

Article

# Thinking Categorically: Why is Library and Information Studies Afraid of Power?

Mary Greenshields and Lydia Zvyagintseva

## ABSTRACT

Why does librarianship hang on to the strict division of the object of inquiry and the subject pursuing inquiry? This paper adopts a conversational form, as seen in feminist work such as Nancy Fraser, Rahel Jaeggi, and Brian Milstein's *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (2018) and Carol Gilligan and Naomi Snider's *Why Does Patriarchy Persist?* (2018) in order to explore the contradiction between activism and research in library and information studies (LIS). We chose this form to connect our philosophical approach with our work, as well as to contribute to a growing body of scholarly work written in forms beyond the traditional empirical article. Our research questions in this conversation are: Is it truly possible to transform the field and what is the implied state of transformation? In exploring these questions, we draw on our experience and several examples of research projects that combine activism and inquiry in LIS, digital humanities, and interdisciplinary education in North America. Projects and movements explored include: We Here//UpRoot Knowledge, Dark Laboratory, Land Grab Universities, and Blackfoot Digital Library. While committed to building community among practitioners and scholars in the field, we are ultimately skeptical of the extent to which the field can indeed be transformed through discursive means alone. We see the devaluation of research by practitioners and the immaterial labor of their activism, pitted against the valuation of "pure research" as the legitimized form of liberal idealist philosophy in LIS. Further, we emphasize that new theoretical frameworks are necessary for LIS to consider

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transformation that unites both material and immaterial aspects of librarianship, including the dynamic constituent power and assemblage as collective power within the profession.

## INTRODUCTION

For whom does librarianship toil? This is a guiding question for our exploration of where activism and research intersect, if they do indeed, in library and information studies (LIS). The underlying assumption behind the training of librarians and their preparation for practice is that more effective assemblage of information in research projects leads to better results. Do these results stand on their own, however, or do they transform society in some way? While committed to building community among practitioners and scholars in the field, we are ultimately skeptical of the extent to which the field can indeed be transformed through discursive means alone.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a conversational form, as seen in feminist work such as Nancy Fraser, Rahel Jaeggi, and Brian Milstein's *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*,<sup>1</sup> and Carol Gilligan and Naomi Snider's *Why Does Patriarchy Persist?*<sup>2</sup> in order to explore the contradiction between activism and research in LIS. We chose this form to connect our philosophical approach with our work, as well as to contribute to a growing body of scholarly work written in forms beyond the traditional empirical article. The conversational form is a long-standing methodology in feminist scholarship, ranging from mentor/mentee and established scholars' philosophical conversations,<sup>3</sup> to published discussions between activists.<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with feminist conversation analysis, a methodology used to analyze interview data in the social sciences, we approach discourse on assemblage in LIS through a shared conversation between two white cis-female Canadian academic librarians with the goal of subverting the value-free lens purportedly applied in the social sciences to explore our engagement and experience of the ideas presented in this research. Feminist methodology may be understood to exhibit features that separate it from positivist methodologies, as well as features that are particularly useful in considering social movements and discursive means: a diverse, gendered perspective; an experiential and participatory approach; reflexivity; hierarchical subversion; and a social change focus.

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Fraser, Rahel Jaeggi, and Brian Milstein, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Carol Gilligan and Naomi Snider, *Why Does Patriarchy Persist?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See Fraser, Jaeggi and Milstein and Gilligan and Snider, among others.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia McFadden and Patricia Twasiima, *A Feminist Conversation: Situating Our Radical Ideas and Energies in the Contemporary African Context* (Mozambique: Maputo Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018).

Our approach to this work has been to discuss the topic via a shared document in the cloud and to later weave into our musings the scholarship we have drawn from to form and support our perspectives.

## CONVERSATION

**MARY:** We have heard of many “turns” in the academy over the last 50 years: for example, the linguistic,<sup>5</sup> spatial,<sup>6</sup> and data<sup>7</sup> turns. Have you observed a new turn, perhaps toward activism, or what some might describe as “engaged scholarship”?

