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# A Holistic Decolonial Lens for Library and Information Studies

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**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to introduce a holistic decolonial lens for Library and Information Studies (LIS). As such it centres in the following questions: what does decolonisation mean in the context of LIS? How can a holistic approach help improve our understanding of the field?

**Design/methodology/approach** – This is a conceptual paper that draws on theoretical analysis and discussion with in-depth examination of two cases of librarianship and information for development.

**Findings** – The paper presents a decolonial framework for interpreting and comprehending LIS-specific issues. As a result, we believe it is critical to recognise three interconnected types of colonial legacies and identify ways in which LIS academics and practitioners can consider these in the context of their research and work.

**Research limitations/implications** – The paper introduces a holistic framework for thinking about decoloniality in the LIS discipline. Further work should consider how this framework can be useful for other LIS fields, as well as how can the process of engaging with the framework lead to some transformative action in practice.

**Practical implications** – The framework is of practical significance for LIS academics and practitioners who wish to take a decolonial approach to their research and thinking. We provide questions intended to lead to action

**Originality/value** – The paper provides a holistic decolonial approach to critically reflect on research and teaching practices in the context of LIS.

**Keywords** - decolonisation, information, information studies, coloniality, decoloniality.

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

# 1. Introduction

The Rhodes Must Fall movement in 2015, which advocated for the removal of the Cecil Rhodes<sup>1</sup>'s statue, received international attention and rekindled a broader movement to decolonize education in South Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Moosavi, 2020). This sparked the formation of other student movements at other universities, both in South Africa and around the world.

Decolonisation remains a contentious term, encompassing a wide range of perspectives, approaches, political projects, and normative concerns. Decolonisation is usually understood as a way of challenging colonialism, empire, and racism as key forces in society today (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu, 2018). In the context of the University, it is a way of understanding how colonial legacies continue to be an everyday reality, not just in terms of economic and political interventions, but also in terms of knowledge production processes. Scholars argue that universities, as institutions of knowledge creation, preservation, and reproduction, serve the colonial project by educating elites in the image of the European white man (Gopal, 2021).

In response, many academic disciplines are investigating their bodies of knowledge to ask if these reproduce colonial legacies through the dominance of theoretical traditions originating in the global North (Mbembe, 2016), as well as through the Whiteness<sup>2</sup> of those who work and teach about it (Esson et al., 2017; Brooks-Immel & Murray, 2017). However, given the proliferation of initiatives to decolonise, and although the resurgence of decolonisation debates is encouraging, scholars and activists alike are concerned about the uncritical ways in which the term is being adopted by institutions, co-opted into neoliberal agendas, and isolated from its feminist and anti-capitalist traditions/origins, limiting its focus to diversifying reading lists and public messaging (Moosavi, 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a holistic framework to contribute to decolonial efforts in LIS. Some efforts to address decolonisation in LIS have begun (see Patin et al., 2021). Given the complex and fragmentary nature of LIS, it was decided to focus on two particular sub-fields in LIS: librarianship and information for development. Librarianship is a critical component of LIS and a traditional bedrock for it, and both practitioners and scholars of librarianship have increasingly attempted to decolonize their practices (Birdi, 2020, 2021). Information for Development, with its emphasis promoting access to information to the most underserved communities, is a field one would expect to already be strongly engaged with decolonial thinking. It has been begun to recognise how concepts like development are increasingly seen as part of the colonial agenda, because they imply that all countries can/should "progress" toward the model offered by the global North (Jiménez and Zheng, 2018, 2021; Vannini et al., 2017).

This paper's authors are academics from the same Western university and Information School. As such, we have to acknowledge our on-going privilege within coloniality. Thus, we have been working to think through the implications of decolonisation for our department, seeking a holistic approach that includes critically examining reading lists, research areas, diversity of students and staff members, and other dimensions. The first author is a Peruvian

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<sup>1</sup>Cecil John Rhodes was a British imperialist who advocated the invasion of Africa to make it into a British colony (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018)

<sup>2</sup> In this paper we adopt an understanding of whiteness that refers not only to racial and ethnic categorizations but a complete system of exclusion based on hegemony (Garner, 2007)

academic who is of mixed race who has conducted research predominantly in the global South. The second author is a white Italian academic, who has worked in different Western Universities across different continents and conducted research both in the Global North and South. The third author is a white middle-aged, British male scholar much of whose work could be potentially categorised as implicitly shaped by colonial thinking. Collaborating on the paper was seen as part of the process of self-liberation from the limits of this perspective.

Based on our research and lived experiences, as well as our reading of the subject, our starting point is that decolonisation requires a comprehensive and integrative approach. That is, decolonisation should not be limited to a single aspect of our academic work (e.g. research or teaching for instance). Instead, decolonisation should be viewed as a *holistic*<sup>3</sup> approach that calls for a systematic change in our disciplines and practices as they currently exist, as well as in our institutions and roles in academia. It necessitates that we focus on more than just diversifying our reading lists for our modules or citing more people of colour in our papers. Therefore, our research questions are ‘What does decolonisation mean in the context of LIS? And how can a holistic approach help improve our understanding of the field?’

This paper is structured as follows: the first section will provide an overview of LIS studies and what has been done in relation to decolonisation. We focus on 2 specific foci within LIS to provide more specificity. We then introduce Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2013) framework as a starting point for our holistic framework for thinking about decolonisation in the context of LIS. We conclude by discussing how the framework can be operationalised and adapted for a critical analysis of information studies.

## 2. Library and Information Studies

Many authors have expressed concern and interest in defining LIS and its scope (Åström, 2008; Bates, 2015; Chua & Yang, 2008; White & Griffith, 1981). Walter and Wilder (2016) suggest three reasons for this: a lack of LIS courses and programmes, a lack of LIS-specific theory, and the close links between research and practise. This broadens the scope of LIS research to include “[...] the collection, organisation, retrieval, and presentation of information in various contexts and subject matters.” (Bates 2015). In more general terms, LIS deals with ways to facilitate communication of information between people, and has mainly been categorised in specific research areas, including “information seeking and retrieval, classification and indexing, collection development, information systems design, and management of information services” (Åström, 2004, p.12).

