

Critical Sociotechnical Systems

# When AI Reinscribes Empire

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Libraries as Spaces of Counter-Pedagogy

California Conference on Instruction Librarianship 2026

*Library Instruction in Changing Times*

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BlackSTS • Critical Data Studies

Abolitionist Librarianship

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# Agenda

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**01**

## **The Colonial Archive of AI**

How colonial logics of extraction, categorization, and control structure today's AI systems

**02**

## **Libraries: Complicity and Resistance**

Confronting the library's dual history as both enforcer and site of liberation

**03**

## **Toward Liberatory Literacy**

Reframing AI and data literacy as tools for liberation rather than compliance

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## **Workshop Activities**

Active learning for critical engagement with AI systems

# 01

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## The Colonial Archive of AI

How colonial logics structure today's AI systems

# The Colonial Logics of AI

## Extraction

Taking data without consent from marginalized communities. Training datasets scrape text, images, and labor.

## Categorization

Sorting people into fixed hierarchies. Labels become destiny; classification becomes control.

## Control

Using data to manage and surveil populations. The archive becomes an instrument of dominance.

## The Critical Frame

LLMs reenact the colonial archive—collecting and fixing people into categories, reinscribing racial hierarchies, and perpetuating **epistemic violence**.

As Simone Browne argues, these systems are **genealogically connected** to the data practices of slavery (*Dark Matters*, 2015)

# From Ledger to Algorithm

## The Slave Ship Ledger

*"50 men, 30 women, 20 children"*

Categories replaced individuals. Prices replaced lives. The ledger transformed persons into **fungible units**.


## Today's Algorithms

**Credit scores:** three-digit fungibility

**Algorithmic hiring:** interchangeable data points

**Predictive policing:** aggregated risk profiles

Same grammar: abstraction → equivalence → replacement

 The innovation was not cruelty. It was the **systematic production of data** that made persons into units. We have not escaped this form—we have **automated it**.

# "Good" Data and the Violence of Precision

## The Zong Insurance Claim

132 persons thrown overboard. £30 per "unit."

Precise numbers. Clear valuation. Legally admissible. This is **exemplary data**—the violence is in the form of knowledge itself.

## McKittrick's "Bad" Measure

**The Uncounted** — the song in the hold, the refusal to be measured

**The Relational** — duration, presence, a "groove"

**The Imprecise** — wonder, curiosity, openness

These are not "pre-data" or anti-data. They are **alternative data practices** that do not require the reduction of life to number.

# The Racializing Function of Surveillance

## Branding

Flesh as data storage

Identity inscribed in skin.

→ Facial recognition

## Runaway Notices

Physical description as database

Data for tracking.

→ Digital profiles

## Lantern Laws

Compulsory visibility

Required to carry light to be legible  
to power.

→ Location tracking

## Book of Negroes

3,000-entry population  
database

→ Gov't databases

## The Continuity Thesis

These systems are not analogous—they are **genealogically connected**. The racializing function is **the historical purpose** of these systems.

# 02

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## **Libraries: Complicity and Resistance**

The library's dual history as enforcer and liberator

## The Library's Uninnocent History

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Libraries are not innocent. Their histories are bound up with **anti-literacy laws**, **segregated access**, and **professional complicity** in structures of exclusion.

### The colonial archive lives in our systems:

- **Cataloging** — Dewey Decimal's racial hierarchies in knowledge organization
- **Metadata** — Erasure of Indigenous naming practices
- **Collections** — Budgets centering Western knowledge production

To teach AI literacy without these histories is to teach **compliance with systems designed to exclude**.

## Sites of Resistance

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### Insurgent Literacies

Enslaved people risked everything to learn to read. Literacy was **an act of resistance**.

### Community Archives

The Schomburg Center preserved Black intellectual traditions. Zines, oral histories, and radical collections.

### Liberation Schools

The Black Panther Party taught **community-controlled literacy**. Education as liberation.

This dual history—**complicity and resistance**—is the ground on which instruction librarians stand.

# 03

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## Toward Liberatory Literacy

AI literacy as liberation, not compliance

## What Is Liberatory Literacy?

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Reframe AI literacy not as neutral "skills training," but as **liberatory literacy**—helping students interrogate sociotechnical systems and imagine alternative futures.

Grounded in **BlackSTS**, **Critical Data Studies**, and **abolitionist librarianship**.

### Liberatory Literacy Asks:

Who built this? Whose data was extracted?

Who benefits? Who is harmed?

*Skills training: "How do I use this tool?"*

**Liberatory literacy:** "What worlds does this tool make possible and impossible?"

## Identify AI's Colonial Inheritances

### Fungibility

When does the system treat people as **interchangeable units**?

Click profiles. Hiring algorithms. Risk scores.

### Precision as Violence

When does "clean data" render **suffering invisible**?

Crime stats as "ground truth."

### Categorization as Control

When do fixed categories **constrain identity**?

Gender classification. Race labels in policing.

The goal: teach that **bias is structural, historical, and inherited**—not a bug to fix.

## Examine Who Is Harmed and Who Benefits

### Who provides data?

Marginalized communities  
scraped without consent.

### Who builds it?

Predominantly white, male,  
Western teams.

### Who profits?

Corporations monetizing  
extracted data.

### Who is invisible?

Those whose languages and  
knowledges don't appear in  
training data.

Not "Are these systems racist?" but "**How do they operationalize the racializing logics of their precursors?**"

## Build Critical Data Literacy as Liberation

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### Reading Against the Grain

Finding in datasets the evidence of what they exclude. What stories do the silences tell?

### Epistemological Refusal

Not all knowledge requires extraction. When is it ethical to **refuse data collection**?

### Relational Knowledge

Knowing through relationship, duration, and presence rather than measurement.

### Imagining Alternatives

What practices value **particularity over fungibility**, wonder over prediction?

# 04

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## Workshop Activities

Active learning for critical engagement

## Analyze AI-Generated Text & Metadata

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In small groups, analyze **AI-generated text** alongside **training dataset metadata** to surface hidden biases.

### PROMPT

"Whose perspective is centered? Whose is erased? What do the metadata reveal about whose data was **extracted**?"

### TASK

Identify **three instances** of reinscribed colonial/racial/gendered logics. Discuss: How would you teach students to spot these?

15 minutes

## Map Epistemic Violence & Brainstorm Counters

### Mapping Exercise

Identify **epistemic violence** in AI systems in your instruction contexts.

**Epistemic violence:** imposing one way of knowing on others, rendering their knowledge illegible.

Map: Where does this happen in **your library**? Your institution?

### Brainstorm Counter-Practices

In groups, brainstorm:

- Redesign a **one-shot session** for liberatory literacy
- What questions to add to existing lessons?
- How to **collaborate with students** to resist extractive data practices?

**Share one strategy** with the full group.

Build a community of practice around **liberatory instruction**.

15 minutes

# Take-With Framework

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## WHEN YOU SEE FUNGIBILITY

Ask: **What particularity is lost?**

## WHEN YOU SEE "GOOD" DATA

Ask: **Whose story does this flatten?**

## WHEN YOU SEE COMPULSORY VISIBILITY

Ask: **Who is served? What would refusal look like?**

## WHEN YOU SEE INTERCHANGEABLE UNITS

Ask: **What relation connects them?**

Not how to improve the data. How to **imagine other ways of knowing.**

## Thank you.

Open for questions and conversation.