Dispositif: Or Subjectivity and Neutrality in Libraries

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Many people take refuge in a neutralist politics. But even this unconsciousness generates anguish. - Negri and Guattari, 1990

Most people understand a dispositif according to Foucault as a way of defining how a social movement uses knowledge structures to exercise their power. This is a solid foundation, but as interpreted by Antonio and Negri, a dispositif is a way of creating subjectivities. I believe this is where librarians fit. We are in the position of facilitating the creation of subjectivities. Under this definition your library isn't neutral. It never was, and it never can be. Librarians who claim a neutral position are setting themselves outside of a vital conversation, a conversation with real and damaging impacts. In almost all cases, choosing not to pick a side is, in itself, picking a side. Or even worse, like Switzerland during the Second World War, it's playing both sides for your benefit. Any attempt to claim a neutral stance assumes a librarian can be objective, and if we understand the library as a creation-space of dispositif, we realize objectivity cannot be obtained. Every decision you make is political, because *all things are political* and all politics are subjective. Your politics are your ethics in action. At the most fundamental level, that's what politics are: a willful expression of your ethics.

Librarians aren't concerned about neutrality, and anyone who says they are, deflect the real issue-at-hand. *The established schema of librarianship is adverse to controversy.* Can I understand why? Of course. Public support for libraries connects to local funding; without positive press, funding sources are threatened. But don't confuse the problem with the solution, libraries are threatened either way, and giving ground is not going to rectify that. We'll work on these issues as we stand up for ourselves, not slink into the dark corners. Remaining silent on a topic is not the same as being neutral. One of the strongest forms of action can be *inaction*. When you decide not to do anything, you're already taking a stand. So, what kind of institutions do we want to be? Do we want to sequester ourselves, simply placing holds on new books all day, or do we want to light a fire that fulfills why many of us became librarians in the first place; *to change the world*. Librarians should view their interactions with their communities phenomenologically, examining the space-between themselves and the communities they serve.

We need to *empower* our communities and strengthen them, and this can only be done if we understand our interactions with them. How can you help anyone if you don't understand them and their needs? As Fanon said, "Everything can be explained to the people, on the single condition you want them to understand" (Fanon, 2005). Coupled with Pisacane, that "ideas result from deeds, not the latter from the former, and the people will not be free when they are educated, but educated when they are free" (Messer-Kruse, 2012). We understand the role of education is not indoctrination, but, it's something to take to heart. People do not need to be educated about the white supremacy *they live in*, but movements like Black Lives Matter or how the plight of the Palestinians is purposefully misrepresented by *those who wish to see people oppressed* (Khan-Cullors and Davis, 2018; Schulman, 2017). Feigning neutrality harms us. If you don't stand for anything, you'll fall for everything.

We need to learn the difference between intellectually honest writing and propaganda, and how something said once doesn't retain the same meaning when repeated. Differentiating between the two is not always easy, but it's a vital skill. It's something we, as a profession, claim to know, but example after example proves that untrue. For instance, your library likely has items in their collections about Christopher Columbus, John Smith, and George Washington that adhere to a 'hero narrative,' so many authors perpetuate and masquerade fiction as truth that 'sounds good' and fits the cultural metanarrative. By retaining these items in your collections, you are taking a stance on that narrative, namely that you support it. You cannot have those items in your collection and claim to be neutral, unless you put them all in the fiction section where they belong. Working with marginalized and oppressed groups, making sure they are represented in your collection, programs, and community is where true history is being created and lived. Don't be swayed by groups who claim to be oppressed (I'm looking at you Men's Rights Activists and Christians). Merely claiming to be marginalized doesn't make you marginalized. Dive into your local ordinances, laws, policies. Deeply immerse yourself in your community. Listen, and more than listen, hear. Carla Hayden, the fantastic Librarian of Congress, said it best, "(Librarians) are activists, engaged in the social work aspect of librarianship. Now we are fighters for freedom…" (Orenstein, 2003). Freedom that im-

pinges on someone else's freedom isn't freedom, that's power. It's vital to understand the difference.

There are grave concerns about how collection development shouldn't censor any point of view. And I believe that. We've seen this problem arise time and time again, whether it's *And Tango Makes Three* or the deservedly failed Milo book. It runs down the political line, and our personal politics make us feel passionate about these issues. The resolution of this stems from your collection development policy. You need a strong one. No, you shouldn't not add Milo's book (I'm using this as an example since I'm sure we're all familiar with the controversy), because he's a spiteful, hateful man, but you might consider not adding it because it's poorly written, or poorly researched. You cannot decide to not add a book because the author is vile. I mean, you probably have books by Kissinger (a war criminal), Orson Scott Card (a homophobe), Hemingway (a serial abuser), Dr. Seuss (a racist), nor should you try, as many of us do, to separate the works from the authors. An author and their work are intimately linked and neither should be dealt with in isolation. It should go without saying that people are a product of their environment, a combination of nature and nurture. But, your socio-political background only *explains* your behaviors and points of view and your choices; it does not excuse them. Saying someone is a 'product of their time' minimizing the issue-at-hand and even worse, minimizes the efforts of the people who fought to change that dominant oppressive cultural narrative that they recognized as abhorrent. Are you just simply buying books to fill shelves? Or are you actually *developing a collection*? If you feel like you are compelled to purchase a book by a bigot, whether through community pressure or 'cultural relevance,' I understand. But you can also host a program or partner with an organization that works towards liberating oppressed peoples. U.S. public libraries spend a lot of time, energy, and resources on Banned Books Week, which works to highlight issue of censorship and literature. There is discussion on why these books were banned, what the issue with banning them is, and if that decision was overturned. We, as library professionals, should be able to justify each item in our collection the same way. That's the development in collection development.

