The Clash of the Commons: An Imagined Library Commons Discourse

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Abstract

The commons has been adopted by Library Information Science (LIS) as a metaphor for transformational library spaces. However, post-colonial scholarship exposes the material violence and exclusionary practices that coincide(d) with commons-making in Europe and North America. When weighing such assessments against the traditional role of American libraries as mechanisms of colonial values, it becomes necessary for library professionals to critique their continued evocation of commons discourse from a perspective that centers on decolonization. Responding to this challenge, I historicize the commons as both an imagined ideology and an actual instrument of power to contextualize Indigenous and post-colonial assessments of commons-making in the settler colonial United States and dismantle taken-for-granted definitions of the commons. I then demonstrate how the history of the US public library has served to naturalize imagined commons-making projects. Finally, I use this discussion as a lens through which to analyze the commons discourse animating a selection of promotional literature published by urban public library commons spaces. Informed by the work of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, I will argue that LIS literature's fetishization of the commons to describe modernized urban library spaces reflects an idealized, future-oriented commons produced by the colonial consciousness that obscures the material reality of minority displacement.

Keywords

Commons, library commons, discourse analysis, Enlightenment, decolonization, gentrification, public libraries

Biography

Emily Benoff is a second year MLIS student at UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies specializing in Archival Studies. She is also a recipient of an Andrew W. Mellon-funded Community Archives Internship through UCLA's Community Archives Lab for which she works at the Skid Row History Museum and Archive.

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, the Library Information Science (LIS) field has increasingly adopted the notion of the commons as a metaphorical ethos for transformational library practices in the digital age. Rooted in an idealized appreciation for the collective management of premodern English lands—on which tenants were said to have established mutually beneficial social practices that guided their use of communal resources to meet their daily needs outside the construct of market-based economies—library commons discourse espouses a philosophy of accessibility, egalitarianism, collaboration, and social equity. Integrating user-centered spatial planning, non-hierarchical interactions between library staff and patrons, and an impartial flow of ideas, professional literature about the commons imagines the library as a democratic social infrastructure that works to create an engaged citizenry and accommodate users' diverse needs.

In the 1990s, theorizations about the potential of the commons in library literature ultimately led to the burgeoning modernization of closed-off, outdated physical library spaces into those with open floor plans, comfortable and flexible furniture, advanced technological offerings, and natural light. What was once ideological metamorphosed into something material when commons began to be applied as a naming convention for these renovated library spaces. A thorough review of current library literature reveals that the commons has since become naturalized as a central tenant animating libraries' and librarians' visions of themselves in the 21st century. In a paper published by the American Library Association (ALA), for instance, David Bollier (2007) lauded the information commons as "the missing vocabulary of the digital age." Scott Bennett (2015) echoes this reverence in advising his colleagues that "no one now plans an academic library without a learning commons," (p. 215).

When extracted from utopian library literature, flashy signage on library walls, and inspired opening-day press releases, the concept of the commons is implicated in a knotty history of dispossession, power relations, and nostalgia. Historical evidence exposes a deep-rooted schism in popular perceptions of the commons: the imagined, idealized commons, land "free for all" which has been reified as an inherent fact of history, has long been estranged from the material violence and exclusionary practices that have often coincided with commons-making in Europe and North America. A conflation of the imagined and material commons in the US settler imagination—as famously legitimized by John Locke's writings on property rights and the colonial commons—results in the erasure of the dispossession enacted by commons (re)appropriation. Many post-colonial and Indigenous scholars have challenged liberal and radical commons discourse by proving that both commons *and* enclosure contributed to settler seizure of North American Indigenous lands,

and that the difference between the two is often inconsequential in the settler colonial context (Greer, 2012).

When weighing such assessments against the traditional role of American libraries as mechanisms of colonial values, it becomes urgently necessary for library professionals to begin critiquing their continued evocation of commons discourse from "a perspective that starts from the experience of colonization," (de Lissovoy, 2017, p. 44). Responding to this challenge—and deeply influenced by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2012) intersecting notions of (re)occupation as a "settler move to innocence" and commons as a "claim to settler sovereignty"—I will argue that LIS literature's fetishization of the commons as a transformative discourse to describe modernized urban library spaces reflects an idealized, future-oriented commons produced by the colonial consciousness that obscures the material reality of minority displacement.

In this paper, I will perform two consecutive interventions into library commons discourse. First, I will historicize the commons as both an imagined ideology and an actual instrument of power to contextualize Indigenous and post-colonial assessments of commons-making in the settler colonial United States and dismantle taken-for-granted definitions of the commons. Extending this dichotomy into the colonial library, I will demonstrate how the history of the US public library has served to naturalize imagined commons-making projects. I will then use this critical discussion as a lens through which to analyze the commons discourse animating a selection of commons promotional materials published by the ALA, the DC Public Library (DCPL)'s Digital Commons, and the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL)'s Shelby White and Leon Levy Information Commons and Civic Commons. The promotional materials included in my analysis take multiple forms, most notably informational literature distributed by the ALA; press releases published by the DCPL and BPL; content published on the DCPL's and BPL's websites; and secondary newspaper articles and blog posts written about the DCPL's and BPL's commons. I will conclude this paper by encouraging LIS professionals to recognize and accommodate the "fugitive" activity that animates the urban public library undercommons as theorized by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013).

