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NOT THE SHARK, BUT THE WATER

How Neutrality and Vocational Awe Intertwine to Uphold White Supremacy

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Libraries are beloved institutions both in practice and in the public imagination. Over half of the population in the United States used a public library in the year 2015 to 2016 (Horrihan 2016) and libraries are described by authors, philosophers, and intellectuals with lofty words such as *temples*, *sacred places*, and *sanctuaries*.

Similarly, professional library literature extends this belief that the very existence of libraries creates democracy, learning, and civilization, and it conflates librarians' work with the actual buildings themselves (Latimer 2011; Sweeney 2005). This conflation of profession and place creates a narrative that what librarians do must be "good," because libraries are "good," and "sacred places." This narrative results in vocational awe, a phenomenon traced and defined by Ettarh as "the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique" (2018).

Both neutrality and vocational awe have been codified as values of librarianship, and rarely have these values been challenged in trade and professional literature, nor their ties to White Supremacy examined. Neutrality, defined as "the state of not supporting or helping either side in a conflict, disagreement, or war," has long been considered a library value.¹ For the purposes of this chapter, we will focus on what Charles Mills describes as the "present period of de facto White Supremacy, when whites' dominance is, for the most part, no longer constitutionally and juridically enshrined but

rather a matter of social, political, cultural, and economic privilege based on the legacy of the European conquest, African slavery, and European colonialism” (1997).

This chapter examines these values and how they are embedded within librarianship, as well as the myriad ways they intersect to uphold White Supremacy throughout various types of work and service in librarianship.² Finally, the chapter will demonstrate how vocational awe and neutrality continue to disenfranchise librarians, particularly librarians of color. By deconstructing assumptions and values integrally woven into the field, the authors hope to posit how librarianship can potentially evolve into a field that not only supports the people who work in libraries, but also empowers marginalized communities and fosters librarians’ avowed democratic values. We, the authors, identify individually as first-generation American and Black, first-generation American Latina/Mestiza, and first-generation Asian American, are deeply invested in seeing the profession grow in its capacity to critique and change itself, and will draw on Critical Race Theory (CRT), which examines the totality and embedded nature of racism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The first CRT tenet that we rely on, “racism as ordinary,” is defined by Delgado and Stefancic as the idea that “racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture” (2017, 8–9). Because White Supremacy culture underlies the landscape of librarianship, and vocational awe and *neutrality* are arguably two of its most important mainstays, the assumptions, beliefs, and policies born from these values are seen as the norm rather than things to be challenged and ultimately transformed.³ Within this overarching tenet, we draw specifically on Alan Freeman’s identification of a “perpetrator perspective” and a “victim perspective” in understanding White Supremacy, as well as Cheryl I. Harris’s multifaceted approach to understanding whiteness as property. The second CRT tenet that we draw on to examine *neutrality* and vocational awe is “critique of liberalism,” which pushes back against the idea that “equal treatment for all persons, regardless of their different histories or current situations,” yields an equitable social structure, and that “with the election of Barack Obama, we arrived at a postracial stage of social development” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 26). Specifically because the value of *neutrality* in libraries relies on these misconceptions, we italicize this term throughout the rest of this chapter to highlight the fallacy in the goals of *neutrality*-framed library work.

Due to a prevalent idea that “libraries are for all,” there is a misconception that racial inequity does not affect libraries and requires no real intervention in libraries because people from all races, creeds, and walks of life are treated equally in the space. This idea is a central defense of *neutrality*; proponents of *neutrality* state that since we serve everyone, we must allow materials, ideas, and values from everyone. It also bolsters vocational awe, in that it forestalls meaningful critique of the field, particularly critique of its racial dynamics. As three People of Color, we have experienced on the micro and macro levels how librarianship weaponizes vocational awe and *neutrality* to uphold White Supremacy and further marginalizes communities of color. However, our very marginality allows a clearer view of the disconnect between the espoused values of librarianship and the reality of the field. We use this view to examine the current narratives of library work and, in a CRT tradition, to revise the history that has so long comforted the white majority of our profession (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 25).

Many of CRT’s tenets overlap, particularly to relate the following ideas: that White Supremacy is purposefully maintained over time and is not happenstance and that the dismantling of White Supremacy is poorly served by incrementalism and similar liberal methods of achieving equality. Incrementalism, as defined by Lindblom, is the method of change by which many small policy changes are enacted over time in order to create a larger broad-based policy change (1980). Incrementalism, as a method, will not be limited to public policy in this analysis but will also encompass the larger implicit and explicit cultural rules that define the field of librarianship.

We argue that the predominant idea of racism, as discrete and easily identifiable acts of prejudice, creates a dangerous notion that racism is essentially so rare as to be almost mythical. Alan Freeman terms this mindset the “perpetrator perspective.” In other words, the dominant ideology of racism holds that racism is merely discrete acts, visible as evil through intent. By contrast, the “victim perspective,” a term that Freeman acknowledges is ironic, understands racism and White Supremacy not as acts, but as conditions of life (1995)—not as a shark, but as the very water (Blackwell 2018).

