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Library Trends, Volume 64, Number 3, Winter 2016, pp. 585-603 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0003>



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Compliant Trust: The Public Good and Democracy in the ALA's "Core Values of Librarianship"

MAURA SEALE

ABSTRACT

This paper will consider the Core Values of *The Public Good and Democracy* as articulated in the American Library Association's "Core Values of Librarianship" (2004) and its affiliated documents in conjunction with the ways in which these two Core Values are deployed in library discourse around the Ferguson (Missouri) Public Library, particularly during the last four months of 2014. Both the ALA's Core Values document and library discourse around Ferguson heavily rely upon liberalism in regard to power and conflict, subjectivity and equality, and capitalism. This reliance results in a vision of librarianship and an understanding of the Ferguson Public Library that are completely decoupled from political, economic, social, and historical contexts. This decontextualized discourse fits seamlessly within neoliberal ideology and is ultimately antidemocratic.

"The mythical scientific respect of peoples for the given reality, which they themselves constantly create, finally becomes itself a positive fact, a fortress before which even the revolutionary imagination feels shamed as utopianism, and degenerates into a compliant trust in the objective tendency of history."

—Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1947/2002, p. 33)

On August 9, 2014, white police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed unarmed African American teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a town not unique in its history of racial tensions.¹ Days of protests, the declaration of a state of emergency by Governor Jay Nixon, and the deployment of the National Guard followed the shooting. On August 18, 2014, at the height of the unrest, Scott Bonner, the director of the Ferguson Public Library, posted a photograph on Twitter. The photo, with the

LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 64, No. 3, 2016 ("Valuing Librarianship: Core Values in Theory and Practice," edited by Selinda A. Berg and Heidi LM Jacobs), pp. 585–603. © 2016 The Board of Trustees, University of Illinois

caption “From @fergusonlibrary—we’re here for YOU #Ferguson!” is of a sign outside the library, next to an American flag (Bonner, 2014a). The sign reads “Stay Strong Ferguson / We Are Family.” Behind it, the sign for the Ferguson Public Library can be seen. There is nothing else remarkable about the photo; the presence of a sidewalk, parking lot, cars, and trees read as a typical suburban landscape (see fig. 1).

The Ferguson Public Library intentionally remained open and even expanded programming during the protests in August and again in November when a grand jury failed to indict Wilson, while schools and other institutions closed, though, and this was perceived as anything but typical and unremarkable by mainstream media outlets. NPR, Salon, Talking Points Memo, ABC, CBS, MSNBC, BBC, Reddit, Mashable, the *Atlantic*’s CityLab, and Daily Kos all covered the story of the library remaining open and offering programs, as well as the subsequent and sizeable donations of both books and money to the library (BBC Trending, 2014; Bonner, 2014b; Curry & Grimes, 2014; Dwyer, 2014; Einenkel, 2014; “Ferguson Public Library an Oasis for a Turbulent Town,” 2014; Goodyear, 2015; Levine, 2014; Thompson, 2014; Williams, 2014). While mainstream media coverage emphasized the uniqueness of the library’s actions, library media such as *Library Journal*, *American Libraries*, and numerous librarian blogs countered that this was not exceptional, that this is simply what libraries do. This theme in the library media’s coverage likely emerged from Bonner’s interviews. In a *Library Journal* article, he is quoted as saying: “This is totally, exactly, right in the wheelhouse of what any library does, what every library does. We have a dramatic moment, and a dramatic circumstance caught the nation’s attention, but this is what libraries do every day” (Bustamante, 2014). In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Bonner states that “what the media caught in Ferguson was just libraries being libraries. . . . We’re just being a library” (Albanese, 2015, n.p.). Other library scholars and practitioners described the actions of the Ferguson Public Library in almost identical terms. R. David Lankes (2014a) notes that “the librarians of Ferguson did their job,” while Rebecca Miller (2014), in an editorial titled “It’s What We Do,” describes the actions of the Ferguson Public Library as “the essence of public library work” (p. 8). Currently, the description of the Ferguson Public Library on its Twitter profile is “just doing #whatlibrariesdo” (Ferguson Public Library, n.d.).