Neutrality is based on holding the middle ground, the balancing point between two diametrically opposed views.

There is a glaring problem with this view, and that is the poles change. Which means neutrality *changes*. To stay in the 'center' we have to move towards whatever pole is pushing out. Example: the (decidedly bigoted Dewey Decimal System) lists phrenology in the 139s. This is the range of philosophy and psychology. That's hardly a neutral decision. It's placing debunked pseudoscience on the same plane as substantiated research. That's not to say current modalities won't be overturned, but in that case *they should be re-cataloged*. You cannot assert your collection is neutral when it's based *on a non-neutral cataloging schema*. The issues of our cataloging schemas have been addressed ad nauseum and I'll refer you to a more detailed exploration of the topic in Safiya Umoja Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression*. But if a foundational principle of library science can be so easily and explicitly highlighted as biased, what claim is there for a neutral profession?

Robert Anton Wilson said it best, "It only takes 20 years for a liberal to become a conservative without changing a single idea" (Wilson, 1997). The point isn't to pass judgement on a particular set of views, but rather to show that any ideological foundation is built on shifting sands. Poles change, and if you don't move with them and constantly evolve your thoughts, you'll be swept away. And it's usually out to sea, not back to shore. Frantz Fanon points out clearly, that troubled times had unconscious effects not only on the active militants, but also on those claiming to be neutral and to remain outside the affair, uninvolved in politics (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983). The Overton Window is in full effect here. There is no escaping politics, the *body politic* is inscribed on each member of a society, and the inscribing begins at birth via your ascribed gender, race, class, etc. You are born political and only those at the height of privilege can wear that mask of neutrality. Your neutrality is *born of privilege*. As Anne Fausto-Sterling explains nature and bodies are always being transformed by social interactions. Specifically, harking back to Fanon, we know that culture and societal pressures can have physical effects on the body. Culture can literally shape bones. The library plays a dual role in this regard, our culture shapes our community, but our community also shapes our culture. We cannot exist apart from this, and choosing neutrality will have serious ramifications for the bones of our culture. (Fausto-Sterling, 2005)

Going even further in discussing the polemics of neutrality

in libraries, we see that neutrality has never been a core tenant of libraries, and it's only recently that we've attempted to assert ourselves into that position. Unfortunately, our lack of neutrality skews negatively, either as discriminatory hiring practices (Misra, 2018) or policies that marginalize portions of the community (specifically the homeless or poverty stricken (Mars, 2018). These policies are in place to 'protect' the patrons, which is almost exclusively affluent white patrons (dp.la. 2018). The same rational is used to justify having police and cameras installed in libraries. This security theater does little to protect our patrons, and actively discourages marginalized portions of our communities from access our libraries. These are some of the most predictable dangers of the 'neutrality' argument.

A lot of us grew up hearing, 'everyone is entitled to their beliefs'. We have been convinced that if someone believes something, they are entitled to it. *They aren't.* No one is entitled to their beliefs, no one is entitled to any belief. We need not respect a belief merely because someone holds it, that respect is earned by *informing* that belief. A belief held in isolation isn't a belief, it's a thought. A belief is something you act on and that acts on you, it's primary and immediate; beliefs are *lived-in* thoughts, they correspond to experience. *Context* is everything. *Every belief deserves to be challenged.* There are no exceptions to this. If a challenged person responds 'that's just what I believe,' you are not required to give them a pass. That's intellectually dishonest and *immoral*. In a functioning society *communication is key*, and when someone refuses to communicate they harm the community. I'm not advocating ostracizing anyone, cutting them off from the community, or punishing them for the thoughts, but we all must be held accountable for them. Censoring isn't the answer. I call you to *viscerally* engage your community, from the core of your being. If a work violates your collection development policy, you should be able to clearly and explicitly point to the problem. Censoring allows the author or group to *claim oppression* even when there is not, which is dangerous since the *appearance of oppression* is easily confused with actual oppression.

Libraries have never been neutral, and never truly can be. It's not something to aspire to, it's not something to hold dear, and the veneer of neutrality isn't doing anyone any favors. This false dichotomy of attempting to show 'both sides' is easily washed away as soon as we look at the actuality of how a library functions, the embedded systemic issues, whether it's the lack of PoC in libraries, your collection development, bigoted cataloging systems, or myriad of other issues. You're mired in controversy before you begin, you can't feign ignorance and hide behind 'neutrality.' You just look like cowards. And has oft been repeated, you're on the wrong side of history. To twist Artaud a little, 'I call for [librarians] burning at the stake, laughing at the flames" (Artaud, 1958). Every patron who walks through your doors should find something in your building that challenges them. *They* can choose not to engage, but the library *must* offer it. But I want to be clear, this doesn't mean inflammatory books that are only intended to cause harm; that's not challenging anyone's worldview, it's merely capitalizing on ignorance or hate to sell a product. If we're going to create subjectivities we should be creating joyful ones.

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