We Will Not Be Erased: A Militant Manifesto for Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This essay expands on the Jean E. Coleman Library Outreach Lecture, delivered by the author at the 2025 American Library Association (ALA) Conference. It is a declaration of survival, resistance, and liberation for library and information science professionals. Born of historical and ongoing assaults on archives, knowledge, and marginalized communities, this manifesto argues that neutrality is complicity, survival is sacred, abolition is necessary, imagination is a weapon, information is power, care is not optional, strategy is essential, and erasure is intolerable. Drawing on the works of Octavia Butler, Robin D. G. Kelley, Ruha Benjamin, adrienne maree brown, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Ella Baker, this essay situates the manifesto within a broader lineage of Black, queer, feminist, and abolitionist traditions. It outlines the implications for library and information science (LIS), offering pathways for librarians, archivists, educators, and cultural workers to resist erasure and reclaim their role as agents of liberation.

Introduction: Born of Fire

This manifesto—our manifesto—is born of fire. Not metaphorical fire, but literal fire: the Tulsa Race Massacre that destroyed Black-owned archives and libraries in 1921; the flames of the Stonewall Inn that ignited the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement; the burning of libraries in Iraq and Afghanistan during war; the books set aflame in effigy to enforce censorship and exclusion.

It is also born of subtler violences: a child denied access to a book deemed "inappropriate"; a library worker admonished to remain "neutral"; a patron insisting that equity is "political"; a colleague silenced by casual racism. These moments accumulate, creating exhaustion—but also resolve.

Against all odds, we are still here. We are organizing. We are dreaming. We are planting seeds with every drag story hour, every zine workshop, every critical information literacy session, every refusal to comply with surveillance requests.

This essay expands the militant manifesto, developing its eight principles into a radical framework for LIS practice. Each principle is examined through scholarly analysis, connected to liberationist traditions, and grounded in real-world examples.

Table 1: Cooke's Radical Lenses Framework for LIS

Butler (Survival)	Kelley (Imagination)	Benjamin (Abolition Tech)	brown (Emergent Strategy)	hooks (Love Praxis)	Lorde (Marginal Power)	Baker (Democratic Organizing)	LIS Application
Adaptability & change	Imagination as liberation	Reimagining systems	Change is constant; iterative	Love as praxis	Change through survival	Bottom-up transformation	Ethically adapt with justice in mind
Building community	Collective struggle	Relational justice	Move at speed of trust	Care-centered solidarity	Interdependency from margins	Grassroots people-led power	Co-create trust-based spaces
Self-sufficiency	Autonomous structures	Tech sovereignty	Small is all	Truth-telling autonomy	Self-definition as resistance	Collective local leadership	Use open tools; resist corporate dependency
Stealth & caution	Strategic resistance	Surveillance resistance	Critical connections	Loving resistance	Anger as clarity	Quiet organizing from within	Resist surveillance & protect privacy
Education & knowledge	Critical consciousness	Power in knowledge	Intentional learning	Transgressive pedagogy	Voice as liberation	Grounded liberatory learning	Teach community-rooted radical literacy
Emotional resilience	Radical hope	Care as praxis	Healing-centered design	Healing as labor	Emotional survival	Community care as infrastructure	Trauma-informed programming
Resourcefulness	Grounded practice	Values-based innovation	Move through uncertainty	Love transforms reality	Tools from the margins	Mutual aid & shared resistance	Turn scarcity into strategic resilience
Spreading vision	Freedom dreams	Abolitionist futures	Fractal change; future now	Visionary love	Erotic as world-making power	Deep democratic participation	Inspire liberatory programming & archives

1. Neutrality Is Complicity

The idea that libraries can remain neutral in a world structured by inequity is a myth that serves those already in power. Neutrality has long been enshrined as a professional standard in LIS, but in practice, neutrality has always been a form of compliance with existing hierarchies. When librarians refuse to take a stand against censorship, systemic racism, or homophobia, they are not remaining neutral; they are tacitly affirming the status quo (Cooke 2016).

Consider the moments when trans youth are denied access to affirming resources, when abolitionist literature is stripped from prison collections, when Indigenous knowledge is omitted from subject headings, or when colleagues and patrons are demeaned because of their religion, orientation, or race. Silence in these situations is not professionalism—it is complicity. As actor and activist Whoopi Goldberg has stated, "Every time you don't say no, it's a soft yes" (2017). In other words, neutrality is not the absence of choice but the active reinforcement of harm.