As mentioned before, given the complex and fragmentary nature of LIS, it was decided to focus on two particular sub-fields in LIS: librarianship and information for development. We think these are good starting points given the emerging efforts to adopt a decolonial lens in these fields.

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<sup>3</sup> By holistic we mean an approach that looks at the issue from various angles, considering the root causes of an issue to be situated in historical and social factors. As such, it recognises the ways to overcome these will be varied, systemic and long-term, rather than quick, techno-fixes.

## 2.1 Librarianship

The decolonial agenda demands a reflection on every aspect of libraries as institutions and librarianship as a profession and discipline. Fundamentally, the notion of the library as dedicated to access and preservation of published works implicitly privileges text as a form of knowledge. In a colonial context this privileging of written knowledge over other forms of knowing, particularly oral knowledge, was part of the ideology that justified imperial rule and involved the subordination, even destruction of indigenous knowledge: epistemicide (Nyamnjoh, 2012). The emphasis on written, published knowledge, which is essential to the notion of a library, is also strongly connected to a privileging of certain ways of knowing, reflecting a totalising Eurocentric knowledge tradition, particularly emphasising western scientific knowledge (Crilly, 2019a). In global South contexts, the propagation of scientific knowledge is often strongly linked to the undermining of traditional knowledge (Cox et al., 2020). Indeed, the very distinction between a library, archive and museum reflects assumptions about the ordering of knowledge, in ways linked to the ideologies that lay behind colonialism. The national library, archive and museum were key institutions in the imagination of the nation state (Anderson, 1991). Recreating them in the global South was an attempt to reproduce the nation state there, which often resulted in the suppression of the diversity of local knowledge around a manufactured myth of nationality.

Further considering libraries as collections, their special collections, which are often seen as unique cultural assets, need to be questioned for privileging records of particular social groups, often those with imperial and colonial connections. For example, as there was little of British society that was not historically implicated in imperialism, so we are likely to increasingly ask questions about such sources in the UK. The evidence suggests that digitisation priorities have not dislodged such biases and, as AI technologies start to use digitised material as training data, there is a risk that the biases will be further reproduced (Cordell, 2020).

A particularly unfortunate legacy is that systems of classification still used in most libraries embed antiquated, often racist, androcentric assumptions about the ordering of the world (Olson and Schlegl, 2001). This both constitutes a problematic representation, and adds to challenges of navigating libraries, fragmenting parts of collections that would now be seen as connected.

These might appear to be largely legacy issues but an important form of on-going coloniality is the implication of libraries within a system of scholarly publishing largely owned in the global North, edited and refereed by scholars in the global North. The massively funded research systems in countries such as the USA dominate global publishing in research through the scale of their output. Commercial publishers have come to control the publishing of this content. The sophisticated access tools like Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, which dominate knowledge discovery, are largely made up of English language journals. Impact factors are measured by citations within this system. This gives editors and reviewers from the global North, and from anglophone countries in particular, colossal power to control what is published and so reproduce their own knowledge (Albornoz et al., 2020). Material published outside this system, such as in non-English journals published in Africa or Latin America, is rendered virtually invisible and unobtainable. Uncited, it lacks the prestige of material in WoS or Scopus journals. This pressurises scholars in the global South to also

publish in these journals, despite the barrier of language and cost. It also motivates them to use intellectual reference points and research problems defined in the global North. Funding of global South research is often dominated by the agendas of the global North already (Gwynn, 2019). In north-south collaborations it is well-resourced researchers from the global North who seem to benefit most. Indeed, African universities tend to be copies of models from the global North (Nyamnjoh, 2012; Andrews and Okpanachi 2012). The academic library's implication in this system embeds it deeply in a colonised system of knowledge creation and circulation and on-going coloniality (Crilly, 2019a).

This analysis also has implications for the scoping of information literacy (IL). Often, IL has rested uncritically on the assumption that publications in high impact sources and found through systems like WoS and Scopus should be privileged as authoritative. Once we recognise that the system of publishing contains significant biases, new sets of questions need to be brought into information literacy.

Some of these problems seem to exist primarily in the realm of knowledge but appear to reflect wider forms of inequality and social justice and the power structures that lie behind them, such as capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. The power of commercial publishers is one aspect of this. The increasing dominance of managerialism and neo-liberal thinking in library management could also be seen as connected to them. The LIS curriculum largely reflects the needs of the profession, yet certain focuses, such as on technologies, can be seen to reinforce a form of technological solutionism which "is inescapably bound up with white masculinity" (Mirza and Seale, 2017: 172). Technological change is often presented as inevitable and to be able to solve complex social problems, while service values and female labour is rendered invisible. The privileging of certain forms of knowing is linked to very material forms of inequality. In the global South often scientific based agricultural practices, involving mechanisation and chemicals, for example, driven by commercial interests and tied to globalised trade has for decades threatened local indigenous, potentially more sustainable forms of agriculture.

As well as connecting to these wider social structures, these issues must also touch on the level of lived experience. For example, while libraries have often been portrayed as neutral spaces, through a decolonising perspective their very architecture must be recognised to allude to culturally specific classical or European traditions, themselves redolent of colonial assumptions (Beilin, 2017; Brook et al., 2015). The décor may also reproduce symbols of western culture and more directly historic connections such as to past academic dignitaries and benefactors, who within a revisionist context may seem doubtful, e.g., "male, pale and stale". They symbolise forms of privilege. Thus, the embodied experience of a library may be seen as shaped by privileges linked to colonialism.

The invisibility and persistence of these problems may be partly linked to the fact that the UK library profession is acknowledged to be ethnically white (Hall et al., 2014). The profession's image as highly literate and its association with access and preservation of mainstream culture must partially account for the slow penetration of the profession by people from ethnic minorities, despite many attempts to diversify in the US (Warner, 2007) and UK.