**LYDIA:** Yes! In the past two years, I participated in the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI). Even in fields focused on the empirical or technical aspects of inquiry, of which the Digital Humanities (DH) have been accused, more and more space is being dedicated to questions of the social. For example, DHSI offered courses like, “Race, Social Justice and DH: Applied Theories and Methods,” “Pedagogy of the Digitally Oppressed: Anti-Colonial DH Critiques & Praxis,” and “Surveillance and Critical Digital Humanities.” Further, the publication of volumes, such as *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory*, *Beyond Accommodation: Creating an Inclusive Workplace for Disabled Library Workers*, and *Borders and Belonging: Critical Examinations of Library Approaches toward Immigrants*, have added to the growing body of literature on critical librarianship and information studies in recent years.<sup>8</sup> This includes the launch of new journals, such as the *Journal of Critical Digital Librarianship*,<sup>9</sup> in an area of LIS which, much like DH, has typically not explored issues of power until recently. Thus, we may see scholarly activity like this as evidence of the so-called “social turn” in

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Charles W. J. Withers, “Place and the ‘Spatial Turn’ in Geography and in History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 4 (October 2009).

<sup>7</sup> See Gary Hall, “Toward a Postdigital Humanities: Cultural Analytics and the Computational Turn to Data-Driven Scholarship,” *American Literature* 85, no. 4 (2013); Baiyang Li, Yaqian Song, Xinyu Lu, and Lihong Zhou, “Making the Digital Turn: Identifying the User Requirements of Digital Scholarship Services in University Libraries,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2020.102135>.

<sup>8</sup> See also Nicole A. Cooke and Miriam E. Sweeney, *Teaching for Justice: Implementing Social Justice in the LIS Classroom* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017); Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017); and Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> The journal was launched in 2021.

contemporary research.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, engaged scholarship, as the integration of research methodologies and community development, has its own tradition rooted in American Pragmatism and participatory action research, with works by Boyer<sup>11</sup> and Hoyt<sup>12</sup> defining the parameters of this area of study. In this sense, engaged scholarship is not new. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 sparked a wave of anti-racism discussions, book clubs, events, and meetings in learning organizations across North America<sup>13</sup> but, clearly, little has changed structurally to address the inequity of BIPOC communities in the United States and Canada. For example, the Canadian federal government recently appealed a court's decision to uphold a Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling on Indigenous child welfare compensation<sup>14</sup> while teaching Critical Race Theory or even the history of racism continues to be restricted or banned in parts of the United States.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, this is because, fundamentally, the material conditions of exploitation based on race, class, gender, ability, and other constructs, remain built into

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<sup>10</sup> See William Hirst and Suparna Rajaram, "Toward a Social Turn in Memory: An Introduction to a Special Issue on Social Memory," *Journal Of Applied Research In Memory and Cognition* 3, no. 4 (2014): 239-243, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2014.10.001>; Constanza Miranda, Julian Goni, and Trinidad Sotomayor, "Embracing the Social Turn: Epistemic Change in Engineering Students Enrolled in an Anthro-Design Course," *International Journal Of Technology And Design Education* 32 (2022): 2697-2724, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10798-021-09699-x>.

<sup>11</sup> See Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, 1st ed, (Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990); and Ernest L. Boyer, "The Scholarship of Engagement," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 49, no. 7 (1996).

<sup>12</sup> Lorlene Hoyt, *Transforming Cities and Minds through the Scholarship of Engagement: Economy, Equity, and Environment*, (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> See Saida Grundy, "The False Promise of Anti-Racism Books," *The Atlantic*, July 21, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/07/your-anti-racism-books-are-means-not-end/614281/>; Tre Johnson, "When Black People Are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs," *Washington Post*, June 11, 2020. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/white-antiracist-allyship-book-clubs/2020/06/11/9edcc766-abf5-11ea-94d2-d7bc43b26bf9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/white-antiracist-allyship-book-clubs/2020/06/11/9edcc766-abf5-11ea-94d2-d7bc43b26bf9_story.html).

<sup>14</sup> See Olivia Stefanovich and Nick Boisvert, "Ottawa Will Appeal Court Ruling on Indigenous Child Welfare but Says It's Pursuing a Compensation Deal," *CBC*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ottawa-federal-court-ruling-appeal-decision-child-welfare-1.6229567>.

