

Livingness as a Liberatory Framework for Decolonizing LIS Praxis

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ABSTRACT

The fields of library and information science (LIS) are in a pivotal moment. While the stakes may seem higher than ever, Indigenous, Black, and queer communities have long anticipated this moment, demonstrating how libraries and archives are not yet equipped to meaningfully participate in the project of decolonization. I build on existing calls for decolonization in our discourse and practices by drawing attention to the living/non-living dualism in our ontologies and the ways it constrains our ability to reconcile with our fields' colonizing origins. I contemplate what it would mean to treat all information as endowed with a sense of livingness, which exposes the ethical downfalls of trying to neatly group objects as living or non-living, document or body. Livingness as a liberatory framework moves our discourse beyond who or what should be given ethical regard and centers a relational, more-than-human ethics of care.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Information ethics; Critical librarianship; Archives; Information literacy.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Livingness; Decolonization; Praxis; Metatheory.

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INTRODUCTION

The fields of library and information science (LIS) are in a pivotal moment. The infestation of AI technologies, the collapse of foundational infrastructures that once seemed perpetual, and the open adoption of fascism, racism, and transphobia in U.S. society have understandably conjured existential questions about our futures. While the stakes may seem higher than ever, Indigenous, Black, and queer communities have long anticipated this moment, demonstrating how universities, libraries, and archives are not yet equipped to meaningfully participate in the project of decolonization we need to create a new kind of world.

To meet this moment, I build on existing calls for LIS educators and practitioners to decolonize our discourse and reorient our practices around ethical frameworks that center Indigenous, Black, and queer ways of knowing (Cooke & Kitzie, 2021). We have been advised that “For non-Indigenous individuals decolonization work means stepping back from normative expectations”, including “that... all knowledge in the world can be represented in document form” (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015, p. 678). Stepping back from our “normative expectations” requires a deep rethinking of how our fields’ orientation towards documentation and classification perpetuates harmful mind/body dualisms (Lloyd-Zantiotis, 2010) like human/non-human, civilized/uncivilized, and living/non-living that must be deconstructed to move past the colonizing sensibilities embedded in our work.

In this paper, I draw attention to the living/non-living dualisms in our ontologies and the ways they constrain our ability to reconcile with our fields’ colonizing origins (Boisvert, 2023; Caidi et al., 2017; Desai, 2001; Popowich, 2021; Radbill, 2024; Scale, 2021). This dualism has previously been interrogated in the embodied information literature (Bates, 2018; Marlin-Bennett, 2013; Olsson & Lloyd, 2017). I build on this work to contemplate what it would mean to treat all information as endowed with a sense of livingness. I propose livingness as a critical framework for decolonizing LIS praxis (Budd, 2003), where theory and practice are inseparable tools for liberation (Freire, 1970). Livingness exposes the ethical downfalls of trying to neatly group objects as living or non-living, human or non-human, document or body for the purposes of responsible stewardship. It invites a radical reimagining of the harmful assumptions we hold about human beings and non-human “others”, including who and what require ethical consideration in our work. My goal is not to argue that documents, information, and data are alive, but to understand how our categories of living and non-living have shaped our core beliefs and practices (i.e. praxis) in LIS. Such a reorientation draws on the tenants of slow information (Poirier & Robinson, 2014) and resists seeking “easy” and “fast” answers to the old problems of colonization, inviting LIS educators and practitioners into a generative imagination that materially fosters liberation in our work.

LIVING/NON-LIVING DUALISMS IN LIS

Understanding the affordances of livingness for decolonizing LIS praxis requires us to critically examine the paradigms underlying many of our practices. This aligns with Budd’s (2001) claim that LIS practice must be critically examined and Kitzie et al.’s (2022) insistence

that we center marginality and embodiment in our discourse. I agree with Wagner et al.'s (2025) assertion that librarianship “remain[s] entrenched within colonialist and cisnormative frameworks” (p. 398). In this spirit, I examine how the information-as-thing and embodied information paradigms inhibit our ability not only to recognize the livingness of documents and information, but of anything or anyone considered less-than-human.

Information-as-Thing

Information-as-thing is a materialist approach that sees information as located in physical documents, including digital data (Buckland, 1997, 1997). Several scholars have shown how the Western valorization of documents, text, and data – and the pursuit of collecting and indexing such materials – serves as a mechanism of colonialism that takes “living” materials and turns them into documents (Campbell, 2022; Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015; Littletree et al., 2020; Turner, 2020). Furthermore, the colonial ideologies inherent in documentation within libraries and archives (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015; Turner, 2020) have transferred into the digital and datafied (Author, 2024; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Guerrero Millan et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024), where “Racist datafication of marginalization and discrimination have sometimes taken the form of data colonialization” (Lupton et al., 2020, p. 374).

