George Floyd’s recent murder on May 25, 2020, initiated ongoing related Black Lives Matter protests and rallies. His murder, and prior similar incidents, are further proof to me of the systemic racism that continues to plague the Black community. I am an immigrant from Guyana, and my personal experiences thus far living in the United States prove that I am more of a Black American than DNA testing confirms. Detailed herein are some of my personal experiences as a Black American in law librarianship.

Back to My Roots
While in law school, I recall hearing white law students talk about how they received guidance and help with their legal studies from their respective fathers, uncles, aunts, or other relatives who were lawyers. Unfortunately, I had no relatives to give me any guidance or help with my legal studies. As a Black student, this was a disadvantage in multiple ways. For example, in certain first-year classes that were difficult, such as contracts, I had a hard time grappling with the meaning of certain terms and concepts, and I did not have family to further clarify these terms for me. But this did not stop me from persevering in becoming a lawyer.

I attended Touro Law School on a partial scholarship, which was necessary as I otherwise could not have afforded to attend. I was one of two Black male law students in my section of about 45 students in total. This affected me mentally, as I felt lonely and isolated at times. These feelings were somewhat alleviated after I joined the law school’s Black Law Student Association (BLSA). BLSA’s second- and third-year students provided me with the words of encouragement I needed to not feel so alone.
Traumatic Events

One afternoon, while taking my first-year constitutional law exam, two detectives from a nearby precinct walked into the classroom and asked me to step outside. In the hallway outside the classroom, the detectives proceeded to read me my rights and tell me I was under arrest. I was in such shock that I did not even ask what I was being arrested for. I went willingly to the precinct where I was booked and held overnight. I called my parents and they hired a lawyer. As I waited for the lawyer to arrive, I was taunted by the detectives to sign a confession statement, even though I did not know why I was under arrest. The following morning when I appeared before a judge, I finally learned my alleged crime was stealing and using a white female classmate’s credit card.

When I returned to school, I was told by friends that she had reported her card as lost while she was in the law library. During their investigation, the detectives discovered the card was used by a man fitting my description. They had an image of the back of a bald man of color from a pizzeria security camera where the card was used to purchase pizza for $11.43. I do not know the chain of events, but my recollection is that the detectives showed my female classmate the pizzeria image and the connection was made that I fit the description. I was never asked where I was at the time the card may have been stolen. Therefore, how could they determine that I “fit the description” based solely on the image of the back of the head of a bald man of color? As I was the only black male with a bald head at the law school, it could only make sense to them that I was the one who committed the crime.

The Aftermath

The trauma from this event reverberates to this day. I still respond and react in spaces based on this one experience, and it is one of many in my life. It was humiliating and embarrassing to be asked to leave the exam in front of all my classmates, especially as the only Black person in the room. Couldn’t they choose a better time and place? Between the financial difficulties, the trauma from the ordeal, and my disbelieving parents, I never sought legal action for being wrongfully accused. I still wonder if I had not been in law school where I would be now?

The case was ultimately dismissed, and I had the records sealed for fear they would hurt me professionally. Although it should not be an issue, I was not taking any chances. The trauma was so extreme that I had to take a year off from law school, which led to further alienation amongst my classmates as I was commencing my second academic year with a different class. But I did not drop out, even though the thought crossed my mind.

Most of my classmates in library school were white. I was, yet again, one of six males in my class. I was also the only black male with a JD who had prior law library experience.

Working as a Law Librarian

In the profession thus far, I wonder why organizations such as the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) cannot come up with a feasible methodology to conduct a meaningful salary survey that includes race. I have heard similar comments from other librarians of color that there is a significant inequity in salaries relative to white law librarians versus black law librarians. I have not considered the role of gender in this statement. However, for this to persist as long as it has, there is no other conclusion to make than that systemic racism is very prevalent in the law library profession. It is my hope that AALL’s new committee, per my recently approved resolution on diversity and inclusion, will determine an appropriate methodology to conduct such a salary survey.

In my first year as an academic reference librarian, while sitting at the reference desk with my name displayed as the reference librarian on duty, students regularly commenced their inquiries with “I am not sure if you can help me…” In other instances, they bypassed me altogether and asked the white collection services staff their reference question, only to be referred to me.

Even today, I experience instances of disregard, such as when I see students’ quizzical facial expressions as I walk in the room the first day of their legal research course, seemingly indicating to me they do not believe I am a law librarian, with a JD, and qualified to teach them legal research. How would this make you feel?

In terms of networking events for my local chapter, the attendees are predominantly white. From speaking with other Black librarians, they choose not to attend these “networking” events because they don’t feel welcome in these predominantly white spaces.

I have been engaged in a variety of activities throughout my professional life that helped play a role in potentially reshaping and changing some of what was systemic. I was president of my law school’s Black Law Students Association. I presented on various related topics at AALL conferences, such as intersectionality and cultural competence. I am the current chair of BCAALL (Black Law Librarians Special Interest Section), and I was instrumental in submitting its first successful petition in over 10 years to become a special interest section. About three years ago, I initiated and developed the first Diversity & Inclusion Committee for the Law Library Association of Greater New York, where I still chair. This is who I am as a Black law librarian, someone who not only has a JD and an MLS with many years of experience in librarianship, but who is still also only a Black man. I know I am only one of many law librarians with similar stories, and I hope this series brings about a greater understanding of what it means or how it feels to be Black in law librarianship.