## Draft 11: Radical Empathy Report from the Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice Working Group

Libraries should be a force for social change. We in the American Library Association can no longer remain passive and compliant in the face of continuing inequity and injustice. We aspire to a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive future and refuse any longer to hide behind the practice of neutrality.

Having reviewed neutrality rhetoric and searched for an alternative as charged in [the Resolution to Condemn White Supremacy and Fascism as Antithetical to Library Work](https://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/ALA%20CD%2043%20Resolution%20to%20Condemn%20White%20Supremacy%20and%20Fascism%20as%20Antithetical%20to%20Library%20Work%20Final_0.pdf), the Working Group on Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice[[1]](#footnote-1) proposes the adoption of radical empathy as a framework for replacing neutrality, and we will explain how we came to this conclusion.

The library profession and its institutions have long perpetuated the myth of neutrality, but it is not accurate to suggest that libraries and library workers are neutral. In fact, libraries have historically had and continue to have, a primary role in upholding unjust systems of racism and discrimination. To claim neutrality in a system with inherent power differentials is to support the inequities that stem from those differentials and continue to privilege those in power.

Radical empathy, according to Terri Givens, calls for “moving beyond an understanding of others' lives and pain to understand the origins of our biases”[[2]](#footnote-2) including internalized oppression. Radical empathy is a framework for addressing inequities using six steps, which we suggest applying to library work through thoughtful questions:

1. **Being willing to be vulnerable**. How can library workers examine the structures of our institutions and our profession to identify the impact of structural racism and other built-in biases on how we do our work and interact with others?
2. **Becoming grounded in who you are**. What does it mean to know ourselves, to understand how we express that knowledge in our work, and to understand how other people are impacted by the systems of our society?
3. **Opening yourself to the experiences of others**. How should library workers open ourselves to the experiences of others? What does it look like to listen and learn to others as we do our work?
4. **Practicing empathy**. What does it mean to practice empathy in library work? What does this mean for neurodiverse people who may have different approaches to empathy? How can a library or association promote empathy through policies and practices? How do we build diverse perspectives into the way we approach our work?
5. **Taking action**. How do we move from rhetoric to action as library workers, institutions, and associations? How do we build connections and establish or strengthen communication?
6. **Creating change and building trust**. How can library workers and leaders work for effective change? What steps can we take to build trust within the profession and with our communities?

In order to provide 'the highest level of service to all library users'[[3]](#footnote-3) and facilitate the necessary structural changes to promote equity, library workers must practice radical empathy." However, library workers cannot be expected to make these changes on their own.

Radical empathy must also be practiced at the organizational level. While individual action is key to the success of implementing radical empathy, organizations and their governing bodies must set the tone by applying a lens of radical empathy to all policies and procedures, including institutional values, and make changes that reflect this shift in focus.

Through radical empathy, we can commit to combating implicit and explicit bias and dismantling structural inequities, such as white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, heteronormativity, trans-antagonism, and ableism. Radical empathy calls on library workers to prioritize marginalized people's safety and needs over privileged people’s comfort.

As each library moves from neutrality rhetoric policies to radical empathy it should take care to ensure that neurodivergent library workers, who may have limited capacity to engage in emotional empathy or cognitive empathy, are senstively considered.

We believe that radical empathy is one way to achieve the goal of a more equitable and inclusive future.

The [ALA's core values](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues) are anything but neutral. The positions and policy statements in the ALA Policy Manual spell out specific ethical commitments that demand sides be taken in contentious situations. It is important to be explicit about our beliefs and how they inform our work. As library workers, we should:

* advance and fully implement equity, diversity, inclusion, justice, and belonging in hiring, mentoring, supporting, and promoting library staff; and advocate for equity, diversity, inclusion, justice, and belonging in relationships with library vendors;
* promote equitable access to information, providing more assistance to those who need it most;
* provide a diversity of perspectives in our collections and resources highlighting communities that have historically been underrepresented or excluded;
* listen actively to recommendations of individuals from marginalized groups;
* ensure and advance equity in providing access to facilities, resources, and services;
* educate ourselves and our users about the critical evaluation of information and the structures in which it is created; and
* champion social justice, taking action to combat discrimination and systemic racism.

To succeed in these goals we propose radical empathy rather than neutrality as our guiding value.

## Additional Sources Consulted

Mike Murawski “[Towards a More Human-Centered Museum: Part 2, Building a Culture of Empathy](https://artmuseumteaching.com/2018/02/06/towards-a-more-human-centered-museum-part-2-building-a-culture-of-empathy/),” Art Museum Teaching, February 6, 2018.

Jennifer A. Ferretti, “[Neutrality is Hostility: The Impact of (False) Neutrality in Academic Librarianship](https://citythatreads.medium.com/neutrality-is-hostility-the-impact-of-false-neutrality-in-academic-librarianship-c0755879fb09),” Medium, February 13, 2018.

Dani Scott and Laura Saunders, “[Neutrality in public libraries: How are we defining one of our core values?](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0961000620935501),” *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, June 30, 2020.

1. The Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice Working Group was approved by the ALA Executive Board with representatives from the Accessibility Assembly; American Indian Library Association; Asian Pacific American Librarians Association; Black Caucus of the American Library Association; Chinese American Librarians Association; Committee on Diversity; Committee on Professional Ethics; Intellectual Freedom Committee; Joint Council of Librarians of Color; Library Services to the Justice Involved Interest Group; National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking; Rainbow Round Table; and the Social Responsibilities Round Table. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dr. Terri E. Givens, “[Radical Empathy: Finding a Path to Bridging Racial Divides](https://www.terrigivens.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Terri-Bio-1.pdf),” Brighter Higher Ed, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [*American Library Association’s Code of Ethics*](http://www.ala.org/tools/ethics), adopted 1939 by the ALA Council; amended June 30, 1981; June 28, 1995; January 22, 2008; and June 29, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)