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Referencing Audre Lorde

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Referencing Audre Lorde

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Lorde: a refugee librarian who sought asylum in writing. This close reading and textual analysis of canonical texts, speeches, and archived audio recordings of Audre Lorde embraces Lorde's many identities, including her identity as a librarian who chose to depart from the library as a means of survival.[1] As reference librarians, we should study Lorde's example. It is our duty as reference librarians today to learn from Lorde's choice to act in a space where silence can be transformed into language and action. If we are able to acknowledge these limitations and opportunities in our own service and institutional structures, we may move toward a realm of reference librarianship and justice.

Aside from the work-in-progress research by librarian Dr. Ethelene Whitmire, there is no comprehensive publication on Audre Lorde's life as a librarian.[2] Until Whitmire's use of unpublished archival evidence is unveiled, what is currently available on Lorde as a librarian are brief autobiographical sketches from interviews or secondary-sourced chronologies.

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1   This is in direct contrast to other close readings of Lorde which view Lorde's poetry, teachings, fiction, or speeches as post-nationalist, lesbian-feminist, or non-essentialist.

2   Ethelene Whitmire, "The Audre Lorde Was a Librarian Project: Audre Lorde, Black Lesbian Feminist Mother Poet Warrior, Was a Librarian," *The Audre Lorde Was a Librarian Project*, April 9, 2013, http://theaudrelordelibrarianproject.blogspot.com/2013/04/audre-lorde-black-lesbian-feminist.html.

We learn that it was Lorde's intention to become a librarian as a way to effect social change. This was coupled with her experience as a young adult coming of age in libraries—where she experienced from both books and the physical library a sense of joy.[3] Her first position at a library was as a young adult librarian at the Mount Vernon, New York Public Library in 1960. She then completed her Masters in Library Science from Columbia University in 1961. By 1968, Lorde served as Head Librarian at the private Town School in New York City. The good feeling that the library provided would eventually prove to be "not enough" for Lorde.[4] She published her first volume of poetry in 1968 and also taught her first writing course from a National Endowment for the Arts grant at Tougaloo College, Mississippi. This transition led her to become a lecturer at City College of the City University of New York, a simultaneous shift with her introduction to Frances Clayton, whom she would spend almost two decades as life partner. Upon leaving librarianship, Lorde moved toward identifying her life as a lesbian/poet/revolutionary.

What then, can we learn from Lorde's transition from librarian to lesbian/poet/revolutionary? What if anything, did Lorde carry with her from her librarian training to the world of poetry, teaching, and community leadership? And how do we *reference Audre Lorde* and her work in our own library reference practice?

Refugee Librarian

As a United States-born, West-Indian-identified activist, Lorde's identification with nation and state was deeply rooted in her Black radical feminism and teachings of unification. In describing Lorde's diasporic relationships to Grenada, her ancestral home-country, Black lesbian scholar Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs supplies Lorde's analysis of military engagement amongst Black soldiers: "Lorde tells us … we are related through racist systems that we do not control, and we can create solidarity only if we acknowledge our

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3   Nina Winter, "Audre Lorde," in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, ed. Audre Lorde and Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 11.

4   Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, "An Interview with Audre Lorde," *Signs* 6, no. 4 (1981): 722.

different relationships to power."[5] The institutional affiliation of the library with the State was likely antithetical to Lorde's revolutionary transitions and identifications. Scholar Cheryl Higashida identifies Lorde's connections to a multi-layered nationalism, which she coins as a "cultural nationalism." Higashida posits,

> Lorde's post-invasion prose and poetry that she most explicitly and consistently explores [is] a nationalist internationalism positing that African Americans are morally and politically bound to support Third World and indigenous struggles for national sovereignty and that anti-colonial struggles illuminate and impact African Americans' situation in the United States as an oppressed people.[6]

These international and diasporic layers of nationalism, coupled with second-wave Black feminism are highly referenced in Lorde's text "Grenada Revisited," which Higashida views as a "beginning of a new leg of Lorde's political development."[7] Higashida explains, "Lorde fully elaborates her nationalist internationalism in 'Grenada Revisited' which counters U.S. state discourses… In doing so, she foregrounds the impact of independence and (neo)colonialism."[8]

For Lorde, teaching was "a survival technique."[9] The sense of joy that was once attributed to the library was "no longer enough" for Lorde, prompting her to move into a realm of social justice.[10] An exit from an administrative and non-faculty position in Library and Information Science to a field suited for revolutionary action (one which could be argued was made possible by the autonomy granted to a college lecturer, poet, and scholar with faculty status) is indicative of a political need to exit from the role of administering tasks

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5 Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "'But We Are Not the Same': Generating a Critical Poetics of Diaspora," in *Audre Lorde's Transnational Legacies*, eds. Sabine Broeck and Stella Bolaki (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 169.

