

## Towards an Ethics of Difference: The Pluralist Library

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### **Introduction**

Libraries are fundamentally political organizations. Since the conception of public libraries in the era of the public sphere (Habermas 1991), libraries have been tied to the production of knowledge. As Scout Calvert describes in their dissertation, “what counts as knowledge is determined by relations of power. Hence, libraries produce power, and are at the service of power” (Calvert 2008). This power extends positively and negatively. Libraries are able to empower their user base through the production of positive power, creating circumstances in which their patrons can succeed. But there is also the danger of negative power, with the library controlling the information towards a certain political end.

In response to this second possibility, librarians have tended to err on the side of neutrality. Neutrality is an ethical system which prioritizes negative liberty for library users. In other words, users are granted freedom from coercion by librarians. Neutrality emphasizes ideals of freedom from censorship, freedom of speech and access to information. A neutral librarian attempts to remove the influence of their power as far as it is possible. From a neutral position, the librarian provides the freedom for library users to access whatever information they need or want so that they can make decisions on their own.

In the last number of years, there has been a great deal of discussion surrounding neutrality in itself. Much of this discussion has focused on the impossibility of truly being neutral, and an understanding that neutrality is itself coercing library users towards certain normative political interests. While I am greatly indebted to this work, and quite sympathetic to its arguments, I intend this

paper to veer in a different direction. Rather than critiquing neutrality in itself, this presentation will critique the position that neutrality holds within LIS. It is my contention that neutrality functions as a hegemonic and universalizing theory within LIS, and it is this position that needs to be critiqued. I will begin by establishing neutrality as a hidden, hegemonic ideology by looking at the historical role that positivism played in the education of librarians: a lineage that continues in contemporary practice. Once neutrality is established as a hegemony, the presentation will move to critique the notion of neutrality in this space. This critique draws upon the work of what could be called “assemblage feminism”, and will borrow from the writings of Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* and Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman*. The critique from feminism presents a positive way out of hegemony, through the affirmation of plurality. This opens the avenue for libraries to affirm a plurality of ethical systems, not based on a relativism, but an affirmation of difference.

## **Hegemonic Neutrality**

### *History of Hegemonic Neutrality*

In International Relations, a hegemonic state is one that hold power or control over other states through military or economic power. In the contemporary geopolitical climate, the United States is considered the hegemon. In social theory the term works similarly, a hegemonic theory is one which controls the discourse or is universalized within the discourse. Hegemonic theories often go unquestioned as dogmatic notions of the “way that things are”. A hegemonic theory doesn’t arrive, but is produced through various intensities. We can map how neutrality became a hegemonic theory within LIS by looking back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, librarianship training took place as apprenticeship. If you wanted to be a librarian you would go work under a local librarian as an apprentice. This was common for many professions, such as law and medicine. Around the 1930s, the training model began to change from an

apprenticeship model to a university model. Librarianship was no exception, and increasingly adopted university attained professional degree during that period of time (Calvert 2008). As it moved into the academy, librarianship acclimated itself by adopting the methodology of social science, situating itself as a legitimate discipline within the academy. This is where we begin see the root of neutrality.

During the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, logical positivism was the dominant philosophy of science. Positivism is the belief that Truth claims must be empirically verified. In order to reach empirical findings, the scientist must remove themselves from the experiment insofar as it is possible. Thus, in order to discover Truth about the world, the scientist must remain neutral in the experiment. Neutrality and objectivity remain important components of scientific approaches today, but what might be more important to examine is the notion of Truth within positivism, as positivism sought to explore generalizable or universal claims about the world. These generalizable or universal claims seek to explain the way that the world is, allowing these generalizations to become dogmatic. I'm inclined to side with Archie Dick, in his suggestion that positivism was embraced in LIS discourse, and that this led to the discipline seeking "to formulate laws and generalizations applicable to library related activities" (Dick 1999). In other words, as librarianship positioned itself as a social science, it adopted positivistic methods and practices – of generalizability, neutrality and objectivity – and reproduced them within the library setting.

### *Contemporary Hegemonic Neutrality*

Today we can see how these practices – of generalizability, neutrality and objectivity – play an integral role in the contemporary library. Neutrality is a unique ethical position in that it denies it is an ethical position. The central claim of neutrality is that one should deny ideological positions, without recognizing that neutrality in itself is an ideological position (Harris 1986). In this way, neutrality can serve as a hidden or untouchable ethic. Foucault once said that "the source of human freedom is never

to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, or immobile” (Bess 1998). In its hidden dimension, neutrality is able to become untouchable, it is accepted as the way that things are. Any ethic that embraces some sort of value is *prima facie* rejected by the neutral approach.

