Guest Editorial

Perspectives

One of my priorities is to bring different perspectives to the readership of College & Research Libraries. *They may come from many different contexts and address a variety of issues. The guest editorial in this issue of C&RL is a voice new to the profession, from a graduate student at Illinois, an ALA Spectrum Scholar and an ARL Diversity Scholar who is addressing a meaningful question.*

As I reflect on my first year of library school, it is hard for me to reconcile the equitable values that ALA promotes and the "neutral" identity that some libraries/librarians would like to claim.[1] As librarians, we are obligated to adhere to ALA's first code of ethics calling us to provide "the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; *equitable* service policies; *equitable* access." What does this mean? Based on the Final Report of the ALA Task Force on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, "equity assumes difference and takes difference into account to ensure a fair process and, ultimately, a fair (or equitable outcome)."[2] However, in the same document, equity is contrasted against "formal equality [which] implies sameness," a definition echoing that of neutrality, contingent on the idea that we are "not engaged on either side [of a political or ideological grouping]."[3] The foundational ideas of neutrality are in direct opposition of equitable values, which fuel many diversity initiatives in an attempt to encourage diverse individuals to, not only engage with the library, but also consider librarianship as a career. Consequently, the assertion that libraries are neutral masks[4] the ways librarians further contribute to social issues rather than combat them.

I argue that rather than supporting equitable values and reinforcing library-led diversity initiatives, the claim of neutrality that libraries wear contradicts these efforts. One such example of this is the presumed neutrality and undeniable reliance on standards and classification systems in libraries. Just as Bowker and Star emphasize in *Sorting Things Out,* despite the invisibility of classification systems, "each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another. This is not inherently a bad thing—indeed it is inescapable. But it is an ethical choice, and as such it is dangerous—not bad, but dangerous."[5] Library users can identify this threat in the various subject heading terms found in the Library of Congress Subject Heading classification system; specifically, the subject term "Illegal alien" plainly demonstrates the suppression of one point of view over the other. Rather than "just describe" as "neutral" classification systems might, this subject heading operates similarly to Foucault's "failing" prison and "gives rise to one particular form of illegality in the midst of others, which it is able to isolate, to place in full light and to organize as a relatively enclosed, but penetrable, milieu."[6] The use of the term "Illegal alien" in conversation or in a classification system automatically puts this group in the position of "the other" because it is contingent on the assumption that library users and/or users of LCSH are straight white men.[7] Anyone who identifies as anything other than a straight white man must subsequently alter their searching

behavior in favor of this valorized point of view. How can such a system assist librarians in their pursuit of equitable access?

The disconnect between equitable values and the purported importance of neutrality in libraries has previously been identified by Seattle Central College's library staff, who have actively taken a stance of non-neutrality in support of undocumented students. They recognize that "libraries are rarely neutral, as our actions always reflect on our conscious or unconscious biases."[8] The claim of neutrality serves as a distraction from our pursuit of equity and furthermore can create distrust between libraries and minority communities. As Seattle Central found, in actively professing non-neutrality some students felt more welcome to use their services.[9] By recognizing the function of neutrality within their community and choosing to find ways to subvert it, they have ensured the equitable access to all library resources by all library users, documented or not.

I recognize that a solution to this is not easy; as seen in the case of the subject heading, in which for the first time ever, Congress intervened and overturned the ruling to remove the "Illegal alien," subject heading from LCSH in 2016. There are and will always be some situations in which libraries, or individual librarians, will not have the power to immediately make significant change. However, we cannot expect for and depend on diversity initiatives to recruit and retain diverse library staff. Providing equitable access to support diverse individuals and encouraging them to engage with the library is more complex than listing it in official documents. The conflicting dual identities of "equitable libraries" and "neutral libraries" ultimately prevents us from providing the highest level of service to patrons. Despite ALA's code of ethics, it is difficult to pursue our values of equitable service and access under the guise of neutrality.

As a library school student, I am enthusiastic to enter a field that is, as it always has been, evolving with society. However, as I learn more about the equitable access (or lack thereof) that libraries provide, I approach this perception with more caution. As stewards of information resources and the classification systems we use to find resources, libraries and librarians can sometimes contribute to larger, systemic problems. After becoming more aware of our own prejudices and biases, especially ones that already exist within our classification systems, we also recognize the access we provide to our patrons. As I consider my future in librarianship, I find myself asking: *Whom* do our equitable values serve and how does our identity of "neutrality" serve them?

<div align="right">

Lauren A. Camarillo
Graduate Student, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

</div>

Notes

1. "Are Libraries Neutral?" *American Libraries* 49, no. 6 (June 2018): 32–38, available online at www.library. illinois.edu.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/proxy/go.php?url=http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/ login.aspx?direct=true&db=eft&AN=129980377&site=eds-live&scope=site [accessed 26 June 2019].

2. K. Fiels, "Definitions of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: Recommendation 4.2 from the Final Report of the ALA Task Force on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion," *Committee on Diversity, Report to Council, 2017 Annual Conference, Chicago, Illinois* (June 26, 2017), available online at www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/ content/governance/council/council_documents/2017_annual/cd_44-44.2_cod_62617_FINAL.pdf [accessed 28 June 2019].

3. *Merriam-Webster Online, s.v.* "Neutral" [Def. 2], available online at from https://www.merriam-webster. com/dictionary/neutral [accessed 1 July 2019].

4. "Are Libraries Neutral?" 33.

5. Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 7.

6. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Second Vintage Books, 1995), 276.

7. Amanda Ros, "The Bias Hiding in Your Library," *The Conversation*, available online at https://theconversation.com/the-bias-hiding-in-your-library-111951 [accessed 15 June 2019].

8. Johanna Jacobsen Kiciman et al., "Social Justice and Equity at Seattle Central College: Non-neutrality through Visual Cues," *Alki* 33, no. 2 (July 2017): 10–19, available online at http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lls&AN=124806321 [accessed 13 July 2019].

9. Kiciman et al., "Social Justice and Equity," 11.