

# On Dark Continents and Digital Divides:

*Information Inequality* and the Reproduction of Racial Otherness in Library and Information Studies

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## Note

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## Abstract

**[START PAGE 62]** This paper presents a critical race analysis of Library and Information Studies (LIS) writing on global information inequality, that body of literature focused on the connection between global suffering and disparities in information access related to available content, technologies, infrastructure, and skills. I argue that global information inequality represents a key site for the reproduction of racialized discourse in the field. In particular, I contend that the construction of information inequality as a sign of marginalization powerfully (if tacitly) extends colonial mythologies of racial Otherness and Western civilizational superiority. My engagement with critical race and anti-colonial scholarship in support of this claim focuses on two key ideas: (a) the construction of racial difference in colonial discourse, particularly its recourse to narratives of intellectual and technological capacity; and (b) the concept of (international) development as an example of the relatively recent shift to racialized discourse largely stripped of explicit racial coding. After sketching these ideas in broad strokes, I turn to a critical analysis of such racially encoded international development discourse in global information inequality literature, with a focus on the dynamics of narratives, imagery, and other systems of meaning. The paper both builds on existing critiques of LIS infor-**[START PAGE 63]**mation inequality discourse and contributes a global-facing perspective to a small body of LIS critical race work that has tended to focus on domestic (rather than international) contexts.

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# On Dark Continents and Digital Divides:

*Information Inequality and the Reproduction of Racial Otherness in Library and Information Studies*

*The universal claims of Western knowledge, then, colonial or postcolonial, turn necessarily upon the deafening suppression of its various racialized Others into silence.*

—David Theo Goldberg, 1993, p. 151

At the very first library conference I attended, one of the keynotes (Zuckerman, 2008) presented a dynamic talk on the pitfalls and possibilities of the Internet as a space of global knowledge-sharing and cosmopolitan problem-solving. He touched on a dizzying array of topics including Fiji Water, internet censorship, 419 scams, the One Laptop Per Child project, the relatively few undersea fibre-optic cables linking Africa to the web, and many more. In the midst of it all, the speaker displayed a composite image created by NASA showing a map of the world as it would appear from space if all areas of the world experienced a concurrent nighttime. Concentrations of electrical grid connections appeared glowing pale yellow against a dark blue backdrop of areas without electricity. Not surprisingly, Europe and North America featured the highest concentration of bright spots, but the speaker drew our attention to the map's center, which showed Africa with few concentrations of brightness and thus little capacity for the meaningful connectivity to the world that such light ostensibly represented. "The Dark Continent," he quipped, "is quite literally dark."

I begin with this story because it emblemizes what I want to suggest has come to be a recurring feature of globalist discourse in Library and Information Studies (LIS): the intersection of (well-intentioned) explanations of global poverty and injustice as matters of absent information and technology; and deployments (if inadvertent) of colonial narratives of race (in this case, the well-worn notion of Africa as the Dark Continent). This intersection represents the chief focus of the pages that follow, in which I draw on critical race and anti-colonial writing (particularly, anti-colonial critiques of development) to elaborate a critical reading of LIS global information inequality literature, that body of work concerned centrally with global suffering and its connection to disparities in information access related to available content, technologies, infrastructure, and skills.

Critical writing on race is virtually absent in LIS (Hall, 2012; Honma, 2005; Hussey, 2010; Pawley, 2006; Peterson, 1995, 1996, 1999). In Hall's (2012) words, "the library and information science field has seemingly slapped itself with a gag order. While the discussion of diversity in libraries has proliferated over the past few decades, meaningful dialogue around race has been eviscerated or altogether evaded" (p. 198). In those rare instances where LIS writers have moved beyond simplistic and ahistorical *diversity*-based accounts of race and racism to include deeper examination of the complex social, cul-**[START PAGE 64]**tural, and historical micro- and macro-dynamics of racialized difference and power, the focus has tended to be on domestic (rather than international) contexts.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the scarcity of critical race writing in LIS, information inequality discourse is widespread in the field (Yu, 2006). In problematizing global poverty as an issue of inaccessible information (particularly ICT), the discourse is arguably reflective of a strong humanitarian impulse within LIS, whether articulated under the heading of *information poverty*, the *knowledge gap*, or the *digital divide*: LIS scholars and practitioners interested in global justice ought to work toward ending information inaccessibility, it is suggested, the remediation of which enables socioeconomic development and political agency, and thus a more just, equitable global landscape.