We can look to the Library Bill of Rights for evidence. The first sentence of the Bill of Rights states: “The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums of information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services” (ALA 2015). From there, it goes on to describe a neutral approach to librarianship suggesting that “Libraries should provide materials and information presenting *all* points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval” (ALA 2015). The first line informs us that this policy should guide *all* libraries. This is where the ethical system can be seen as hegemonic, universal, and dogmatic. It suggests that under no circumstances should a library be anything other than neutral. The document denies any possible alternative to a neutral ideological position.

There are other examples of the hegemony of neutrality within the profession. We could look at Office for Intellectual Freedom which denounces any instance of censorship under all circumstances. We could also look at anecdotal conversations concerning certain controversial books. When Milo Yiannopoulos announced a book last year, many librarians said that libraries must carry his book in order to remain neutral.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not the content was blasphemous, or target certain groups of people, the book must be carried in order to fight censorship.

Now, I again want to remind everyone that I’m not arguing against neutrality in itself. Rather, what I want us to focus on is the hegemonic reality of the ethic. The fact that it is presented as the only way of running a library, with no possible room for alternatives. The reality is that for great swaths of the library population, neutrality is the way that things are, without recourse for any sort of alternative.

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1 The book has since been recalled due to scandal surrounding the author.

Neutrality has become a dogmatic, universal and hegemonic theory. It has truly become a powerful ideology.

## **Critique**

### *Assemblage Feminisms*

Thus far, we have established Neutrality as a hegemonic ethical system. It is universalizing and totalizing. My goal now is to critique its hegemony. Rosi Braidotti suggests that universal or hegemonic theories tend to develop out of the notion that there are generalizable or proper ways of doing something. In *The Posthuman* she provides a blueprint for how the “human” develops as a universal category, which reduces all of human experience to a universal. From Antiquity to the Renaissance, this universal has been “man” who has been measure of all things. And I’m conscious about using the word man – historically, the human has been reduced to white, cisgender, heterosexual, wealthy, european men. The “Human” provides a “Truth” about humanity. It is a universal through which human achievement and nature can be measured (Braidotti 2013). Donna Haraway argues along a similar wave of thought. She suggests that the notion of a universal ideal emerges out of the colonization of the world by Western cultural myths. This is to say that notions of universality come about from a desire to generalize and understand the world. Haraway suggests that a “universal, totalizing theory is a mistake that misses most of reality” (Haraway 1991). By reducing humanity to a universal theory – which is situated on the Eurocentric male – we lose reality, and instead are living in the theological realm of scientism.

The cyborg and the posthuman both disrupt the normative hegemony of patriarchy, but they go on to critique hegemony in general as well. Braidotti’s posthumanism strives for a posthuman ethics which focuses on relationality and creativity. Her focus on affirmation is privy to constant change and flux, attempting to not only undermine the hegemony of “man” in humanism, but other hegemonic or

territorial dogmas as well. This ethical system draws from Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's eternal return. It is a return always of difference, an affirmation of difference. Not a dogmatic return to hegemonic notions of reality (Deleuze 1994; Braidotti 2013). Universal positions seek to return and dominate. They want to understand and control reality. This always makes a return to a territorial power structure. And it is this power that must be disrupted.

Haraway's cyborg works in a similar way. Braidotti says of the cyborg: "the figuration of the cyborg, that is to say, a high-tech imaginary, where electronic circuits evoke new patterns of interconnectedness and affinity" with the purpose of "subverting conventional views and representations of human, and especially of female, subjectivity" (Braidotti 1994). Instead of affirming a singular feminism as arbiter of what constitutes feminism, Haraway's cyborg affirms the reality of feminisms that are always changing and becoming (Haraway 1991). The cyborg breaks free of the universal, and opens itself up to new possibilities and disjunctions. It disrupts the biological norm of human by changing the body as it sees fit. This allows for a plurality of cyborgs, and a plurality of feminisms. Working each in their own way, but also connected together. In the work of Braidotti and Haraway, hierarchical dogmatism of hegemony is put aside in order to reach an "interdependence with multiple others" (Braidotti 2013) or a symbiotic becoming with one another (Haraway 2016). Man is no longer granted dominance of humans, white feminism is no longer granted dominance over feminisms of colour, or queer feminisms. Perhaps neutrality should no longer be granted dominance over alternative ethics in librarianship.