<sup>15</sup> Taifha Alexander, LaToya Baldwin Clark, Kyle Reinhard, Noah Zatz, *CRT Forward: Tracking the Attack on Critical Race Theory—A Report from CRT Forward's Tracking Project* (Los Angeles: UCLA School of Law Critical Race Studies Program, 2023), [https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/UCLA-Law\\_CRT-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/UCLA-Law_CRT-Report_Final.pdf).

the social order in which we live. Libraries, of course, operate in this wider context and have similarly begun to examine the sociopolitical landscape in which we exist and labor.<sup>16</sup>

**MARY:** Part of this questioning includes conversations circulating in LIS about the division between social movements and our work in academic libraries. Do you see a conflict between our positionality and our work?

**LYDIA:** The division between activism and scholarly work hinges on the strict separation of the object of study and the subject conducting the study. This core epistemological structure was coined by Karl Jaspers and is based on the irreversible difference between the object of knowledge and the knower pursuing it: “This primordial phenomenon of our conscious existence is so natural to us that we hardly feel its riddle because we do not even question it. What we think, of which we speak, is always different from us, is what we, the subjects, are directed towards as something opposite, the objects.”<sup>17</sup>

This is a foundation of Enlightenment thought that permeates all aspects of academia to this day and is so naturalized to us that to question it seems heretical. This separation is also the basis of striving toward objectivity and neutrality in all matters, which may manifest in the design of policies of information access.<sup>18</sup> Yet scholars employing feminist, queer, Indigenous, and other research methodologies have been emphasizing for years how this division is constructed for a particular purpose and how, when it comes to social matters, in areas such as social sciences and the humanities, any pretense of objectivity is ultimately flawed. We must remember that LIS work is fundamentally about people, and as such, should position itself in the social realm rather than don the cloak of empiricism. On this note, are there areas of librarianship in which you see LIS specifically enforce this separation again and again?

**MARY:** Library work is very often process bound, and I see the profession’s focus on the formal aspects of our work as a major site of the epistemological structure to which you

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<sup>16</sup> See Shiraz Durrani, *Information and Liberation: Writings on the Politics of Information and Librarianship* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2008); Jennifer Dekker and Mary Kandiuk, *In Solidarity: Academic Librarian Labour Activism and Union Participation in Canada* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2014); Baharat Mehra and Kevin Rioux, *Critical Theory and Social Justice in Library and Information Science* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016); Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale, *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2018); Robin Brown and Scott Sheidlower, *Seeking to Understand: A Journey into Disability Studies and Libraries* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), 24.

<sup>18</sup> “ALA Defends Copyright and Net Neutrality,” *American Libraries* 48, no. 6 (June 2017): 13.

refer. How I feel about cataloging, for example, should not affect my implementation of the Library of Congress standards. Neutrality is something we are taught about in library school, but contemporary practice reveals the limitations of this concept in the abstract when real communities challenge libraries' commitments to neutrality.<sup>19</sup> The standard systems and processes we have relied on in LIS, the reliable authorities of the discipline and thus the work, are not equipped to deal with subjectivity in a way that addresses current social concerns around gender, class, Indigeneity, racialization, and so on. These loci of activism exist separately from the labor in libraries, from the cataloging, the collections' development, but inform the greater direction of the library in a way that is immune to assessment and the quantifiability that the profession emphasizes. In the context of prairie librarianship, the Blackfoot Digital Library (BDL)<sup>20</sup> for example exists as its own entity, separate from the main University of Lethbridge Library website, but has informed my work as a liaison to Indigenous programs which thereby influences direction in the library. The community knowledge and labor that Blackfoot Knowledge Keeper Danielle Heavy Head undertakes is separate from the work of Information Technology which uploads materials to the BDL.<sup>21</sup>

**LYDIA:** This resonates with me particularly as the University of Alberta, like many postsecondary institutions in Canada facing restructuring, adopts discursive means to

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<sup>19</sup> The Canadian Press, "Hundreds Protest Toronto Library Event Featuring Controversial Speaker," *CBC*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/megan-murphy-toronto-library-protest-1.5339909>; Haley Ryan, "Halifax Pride Breaks with Library Over Decision Not to Pull 'Transphobic' Book from Shelves," *CBC*, May 30, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/pride-breaks-with-halifax-libraries-after-controversial-book-kept-on-shelves-1.6045823>.