Information-as-thing maintains a colonial logic in its emphasis on the practice of processing objects into documents, where life is subsumed into the non-living information system. To achieve documentary status, objects – whether “non-natural” objects like texts or “natural” objects like animals and human remains – must be processed and organized so they can be retrieved and used. There is an implicit presumption of a “untamed” nature that pre-exists human intervention, which post-colonial feminists have shown to be a flawed logic rooted in the idea of an “uncivilized” community ready to be assimilated (Mohanty, 1988). While a materialist approach to documentation may help return us from the disembodied world of data and technology (Kosciejew, 2017), it does not redress the reductive view of the body present within the information-as-thing paradigm.

Embodied Information

Embodied information interrogates the ways information-as-thing has privileged the role of documents and technology in information practices while overlooking the vital role of bodies in their contexts. In this approach, “corporeality is the source of embodied and situated knowledges, which cannot be expressly articulated through the written word” (Lloyd-Zantiotis, 2010, n.p.). However, theorists who argue for bodies to be regarded as active participants in information practices may unintentionally rely on the same colonizing binaries as previous approaches. Bates’ (2018) theory of embodied information relies on an implicitly colonial sensibility that sees living beings (especially humans) as manipulating nature (i.e. non-living beings) for the purpose of creating information. She claims that “we cannot experience the underlying nerve signals and processes that make the embodied experience possible” (p. 244). In this view, we experience the feeling of life in the mind where the “output” of sensory data is given conscious meaning. Separating the information carried in our nervous system from our mind preserves a colonizing view of life where the body is merely a data processing machine that is needed to participate in information practices.

Lloyd-Zantiotis (2010) and Lloyd & Olsson (2017) have similarly “[drawn] attention to the body and embodied information practices as sources of information” (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017, p. 3). They attempt to raise the body’s status to that of an “information site” that receives equal regard to the knowledge generated in the mind through its interactions with non-living matter. While these theorists argue that “Bodies are lively, material, agentic, and informational” (Marlin-Bennett, 2013, p. 602), they do not necessarily interrogate the mind/body, living/non-living dualisms inherent in Western colonial ways of knowing. Further, embodiment is often considered most visible in “non-normative” contexts (Floegel et al., 2021), leaving white, Western bodies unquestioned for the ways they participate in their own disembodiment.

To move past these modernist conceptions of embodiment, Wagner et al. (2025) draw on Indigenous sensibilities like relationality (i.e. Littletree et al., 2020, 2023) that see embodiment not as restricted to human biology or living beings at all, but to the whole of nature. In my view, the concept of livingness builds on their argument by visceralizing the experience of livingness for those substances we may not typically see as embodied – including information and data.

LIVINGNESS AS A DECOLONIZING APPROACH TO INFORMATION

Embodied information corrects the ways in which information-as-thing neglects to conceptualize our bodies and the seemingly intangible forms of knowledge they provide. That said, its insistence that bodies (especially human) require unique treatment from documents maintains the colonizing dualisms of living/non-living and leaves open the possibility that some bodies and objects can be considered less valuable within our information systems. I attempt to move us away from seeing embodiment as unique to living beings and imagine all matter as imbued with a sense of livingness that requires an ethics of care and an orientation toward relationality.

Like Guerlac (2021), “I propose that instead of life we speak of livingness” (p. 135). Livingness has been adopted in the fields of biotechnology (Karana, 2020; Karana et al., 2023), cultural geography (Choi, 2016; Whatmore, 2006), education (Griffin & Turner, 2021), sociology (Coburn & Crichlow, 2020; Lupton et al., 2020), and design (Lee et al., 2024), often within the paradigms of post-humanism and more-than-humanism. What these ways of knowing have in common is an ethical commitment to problematizing taken-for-granted categories and their material-discursive manifestations in the world. In other words, livingness “confound[s] and expand[s] the notion of animacy, so that objects can also be considered to generate lively forces” (Lupton et al., 2020, p. 366).

Livingness problematizes the simple binaries of living and non-living that we take for granted in Western society and LIS discourse. Livingness “focus[es] attention on bodily involvements in the world in which landscapes are co-fabricated between more-than-human bodies and a lively earth” (Watmore, 2006, p. 603), is “attentive to the co-constitutive role of nonhumans... in the making of the world” (Choi, 2016, p. 618), requires “acts of refusal that move beyond resistance towards a relationality that evades silos and binaristic thinking”

(Campbell, 2022, p. 43), and “understands knowledge to be entangled, situated, indeterminate, and made meaningful by the interpretations attributed to it” (Lee et al., 2024, p. 378). This approach is always more-than-human, going beyond the dualisms present in the embodiment literature. Rather than determining who or what should be given ethical regard in the processes of documentation and datafication, livingness requires we approach all bodies and artifacts – whether “biotic or abiotic” (Marlin-Bennett, 2013), human or non-human – as entangled in an ethical relationship to which we must be accountable.