In February 2015 the American Library Association (ALA) formally commended the staff of the Ferguson Public Library for having “exemplified the library profession’s core values of service and the public good during a time of civil unrest that began immediately following the shooting death of Michael Brown in August 2014” (American Library Association, 2015).² The text of the commendation explicitly references the ALA’s 2004 “Core Values of Librarianship” and its definition of *The Public Good*: “ALA



Figure 1. Photograph of the Ferguson (Missouri) Public Library with sign and American flag. (Courtesy of Scott Bonner.)

reaffirms the following fundamental values of libraries in the context of discussing outsourcing and privatization of library services. These values include that libraries are an essential public good and are fundamental institutions in democratic societies.” *Democracy* is specifically connected to The Public Good in this definition but is also listed and defined separately in the “Core Values of Librarianship”: “A democracy presupposes an informed citizenry. The First Amendment mandates the right of all persons to free expression, and the corollary right to receive the constitutionally protected expression of others. The publicly supported library provides free and equal access to information for all people of the community the library serves” (ALA, 2004). According to the Core Values, the role of libraries is to provide access to information, which enables citizenry and thus democracy; it is this role that renders them a public good. Democracy, then, requires libraries. This connection between The Public Good and Democracy in the Core Values is echoed in the photograph that Bonner tweeted, which visually connects the library, as a public good, and democracy, as signified by the American flag.

This paper will consider the Core Values of The Public Good and Democracy as articulated in the “Core Values of Librarianship” and its affiliated documents in conjunction with the ways in which these two Core Values are deployed in library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library, particularly during the last four months of 2014. It is important to clarify that I am not talking about the work of either the Ferguson Public Library or Bonner, which is unequivocally valuable and beneficial to both the immediate and larger communities, but rather the ways in which library discourse, including library-oriented magazines, trade journals, and blogs, frame, talk about, and make sense of the Ferguson Public Library. I am interested in the larger meanings library discourse ascribes to the actions of the Ferguson Public Library and the events in Ferguson. To that end, this paper outlines the ways in which that discourse heavily relies upon liberalism in regard to power and conflict, subjectivity and equality, and capitalism. This reliance results in a vision of librarianship and an understanding of the Ferguson Public Library that are completely decoupled from political, economic, social, and historical contexts. This decontextualized discourse fits seamlessly within neoliberal ideology and is ultimately antidemocratic.

THE POSTPOLITICAL LIBRARY

The Core Value of Democracy posits that information is constituted by the “free expression” of all people; access to that information creates an informed citizenry, which leads to democracy. In its ideal state the library provides “free and equal access” of all information to all people; it does not discriminate among people or ideas or take positions. This stance is reiterated in the ALA’s “Library Bill of Rights” (1996): libraries should

present “all points of view on current and historical issues [and resist] abridgement of free discussion and free access to ideas” (n.p.). In its “Interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights” (2007), including “Economic Barriers to Information Access” (1993), both of which are cited in the definition of the Core Value of Democracy, the library’s acceptance of all forms of information is emphasized further. Libraries should “resist efforts that systematically exclude materials dealing with any subject matter” and must provide access to “all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause, or movement may be explored.” Resources “presumed to be controversial or disapproved of by segments of the community” cannot be removed, and their presence “does not indicate endorsement of their contents by the library” (2007, n.p.). The first two articles of the “Library Bill of Rights” (1996) strongly restate this: “Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation, [and] 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” (n.p.). These documents continually emphasize the political orientation of information, ideas, and materials, as well as that of community members and library users. Libraries, in contrast, float above this as disinterested, apolitical entities. Although community members/library users may participate in conflicts about which ideas and materials should be represented in the library, the Core Values and affiliated documents dismiss the idea that the library should have a role in these conflicts; the library simply collects everything. It does not take sides. The positioning of the library as a neutral and impartial institution, separated from the political fray, resonates with dominant library discourse around libraries, as described by Chris Bourg (2015), Nina de Jesus (2014), Barbara Fister (2013), and Nicole Pagowsky and Niamh Wallace (2015).

