# Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression

## 1. Introduction

Attempting to understand where the library is located within institutional oppression is a difficult proposition. First, because institutional oppression actively works to disguise, erase, and obfuscate its mechanisms and their consequences; it is very much the proverbial devil -- whose greatest trick is to convince the world that it does not exist. Second, because people sincerely and truly love libraries. They love libraries for a variety of reasons but many tend to associate libraries with a cluster of values that is difficult to gainsay without appearing to side with some fairly unsavoury and undesirable values.

Neil Gaiman recently wrote this about libraries:

Libraries are about freedom. Freedom to read, freedom of ideas, freedom of communication. They are about education (which is not a process that finishes the day we leave school or university), about entertainment, about making safe spaces, and about access to information.[[1]](#footnote-0)

How do you begin an excursion to locate the library within institutionalized oppression when this represents the popular, common conception of libraries? Even if we understand this as idealistic and unrealistic, a less idealised understanding of libraries still frames them as fundamentally *good* institutions that occasionally fail to live up to their values or ideals.

How do we reconcile this understanding of libraries with the very real fact that we continue to live in a deeply inequitable society? A society where oppression fundamentally structures all of our political, social, and economic institutions? Exploring the topology and geography of institutional oppression is a perilous activity and fraught with many dangers.

This excursion shall begin setting out the domain of discourse -- essentially getting the lay of the land by setting out how key terms like 'institutional oppression' or 'enlightenment' will be used within the confines of this article. Next, I will delve into the history of libraries to hopefully uncover what libraries were intended to be. This will involve understanding and engaging the notion that libraries are institutions that have been shaped and created as a means to embody and enforce a particular ideology. Last, I will follow one line of inquiry about how libraries embody and articulate one specific kind of institutional oppression, white supremacy, as a way to demonstrate that libraries cannot be distinguished either from their historical roots nor from their contemporary context within a white supremacist settler state.

## 2. The Domain of Discourse

### 2.1 Institutional oppression

Perhaps one of the more critical elements of this discussion which requires absolute clarity is the boundaries of what is meant by 'institutional oppression'. The notion of institutional or systemic oppression speaks to the ways that certain behaviours, attitudes, and ideologies become formalized in various social, political, and economic organizations, groups, structures, etc. It is about how abstract ideas become reified and concrete through a long, but constantly shifting process of human social organization.

Institutional oppression isn't about how behaviours, attitudes, and philosophies are embodied in individuals, but individuals most certainly do come to embody these things and act as agents of their institutions while, at the same time, other individuals are oppressed. Nonetheless, this isn't an examination of the moral and ethical implications of being oppressive as an individual or of being oppressed as an individual. The focus will remain on all the ways that institutions are structured, created, and maintained, thereby reducing the ability of individuals to make decisions to resist these values.

The clearest example within libraries of institutional oppression is controlled vocabularies like the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) or the Dewey Decimal Classifications (DDC). There are several well known examples of bias within these classifications, like the fact that non-Christian religions within the DDC are forced to share a narrow number range because the classification system wasn't created with the notion of including them. This means that catalogers, whatever their individual beliefs and values, *must* continue to enforce this ideological (and white-centric) belief that non-Christian religions are not important (or as important as the Christian ones).

The way the DDC is set up, a single cataloger ethically opposed to the exclusion and marginalization of non-Christian religions within the DDC can do very little to change the overall system. They cannot assign some other number within the DDC and have it be valid or coherent. If they were to use some other system of classification, the resulting records wouldn't work with current technologies, rendering the items inaccessible. Within such a system, making an ethical choice is very difficult on an individual basis. However, focusing on the system or institution allows us to explore solutions that would allow individuals to make better decisions.

Institutional oppression is about the system and processes that we use in our daily lives that, by the very nature of how they've been constructed and devised, exclude, marginalize, and oppress some people to the benefit of others. As such, attempting to locate the library in institutionalized oppression is about identifying the processes and systems within libraries that instantiate oppressive values and beliefs. These beliefs are not necessarily restricted to the library and, as a consequence, libraries must also be analyzed in relation to other social, political, historical, and economic institutions that act upon the library and that the library, in turn, impacts.