My goal is neither to preclude the potential of commons discourse to imagine cooperative futures nor is it to reject the integration of new technologies and collaborative spaces in public libraries. Instead, I aim to place historical enactments of the commons in conversation with LIS commons discourse to both expose the settler colonial logic mirrored by the use of this metaphor in urban public library spaces and provide a framework for exploring how it contributes to and renders "innocent" the erasure of marginalized library patrons. I approach this attempt to unsettle the American library's view of the commons "as an unambiguous good" (Maddison, 2010, p. 31) with three basic assumptions inspired by Tuck and Yang.

First, I presuppose that, despite being considered a liberatory and equitable arrangement from the standpoint of some settler projects, the commons *inherently* corresponds to the violent enclosure of stolen lands and the reframing of land as natural resource to land as earned property. Without intentionally centering the sovereignty and lived experiences of Indigenous peoples (and I would add but not equate, the sovereignty and lived experiences of all racialized and nonnormative bodies Othered through the lens of whiteness) appeals to the commons serve only to perpetuate oppressed peoples' dislocation from social justice discourse and action. The commons is therefore a "claim of settler sovereignty" that presumes, sometimes unconsciously or implicitly, settler (re)occupation as a given right (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Second, I assume that—because of its universalizing language about solidarity, neutrality, and freedom; its unwavering promise that "no one is excluded; all ideas are welcome" (Kranich, 2003, p. 1); and its tendency to employ diversity and saviorism rhetoric to shield its white positionality—library commons discourse performs a "settler move to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The optics of commons discourse in library literature indicate self-awareness and epistemological inclusivity, but the application of commons-making in library spaces continues to benefit colonial hegemony. Third, my references to settler colonialism's white positionality accepts Tuck and Yang's conceptualization of whiteness as "referring to an exceptionalized position with assumed rights to invulnerability and legal supremacy," (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 18). Accordingly, I assume that whiteness sometimes overflows its phenotypical associations (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5).

In the context of such presuppositions, I will concentrate specifically on public library commons within urban environments, though I recognize that this subset of library commons does not represent the whole, or perhaps even the majority, of US library commons-making. My decision to focus on the urban commons is informed by Naama Blatman-Thomas and Libby Porter's (2018) article "Placing Property: Theorizing the Urban from Settler Colonial Cities." This article analyzes the various ways that property is constructed within the urban landscape to reproduce and reinforce settler colonial power relations. Because the urban environment has long been densely populated and rapidly (re)gentrifying, it effectively becomes, according to Blatman-Thomas and Porter (2018), "a *fait accompli*, or something seemingly fully 'settled,'" (p. 33). Accordingly, settler colonial cities "are emblematic of the logic of settler replacement" in that their developers and government officials have codified their settlement through the language of real estate, surveillance, modernization, and economic development (Blatman-Thomas & Porter, 2018, p. 33). Those Others who do not conform to such standards of progress—beginning with the first Native Peoples on whose lands the city is built—are either assimilated or displaced.

In need of funding, cities are built to attract middle- and upper-class white people who introduce their business ventures and capital into local economies to facilitate a brand of development that will in turn attract more white people. Working class, disabled, nonnormative, and racialized communities are replaced with whiteness

through the prioritization of the same Enlightenment values and "settler claims to sovereignty" that guided original US settlement; urban land exists only for settlers to take and cultivate in ways that advance their own comfort and interests. In this sense, the process of gentrification can be interpreted as a contemporary manifestation of colonial commons-making.

Historicizing the Imagined Commons as an Instrument of Power

In its pursuit of classificatory schemes through which it constructs, substantiates, and, over time, naturalizes its dominance over the Other, the settler imagination has solidified a dichotomous relationship between a singularized, egalitarian commons and its unjust enclosure. This epistemological script has long been played out by settlers in their interminable performance of their own endangerment on the very lands they simultaneously (re)colonize. The commons, the story goes, are moorings of enlightenment, solidarity, and indelible human rights that men are free to access and utilize to sustain themselves. Prominent Enlightenment thinker and so-called "Father of Liberalism" John Locke (1986), whose theories on commons and private property shaped settler colonial logic, embodied this narrative when he claimed that "God, who hath given the World to Men in common, hath also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of Life, and convenience." Accessible to all, the commons must always be protected from those who unlawfully seek to encroach upon such God-given freedoms.

Upon arriving to North America, early European settlers embraced this logic in their mythologization of American lands as unsettled and ripe for occupation. To ensure settler futurity, settlements in New England were often tilled and cultivated collectively, constituting some of the first American commons (Greer, 2012). But, as Dorothy Kidd (2020) reminds us, the supposedly uninhabited lands on which settlers enacted their sovereign claim to the world had long been populated by a "vast plurality of [Indigenous] commons, embodying many different systems of production and social reproduction, social norms, and institutions, governance, and communication," (p. 237). While fantasies of commons-making served to legitimize settlers' seizure of North American land under the guise of cultivation, discovery, and advancement, this imagined utopia was founded upon the genocide, dispossession, and erasure of Indigenous social infrastructures. The colonial commons was made "innocent" through the rhetoric of the Enlightenment, but, in light of the fact that "dispossession came about largely through the clash of an Indigenous commons and a colonial commons" (Greer, 2012), this concept can be exposed as nothing more than a practical instrument of violence and power against Native life and land. Settler commons and Indigenous enclosure are two sides of the same coin. Allan Greer (2012) summarizes this conflict between colonial commons theory and practice in noting, "the notion of a universal commons completely open to all—Locke's 'America'—existed mainly in the imperial imagination," (p. 372).