This analogy brings us to the first tenet we rely on in this chapter—racism as ordinary. As Freeman and many other CRT scholars posit, racism is ingrained in common, everyday experiences, as well as the larger systems that govern society. Due to its very ordinariness, and the dominance of the perpetrator perspective, racism is seen as a moral failing, and therefore it shouldn’t be acknowledged lest it spread. This restrictive construction of racism also led to the idea that those who acknowledge race as

important in any capacity were racist, and thus the true path toward racial equality is integration, assimilation, and “color blindness.” Color blindness, or the belief that ending racial inequality requires treating everyone exactly the same, at its core, flattens all nuance. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) identifies four common “frames” of color blindness, including *abstract liberalism* and *naturalisation*. Abstract liberalism promotes abstract ideas such as “individual choice” and “equal opportunity” as cures for all social inequality. This results in common opinions like opposing affirmative action because it is seen as taking away equal opportunity and imposing preferential treatment. Through the frame of naturalisation, racial inequality is explained away as “just the way things are,” rather than purposeful choices. Paradoxically, being biased toward one’s own racial group is seen as being “natural.”

According to John Gray, a political philosopher who identified common elements of liberal thought, liberalism is seen as the core of modernity; its distinctive features include individualism, universalism, and egalitarianism (Gray 1986). Liberalism sees color blindness, meritocracy, and equal opportunity as part of the dominant moral compass of racial enlightenment. Critical race theory counters this by “question[ing] the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 3), where traditional civil rights discourse stresses incremental step-by-step progress.

Critical race scholars challenge the idea that liberalism is the best framework for solving racial inequality. For example, while the idea of color blindness is admirable—“judging by the content of character rather than color” (King 1963)—more often its effects are both inherently harmful and detrimental to equity, and it disadvantages peoples and communities of color. Here, we are using the term *equity* to mean customs based on general principles of fairness rather than common or statutory law, unlike *equality*, which is to mean sameness (Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil 2002). Policies such as affirmative action, which has historically benefited white women most, are discounted on the belief that they grant race-based “preferential treatment” and therefore don’t fulfill the liberal ideal of “equal opportunity” (Crenshaw 2006). Color blindness posits that taking race into account at all, even to acknowledge past wrongs, is wrong and that those who believe that race is important are in fact racist. This equates white supremacists and racial advocates, ignoring the *severe* underrepresentation of People of Color in systems and institutions and prioritizing abstract elements of liberalism above the reality of multiple nation-state-sponsored and systematic inequalities.

Prioritizing abstract liberal concepts like equal opportunity, meritocracy, individualism, and free choice above lived realities creates a skewed sense of scale for progress. Going back to Freeman's "perpetrator perspective," these abstractions of liberalism create an environment where racist acts are the results of discrete actions that are aberrations from a "normal" life. White people, who are unlikely to experience disadvantages due to race, can effectively ignore racism in American life, justify the current social order, and feel more comfortable with their relatively privileged standing in society (Fryberg 2010). Only the most heinous acts are seen as requiring justice or repair. People of color, who more regularly experience and witness racist acts and discrimination, are seen as "aggressive" or "sensitive" for pointing out the discrepancies between abstract liberal values and the messier nuances of reality (Ettarh 2014). The result of this is that the already always biased system is changed only incrementally, when what is needed, and what we are demanding from our profession, is a full paradigm shift.

"LIBRARIANSHIP IS A PUBLIC GOOD"

In order to fully grasp the ideology and methodology that maintains White Supremacy within librarianship, and its effects on patron/practitioner communities, it is necessary to examine the field of librarianship more closely. A fuller view of the narratives about the field, including its relationship to democracy, *neutrality*, and vocational awe, can situate librarianship fully within the nation-state-sponsored, systemic, and institutional racism prevalent in the United States of America. Exploring these issues requires a brief history of libraries and democratic values in the US.

At its most basic, a democracy is a system of government where the majority of the decisions are made by the people and for the people. There are few narratives so tightly woven into the American identity as that of democracy. Liberalism's mainstay interests, including equal opportunity, individual choice, liberty, and meritocracy, underpin the American identity, from the stories of the Puritans seeking religious freedoms to the Revolutionary War for legislative and economic freedoms. Therefore, tying an occupation or vocation to the narrative of democracy is ostensibly the highest honor and praise. And librarianship, without fail, is tied to democracy. Many, including authors, poets, and legislators, as well as librarians themselves, agree that the library is one of the few truly democratic institutions. Vartan Gregorian went so far as to say, "The library is central to our free society. It is a critical element in the

free exchange of information at the heart of our democracy” (1989, 71). Because libraries espouse values such as equal access to all, dedication to lifelong learning, and acting as a sanctuary for diverse community needs, they are often touted as the last public noncommodified and inherently democratic public place. Libraries are not only built on the egalitarian promises of democracy; they exist to promote them.