### 2.2 The Enlightenment

Perhaps the current, definitive work on the relationship between libraries and the enlightenment is, well, *Libraries and the Enlightenment* by Wayne Bivens-Tatum. Chapter 1 of the book is dedicated to discussing what the enlightenment actually is and lays out the parameters for Bivens-Tatum's discussion. His discussion largely rests on a distinction drawn between enlightenment as historical period and enlightenment as a "set of philosophical and political principles that emerged from this period in history"[[2]](#footnote-1).

Bivens-Tatum is also careful to note his bias towards the enlightenment when he writes:

I will be discussing the principles of the Enlightenment in a positive way -- in line with numerous historians and philosophers over the last 300 years -- the past few decades have also seen a negative reaction to certain aspects of Enlightenment, or sometimes...to distortions of Enlightenment thought taken for the real thing.[[3]](#footnote-2)

In the same spirit, I'll state outright that I think the enlightenment is and was evil. I don't use the word 'evil' lightly, but I'm hard pressed to think of any other word to describe a set of philosophical and political ideas that directly led to the deaths of millions of people and the subjugation of pretty much the entire world under white colonial powers[[4]](#footnote-3).

My general perspective is to understand the enlightenment as an ideology. We cannot separate the philosophical and political ideas of the enlightenment from its historical context. Moreover, we cannot separate how these ideas formed the conceptual basis for many of our current political, economic, and social systems.

This also puts one of Bivens-Tatum's comments into an interesting light "Attitudes have now changed for many in the West -- in those countries most touched and transformed by Enlightenment"[[5]](#footnote-4). This statement is almost comically ridiculous and so entirely Eurocentric that it is breathtaking. The first thing we can understand from this statement is that Bivens-Tatum mostly certainly understands the 'West' as being the most civilized place in the world as enlightenment thought is understood by many people to have a 'civilizing' influence. The fact that he non-critically uses the 'West' to demarcate white people from the rest of the world betrays how little he knows (or cares) about the historical context of the enlightenment and of racial politics today. This fairly common usage entirely depends on erasing the inherent violence of the term 'Western' when one really means 'white'.[[6]](#footnote-5) That he is most certainly using 'enlightenment' as a stand in for 'civilized' is fairly clear when he talks about being 'touched and transformed.' We exist in a contemporary reality where entire continents have been laid waste by enlightenment values being forced onto them. Entire cultures and peoples have been so thoroughly transformed after being 'touched' by the enlightenment that they no longer even have a history, religion, or culture that would be recognized by their ancestors.

In any case, my hope in this discussion of the enlightenment and its thought and values is to make it clear that the relative worth of the enlightenment and its historical impact is heavily influenced by an individual's own context. Regardless of what Bivens-Tatum asserts, there is no coherent way to separate out the historical/material realities of the enlightenment from its thought and values.

To further clarify, since Bivens-Tatum engages in an interesting, rhetorical sleight of hand: "If anything, it is the immanent critique within Enlightenment political thought that allows us to view the contrast between the the rhetoric and practice of, say, Thomas Jefferson, as a contradiction"[[7]](#footnote-6). This appears tantamount to Bivens-Tatum asserting that it is *because* of the enlightenment that we are able to criticize the enlightenment. Essentially, that it is an enlightened value of 'freedom' that allows us to perceive the contradiction of a slave-owner writing about freedom.

Strangely, this insistence on the complete hegemony of enlightenment values and thought in society today essentially proves the point I've been trying to make about the enlightenment as being one of many tools developed during the height of colonialism as a means for ensuring and maintaining white dominance over the world. That Bivens-Tatum fails to make room or space for criticisms of the enlightenment that occur from *outside* of the tradition represents his commitment to the myth-making hegemony of the enlightenment itself[[8]](#footnote-7). This is evident in his statement that "Their historical blindness to their own contradictions hardly negates the universal appeal of enlightened political thought"[[9]](#footnote-8).