In his helpful contextualization and dismantling of radical commons discourse, Ben Maddison (2010) proves that the commons has been dichotomized into both an idealized vision and an oppressive power structure beginning as far back as the 13th century. In the abstract, the commons were hyperbolized in the Medieval popular imagination as a nostalgic evocation of lands freely held and accessed by Anglo-Saxon peasants prior to their invasion by the Normans in 1066 (Maddison, 2010). The peasantry employed the commons as a romanticized symbol of a time before the conquest. "This usage was critical," urges Maddison (2010), "as it made it possible later to imbue the term *commons* with expansive meanings of freedom and rights, something that became prominent in periods of social conflict," (emphasis in original, p. 32). As was the case for colonial settlers intending to solidify their conquest over North American Indigenous lands, Medieval peasants sharpened the distinction between the commons and enclosure as a response to "the expectation of [their] future demise," (Veracini, 2011, p. 3). (I would be remiss not to point out, however, that the peasants' expected demise was founded in a reality of subaltern oppression whereas that of the colonists' was/is an unsympathetic instrument of imperialism.)

This new imaginary commons was soon transformed from a metaphorical trope to a codified ideology through the singing of the Magna Carta in 1215. Feudal barons, whose own claims to land were threatened by the monarchy, coopted peasants' nostalgia by employing phrases such as "Liberties…we have granted to all Men" ("Charter of the Forest," 1225) in order to advocate for universal rights to land and life as liberated from the crown. Despite its inclusive rhetoric and promise to expand access to the commons, the Magna Carta actually served to reassign land rights previously held by the Crown to the barons who quickly began to usurp the newly created commons for their own use, heavily restricting peasants' access to this land. Thus, the Magna Carta initiated a trend through which the powerful, enlightened class employed the commons as a hollow metonym for justice and emancipation which served only to relieve them of any self-inflicted guilt associated with their practice of peasant enclosure. This "move to innocence," imbued with connotations of top-down saviorism, predated what Tuck and Yang (2012) see as a "settler fantasy of mutuality based on sympathy and suffering," (p. 20). Long before the colonization of North America, then, idealized commons language was employed by those in power to obfuscate the practical implications of commons-making which resulted in the oppression of the subaltern.

In the context of the 17th century English Civil Wars, a group of radical peasants called the Diggers—and especially their leader Gerrard Winstanley—contributed significantly to the universalization of an imagined commons. Winstanley's commons discourse ultimately eclipsed the "exclusivity and restriction [that] lay at the heart of the English commons," (Maddison, 2010, p. 31). Even before Locke, he transformed the commons from a localized and practical concern about lands and social customs to a future-oriented ethos guided by albeit sympathetic dreams of anti-market and cooperative arrangements. In a move that resembles Locke's

"imperial imagination," Winstanley effectively "liberated commons conceptually from their everyday, practical enmeshments in the real property and power relations of seventeenth-century England," (Maddison, 2010, p.35).

The colonial commons was construed to represent more than just equitable access to land; it was also, and more importantly, highly symbolic of the colonizer's *right* to make his home on and settle such land through his hard work in harvesting and developing it (Tuck & Yang, 2012). John Locke's oft-cited formula for legitimizing the act of commons-making posited that working the land, cultivating and clearing it, earned settlers the right to occupy it. Indeed, the characterizing difference between colonialism and settler colonialism is that colonizers engaged in the latter project stake their claim to land, make their home on it, and never leave. North American settlers actualized their commons rhetoric and legitimized their claims to sovereignty and homesteading primarily through the exploitation of labor. Colonial commons were inherently tied to European notions of property in that their appropriation necessarily required that settlers extract value (crops) from the land. Accordingly, also concealed by settler commons rhetoric is the degree to which commons-making was/is contingent upon the exploitation of chattel slaves who were disenfranchised by whiteness and forced to complete the manual labor of cultivation. Though chattel slavery is most commonly associated with the fungibility of African people as forced laborers, Tuck and Yang (2012) reference Erica Neeganagwedgin's research in revealing that Indigenous people were sometimes also made into chattel slaves (p. 6). Simply put, settlers had the privilege to imagine a commons free for all; Indigenous and African people were simultaneously subsumed into the category of common resources that were ripe for the taking and tasked with actualizing a settler fantasy in which they would not have a stake.

In recognizing this, Tuck and Yang (2012) successfully encapsulate the main storyline animating the imagined, enlightened commons mythology:

> The settler is making a new 'home' and that home is rooted in a homesteading worldview where the wild land and wild people were made for his benefit. He can only make this identity as settler by making the land produce, and produce excessively, because 'civilization' is defined as production in excess of the 'natural' world (i.e. in excess of the sustainable production already present in the Indigenous world), (p. 6).

We can see how the colonial consciousness discursively prioritizes both the supposed improvements made to and monetized resources extracted from the settler commons over the fact that such actions destroy the preexisting physical, ontological, and epistemological relationships between Indigenous people and the same land. Greer (2012) redirects our attention to the material reality lurking under the surface of this commons rhetoric in acknowledging that "Indians were allowed to live here [on settler commons] and support themselves as best they could,

but the rules governing access to resources would be those of the colonists," (p. 382). Indigenous sovereignty is lost through enlightened appeals to common property in a process that developed concomitantly with American state-making (Greer, 2012).

The Library as a "Claim to Settler Sovereignty"

In 1833, almost three centuries after the first settler colonial project was established in Jamestown, Virginia, the first American public library "offering free library services to the general public and supported by tax money" was opened in Peterborough, New Hampshire (Kevane & Sundstrom, 2014, p.117). Within the next forty years, American public libraries would grow into one of the prominent social institutions associated with the formation of the settler state. Not surprisingly for an institution developed in the context of a commons mythology advocating the subjugation of the Indigenous and enslaved, the American public library's foundation ethos mirrored the settler commons rhetoric of "civilizing" and "improving" all that was not white, and excluding or erasing all that could not be assimilated.