### *Returning to libraries.*

Braidotti and Haraway question the unquestionable, opening up the room for a pluralism of difference. Now, while I do not believe that man and neutrality are equivalent in terms of content, I am trying to suggest that they are equivalent in terms of form. Both dominate through dogmatic adherence, and

close off alternative ethical or political systems. Just as we can question the idea that “man” is the measure of all things, we can also question the notion that librarians ought to be neutral arbiters of material in all circumstances. Neutrality closes off the library to possible ways of being. In doing so, it doesn’t allow for the library to exist in different ways that are not necessarily better or worse, but simply different. I’m not saying that there aren’t wrong ways to run a library, but perhaps there might be more than one right way. We must question the singleness of the neutral hegemon.

Like Haraway’s move from feminism to feminisms, libraries can move from a single dogmatic ethic towards a plurality of ethics. In this, libraries can seek to affirm the differences and distinctions that are in some ways central to their purpose – libraries serve everyone no matter who they are. And we can see that this sort of thing is already occurring. A library like Xwi7xwa at the University of British Columbia might be seen as an example of this. On its website, Xwi7xwa states that it privileges indigenous perspectives. Xwi7xwa isn’t likely to make collection decisions simply based off of “neutral criteria”. Rather, it is going to provide information that is useful and needed by its user base. This isn’t a neutral approach, but an active one.

We might imagine a similar sort of library that exists for a Jewish community. We wouldn’t expect such a library to carry blatant anti-semitic texts in order to provide both sides of the story. Rather, we’d expect such a library to be active in its collection management, and build in criteria to keep certain material out on ethical grounds. The same could be done in a women’s library or various other disciplines. I’ve focused here on libraries based around identity, but we could see the similar sorts of creative criteria happening in a medical library, where the ideal is a collection of the most accurate papers or resources, rather than a neutral collection of all papers on a subject. . In essence this would be something like what Buschman is talking about in with his work on Habermas (Buschman 2003). In

such circumstances, the library is no longer being neutral, but rather attempting to provide the best information based on its users needs, or providing the best possible collection.

And this isn't to say that a neutral approach to collection wouldn't be the best ethical practice in many libraries. We can think about many academic libraries where a neutral ethic would remain a best practice – where the users need and want access to all positions, even those which are problematic. This isn't to say that we could ever truly be neutral in a situation, but it is to suggest that there are circumstances where we should strive to be as neutral as possible (just as they do in scientific experimentation). Neutrality is not the problem here, rather its dogmatic positionality is. By questioning this hegemon, we can, perhaps, move to a more egalitarian and pluralistic understanding of library ethics, affirming differences, rather than erasing them.

## **Conclusion**

In his book *Dark Ecology* Timothy Morton puts forward the following hope for politics:

...let's not have a one-size-fits-all politics. We need a politics that includes what appears least political – laughter, the playful, even the silly. We need a multiplicity of different political systems. We need to think of them as toylike: playful and half-broken things that connect humans and nonhumans with one another. We can never get it perfect. There is no final, correct form that isn't a toy. There is no one toy to rule them all. And toys aren't exclusively human or for humans. (Morton 2016)<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this is it. Perhaps we take the dominant categories too seriously. Neoliberalism, patriarchy, neutrality. It is because these are taken too seriously that they become problematic. In librarianship,

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2 While not explicitly tied into this presentation, the idea of non-humans interacting with humans is an interesting one given the posthuman basis for my argument. It should be stressed that "Posthuman" does not mean anti-human. Rather it decentres the human in ontological structures. In any case, in libraries we must think about non-human objects and the ways that they shape our experience of nature. This includes things like books, computers, stacks, desks, and furniture, and how these objects transform human interaction with the environment.

we've allowed the ring of neutrality to rule them all for too long, and it might be the case that that ring needs to be thrown into the fires of Mt. Doom (as I would argue is the case with neoliberalism and patriarchy). But it also might be that this ring simply needs to be situated in its proper place, it needs to be treated as simply one toy in the box, rather than the box itself (as is the case with feminism vs feminisms). When we allow neutrality to function as the box, it closes us off from alternatives that might open up new modes of creation and play. Yet, if we were to treat it as a toy, it could be used by whoever wanted to use it, while not closing off alternatives to those outside of its parameters.

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