A number of LIS writers have criticized global information inequality literature for its uncritical adoption of traditional international development languages (e.g., Haider, 2007; Haider & Bawden, 2006; Hudson, 2012; Lindh & Haider, 2010). These critics have pointed out that the adoption of such discourse in LIS ultimately reproduces attendant (and widely problematized) assumptions about poverty, progress, expertise, and modernization. Other writers have pursued similar critiques from political economy perspectives, exploring in more detail the important question of which particular political and economic interests are served by dominant problematizations of the digital divide (e.g., Luyt, 2004; Stevenson, 2009). This paper seeks both to deepen such critique of global information inequality discourse and to contribute a global-facing perspective to the small body of critical race writing in LIS, through an exploration of the continuities between LIS information inequality literature's uncritical recourse to dominant development frameworks and the broader context of colonial discourses of racial difference. As scholars outside LIS have documented abundantly, Western imperialism has historically been premised on and perpetuated through intersecting assumptions about the civilizational superiority of the colonizer and the backwardness of the colonized.

The central claim of this paper is that global information inequality, as a dominant narrative circulated within the intellectual output of LIS, operates as a racialized discourse in the field: The construction of information inequality as a sign of marginalization serves as a key (if largely unwitting) site for the reproduction of racialized knowledge in LIS, inasmuch as it works to extend colonial mythologies of racial Otherness and Western civilizational superiority. My engagement with critical race and anti-colonial scholarship in support of this claim focuses on two key ideas: (a) colonial discourse's construction of racial difference and particularly its recourse to narratives of intellectual and technological capacity; and (b) the operation of the concept of development as an example of the relatively recent shift to deracialized language in the extension of racialized discourse. After sketching these ideas in broad strokes, I turn to **[START PAGE 65]** a critical analysis of global information inequality literature, with a focus on the dynamics of narratives, imagery, and other systems of meaning.

Before proceeding further, it is worth offering a few comments about the scope of the paper. First, I am not seeking to elaborate a position on the broad question of the degree to which ICT can be useful in struggles against global dispossession: While I do hope my analysis interrupts the technological utopianism that seems to animate much information inequality literature, I do not dismiss, as necessarily inappropriate or ineffective, all those integrations of ICT in global justice contexts. Second, my aim is not to present pragmatic policy recommendations. While I

am not dismissing the need for policy work, it seems to me that the overwhelming emphasis on the technical and practical in LIS has tended to limit exploration of deeper theoretical and cultural questions, explorations that represent legitimate forms of intellectual work in their own right. At the same time, my analytical focus on systems of meaning should not be understood to be a repudiation of the materiality of power: While I am indeed concentrating my efforts on reading texts and narratives, I believe it to be equally relevant to inquire, in more depth, into the systems of political and economic interest and production at stake in these contexts.

Finally, a brief note about terminology: In keeping with previous writing (Hudson, 2012), I will be using Shahidul Alam's (2008) term *majority world* throughout this paper in place of phrases like "developing world," "underdeveloped nations," and "Third World." Alam (2008) coined this phrase to address the "strong negative connotations" of these latter traditional terms, which, he argues, "reinforce the stereotypes about poor communities and represent them as icons of poverty" (p. 89). He adds that such terms "hide their histories of oppression and continued exploitation [...] and hinder the appreciation of the cultural and social wealth of these communities" (p. 89). To again draw on Alam's (2008) words, the use of the phrase *majority world* (and its counterpart *minority world* instead of *developed world*) captures,

the fact that we are indeed the majority of humankind. It also brings sharp attention to the anomaly that the Group of 8 countries—whose decisions affect the majority of the world's people—represent a tiny fraction of humankind [...] It also defines the community in terms of what it has, rather than what it lacks. (p. 89)