One of the most ingrained values of American democracy that libraries work to uphold is the freedom of speech, as guaranteed in the First Amendment to the Constitution. However, the way that libraries do this perpetuates a common misapplication of the First Amendment. Mari Matsuda explicates this misapplication—because antiracists’ right to protest and culturally foil racist speech is protected, the government assumes that it “must take affirmative steps to preserve” the right of racist speech (1993, 33). In this national context, where the state protects racist speech broadly and penalizes it narrowly, libraries use the assumption that the law is *neutral* and take on the same position. Library workers’ vocational awe leads them to gloss over this fault of American conceptions of freedom of speech, because protecting the First Amendment is seen as right and democratic.

On the surface, it seems natural that libraries and librarians would embrace and celebrate these assumptions wholeheartedly. As many see it, not only do libraries and librarians work to save the democratic values of society, they also go above and beyond to serve the needs of their neighbors and communities. This can be seen as early as the dedication of the Boston Public Library McKim Building, one of the first public libraries in the United States, which was proclaimed “a palace for the people” (Wiegand 2015), with the walls themselves inscribed with phrases such as “Free to all,” and which served as a model for many libraries that followed.⁴ Speakers at the dedication discussed how the American library evolved from a pure temple of knowledge to a democratic and civic treasure—one open to “the rich and the poor... the high and the lowly born, the masses who wield the hammers of toil, and the unenvied few who are reared in affluence and ease” (Ditzion 1947, 22). As more time went by, the story of the democratic library grew more powerful.

Andrew Carnegie, a Scottish American steel tycoon and philanthropist, became the most famous library philanthropist.⁵ Prohibited from using a local library as a young man because he couldn’t afford its fee, he later went on to establish over 2,500 public and academic libraries; the very first was built in his hometown, Dunfermline, and has an inscription over the door, reading, “Let there be light.” Arguably one of the most well-known biblical phrases, Genesis 1:3 refers not just to physical light, but rather to the mandate of all creation—that the Divine Light shine throughout the

world. This Divine Light would be connected to truth and knowledge throughout the Bible (Daniel 5:14; 1 John 1–5). Plato and other philosophers would also use the metaphor of knowledge as light as an ascent from ignorance (darkness) to knowledge (light) (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). In both examples, the sacredness of the library is not just in the materials, but in its accessibility and public access to said knowledge.

As libraries and, by extension, librarianship continued to be venerated for their ties to democracy and library benefactors such as Carnegie became tantamount to “patron saints,” what began as a good story became the *only* story about libraries and librarianship. This narrative grows with every allegorical reference to libraries as “temples of learning” and librarians as “generals in the war on ignorance” (Warren 2014; Nichols School 2017), until it essentially becomes mythology. Libraries become sacred spaces, and its workers become priests and missionaries. The job duties and values of librarianship are turned into work as a service to God and fellow men. Finally, vocational awe is born, and as these mythologies are perpetuated in trade and professional literature, they are accepted as truths. Most dangerously, the mythologies become more important than reality, especially if reality contradicts the mythology.

In the context of librarianship’s self-perceived stake in democracy, which is deeply tied to vocational awe, it becomes extremely difficult to critique major precepts of the field, such as *equal access* and *neutrality*, without being seen as sacrilegious. To expose the discrepancies between rhetoric and reality is to challenge the very sacredness of librarianship, and in turn, to challenge democratic values. Okun defines this characteristic of White Supremacy culture as “only one right way” (Okun, n.d.), or the belief that there is one correct way to do things and once people are introduced to the correct way, they will see the light and adopt it. Vocational awe directly ties into White Supremacy culture by creating a narrative of librarianship as inherently good and sacred work while delegitimizing all other narratives as undemocratic and blasphemous. And through the codification of values into the trade and professional literature, vocational awe compounds the White Supremacy culture characteristic “worship of the written word,” by valuing white documents and standards over the nuances and complexities of reality.

Just as early CRT scholars posited with regard to the legal profession, both vocational awe and *neutrality* shield the library profession from coming to terms with its racialized past and its integral part in the advent and growth of white supremacist systems in American society. Todd Honma refers to the American colonization process as a “whitening process whereby European ethnics possessed a particular ethnic mobility based on the color of their skin that allowed them membership to a white

racial identity” (2005, 7). This racial project is the seat of power and privilege over racially marginalized communities. By virtue of their privileged position, librarians of the status quo can afford to remain neutral toward issues that don’t affect them personally. The legacy of a homogenous profession has given power to this position. Oppression is seemingly overlooked for its lack of impact, whether direct or indirect, not only by the individuals who make up the profession, but also by the profession itself. *Neutrality* is seen as “fair” and therefore “good,” playing into vocational awe.