This summary indicates the breadth of challenge to libraries and librarianship posed by decolonisation. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the library profession

has questioned and sought to address the weak points in this system over a long period. This has been somewhat fragmentary, and we will suggest part of the power of the decolonial perspective as set out later in the paper is to lend coherence to this critique.

While libraries do privilege printed publications, much work has been done (in North America, Australia, and New Zealand/Aotearoa) through indigenous librarianship to think about the appropriate ways to repatriate indigenous knowledge and cultural creations, or collect, describe, and preserve them, generally through the active involvement of the communities themselves (Burns et al., 2009; Gosart, 2021). As regards the bulk of library collections, it remains the case that Western scientific knowledge is a highly successful epistemic system, and it is appropriate that libraries within global North contexts do make access to this as a priority. Furthermore, most libraries do not just include texts based on western scientific knowledge. They also contain diverse alternative currents of thought, albeit largely from within global North traditions. These already begin to challenge a totalising Eurocentric tradition (Crilly, 2019a). The biased nature of collections and exclusion of certain types of knowledge is undeniable but to a large extent the weaknesses in collections reflect biases in the research of academic disciplines for whom they have been collected. Collection development policies can be rethought (Wilson, 2022) and collections be recontextualised as themselves not neutral but as outcomes of colonialism and colonality (Crilly, 2019b). How items are classified and the language used in descriptions are being reconsidered (Cambridge University Decolonising Through Critical Librarianship Group, 2022). Recent work around decolonising reading lists has supported academics as they seek to refresh their disciplines and their teaching (e.g., Wilson, 2022).

Librarians have often recognised the limitations of resource discovery systems for locating publications from the global South and actively sought to collect from there, e.g., from African presses. Increasing digitisation is probably making this material gradually more accessible. Again, library special collections have been increasingly understood as representing historical viewpoints on class, sexuality, gender identity and ethnicity that warrant challenging. The weaknesses of historic classification systems have also been acknowledged, and many changes made, if slowly and not at a fundamental level. Critically, a large part of the drive for open access, a movement of which librarians have been strong advocates, has been to seek to address the control over knowledge production exercised by commercial publishers with its bias towards the global North. Librarians have always promoted critical thinking in knowledge search and challenged over reliance on measures of quality rooted in impact factors through the notion of responsible metrics. Thus, over a long period, aspects of the infrastructure of colonality have been questioned.

Ultimately, though, academic libraries sit within institutions which themselves profit from and even depend on their status in the global educational system created by their domination of historical and current knowledge production systems, strongly linked to colonialism. The profitable flow of international students, for example, is premised on the supposed superiority of education in the global north. Library collections largely reflect the scholarship happening within institutions and their requests for content. If decolonisation is identifying limits in the openness of academic knowledge communities in the global North, this is the underlying factor, rather than what is in libraries. Libraries will respond through their collections if and when scholarship itself diversifies.

In terms of a link beyond knowledge to structural factors such as racism and capitalism, works of critical librarianship engaging with critical theory have been asking questions about the relation between mainstream librarianship and its teaching and neo-liberalism for some years (Nicholson and Seale, 2018). There seems to be some evidence of this becoming more mainstream (e.g., the 2021 Association of College and Research Libraries' environment scan included it as a reference point for the first time). So, the systematic connections between library practices and social injustices seem to be becoming increasingly recognised.

In terms of lived experience too there is increasing recognition of the need to design library spaces that address the needs of all users. Critically, also, the lack of diversity of staffing has been acknowledged and attempts are being made to widen the basis of the profession and understand the experience of people of colour within the profession. New forms of participation in the management of libraries are being developed that bring new communities into the collection process (Chamsaz, 2022). As a profession largely filled by women, it is in a strong position to appreciate the intersectional dimension of decolonisation. Ultimately, the fundamental values of the profession encompassing human rights, equalities, and diversity; preservation and continuity of access to knowledge; intellectual freedom align strongly with seeking to address epistemic injustice (CILIP, 2018).

Thus, libraries are quite deeply embedded in colonising structures. This has been recognised for some time, but the response has been typically fragmentary and small scale. The current movement for decolonisation has given great new energy to these efforts: with many professional events and publications reflecting a desire to tackle the issue. The strengthening decolonisation agenda pushes us to set out on what is likely to be a long and challenging journey.

## **2.2 Information for development**

'Information for development' refers to a field of study concerned with inequalities in information access among different communities around the world, in particular the ones that are most underserved due to the legacy of colonial structures of privilege and power. The field sits at the nexus of information studies and international development research, and its main focus is connected to 'providing' opportunities for socio-economic development to communities deemed as 'underprivileged' or 'underserved', both in the global South and North. The field considers 'information' as pivotal to 'promote development' based on the assumption that information is a defining feature of today's society, and that it is essential for the wealth of our markets to access quality education and for maintaining healthy democracies (Webster, 2014). Conversely, information scarcity is identified as a main barrier to development. Information for Development, therefore, examines the opportunities that meaningful access to information can bring in terms of social, economic, and environmental development (Talero & Gaudette, 1995), focusing mainly on the impact of availability of infrastructures to access information (including technologies), information content and its quality, and skills development (Hudson, 2016).

As in Librarianship practice, here, too, we see how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play a major role in the field. ICTs are considered central in granting access to information, (re)producing and sharing it at the global level, and enabling and

amplifying new and existing information flows (Castells, 2000). Yet, access to ICTs is not equal within and throughout societies, which makes access to information itself uneven: communities exist in remote areas of the world who lack the required infrastructure to support the use of ICTs; people of different ages, class, and gender may face different barriers to use ICTs meaningfully (e.g., literacies, affordability, cultural matters); communities may not find content that is relevant to their lived experiences, due to contextual or language issues. These and other barriers to access ICTs and, consequently, relevant meaningful information are the cause of what has been referred to as the ‘digital divide’ (or, as some authors claim, the ‘digital divides’) (Keniston, 2004; Tsatsou, 2011). Therefore, the Information for Development agenda, and the agenda of the Information and Communication for Development (ICT4D) in particular, has largely been framed in terms of ‘bridging the digital divide’ and ‘providing access’ - to technologies and, therefore, implicitly, to information - to those who are left behind in our global and interconnected world. In this vein, libraries, and other venues for public access to information (e.g., telecenters, community technology centres, community multimedia centres, etc.) have been identified as privileged actors for bridging the digital divide because of their central role in providing digital skills training and for being communities’ focal points to fulfil contextual informational needs (Gómez, 2011; Rega et al., 2013; Sey et al., 2013; Sey & Fellows, 2009; Vannini, Nemer, & Rega, 2017).