For LIS, this means dismantling neutrality as a guiding value. Instead, the field must adopt equity, justice, and care as professional commitments. LIS programs must train students to interrogate the politics of classification, metadata, and access, and institutions must revise policies that silence library workers in the name of "objectivity." Neutrality has failed us; only justice will move us forward.

2. Survival Is Sacred

In oppressive systems, survival is not passive—it is an act of resistance. Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* reminds us that "God is change" (1993, 3), but survival amid that change requires resilience, adaptation, and care. Capitalism thrives on exhaustion, white supremacy thrives on silence, and the state thrives on surveillance. Yet every time a librarian protects a patron's privacy, resists disinformation, or creates a safe space for a marginalized reader, survival itself becomes revolutionary.

bell hooks (1994) frames survival as a conscious choice to "choose life" against systems that would prefer our disappearance. For librarians of color, queer workers, disabled staff, and others at the margins, surviving hostile institutions is itself political work. Survival is not just about continuing to exist; it is about preserving knowledge, memory, and community for future generations.

To honor survival in LIS, institutions must recognize survival as professional labor. Trauma-informed workplace policies should become the norm, not the exception. Professional organizations should invest in peer support and affinity groups for marginalized staff, creating networks of care and solidarity. By affirming survival as sacred, we reposition resilience not as individual endurance but as collective resistance.

3. We Are Abolitionists

To be an abolitionist is to reject the idea that harm can be solved by punishment or control. Within libraries, abolition means refusing to replicate carceral logics. It means saying no to surveillance technologies that monitor students' movements or track their online activities (Benjamin 2019). It means rejecting partnerships with police or security forces that criminalize unhoused people and youth of color. It means standing against partnerships with groups like Moms for Liberty, who seek to weaponize libraries against marginalized communities.

Instead, abolitionist librarianship asks us to build systems rooted in healing and care. This might take the form of abolishing library fines (Drabinski 2019), which disproportionately punish low-income patrons, and refusing collaborations with police that criminalize unhoused people (Balestreri 2020). It might involve adopting restorative justice practices to address conflict within library spaces. It certainly requires developing coalitions with abolitionist organizers, mutual aid networks, and grassroots movements.

As Ruha Benjamin (2022) reminds us, abolition is not just about tearing down harmful systems—it is about imagining and building alternatives. For LIS, this means investing in community resources, creating non-carceral safety strategies, and centering the dignity of all patrons. Abolition is not an option; it is a necessity if libraries are to resist becoming agents of state violence.

4. Imagination Is Our Weapon

Imagination is not a luxury in the fight for justice—it is a weapon. Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) reminds us in *Freedom Dreams* that radical imagination is the foundation of liberation. Without imagination, there can be no vision of a future beyond oppression.

Libraries are uniquely positioned to nurture this imagination. A zine-making workshop is not just craft—it is a mode of resistance. A community archive is not just a collection—it is a revolutionary act of memory (Caswell 2014). A queer teen book club is not just programming—it is a spell cast into the future.

Octavia Butler's speculative fiction demonstrates how imagination can serve as rehearsal for liberation, while adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* shows us that small, fractal acts of imagination ripple outward into systemic change. Libraries that embrace imagination as strategy create space for new ways of being, knowing, and relating.

In practice, this might mean incorporating Afrofuturist design into programming, funding community storytelling initiatives, or embedding speculative projects into LIS curricula. By positioning imagination as a professional competency, LIS acknowledges that dreaming is not frivolous but essential to survival.

5. Information Is Power

The cliché that "information is power" takes on new urgency when we recognize how information can be weaponized to uphold systems of oppression. Librarians are educators, culture workers, and digital freedom fighters. Our work dismantles disinformation, teaches critical media literacy, and unearths whitewashed histories that institutions would prefer to forget.

Audre Lorde (1984, 110) warned us that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." For LIS, this means rejecting the shallow approaches to "information literacy" that teach students to evaluate sources without interrogating the power structures behind them. Instead, libraries must teach critical cultural literacy—an approach that situates information within histories of race, politics, design, and emotion (Cooke 2021).

This shift has profound implications. Instead of simply asking students to "fact-check," we can ask them: Whose voices are missing? Whose stories are silenced? Who benefits from this narrative? In doing so, we empower students not just to consume information, but to resist, question, and create.

Information is power, but only when wielded critically, contextually, and collectively.