## Colonialism, Development, and the (Re)Production of Race

Critics of colonial discourse (e.g., Mudimbe, 1988, 1994; Said, 1979, 1993; Smith, 1999) remind us that Western colonialism has never been a purely military or economic undertaking: Where empire has drawn its power from swords and railroads, from pipelines, pesticides, and drone strikes, it has also drawn **[START PAGE 66]** its power from cultural practice—that is, from the production and circulation, reproduction and recirculation, of texts, narratives, languages, and imagery, both literally and figuratively. A key aspect of colonial knowledge production in this respect has been the articulation of narratives of racial difference, which have circumscribed the limits of how the landscape and communities under the gaze of conquest have come to be known and named, whether through the writing of a pen on paper or sword on skin. Such narratives came to be elaborated in binaries of self and Other: the adult worldliness of Europe versus the childlike innocence of other regions; the trustworthiness of the West versus the duplicity of the rest; the bodily self-restraint of whiteness versus the hypersexuality and violence of blackness; lightness versus darkness; modern versus primitive; individuality versus collectivity; industriousness versus laziness; refinement versus crudeness; and so on (see, e.g., Baaz, 2005; Fanon, 1967; Goldberg, 1993; Mudimbe, 1988, 1994; Said, 1979). Such binaries have represented the terms through which colonialism has come to consolidate race as a signifier of populations of bodies associated with characteristics, behaviors, capacities, and locations presumed to be inherent, predictable, and timeless.<sup>2</sup> Interarticulated with gender, sexuality, and other modes of social differentiation (see, e.g.,

McClintock, 1995; Mohanty, 2003; Young, 1995), such racialized knowledge has served as a vehicle through which the West has come to be invented as representative of a universal humanity in contrast with the narrow cultural particularity of the Other. These binaries have been understood to mark rigid and mutually exclusive distinctions that need no further explanation, that go without saying, even though, as Bhabha (1994) has pointed out, they have required constant repetition to maintain their power. Varied and precarious as it has been, the construction, as such, of the civilizational superiority of the West and the barbarity of the rest, has served as a means of legitimizing conquest: The physical violence of empire has been made both conceivable and admissible through such narratives (Adas, 1989, 2006; Baaz, 2005; Grovogui, 2001; Kothari, 2006; Smith, 1999), as well as serving, in its enactment, to advance these narratives further.

Narratives of science and technology have come to occupy a particularly central role in colonial distinctions of self and Other. As Adas (1989) has documented in some detail, the 18th century saw a shift in colonial discourses of Otherness: Emphasis on religious difference (and specifically the absence of Christianity in non-European indigenous communities) declined in this period, as emphasis on scientific and technological achievement came to be the central measure in European accounts of their own civilizational superiority. This emphasis on science and technology has operated as part of a broader account of the putative intellectual inferiority of the colonized, which erases non-Western ways of knowing the world, locating the West as the sole source of legitimate intellectual production. As Smith (1999) puts it, **[START PAGE 67]**

One of the supposed characteristics of primitive peoples was that we could not use our minds or intellects. We could not invent things, we could not create institutions or history, we could not imagine, we could not produce anything of value, we did not know how to use land and other resources from the natural world, we did not practice the 'arts' of civilization. By lacking such virtues we disqualified ourselves, not just from civilization but from humanity itself. (p. 25)

While narratives of racial difference have indeed been central to modern colonialism, the terms of racial differentiation have not remained consistent. Indeed, the concept of race as a mode of colonial governance has drawn its power in part from what Bhabha (1994) terms its ambivalence—its capacity to, at once, insist on the immutability of racially embodied characteristics, while shifting the terms and parameters of racial schemas in alignment with the needs of particular times and places. As Goldberg (1993) puts it,

Conceptually, race is chameleonic and parasitic in character: It insinuates itself into and appropriates as its own mode more legitimate forms of social and scientific expression. Racialized discourse is able to modify its mode of articulation. It can thus assume significance at a specific time in terms of prevailing scientific and social theories and on the basis of established cultural and political values. (p. 107)

In the Western world, the latter half of the 20th century, in particular, saw an intensified retreat from scientific racism. In the face of anti-colonial and civil rights struggles, as well as in the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust, Western nation-states were forced to distance themselves from their own explicitly racialized policies, with public discourse starting to shift away from open assertions of race as a marker of inherently physical difference (Goldberg, 2009; Lentin, 2005; Thobani, 2007). Clearly, this shift has not been accompanied by an epochal

end to the violent domestic and international materiality of Western imperialism, nor to its entrenched narratives of inherent difference. The shift has been discursive, a shift in framing, and specifically a move to what John Solomos (1994) has characterized as metonymic racism. A metonym is a rhetorical device whereby a concept or object is represented through an associated term rather than its actual name—*The White House* as a reference to the U.S. president, for example, or *suits* as a moniker for the officials who (may) wear them. Likewise, expressions of contemporary racialized discourse tend to be characterized less by direct naming than by the substitution of racial metonyms—*terrorism*, for example, or other ostensibly nonracial concepts like *security*, *citizenship*, *immigration*, *illegality*, *crime*, and *welfare*. Such terms are racially coded: They implicitly call forth the imagery, narratives, and logics of racial difference of earlier eras, and indeed effect particular material conditions, but avoid the taboo of blatant invocations of race and its attendant imagery of unapologetic racial science and colonialism.<sup>3</sup> **[START PAGE 68]**