Many of these notions at the basis of the field, though, are problematic from a decolonial perspective, as critical scholars in the field have started to point out. First of all, scholars have questioned the idea that information and ICTs - and ‘providing access’ to them – can be way to development – thus, a way to address those very same global dispossessions, social injustices, inequalities, and socio-economic disparities caused by the legacy of colonial powers. Besides being fundamentally simplistic, this rationale conceals the tacit assumption individuals at the margins need information to participate in the information society and – subsequently – into the knowledge economy (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Information is seen as capital to be transformed into economic resources, allowing people to enter the global market and ‘develop economically’ (ibid), which reinforces existing societal structures and the predominance of neoliberal thinking that originate from colonial times (Goel, 2021).

Furthermore, as mentioned also in section 2.1, information and its production are not an equal ground where anybody has the same right to contribute (Andrade & Urquhart, 2011; Walsham, 2020; Qureshi, 2015). Information production, and particularly scholarly and digital information production, is disproportionately produced in and by the global North. ICTs themselves, as well as the information systems they are governed by, are mainly developed and designed in the global North, mostly by middle-class, middle-aged white men. Their functions and affordabilities carry culturally biased values (see e.g., Garcia-Gavilanes et al., 2013; Makri & Schlegelmilch, 2017; Miquel-Ribé & Laniado, 2018; Oliveira et al., 2018; Reinecke et al., 2013) that reflect colonial legacies and devalue local principles and practices (Bidwell, 2014; Bidwell et al., 2016; Merritt & Bardzell, 2011). Furthermore, critical ICT4D scholars have come to understand that, despite their potential to reduce inequalities, ICTs may also increase them (Unwin, 2009), *de facto* acting as amplifiers, and not as equalizers, of existing societal issues (Toyama, 2015).

The implicit assumptions underlying the very foundations of information for development reflect colonial structures in their *power*-relations, in their impositions of *knowledge* superiority, and in the very *essence* of values and actors that are allowed to participate, make decisions, and shape the agenda of the field.

Critical scholars in the field have examined the relationships between researchers and communities in terms of *power* dynamics, and they have tried to offer frameworks to improve scholars' work in intercultural contexts (Brunello, 2015; Vannini, Nemer, Halabi, et al., 2017). However, this very same analysis reflects a view where researchers, mostly coming from the North, recreate colonial power dependencies and dynamics between the North, where development comes from, and the South, where it has to land. Funds for research disproportionately coming from Western countries, they rarely sponsor South-to-South collaborations, and they mainly label countries in the South as beneficiaries (Marais & Vannini, 2021; Walsham, 2020). When South-leading collaborations are implemented, partners are not always seen as participating equally (van Stam, 2020).

The pressure to please funders and their constraints are further perpetrating these dependencies, which rarely allow the time and continuity needed for real change to happen for (and from) the local communities (Holeman & Barrett, 2017; Raftree, 2011, 2015). Only more recently, the very meaning of 'Information for Development' has been critically examined. Scholars have been questioning the way 'development' is conceptualized (Heeks, 2006), as well as how it is framed within Western ideologies and power structures (Zheng et al., 2018), how it is still driven by theories of modernization and individual capital (Jiménez & Zheng, 2018), and how it is still framed at meeting people's immediate needs without addressing the root causes of their disadvantage (Poveda & Roberts, 2018). The same way, scholars have begun to emphasise the importance of considering whose information should be archived and used (O'Neal, 2015; Thorpe, 2019; Watkins et al., 2021; Zondi, 2021).

The question of who benefits from Information for Development research, whose information is prioritized, and who designs, sponsors, and conducts research is tightly related to issues of *being* and its antithesis. Being a researcher or being a beneficiary. Being the research designer and decision-maker or being the enumerator. Information for Development field does reflect the general Academic disparities between the North and the South, where most of the published researchers are working in institutions located in the global North (Joia et al., 2012; Walsham, 2020; Bai, 2018; Gosh et al., 2015) and indigenous or local communities in the global South are considered either as merely receiving beneficiaries and objects of study, or as research helpers who can do (unrecognized) labour for them. These extractive practices perpetrate the racist structures imposed by the colonial powers (Harris, 2015; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999).

These practices contribute to exacerbate the *knowledge* asymmetry that is evident in the published outputs we mentioned in 2.1., and that is further perpetrated by the methodologies and instruments – such as ICTs – used to produce it, which are, once again, imported from the North (Oliveira et al., 2018; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). Critical scholars in the field have pointed out to how this enacts the image of the North as technologically superior, while the South is a mere receiver, in a very colonial fashion, of patterns dictating how information should be, how technology should work, and what good research looks like (Bidwell, 2014; Bidwell et al., 2016).

Scholars have also highlighted how these knowledge-transfers from the North to different contexts in the South only very rarely produce long-term sustainable results (Heeks, 2010; Unwin, 2009), and how only participation of local communities and consideration of local dynamics could ensure research and development projects to succeed (Brunello, 2015; Roche, 2008). Thus, libraries have been addressed as spaces for community participation and production of local content (Nwalo, 2000; Sey et al., 2013; Vannini et al., 2013), while participatory methods have been adopted to promote community empowerment (Bentley et al., 2017; David et al., 2013; Vannini et al., 2015). However, the field seems to have been

motivated mostly by sustainability issues than by dismantling the structural colonial legacies that produced these imbalances in the first place (Irani et al., 2010; Jimenez & Roberts, 2019). A decolonizing approach would continue these efforts to offer more holistic and transformational propositions to I4D.