6 Cheryl Higashida, "Audre Lorde Revisited: Nationalism and Second-Wave Black Feminism," in *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945–1995* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 137.

7 Ibid., 137.

8 Ibid., 141.

9 Lorde and Rich, "An Interview with Audre Lorde," 719.

10 Ibid., 722.

for the nation-state. This comparison of library to state is congruous with Stephen E. Bales's application of French Marxist Louis Althusser's concept of the "Ideological State Apparatus" (ISA), where he provides a Marxist analysis of academic libraries in the western world as educational and religious ISAs. "These early library temples helped to maintain the political/economic *status quo,* illustrating the seemingly perpetual connection between religion, politics, and money."[11] Lorde's intention to move outside of, or at the very least to no longer perpetuate oppressive systems, led her to a natural progression outside of the library. Her relationship to power and its practical application, it is argued here, did not however remove her applications of reference service or learned librarianship from her continued teaching and writing practice.

War in the realm of the unicorn

Swaziland-born artist Nandipha Mntambo creates sculpture of the female body and identity in relation to her creation of half-woman and half-bull figures. In her use of the bull, Mntambo articulates "a fascination with 'the in-between space and how it leads to understanding the world in a more global way."[12] Creating visual representations of space that reside between "the binaries of attraction/repulsion, male/female, animal/human, myth/reality, black/white, Africa/Europe," Mntambo's use of her own body and her mother's body to construct these mythological forms suggest that "… the politics of representing *other people* is complex and can create strange friction" (italics mine).[13] If compared to Mntambo's bull-creatures, Lorde's metaphorical creatures in her collection of poetry, *Black Unicorn,* urge the reader in a "Litany for Survival" to speak in a world where silence is expected and encouraged. Lorde writes: "and when we speak we are afraid/ our words will not be heard/ nor welcomed/ but when we are silent/ we are still afraid/ So it is better to speak/ remembering/ we were never meant to survive."[14]

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11   Stephen E. Bales, "The Academic Library as Crypto-Temple: A Marxian Analysis," in *Class and Librarianship: Essays at the Intersection of Information, Labor and Capital*, eds. Erik Sean Estep and Nathaniel F. Enright (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016), 8.

12   Seattle Art Museum, Fowler Museum at UCLA, and Brooklyn Museum, *Disguise: Masks and Global African Art*, 2015, 34.

13   Ibid.

14   Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," in *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (New York: Norton, 1978), 31–32.

As with her teaching, Lorde's unicorn responds to a need for survival. Like Mntambo's bull, Lorde repels the friction created by normative binaries and instead measures the "we" inside of a unifying in-between space. In these definitions, "we" are all in-between. If one considers their many self-identifying qualities, there is likely a piece of ourselves that has been pushed to silence, that resides between the binaries, that is authentically our body or that of our mother. Separation from *other people*, any group outside of our own parallelisms, is the first step to understanding self-determination, to then understand how we are similarly "related" to the "systems that we do not control."[15]

Lorde's identification with lesbian feminist, and at times separatist, frameworks can inform reference work and service. In-between spaces create strange friction at the reference desk, for example, a space that holds two or more co-existing bodies negotiating boundaries and hierarchical roles, which will contextualize the exchange of information at bay.[16] Friction is further exacerbated if and when the representations of the bodies which occupy the reference desk already hold societally inequitable positions. Using Lorde's response to a need for survival, or perhaps her decision to leave librarianship for teaching, we are reminded of the stark power relationship between librarian and user. Further, if we consider the library an ISA, and if it is from the State that we, those of us who champion social justice, all fight to survive, the library will not shield us from social death.

Whiteness Studies in Library and Information Science defines societal inequity as a collective truth. According to librarians of the online journal, *In the Library with the Lead Pipe,* librarian nina de jesus suggests that through a lens of whiteness, "libraries very much participate in a larger imperial project that justifies war."[17] In the case where a patron and a librarian

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15 Gumbs, "'But We Are Not the Same': Generating a Critical Poetics of Diaspora," 169. A reiteration of the quote on noting the relationships between black soldiers from different nations.

