Reflection Paper 1: Present

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LIS-762-01: Critical Race Information Theory: Power of the Capture Moment

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Critical. Objectivity. Power. Capture. These four key terms have shaped our learning

community discussion and have added dimension and layers to the lens through which I listen,

read, and think about the content I'm consuming, the institutions parameterizing my social,

economic, and political life, and the conversations in which I participate. Exploring the use of

critical race theory as a tool for defining and describing hierarchies of race and power that

impacts laws, policy, and political action has given me new pause for reflecting on who I am as a

scholar and how I envision myself as a practitioner in LIS and a citizen of the world.

Honma's *Trippin' Over the Color Line* and community discussion with Dr. Kafi Kumasi

have provided a base for my reflections on objectivity, power, and capture at large, and

particularly in context of the LIS field. Building on Homna's critique of white colonialism in the

library, Kumasi described the racial problems of LIS as rooted in institutional inabilities to talk

about race and the inaccessibility of information that is culturally, racially, and contextually

relevant. We are frequently confronted by messages urging us to believe that 'facts don't lie',

that libraries and archives and government records are sources of truth and freedom by virtue of

the information and data they store. A critical race lens prompts us to unpack and dismantle these

assertions and to examine where the data and information that become 'facts' originate, who

shapes it into stories, how the institutions where information is stored are built and governed, and

to whom they make information available. It is not in the access but the findability, the context,

and the positioning of data and information that creates what comes to be considered truth, and

these aspects are cyclically reinforced by and reinforcing of power.

My expanding critical lens and journey through meaning with my learning community

leads me to reject the notion that information can ever be neutral, and to question whether

objectivity can ever exist. My focus, then, shifts to understanding subjectivity, context, and their relationships to capture and power. In *The Word and The River: Pedagogy as Scholarship as Struggle,* Charles R. Lawrence, III explores Vincent Harding's tradition of "the Word". Compellingly, Lawrence writes of subjectivity as non-neutrality, as rejecting the existence of objectivity, and as recognizing the power of position in the creation of history and in its interpretation. "What we see and feel today, our own perspectives and perceptions, appear distorted and unreal when they appear against the background of a history that has excluded the voices of those who have seen the world from positions most like our own," Lawrence writes (Critical Race Theory, 1995, p. 339). Lawrence furthers the importance of context and the non-neutrality of narrative in his discussion of storytelling. Storytelling is a tool of cultural preservation and growth in African tradition, thriving on the continuation of stories and oral history. Storytelling is a tool of persuasion and oppression in law, where the narratives erase the subjective experiences of people of color, or narratives of fear that continue to center whiteness.

Stepping into the topics of the present, especially those of surveillance, mass incarceration, and regressive laws, the connections between data, information, narrative, and power are dynamic and interconnected. Class discussion on the flow of data through power has inspired more structure to my reflection on these concepts and the perspectives of guest speakers in class. In discussion, Dr. Jon Feingold stated that a law is only as good as the party that enforces it, which, when applied to information, can be restated: data is only as good as the parties who collect, store, interpret, share, and own it. Tying this to Matthew Guariglia's analysis of surveillance and policing, which he described in community discussion as "soaked to the bone in race-making and othering", and Michael Morisy's critique of the context and whose stories are told through public records, I am continually working through a mental model of the