The concept of *development* (used here as a short form of *international development*) is similarly racially coded. As anti-colonial and critical race writers have demonstrated, dominant development discourse represents a key site for the reproduction of colonial constructions of race (Goldberg, 1993; Kothari, 2006; McEwan, 2009; White, 2002). Indeed, in alignment with the gradual post-World War II disavowal of race in public discourse, U.S. President Harry Truman (1949) used his 1949 inauguration speech to emphasize a shift in international relations from empire to benevolence, in what has largely been seen as the formal proclamation of the development era: “The old imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit—has no place in our plans,” he declared. “What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing” (para. 54). Development was thus formally introduced into public discourse as a paradigmatic departure from the violence of empire and the adoption of a wholly new attitude of humanitarianism.

Of course, this definition of imperialism and humanitarianism as representative of mutually exclusive and sequential historical periods does not hold up to historical scrutiny: Discourses of international benevolence and aid have historically co-existed and intersected with discourses of colonialism.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the prevailing (if implicit) definition of development in terms of its *discontinuity* from colonialism has worked to obscure the *continuities* between the two formations (Kothari, 2006). Anti-colonial critics emphasize that development, like colonialism, is indeed predicated on the global identification and problematization of *difference*—differences between communities, differences in conditions of existence: Dominant development accounts of majority-world suffering have tended to reproduce familiarly colonial binaries of self and Other in their mapping of developing and developed identities for the majority and minority world respectively—poverty versus wealth; primitiveness versus modernity; corruption and failed states versus democracy and good governance; traditions and folklore versus science and reason; and so on (Adas, 2006; Baaz, 2005; Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 2010; Goldberg, 1993; Grovogui, 2001; Kapoor, 2008; Kothari, 2006; McEwan, 2009; White, 2002). Development, in other words, becomes a narrative of teleological majority-world progress toward a putatively universal standard represented by the minority world. Moreover, as anti-colonial critics of development emphasize, it is precisely the *dehistoricization* of conditions of global

dispossession that enables such binaries to operate as forms of *racialized* knowledge: Rather than understanding the conditions it problematizes as the outcome of specific historical processes and international relations, development discourse tends to treat such conditions as originary—as predictable and recurring characteristics of different populations, outside of history and thus wholly internal in their genesis (Grovgoui, 2001; Kothari, 2006; Shiva, 2005; White, 2002). Majority-world communities do not, in this logic, face marginalization because of any action by the minority world; the majority world is marginalized because of its presumably inherent marginality. **[START PAGE 69]** Development's metonymic reproduction of race—its tacit invocation of colonial narratives of naturalized group difference—is thus as much a function of what is ignored as it is of what is explicitly said.

### Information Inequality as Racialized Discourse

LIS writers on global information inequality have tended to uncritically adopt such dominant development frameworks and in turn unwittingly reproduce the colonial mythologies of Otherness embedded within them. Even as LIS has continued to be widely assumed to be race neutral (Hall, 2012; Honma, 2005; Pawley, 2006), the field's discourse of information inequality—the problematization of digital divides and ostensibly absent information in marginalized communities—has therefore tended to operate as a metonymic extension of race.