Livingness is compatible with the project of decolonization to which LIS must commit to move past reformism towards liberation, “where fettered persons gain the ability to be aware of their larger epistemological systems... so as to possibly change them or shift out of them entirely” (Dotson, 2014, p. 131). In her interrogation of cryopreservation and their “colonial appropriation” of Indigenous genetic information, TallBear (2017) problematizes the binary concepts of animate and in-animate and the ways they excuse researchers from being held accountable when the matter they collect is seen as non-living and disconnected from context. Embodiment is not enough when Indigenous bodies are, as TallBear notes, seen as vanishing, historicized, and incompatible with the Western technological utopia. Instead, livingness acknowledges the ways each of our bodies are entangled with time, space, discourse, ideology, and practice – as well as documents, data, and technology. We might consider how the attempt to preserve Indigenous DNA might be akin to the desire to preserve Indigenous artifacts – rather than determining how to respectfully treat DNA as an artifact, we can see all “artifacts” as imbued with a livingness that requires us to ethically relate to them like bodies. This is already an accepted practice in many Indigenous knowledge systems where “objects” contain spiritual information that shapes how it can be interacted with (Deloria, 2001; TallBear, 2017), which may provide guidance for how to adopt a perspective of livingness within LIS more broadly.

Livingness has the potential to change how LIS educators and practitioners talk about, interact with, and ethically regard documents, data, and information – as well as technologies, people, and the environment. Currently, livingness only appears to have been applied in the archival arm of LIS to reframe artifacts as inseparable from the human relations in which they are entangled (Campbell, 2022; Turner, 2020). Guerlac (2021) articulates a framework of livingness where information serves as a critical foundation for life. She claims that through livingness, “we are released from an exclusively human framework of thinking which lends itself to appropriation by the interests and seductions of white privilege” (152) and instead can see life as the product of these entanglements. However, Guerlac’s framework does not necessarily interrogate how livingness fits into a decolonizing ethics or explain the implications of livingness for information-related practices. Material-documentary literacy, with its limitations noted, provides some indication for how livingness may transform our treatment of information, data, and documents. Koscijew (2017) explains, “A document does more than reconstitute. It constitutes different things, such as ideas or identities, and materializes them in order that they can be analyzed, classified... and used” (Koscijew, 2017, p. 101). We might say that a documents’ ability to reconstitute is indicative of their livingness, which should attune us to an ethical sensibility that does not see their role – nor the role of any object or being – as limited to being classified, analyzed, and used.

IMPLICATIONS OF LIVINGNESS FOR LIS PRACTICE

This reorientation around livingness has serious implications for librarianship that contributes to long-standing efforts to decolonize our field (Edwards, 2019; Laverty & Berish, 2022; White, 2017). Livingness as a liberatory framework moves our discourse beyond who or what should be given ethical regard and instead centers a relational, more-than-human ethics of care at every level of practice (Lupton et al., 2020). As Guerlac (2021) reminds us, “Livingness happens in the really real, which we can only access through a different kind of thinking, one that is not dominated by the abstractions of algorithms and statistical analysis” (p. 153). Colonialism is not a problem that can be solved by new technologies in old systems and requires us not only to critically reflect on our orientation towards documents and information, but what we can (and ought) to do differently. Care, reciprocity, and relationality must be core tenants within a framework of livingness for decolonizing LIS practice.

Foundational practices like information literacy instruction can be reframed through the concept of livingness to redirect us from teaching students how to find and create information to understanding what is required to be in dialogue with various information sources and communities. We might take inspiration from Indigenous approaches to information literacy, where kinship is vital and we practice “relational accountability as allies” to shift our practice toward decolonization (Littletree et al., 2023, p. 5). For example, while many librarians rely on institutionalized documents like the ACRL Framework, we often treat it with a lack of livingness that sees it as universally applicable (Lloyd-Zantiotis, 2010). Instead, local knowledges about teaching best-practices that are centered in decolonization can offer not only more practical guidance but can challenge the dominant position given to such texts in our practice.

While a fully realized framework for livingness requires empirical, creative, and material efforts beyond the scope of this paper, we can imagine how the many facets of librarianship can embrace (**not appropriate**) more-than-human perspectives from Indigenous, Black, and queer communities in resisting the current influx of fascism in the United States. Future work on this topic will involve ongoing conversations between practitioners, scholars, and those communities who have been harmed by the colonizing origins of our field.

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