Part of the point I'm making is that enlightenment values and political ideas do *not* have universal appeal. And framing it this way is, itself, a colonial act meant to enforce the current hegemony of the ideology. The reality is, colonialism has been resisted from the beginning and it continues to be resisted. Bivens-Tatum's responses to critics of the enlightenment has no space for anti-colonial/decolonization critiques of enlightenment thought and values.

This is, above all, where my current criticism of libraries is coming from: understanding them as an institution within a white supremacist settler state and, to the extent to which libraries embody enlightenment values, this is also a criticism of those values themselves. The ongoing existence of the settler state (especially if we are talking about Canada and/or the US) and all of its institutions necessitates continued resistance and working towards decolonization. A small part of which is deconstructing how even cherished and seemingly unassailable institutions like libraries continue the colonial project and, thus, are sites of violence and oppression.

### 2.3 'Libraries'

To a large extent, this paper will be focusing on public libraries, or, at least, the *idea* of public libraries. Libraries obviously existed before the enlightenment and pre-enlightenment it is pretty easy to see how libraries functioned as a way to entrench social disparities in power: few people were literate, few people had access to libraries, and education was definitely *not* something that your average person had access to.

The idea of libraries was created during this period. They are one of the (many) institutions created by the ideology of enlightenment, as Bivens-Tatum notes in the opening paragraph of his conclusion:'

The scientific and political principles of the Enlightenment provide the philosophical foundation for American academic and public libraries, and the ultimate goal to which these libraries as a system approach -- a universal library available to all -- would be the culmination of the Enlightenment project in the domain of information.[[10]](#footnote-9)

At this moment in time, it is harder for me to see academic libraries as fitting within this universal model, mainly because academic libraries aren't (often) understood as 'public' or as being accessible to individuals outside of the academic community[[11]](#footnote-10). More importantly, it is public libraries that exist within the minds and imaginations of the 'public' as embodying this romanticized ideal.

## 3. Whence libraries?

### 3.1 The historical genesis of libraries

The answer to the questions in the previous section partially rely on the history of libraries. Getting into the history of libraries can take many different paths, but for this paper we are going to follow along with the historical and intellectual context described by Bivens-Tatum in chapter three of *Libraries and the Enlightenment*. The chapter is rather delightfully titled "Public Libraries and the Political Enlightenment", something that rather supports my ideological approach for understanding the enlightenment.

In discussing the purpose of public libraries, he notes that:

Public libraries began as instruments of enlightenment, hoping to spread knowledge and culture broadly to the people, who as free citizens of a democratic republic required access to that knowledge and culture to live fuller lives and to become better citizens.[[12]](#footnote-11)

He also notes that public libraries pretty have much failed miserably on this account by not being widely used -- and that those who did use it were largely interested in entertainment[[13]](#footnote-12).

The first (and most obvious) conclusion we can draw from this is that public libraries in America were and always have been political. They have been, since their inception, creations of a specific and particular ideology. I'm also perfectly willing to follow Bivens-Tatum in saying that this ideology is that of the political enlightenment.

As such, it is pretty clear that Bivens-Tatum's idea that historical details and context have little bearing on the ideas can't hold much weight when we are, at least, speaking of public libraries. The fact that, for this discussion, we are talking about a specific country (the US), at a specific point in time are non-trivial details when attempting to understand the political impact of libraries and the impact politics had in shaping libraries as we know them. Indeed, this shaping by political forces is exactly what Bivens-Tatum discusses in the last section of the chapter[[14]](#footnote-13).

And, in anticipation of his arguments against 'revisionist histories' about the founding of public libraries[[15]](#footnote-14), I note that I am, in fact, following his account of the historical motivations and ideology surrounding the formation of libraries. I do honestly think that they were motivated by enlightenment ideals. Where we significantly depart is in statements like this, "we can have a reasonable pluralism in society, but only if everyone acknowledges the authority of the public democratic institutions'[[16]](#footnote-15).

So that my position is very clear: I *don't* acknowledge the authority of public democratic institutions. This is exactly *why* I'm writing a paper locating the library in institutional oppression. I'm not attempting to quibble about what is or isn't the enlightenment or what did or did not motivate the creation of public libraries. Part of my argument rests on the understanding that libraries, as an institution, are oppressive *because* of their relationship to a white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal settler state. And because of the exact reasons he describes: libraries are necessary for creating better citizens of a democratic state. This is one of the major reasons why, as they currently exist in Canada and the US, libraries are a tool of oppression, rather than of liberation.

