

Moving Beyond Metaphor

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ABSTRACT

The decolonization of LIS can no longer be metaphorical. We know what must be done, now we must make it real: How do we *move beyond metaphor*? To honor the scholars doing this work before us, we recommit to their call to get our community #InFormation. This paper revisits assumptions around (neo)coloniality and comm(unity) to identify (non)metaphorical onto-epistemic injustices in LIS which destroy our ability to know and become (Patin et al., 2024). We articulate two practices to guide our transition toward critical praxis. Grounded by compassion, accountability, relationality, and empathy, *Responsibilities of Resistance* involves perceiving systemic conditions of erasure, giving intentional descriptions of actions, coordinating responses, and engaging in empathetic solidarity. *Mentoring in the Round* is a pedagogy of protection which emphasizes several benefits of a collective peer group. We diverge from prior work by ending with a demand for action: we are beyond the point of rhetorical plea.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Community engagement; Sociology of information; Critical librarianship; Pedagogy; Social Justice

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Mentoring in the Round; Pedagogies of Protection; Decolonization; Information Ethics; Empathy

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INTRODUCTION

This is a paper we did not want to write. We'd rather engage in philosophical inquiry, except the problems facing our world are not solely philosophical. Unprecedented censorship, mass layoffs, democratic backsliding, and attacks on cultural identity are beyond metaphorical. We can't think about anything except the agency and welfare of our students, our colleagues losing their livelihoods, our grants being terminated, our commitments being inhibited, and our jobs being threatened. Anyone surprised by such actions, or our arrival at this current cultural moment, undoubtedly failed to listen to the voices who are and **have been** advocating for justice in our field. So long as we uphold colonial practices which sidestep equity in the face of appeasement, we will never be able to heal from collective harm: **it is beyond time** for our field to act.

The co-optation of DEI work by institutions, repackaged as superficial reactions to social change, has obfuscated genuine commitments to decolonization. Capitalist distortions of justice have revealed tensions between personal commitments and institutional actions. Commercialized banned books, for example, highlight the paradox of privileged access and monetization which avoids addressing the systemic issues behind banning. These observations affirm how transformative equity work requires resilience amid resistance: when progress threatens those who benefit from oppression, oppressors often work to slow or halt change (Gorski and Swalwell, 2023). Such practices perpetuate a system of production and awareness rather than dismantlement: Assmann's (2010) theory of canonization underscores, for example, why popular history tends focus on presenting "palatable" narratives, such as "I Have a Dream," (King, 1968) rather than "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (King, 1992), so as to avoid "confrontational" rhetoric.

Nearly a decade ago, the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) held their conference revolving around professional issues in "Community Engagement and Social Responsibility." During a panel on "Communities in Crisis: What Everyday Acts of Terrorism Tell Us About Social Responsibility in LIS" (Chancellor et al., 2017), participants led a dialogue on recognizing the worth and dignity of Black Lives in LIS, calling for changes requiring our LIS community to get "#InFormation". However, the conversation was derailed by an audience member who argued against using the word "terrorism": an act of testimonial injustice denying and dismissing the panelists' description of their lived experiences. This interruption precluded discussions on moving forward and implementing practical and community-oriented solutions. Even at ALISE, pursuing justice became **metaphorical**.

As ALISE "celebrates" its 125th anniversary, our field must collectively revisit and reassess our responsibilities and acknowledge whose agency is restricted, which cultural heritages and ideologies are privileged, and which practices are devalued. While we know what has to be done, now we must make it real: How do we *move beyond metaphor*? To honor the scholars who pursued this work before us, we recommit to their call to *get our community #InFormation*. We revisit our assumptions of (neo)coloniality and comm(unity) to demonstrate a plurality of (non)metaphorical onto-epistemic injustices in our field which destroy our ability to know and become (Patin et al., 2024). We articulate two sets of practices to guide our transition to critical praxis: responsibilities of resistance and pedagogies of protection. We end with a demand for action after previously holding space for invitation and calling in. We are beyond the point of rhetorical plea.

(NEO)COLONIALITY AND COMM(UNITY) IN LIS

Coloniality encompasses the universalist attitudes and oppressive practices stemming from colonialism which restrict knower agency, identity categories, and (dis)empower non-dominant ways of knowing and being in the world. To reject the ahistoricity of such structures, Shohat and Stam (2014) articulate (neo)coloniality as a more precise description for situating and diagnosing contemporary domination, signaled by “widespread poverty”, “burgeoning famine”, a “paralyzing ‘debt trap’”, the “opening up of resources for foreign interests”, and “internal political oppression” (p.17), alongside racialization, a product of colonialism enabling “ontological European superiority” (p.18). Critiques of coloniality are longstanding in discussions of geopolitics (Mignolo, 2011; 2012), racial inequality (Du Bois, 2017), national culture and interpersonal identity (Fanon, 1967), feminist organizing (Lorde, 2001), epistemic violence (Spivak, 2023; Dotson, 2011), and framings of the academy “as an arm of the settler state” (Grande, 2018 p. 47) demonstrated by “individualized inducements” and “hierarchies of individual worth and labor” (p. 61). The U.S. exhibits many symptoms of (neo)coloniality: wealth is inequitably distributed, healthcare is inaccessible, imports are high, and political polarization is palpable. (Neo)coloniality and Eurocentric perspectives are pervasive in LIS. Considering universalist historical claims about the value and functions of library institutions, such as “Libraries have always been open and inclusive”, undermines prior exclusionary practices on the basis of identity (Smith and Patin, 2024). We build and maintain systems dependent upon universalist practices of classifying and naming. We make judgments about who can claim to be in the profession of librarianship inherently tied to credentialism.