<sup>20</sup> See <https://www.blackfootdigitallibrary.com/digital/collection/bdl>.

<sup>21</sup> The stated purpose of the BDL is "...to honor *akaitapii* [italics added] 'our ancestors who observed the radical changes being forced upon our communities in the context of colonization, and who took it upon themselves to record their knowledge for the benefit of future generations', and their desire to speak through a variety of recording media to the grandchildren they never had a chance to meet, thereby ensuring that their knowledge is carried through to future generations." It is the home of documentary work by and for the Blackfoot that began "over a century ago." Through a memorandum of understanding, the library is supported by the University of Lethbridge and Red Crow College and is managed by Danielle Heavy Head. See: <https://www.blackfootdigitallibrary.com/digital/collection/bdl/custom/about>. For more about Danielle Heavy Head's interpretation of her "life's work," see Mary Greenshields and Adrienne Danielle Heavy Head, "Let Me Draw You a Map: Knowledge Management From 'Two Completely Different Streams of Thought,'" *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 4 (February 2019): 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v4.31467>.

mystify the very material changes taking place as a result of budget cuts.<sup>22</sup> Such dire material conditions often force library professionals to seek new ways to make sense of our work. In an effort to align more closely with the vision of the parent institution, libraries, too, reorganize and adopt new service models. Recently, in discussions of how an academic library can work together as one system rather than a collection of specialized silos, a colleague used the analogy of deciding to go for a walk: the head makes the decision and the body executes the activity. However, feminist theorists have long challenged this strict separation and highlighted the knowledge held in the body.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the isolation of strategy from operations is arguably a mystification that serves to legitimize the power of administration, because “on the ground” activity informs, shapes, and defines what strategy should be adopted. We may use such metaphors uncritically, accepting the supposedly “natural” hierarchy between cognition and the body and therefore without questioning what logic such library culture instills in us. Yet anyone who has reflected on the implications of organizational decisions when operating a service point knows that it’s all a big mess. Often, activity happens first and then we make sense of it; we assign categories to its facets and make meaning of it. This is why I have always found how a library describes its organizational structure so fascinating: is there a strict division between Research and Learning? Is Special Collections part of broader set of Collections activities? Are Digital Archives with institutional archives or digitized content? How we understand the scholarly process and the role of Libraries in it is indicative in the names for units, service points, and job titles. LIS schools would have us believe there is little philosophical underpinning to such practical implementations but to me, these are all outcomes of an epistemological orientation toward the subject-object division. Do we believe we are part of the world in which we live, or do we understand ourselves to occupy some external, if temporary, position on the scholarly process?

In contrast, projects like Dark Laboratory,<sup>24</sup> though not necessarily of an LIS nature, begin with the underlying philosophy from the start. In describing the aims of the project, Dark Laboratory reminds us to begin from a different frame, and not to pretend to occupy some ahistorical, immaterial position, but from a place that starts from the

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<sup>22</sup> Allison Bench, “University of Alberta Says It Bears Brunt of Provincial Budget Cuts; Worries about Quality, Reputation,” *Global News*, March 10, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7688799/university-of-alberta-budget-cuts>.

<sup>23</sup> Winifred Whelan, “Bodily Knowing: ‘More Ancient Than Thought,’” *Religious Education* 89, no. 2 (1994): 184-193, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408940890204>; Alison M. Jaggar, *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2016); Ruth Trinidad Galván, “Collective Memory of Violence of the Female Brown Body: A Decolonial Feminist Public Pedagogy Engagement with the Femicides,” *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 24, no. 3 (2016).

<sup>24</sup> See Dark Laboratory, <https://www.darklaboratory.com>.