6. Care Is Not Optional

Care is often dismissed as "soft" or "secondary" labor in LIS, but in reality, care is a disruptive force. It refutes the neoliberal obsession with productivity. adrienne maree brown (2017) calls care infrastructure—a foundation upon which liberation is built.

Within LIS, care is both urgent and strategic. Library workers face burnout, racial battle fatigue, and hostile workplaces. Patrons face surveillance, disinformation, and exclusion. To prioritize care in this context is to resist. Within LIS, care challenges toxic hierarchies, interrupts burnout, and becomes an organizing principle (Accardi 2013).

Embedding care as a core institutional value means redesigning workflows to prevent burnout, developing healing-centered programming for staff and patrons, and rejecting

managerial practices that punish vulnerability. Care also requires recognizing that emotional labor is professional labor—and compensating it accordingly.

Care is not optional because without it, neither library workers nor patrons can thrive. In the fight for liberation, care becomes our armor, our fuel, and our map.

7. We Move with Strategy

Change does not happen by accident. Ella Baker's organizing principles remind us that sustainable transformation requires collective power, bottom-up leadership, and movement at the speed of trust. For libraries, this means adopting strategy as a guiding principle.

Strategic action might involve transforming staff meetings into spaces of organizing and resistance, embedding political education into programming, or reimagining metadata work as truth-telling. It also involves slowing down, resisting the pressure to produce rapid but shallow change. As adrienne maree brown (2017) reminds us, "Small is all." The small, intentional actions we take ripple outward into systemic transformation.

In LIS, this means resisting authoritarian decision-making, centering grassroots staff input, and moving at the speed of trust (brown 2017). It can mean adopting participatory governance structures that redistribute power within institutions. It can mean training library workers in organizing skills, empowering them to resist harmful policies and demand better working conditions. It can mean fostering intergenerational mentorship and solidarity, ensuring that wisdom is passed across cohorts.

Strategy ensures that our resistance is not scattered but cumulative, not reactive but transformative.

8. We Will Not Be Erased

At the heart of this manifesto is a refusal: the refusal to be erased. We will not be erased from collections, from hiring committees, from unions, from conference stages, or from the leadership of our profession. Our labor, our histories, and our dreams belong to the future of LIS.

This refusal is rooted in the survival of those who were never meant to endure. As Audre Lorde (1997, 31) insisted, "We were never meant to survive." Yet we have, and we will continue to. The erasure of marginalized communities—whether through book bans, silenced voices, or institutional exclusion—is not inevitable. It is a battle we are prepared to fight.

For LIS, refusing erasure means protecting collections under attack, ensuring that queer, Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and other marginalized voices remain accessible. It means demanding representation at every level of leadership. It means publicly resisting censorship and refusing to comply with systems that would diminish us.

Our presence is resistance. Our work is testimony. Our future is inevitable. We will not be erased.

Case Studies of Resistance

The principles of this manifesto are not theoretical—they are already being enacted across LIS and adjacent spaces.

The Free Black Women's Library in Brooklyn, for example, creates a mobile library dedicated to the works of Black women authors, turning literature into community survival. Abolitionist library workers across the United States resist prison censorship, ensuring that incarcerated people have access to abolitionist literature. Indigenous librarianship challenges the colonial foundations of archives, restoring sovereignty over knowledge and cultural memory. Communities organizing around drag story hours have resisted far-right attacks, reframing children's programming as a site of radical affirmation.

Each of these examples demonstrates how the manifesto's principles are already alive in practice. They serve as evidence that militant librarianship is not only possible but already thriving.

Conclusion: Toward a Militant LIS

This manifesto is not abstract. It is practical, urgent, and necessary. Libraries are frontline spaces in the struggle against fascism, white supremacy, and censorship. The eight principles articulated here—neutrality is complicity, survival is sacred, we are abolitionists, imagination is our weapon, information is power, care is not optional, we move with strategy, and we will not be erased—together form a militant framework for LIS.

Our stance must be refusal. A refusal to teach or perpetuate neutrality. A refusal to replicate harm. A refusal to let students believe that knowledge is objective or apolitical. But it is also an invitation: to imagine otherwise, to dream wildly, and to learn together in service of a freer world.

The work ahead is not easy. It requires courage, vision, and solidarity. But librarians, archivists, and cultural workers have long been keepers of memory and dreamers of new worlds. Our profession is not neutral; it is a site of struggle. And in this struggle, we declare with force and with love: We will not be erased.

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