16 Shawn(ta) D. Smith, "Patricia's Child, Patrick's Penis & the Sex of Reference: A Lesbian Librarian's Log of Perverse Patronage," in *Out behind the Desk: Workplace Issues for LGBTQ Librarians*, ed. Tracy Marie Nectoux, Series on Gender and Sexuality in Librarianship, no. 1 (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2011). In this essay, I articulate a personal example of an exchange at the reference desk, where the librarian may be victim of sexual harassment as a result of the implied and actual sexual orientations of the librarian and patron.

17 nina de jesus, "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, September 24, 2014, http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-the-library-in-institutional-oppression.

are of differing if not contrasting races, genders, ages, sexual orientations, or religions, whiteness is active during the reference interaction. As librarian April Hathcock writes, "the normativity of whiteness works insidiously, invisibly, to create binary categorizations of people as either acceptable to whiteness and therefore normal or different and therefore other."[18] Despite this binary recognition of whiteness, the solution can only exist outside of the realm of the State, which could mean a solution only exists outside of the library space. In the realm of the bull and the unicorn, where "we" exist in an in-between space, where we were never meant to survive, where the library is an apparatus upholding the regime of the nation-state, regardless of the identities of either individual, once any two bodies meet the friction persists, and without a doubt the two bodies are at war.

In 1977, Lorde spoke on a panel at the Modern Language Association in Chicago and subsequently published this talk as "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" in *Sinister Wisdom, A Lesbian Literary and Art Journal* in 1978. One of her most canonical speeches, Lorde reveals her confrontation with death as a result of preparing for an unexpected need for breast surgery. In addition, she notes that this battle for survival led her to recall life's regrets, which she found, were her silences. "Death," she says, "is the final silence."[19] Lorde's meditation on silence can be synonymous with the iconic caricature of the "shh-ing librarian." In the library, our immobilization from the very act of silence and silencing feeds tools of whiteness. Lorde teaches us that despite an inescapability of whiteness, "it is not difference that immobilizes us, but silence."[20]

Survival amidst silence

By the 1980s, Lorde was a frequent public speaker, leading international discussions on language, poetry, and social change. One speech in particular was an address to the Black feminist community of the Women's Center of Medgar Evers College at the City University of New York. Her

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18   April Hathcock, "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 7, 2015, http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe. org/2015/lis-diversity/.

19   Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 40.

20   Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action."

speech, "I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities" was later published as a pamphlet as a part of the Freedom Organizing Pamphlet Series of the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Of the many points made in this speech, a pivotal lesson comes at the very start.

> Black women are not one great vat of homogenized chocolate milk. We have many different faces, and we do not have to become each other in order to work together. It is not easy for me to speak here with you as a Black Lesbian feminist, recognizing that some of the ways in which I identify myself make it difficult for you to hear me. But meeting across difference always requires mutual stretching, and until you can hear me as a Black Lesbian feminist, our strengths will not be truly available to each other as Black women.[21]

In the above quote, Lorde assumes a formulation of agency for both parties. "Mutual stretching" is required "across difference." In order for two entities to truly meet each other difference must be penetrated, intersected. Meeting across difference is synonymous to enacting the line connecting two binaries—channeling that in-between space is required to share strengths. This is a radical formula to apply to reference service, which assumes a hierarchical position on behalf of the library (State) and the patronage. In the remainder of the chapter, an in-depth look of this formula, outlined as a three-step process, will further explain how we may reference Lorde in our future applications of reference service with an aim to employ social justice in our work.

In Lorde's concept of sisterhood and embracing difference, a student does not need to know the library as the librarian does in order to navigate the space. Similarly, the librarian does not need to know more about the patron than is provided by the patron on his or her own terms. "Because I feel it is urgent that we do not waste each other's resources, that we recognize each sister on her own terms so that we may better work together toward our mutual survival."[22] Among any differing groups, whether it be Black-lesbian-feminist/Black-non-lesbian-feminist (as it was in the "I Am Your Sister Speech") or librarian/patron (as it is here), it is in the in-between space which is required to assure mutual survival. For Lorde, this formula of survival could be stated in three parts: 1) Acknowledgement of

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21   Audre Lorde, "I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities," in *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 19.

22   Ibid., 20.

difference, 2) mutual stretching (to hear past the silences), and, 3) resource sharing to ultimately receive each other on her own terms.