At the most basic level, LIS use of development nomenclature as a means of differentiating global communities—that is, its recurring references to the minority world as “developed” and the majority world as “developing,” “less developed,” or “underdeveloped”—leaves intact development's positioning of the minority world as the civilizational standard (Haider & Bawden, 2006, 2007; Hudson, 2012; Lindh & Haider, 2010). However, the reproduction of colonial mythologies of race through information inequality discourse extends beyond the simple invocation of variations on development's name, encompassing more substantive rehearsals of development's core assumptions and narratives about majority- and minority-world identity and capacity. Information inequality discourse's central claim that information access is crucial to overcoming global dispossession is difficult to contest, of course, not least because it is broad almost to the point of meaninglessness. However, in numerous texts that assert this claim, authors conflate the ostensibly universal concept of *information* on the one hand with minority-world knowledge systems and technologies on the other. For instance, one pair of authors (Jansen & Sellar, 2008) assert the era-defining centrality of information to socioeconomic agency and lament the global preponderance of what they call “the information privileged and the information underprivileged,” even as they situate such universalist claims in a flatly Eurocentric trajectory of *progress* in information history that runs, to use the authors' own terms, from “Greeks to Gutenberg to Google” (pp. 5–6; see also Câmara & Fonseca, 2007; Sedimo, Bwalya, & Du Plessis, 2011). The West's information history and systems are thus understood to be so representative of a universal standard that their particularity bares no mention. Non-Western communities are cast here tacitly, appearing only as the information underprivileged and characterized by their positioning outside of histories of information production: In Abrahamsen's (2000) words, they are assumed to **[START PAGE 70]**

have no history of their own, hardly any past worth recalling, and certainly none that's worth retaining. Everything before development can be abandoned, and third world countries emerge as empty vessels waiting to be filled with the development from the first world. (p. 9)

Where the history of information progress is understood to be the history of minority-world information forms and technologies, the integration of Western ICT appears as the measure of the majority world's ability to address its suffering. Within recent LIS writing on information inequality, there is indeed a recurring assertion of a global consensus on the centrality of ICT adoption in majority-world attempts to improve quality of life (Austin, 2010; Britz, Lor, Coetzee, & Bester, 2006; Dobrota, Jeremic, & Markovic, 2012; Gebremichael & Jackson, 2006; James, 2011; Mutula, 2008). One author (Press, 2004) represents this ostensible consensus as a natural culmination of a longer history of Western benevolence, enthusiastically citing as proof a story told by noted modernization theorist Daniel Lerner about the glowing reception of Western technology by quaint and fascinated Turkish villagers in the mid-20th century:

[B]etween 1950 and 1954 the number of radios in the village grew from one to over 100, and many people moved from farming to cash-paying jobs. The people welcomed modernization, referring to a grocer who got the first radio in 1950 as a "prophet". (para. 2)

While such explicit representations of majority-world communities as primitive and childlike are rare in the literature, LIS discourses of information inequality frequently draw upon imagery that situates majority-world communities outside of modernity, either temporally or spatially. In alignment with so many other development narratives, the information society appears as the known mark of progress in a linear trajectory of modernization along which nations travel according to their individual capacity. With minority-world communities represented as the standard bearers of ICT-driven civilizational advancement, majority-world communities figure as "latecomers" (James, 2008), as "lagging behind" (Gebremichael & Jackson, 2006), assessed according to their ability to "catch up"; or alternately, as spectators, observing from the outside rather than participating in the space of modernity (Britz et al., 2006; Gebremichael & Jackson, 2006; Opesade, 2011). The majority world is cast, again, as outside of history—as *in* another place and *of* another time.

To be sure, some LIS writers emphasize that practices of addressing information inequality should not be limited to a simple transfer of technology or other material resources. Information inequality discourse makes frequent appeals to narratives of learning in this respect, emphasizing that the education of majority-world communities is key to their harnessing the power of information for improving quality of life (Austin, 2010; Britz, 2008; Britz et al., **[START PAGE 71]** 2006; Dutta, 2009; James, 2011; Mansoor & Kamba, 2010; Underwood, 2008). As one author (Austin, 2010) puts it,

Development cannot be achieved until those who use the new technology understand how they can use the information retrieved to take the next steps toward social and economic empowerment. [Information professionals] have a responsibility to enable the development of the individual. We are required to assist the user to develop the skills necessary to use information confidently. (p. 224)