While the white male settler, the pioneer, was rhetorically positioned as the archetype of occupying and improving stolen lands, the white woman, Lady Bountiful, was made into an archetype of civilizing and assimilating the Other into the colonial values that naturalized the settler state as that which has always been settled. Helen Harper (2000) notes of Lady Bountiful that "embodied, she was the sponge or mediating agent between the subaltern and the colonial state," (p. 132). In her essay exploring the manifestations of Lady Bountiful in the American library, Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (2016) applies this role to the white, mostly female librarian who was tasked with Americanizing and uplifting oppressed peoples who could not help themselves. "Through her civilizing and educating work," Schlesselman-Tarango (2016) specifies, "[the white librarian] also functioned to sanction capitalism, enforce traditional gender roles, and encourage deference to authority," (p. 676). This colonial ideology as disseminated within the library worked to define and solidify the very norms of citizenship and democracy that remain central tenants of American librarianship today. Continuing to reinforce such ontological claims, the ALA currently includes democracy as one of its twelve core values asserting that "a democracy presupposes an informed citizenry," (ALA Council, 2019). Indeed, the right to settler commons-making is and has always been extended only to those who the settler determines to fit into this socially constructed category of "an informed citizenry." In a 2017 interview between former National Indian Education Association (NIEA) Library Project Director Charles Townley and Dr. Sandy Littletree, for example, Townley makes the connection between settler commons-making and the public library; he stresses the fact that "the library in Indian terms is a colonial institution. There's no getting around it," (Littletree, 2018, pp. 78-79). In the performance of the settler logic of replacement, then, the public library assumes a supporting role.

As proven by analyses of Lady Bountiful in the library, settler colonialism not only seeks to occupy land through commons-making, but it also seeks to occupy minds through the perpetuation of a whitewashed mythology that writes the material truths of stolen Indigenous lands, epistemological violence, and racism out of American history. "In a context like this," nina de jesus (2014) recognizes, "many of the current real-world examples about how libraries are 'failing' marginalized people become clearly not a 'failure' but intentional. Public libraries…were not designed for everyone." As much as its literature tries to hide it, the role of the contemporary public library remains defined by exclusion, enclosure, and ultimately settler replacement. This is particularly true for urban public libraries, which are situated within a city's broader municipal infrastructure as mechanisms through which to (re)constitute the *fait accompli* of urban settlement.

This fact becomes increasingly inconspicuous vis-à-vis idealized library commons discourse when considering how the hegemonic nucleus of the urban public library is no longer confined within its walls. Instead, the existence of public libraries as physical settler-coded spaces within broader urban landscapes can be seen as yet another covert manifestation of colonial commons-making. In 2007, the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) conducted a widely cited study on the contribution of public libraries to "place-based economic development strategies," (p. 23). In the study, ULC researchers excitedly promote an opportunity for urban development with regards to the library: an observed "shift in the role of public libraries- from passive, recreational reading and research institutions to active economic development agencies," (Urban Libraries Council [ULC], 2007, p. 2). In modernizing their buildings to accommodate programs that assimilate urbanites to the workforce, strengthen small businesses, attract tourists, and contribute to the "stability, safety, and quality of life in neighborhoods," (ULC, 2007, p. 3) public libraries are becoming marketable institutions that impose the logic of replacement throughout urban space. Perhaps settlers no longer cultivate urban land to stake their rightful claims to sovereignty; they certainly do, however, build and expand public libraries to stake their claims to urban spaces and ensure their own futurity. Words like safety, stability, and development in the context of improved neighborhoods are often, when mediated through the white gaze, metonyms for gentrification.

At the same time, a 2011 Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study (PLFTAS) reveals that "55 percent of urban libraries reported an operating budget decrease…compared to 36.2 percent of suburban and 26.9 percent of rural libraries," (p. 13). Though I could not find more recent data on such disparities, it is reasonable to believe that urban library budget decreases have been sustained in the wake of Trump-era policies aimed at weakening vital public infrastructure. As operational budgets decrease, urban public libraries are more pressured to prove their relevance to and ideological consistencies with broader municipal interests in order to secure needed resources and funding in the present and ensure their continued existence in the future. Public libraries are directly enmeshed in the contingencies of the market, rendering farcical their anti-market commons

fantasies. Furthermore, the PLFTAS report proves that, in the financial sense, public libraries are faced with the "expectation of [their] future demise," (Veracini, 2011, p. 3)- a condition which, as was established in the case of English and North American commons-making, often results in the settler tendency to double-down on the commons-enclosure bifurcation.

Tracing a Discourse: Locating an Imagined Library Commons

As has already been discussed, American public libraries have long existed as the epistemological counterpart to the physical (re)appropriation of Indigenous lands through settler commons-making. The rise of place-based economic development strategies associated with gentrification further situate the urban public library as a symbol of whiteness that can assist with the (re)occupation of the urban landscape. Extending this argument further, Anna Maria Guasch and Joseba Zulaika (2005) highlight the role played by institutional buildings such as museums and public libraries in mediating the discourse of visuality in and of the city, contributing to the discursive production of the "urban" by being part of a larger network of visual images defining the normative city environment. In analyzing the effects of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, on the city more broadly, they note that "the dominant image is the container, not the content," (Guasch & Zulaika, 2005, p. 16). Referencing Guasch and Zulaika's work on the Guggenheim Bilbao, Gilian Rose (2016) clarifies this assertion when she states, "more and more often, spectacular architecture is commissioned as part of urban regeneration projects so that images of that regeneration can be used in city marketing and tourism campaigns," (p. 248). In the case of the urban public library, both the container (the modernized library space) and the content (the privileged knowledge) it holds produce a commons discourse that conceals the displacement of marginalized users through such urban regeneration both inside and outside the library. Large architecture firms winning competitive bids and two-hundred billion dollar budgets assimilate historical library buildings into the streamlined architectural formulas visually coded as signifiers of the gentrified future; "look at us," libraries scream to the city's incessant high-rises and so-called urban renewal projects, "we're one of you."