Our institutions also replicate (neo)colonial power. Consider the recent debacle of the National Archives and Records Administration: accusations of censorship and the subsequent removal of the National Archivist destabilized NARA’s institutional reputation, diminishes professional and public trust in its historical work, and encourages censorship (Villa, 2024; Shogan, 2024; SAA, 2025; Grossman and AHA, 2025). As a federal institution which preserves American history, our profession should be able to look to NARA as a role model: a lack of responsible stewardship over the documents housed there and the narratives they convey enables the proliferation of fallacies (Youngman and Patin, 2024a). In March 2025, a new acting director of the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS, 2025) suggested IMLS would soon function “in lockstep with this Administration to enhance efficiency and foster innovation” and will “restore focus on patriotism, ensuring we preserve our country’s core values, promote American exceptionalism and cultivate love of country in future generations” (IMLS, 2025). In the span of a week, all but 12 IMLS employees were placed on administrative leave, and all state grants were canceled in contradiction to the purposes and priorities outlined in the Library Services and Technology Act (IMLS, n.d.). The performative injustice of claiming to support America’s institutions of culture and learning by stripping essential resources “to the minimum presence and function required by law” is feckless and abhorrent. The parallels of dismissal and co-optation remind us there is still more work to be done in our field. Our actions cannot be solely rhetorical. Our statements and advocacy cannot be theatrical. Our field’s decolonization can no longer be metaphorical (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Though our field remains rooted in (neo)coloniality, many scholars have previously warned about harm and encouraged us to move toward decolonization (Lilley, 2021; Littletree et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2021). Rebecca Knuth (2003) described the dangers of regimes and acts of

libricide, encompassing purposeful large-scale “initiatives designed to advance short- and long-term ideological driven goals” (p.5). By understanding the destruction of knowledge in the past, it becomes clear that “twentieth-century history does not guarantee a healthy outcome for intellectual freedom in libraries or democracy in twenty-first century society, nor does it mean that a successful defense of intellectual freedom will be anything other than draining and heartbreaking” (Jaeger et al., 2022, p. 326). Not only have we seen the destruction of books over the past, we see attacks on knowledge and knowing more generally and attacks on people's capacity to know (Patin et al. 2021).

In LIS, we've considered the devaluing of international contributions to librarianship and a critique of English as our field's lingua franca (Yeon et al., 2023), and as a critique and call to action for memory institutions to address prior instances of anti-Blackness (Patin et al., 2023). The uncritical popularization and adoption of AI Tools without considering the moral, ethical, or environmental consequences of use (Youngman et al., 2023) speeds us towards an AI empire (Tacheva and Ramasubramanian, 2023) which replicates harm in digital worlds (Youngman and Patin, 2024b). Since the establishment of ALISE proceedings in 2018, we identified 12 scholarly works explicitly discussing “decolonial”, “decolonization”, or “decolonizing”: one poster (Hirschy, 2018), five panels (Samek et al., 2021; Chu et al., 2023; Chu et al., 2022; Samek, 2022; Samek and Bossaller, 2023), and five papers (Méndez, 2020; Stevenson, 2020; Zavalina and Chelliah, 2021; Hill et al., 2021; Hill and Mills, 2023).

Reckoning with and undoing the collateral damage of (neo)coloniality—the essence of decolonizing—within the LIS profession requires us to recognize the necessity of refusal (Tuck and Yang, 2014a; 2014b) and gratitude for the community we build and who support us (Tuck and Yang, 2018). Community is the people sitting around you: it's who we surround ourselves with now and who we want to converse with in the future. Community is a collective working toward *communal unity*. The lack of institutional accountability and commitment to sustaining change requires us to get our community #InFormation:

“[Community] is not a place, a building, or an organization...Community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. People form and maintain communities to meet common needs. Members of a community have a sense of trust, belonging, safety, and caring for each other. They have an individual and collective sense that they can, as part of that community, influence their environments and each other” (Chavis and Lee, 2015, para. 4-5).