relationships between capture, data, information, narrative, and power, and what I mean when I use these words. In effort to document and more fully reflect on these relationships and their directionality, I've been working through the chart below.
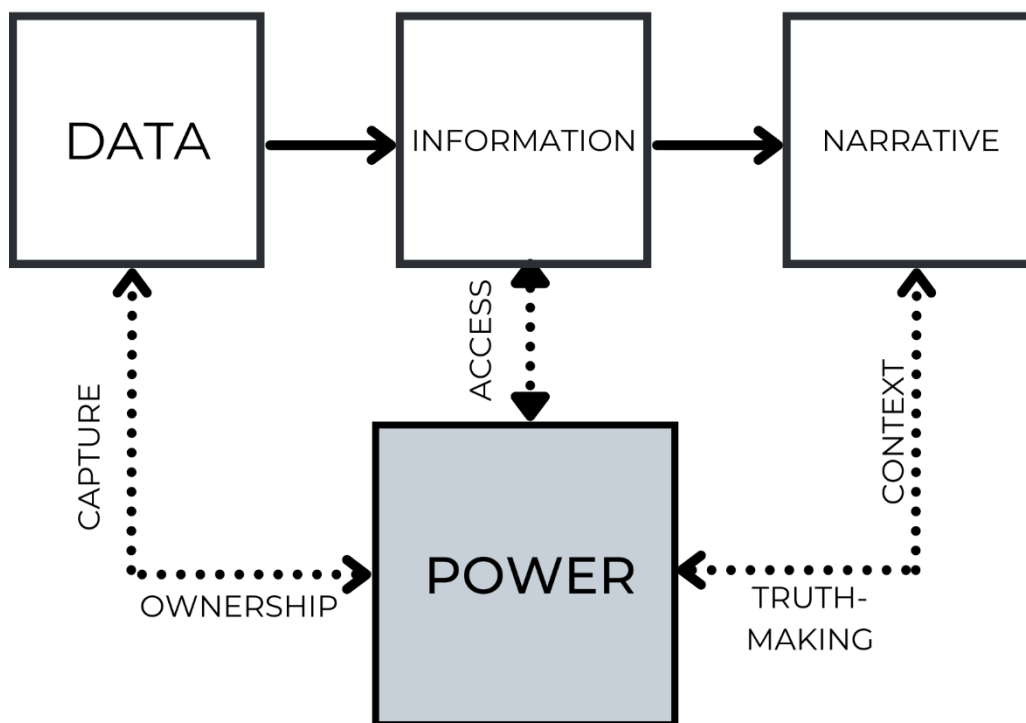
I will begin with terminology, to be clear about what each boxed term in this table means. By *data*, I mean the facts, observations, statistics, thoughts, images, videos, or other values and medium collected and stored in some way. *Information* is the way data is described or represented. *Narrative* is how information is arranged to tell a story and represent meaning. *Power* is defined in sociological terms, as the ability to control or influence others.

When reflecting on the foundational readings and legacy of CRT in combination with the topics of the present and with inspiration from Lawrence, I have been considering the bidirectionality between power and data, power and information, and power and narrative. The flow from data to information to narrative is linear, however, each of these components is influenced by and, in turn, influences power. The capturer has power over the data that is

created, while the ownership of data creates power. That is, the party who captures data has power over the party about whom data is captured, but the party who owns the data; that is, the party that controls its storage via ownership of servers, databases, or records-keeping, has power over how it flows through to become information and narrative.

When data becomes information, its relationship with power is based on access. Information matters when it is used, and access defines who is able to use and who is excluded from the use of information. In this way, it is controlled by and perpetuates power. Finally, information is arranged to make the stories that create narrative. Those with access to information, and therefore power, determine the context of its use and create its narratives. In turn, narratives are presented as truth, taking us back to the rhetoric of "facts don't lie" and the fragile and troublesome idea that the institutions of information, be they libraries, police, or government institutions, are the keepers of truth.

Studying the framework of CRT and the challenges of the present day compels me as an LIS scholar to embrace the nuances of context, subjectivity, and ownership and power in the capture, storage, access, use, presentation of, and impact of information as a whole. I am not so much interested in the business of reforming the present as I am in the work of envisioning a future that departs from the practices, attitudes, and institutions that have created and sustained a present so ripe with power imbalance and racism. Inspired by Jarrett M. Drake's vision of liberatory archives and acts of belonging, I am eager to explore CRT in an information context and further develop new models and modes of thinking in the LIS field.

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