The library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library adopts this representation of the library as an apolitical, conflict-free space and juxtaposes it to the politically charged atmosphere outside the space of the library—in the city of Ferguson, the state of Missouri, and the United States more broadly. The Ferguson Public Library is described as a “haven” (Albanese, 2014, p. 35); a “safe place for children and citizens” and a “constructive space” (Lankes, 2015, n.p.); a “hub of strength and solace” (Adams, 2014, n.p.); “a sanctuary for respite, reflection, and learning” and “refuge [from] social and civic unrest” (Miller, 2014, p. 8); a “refuge from chaos taking place outside” (Inklebarger, 2014, p. 17); “a safe place, an oasis, a refuge, and an inspiration” (Stephens, 2015, p. 1); and as “providing peaceful, quiet space and time amidst the political turmoil that had been taking place within the city” (ALA, 2015, n.p.). In the words of a sign that appeared in the Ferguson Public Library, it is a “quiet oasis where we can catch our breath, learn, and think about what to do

next" (see Adams, 2014, fig. 1). Similar to the definition of the Core Value of Democracy, which ties democracy to the educational work of libraries, library discourse around the Ferguson Library focuses on education. The initial action that generated interest among mainstream media was the library's transformation into an "ad hoc school" when the Ferguson-Florissant school district delayed the start of the fall semester for a week following Brown's death (Albanese, 2015). A highly successful Twitter campaign led to the donation of hundreds of books—to many the physical embodiment of education—to the Ferguson Public Library (Manfredi, 2014; Peet, 2014). Library discourse emphasizes Ferguson Public Library's focus on "helping people find the information they need, in whatever setting" (Miller, 2014, p. 8) and its role in "providing continuing education" (Bustamante, 2014, p. 10). Lankes (2014b) explicitly ties the educational work of the Ferguson Public Library, and indeed all libraries, to democracy. In comparing Ferguson to both the Arab Spring (2010–2012) and the 2015 murders of *Charlie Hebdo* journalists in Paris, Lankes contends that "an engaged community, a library dedicated to learning and making a difference is a powerful deterrent to violence" (n.p.) and urges readers to "fight violence with information and understanding" (2015, n.p.). Education enabled the democratic reforms of the Arab Spring and can counter the anti-free-speech fundamentalism of the *Charlie Hebdo* murderers. In the library media discourse around Ferguson Public Library, both libraries and education are consistently depicted as completely distinct from, and even oppositional to, conflict.

The work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2005) problematizes the positioning of the library and education as simultaneously neutral, impartial spaces and incubators of democracy. She understands politics as an arena of power, conflict, and antagonism. Postpolitical or antipolitical stances, such as postpartisanship, consensus, neutrality, and impartiality, which Mouffe suggests are tied to liberalism, refuse to "acknowledge the antagonistic dimension constitutive of 'the political'" (p. 2). This refusal is significant because antagonism and conflict are what make democracy possible; a lack of dissent signifies the imposition of authoritarian order. Moreover, the presence of conflict creates space in which existing orders and power structures can be challenged and their reification resisted: "An agonistic conception of democracy acknowledges the contingent character of the hegemonic politico-economic articulations which determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment. They are precarious and pragmatic constructions which can be disarticulated and transformed" (p. 33).³ The discursive construction of libraries generally and the Ferguson Public Library more specifically as sites outside of politics, as spaces free of and even opposed to conflict, is ultimately antidemocratic in that it forecloses the alternative possibilities created by disagreement.

The association of education with postpolitics and as a counter to antagonism implies a very constrained vision of education, in which conflict and power are swept away, and learners merely accept the world as it is. This may produce an informed citizenry in the most basic sense, but not a citizenry empowered to enact democracy.

The postpolitical stance of the Core Values and library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library performs specific political work despite its disavowal of politics: it obfuscates the embeddedness of information creation and access in power relations. Information is not simply the “free expression [of] all persons” depicted in the Core Values definition of Democracy (ALA, 2004, n.p.). According to Michel Foucault (1995), the production of knowledge is intimately bound up with the operation of power:

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relations without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (p. 27)