These two examples of fields within LIS illustrate how colonial assumptions are implicit in their foundational ways of thinking and practices. In both cases scholars and practitioners are asking questions about these assumptions with increasing urgency. As of yet, however, these efforts have been fragmentary. Although some in the discipline have begun to engage in decolonial thought, we believe that these efforts are still partial and are not addressing the structures of the decolonial power, allowing them to continue to reproduce. While they advance a more critical approach to LIS, they may, in fact, reduce these complex power structures to specific aspects of race, knowledge, and redistribution of wealth. Concentrating solely on the racial characteristics of LIS academics risks ignoring knowledge production. Similarly, focusing solely on knowledge production may inadvertently undermine the importance of a more diverse and inclusive workforce, and so on. We argue that, to be truly decolonial, the field of LIS should adopt a more holistic approach that considers the different aspects and impacts of coloniality. We therefore propose a holistic framework as a practical set of guidelines to be adopted in the field.

The next section introduces a holistic approach to decolonisation.

### **3. Three interconnected colonialities**

Colonialism can be described as the imposition by a foreign power of direct rule over another people and the taking of their land (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). This process of imposition often led to the creation of empires mainly from countries like Britain, Spain, France, Portugal, developing a “relationship of domination and subordination between the metropole and one or more territories or colonies that lie outside of its boundaries yet claimed as its legal procession” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 116). In the period after World War II, many countries gained independence from imperial control through wars of liberation or more peaceful struggle.

Even though this historical moment was crucial, by the 1990s, scholars explain that there was a perceived failure of decolonisation in most nations (Quijano, 2000). Most formerly colonised territories were being ruled by minority elites, and patterns of colonial power continued both internally and with relation to global structures (Mignolo, 2011). Similarly, institutions in the global north retained various colonial practices. This led to scholars theorising the notion of coloniality, referring to the legacies and leftovers of colonialism, which outlived formal colonialism and became integrated in succeeding social orders (Quijano 2000).

There are many ways to examine the remaining colonialities. In this paper, we introduce Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2013) framework, with three distinct forms of coloniality which, although presented as separate, are in many ways overlapping and interdependent. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) introduces these colonialities as useful analytical tools for gaining a better understanding of the roots of African predicaments and quandaries, by considering the political, social, ideological, economic, or epistemological dimensions. In this sense, it

provides a holistic way of looking at these complex and multidimensional issues. For purposes of our paper, we adapt this framework to focus on the context of LIS as an academic discipline.

### **3.1 Coloniality of power**

The notion of “coloniality of power” identifies the racial, political and social hierarchical orders imposed by European colonialism in Latin America that prescribed value to certain peoples and societies while disenfranchising others (Bhambra, 2014). The project of colonising America became a model of power, or the very foundation of what was to become modern identity, inextricably framed by world capitalism and a system of dominance structured around the concept of race.

Quijano (2000, 2007) explains how the concept of race as we currently understand it has its origins in the colonisation of the Americas. During this period, conquered and dominated peoples were placed in a natural position of inferiority, and their phenotypic qualities, or the expression of our genes, as well as their cultural characteristics were regarded as inferior. Thus, race became the primary criterion for allocating world population to ranks, positions, and roles within the new society's power structure. Moreover, Quijano explains that capitalism was an already existing form of economic relation, but it became tied to forms of domination and subordination that were central to maintaining colonial control first in the Americas, and then elsewhere (2000). In the historical process of the constitution of America, all forms of control and exploitation of labour and production, as well as the control of appropriation and distribution of products, revolved around the relation of capital-salary in the world market (2007). These forms of labour control included slavery, petty-commodity production, reciprocity, and wages. This led to a global model of control of work, constituted around and in the service of capital, its configuration as a whole was established with a capitalist character as well. As a result, colonialism is inextricably linked to modernity and capitalism, as well as the racial hierarchies that inform racism.

Scholars have expanded on this to examine the notion of gender. This is due to the fact that colonisation altered indigenous sense of self, identity, cosmology, and gender relations. Thus, modernity/coloniality sought to erase pre-existing gender systems, through the imposition of binary oppositions and hierarchical social categories (Lugones, 2007). The imposition of race accompanied the inferiorisation of indigenous peoples, while the imposition of gender accompanied the inferiorisation of indigenous women (Lugones 2007).

The coloniality of power offers us a structural approach capable of thinking about larger structural issues of power and how they interact with discourse and practice reinforcing the oppression of some. Oppression is understood as ‘a set of social conditions that systematically disadvantage members of one social group relative to another (Khader, 2019, p. 5). In this case, colonial legacies would reinforce the oppression of those based on their race, gender, and socioeconomic class, thus examining how capital issues are racialized and how race issues are embedded in a capital logic. Moreover, those who require capital or modernization are also racialized into inferior categories. Similarly, those with access to capital and who are already modern are racialised into a superior category.

In addition to assisting us in identifying existing structures of oppression and injustice, coloniality of power provides hints as to how we can seek to transform and eradicate given structures. Quijano explains that it is necessary to remove ourselves from what causes modernity and coloniality, and forms of power that are not derived from ‘free decisions made

by free people' (2007, p. 177). For Quijano, these forms of power are manifested as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and dominance. Therefore, adopting approaches that actively focus on these aspects is crucial to the engagement with coloniality of power.

## 3.2 Coloniality of being

The concept of "coloniality of being" suggests that colonial relations of power did not only leave indelible marks in the areas of race, sexuality, knowledge, and the economy, but also on the general understanding of being. This refers to the effects of coloniality in people's lived experience and in their mind and perceptions of themselves Maldonado-Torres (2007). The concept relates to issues of human ontology, how we see and perceive ourselves.