NEUTRALITY AND VOCATIONAL AWE: THE SEAT OF PRIVILEGE AND POWER

Neutrality as a framework for library work is used as a means to bypass all forms of implicit and explicit bias. As Brown and Jackson write, “The appearance of neutrality primarily operates to obscure the fact that the perspective of the white majority is embedded within this view” (2013, 14). *Neutrality* is not always the specific term that is used to invoke this framework; the terms *objective* and *unbiased* are also used interchangeably in the library context to describe a lack of bias. But because explicit and implicit bias is inherent to the human experience, this is not achievable. To argue for *neutrality* or objectivity as the framework for all library activities is to leave workers and institutions with the impossible task of providing a one-size-fits-all service to the public with subjective guidelines, which actually works to perpetuate harmful behavior.

This is not to say that those who believe in the *neutrality* framework are bad people. On the contrary, intentions may be good and yet yield harmful results that may not be immediately apparent to the white majority of the profession; good intentions with harmful impacts are a hallmark of Freeman’s perpetrator perspective of White Supremacy. Delgado and Stefancic sum this up in their analysis of liberal preferences for color blindness, which is a form of *neutrality*: “Color blindness can be admirable, as when a governmental decision maker refuses to give in to local prejudices. But it can be perverse, for example, when it stands in the way of taking account of difference in order to help people in need” (2017, 27). The admirability of *neutrality* bolsters vocational awe by averting critique.

On the topic of objectivity in reference services, Brook, Ellenwood, and Lazzaro wrote, “Librarians are generally expected to take an objective or neutral approach to assisting patrons”; as detailed in the section that follows, this is codified as an expectation for service in key professional statements. This principle also helps to reinforce the “racialized power-dynamic status quo” (2016, 274). When the profession discusses

neutrality, we believe that the profession actually seeks equity. However, *neutrality* will not yield equitable results and will always fall short because it relies on equity already existing in society. This is not the condition of our current society, nor is it true for the profession. Therefore, *neutrality* will actually work toward reinforcing bias and racism.

The definition of *neutrality* within the library context has, for some, become synonymous with intellectual freedom and antonymous to censorship. Those who believe it is the duty of the library to carry out policies and practices in a *neutral* manner also invoke the right to free speech as written in the First Amendment. *Neutrality* and vocational awe have intertwined deeply in such a way that disagreement with either is seemingly admission of being a “bad librarian” (Ettarh 2019). This was evident at the 2018 American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Meeting President’s Program titled “Are Libraries Neutral?” Formatted as a debate, this session focused on whether libraries *are neutral*, if they’ve ever *been neutral*, and if they *should be neutral*. Two speakers for *neutrality* and two speakers against *neutrality* read prepared perspectives on the subject and four commentators provided reactions to the debaters.

Framing *neutrality* as a “debate” works to polarize the profession, constructing the issue as black and white (for or against) and without nuance. The library worker is thus placed in the position of being either pro- or *antineutrality*. The former works to obfuscate the experiences of the patrons we serve (as well as our workforce) and aids vocational awe. The unidentified gaps that result do the most harm to marginalized communities; only dominant communities benefit from *neutrality*. One could argue that an unintended consequence of this tactic works to further reinforce *neutrality* as a dominant professional ideology. Once this polarization is in play, we lose the intended purpose of the *neutral* ideology, which is equity.

CODIFICATION OF NEUTRALITY AND VOCATIONAL AWE AS PROFESSIONAL VALUES

As vehicles by which racism has been normalized in libraries, *neutrality* and vocational awe are codified in key symbolic documents by which library workers verbalize institutional and professional values. Though there are many examples, including longer-standing ones, two documents of ALA are preeminent—the Code of Ethics and the Library Bill of Rights. These documents are significant because ALA is the largest professional association for library workers in the United States, and these documents, both current and past versions, are expressions of professional ideals that are assumed to be common enough to organize around.

We argue that the codification and intertwining of *neutrality* and vocational awe in both documents makes them organizational fictions. *Organizational fictions*, a term brought to library and information science (LIS) literature by Pauline Wilson (1979) and Kaetrena Davis Kendrick (2017), was coined and defined by Robert Dubin as “fictions that are necessary in order that action within the formal organization may proceed” (1968, 341).

One example of *neutrality* as organizational fiction lies in the current ALA Code of Ethics statement, “We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources” (American Library Association 2008). Like most *neutral* stances in librarianship, this principle assumes that American libraries function in a society that is already equitable—that all librarians’ (and all people’s) personal ethics are already equally represented in society and in libraries, and all that is needed to maintain this preexisting equity is to give equal weight and equal space to all viewpoints. The Code of Ethics also states, “We provide the highest level of service to all library users.” Within context, this principle assumes *neutrality* to be a quality of “highest service,” and furthermore, it acts to weaponize vocational awe in library workers attempting to live up to an aspirational code. It is entirely unclear how a “highest level of service” can be realized, and how library workers are to cope under constant capitalist pressure to expand and increase what can be considered a “highest” level of service.