For example, the scientific discourses around sex that Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) and the “assessing, diagnostic, prognostic, normative judgements concerning the criminal” (1995, p. 19) that he traces in *Discipline and Punish* do not neutrally describe preexisting realms of sexuality and criminality but create and inscribe them in power relations. Moreover, these discourses create subjugated subjects, the sexual deviant and the criminal, and more generally “those one supervises, trains and corrects, . . . madmen, children at home and at school, the colonized, . . . those who are stuck at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives” (p. 29). David Theo Goldberg (1993), in *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*, extends Foucault’s argument to race and racialized discourse in the West. For both Foucault and Goldberg, these discourses emerge from and are associated with science and notions of scientific objectivity and so easily become naturalized, reified, and thereby invisible. In contrast to the definition of Democracy in the Core Values, expression is not unrestrained, nor is it sanctioned for all persons. Some people can be creators of knowledge, while others are designated as the objects of that knowledge. Sometimes discourse or expression is compelled, rather than freely given. The definition of Democracy as a Core Value, in its depiction of information, ideas, community members, and library users as political only inasmuch as they are openly partisan, does not grasp the deeper workings of power in knowledge about the world. A postpolitical stance is unable to think of power and conflict as structural or systemic, and can only understand them in terms of individual actions; it is

the community member seeking to ban a book, not the discursive production of racialized subjects, that enables and justifies economic exploitation and social oppression.

The inability to think structurally and systemically is also apparent in the library media discourse around the Ferguson Public Library. The Ferguson Library is “wide open to every human being in Ferguson” (Bonner, qtd. in Albanese, 2014, p. 36), but upon entering, library users encounter a sign: “During difficult times, the library is a quiet oasis where we can catch our breath, learn, and think about what to do next. Please help keep our oasis peaceful and serene” (see Adams, 2014, fig. 1). In interviews, Bonner repeatedly noted that “the oasis comment was a gentle reminder not to bring the trouble into the library” (Inklebarger, 2014, p. 18). It is not clear from Bonner’s comment who is going to bring trouble into the library. Given that the police, like the library, are an arm of the state, would they obey a sign? If violence is sanctioned by the state, as with the police or military, would it be referred to as “trouble”? Do members of the police force or National Guard use the library as community members? This sign, even if consciously intended to, cannot impartially apply to “every human being in Ferguson.” It participates in the same discourse of black criminality as Wilson’s testimony about Brown in its sole attribution of possible trouble to the general, nonpolice population of Ferguson, which is roughly 67 percent African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).⁴ Wilson’s actions and the wording of this sign are obviously not equivalent, but they both exist within racialized discourse that lends them the air of common sense or at least believability. Because the individual action of creating and posting the sign does not explicitly target African Americans and only subtly references tropes of racialized discourse, both it and the library are perceived to be impartial. The structure of racialized discourse and the historical context that make it impossible for the sign to have the same meaning for everyone are invisible in library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library. The postpolitical nature of libraries articulated in the Core Values and library media discourse disavows the importance of power and conflict and as such, is deeply ahistorical. It functions as an alibi for a refusal to engage with the social, political, economic, and historical contexts in which libraries work. Like all institutions, libraries participate in racialized discourses, are embedded in power relations, and reproduce relations of domination and subordination (de Jesus, 2014; Foucault, 1995; Goldberg, 1993; Said, 1994). This does not mean they are irretrievably malicious, but ignoring the larger context does not make that context or the implications of that context disappear.

LIBERAL SUBJECTS AND PUBLIC SPHERES

The postpolitical stance of libraries promulgated by the definitions of Democracy and The Public Good in the Core Values is rooted in a logic of

equivalence: all patrons, all materials, all sides of a question, all points of view, all expressions of ideas are functionally equivalent. In the definition of Democracy, equality of access is ensured by the fact that it is “free” (ALA, 2004). The ALA’s related document, “Economic Barriers to Information Access,” expands on this idea and “opposes the charging of user fees for the provision of information by all libraries” as they are “potential barriers to access” (1993, n.p.). Accordingly, the removal of such barriers thereby leads to equal, equitable, and even universal access, as the Core Values and its affiliated documents consistently takes its subjects to be “all people.” The presumption of universality that underlies “all people” and the argument that equality is the end result of the removal of external barriers depend on liberal subjectivity. Goldberg (1993) provides an outline of the liberal subject: “abstract and atomistic, general and universal, divorced from the contingencies of historicity as it is from the particularities of social and political relations and identities” (p. 4). The liberal subject is characterized by a “presumed sameness, the universally imposed similarity in identity” (p. 7), and it is this sameness that creates its fundamental equality: all liberal subjects are abstracted, evacuated of content, and therefore equal.