“dispossession of Indigenous sovereignty” and “African enslavement.”<sup>25</sup> The multi-faceted description of the Dark Laboratory’s philosophy includes learning, specifically how “to learn from non-Western traditions about how to tell a *good* story. ‘Good’ has meaning in the sense of the ‘common good,’ ethical grounds, and the value of being an engaging storyteller using multimedia.”<sup>26</sup> Projects like Dark Laboratory are explicitly committed to furthering learning, whereas libraries continue to have an ambivalent relationship with this process. Arguably, to this day libraries see themselves as providers of access to knowledge but not learning catalysts, as such. Access is a passive concept, whereas catalyzing implies action after all. Individualism and the freedom of that individual to learn whatever they like at their own pace is at the core of this conceptualization. Thus, what services are offered, how they are described, how they should interact with researchers in universities, for example, all stem from that conceptualization. Do we merely offer catalogs of options for learning, or do we actively step into the river with the learner, so to speak, and thus transform both the river and ourselves in the process? To me, these are fundamentally philosophical questions, but such topics are rarely prioritized when librarianship must constantly adapt to the impacts of global capitalism as they play out on the local scale.

**MARY:** Why do you think LIS hangs on to this separation with such ferocity? What is at stake in the commitment to this epistemological position?

**LYDIA:** In *The Politics of Everybody*,<sup>27</sup> Holly Lewis argues that dissolving binaries and flattening difference is not a path toward liberation but in fact part of the liberal project which seeks to mystify the workings of power construction in the first place. In other words, the difference between these areas of praxis is not the problem in itself; thus, collapsing the division is not going to resolve the contradictions. Because contemporary libraries are products of the Enlightenment<sup>28</sup> and are thus shaped by ideas such as intellectual freedom, individual liberty, political and societal equality among all persons, democracy, and tolerance of diversity, their inherent idealist epistemology carries on in our work today. A profession based on idealism thus lacks a materialist foundation to understanding the world, and its way of dealing with difference is discursive. It seeks to redefine terms, change labels or their definitions, and encourage more conversational exchange rather than rebuild conditions in which definitions are embodied, in which real

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<sup>25</sup> Dark Laboratory.

<sup>26</sup> Dark Laboratory.

<sup>27</sup> Holly Lewis, *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Marxism at the Intersection* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Wayne Bivens-Tatum, *Libraries and the Enlightenment* (Los Angeles, CA: Library Juice Press, 2012).

people encounter real things, and where material realities, like money and time, are on the line. Canada's impotence in taking meaningful action to redress the history of colonial harm to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, can be understood using Coulthard's theory on the politics of recognition.<sup>29</sup> It is also fascinating to see the instinct to flattening difference as a form of activism legible to LIS.

You have worked with activists and people who seek to make material improvements to living conditions in their communities. Do you see devaluation of research by practitioners and the immaterial labor of their activism pitted against the valuation of "pure research" of employed academics?

**MARY:** It is so unfortunate. It is a division that is unnecessary and creates mistrust. When I began my liaison role at the University of Lethbridge, I was advised by a senior faculty member to "forget the community stuff," as it does not get funding, nor does it shine brightly on professional evaluations. As a new member of the university community, I was highly disturbed by this comment, particularly as the majority of my work, as I understand it, exists to serve the community. Yet this is likely a common truism of the contemporary academy. I am certain many of us have received similar advice. There is real tension between the individualism inherent in the liberalism that universities have embraced and the collectivism inherent in activist work, and this spills over into the researcher versus practitioner debate. The "real" work, in the sense of the work that improves material conditions in the immediate, is absolutely devalued, as illustrated by my senior colleague's comment to me. We also see it in studies of community-based scholarship in the ideological and economic market of the contemporary university.<sup>30</sup> If we accept that the university, under the tenets of liberalism, exists to free or empower the individual, we can see how activism is viewed as "less than" because it is situated in a collectivism that runs counter to this notion. To return to the example of the Blackfoot Digital Library, it is without a doubt the single greatest good that the university library supports for the Blackfoot Confederacy. However, it is not the subject of "pure research" because it is