This three-step process is cyclical. Meeting someone on her own terms, step three, means an acknowledgement of difference, step one. Lorde aims to clarify by stating: "I do not want you to ignore my identity, nor do I want you to make it an insurmountable barrier between our sharing of strengths."[23] A Black lesbian poet and contemporary of Lorde, Pat Parker, makes a similar claim in her well-known poem, "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend." In the first verse, Parker writes, "The first thing you do is to forget that I'm Black./ Second, you must never forget that I'm Black."[24]

Archival material of Lorde

A summary of Audre Lorde's special collection of materials (special because these are the materials that she chose to donate) can be found on a curated WordPress site of selected archival special collections held at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA). The description of her collection states:

> Audre Lorde (1934–1992) was a poet, activist, and influential feminist thinker. This collection consists primarily of drafts, manuscripts, and corrected proofs of her writings, including Zami: *A New Spelling of My Name* and *The Black Unicorn*. Lesbian Herstory Archives also has a large collection of digitized Audre Lorde tapes. Holdings include a recording of Audre Lorde's famous "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" speech from the Second Sex Conference at NYU in 1979. Please note that some of Audre Lorde's collection is stored offsite. If you are a researcher interested in her collection, you are advised to contact Lesbian Herstory Archives in advance of your visit. [2.085 linear ft.][25]

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23 Ibid.

24 Pat Parker, *The Complete Works of Pat Parker*, ed. Julie R. Enszer, First edition, Sapphic Classics 102 (Brookville, NY: A Midsummer Nights Press; Dover, FL: Sinister Wisdom, Inc., 2016), 76.

25 Lesbian Herstory Archives, "1979–1983," *Special Collections: A Guide to Lesbian Herstory Archives' Special Collections*, July 24, 2012, https://herstoryspecialcollections.wordpress.com/1979-1983/.

Lorde's special collection, numbered 8323, as the twenty-third collection processed in 1983, includes additional references to photographs, audio recordings, video recordings, books of poetry, and ephemeral materials housed in other parts of the collection. Her audio recordings were digitized as a result of a project and collaborative relationship with a local library school who subsequently donated digital audio recordings back to LHA and created an Omeka site hosted on their servers to share Lorde's voice.[26]

Of the many recordings, three sides of tape represent the facilitation of the *Committee for the Visibility of the Other Black Woman* event held in New York City in 1980. Lorde's facilitation style in a room of lesbians was very "librarian," by enacting the theories of the three-part formula outlined above. As if listening to a bibliographic instruction session, with community self-determination rather than databases as its source material, this archival evidence illustrates Lorde's process of placing herself at the center, while simultaneously exhibiting the expectation from others to do the same. To adequately reference Audre Lorde as a conduit for library reference work, her voice, or in this case, transcript excerpts, will lead to a better understanding of her praxis.

Audre Lorde constructing an In-between space

The *Committee for the Visibility of the Other Black Woman* held an event to commemorate and introduce the community of women in New York City to the first national Black Lesbian Conference, set to occur on October 17–19 1980 in San Francisco. Livinia Pinscin, a member of the Committee, and board member of the first third-world-women (lesbian of color) lesbian organization in the country, *Salsa Soul Sisters*, introduced the event by naming Audre Lorde as a "surprise facilitator" followed by cheers from the

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26   Shawn(ta) D. Smith-Cruz, "Tape-by-Tape : Digital Practices and Cataloging Rituals at the Lesbian Herstory Archives," in *Queers Online: LGBT Digital Practices in Libraries, Archives, and Museums*, ed. Rachel Wexelbaum (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2015), 85–110. More on this relationship and digitization process can be found in this book chapter. In "Tape-By-Tape," I describe Maxine Wolfe, an LHA coordinator who spearheaded and negotiated the project and who mailed Audre Lorde's family copies of the recordings before they went live onto the website. I recall the voicemail left on the LHA answering machine by Elizabeth Lorde Rollins, Lorde's daughter, who was overcome with generosity at the sound of her mother's voice emitting from the newly digitized recordings inside the surprise package. Her emotional output can be reimagined by a listening to these remarkable recordings currently available online.

women in the room. Lorde begins her facilitation by interrupting herself: "When Livinia spoke of the Black Lesbian community, she said very rightly so that we were a very diverse (can you hear me in the back?—a little louder, okay well why don't I stand up)." This act of self-interruption, in order to ensure a cohesive room was followed by a change in her own positioning—she subsequently stood up so that she could be heard. This move of her own body not only allowed for her own voice to be audible, but immediately changed the dynamics of the room, which had up until that point, focused on a hierarchy of speaker, and audience. Lorde did not address the room, she worked *with* the room to engage in mutual stretching.