In his books, Fanon describes colonization as a dehumanizing process in which the colonized internalizes a complex of inferiority or of dependency. This complex derives from the systematic exclusion of their kind - often connected to racist ideologies that see the colonized people of colour as not trustworthy, not capable, and not sophisticated (Fanon, 1952, 1961). Using Fanon's concepts of the 'wretched of the earth', Maldonado Torres points to the way the experiences and existences of the racialized colonized are continuously erased by the colonizers, depriving them of their "ontological resistance or ontological weight" (2007, p. 253) and not recognizing the ways their Being, their lives are normalized as killable, rapeable, dominable, non-human - i.e., in a constant place of war. "Invisibility and dehumanization are the primary expressions of the coloniality of Being" (ibid., p. 257). According to Fanon, to get out of the vicious cycle of oppression, the colonized need to create their own identity, freed from the way the colonial power sees and defines them (Fanon, 1952, 1961).

Decolonizing the being and the mind, then, refers to the process of overcoming the social constructs that not only deem the colonized as inferiors, but also influence their self-perception as such. Moreover, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) explains that the coloniality of being is important because it helps us to investigate how humanity for indigenous people was portrayed, which subsequently led to the "objectification"/"thingification"/"commodification" of these people. This has implications on knowledge and knowledge production as well, in which the colonized often feel less competent than their Western counterparts. Bidwell (2016), for example, explains how oppression of African researchers is often "more embodied than overt" and "African scientists often feel stuck in subservient positions when collaborating with researchers from so-called developed regions even in fields where Africa has extensive research expertise and experience, e.g., health sciences" (p. 24).

The coloniality of being allows us to deeply focus on the individual dimension and how individual subjects are portrayed. It focuses on two aspects, one in how we see ourselves; and two in how we see others, objectifying and dehumanising them (i.e., indigenous people). In essence, it requires an introspective process of reflecting on the self, as well as the lived experience of those around us.

## 3.3 Coloniality of knowledge

Finally, the term "coloniality of knowledge" refers to the way in which our understanding of what constitutes knowledge is mostly embedded in Western forms of thinking, or western epistemologies. When authors talk about Western epistemologies, they usually refer to the

notion of Eurocentrism, as “[...] an epistemic phenomenon that received its name from the territorial location of actors, languages, and institutions that managed to project as universal their own world sense and worldviews.” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). This form of knowledge, which was privileged through modern sciences, is typically built upon a rationalist, secular epistemology that elevates the importance of science, economics, and technology. In this way these entities become perceived as neutral and having universal applicability (Connell, 2007). What is ignored is that this form of knowledge originates from a specific historical, cultural, and geographical location. Moreover, given its perceived universality, other forms of knowledge (e.g., local and indigenous) tend to be perceived as less relevant and deficient (Kidd et al. 2017).

Raewyn Connell's (2007) thoughts on universalism and Northern theory help us understand some of the differences between Eurocentric and Northern knowledge systems. Contrary to popular belief, most classical texts, despite being written from specific geographical locations, such as the metropole, claim to speak in universal terms. These texts' claim of universality, their strong focus on problems in 'metropolitan' theoretical literature, their gestures of exclusion from the periphery, and their grand erasure of the colonial experience are all characterised by Connell (2007).

This way in which knowledge is constructed is constitutive of modernity and the making of a capitalist world system. It also implies the systematic subordination of the knowledge and cultures of groups outside Europe. And, as such, it promotes a hegemony of a particular type of knowledge that stems from a particular geolocation. This then gets translated into publications, which mostly benefits research that is connected to the already dominant discourse and systematically excludes different perspectives (Bidwell, 2016).

To counter the coloniality of knowledge, Quijano advocated for "epistemological decolonization," in which alternatives to Western claims are given more weight (2000; 2007). Quijano suggested the need 'to liberate the production of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity' (2007, p.177). Moreover, decolonial scholars propose the concept of 'pluriverse' and 'pluriversal knowledge'. Claiming that the idea of a dominant, universal tendency that claimed a superior position from "other" worlds is a result of the colonial process, the notion of the pluriverse stems from acknowledging the existence and validity of different ways of being in the world, opening up possibilities of coexistence of different worlds and world views.

Figure 1 summarises the three overlapping and interdependent colonial legacies which originate from the post-1492 conquests that first created the empires and constituted an important part of how our world is shaped. The next section introduces some starting points for what constitutes a way to rethink the world, in general, and the field of LIS in particular, by seeking to remove these colonial legacies.

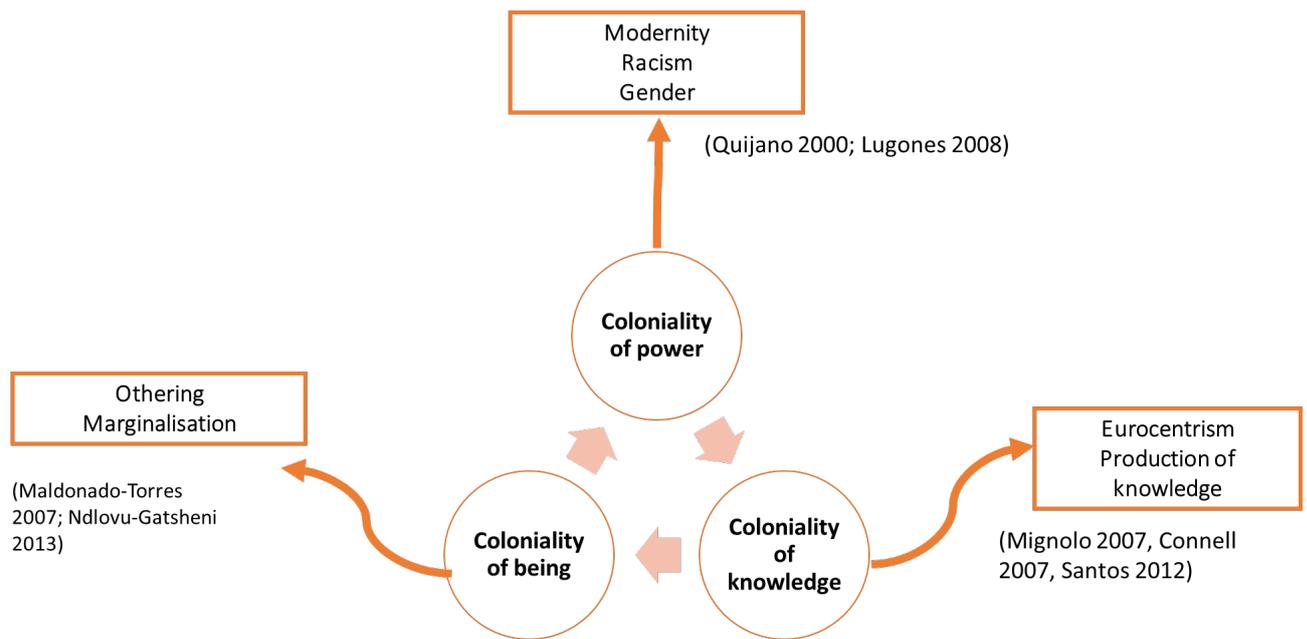


Figure 1: Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013) framework of the Coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being. Adapted from Seroto (2018)