Library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library’s actions in 2014 frequently relies upon liberal subjectivity as well. Bonner claims that “our doors are wide open to every human being in Ferguson” (qtd. in Albanese, 2014, p. 36). Miller (2014, p. 8) observes that “the library was there for everyone.” The Ferguson Public Library tweeted in August 2014 that “We are here for all of our residents” (see Adams, 2014, fig. 3), and in the photo that began this paper, stated: “We are family” (Bonner, 2014a). Notions such as “everyone,” “all people,” and even “family” assume some sort of sameness, equivalence, or universality that unifies the group. This evocation of sameness is echoed in more specific discussions of Ferguson. Lankes (2015, n.p.) argues that “the libraries showed Ferguson to be a place of multiple races coming together around children, learning, and a desire for a better future.” Similarly, in an interview Bonner notes: “But, I have to say, even in the middle of such divisiveness, there are things that will always bring people together. If you say ‘the kids need you,’ people from all perspectives will show up. And in Ferguson, they did” (Albanese, 2015, n.p.). In these cases, a presumed universal interest and investment in library creates equivalence among people.

Goldberg (1993) argues that race is central to the formation of liberal subjectivity, but the project of liberalism insists on its own universality and the irrelevance of differences like race.⁵ The “quiet oasis” sign discussed previously epitomizes this contradiction. It is addressed to everyone entering the library; it claims to be neutral. Race does not matter, even if the sign has differential impacts based on race. The liberal conceptualization of equality, which is rooted in a logic of equivalence, provides the ground-

ing of the Core Values and the quiet oasis sign, but is severely limited. In “On *The Jewish Question*” (1844/2009), Karl Marx describes the division of the liberal subject into the living individual of civil society and the citizen of the liberal state. The state declares that every person is a citizen and that every citizen is equal, but this declaration does not and cannot abolish differences between people such as race, in the case of Ferguson, or religion, in Marx’s example. Legal equality is the equality of citizens in relation to the state, and citizens are equal because they are the same. It is a formal equality. Social equality is much more expansive—it does not ignore differences between living individuals or understand equality as solely a relationship between the citizen and the state. The establishment of legal equality then neither requires nor enacts social equality; it can simply be declared. In Marx’s terms *political* emancipation is not *human* emancipation. The Core Values and its affiliated documents as well as the quiet oasis sign in the Ferguson Public Library and invocations of “everyone,” “all people,” and “family” in library discourse around Ferguson assume that the lack of explicit, formal, legal, or institutional barriers constitutes equality. The lack of those specific sorts of barriers allows us to declare that we are equal; social inequities that cannot be resolved through legalistic mechanisms do not matter within the liberal conceptualization of equality. We are all liberal subjects, “self-sufficient monads,” legal citizens of the liberal state/United States, and are thereby entirely equal.

The descriptions of the Ferguson Public Library in the previous section, as orderly, civil, and conducive to thought, accompanied by its assertion of being “wide open to every human being in Ferguson,” evoke Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the *public sphere*. John Buschman (2003, 2005, 2006) has most thoroughly articulated the relationship between libraries and the public sphere. Like Habermas’s original formulation of the bourgeois public sphere, libraries provide nonpolitical space for rational discourse, debate, and critique around public concerns of interest to all, as well as the information that informs them, and thereby enable and promote democracy.⁶ The library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library frequently suggests that libraries are democratic spaces within which everyone can speak and be heard.

The definitions of The Public Good and Democracy and the relationship between them in the ALA’s “Core Values of Librarianship” (2004) also resemble Habermas’s public sphere. The public good of libraries lies in the provision of an arena in which people may freely speak or otherwise express themselves, receive the expressions of others, and access information so as to become informed citizens. As informed citizens they can then engage in rational discussion of public matters that moves democracy forward. However, Nancy Fraser (1990) points to the fundamental embeddedness of the public sphere in the social world. The concepts of *private* and *public* are not natural and neutral but “are powerful terms that are