Neutrality and vocational awe in the ALA Code of Ethics can be traced to its earliest 1939 version. For example, the 1939 code states, “Recommendations [for new hires] should be confidential and should be fair to the candidate and the prospective employer by presenting an unbiased statement of strong and weak points” (American Library Association 1939). Essentially, it presents the act of considering both “strong and weak points” as evidence of having overcome biases. Yet, bias manifests itself everywhere, not just in the selection of points to represent in deliberations or arguments. As librarians of color, we see that this root of *neutrality* as organizational fiction is particularly harmful because it remains pervasive in library hiring processes today. It is weaponized to uphold implicit biases in hiring, and the rhetoric of *neutrality* in hiring merely allows white supremacist ideologies to stand in as “unbiased” (Hathcock 2015). This is evidenced in demographic statistics of the profession, which indicate that librarianship is roughly 87 percent white (American Library Association 2012).

The 1939 code also states, “In view of the importance of ability and personality traits in library work, a librarian should encourage only those persons with suitable

aptitudes to enter the library profession and should discourage the continuance in service of the unfit." Through this principle, the 1939 code allowed the reader to decide what characteristics were "suitable" for library work, without consideration of the impacts of racist, ableist, and classist biases on judgments of "suitability," and it entitled the dominantly white library profession to weaponize these biases through vocational awe. Excluding "unsuitable" library workers was posed as an act of protecting the purity of the profession from negative influence. This root of vocational awe was further built up by the 1939 code's invocation that library workers should have a "sincere belief and a critical interest in the library profession," and "criticism of library policies, service, and personnel should be offered only to the proper authority for the sole purpose of improvement of the library." The historical presence of these statements in the Code of Ethics indicates how rooted the rhetoric of *neutrality* and vocational awe is as a pillar of White Supremacy in the library profession, and their legacy remains in our professional culture today despite their removal from the code.

Vocational awe and *neutrality* also feature heavily in the Library Bill of Rights, another document adopted by the ALA in 1939 and continuing in modified form today. The Library Bill of Rights does not state whose rights it guarantees, and it largely reads as a bill of responsibilities for library workers; three of its seven articles begin with the phrase "Libraries should." Unlike the US Constitution's Bill of Rights or patients' bills of rights in the medical profession (some of which are passed as state or local law and thus enforceable), no part of the Library Bill of Rights or its official interpretations attempt to enforce or ensure support for libraries and library workers in upholding its principles. Because of this lack of infrastructure to uphold its highly aspirational principles, the entire document essentially acts as organizational fictions about library workers' ability to generate positive social outcomes in the dissemination and use of information. For example, library workers are often exhorted to protect free speech by resisting censorship; as stated above, this carries an implicit weight because protecting free speech is tacitly equated to protecting American democracy (American Library Association 2017). While positive in intent, the unfortunate fallout of this exhortation is a generalized professional inculcation of vocational awe, manifesting in library workers' performance and expectation of professional martyrdom (Ettarh 2018).

Many of the Library Bill of Rights' individual articles work to augment the way *neutrality* and vocational awe are upheld in libraries—for example, "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues." This operates on an assumption that all points of view on all issues are equally fixed in formats that libraries collect and that publishers equally publish

all points of view. Yet, research shows that authors of color, particularly Black and Indigenous authors, are published significantly less than white authors and that the publishing and library industries are similarly white (Roh 2016). Thus, this Library Bill of Rights article presents a farcically aspirational idea, that equal representation in library collections is a responsibility that librarians can and should take on alone; this organizational fiction feeds librarians' vocational awe by ignoring the fact that many of the barriers to fair representation in knowledge dissemination lie outside the domain of library work.

The ALA Code of Ethics and Library Bill of Rights are emblematic of the way *neutrality* and vocational awe thread through our professional values at a broad level. Their presence in profession-wide value statements ensure that they operate in institutional ones as well, including through institutional missions, policies, procedures, and common rhetoric behind specific library services. We encourage readers to reread their libraries' organizational documentation and consider the ways that *neutrality* and vocational awe are codified in them. We now turn to unveil and scrutinize *neutrality* and vocational awe in facilities access, collection development, public services, and resource discovery.

ACCESS TO FACILITIES

Providing equal access to library space is one of the more common ways the philosophical discussion of *neutrality* is pursued. At the 2018 ALA President's Program, it was discussed in the context of a public library allowing community members to book meeting spaces no matter the group's beliefs or agenda. Here again, *neutrality* works as a pillar of vocational awe. The argument in favor of *neutrality* in this procedural situation is that if you assent to everyone, you've treated everyone equally and are therefore inherently good. This is an example of what Delgado and Stefancic describe as a formal conception of equality, "expressed in rules that insist only on treatment that is the same across the board," and when in use can "thus remedy only the most blatant forms of discrimination, such as mortgage redlining or an immigration dragnet in a food-processing plant that targets Latino workers or the refusal to hire a black Ph.D. rather than a white college dropout, which stand out and attract our attention" (2017, 9). The library space itself is seen and treated as *neutral* ground, but as Charles Mills describes it, "Space is just *there*, taken for granted, and the individual is tacitly posited as the white adult male, so that all individuals are obviously equal" (1997, 41).