## 4. A decolonial approach to Library and Information Studies

In this section, we will seek to operationalise the framework. Following closely Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013) framework on decolonisation as a starting point, we conducted an iterative process looking at the sub-fields of LIS, followed by a discussion among the authors on suggestions for questions that might be relevant to our own research practise and that of our colleagues. To begin, we identified initial themes that arose from the framework and were related to the LIS literature, which we then developed further. We came up with a preliminary list of themes that we thought were important (for example, "race," "modernity," "gender," and "structural power"). After that, we looked at literature that addresses the three colonialities and its shortcomings, in order to examine the themes and redefine them in light the literature (for example, "reflexivity", "antiracism", "pluriversal knowledges"). Our initial themes were grouped into three distinct starting points as a result of the iterative process between the framework and the LIS literature. Then, in light of this analysis, we expanded our initial suggested questions and came up with a few more.

Our goal is not to prescribe solutions for LIS to engage with decolonisation, but rather to propose starting points that explicitly acknowledge the effects of colonisation and how it influences our discipline. As our review of librarianship and information for development have demonstrated, there is already an engagement with decolonisation. It is important to understand that decolonisation is a long-term process. Furthermore, it is a process of "complete disorder" (Fanon, 1961) that should never be regarded as harmonious or simple. Instead, it should be acknowledged that engaging in decolonisation requires a long-term process of dismantling, challenging, and transforming. It is inevitably both a collective

undertaking and one that is personally challenging. Our argument is that the discipline, and information scholars, could benefit from acknowledging these three overlapping and interconnected colonial legacies: the coloniality of power, the coloniality of being, and the coloniality of knowledge.

The next section depicts our operationalisation of the framework by offering starting points and initial questions that can help LIS scholars engage. We summarize them in Figure 2, where we offer our own framework for a decolonial approach to LIS. In the next sub-sections, we provide a description for these starting points from each, which can be used as reference by information scholars to engage in critical reflective discussions around decolonisation, as well as their own research, and their teaching and work practices within universities and libraries.

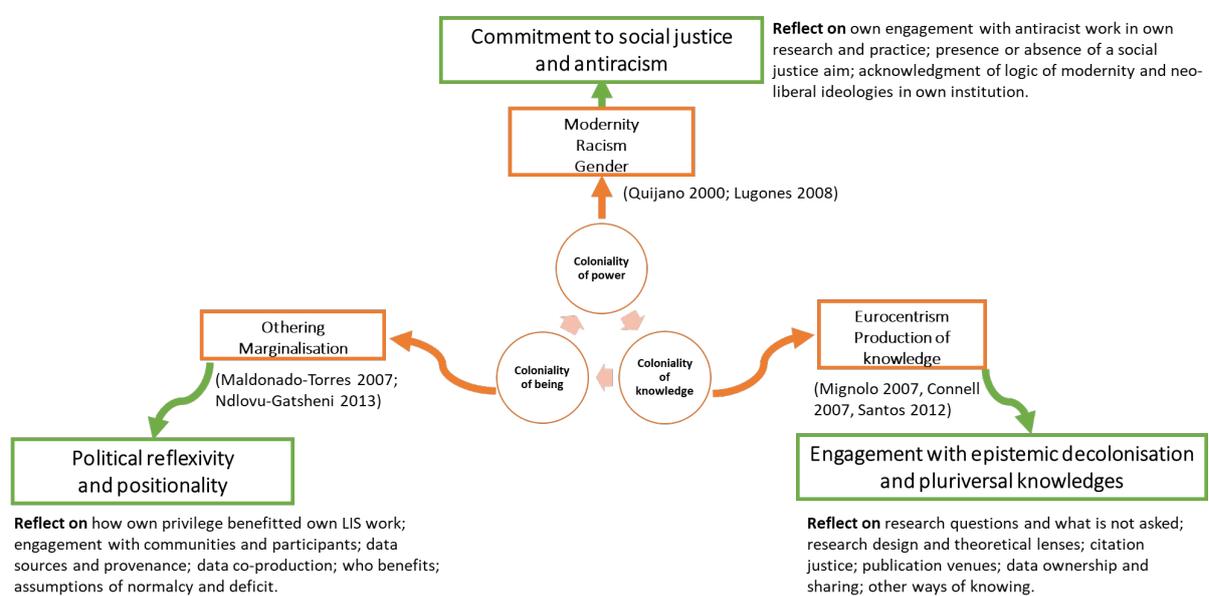


Figure 2: A holistic framework for a decolonial approach to LIS.

## 4.1 Commitment to social justice and antiracism:

As the coloniality of power refers to the broader social orders that result in the oppression of groups, a decolonial lens involves a commitment to concepts and approaches that seek to dismantle such structures of power. It is about seeking social justice as the reduction of group oppression (hooks, 2014; Khader, 2019).

More specifically, it considers a commitment to antiracism, which is defined as ‘forms of thought and/or practice that seek to confront, eradicate and/or ameliorate racism’ (Bonnett 2000, p. 4). This specific approach centres on justice and equity (Gilroy, 1990) and rather than being only about opposing racism, it is also about constructing a positive future for everyone, with harmony and mutual respect (Anthias and Lloyd, 2002). As such, it is a transformative approach that necessarily involves dismantling existing structures of oppression that are experienced by minoritised communities.