### 3.2 Libraries are (and always have been) political institutions

When Bivens-Tatum writes:

Public libraries began as instruments of enlightenment, hoping to spread knowledge and culture broadly to the people, who as free citizens of a democratic republic required access to that knowledge and culture to live fuller lives and to become better citizens.[[17]](#footnote-16)

It becomes impossible not to understand that the primary purpose of libraries wasn't education (as he erroneously concludes from a claim like this[[18]](#footnote-17)) but political. Education within this ideological statement is only a means to an end: creating better citizens. In this instance 'better' equals 'better educated.'

Almost nothing in that statement about the purpose of libraries is value-neutral and apolitical. And it would be difficult to unpack everything that is oppressive about this motivation to create libraries.

One of the clear points of contention is 'citizen.' At the time that the first public library was founded in the US, only white people were citizens (and able to become citizens). Of course, citizenship in the US has been extended to many kinds of people today. However, the point I'm making about this relationship between libraries and citizenship is exactly that: 'citizen' is a flexible political category and who is or isn't a citizen depends entirely on the American settler state. As a consequence, we can see that libraries were never intended to be for 'everyone.'

Of course, not being for everyone isn't necessarily oppressive. We generally understand the purpose and value of some kinds of exclusionary spaces (like women's only shelters or cultural community centres). Even accepting that it is okay for libraries to be exclusionary spaces (which Bivens-Tatum wouldn't find acceptable[[19]](#footnote-18)), the fact that libraries are structurally inclined to benefit only those people who happened to be citizens when public libraries first became a reality should make us pause. Especially when we see someone like Bivens-Tatum arguing that "this is in fact the ultimate goal of both academic and public libraries, to make all knowledge accessible to every citizen, a universal library accessible to all"[[20]](#footnote-19).

It is interesting to note this strange conflation in Bivens-Tatum's claim, since he clearly thinks that 'everyone' is a citizen, which is demonstrably false. You only need to look at the rhetoric surrounding undocumented immigrants in the US to understand how much this isn't true and how much 'citizens' absolutely do not *want* it to be true. More importantly, we must also see a tension here with his earlier claims that "we can have a reasonable pluralism in society, but only if everyone acknowledges the authority of the public democratic institutions"[[21]](#footnote-20). The reality is this: so long as the purpose of libraries are this closely tied to supporting a settler state, they will never be able to "make all knowledge accessible"[[22]](#footnote-21), not when some knowledge has the ability to destabilize the settler state. Libraries are one means by which the settler state ensures its continued power.

In a context like this, many of the current real-world examples about how libraries are 'failing' marginalized people become clearly not a 'failure' but intentional. Public libraries in America and Canada were not designed for everyone; they are, as Bivens-Tatum says, intended for citizens. And their purpose is to create *better* citizens. This is not a politically neutral purpose.

If we view libraries as embodying a particular political ideology (that of enlightenment and its support for democracy) and if we understand that libraries were created to make citizens better, then libraries are sites of indoctrination. From this angle, public libraries were never intended to be universal, rather they were always going to include some information and exclude others. More importantly, so long as libraries are informed and constrained by the enlightenment ideology, they will never be universal or live up to the dream of containing all knowledge and making it accessible to all peoples.

### 3.3 Libraries and Liberalism

That liberalism is the main (or perhaps most successful) political ideology to come out of the enlightenment apparently goes without saying: "Liberalism is perhaps the most characteristic political philosophy of the Enlightenment"[[23]](#footnote-22). In my search for reference and resources for this paper, the connection between liberal philosophy and the enlightenment was simply taken as fact rather than something that needed to be established. And Bivens-Tatum definitely connects liberalism with the enlightenment in his book with no explanation or attempt at explaining the relationship. As such, I'm going to take this as a given: liberalism is the modern day embodiment of enlightenment values.

