The term "microaggression" was used by Columbia Teachers’ College professor Derald Wing Sue, and his colleagues, to refer to “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities.” They can be intentional or unintentional, and communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people. Mostly, people of color. Described or dubbed as "the new face of racism," microaggressive statements are more subtle. They can be small everyday slights (intended or otherwise) that harbor an underlying attitude of racism, sexism or homophobia. Microaggressions exist everywhere: in public, on the bus, at discussions (or in conversations), on campuses, at work – yes, at the library, too! Why, you don’t think the library is work? Someone once asked me where was going. I responded: “to the library.” I assumed she knew I was a librarian – “no, really, you’re all dressed up as if you’re going to work.” “I am.” “Where do you work?” It took a while for her to get it, that I worked in a library. Her next question was: “and you’re dressed up like that? I thought you were a lawyer or banker, or something!” Was I over-dressed for work at the Library? I don’t think so. Should I have been casually dressed? Did I violate any “library dress code?” I politely responded that people who work in libraries are also workers, many are professionals with advanced academic degrees, many supervise, answer complex questions at reference desks, assist patrons in looking for reading and research materials, many do program planning, coordinate book purchases, gather and organize relevant information for every aspect of life, etc. The people, such as myself, who work hard at installing computers and the right software to enable people type resumes, term papers, print insurance certificates play computer games, register for programs, are not library volunteers, they are workers. People don’t just show up and read. There are people who work there to help facilitate that joy and act of reading and researching, and they get paid, so, in my opinion that IS work! She didn’t know I had a way with words when provoked!

It is a habit for people to assume a person’s heritage, by simply looking at them, listening to them, based on a statement, or based on their skin color or accent. Here are a few examples:
A visitor to the library comes up to the information desk and asks:

“Hi, I have a 10 o’clock appointment with your director. Could you, please, tell Tony Bullock that Thomas Sanderson is here to see him?”

Director Toni Bullock stretches out her hand and responds: “Hi, Thomas. I am Toni Bullock, the director.” Thomas is taken aback and replies: Oh, sorry! I was expecting a man…and someone older!” The director had no choice but to smile. “Let’s go to my office, please,” was
all she could say! Perhaps she was used to people hearing her name and thinking she was male. But what about the wrong assumption of her age? Does a position or title have to carry an age badge? I think, in this case, Thomas had embarrassed himself enough! There was no need to correct him any further!

A patron comes to the circulation desk, and says to the clerk (who has Asian features) “Hi, I have a major problem, is there someone back there who speaks English very well, who can understand me?” That clerk probably speaks better English than the patron, or better still, the person speaks the best English of all the clerks in the back office! At a previous job, a patron came to the Circulation Desk to check out a video. It was a Jewish holiday. I guess the clerk looked Jewish – whatever that look is supposed to be – but he asked the clerk “I guess you’re not observant, so you didn’t take the day off, huh?”

A patron comes to the reference desk and remarks “You look very colorful. Do you wear a lot of this on the islands?” Which of the islands? Can the librarian not be from Africa, or any other Afrocentric place? Where is it written that only people from “the Islands,” wherever they are, wear colorful clothes? Better yet, the librarian could be an African American who just loves bright-colored clothing.

YOUR ENGLISH IS FLAWLESS, DO YOU SPEAK ANY CHINESE AT HOME? WHY WOULD I? I’M NOT CHINESE. OH! YOU DEFINITELY LOOK CHINESE. ARE YOU SURE?
Are you familiar with the Kente cloth from Ghana? It is the most colorful fabric I know, and it is not an Island original.

Here’s a real one: A colleague walks up to me, at the reference desk and remarks: “you must have a low electric bill at your house!”

“Why?”

“Your clothes are always so bright, I am sure they’ll light up any room without turning on any lights!”