Libraries as institutions and the LIS profession have a historical legacy of complicity and participation in racism and segregation, but to attribute that solely to our

history leads us to believe we are postdiscrimination. On the contrary, we are closely aligned with racism in the US, past and present. We may not have separate restrooms for People of Color and whites, but there are now other structural means of discrimination. We convince ourselves that because we have a *policy* and because we believe in *neutrality*, we are protected from being accused of discrimination. Yet, those very policies, written for subjective interpretation, give staff, library security, and police the opportunity to decide whether or not someone *appears* as if they are utilizing the library properly and the way it was *intended* to be used.

Stories in which Black and Latinx students and members of the community are asked to leave library spaces, or in some cases are removed forcibly by police, are not uncommon. Unfortunately, this is on trend with US statistics. It's so common for the Black community, in fact, that a hashtag is associated with these instances, #studyingwhileblack. For example, in 2018, a Black library and information science student at Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, was told he could not use the university's law library (untrue, according to the policy) and the law school student who was staffing the desk that day called campus safety to remove him. Seven officers showed up before he left the library (Harriot 2018). Similarly (and worse), in April 2019 at Barnard College's library, a Columbia University student went to the Barnard library as all Columbia University students are permitted to do and was physically detained by campus police officers. As Scott Jaschik reported, "Barnard has a policy of checking IDs as people enter various facilities after 11 p.m., and this incident took place close to midnight. But many students said that the policy is inconsistently enforced, and that applying it to a black person—particularly in this way—constitutes racial profiling" (2019).

These incidents show that there is a pervasive belief among many library workers that Black and Latinx patrons do not belong in library spaces and that the library space needs to be returned to its default or *neutral* state. Unconsciously, many see this *neutral* state as whiteness, which leads to a belief that Black and Latinx patrons should be removed. Much as the ALA's original Code of Ethics indicated a pervasive belief that "unsuitable" people should be prevented from entering the profession and it used vocational awe as a justification for upholding racial bias, these incidents show a general belief that library spaces are elevated spaces and that those considered "unworthy" should be prevented from accessing them.

In building a key CRT concept, whiteness as property, Cheryl I. Harris points out that the right to use and enjoy anything that could be considered "property" throughout history has been either exclusively or disproportionately enjoyed by

white people, and the systematic dispossession of People of Color's right to use and enjoy property is a means by which White Supremacy is normalized (1995, 282). Harris further points out that property itself tends to be governed by "custom," or social norms; the process of dispossessing people of their right to use and enjoy something is rarely recognized as anything other than a *neutral* act because it upholds what the dispossessors see as just, normal, and right. Thus, inconsistencies in enforcement of policies about who can access library spaces are commonly justified as *neutral*. We argue that subjective policies loosely followed in a racialized space are neither *neutral* nor equitable. Claiming that the profession provides unbiased service using the *neutrality* framework is false and prevents the profession from doing actual equity-based work.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

When selection of materials is based on subjective policies, how does one remain *neutral*? How does one select library materials using the *neutral* framework when the materials aren't *neutral*? According to "Diverse Collections: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," library workers have a "professional and ethical responsibility to be fair and just" in "defending" the user's right to read, view, or listen to material protected by the First Amendment, regardless of the creator's views or personal history. Furthermore, "library workers must not permit their personal biases, opinions, or preferences to unduly influence collection development decisions" (American Library Association 2019). The methods by which to work *neutrally* in collection development are unclear, particularly because contrary to public belief, libraries are not mandated to collect and keep all materials in perpetuity.

The constant framing of *neutrality* as a for-or-against "debate" prevents any substantive discussion about equity in collection development. It also magnifies vocational awe in a number of ways. First, it sets up an argument that the written word is sacred. Worship of the written word is a characteristic of white supremacist culture and a form of epistemic supremacy, defined by Morales and Williams in chapter 2 as the "set of social systems, infrastructures, and knowledge pathways" that facilitate and uphold the destruction of any system of knowledge not controlled by the ruling class. It is a primary means by which the knowledge of many nonwhite cultures, and the traditions by which that knowledge is passed down, is suppressed (Okun, n.d.). Because the written word is considered sacred, librarians who organize and bring together printed works are sacred by extension, and furthermore, any assumptions that they make about which materials are good for the library's community are seen

to be true. Very rarely do librarians discuss the problem that library patrons generally have no democratic outlet by which to have a unified and organized voice in the selection and deselection processes. The profession has not properly differentiated between depository and library. A depository may keep unused material of historical value, but a library serving the needs of its community properly must have an up-to-date collection that changes consistently (Slote 1997).

Similar to policies that address who may use library space and for what purposes, many libraries have collection development policies to help guide their collecting and discarding of materials. Historically, it is in collection development that morality conflates with *neutrality*. In describing the early years of libraries, Jaeger and colleagues explain, “From the beginning of the American republic, some leaders saw the library as a social institution that could simultaneously diffuse knowledge to members of society and prevent the wealthy and socially elite from having hegemonic domination over learning and education—although it was those elite who selected materials for library patrons” (2013, 167). Before young adult (YA) fiction was popularized, it was under intellectual scrutiny by libraries (Freedman and Johnson 2000). Similarly, romance novels were morally scrutinized (Speer 2001).