While they may appear innocuous and are most certainly well-meaning, such narratives

exemplify the tacit rehearsal of colonial mythologies of racial difference and intellectual capacity within dominant development discourse: The assertion of the centrality of individual education to relieving suffering only becomes tenable through the tacit assumption that marginalization is, at some level, an outcome of the ignorance of the marginalized—that is, their lack of knowledge, or at least of the right kind of knowledge. The operation of such assumptions as forms of racialized knowledge is brought into greater relief where information inequality writers highlight the *absence* of information society education: In one text (Britz et al., 2006), Africa’s failed status as a “knowledge society” (understood to be surmountable partly through education) is attributed in part to the “brain drain” (understood to be the migration of educated professional classes to the minority world); this “brain drain” is, in turn, presented as threatening to leave the entire continent, in the words of the authors, “brain dead” (p. 37). Another text (Dutta, 2009) characterizes the “ignorance” and illiteracy of the rural poor in majority-world communities as among the factors contributing to their “stagnation” (p. 48) as people while yet another (Britz, 2008) characterizes illiteracy and information illiteracy as a form of dependency and “intellectual disability” (p. 1176). As Smith (1999) notes, literacy,

in a very traditional sense of the word, has been used to determine the breaks between the past and the present, the beginning of history and the development of theory. Writing has been viewed as the mark of a superior civilization and other societies have been judged, by this view, to be incapable of thinking critically and objectively, or having distance from ideas and emotions. (pp. 28–29)

Elsewhere, information inequality literature reproduces development constructions of majority-world intellectual incompetency through the rehearsal of what critics call *good governance* narratives: with the ahistorical circulation of tropes of majority-world failed states, despotism, and exceptional corruption, and the attendant presumption of minority-world democratic maturity, majority-world capacity for self-governance in the absence of formal external oversight figures as always already questionable (Baaz, 2005; Grovogui, 2001; **[START PAGE 72]** Kapoor, 2008; Kothari, 2006). One set of writers (Britz et al., 2006) point to what is implied to be Africa’s demonstrably incompetent management of generous Western aid, situating it as grounds for questioning the continent’s ability to become a “knowledge society” (p. 26). For another set of authors (Meso, Datta, & Mbarika, 2006), the experience of Western nations has demonstrated a reciprocal relationship between good governance and ICT adoption as factors in improving quality of life: The actualization of national ICT solutions as socioeconomic benefit is *dependent* upon competent governance; and yet ICT is itself also *productive* of good governance by allowing more extensive, diverse, agile, and dialogic communication between government and other stakeholders. However, this emerges as an apparent (and not easily resolved) conundrum in the text, since the authors introduce the majority world homogeneously and ahistorically as “home to governance failures leading to internal unrest and civil strife” (p. 186). As such, the majority world’s ostensibly incompetent governance—in a word, its unruliness—is presented as a key factor perpetuating the digital divide, the bridging of which would allow such communities to competently govern their own affairs; the majority world, in short, is standing in its own way.

In keeping with dominant development discourse more broadly, information inequality

literature thus seems to approach majority-world governance problems as it does majority-world marginalization more generally: as an extension of originary characteristics rather than as the product of an ongoing history of geopolitical relations. In other words, it is the very absence of considerations of colonial contexts, past and present, within information inequality discourse that works to reproduce narratives of inherent majority-world civilizational inferiority. Absent an exploration of the minority world's vested interest and widespread interference in majority-world governance, one can only assume that the widely (and disproportionately<sup>5</sup>) reported corruption of majority-world governments is somehow intrinsic to such communities. Absent an investigation of the peculiarity of otherwise universalized Western modes of knowledge production, organization, and circulation, one can only assume that the widely cited lack of ICT and other "information literacy" skills among majority-world subjects is evidence of such subjects' characteristically low intellectual capacity. Where the rhetoric is one of individualized "uplift" for improved quality of life—as it is, for example, in the Gates Foundation's emphasis on giving individuals in the majority world "the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty" (Jacobs, 2010, p. 27)—the implication, however tacit, is that the problem lies within the individual to begin with—that it is, in a word, inherent.