What do you say to that, especially if the person happens to be your supervisor” Do you take it as a joke, or do you “straighten the person out” or do you summon all the patience you could probably muster and gently explain that people have different tastes in color, clothing, fashion, etc.? And, where do you respond to this? Remember, the remark was made at the reference desk, where all who cared could hear. Do you take the person to the back office and let her have it, do you lightly reprimand her and say “not in front of the general public,” do you just let it go, or do you give your response right there at the desk? How would you handle it? Would you just say that was an insensitive, unfortunate, uncalled-for remark and “let it slide?”
Microaggression is not “casual racism.” Though the aggressor may not realize the effect of his/her barb, those “casual statements” do have hurtful consequences and can be belittling! I recently experienced a clear example of microaggression when people that I thought were respectful of my accomplishments and credentials questioned my ability to provide professional information. Was it ignorance? Was it because they really were not aware of my credentials, or was it subtle racism? And how do you respond to their queries? “Regular” patrons often feel comfortable, when they approach the reference desk with their questions, and can get very conversational. When a patron makes a statement, and then claims “it’s nothing against you but…” that casual inference is a harbinger of a harsher statement or opinion that is microaggressive. The recipient of that statement becomes aware of a reserved though (or feeling) or opinion of the aggressor. There’s a sudden difference in opinion a kind of under-toned victimization going on. The attitude changes, and the recipient is suddenly placed on guard, waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop. And more often than not, it does! So, what do you do? You know you’re offended but, you want to maintain a polite, pleasant attitude you’re trying so hard. Customer service 101.

This was sent to me by my sister-in-law on Facebook:
And another example, questioning my ethnicity, upon reading the name on my nametag:

WILHELMINA?
YOUR NAME
DOESN’T SOUND
AFRICAN.
WERE YOU
ADOPTED?

Here’s another one I love (and I tell this story all the time.) I was baffled that someone in modern day America, who is a librarian, could ask me this:

“Wilma, how did you get here?” Not knowing what she was getting at, I responded “by subway.” “No, really, how did you get here, to America?” I did a double take. She had been watching too many Tarzan movies! She admitted it, too! Since I was in one of my mean, sarcastic moods, I responded “I lived in the deep jungles of Africa, so to get into the City, I
went from one canopy walk (she had no idea what that was) to the other until I got to the shore. Then I got into a canoe and we rowed over to the ship, which was off-shore and that took me to the capital where I caught a Pan Am flight heading to America.” “Boy! It must have taken you a long time to get here! Was it exciting for you?” To cop the American phrase, “I could have slapped up the side of her head!” Instead, I patiently told her: ”yeah, you know, I wanted to come to America, so I did what I had to do!”

How was she to know that my first visit here was in the 60’s? That I came on what was called a jet plane. Ghana not only had its own fleet of planes (Ghana Airways) but had also formed a partnership with BOAC (the British Overseas Airways Corporation). We also owned a fleet of ships (the Black Star Line.) I think she would have fainted, if she knew. I was so offended that I wanted to be as sarcastic as I could possibly be. It was insulting, and in modern day terms, very racial, and condescending. But, I saw it for what it was – ignorance. The fact that she was a librarian did not mean that she was well-read or very knowledgeable. The farthest she had been from Long Island and Brooklyn was Staten Island. Another colleague knew from my face that I was annoyed and was leaning towards being unmerciful, so she intervened and said “Come on, look at her. Does Wilma look like she knows how to swing from tree to tree? Don’t be offensive. Lots of places in Africa have western influence and are just like here!”

Here’s another personal anecdote:

I announced a few months ago that I was going home, to Ghana, for a couple of weeks. Colleague: “Home where, to Africa?”

Me, patiently: “Yes, to Ghana.”

Colleague: “Ooo! Take lots of pictures. I would like to go on a safari, there. Is it as beautiful as what we see on TV?”

I had no idea what she had seen on TV, or why she would associate Ghana with safaris, but, I was willing to humor her until this next statement: “Say hello to the elephants. Do you get to ride on them when you go home?”

Here’s where I lost it: “For your information, the only time I’ve ever seen an elephant is at the zoo! Where in heaven’s name do you think I live or come from? Africa is not all jungle and grasslands, you know!”

I knew I had to calm down, so I immediately pulled out my cell phone and showed her a picture of Accra, the malls, and a couple of houses I had visited. Did she stop there? Her response:

“This is not Africa! Where are the forests?” Okay, Wilma, walk slowly away. Just go, and don’t answer. So, what did I do? Education will have to come from within. We have a staff page on our library’s website. So, I’ve decided to post pictures of this trip and other trips to Ghana, so that they could see how cosmopolitan some of the places in Ghana could be.
“WHEN I SAY I’M FROM AFRICA”
What people think...

What I mean.
We do it to ourselves, too! During a friendly chat with some colleagues, a friend who we shall call Dora, asked “Sam, who is this lovely young lady you brought with you, today?”

Sam: “my niece from Lagos.”