GETTING #INFORMATION: WAYS OF MOVING BEYOND METAPHOR

Responsibilities of Resistance

To move toward onto-epistemic justice in our field, we must cultivate our awareness and pursue repair from instances of erasure. Doing so requires us to acknowledge ethical commitments to each other while recognizing the systems and sources of information serving as barriers to access. Our field has a collective responsibility to pursue vigilance through a sustained resistance to forces antithetical to our professional praxis. Our collective must

prioritize **responsibilities** of *compassion* (as a genuine concern for supporting the welfare of others), *accountability* (owning up to and changing our exclusionary structures and practices), *relationality* (recognizing our interconnectedness and the power of our shared values which bring us together), and *empathy* (knowing how to understand and value differences of experience). In pursuing cultural competence, responsibilities of resistance promote cognitive growth and self-awareness, attention to environmental factors inhibiting cultural engagement, and emphasizes the centrality of interpersonal relationships in building community (Overall, 2009, p.191).

Undertaking acts of **resistance** requires us to hone four capacities: (1) perceiving systemic conditions, (2) using intentional descriptions of actions, (3) coordinated responses, and (4) empathetic solidarity. *Perceiving systemic conditions* involves constantly interrogating our cultural assumptions and the framings we impose upon individuals rather than systems of power: attention to carceral capitalism, (neo)coloniality, and objectivity is paramount in pursuing accountability for human suffering. *Intentional descriptions of actions* require us to purposefully name divergent modes of erasure by the result of repression, protection, bureaucracy, amendment, or neglect (Fredrikzon and Haffenden, 2023), epistemic injustice (Patin et al., 2021), or archival silences (Fowler, 2017). When creating descriptive accounts of events, we must attend to how our language matters in the process of generating collective meaning (Youngman, 2025). Once equipped with recognition and description, we may be able to pursue *coordinated responses* to prevent recurring future harms: reactions without reckoning risk replication. Such coordination must be a collective act of organizing. Getting our community #InFormation requires *empathetic solidarity*: we must believe and support our colleagues who share their experiences in support of communal unity.

Pedagogies Of Protection

Pedagogy is a way of facilitating knowledge protection and considers how we teach and interact with students. We argue pedagogy should also consider protection as a means to safeguard our students against harm. Pedagogies of protection include: supporting resistance against institutional bureaucracy; recognizing performative injustice (Youngman et al., 2022); celebrating moments of eureka; and fostering the process of becoming a colleague. To honor these practices as we bring people into our field, we should equip them with care, support, and the tools necessary to sustain themselves and their communities through collaborative mentorship.

Traditionally, mentoring is viewed as a dyadic relationship between a person in a more advanced stage and a person in a less advanced one (Dansky, 1996; Huizing, 2012). Johnson (2015) defined mentoring in academia as “a personal and reciprocal relationship in which a more experienced (usually older) faculty member acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced (usually younger) student or faculty member” (p.20). While we acknowledge the importance of the dyadic mentor relationship to research and teaching experiences, decolonizing requires a commitment to anti-hierarchical and situated forms of support which consider an individual's safety and cultural experiences (Gray and Mehra, 2021). Huizing (2012) introduces a typology of group mentoring: One-to-many, many-to-one, many-to-many, and peer group mentoring. The first three types involve a clear distinction between mentor and mentee, whereas peer group mentoring is unique since participants can change their role in a group. *Mentoring in the Round* as a pedagogy of protection, emphasizes several benefits of a collective

peer group: (1) the broadening of the network, (2) a more collaborative atmosphere, and (3) closer relationships working to create a connected community (Moss, Teshima & Leszcz, 2008; Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Huizing, 2012).

Mentoring in the Round is inclusive by nature and highlights the diversity of thought that individuals contribute to the collective. This dynamic, unbounded, and informal nature of peer mentoring in the context of group mentoring represents a scholarly community within a naturalistic environment personalizing the academic journey. This supplements each member's well-being by going beyond a task-directed process to one more reflective of passion in LIS education. Using this collaborative approach, we can build collectives with an ethics of care as a foundational principle, empathy and compassion at the forefront, and a focus on relationality and well-being which other traditionalist mentoring environments lack. Such pedagogies of protection are a collaborative practice which return agency to those involved in the mentoring relationship and may cater to unique cultural experiences and identities. Through non-judgmental and supportive collaboration, *Mentoring in the Round* stimulates ideas, removes isolation, and contributes to the development of engaged information professionals while decolonizing views of mentorship.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

Moving beyond metaphor is an act of resistance: “in the pursuit of freedom, courtesy is not a virtue” (Jackson, 2024, p.3). Maintaining our agency under authoritarianism requires us to act, rather than complying in advance. Indeed, we have a shared responsibility to: (1) promote agency by recognizing and using the power we have to engage in advocacy or local activism; (2) sustain epistemic vigilance by locating gaps in our structures, and when things don't work, fixing them; (3) educate and organize with the intention to place praxis and community-first impact as the outcome of our research, teaching, and service. Getting our community #InFormation must be both a professional purpose and a call to action. We are *Information* professionals concerned with providing access to resources and facilitating knowledge production, and, *In Formation* professionals who must use our collective organizing power to support community well-being. Let us heed Beyoncé's wisdom: “Okay, [LIS], now let's get in formation.”

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