frequently deployed to delegitimize some interests, views, and topics and to valorize others" (p. 73). That is, designating some matters and interests as public and therefore worthy of expression and discussion in the public sphere is made possible by the designation of others as fundamentally private and not of universal concern. The public sphere is, a priori, not neutral, but embedded in the power relations and inequities of the social world. This is the trouble, conflict, chaos, unrest, and turmoil that should not be brought into the quiet oasis of the Ferguson Public Library. Similarly, racism is often understood as a private matter, of interest primarily to people of color rather than whites and therefore not universal; this idea is echoed in library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library. The Ferguson Library is a space in which "we [can] catch our breath, learn, and think about what to do next," but not a space in which to discuss racism or police brutality. This stance is not politically neutral or postpolitical; it is making a judgment as to what discussions and which people matter. The Ferguson Public Library, like all libraries, is permeated by racialized history, discourse, and power, despite its claims to postpolitics and impartiality.

In light of social inequalities and relations of domination and subordination, Fraser questions the possibility of individuals and groups deliberating as peers around the question of the common good, as well as the purported neutrality of the public sphere. She notes that "declaring a deliberative arena to be a space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized is not sufficient to make it so" (p. 60). Her critique parallels that of Marx in "*On The Jewish Question*" (1844/2009): the abstract equality of citizens in the liberal state or of participants in the public sphere does not create social equality. It does not erase the inequalities and power relations of the social world. The "quiet oasis" sign, in its impersonal address to everyone (Warner, 2002), attempts to establish the Ferguson Public Library as a neutral public sphere in which everyone is equal, but it cannot escape its social context of racial inequality. The reliance upon liberal subjectivity and uncritical conceptions of the public sphere in both the Core Values and library media discourse around Ferguson Public Library is fundamentally a political position: it is the denial of structures of power, including that of white supremacism. Neutrality, impartiality, and postpolitics merely obscure liberalism's inability to reckon with structural and systemic power relations and its investment in ahistoricism.

CAPITALISM

The definition of the Core Value of The Public Good, unlike many of the ALA's other Core Values, makes reference to a specific context: "ALA reaffirms the following fundamental values of libraries in the context of discussing outsourcing and privatization of library services" (2004, n.p.). The positioning of libraries as public goods and democratic institutions

is contrasted to outsourcing and privatization, which are connected to capitalism. Yet the relationship between democracy and capitalism is not necessarily oppositional, as both are linked in their historical development, are constitutive features of modernity, and rely upon logics of equivalence. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947/2002), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno theorize the relationship among modes of knowledge that emerged in modernity, liberal subjectivity, and capitalism. In their formulation, enlightenment/modernity begins with the separation of human beings from nature, which instantiates the liberal subject and renders the natural world an object that can be known. The relationship between human beings as liberal subjects and nature is patriarchal and one of mastery. Nature is overdetermined as knowable. As in Foucault's (1995) concept of *knowledge-power*, the creation of knowledge about the world is an enactment of power, but it is also the separation from nature that makes both the subject and thought possible.⁷

Writing during World War II, Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/2002) perceive the rise of totalitarianism and spread of industrial capitalism as the "self-destruction of enlightenment" (p. xvi). "Thought" has lost its critical awareness and become limited to logic, technology, mathematics, and instrumentality. The only things that matter are those that can be measured. The emphasis on what can be abstracted, quantified, and calculated finds resonance in the liberal subject, which is universal and equivalent, and in capitalism, which initiates its own form of abstract equivalence—*exchange value*, in which everything is exchangeable with everything else at some quantity. Through this structural similarity, capitalism reifies the liberal subject. Reification dehistoricizes and naturalizes, so that the world as it is becomes the only possible world.

Democracy and capitalism both require the abstracting and equalizing qualities of liberal subjectivity, but this logic finds its fullest expression in neoliberalism, which is "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Within neoliberal ideology, all arenas of life should be constructed as markets, and value is conceived of solely in economic terms. It is Horkheimer and Adorno's instrumentality writ large. The liberal subject, the self-sufficient monad, is central to neoliberalism. David Harvey argues that neoliberalism is able to become so dominant and achieve the status of common sense (or become reified) because it is rooted in liberal ideas of individual freedom (p. 5). This individual freedom is guaranteed by the freedom of the market, which sometimes takes the form of outsourcing and privatization.⁸