Dora takes a good look at said niece, pulls Sam to the side and asks, jokingly, at first: “tell the truth, is she your ‘side piece?’ I thought you said she was your niece?”

Sam: “yes, she is.”

Dora: “but, you just said she is from Lagos. You are a Fanti. How is she your niece?”

Sam: “my parents are originally from Nigeria. I was born and raised in Ghana and speak Fanti but, my other siblings were born in Nigeria. She is my sister’s daughter.”

Dora: “Oh!”

At the next get-together, there’s a discussion on the history of the Fante. Dora tells the others in the gathering “Don’t ask Sam about tribal practices, he’s Nigerian!” And that, my friends, effectively excludes Sam from further discussions of the Fante!

Have you heard of a white person calling another “white trash?” What constitutes decent or trash? Some can’t help their backgrounds or level of income or standard of living. Others can work hard and be strongly determined to alter their style of conditions of living. But should be microaggressive or judgmental? The problem is not just white on white or white on black, or white on Asian, or black on Asian, black on black, or even African on African.
I often hear my own children and the children of other Africans stereotype us parents. If there is an African in this room, I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase “African parents be like….” There’s a multitude of examples of the African parent’s syndrome on YouTube. But here’s one that is typically African:

“*You’re not like the Other Black people I know. You speak so well.*"
Have you had a patron walk up to the service desk with this statement: "my son just bought me a phone but, I’m a klutz when it comes to technology. Can you show me how to download an eBook to my phone?" He probably isn’t – not when he’s showing you a cell phone model that is probably much newer than the model you have, or if he knows the word “download." He knows enough about the existence of eBooks to want to have one on his phone. He is quite savvy. However, he already assumes you will pre-judge him. Hence, that opening statement. What should you do or say? Have you noticed that sometimes we raise our tone of voice when we talk to someone older than we are? I was at the physical therapist’s office, one day. We were having a very pleasant conversation, and I remarked that a song that was being played was one of my favorites when growing up. Immediately, one of the patients stopped and asked, how old are you? I replied 59. She stopped, gave me a good look and said “Yeah, right and I’m 25!” I should have kept quiet. I insisted I was 59. Her next sentence was uttered so slowly (but loudly) I wanted to just… but, I didn’t. She had immediately put me in the “elderly and hard-of-hearing” category! She probably thought I should be in the nursing home and not the therapist’s office. How about this:

Friend: “Is that your grandma?’

Me: “yes.”

Friend: “Oh, she’s so cute!”

Correct me, if I’m wrong but, don’t we often use that word when describing babies or little girls? When, exactly did grandma become an adorably cute baby? When an older employee has completed a task, you expect it to be done, anyway. Please do not compliment the person by saying “Woohoo, great job!” You are, effectively, treating the adult as if he/she were a 5 or 6-year old who needs a pat on the back for a job well done! You WERE expecting the job to be done. That’s why you assigned it. You are not being encouraging, and you are certainly not being cool. You are being microaggressive or patronizing!
We do have to change our approach to people regardless of race, color, gender, or age. And even more so at the Library. But what if you don’t have pieces of evidence (as my proof of the pictures) to squash someone’s ignorance? What do you do to let the patron know that “Betty” is really Asian-American and speaks excellent English? When is Thomas going to realize that a woman can be a director just as well as a man? Or that some names are unisex and that the only difference is in the spelling and not in the pronunciation? How do you explain to “Mr. Smith” that Wilma is not from any island (Jamaica, Barbados, Bahamas, St. Lucia, or otherwise) but an African woman who takes pride in her African wax prints and loves fashion and color?

Folks, what we need to do is educate. Not classroom style but, we have to find ways of patiently educating to aggressor that there’s a world out there besides their narrow view of the way things should be. Like it or not, libraries are service organizations. Good customer service is the key. Great is better. We have to be able to find answers, solutions to these problems. What would you do? What DO you say? At the service desks, we have to strive to be polite, caring, and understanding. We have to be solicitous in our responses without being offensive or condescending. I must admit that some of my responses to the above examples I’ve given are not exactly the right ones but, microaggression has the ability to make you forget your manners, to make you impatiently give a response that you, otherwise would have thought very carefully before giving a response. When you have to explain, use your common sense judgement without being judgmental. You can let the aggressor realize his/her mistake with a gentle correction without embarrassing them. In the case of a co-worker, speak to her/him privately, and let your objections be known, albeit, gently. Microaggression can get out of hand. We are in Public service. What do we do?