wallace.¹⁹ Angola Three member Robert King Wilkerson's conviction was overturned in 2001, and Wallace was released in 2013 after US District Judge Brian Jackson "ruled women were unconstitutionally excluded from the grand jury that indicted Wallace; Wallace died from liver cancer a few days later."²⁰ Although Woodfox's release was ordered by US District Judge James J. Brady on June 9, 2015, Louisiana Attorney General James "Buddy" Caldwell has appealed the decision.

Given the tumultuous history of Wallace's life, the artistic project he worked on with Jackie Sumell was filled with creativity, imagination and hope. Being in a cell for 23 hours a day, in the documentary *The House That Herman Built*, Wallace wrote Sumell explaining that his house would have a 6-by-9 hot tub and the garden would have gardenias, carnations and tulips.

The #76759 exhibition at Brooklyn Public Library had a life-size recreation of Wallace's prison cell, excerpts from his correspondences with Sumell, books from his reading list and a model of the dream home Wallace designed. The exhibit also contained 108 books that Wallace wanted to have in the library at his home.²¹ Some of the books he requested were *Democracy and Revolution* by George Novack; Stalin; Marx; Trotsky; and his favorite, *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon.

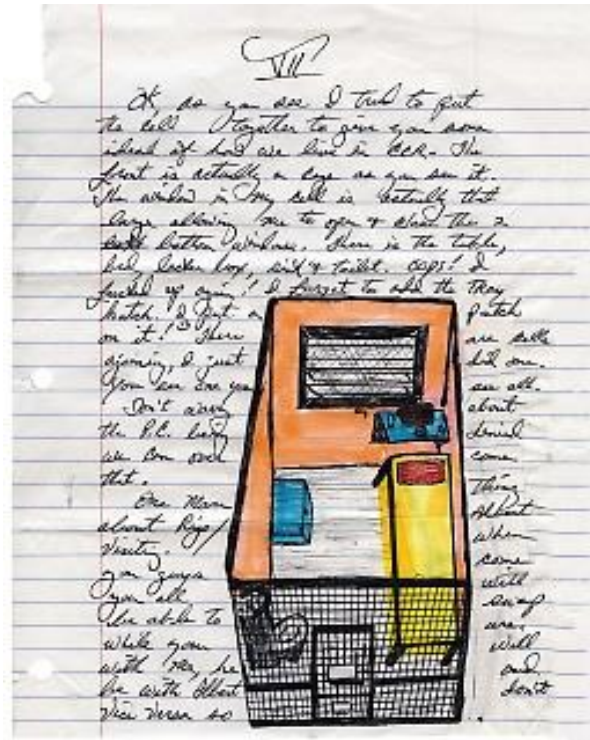


Image #3. Letter from Herman Wallace to Jackie Sumell, 2002 (Photo: Jackie Sumell)

Library outreach director Nick Higgins said the library's target audience for this exhibit and related programming were "the people in our community who don't often think about criminal justice issues and folks who oppose justice reform." When asked if he was concerned about controversial exhibits in libraries, Higgins stated:

I'd actually argue that the topic of solitary confinement, or criminal justice, is not a controversial topic in itself. It's much more controversial that it doesn't get talked about as much as it should in neutral spaces like libraries. The controversy is that this is a system that we all support through tax payments and through our voting habits, yet the direct consequences of this system on individuals, and the enormous collateral consequences of this system on families and communities are rarely given space for critical public dialogue.

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Image #4. Letter to Jackie Sumell (Photo: Jackie Sumell)

Higgins described the most powerful memory he had from the exhibit, "of children and their caregivers walking into the cell together and having a dialogue about what the cell actually was, who lives in the cell and why we put people in these places as a form of punishment. That's a powerful, and critical conversation that the library was able to foster through Jackie and Herman's incredible exhibit."

The importance of exhibits and displays in public spaces, especially libraries, is that they have the opportunity to break us out of our ideological box. To borrow the term "filter bubble," coined from Eli Pariser, chief executive of Upworthy, art displays in public places can break

us from our "filter bubble" of personalized filters that try to guess what we are searching for on Google and Amazon based on collected metadata from past searches. The danger of these invisible barriers is that they can prohibit new ideas from being presented, which stifles dialogue. The promise of dialogue is that it will decrease alienation in communities. In his article, "Making and Unmaking of Strangers," Zygmunt Bauman explains how community or citizenry helps to break down the "mini Berlin Walls" that we build every day.²² Although there is no road map on how to break down these walls, it is evident that art plays a significant role. Oscar Wilde profoundly hits this point in his essay, "The Decay of Lying," stating, "The object of art is not simple truth but complex beauty."



Image #5. Herman's House Gardens (Photo: Jackie Sumell)

Endnotes

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