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<sup>29</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> See Diane C. Calleson, Catherine Jordan, and Sarena D. Seifer, "Community-Engaged Scholarship: Is Faculty Work in Communities a True Academic Enterprise?" *Academic Medicine* 80, no. 4 (2005); Paul Blackmore and Camille B. Kandiko, "Motivation in Academic Life: A Prestige Economy," *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 16, no. 4 (2011); Sherril B. Gelmon, Catherine Jordan, and Sarena D. Seifer, "Community-Engaged Scholarship in the Academy: An Action Agenda," *Change* 45, no. 4 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2013.806202>; Michael Muhammad, Nina Wallerstein, Andrew L. Sussman, Magdalena Avila, Lorenda Belone, and Bonnie Duran, "Reflections on Researcher Identity and Power: The Impact of Positionality on Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Processes and Outcomes," *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 7-8 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920513516025>.

necessarily created as a place to host Traditional Knowledge to serve community. As such, the work is not the subject of regular grant funding, and the power it holds does not reside within the university or the library. The work is powerful. It is extremely important work of cultural memory. It is love work, as evidenced by Danielle's assertion that it is her "life's work."

**LYDIA:** To me, it all comes down to power and LIS's uneasy relationship with it. If librarianship discusses power at all, it usually reveals only a partial picture. We may accept that senior leaders have power—CEOs, University Librarians/Deans, Presidents, etc.—but we rarely talk frankly about where their power comes from, how it concentrates, where it flows, and whether it dissipates. Through the work of Antonio Negri, perhaps much more than Michel Foucault, I have come to see that power cannot be destroyed, nor does it emerge out of nowhere. It is always present in people, in the social fabric. Channeling it, making it *do stuff*—that is, create, generate, produce new things—is ultimately the purpose of power. In popular discourse, we only hear power in a negative context, in that it is used to create negative conditions: to punish, to dehumanize, to annihilate life. Creating new possibilities, however, is also powerful. The design of the CEO/Dean/President role in an organizational structure is not natural but a series of choices, and the fact that power flows upward to such a singular position is also not accidental. Because LIS is a product of late Enlightenment and early capitalism, its reliance on constituted power is also a historical product. Such an understanding of power sees it as stable, contractual, and reliant on rules. After all, what is a contract but an agreement to obey? In my view, such a relationship to power is pacifying, containing, and ultimately anxious. It knows it cannot last; there is always a risk of revolt, refusal, and non-compliance. It requires mechanisms including coercion, repression, and violence to enforce the constitution. In his chapter "Constituent Power," Antonio Negri sees political emancipation as "nothing but the attempt to displace the meaning of the impulse to revolt, the juridical hypostasis of the social status quo."<sup>31</sup> In this framework of constituent power, human rights "and all the constituent propositions of the bourgeoisie" —which arguably include concepts like intellectual freedom, access to information, and representative democracy— "represent neither productive forces nor Utopia." Negri argues that these concepts are mystifications and celebrations of the status quo: "So-called political emancipation celebrates the force of the constituted while presented to exalt the constituent."<sup>32</sup> In library terms, this might mean all of the rhetorical moves to position the hierarchical organization of power as self-evident, natural, and ahistorical. It

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<sup>31</sup> Antonio Negri, "Constituent Power: The Concept of a Crisis," in *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, edited by Andrew Pendakis, Jeff Diamanti, Nicholas Brown, Josh Robinson, and Imre Szeman, 487-500 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 493.

<sup>32</sup> Negri, "Constituent Power."

may mean distancing library work from the operations of the state, or making that work appear liberatory when it fundamentally restricts and resists any material moves to collective, material liberation of the people. Thus, constituted power translates into discursive and material forms to stabilize and naturalize its operation. In contrast, constituent power is dynamic, open, and risky. In some ways, there are no guarantees with constituent power. It is generative, creative, unstable—it may change at a moment’s notice, but who knows what change that will bring? It requires negotiation, exchange, and relation. The constituent subject, according to Negri, is productive because even on the limit of its oppression, “the subject goes back into itself and rediscovers there the vital action and freedom, an assemblage—open because no teleology conditions or prefigures it.”<sup>33</sup> This conception of power is based on the vibrancy of life, and in this sense, it is dynamic. Its possibilities are not foreclosed.