Today, these genres are regularly held in library collections. Yet, their acceptance in libraries was hard-won, and it served only to bolster the free-speech argument that *banning is always bad because it isn't neutral*. A *neutrally* framed response holds that *all* viewpoints deserve equal weight and space in collections, when, as mentioned in a previous section, authors of color are published significantly less than white counterparts. This response is underpinned by a lie—that all viewpoints are equal and valid, including viewpoints that compromise the safety of People of Color. Providing a platform for those viewpoints with shared community resources tells patrons of color that their safety in the library's community is not as important as the appearance of humoring all perspectives equally. It also causes harm to library workers of color, who are required to disembodify from their lived experiences in order to perform purchasing, cataloging, shelving, and checkouts of these materials in order to be seen as “professional” by employers and a profession that is unconcerned with their safety.

LIBRARY PUBLIC SERVICES

When discussing the *neutral* framework for library services, many people might first think about reference work. At the 2018 ALA Midwinter President's Program, James LaRue, then-director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom, made the point that

words on a T-shirt are not the same as action, and he went on to say, “We claim that just by listening or reading we have been injured. So my safety requires someone else’s silence. This view is the foundation of censorship and tyranny” (American Library Association 2018). Psychologically, this is a powerful statement and it evokes feelings with which it is difficult to argue. Stripped of positionality or context, the slogan on a T-shirt should not “injure” individuals. The social reality LaRue ignores is that T-shirt slogans about your marginalized identity *can be* traumatic. As Matsuda points out, victims of hate messages and hate crimes experience both psychic violence (usually resulting in physiological symptoms that can accumulate to produce negative health impacts over time) as well as material restrictions on their personal freedom (1993, 24–25). We are safe from immediate bodily harm when reading a T-shirt, but is that standard enough to support, retain, and value People of Color in this profession? As Matsuda also points out, hate speech commonly correlates to increases in hate crimes and violence against those targeted by the hate speech.

As Alan Freeman points out, much like the US and its antidiscrimination laws, libraries have policies on only the most blatant forms of racist attack, in which perpetrators clearly intend harm. There are no policies that support a library’s only person of color working at a reference desk when a person wearing a T-shirt promoting a hate group comes to the desk. Vocational awe leads many librarians in this situation to believe that societal equity depends on their willingness to serve. There is no room in *neutrality* and vocational awe frames for the danger that the librarian of color faces in this situation.

While the word *neutral* is not found in the “Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers” developed by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), a division of the ALA, *objective* is included. Under “Listening/Inquiring,” the guidelines state that the librarian “maintains objectivity; does not interject value judgments about the subject matter or the nature of the question into the transaction” (2013). Again, utilizing the *neutral* framework for reference services is an attempt to provide equal service to all. However, as Brook, Ellenwood, and Lazzaro describe, “to develop an understanding of how to build anti-racist solidarity through reference practices and to better respond to marginalized groups in ways that are culturally responsive, but not essentializing, it is important to analyze the ways in which reference librarians’ professional guidelines reinforce Whiteness and limit solidarity” (2016). In other words, there can be no solidarity without understanding how whiteness marginalizes, and objectivity is not achievable if whiteness is actively trying to marginalize you.

METADATA AND DISCOVERY OF RESOURCES

As services that are not generally performed in communication with library users, library catalogs and metadata are easily presumed to be *neutral*, but they are anything but. For many years, metadata workflows in libraries have emphasized metadata automation, reusability by other library institutions, and centralization of controlled vocabularies. Over time, these have become such fixtures of metadata workers' vocational awe that almost all cataloging or metadata operations rely on at least one centralized controlled vocabulary or organization system, such as Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), despite a growing body of literature and a growing awareness regarding the ways in which these standards uphold White Supremacy in their structure and content (de la Tierra 2008; Webster and Doyle 2008; Hoffman 2015).

A well-publicized example is the attempted change to the subject heading "Illegal aliens," which gained national attention in 2016. A group of student activists and librarians at Dartmouth College collaborated to propose that the heading be changed in 2014; from 2014 to 2016 (Baron, Gross, and Cornejo Cásares 2016) the proposal passed through an arduous, but typical, process. It was rejected at first, and when revised and proposed again, underwent a compromise decision to be split into two headings, neither of which emphasized well the experiences and rights of racialized undocumented immigrants.