The ALA's "Core Values of Librarianship" (2004) wants to tell a story. In it, all people are equal—equally able to express themselves and thereby

create information. All people are equal and able to equally access information at a library. By accessing information and educating themselves, they become an informed citizenry constituted of equals and enable democracy. This story is one of individual freedom and individual actions, and it is very similar to the stories told by neoliberalism. It is completely dehistoricized and so reliant upon the idea of individual freedom that it appears as obvious, natural, the way things are. In contrast to the ALA's definition of The Public Good, the vision of librarianship as articulated in the "Core Values of Librarianship" is not incompatible with neoliberalism, but implicated in it; their underlying ideologies are the same. This is perhaps why the Core Values cannot meaningfully define The Public Good but can only gesture to its opposites—outsourcing and privatization. The universal and decontextualized nature of the Core Values, tied to its reliance upon liberal subjectivity and its postpolitical stance, erases power relations, obfuscates social inequalities, and denies history. This decontextualization constrains the political imagination of the Core Values by inhibiting systemic and structural thinking. The document is able to identify outsourcing and privatization as discrete problems, but it cannot name the larger political economic system from which these practices emerge nor address the larger implications of that system; it can only promote postpolitical versions of The Public Good and Democracy, which means that the ALA's "Economic Barriers to Information Access" (1993) is solely concerned with user fees, fines, and content restrictions, and not with austerity measures.

The Ferguson Public Library is not well-funded; it serves a population of roughly 21,000 with a \$400,000 annual budget (Albanese, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). According to *Library Journal's* 2014 budget survey, the average operating budget for public libraries serving 10,000 to 24,999 residents was \$803,000 (Peet, 2015a). In 2014 the Ferguson Public Library was primarily staffed by part-time employees, which generally entails limited benefits, such as health insurance, vacation time, and sick time, if any. The salaries of two full-time positions at the library, posted in March 2015, are not far from the federal poverty level, which is already extremely low (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). The library has not been privatized, and staffing has not been outsourced to contractors, but it has been subject to the systematic disinvestment in education, infrastructure, social services, and other arenas that were once provided by the state and funded through progressive taxation that has characterized the past thirty-five years of neoliberal economic policy in the United States (Harvey, 2005). This disinvestment is uneven. Ferguson has also been subject to local, state, and federal government policies explicitly designed to segregate and disadvantage African Americans (Coates, 2014; Johnson, 2015; Rothstein, 2014). The majority African American population in Ferguson has been used as a revenue source for the numerous local govern-

ments created by these racialized policies, which are underfunded due to regressive tax policies that favor capital (Balko, 2014; Johnson, 2015; U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). While some discourse around the Ferguson Public Library includes information about the budget and staffing situation, very little of the larger historical context appears, although, if anything, it would only further emphasize the valuable work done by the library. The library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library accepts this context as a given, as natural, and thereby largely irrelevant to the current story, which is all about #whatlibrariesdo and not #whattheydoitin. The donations of nearly \$450,000 (as of the end of March 2015) and books by individuals is a heartwarming victory for the “good guys” rather than an exemplar of the way in which, under neoliberalism, individual private charity is supposed to—though ultimately cannot—substitute for services formerly funded by taxation and provided by the state (Smith, 2015). The impact of neoliberalism is reiterated in Bonner’s description of the impetus behind the ad hoc school:

But, then the school announced they would be closed for the entire next week. And that kind of shocked everybody—a week of no school—because you have parents that have planned their childcare up to a certain date. They’ve already been burdened by two days of closures, and now it’s another whole week. If you’re working three part-time jobs to make ends meet, and any one of them could fire you for not showing up one day, that’s a big deal. (qtd. in Albanese, 2015, n.p.)

The school program at the Ferguson Public Library, with its volunteer staff, was undoubtedly a good thing, but understanding it solely in these terms obscures the pain inflicted by neoliberal policies, of underpaid part-time work, precarity, and expensive childcare. The library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library assents to neoliberalism. Stripped of context that points to the specific historical choices that led to the current situation of economic insecurity and racialized violence, library discourse is unable to imagine something different. Individual actions such as giving money once to support one library or volunteering for one day are easy; advocating for progressive taxation to adequately fund all libraries in the state or for a living wage is not imaginable. Politics are limited to individual responsibility rather than systemic change, which ultimately devolves to the notion that individual people are to blame when they find themselves living in poverty.