This theory does not suggest that all constituents have an equal amount of power, but it does acknowledge that all constituents have something to contribute. They are related in their difference. Coming together is what amplifies the power, but coming together is always fraught with conflict. This is why, according to Negri, in both the works of Machiavelli and Spinoza, “strength is expressed and nourished by discord and struggle; in both authors the process extends between singularity and multitude, and the construction of the political is the product of permanent innovation.”<sup>34</sup> In my view, this is the source of life! And LIS is generally so devoid of it largely because it is constantly policing the edges of the contract and ensuring that the constitution of the power remains even. This is why risk is rarely tolerated in LIS, and why the profession discursively celebrates movers and shakers but materially alienates them until they get back in line or leave the profession entirely. This is why the work of *We Here* and the publication *up//root*<sup>35</sup> can be perceived as threatening to the LIS status quo, which is rooted in the white, liberal politics of knowledge.

Let’s talk about assemblage for a second. What does it mean to assemble—what is being assembled and to what purpose?

**MARY:** There is an implied sense of transformation, which is assumed to be a good thing. I think we have to be careful not to fall into the logic of idealism, on which LIS is founded and thus structures so much of our thinking, in presuming a fixed state of achievement. This may manifest itself in phrases like “improve librarianship” or “informing society for the better” used to describe our work. However, without precision of *what* exactly is being made better and *for whom*, such concerns risk perpetuating the status quo. What if transformation is neither radical nor easy? Perhaps another conceptual frame is more

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<sup>33</sup> Negri, 490.

<sup>34</sup> Negri, 491.

<sup>35</sup> Created in 2021.

useful, which is what Marxist thinkers might call the dialectic. This understanding of the world posits that everything flows, everything is connected and influences everything else. Indigenous scholars might frame this as relationality, as being embedded in forces like history and the land. Though both are iterative, the obvious difference between the dialectic and relationality being that the dialectic is concerned with transformation or progress while relationality is cyclical and processual. As Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear explains, in Plains First Nations' societies:

...the idea of all things being in constant motion or flux leads to a holistic and cyclical view of the world. If everything is constantly moving and changing, then one has to look at the whole to begin to see patterns. For instance, the cosmic cycles are in constant motion, but they have regular patterns that result in recurrences such as the seasons of the year, the migration of the animals, renewal ceremonies, songs, and stories. Constant motion, as manifested in cyclical or repetitive patterns, emphasizes process as opposed to product. It results in a concept of time that is dynamic but without motion. Time is part of the constant flux but goes nowhere. Time just is.<sup>36</sup>

This framing is useful for librarianship because it helps situate who we are, both as workers in state institutions and as agents of the ideological machinery that those institutions enable.

The liberal understanding of the world, in contrast, pretends that there is no history, or rather that the *present* is reality and the *past* represents history. Everything from the point at hand exists in a neutral, new state full of possibility, not weighed by forces such as local geographies, past conflicts, natural disasters, the exploitation of land and workers by powerful elites, and so on. It is an uncomfortable place to be as professionals because such a positionality equals determinism in that if we are embedded in the forces of history, conflict, and injustice, we have little power and should perhaps give up trying to pursue anything different from what is presented to us as the status quo professional and labor conditions. As Alice Walker explained, "the most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."<sup>37</sup>

A greater consciousness of our assemblage, our collective power as both workers and professionals and the fluidity of the processes inherent in our collective body,<sup>38</sup> is

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<sup>36</sup> Leroy Little Bear, "Jagged Worldviews Colliding," in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, edited by Marie Battiste, (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2000), 78.

<sup>37</sup> William Martin, *The Best Liberal Quotes Ever: Why the Left is Right* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2004), 173.

<sup>38</sup> Here we allude in particular to Deleuze and Guattari's assertion that our relationship, as an assemblage, to material conditions is not static or fixed. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,

particularly important at a time when we are moving from neoliberalism into an arguably new, nebulous world order, a seemingly inscrutable world where billionaires are becoming trillionaires<sup>39</sup> and communities surrounded by water cannot access safe drinking water in one of the wealthiest nations in the world.<sup>40</sup> Instead of assemblage, most of the structures of librarianship are designed to maintain individual separation, to enforce silos, to remind us that we are powerless, that we lack agency while at the same time promoting the idea of empowerment through this individualized autonomy.