It does need to be noted, though, that liberalism as political philosophy/ideology is not really at all connected to political parties as they currently exist in Canada or the US. The type of liberal political ideology that was born out of the enlightenment fundamentally structures most contemporary political parties and organizations. This ideology broadly encapsulates the values of having a democratic state, freedom and inherent rights, etc. While current political parties debate about what counts as 'freedom' and how, exactly, the democratic state should be run, most of the larger, influential ones agree on these basic tenets[[24]](#footnote-23).

In the ALA's Code of Ethics, they write:

We significantly influence or control the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information. In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry, we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.[[25]](#footnote-24)

It should be fairly easy to see the parallels of this statement to what Bivens-Tatum notes was the original motivation for the creation of public libraries, at least as far as the 'political system grounded in an informed citizenry' is concerned.

As the Annoyed Librarian also notes:

Outside of a commitment to liberal democracy in general -- which, by the way, is the only regime that supports the intellectual freedom of writers, artists, historians, philosophers, etc. -- liberal institutions should take no substantive political position. A liberal library association would support intellectual freedom, access to information, and liberal democratic political institutions, but wouldn't go on to make political statements irrelevant to libraries.[[26]](#footnote-25)

While the Annoyed Librarian does think that the ALA (or at least parts of it) are failing this liberal standard, it doesn't make a difference to the reality that, failing or not, liberalism (and thus enlightenment) is the fundamental political philosophy informing how (at the very least) libraries and librarians think of themselves.

Last, as I began exploring in the previous section, we can see that, yes, libraries are political institutions and, from this section, they are politically liberal institutions (in the classical understanding of liberalism). This also means that regardless of what the Annoyed Librarian and ALA wish, the proposition that libraries (and librarians) be politically neutral is a self-defeating one. Claiming that libraries ought to be liberal institutions that take 'no substantive political position' is a political position in and of itself. And it is *not* a neutral one (if such a thing is even possible).

## 4 Libraries, democracy, and the logics of white supremacy

This part of the paper takes a substantive left turn from the outline, mainly because of issues with articles residing behind paywalls that would help me develop concrete lines of criticisms about the contemporary organization and structure of public libraries. I'm also focusing on only one line of criticism, white supremacy and decolonization, because of how focused my earlier sections are on the role that public libraries play (or ought to play) in maintaining a democratic (settler) state.

I'm also largely depending on Andrea Smith's understanding of how white supremacy is constituted:

We may wish to rearticulate our understanding of white supremacy by not assuming that it is enacted in a single fashion; rather, white supremacy is constituted by separate and distinct, but still interrelated, logics. I would argue that the three primary logics of white supremacy in the US context include: (1) slaveability/anti-black racism, which anchors capitalism; (2) genocide, which anchors colonialism; and (3) orientalism, which anchors war.[[27]](#footnote-26)

Since it provides an easy three lens view through which I can examine the library as institution within a larger, democratic settler state like the US or Canada I will demonstrate some of the claims I've made elsewhere in the paper.

Namely, that libraries, being liberal institutions, are not 'neutral' in the ways that many of the sources cited in this paper either want them to be or believe they are. Rather, the explicit and expressed function of libraries, from their inception in the US and Canadian political structures to their existence today, is to create an informed citizenry for the sake of democracy. This allows us to finally locate the library in institutional oppression.

### 4.1 The Logic of Slavery

Andrea Smith writes:

One pillar of white supremacy is the logic of slavery. This logic renders black people as inherently enslavable—as nothing more than property...This logic is the anchor of capitalism. That is, the capitalist system ultimately commodifies all workers: one’s own person becomes a commodity that one must sell in the labour market while the profits of one’s work are taken by somebody else. To keep this capitalist system in place—which ultimately commodifies most people—the logic of slavery applies a racial hierarchy to this system.[[28]](#footnote-27)

The way that libraries articulate this logic of white supremacy is expressed in the fourth statement in the ALA's Code of Ethics, "We respect intellectual property rights"[[29]](#footnote-28).