Similarly, Blatman-Thomas and Porter (2018) uphold that one of the primary ways cities and their constitutive institutions perform and perpetuate the commons myth is through "increasingly marketized formations [and] the entrenchment of settler colonialism via market operations," (p. 31). When the urban landscape has been settled through socially constructed structures of ownership, real estate exchanges, tourism, and incessant waves of redevelopment, the notion of land as settler property becomes reified as a "commonsense, mundane bundle of rights that people hold toward an estate [through which] property is both depoliticized and normalized…and available, in theory, to anyone," (Blatman-Thomas & Porter, 2018, p. 46). When assessed through this lens, the promotion of urban library commons spaces through Enlightenment rhetoric within marketing literature can be

interpreted as a "claim to settler sovereignty." Accordingly, to apply my theoretical critique on commons-making to real-life library commons spaces, I decided to conduct a discourse analysis examining a selection of over twenty promotional and marketing materials published by the ALA, DCPL, and BPL. This literature, I will prove, was both written from the very standpoint of whiteness that animates institutional librarianship as a whole and was meant to disseminate library commons discourse to powerful groups such as other librarians, government officials, business owners, developers, and future gentrifiers at the expense of the general public. My analysis, backed by relevant secondary sources and ethnographic studies, reveals the extent to which the language of LIS commons promotional literature mimics the discourse, colonial logic, and "settler fantasies of mutuality" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 20) comprising the universalized commons of Locke's colonial imagination.

In its 2021 press release announcing the opening of its Civic Commons, part of a massive renovation of its Central Library, the BPL's President and CEO Linda E. Johnson states that "we've efficiently and artfully reclaimed significantly more space for the public, where millions of patrons will soon be able to browse books, log into computers, refine their resumes, register to vote, and so much more," (Brooklyn Public Library [BPL], 2021). The same press release boasts that the Civic Commons' design "both returns space—formerly used for administrative needs—back to the public and anticipates how people might use the Library in the future," (BPL, 2021). Invoking the same hollow images of land reclamation for the common good that Feudal barons codified in the Magna Carta and North American settlers employed as a means of legitimizing their occupation of Indigenous lands, the BPL exposes its underlying assumption that the stolen urban landscape on which its Civic Commons is built should be rightfully (re)occupied by the settler institution. The promise to utilize such space in the service of productivity and future-oriented Enlightenment activities (i.e. gaining knowledge through books, entering the job market, engaging in civic duties) further serves to replicate the exclusionary norms through which settler commons-making was made available to some while simultaneously representing the enclosure of others. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio is even quoted in this press release as saying, "with this new investment, the Brooklyn Public Library can better serve the public, making it easier than ever before for New Yorkers to…expand their careers in their own backyard," (BPL, 2021). By superimposing notions of capitalism and productivity onto urban land (the patrons' universalized backyard), de Blasio directly reflects Locke's attempt to render colonial commons-making "innocent" by asserting that whoever cultivated the land earned the right to occupy it through his own labor.

Likewise, by emphasizing their respective roles in pioneering the library commons concept both the DCPL and the BPL promotional materials work to perpetuate what Sherene Razack (2002) identifies as the settler myth "that white people came first and that it is they who principally developed the land," (pp. 1-2). For instance, in a blog post announcing the opening of the Shelby White and Leon Levy

Information Commons, Melissa Morrone (2013), the BPL's Technology Training Specialist, declares that "the Info commons is the first of its kind." In a news release publicizing the opening of its Digital Commons, the DCPL also claims "the District is the first to feature a space of this size and scope," (D.C. Public Library [DCPL], 2013). In an article published by the Washington Post, Nicholas Kerelchuk, the manager of DCPL's Digital Commons, doubled down on the metaphor of library commons-making as the discovery of uncharted territory when he gloats, "everyone's done a computer lab, people have done a digital bar, people have done a maker space, in some cases they've done a style of co-working space with collaborative rooms…but no one's ever done it all in one room," (Peterson, 2013). The supposed sovereignty and singularity of each commons space as advanced by the literature enacts what Edward Said (1979) calls "an act of beginning [which] necessarily involves an act of delimitation by which something is cut out of a great mass of material, separated from the mass, and made to stand for…a starting point," (p. 16). What, then, of the long history of Black and Indigenous librarians who have worked to resist their enclosure by creating their own inclusive library spaces and collections? What of the "great mass" of liberatory library interventions that have transformed librarianship through time outside the confines of the institution? That the library commons marks the starting point of inclusivity and openness in the library is an ahistorical claim to settler sovereignty.