COMPLIANT TRUST

The epigraph from Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/2002) that began this paper describes the reification of history: when we fail to recognize that the world in which we live is created by choices we make, we come to

believe that change, or a different world, is not possible. We come to see history as something that happens to us, rather than something we actively shape, and feel the only action we can take is to hope for the best, compliantly trusting in the objective tendency of history. Both the ALA's "Core Values of Librarianship" and the library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library trust that the world is as it should be. Their ideological commitment to liberalism means that both are centered on the idea of individual freedom. Both embrace a postpolitical stance that rejects conflict, which leads to an inability to think systemically and historically and thereby understand contemporary structures and power relations as fundamentally contingent. Liberal understandings of subjectivity and equality and uncritical use of the notion of the public sphere further disavow the importance of the social world, with its inequalities and power relations, and emphasize instead individual action in a world without constraints. In this world, people are equal and have the same problems; they can all speak and be heard in the impartial public space of the library. This is the underlying logic of neoliberalism, which rejects structural, systemic, and contextual explanations of the world, instead reifying it and denying the possibility of change and alternative choices. Because the "Core Values of Librarianship" is grounded in the same logic, it is unable to articulate a convincing defense of The Public Good and Democracy or libraries' role in either; because the library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library is grounded in the same logic, it cannot see past the generous donations to the library and offer a critique of the ways in which government and larger society chose, and continue to choose, to create racialized ghettos and withdraw support from public services. Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/2002, p. 32) point out that "each advance of civilization has renewed not only mastery but also the prospect of alleviation," and indeed the public good and democracy may offer alleviation, but not if they are understood ahistorically and allowed to degenerate into compliant trust. Mouffe's (2005) insistence that democracy be reframed and understood in terms of power, conflict, and antagonism helps us reject reification of the world and reclaim a revolutionary imagination, as dissent reveals both alternative social orders and the contingency of the ones we currently live within. In contrast to the library discourse around the Ferguson Public Library that has been the focus of this paper, the actual, material work of the Ferguson Public Library and Bonner was and is able to alleviate some of the very real pain caused by neoliberal economic policy and racial oppression. Unlike the ALA's Core Values, this work embodies the revolutionary imagination and, without words, is able to articulate the ways in which libraries are an essential public good. This work demonstrates that different choices are possible and that they can transform the world in which we live.

NOTES

1. At the time of this writing, the widespread killing or injuring of unarmed African Americans by police in the United States is receiving much attention. See Ryan Gabrielson, Ryann Jones, and Eric Sagara (2015) and Rich Juzwiak and Aleksander Chan (2014) for overviews. More recent cases at the time of this writing include that of Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina (Graham, 2015) and Freddie Gray in Baltimore (Marbella, 2015). There were protests in Baltimore in April/May 2015, and the library discourse around the Enoch Pratt Free Library is similar to that experienced by the Ferguson Public Library. See Lisa Peet (2015b) for an example.
2. Scott Bonner was also named a “Mover and Shaker” by *Library Journal* in March 2015, and the Ferguson Public Library was named “Gale/LJ Library of the Year” by the same journal in June 2015 (Berry, 2015; “Movers and Shakers” 2015).
3. *Agonistic conflict* refers to a specific form of conflict in which each side recognizes the legitimacy of the other’s positions, but there is no solution that will satisfy all sides.
4. See Jamelle Bouie (2014) for a discussion of how stereotypes of black criminality played out in Darren Wilson’s testimony.
5. See Nina de Jesus (2014) for a discussion of how specific modes of racialized discourse—for example, slavery, genocide, and Orientalism—are crucial to liberalism.
6. See also Mark Peterson (2014) and Matthew Williamson (2000).
7. This is the dialectic of enlightenment, which enables both totalitarianism and critical thought.
8. Notions of individual freedom are particularly powerful in the United States (Harvey, 2005, p. 84), but neoliberal policies are not limited to the country. Harvey tracks the parallel rise of neoliberalism in the United Kingdom and United States through the 1980s and 1990s, as well as in other European, South American, and Asian countries. Neoliberal principles underlie the work of nongovernmental/intergovernmental organizations, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, and the austerity and currency policies deployed with particular vehemence by EU governments following the economic crisis of 2008.

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