It is worth noting that some information inequality writers in LIS do make efforts to interrupt traditional development tendencies towards Eurocentrism. Such efforts typically involve an emphasis on the importance of cultural propriety and relevance, the notion that it is neither effective nor ethical to base information inequality solutions solely on Western information systems and **[START PAGE 73]** content. One writer (James, 2005), for instance, argues that attempts to address the global digital divide through top-down transfer of Western ICT are fundamentally flawed in that they focus on the promotion of individual internet use in majority-world communities; this strategy, the author argues, diverges from the social, economic, and cultural realities of the majority world, wherein solutions based around the fusion of community radio and internet access have proved to be far more effective (see also Gebremichael & Jackson, 2006; Jansen & Sellar, 2008). Inasmuch as they imply the peculiarity of minority-world information systems and present majority-world communities as capable of technological innovation, such arguments do, to an extent, disrupt dominant narratives of the West as civilizational standard. At the same time, an emphasis on cultural propriety and relevance does not necessarily represent a meaningful departure from the fundamental assumptions of dominant development discourse. An author may stress the need for locally appropriate solutions to the digital divide, but the traditional problematization of the digital divide in terms of modernization towards "development" remains more or less intact. As Lindh and Haider (2010) point out in their analysis of LIS discussion of indigenous knowledge, "local" knowledges may well be validated as starting points, but their recognition as a contributing force within the global information society is typically only conceivable where they are affiliated with actors, audiences, institutions, or forms of publication and circulation that are themselves generally associated with the minority world's modernity. Dispossession ultimately still figures as individual and originary, as the majority world's putatively inexplicable inability to harness the power of information to "catch up" (even if in locally appropriate terms) to the quality of life exemplified, ahistorically, by the minority world.

In conformity with the dynamics of development discourse highlighted by anti-colonial and critical race writers, then, LIS literature on information inequality has tended to operate as a site for the tacit extension of colonial mythologies of race: In spite of ostensibly deracialized language and what are undoubtedly good intentions, LIS articulations of global information inequality—information poverty, knowledge gaps, digital divides—inadvertently reproduce narratives of inherent Western civilizational superiority, calling forth imagery of familiarly ahistorical—which is to say intrinsic—group difference and inequality along distinctions between modernity and backwardness, expertise and ignorance, governance and unruliness, science and folklore, development and underdevelopment, information and its absence.

## On Critical Race Work and LIS

The suggestion here is not that all LIS practices advocating a role for ICT or information in countering the marginalization of majority-world communities automatically perpetuate racist colonial mythologies and the systems of **[START PAGE 74]** international domination they support. Likewise, I do not wish to be understood to be implying the futility of cooperative global efforts towards improving quality of life, nor to be asserting the existence of some idyllic, homogenous pre-modern majority world (a narrative that in its own way reinforces colonial tropes of inherent difference). What I am suggesting is not so much that global information inequality is conceptually irredeemable, but rather that it is not innocent, that it intersects with broader histories of colonialism, particularly the reproduction of the racial mythologies by which such systems of power are animated. The implication here is that LIS accounts of race need to move beyond the prevailing assumption that race only exists where it is explicitly called forth, where it is understood to be a fixed a priori identity best addressed through a politics of diversity. The implication, in short, is that we need to recognize that racialized difference is produced and reproduced contextually and often implicitly. Historicization, in other words, ought to represent a key part of any critical race work in LIS, as a contribution to the broader process of decolonizing information work: If the field is to be a space *from* and *within* which to interrupt entrenched systems of racial domination and relations of coloniality, our work must in part involve consideration of the ways in which both the global phenomena *to* which we refer and the conceptual frameworks *through* which we refer are constituted through cultural and historical processes larger than the best of our intentions. To this end, the particular aim of this paper has simply been to denaturalize ostensibly universal and ahistorical LIS formulations of information inequality, and to situate them preliminarily within the broader context of racialized knowledge production through traditional development discourse.

There are a few further implications to this work that I wish to highlight in closing, as directions for future research. First, a deeper investigation of the dynamics of racialized knowledge production in normative LIS discourses on the global offers a basis for the exploration of dynamics of race, identity, and agency within LIS communities themselves. My investment in unpacking the languages of dark continents and digital divides in information inequality texts therefore goes well beyond the mere exposure of a discursive precarity that, in the end, is anything but unique. At some level, this work connects to an interest in unpacking my own sense of alienation as a racialized subject in an LIS environment that reproduces narratives of

the inherent civilizational inadequacy of the communities of which my ancestors and living relatives are a part. If we understand the decolonization of information work to involve a recognition that colonial discourses of difference have profoundly influenced whose ways of knowing and speaking the world are considered legitimate, whose ways illegitimate, and whose altogether inconceivable, we might also extend such work to inquire into how these discursive dynamics operate within LIS to enable, constrain, and foreclose particular spaces of identification from and through which to speak. **[START PAGE 75]**