The settler "act of beginning" is furthered by the promotional literature's universalizing rhetoric that establishes the library commons as an emblem of all future library practices. Beyond the BPL's (2021) assertion that its Civic Commons "anticipates how people might use the library in the future," future-oriented rhetoric is abundant within the commons promotional literature I analyzed for this project. Johnson claims that with the introduction of the Civic Commons the BPL "looks with great excitement toward its future," (BPL, 2021). A DCPL press release likewise notes that the Digital Commons will provide access to "emerging technologies and the skills needed to be successful in the future," (Urban Libraries Council [ULC], 2014). If the library can endeavor to control how it is viewed in the public consciousness now and in the future, it can ensure that the field remains aligned with the very tenants of whiteness that will guarantee its permanence in a rapidly gentrifying white settler city. Just as the idealized settler commons myth was meant to preclude the potential for "decolonial leadership, and forms of self-governance" in the newly colonized North America (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 28), so too does library commons discourse serve to erase the diversity of autonomous library projects emerging to meet the needs of marginalized communities as a means of naturalizing colonial logic. The recent proliferation of Tribal Libraries that preserve and transmit Indigenous knowledge and the revival of "more informal and itinerant modes of collecting and lending" created to center Black perspectives both prove that the future of libraries expands beyond what can be imagined by the white gaze (Littletree, 2018; Mattern, 2019).

Such a commons fantasy—which congratulates itself as being the "first of its kind"—disturbingly mirrors the colonial "right" to settlement in North America which was, in reality, enacted through violent confrontations between preexisting Indigenous commons and newly created settler commons. The ALA goes as far as to perform a type of "move to innocence" that Tuck and Yang (2012) term "settler adoption fantasies," or the tendency of white settlers to co-opt certain aspects of Indigeneity into the stories they tell themselves about their own colonial identities (p. 13). In a discussion paper on the information commons prepared for the ALA Office of Information Technology policy, Nancy Kranich (2003) boasts that "libraries fortify relationships with their communities by serving as stewards of *resources held in common*—resources that are held in trust for current and future generations," (emphasis in original, p. 1). By reframing typical commons language of improvement and cultivation into the historically Indigenous concept of resource stewardship, the ALA appropriates Indigenous ontologies while ultimately serving its own colonial interests and projects.

As previously situated by both Rose (2016) and Guasch and Zulaika (2005), DCPL's and BPL's advertised reclamation of stolen landscapes and naturalization of their roles as pioneers is consistently spatialized through the aesthetics of openness, lightness, flexibility, and modernity. The majority of the promotional materials published by the DCPL and BPL include extensive photographs and architectural renderings of their newly designed commons spaces. These photographs show open floor plans, sleek desks and counters clad in light-colored wood, floor-to-ceiling windows and glass panes, and an overwhelming use of the color white: white floors, white vaulted ceilings, white light fixtures. The library commons establishes whiteness as an unspoken norm and, in doing so, "commands the visual field to represent cleanliness, purity, and goodness," (Smith et al., 2021, p. 139). Both the DCPL and the BPL are complicit in what George Lipsitz (2007) calls "the racialization of space and spatialization of race." Whereas the Feudal and Lockean commons both imagined themselves to be accessible to all men while only being open to white landowners, so too are the DCPL and BPL's library commons—despite their repeated claims to accessibility, participation, community, and freedom—designed specifically to ensure the comfort of the privileged white settler. In this regard, Sara Ahmed (2007) recognizes that if "whiteness allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home, then those bodies take up more space," (p. 159). More white space in the urban library commons means more land occupied by the settler in a rapidly regentrifying city and more opportunities to render non-white library patrons dangerously visible within commons architecture.

The white positionality guiding the idealized library commons is further exposed by the inconsistencies within commons discourse between its claims to democracy, freedom, and diversity and its targeted demographic as addressed by its promotional literature. This manifestation of the tension between commons myth and material reality is exemplified most obviously in Sheila Bonnand and Tim

Donahue's article "What's in a Name? The Evolving Concept of the Library Commons." Bonnand and Donahue (2010) note that:

> The real potency of this name commons lies within us, the library profession…There is an important sense of external validation that accompanies the naming of a commons space. It signals to others that something tried and tested is being established that has the stamp of approval by a much larger community (pp. 232-233).

With its memorialization of the commons as a universal beacon of cooperation and equity, library literature has incorporated the script of the commons fantasy into the story it tells itself about its professional virtues. Simply put, library commons discourse, as demonstrated by Bonnand and Donahue's essay, can be rendered nothing more than an extension of the field's vocational awe: the belief amongst librarians "that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique," (Ettarh, 2018). Applying the commons as a symbol of the LIS field's continued benevolence and success—a highly subjective claim that becomes homogenized and factualized by highlighting its supposed "external validation"—librarians work to whitewash their institutional power. In this way, the library commons is situated as a professional construct meant to legitimize the (re)settlement of colonial values within American society through the solidification of the library as an Enlightened institution.

Furthermore, commons promotional literature is for the most part conspicuously targeted toward a *certain type* of library patron, one that is not necessarily consistent with the demographic of patrons who rely on public library spaces and resources to meet their immediate needs. Commons advocates like librarian Lauren Pressley (2017) uphold that "combined professional expertise and a strong grounding in user experiences can provide necessary content and context to create a space that can be transformed for the local community," (p. 113). But, for the DCPL this "local community" is severely limited. A press release for their Digital Commons advertises that "entrepreneurs, start-up ventures, tech novices, students and makers have a new place to see their ideas become a reality," (DCPL, 2013). Another press release espouses a goal of serving "a community with a wide range of education and technology backgrounds, along with an ever increasing number of tech entrepreneurs calling DC home," (ULC, 2014). The BPL's commons literature addresses the same homogenized audience under the guise of universal access. The Information Commons is marketed as a place that provides "opportunities for freelancers, students, job seekers, and lifelong learners" and serves to "reintroduce and reinvent [the BPL] to Brooklyn's vibrant technology sector and creative community," (BPL, 2022; ULC, Information Commons). In the vernacular of gentrification, creatives, tech-sector employees, freelancers, students, and startup ventures are all coded middle- or upper-class and white. The lived experiences and service needs of the statistical majority, according to a Pew Research Center report, of African Americans, Latinos, and lower-income households who rely on public

libraries to meet their immediate Wi-Fi and computer access needs are erased through such library commons rhetoric (Horrigan, 2015, p. 17).