As stated in the preprint of "Property Rights and Capitalism in the *Oxford Handbook of Capitalism*, "property rights are a necessary but not sufficient condition for capitalism"[[30]](#footnote-29). When discussing how private property resolves the tragedy of the commons they note, "through the right to exclude, private property rights transform common pool resources into private goods. Excludability, together with the right to control and claim to value, eliminates both problems"[[31]](#footnote-30).

This is an important distinction from how many non-Black conceptualizations focus on Black labour in settler states:

Theories that attempt to triangulate Blackness into the Settler/Native antagonism in White settler states do so by positing Blackness as the labor force that helps make the settler landscape possible. It is true that Black labor literally tills, fences in and cultivates the settler’s land. However, this singular analysis both obscures the issue of Black fungibility and reduces Blackness to a mere tool of settlement rather than a constitutive element of settler colonialism’s conceptual order.[[32]](#footnote-31)

In attempting to understand how the logic of slavery informs and structures intellectual property, we can see from King that "the enslaved embody the abstract “interchangeability and replaceability” that is endemic to the commodity... Beyond, the captive body’s use as labor, the Black body has a figurative and metaphorical value that extends into the realm of the discursive and symbolic"[[33]](#footnote-32) and that "intellectual property is extremely important for capitalism"[[34]](#footnote-33). Lastly, "the overall trend in intellectual property protection is broadly correlated with the rise of capitalism. In fact, some institutional features associated with capitalism had to exist prior to the full development of intellectual property rights"[[35]](#footnote-34).

Thus, we can see that capitalism, as whole, rests on the logic of slavery and that intellectual property, as we know it today, is somewhat dependent on the existence of 'institutional features' of capitalism. As such, the ALA's avowed support for intellectual property entails support for capitalism and white supremacy, as one cannot currently 'respect intellectual property rights' without supporting the institutions of capitalism that gave rise to our current system and which, in turn, is fundamentally structured around the logic of slavery.

Of course, many people would counter this claim by saying that the manner by which libraries operate fundamentally contradicts this capitalist impulse by making 'intellectual property' freely accessible to the public. Except this isn't entirely true or, rather, it doesn't represent the entire picture.

When we look at the work of libraries, we begin to see that they actually play a significant role in not just 'respecting intellectual property' but in ensuring the stability of intellectual property itself. One mechanism through which libraries do this is through the creation of 'authority records': "An authority record is a tool used by librarians to establish forms of names (for persons, places, meetings, and organizations), titles, and subjects used on bibliographic records"[[36]](#footnote-35).

While the Library of Congress (LOC) makes it clear that authority records are created with the intent to improve accessibility, the mechanism they use for this ensures that every creative work necessarily has an identifiable owner. This is necessary in a system of capital wherein everything and everyone can (and likely will be) reduced to a commodity. Having 'orphaned works' creates a serious problem within a system of intellectual property and should be avoided where possible within capitalism[[37]](#footnote-36).

This is only one way that libraries come to be implicated via active participation in the logic of slavery, of capitalism, and of white supremacy. We can also see that libraries, regardless of their making 'knowledge' or 'information' accessible for free, do not actually challenge or resist this logic. Rather, libraries are another institution necessary for maintaining a system of intellectual property within a larger context of white supremacy that depends on the inherent enslavability of Black people.

### 4.2 The Logic of Genocide

According to Andrea Smith:

This logic holds that indigenous peoples must disappear. In fact, they must always be disappearing, in order to enable non-indigenous peoples’ rightful claim to land. Through this logic of genocide, non-Native peoples then become the rightful inheritors of all that was indigenous—land, resources, indigenous spirituality, and culture. Genocide serves as the anchor of colonialism: it is what allows non-Native peoples to feel they can rightfully own indigenous peoples’ land. It is acceptable exclusively to possess land that is the home of indigenous peoples because indigenous peoples have disappeared.[[38]](#footnote-37)

How libraries enforce this logic of white supremacy should be rather obvious by this point. It has been noted many times within this paper that libraries were created and continue to be conceived as institutions designed for benefit of creating an informed citizenry for the sake of democracy.