Furthermore, our denaturalization of the linkages made between dispossession and lack of access to minority-world information might prompt a reformulation of the role of information access in global violence against racialized communities. Consider the following few examples of the extension of such violence in the absence of substantial public discourse in corporate news media and other institutional environments. Drawing on documents released by U.S. National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden, investigative journalists Glen Greenwald and Jeremy Scahill (2014) recently reported that the U.S. has been using cellphone geolocation as a primary method of identifying targets for its drone strikes, a tactic that bases these already legally dubious assassinations of people in Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia on the possession of a given mobile phone rather than actual identification by human intelligence. Enbridge, Kinder Morgan, Pacific Trails Pipelines, and other companies have been attempting to run gas and tar sands oil pipelines through the unceded territories of the Unist'ot'en clan of the Wet'suwet'en people on the West coast of Canada, moves that pose grave risks to the community and that have been resisted for more than four years by a Unist'ot'en blockade encampment (Flegg, 2014; unistotencamp.com). Close to 300,000 indebted farmers have committed suicide in India since 1995 after the restructuring of Indian agricultural policies in favour of the monopolistic interests of transnational corporations like Monsanto (Shiva, 2013). The massive proliferation of the mobile devices that are apparently so central to the era of supposedly "weightless" information (Britz et al., 2006) has been made possible in part by a violent process of mineral extraction in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a process that has included slavery, systemic sexual violence, displacement and internment of indigenous populations, environmental destruction, and the continuous complicity of transnational mining and electronic corporations headquartered in the minority world, in what Carmody (2011) has called the *new scramble for Africa*. How does the institutional failure to meaningfully circulate, situate, and integrate such information within the *minority* world's information society—a failure, in a sense, of *minority*-world information access, skills, and governance—serve to extend the material dispossession of *majority*-world communities?

Perhaps the broader implication here is that the decolonization of information work—and the critique of racialized difference it entails—ought to involve questioning the impetus to accord explanatory primacy to hegemonic notions of information in our accounts of global dispossession—our tendency, that is, to respond to marginalization by calling for education, information, and technology for the marginalized. An element of such work may indeed be a practice of the minority world coming to terms with the peculiarity of its own history. **[START PAGE 76]**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Honma's (2005) critique of race and citizenry in American public library history; Pawley's (2006) account of race in the (American) LIS curriculum; Peterson's (1995, 1996, 1999) critiques of (American) discourses of multiculturalism in the field; and Espinal's (2001) unpacking of the dynamics of North American librarianship through the lens of whiteness studies.

<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it is worth stressing that colonial discourse has not uniformly insisted that the inferiority of the colonized is immutable and irredeemable. As Bhabha (1994) demonstrates, the tropes of the "civilizing mission" and the "white man's burden" have represented a space of unresolved contradiction within colonial discourse: The implication has been that the backward and brutish ways of the colonized might be reformed through exposure to the superior civilization of the colonizer, even as the possibility of such reform is never quite realized, constantly deferred through the recurring construction of the colonized in terms of its difference. In this way, colonial discourse exists in a state of ambivalence, expressing, as Bhabha (1994) puts it, "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (p. 86, emphasis in original).

<sup>3</sup> A variety of different critics have explored this dynamic under different conceptual banners, including *colour-blind racism* (Bonilla-Silva, 2003), the *new racism* (Barker, 1982), the *culturalization of racism* (Lentin, 2005; Razack, 1998), and, in the context of U.S. political discourse, *dog whistle racism* (Haney-López, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Gil Gott (2003), for instance, has explored the intersection between abolitionism and racialized imperial discourse, demonstrating that Victorian-era abolitionism, as an early humanitarian project, diverged from previous anti-slavery movements by building its work almost exclusively around slavery within Africa and largely ignoring the massive Western slave trade and the industrialization that it helped to fuel. Gott observes that this humanitarianism turned, simultaneously, on the expression of a desire to liberate Africans from enslavement and on the mobilization of the Dark Continent narrative—Africa as an inherently "dark and diabolical place" (p. 23), a site of primitive, child-like, and barbarous societies. Humanitarianism was thus framed largely as a civilizing mission, a project that required securing a central presence in Africa as a means of instituting Western cultural values (Christianity) and exposing Africans to the supposedly beneficial experience of Western commerce through the integration of their societies into the Western economic system.

<sup>5</sup> See Hicel (2014) on the interests served in failing to examine the role that widespread minority-world corruption has played in the (re)production of poverty in majority-world communities. **[START PAGE 77]**

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