Despite acknowledging that its patrons' needs are diverse, the DCPL and BPL afford a special ontological status to those patrons who are technologically advanced and "bettering themselves" through traditional capitalist ventures. Where the colonial commons were "rightfully" occupied by those settlers who improved the land in accordance with Lockean progress, the library commons described in this marketing literature is "rightfully" occupied by "creators, who turnaround and replenish the marketplace," (Kranich, 2003, p. 2). The community transformation to which Pressley refers now seems to replicate Blatman-Thomas and Porter's logic of settler replacement: incessant gentrification and economic development to (re)settler the white city. The DCPL's Digital Commons even segregated 1,800 square feet of its ostensibly democratic and openly accessible commons space to build a Dream Lab with coworking meeting and presentation rooms specifically dedicated to startups and entrepreneurs on a members-only basis. Enclosed from the rest of the Commons by floor-to-ceiling glass panes, the meeting spaces serve as pedestals through which the subaltern Commons patrons can see and be inspired by the future of the District's economic sector.

Through extensive ethnographic fieldwork undertaken within the DCPL's Digital Commons between 2012 and 2015 (the time period corresponding with the space's opening), Daniel Greene (2021) displays the overtly racialized dynamic that plays out through the distinction between Dream Lab and Digital Commons space. The patrons utilizing the Digital Commons, looking through the glass panels at the meetings occurring in the Dream Lab, were "largely Black, where the future-planners [in the Lab] were largely White. They weren't wearing suits, and though smartphones were common, they were rarely the new iPhones you saw more frequently in the Dream Lab or other meeting spaces," (p. 89). Collaboration and cooperation within the library commons is therefore segregated by race- and so is the library surveillance, with more resources dedicated to policing individual computer use in the main Commons space than to patrolling smartboard use in the Dream Lab meeting rooms. The construction of the Dream Lab within the Digital Commons represents the enclosure of commons space that might otherwise be accessible to library users who do not conform to the service needs and lived experiences of—and who, in many cases, are being actively displaced by—the accompanying vision of the tech worker as the future of America's "informed and active citizenry," (Kranich, 2003, p.1).

Greene further confirms both the blurred distinction between commons and enclosure within the Digital Commons and the incommensurability of commons resources with the service needs of marginalized patrons in his assessment of its individual computer stations. He observes how a paucity of desktop computers frequently becomes an inadequately managed issue within the Digital Commons because a commons computer area is "what patrons wanted and because there was

no other space to accommodate that many people in the building during the normal course of the day," (Greene, 2021, p. 92). The tension between the idealized and material commons as manifested in the Digital Commons was intensified on especially hot or cold days when DCPL's houseless patrons relied on the public library as a cooling or heating center to ensure their immediate survival. "I entered the library as it opened on a two-hour delay in February 2014, a day after a foot of snow hit," Greene (2021) recalls, "and a fifteen-person line immediately formed at the [computer] sign-up desk and didn't subside for three hours. Within forty-five minutes after opening, every seat was filled," (pp. 91-92). When all computers are occupied, patrons are more intensely surveilled so as to limit their computer use and keep the line moving; when the Commons space is too crowded, patrons are asked to leave. So preoccupied with fulfilling its fantasy of assisting tech workers and entrepreneurs in conforming to the strategies employed by the ever-expanding settler project, the Digital Commons displaces the majority of its marginalized users in an act inherent to its design and resource distribution plans.

In all of the promotional literature I evaluated for this study, there was only one explicit reference to the library commons' commitment to meeting the specific needs of "underserved and unemployed patrons," (ULC, 2014). Despite the commons' supposed dedication to user-centered services, the material reality of library commons-making is that which allows marginalized patrons to enter the commons space only if they follow the rules prescribed by the enlightened settler. In the marketing literature I analyzed, this colonial logic is often expressed through the LIS field's fetishization of technology and STEAM training/resources. For instance, in an article on the Digital Commons published by the ULC, DCPL staff boasted its state-of-the-art technological offerings: "3D printers and 3D scanners are available to get hands on experience with the future," (ULC, 2014). Washington Post journalist Andrea Peterson (2013) even goes as far as to compare the design of the Digital Commons to an Apple store, with a Digital Bar offering iPads and e-book readers for patrons to test out as if they were "weighing a purchase." According to Kerelchuk, as quoted in the article, this resemblance is "no accident," (Peterson, 2013). The BPL's Information Commons also advertises its advanced technologies, "including MakerBots, littleBits kits, robotics sets, design software, and recording studio equipment," (ULC, Information Commons). In a promotional video for the Information Commons made using the Commons' recording studio equipment, two white-presenting BPL interns boast that with a library card Commons patrons can even utilize a green screen to "go to the moon," (BPLvideos, 2013). The interns, however, made no mention of the ways that their Information Commons would assist those patrons whose lived experiences and urgent needs do not allow them the luxury of such quixotic foresight.

Former DCPL Chief Librarian Ginnie Cooper clearly summarizes the conditional nature of access to library commons spaces emphasized as a primary theme in the promotional literature. She states that:

> The Digital Divide is now more than just access to computers and internet. As technology continues to expand how people seek employment, work, and create, Digital Commons is a place where the District's growing community of entrepreneurs, developers, designers, students, and educators can create using state-of-the-art software and equipment for free (DCPL, 2013).