This can only be established as a value in a settler state like the US or Canada if the Indigenous peoples of this region have already disappeared. For 'Canada' and the 'United States' to continue to exist as democratic states (or for them to even be conceived as such) requires either that we understand that the Indigenous genocide is already complete or that we ensure that the genocide is ongoing. Since it is a fact that the Indigenous peoples of North America continue to exist, the ideal of libraries as liberal institutions existing to make democracy 'better,' thus stronger, is no less than an ideal wherein the genocide of Indigenous peoples is finally completed (putting democracy in its strongest possible position).

By and large, this is what is missing from Bivens-Tatum's glowing account of libraries and the enlightenment. He wants us to distinguish the historical and material realities of the enlightenment from its ideas/philosophy. Except his basic error is not realizing that the historical and material context of the enlightenment is not actually 'historical' at all. As we continue to grapple with the ideas of the enlightenment today, so do we grapple with the material conditions that both caused and are caused by the enlightenment (settler colonialism, white supremacy, etc).

However, we cannot be surprised by this, since the logic of genocide is "that indigenous peoples must disappear"[[39]](#footnote-38), so the absence of their struggle against settler colonialism in the US (and all other settler states) is necessary. This absence, of course, extends not only to their physical disappearance, but their disappearance from history and discourse. Thus, the ethical code for librarians is fundamentally rooted in the ongoing Indigenous genocides.

### 4.3 The Logic of Orientalism

As Andrea Smith states:

The logic of orientalism marks certain peoples or nations as inferior and deems them to be a constant threat to the wellbeing of empire... Consequently, orientalism serves as the anchor of war, because it allows the United States to justify being in a constant state of war to protect itself from its enemies. Orientalism allows the United States to defend the logics of slavery and genocide as these practices enable it to stay “strong enough” to fight these constant wars.[[40]](#footnote-39)

Smith doesn't go into the details of Orientalism, as it was developed by Edward Said[[41]](#footnote-40), but libraries firmly belong to the discursive space identified by Said as "a structured set of concepts, assumptions, and discursive practices that were used to produce, interpret, and evaluate knowledge about non-European peoples"[[42]](#footnote-41). It is this knowledge that informs the logic of orientalism described by Smith -- the logic that allows the US to justify its ongoing wars.

Libraries disguise their Orientalism by invoking the stance of neutrality: "We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources"[[43]](#footnote-42). However, it is pretty easy to see that libraries are far from neutral spaces. There are many examples in the literature about the ways that collection development[[44]](#footnote-43), reference[[45]](#footnote-44), cataloguing[[46]](#footnote-45), and many other library functions reveal deep biases in how the library as an institution exists. More importantly, as Bivens-Tatum himself writes, "we can have a reasonable pluralism in society, but only if everyone acknowledges the authority of the public democratic institutions"[[47]](#footnote-46). In such as situation, it is impossible for neutrality to exist.

Thus, if we look past this claim of neutrality and understand that it is an impossible position, we begin to understand how libraries come to articulate the logic of orientalism. Part of what made Said's work so groundbreaking and influential is that he demonstrated the way that knowledge creation within the empire is *not* (and never has been) a neutral activity and so the knowledge *itself* cannot be neutral. One of the interesting distinctions often drawn in library literature is between 'information' and 'knowledge'. Information is understood as neutral facts and knowledge is created when we understand information (or something like that). It is a tidy distinction that allows neutral librarians to feel like we are transmitting neutral facts, all unmediated by reality.

Most criticisms of library neutrality tend to focus on the librarians and/or institution, rather than the 'information' or 'knowledge' preserved, stored, communicated, and legitimized by libraries. This is something that definitely holds somewhat more true for research collections, like many academic libraries, over public libraries (but public libraries are still very much implicated in this). Said's claims are, in part, explorations about the epistemology of empire, of colonial expansion, and of war but few criticisms of library neutrality have examined or focused on the role that libraries have within the empire and its epistemology.

When we look into the collections, the actual 'information' contained in libraries and how it is organized, we can see that they (surely by accident) somehow manage to construct a reality wherein whiteness is default, normal, civilized and everything else is Other. In so doing, libraries very much participate in a larger imperial project that justifies war. We see that libraries very happily fulfill this expectation of Bivens-Tatum: "we can have a reasonable pluralism in society, but only if everyone acknowledges the authority of the public democratic institutions"[[48]](#footnote-47), since these 'public democratic institutions' he is discussing are constituent parts of the empire. Seen from this light, is it at all surprising that library collections play their happy role in the Orientalist project of creating the Other?

