

QUESTIONING LIBRARY NEUTRALITY

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WHAT IS NEUTRALITY?

Michael Harris describes neutrality as "The library scientist can and should maintain a strict 'value-neutrality' in his or her work" [1]

PROMOTION

Neutrality is promoted by organizations such as the American Library Association: "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" [2]

WHAT IF WE CHANGED THE CRITIQUE?

Perhaps the problem isn't that the library claims to be neutral, but that the position of neutrality has become hegemonic and universal within the field.

HEGEMONIC

Hegemonic in the sense that neutrality dominates and pervades the institutional framework.

UNIVERSAL

Universal in the sense that neutrality is presented as the only valid option, and sometime the only option.

UNIVERSAL HEGEMONY

HOW DO WE CRITIQUE UNIVERSAL HEGEMONY?

TRADITIONAL CRITIQUE

"In the political and philosophical sense in which I use the term here, neutrality is impossible. In any situation, there exists a distribution of power. Overtly endorsing or contesting that distribution are, of course, political choices; such positions are not neutral. But to take no explicit position by claiming to be neutral is also a political choice, particularly when one is given the resources that make it easy to evaluate the consequences of that distribution of power and potentially affect its distribution." [3]

"...THE SOURCE OF HUMAN FREEDOM IS NEVER TO ACCEPT ANYTHING AS DEFINITIVE, UNTOUCHABLE, OBVIOUS, OR IMMOBILE"

-Michel Foucault [4]

These discourses provide the framework for critiquing universality and domination

Drawing upon the work of critical theorists and feminists theorists will be key to critiquing neutrality as a hegemonic universal

"CYBORG POLITICS IS THE STRUGGLE FOR LANGUAGE AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST PERFECT COMMUNICATION, AGAINST THE CODE THAT TRANSLATES ALL MEANING PERFECTLY"

— Donna Haraway [5]

By drawing upon these critiques of universality and hegemony, the library has the ability to move towards a pluralistic ethics. An ethical system where neutrality is not rejected, but understood as one ethical system among others.

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