Despite its sympathetic overtones, Cooper's integration of Digital Divide rhetoric into library commons discourse further speaks to the commons critiques outlined by many post-colonial and Indigenous scholars. For example, in his article "On Dark Continents and Digital Divides: Information Inequality and the Reproduction of Racial Otherness in Library and Information Studies," David James Hudson (2016) indirectly surfaces a parallel between Cooper's positioning of the library commons as a solution to the Digital Divide and Locke's notion of the colonial commons as a mechanism for civilizing Indigenous lands. Of Digital Divide discourse, Hudson (2016) notes that "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 actual production," (p. 66). Through this lens, library commons discourse seems to pick up exactly where Locke's commons fantasy left off in perpetuating the deep-seated colonial project of erasing Indigenous and racialized knowledge systems through the naturalization of settler ontologies and epistemologies.

The library commons, then, is not presented as a space conducive to leisure, internet use, pluralism, or self-government. Its accessibility to users is directly contingent upon their willingness to conform to the notions of progress advanced by Enlightenment thinking—i.e., "to stay relevant in the workplace," to use "information technologies to develop and sustain new ventures," and to seek "civic engagement and self-improvement," (ULC, 2014; DCPL, Digital Commons; BPL, 2021)—that will ensure the futurity and continued prosperity of the gentrifying city. The library commons is a means to a colonial ends, with an underlying requirement that its patrons employ its resources to better their economic and societal position. This pragmatism is reflective of the contingencies historically informing access to the settler commons: that "the settler's wealth is land, or a fungible version of it," (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). Despite its rhetorical optics to the contrary, library commons rhetoric becomes an inconspicuous tool through which to economize and whitewash city spaces by commodifying individual library patrons as potential contributors to the market; without urban library commons spaces, the settler city, which relies on economic development and (re)investment, might not survive.

Ruminations in the Undercommons: A Non-Conclusion

Through its reclamation of stolen land to perpetuate the production of commodified and colonial-minded settler subjects, the library commons is complicit in displacing

and/or assimilating its most vulnerable patrons. Following a centuries-long history of a commons-making that has been effectively spliced in two—with the complex power dynamics and dispossession accompanying the enactment of the commons in physical space veiled by a nostalgic and imaginary commons rhetoric—the LIS field has settled itself in the realm of fantasy. With this settlement comes the codification of settler norms, which precludes the potential for truly transformational change within library spaces and scholarship. Though library commons discourse promises to produce the conditions that facilitate inclusivity and social mobility, realities of under-resourced, unhoused, and non-white patrons looking through floor-to-ceiling glass panes at white tech workers pursuing their capitalist dreams reveal the stagnation enacted through library commons-making. Motion delineated by the confines of white normativity is acceptable, but too much motion might disrupt the status quo. Historicizing the images evoked in library commons discourse serves to demonstrate how the imagined commons—what Tuck and Yang (2012) describe as a "settler move to innocence"—has always eclipsed the dispossession and violence accompanying the practical application of the commons; nothing changes.

In considering the future of the library commons, and the futurity of librarianship more generally, it is important for LIS professionals to consider the spaces within librarianship that encourage movement, evolution, and non-conformity, and accept the fact, though sometimes uncomfortable, that such spaces may not be within the institutional library. Jack Halberstam (2013), in his introduction to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, offers a helpful insight: "it is a being in motion that has learned that 'organizations are obstacles to organizing ourselves,'" (p.11). Reflecting on the potentialities of this grassroots "non-organizational organizing," I am left with the notion that perhaps the culmination of my endeavors to deconstruct library commons discourse is nothing more than the realization that *true* commoning in the library can only occur when LIS professionals think outside of that which we have been conditioned to revere and reproduce as our "vocational awe," our adherence to the ideology of Librarianship with a capital "l." We must, instead, take a step back and learn from futures already imagined and practiced in the context of minoritized ontologies. We must estrange ourselves from the comforts that come with settlement and be willing to lean into the abyss of intentional fugitivity and itinerancy. Designing our library spaces and using our resources to mutually aid the survival of those whose labor, genocide, and erasure have long undergirded commons rhetoric will serve not only to reground the demands of library futurity in the oppressive conditions of material reality (not in those of colonial fantasies) but will also secure the futurity and well-being of society more generally.

In her chronicle of fugitive libraries, an idea indebted to Harney and Moten's (2013) theorizations on the undercommons, Shannon Mattern (2019) likewise suggests that "now the challenge—for librarians, planners, architects, both formal and fugitive—is to celebrate and support spaces of exception while allowing them to remain separate, and refusing the colonize or fetishize the necessary work they do."

This necessary ethos, as I have implied throughout this paper, should be extended to include a critique of the LIS field's discursive structuring of the library commons as an epistemologically objective antidote to inequity. As Rose (2016), referencing Foucauldian philosophy, concurs, "all knowledge is discursive and all discourse is saturated with power [and] the most powerful discourses, in terms of the productiveness of their social effects, depend on assumptions and claims that their knowledge is true (p. 193). As practitioners of a field so focused on the appraisal, classification, and perpetuation of knowledge systems, our responsibility to denaturalize the possibility of singular truths is especially prescient. In doing so—beginning with the reconsideration of the language we use—our practices can more effectively stem from a space of recognizing the limits to our historically situated colonial beliefs and endeavor to afford autonomy to the liberatory imaginaries that have always been bubbling below on the underside of Enlightenment. "To enter this space," Harney and Moten (2013) conclude:

> is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern of the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons (p. 28).

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