## 5 Conclusions

Looking back, now, at this paper and seeing what all I had to say during this excursion, one of the surprising themes (to me at least) is how often the concept of 'neutrality' came under fire, even though this was not intended. But, as I consider it now, it seems obvious to me that neutrality has been central to locating the library in institutional oppression. Simply a more complex concept of neutrality than is usually discussed within the literature, which tends to focus on the coherence of the neutrality of the individuals operating and working within libraries or on some of the processes and systems of libraries (like classification).

The main notion of neutrality that I challenge within this article is that of institutional neutrality. Regardless of many people's feelings about the coherence of individual neutrality, many have taken it as axiomatic that libraries are neutral institutions and that any failure of libraries to be neutral is largely the fault of individuals failing to live up to the ideals or ethics of the profession, rather than understanding the library as institution as fundamentally non-neutral. An institution that was created not only for a specific ideological purpose but for an ideology that is fundamentally oppressive in nature. As such, the failings of libraries can be re-interpreted not as libraries failing to live up to their ideals and values, but rather as symptoms and evidence of this foundational and oppressive ideology.

In tying my line of criticism to that of colonialism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy (but as a reminder: there are many other lines of criticism that can and ought to be explored when situating the library in institutional oppression), I also have the seeds of solutions, for those who want for such things. The clear solution is decolonization. Of course, this is a difficult prospect for many within the field since it precludes any solution that is reformist in nature; no reform is possible if we understand libraries as fundamentally white supremacist institutions.

For those who find this unpalatable, there is, perhaps, a worthwhile solution in decoupling libraries from their avowed goal in propping up and strengthening settler democracies. This could allow us to preserve the institution, but would require *drastic* and *daring* changes to the overall structure and organization of libraries. Libraries, unlike other institutions of settler states (like the judicial system), have at least some emancipatory potential. Again, though, this would require that libraries and librarians be willing to enact drastic changes.

Changes like entirely doing away with the LCSH and DDC. With creating new systems of classification that aren't fundamentally white supremacist by nature. It would require breaking and disrupting the system of intellectual property and other aspects of capitalism, especially the publishing industry. It would require disrupting the empire's mechanisms for creating 'knowledge' by not simply being a repository for imperial knowledge products. It would require supporting Indigenous resistance to the settler state.

Of course, all of this means breaking pretty much every established value and ideal of libraries today.

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4. And, in those cases where the enlightenment was responsible for causing it, it was justifying the series of events set in motion in earlier times. Moreover, much like the proverbial devil, the greatest trick that the enlightenment pulled was convincing the world we are better off for it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Bivens-Tatum, Wayne, *Libraries and the Enlightenment* (Library Juice Press, 2012), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. While this doesn't really fit into the scope of the paper, I wanted to point out just how simply the genocide of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas is erased with this quotation, by Matthew Wolfson on the enlightenment, "It was also the period in which North and South America were discovered, depopulated and then repopulated." 'Depopulated' is such a sanitary term for the genocide of *millions* of people. More to the point, this is an ongoing genocide as settler states like Canada and the US continue the colonial project. This is why using 'western' for 'white' is violent, as it erases the ongoing genocide of the Indigenous people of the Americas. It treats the colonial project of 'depopulating' and 'repopulating' the Americas as finished, when it is pretty clear that Indigenous peoples in Canada and the US continue to resist settler colonialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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9. Bivens-Tatum, Wayne, *Libraries and the Enlightenment* (Library Juice Press, 2012), 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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11. This is despite the reality that many academic libraries do, in fact pay additional money for licensing to their electronic resources so that people outside of the university can access the collections. Additionally, many do have open stacks (or easily obtainable guest passes to their physical collections -- and some with community library cards). However, academic libraries appear to do little in the way of outreach to the external community and very few community members actually know that they are able to make use of these research collections. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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