For LIS, this involves identifying and questioning the ways in which the discipline promotes ideas of modernity (capitalism), racism and exclusion of minoritised communities, and patriarchy. It involves considering who is in the position of making decisions and setting research agendas, who owns collections and data, and how these practices are ultimately perpetuating and reproducing colonial relationships. It involves including racialized and minoritised communities, whose knowledge is often extracted to produce knowledge in the form of publications, in having a say on how their knowledge is used. It involves analysing how capital in its different forms (e.g., money, technology, information, etc.) within the sector is distributed and how it may further create dependencies and deepen the gap between who is in positions of power and who is not, especially considering racialized people.

### **Questions for reflection:**

How are you engaging with antiracist work in your research and practice?

How is your work aiming for social justice?

Have you acknowledged the underlying logic of modernity in your institutions (if any)?

Have you acknowledged the underlying logic of modernity in technological development and deployment? Have you asked how neo-liberal ideologies are playing out within your institutions?

## **4.2 Political reflexivity and positionality:**

The colonality of being focuses on the self and the individual dimension. As such, it is an introspective process of reflection. But reflexivity not for the sake of it, but with a consideration of the positionality of the individual, the internal narratives and stories that shape our thinking. Here, important sensitising devices include political reflexivity (Abdelnour & Abu Moghli, 2021), but also issues of positionality, considering insider/outsider positions and in-betweenness (Jimenez et al., 2021).

For LIS, the Colonality of being refers to two aspects: one to do with how, as LIS researchers or practitioners, we reflect on our own roles in reproducing or reinforcing colonial narratives. This involves a constant process of self-reflection that seeks to change our way of thinking and seeks to transform how we do our work. An example of this can be Gasparotto (2021) reflexive exercise for promoting a human rights education practice in libraries that acknowledges Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The second aspect refers to how we may be inadvertently engaging with extractive practices against racialized people and other minoritised communities. For example, it prompts us to reflect on how LIS promotes the objectification of indigenous peoples and their knowledge, pushing its white/Western gaze and frameworks on it and ultimately using it to reproduce colonial structures of superiorities and inferiorities. It also asks how racialised and minoritised communities are represented, both in research and in positions of power within the discipline (e.g., who is a scholar, who is a “beneficiary” of a research intervention, who needs to be “helped”, etc.). It involves avoiding naming and referring to minoritised groups solely as “beneficiaries”, “victims”, and other terms that imply their passivity and portray them as sole recipients of services rather than providers.

### **Questions for reflection:**

To what extent has my privilege benefitted me in working in LIS work?

How might we, as librarians or I4D researchers, unintentionally reproduce or reinforce colonial narratives?

How do I engage with communities and participants?

Where are we collecting the data from?

Which communities are we working with? Are we co-producing?

Who benefits from the research?

Am I assuming that the global North is "normal" and viewing the global South through a deficit model?

### **4.3 Engagement with epistemic decolonisation and pluriversal knowledges:**

The colonality of knowledge entails acknowledging and challenging the ways in which the discipline is overwhelmingly dominated by Western knowledge, and how this is systematically promoted as a superior form of knowledge regardless of the context of application globally. As such, it involves pursuing epistemic decolonisation that “clear(s) the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings.” (Quijano 2007 p. 177). It is also linked to querying how whiteness is reproduced through citations and curricula, reinforcing and reproducing the same colonial power relations. Finally, it involves analysing how the discipline promotes universals (vs pluriverses), and making sure it can make space for different voices and visions of the world at all levels (from teaching to research, from library practices to decision-making processes).

#### **Questions for reflection:**

What are our research questions?

What theories/models/concepts/methods are being used?

What theories/models/concepts/methods are being used for researching the global South?

Where were these designed/made?

What might we not be asking?

Would we learn new things if we considered other ways of knowing?

Who are we citing and how are we citing them?

Are we questioning whether our libraries' collections prioritise records of specific social groups? Where are we publishing and why?

What do we do with our findings? Do we share them with the communities we work with?

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, we provide an analysis of some of the current practices that may be ascribed to decolonial thinking in LIS, as well as point out why we think that a more holistic approach to decoloniality in LIS is needed in the field. This article is also presented as part of a process of reflection for the authors on how to critically engage with decolonial thinking in a way that both acknowledges our own privilege and responsibility, and that ensures that this process is not performative. At the same time, we recognise that this is only early steps in what should be a long-term process of listening, reflection, and action.

Current activity in LIS tends to address decoloniality in a one-dimensional way, focusing mainly on certain aspects of knowledge that can be decolonized. However, colonialism is a multi-dimensional process that has constituted the social structures that guide the way our world works. These structures have affected (and are still affecting) peoples, geographies, and minoritised communities for centuries through structures of power, promoting superior and inferior categories of being, and superior claims of universalism knowledge. We therefore propose a holistic framework with the aim to offer a practical tool for LIS scholars and practitioners to think about decolonising their discipline in their research, in their teaching, and in their practises.

We argue that a holistic approach is relevant to LIS for three main reasons: 1) it interlinks social struggles, recognising the interconnectedness of the different levels of oppression (including race, gender, geography, class) that stem from the colonial legacy; 2) it uncovers the broader structural factors that guide/design/create our world. This means we cannot reduce solutions to issues of reading lists, citations, and so on; 3) it draws attention to the fact that decolonisation is an ongoing process, continuously reproduced by existing institutional arrangements which will take a long time and collective struggle to escape. Colonial legacies have been shaping our society for centuries, so it is not realistic to think colonialism will be overcome in a fortnight with 'off-the-shelf' fixes. A one-dimensional approach to decolonisation might suggest that easy fixes are available, and that a few reading lists and/or research projects will be enough to make the discipline decolonial. But reducing the decolonial approach to a simple one-story/angle, invalidates the need of a more radical paradigm shift, which is more interconnected, and where social struggles show how they are interlinked with other challenges experienced by others.

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