**LYDIA:** This is the insidious operation of ideology in constructing contradiction while pulling the wool over our eyes with the promise of its resolve with newer, better, and more accessible data. So, returning to the underlying assumption behind the training of librarians and their preparation for practice, more effective assemblage of information in research projects leads to better results. If liberation is possible through better information, then liberation is limited to the ideological sphere—that is, to the formation of ideas, beliefs, and values only. This understanding of LIS’s power lacks a material analysis. In contrast, Negri reminds us why an understanding of the material aspects of our world is significant to the liberatory project when he writes, “living labor against dead labor, constituent power against constituted power: this single polarity runs through the whole schema of Marxist analysis and resolves it in an entirely original theoretical-practical totality.”<sup>41</sup>

For example, the Land-Grab Universities project in 2020 did in fact assemble vast amounts of information and produced extraordinary results: the researchers behind the project built and visualized around 80,000 individual land parcels distributed through the Morrill Act of 1862. The Land-Grab Universities project is a database produced using primary sources, including land patent records, congressional documents, historical bulletins, historical maps, archival and print resources at the National Archives, state repositories and special collections at universities and more. Specifically, the project reconstructed “approximately 10.7 million acres taken from nearly 250 tribes, bands and

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*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>39</sup> Rupert Neate, “SpaceX Could Make Elon Musk World’s First Trillionaire, Says Morgan Stanley,” *The Guardian*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/20/spacex-could-make-elon-musk-world-first-trillionaire-says-morgan-stanley>.

<sup>40</sup> CTVNews, “‘Terrible Situation’: Iqaluit Water Crisis Exposes Precarious Conditions in the City,” October 13, 2021, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/terrible-situation-iqaluit-water-crisis-exposes-precarious-conditions-in-the-city-1.5622240>.

<sup>41</sup> Negri, “Constituent Power,” 495.

communities through over 160 violence-backed land cessions.”<sup>42</sup> The project investigators worked from the files in the General Land Office Records, which has been digitizing land-patent records in the United States since the 1980s. They then filled the gaps in the Bureau of Land Management database by geo-referencing the map of “Indian land areas judicially established”<sup>43</sup> by the Indian Claims Commission.

This inquiry into the origin of wealth in the American system of higher education took two years to complete, and it is an important project that connects data and social justice. The project alone however does not lead to the return of the land to the nations from whom they were stolen. It documents the complicity of many public education institutions in the colonial project of North America to fund scholarship with expropriated Indigenous lands, but documentation alone does not transform education institutions beyond the historical, socio-economic forces that developed them. Only action seeks transformation, and only living labor—that is, human beings coming together—is capable of action. As Antonio Negri reminds us, it is living labor that “embodies constituent power and offers it general social conditions through which it can be expressed: constituent power is established politically on that social cooperation that is congenital in living labor: thus interpreting its productivity or, better, its creativity.”<sup>44</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the takeaway for us in LIS is not to divorce the questions of labor from the questions of knowledge, in that only by connecting the material and the ideological aspects of our work does action and the capacity for transformation become possible. This connection of material and immaterial labor performed by librarians requires a new frame to understand our work as academic subjects, as it rejects the contractual, stabilizing nature of constituted power manifested in forms like the rigid hierarchy, absolutist understandings of equality and freedom, and the instrumentalist understanding of information literacy instruction in order to produce subjects capable of functioning in the capitalist economy. Assemblage as constituent power in LIS therefore means negotiation, uncertainty, potential, creativity, and productive conflict that contends with the contradiction of the production of subjectivity and activation of liberatory potential. Assemblage in LIS embraces difference as it works at a collective level. In other words, an assembled LIS is actively committed to the development of

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Lee, “How We Investigated the Land-Grant University System,” *High Country News*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.hcn.org/articles/indigenous-affairs-education-how-we-investigated-the-land-grant-university-system>.

<sup>43</sup> Geological Survey, U.S. and United States Indian Claims Commission, *Indian Land Areas Judicially Established* (Reston, VA: The Survey, 1978), <https://www.loc.gov/item/80695449/>.

<sup>44</sup> Negri, “Constituent Power,” 495.

genuine liberation in each person by giving them the tools to live fully as human beings, which embraces both the intellectual and material aspects of life.

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