At that point, conservative members of Congress itself intervened through two actions. A report accompanying the 2017 funding bill for legislative agencies (including the Library of Congress) directed the Library of Congress to "maintain certain subject headings that reflect terminology used in title 8, United States Code" (US House, Committee on Appropriations 2016), and Republican congressperson Diane Black (TN-6) introduced a stand-alone bill specifically ordering the acting librarian of Congress to retain the "Illegal aliens" heading (US House 2016). While the former bill is not specific, and the latter never moved to a vote, these tactics had the impact of intimidating the library community; as of August 2020, the announced change to the heading has yet to be made, though the decision has not been formally reversed. In the meantime, the heading remains present in many catalogs; many cataloging workflows deploy LCSH in such an automated way that it takes significant labor and creativity to make local deviations (Fox et al. 2020).

While Congress's intervention in this example is unusual (notably, it occurred as anti-Latinx and xenophobic rhetoric during the 2016 presidential campaign rose to a fever pitch), it reminded library workers of the fact that the proposal process for LCSH has never been *neutral* or apolitical. White supremacist terminology is

deeply entrenched in LCSH and many other universal cataloging mainstays, and it echoes and reinforces the White Supremacy in library spaces, collection development, and public services. The process that the Dartmouth students and librarians went through returns us to Harris's concept of whiteness as property and the way "custom," or social norms, governs legal property. A crux of Harris's analysis is that, in many ways, whiteness as an identity has many of the characteristics of legal property. She refers to the example of European colonization of the "New World," experienced as violence and obliteration of custom by Native American people but viewed as "common sense" by the European colonizers because it "confirmed and ratified their experience" (Harris 1995, 280).

Seen through this lens, the crucible that the Dartmouth LCSH proposers underwent is clearly seen as a struggle in which they worked to reassert the customary language of racialized undocumented immigrants in the vast property of LCSH, and they were refused because this language did not confirm and ratify the custom that built the system. As a vocabulary built by, for, and about white people, LCSH essentially acts as the primary extension of the property of whiteness in library structures. Although considered an incremental improvement upon previous systems, the proposal process is nevertheless still designed to restrict approval where proposals do not conform to white supremacist custom, and, as is traditional in White Supremacy, it acts as that custom's mechanism to accept or refuse the social norms represented in it.

CONCLUSION

In locating *neutrality* and vocational awe in professional codes and tracing their impacts across library facility access, public reference services, collection development, and metadata and discovery, we find that no part of the library work cycle benefits from the intertwining of *neutrality* and vocational awe. Although well intentioned, these values work together to normalize and uphold racism and White Supremacy in libraries, even where they are espoused with the intent of working toward equity. They function to justify libraries' demonstrably harmful impacts on workers of color and patrons of color, and to erase their experiences. Because the entire framework of *neutrality* assumes that equity already exists in all social systems, it functions in our inequitable culture to obfuscate the myriad experiences of library patrons and workers. It aids vocational awe in creating a professional culture that assumes and relies on its own perceived goodness and curtails meaningful criticism and dialogue, particularly about the ways that libraries perpetuate oppression. Together, these two

precepts create a culture in which white norms for recognizing racism are allowed to predominate; only egregious attacks or acts are recognized as “racist,” and the underlying culture and systems that produced the egregious attacks go unchallenged.

We demand a paradigm shift, to begin to dismantle racism and live up to the values that libraries espouse. This requires a commitment to let go of vocational awe and *neutrality* as professional values. Because vocational awe functions to quash critique or dissent toward librarianship and library institutions and prevents us from reimagining our future, relinquishing it will enable full and rational discussions based on criticisms of the profession, without repression from deep-seated fears of betraying the profession. Rejecting *neutrality* while acknowledging that inequity is endemic in current and common LIS praxis will help library workers to meet patron communities (and each other) where they are, rather than forcing marginalized people further to the margins.

Furthermore, because White Supremacy is naturalized within library professional culture through these values, we believe that full relinquishment, rather than partial and incremental, of *neutrality* and vocational awe is needed for library workers and institutions to actualize our espoused values of equitable and inclusive service for all. We demand that libraries finally change, not only to meet the world that we currently live in but to meet the world that we are striving for.

NOTES

1. *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “neutrality,” accessed July 4, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/neutrality>.
2. The authors use “librarianship” here very broadly. It is not limited to those with the degree, but rather includes all people that work in libraries.
3. Italicizing *neutrality* is essential to our thesis, as it provides a visual, stylistic cue for the reader to critically identify elements of domination.
4. Augst and Carpenter point out that, although the idea of equal access is now considered foundational, it encountered significant class- and race-based resistance at first. When Boston Public Library began accommodating working-class and affluent people in a single building, “the fear of outsiders in the temple of culture—children and immigrants, the homeless and tourists—became outright fear of physical and moral contamination, as with the idea that books circulated in the slums would spread cholera to the suburbs, like pathogens of class breakdown” (2007, 172).
5. Significantly, Carnegie’s library-as-enlightenment ideal was never intended to uplift all equally; Shaundra Walker connects his investments in historically Black colleges and universities to an interest in keeping Black Americans in manual and industrial labor, and highlights his disinterest in HBCUs that did not adhere to “industrial-vocational” curricula (2017, 37–38).

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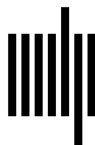
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