Once Lorde stands, she goes on to speak for two minutes, all of which is excerpted here by my transcription:

> I think it's very true that we are a very diverse group. And this diversity should be not a reason for necessarily conflict, but it should be a source of our strength. However, I think we need to remember that as black lesbians we nonetheless have grown up in what is a very abnormal situation. Which is this society, that tells us to begin with, the fact that we are black women, meaning that we are cyphers, the fact that we are black women-identified-women, black lesbians, make us even less so. Okay? But it is not diversity, it is not *difference* which is the source of conflict, but our inability to recognize those differences, our inability to recognize each other and our differences, and to work together. As I said a few nights ago, we have been schooled within this place to believe that "comfortable sameness" is the answer to all of our problems, but that same "comfortable sameness" that we want to relax into inevitably becomes another name for death. So at the same time as we recognize our differences, they are not reasons to separate us, they are reasons to bring us together. They are a kind of wonder, a kind of cross-pollination that we could all enjoy, that we can all deal with, that really can fuel our movements for change. And I think we need to keep that in mind both when we listen to our speakers, and when we begin to deal within ourselves what are the pieces within each one of us, right, that harkens to something we are not familiar with; what are the pieces within ourselves that we

can use and expand, out of contact with someone or something, that is very different from ourselves.[27]

A close reading of Lorde's opening facilitative remarks mirror ideas promoted in her writings and speeches. She continues to reiterate that difference and self-recognition are tools toward unification and survival. Lorde defines collective truths: diversity, societal burdens, and a false sense of community through sameness as another name for death. If, however, we apply the survival formula, then Lorde enacts acknowledgement, mutual stretching, and resource sharing. 1) Acknowledgement of difference is expressed plainly by defining diversity as a collective truth. 2) Mutual stretching (to hear past the silences) is enacted by the call to notice the "comfortable sameness," to then push past this comfort to hear beyond what is recognizable. Finally, Lorde shows the room how to participate in 3) resource sharing to ultimately receive each other on ones own terms, to reach inside ourselves—activated by "contact with someone or something, that is very different from ourselves."

Conclusion

Lorde's teachings and philosophies may be applied to library service only if we understand the library as a structure that supports a maladjusted and inequitable State. Reference librarians' roles as individual bodies, interacting with other individual bodies, during one-on-one reference interactions, or in large classroom instructions, are ripe with the opportunities to come into "contact with someone or something, that is very different from ourselves." Acknowledgement of these differences, mutually stretching, and then sharing our resources on our own terms is a challenging yet possible move toward survival.

To those reading this book, or happening upon this book chapter, this formula for referencing Lorde may seem redundant to current practice, however, it should not be assumed that librarians harbor tools for interaction that include acknowledgement, mutual stretching and resource

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27 Audre Lorde, *Conflicts in the Black Lesbian Community, Brooklyn NY, Organized by the Committee on the Visibility of the Other Black Woman (Tape 2 of 3)* (Committee for the Visibility of the Other Black Woman), accessed April 12, 2017, http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/document/SPW1163. Transcribed from digitized online version, omitting any additional voices for the purposes of this chapter.

sharing. Policies are being adopted slowly, such as the ACRL *Framework*[28] which calls for increased engagement in student interaction during instruction and derives its conceptual analyses from "metaliteracy with special focus on metacognition, or critical self-reflection, as crucial to becoming more self-directed in that rapidly changing [information] ecosystem."[29] The six frames of the ACRL *Framework* as a result, are directly related to Lorde's three-part-formula. The first frame, Authority is Constructed, for example, contains a disposition for learners to "develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview."[30]

A distinction from Lorde and the frames, however, is highlighted in Lorde's focus on collective truths of difference within the State, which acts as an apparatus from which we all seek to survive. Compared to the first frame, where individual bodies are named as "learners," "experts," and "authorities," Lorde's work teaches us (think back to the land of the unicorn) that "we" have the ability to exist in an in-between space, where distinctions of hierarchy need not continue to immobilize us. Focusing on the dispositions of diverse worldviews and consciousness of frequent self-evaluation, as the frame suggests, is made more powerful when applied to Lorde's disposition of a focus on survival.

This distinction of Lorde's work as a librarian, compared to her societal contributions as a mother/poet/revolutionary, locates her efforts and identities inside of an imagined space, a library space, thereby creating a new paradigm for understanding and interpretation. This chapter's imagining, to *reference Lorde,* is to imagine her as a librarian during her years inside the public and school library, to remember her actions as an educator inside the classroom, and to recall her facilitation inside conferences and workshops populated by a community of lesbians and writers. In consideration for how to enact a reference interaction that promotes social justice, referencing Lorde will mean seeking refuge in an in-between space, as if our survival depended on it, and fleeing traditional library/patron dichotomous behavior, beyond silence.

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28   American Library Association, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," Text, *Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL)*, (February 9, 2015), http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

29   Ibid.

30   Ibid.

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