

Review of Land in Libraries: Toward a Materialist Conception of Education

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ABSTRACT: Review of Zyagintseva, L, & Greenshields, M. (Eds). (2023). *Land in libraries: Toward a materialist conception of education*. Library Juice Press.

Keywords: libraries, land, decolonization, Indigenization, land-based education



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In Zvyagintseva's (2023) introduction to *Land in Libraries: Toward a Materialist Conception of Education*, a new volume from Library Juice Press that she co-edited with Mary Greenshields, she lays out the collection's central thesis and *raison d'être*: "the question of land is largely absent in memory institutions like libraries, archives, and museums ... [memory institutions] appear ahistorical, atheoretical, and landless in their understanding of themselves, their work, and their impact on people" (pp. 1–2). The seven pieces that follow take up the neglected question of land across a variety of contexts.

In the book's first chapter, Weymouth explores the different ideological and economic interests involved in libraries during settlement of the United States' western frontier. Whistance-Smith follows this with his close analysis of public library architectural design. Judge and Crook take up the role of public library local history collections in the settler imaginary, then Nomiyama and Ho point to the lack of land-based education practices in university library research commons. Edwards et al. unpack the importance of heartfelt land acknowledgements in academic libraries, while Bitz calls for librarians to reexamine their relationship to land-based education. Finally, Hahn closes the volume interrogating the overlooked materiality of cloud infrastructure, urgently making the case for the imperative of degrowth in the face of imminent climate catastrophe.

By far, the strongest piece in the collection is Bitz's autoethnographic "Downstream," in which she deftly interweaves a reflection on a group canoe trip down the South Saskatchewan River with meditations on her own Métis identity, embodied cognition, place-based knowledge and pedagogy, and libraries' role in colonialism and perpetuating logocentrism. Attempting a summary of the piece feels like doing it a disservice and detracts from the pleasure of reading Bitz's carefully considered prose, which is something that can be said about very little LIS scholarship. Leaving that aside, however, towards the end, she poses provocative questions about envisioning radically different ways that libraries and librarians could relate to the land that they occupy:

What would libraries look like and what would be the role of the librarian if we were to make space for the diversity of knowledges created through relationships and reciprocity? How would research change? How would we use the tools we have to foster new ways of learning, knowing, and being? The answer is—by necessity—*different in every city, in every library*. (p. 163)

Any attempt to understand libraries and librarianship that is authentically localized *necessarily* frustrates standardization, generalization, and abstraction, inheritances and tendencies of positivist "information science" that work against engaging with Zvyagintseva's framing "question of land." Perhaps it is even a stretch to assume that what could be arrived at through deep reflection on Bitz's questions would even be comparable to "libraries" or "librarianship" as we presently know them.

Another particularly compelling piece in *Land in Libraries* is Whistance-Smith's architectural analysis of two recently constructed branch locations of the Edmonton Public Library (EPL) in "Towards a Spirit of Place in Library Architecture." Early on in this piece, Whistance-Smith (2023) is disarming in his honesty when he states, "[w]hile an architecture that responds with care to the qualities of a particular place does go against the classic colonial approach of

imposing foreign styles, it does not necessarily decolonize or indigenize the space in any meaningful way” (p. 40). It is refreshing—particularly in an age where words like “indigenization” have become fashionably appropriated by institutions for use in planning documents and advertising slogans with wildly different meanings and intentions (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018)—to read anyone qualify an action or gesture as not necessarily decolonial or indigenizing, but still perhaps worth exploring intellectually. Whistance-Smith contrasts EPL’s Calder and Capilano branch libraries at length, illustrating how initial architectural design choices implicitly shape an individual library’s relation to the land, or estrangement from it.

Edited collections are perhaps unavoidably uneven due to the range of voices and methodologies that they frequently try to include. Several other pieces in *Land in Libraries*, though promising in theory, do not push far enough to contend with the depth of analysis that Bitz and Whistance-Smith exhibit. Nomiya and Ho’s “Rooting Research: A Critical Examination of Incorporating Land-Based Education in Universities’ Research Commons” is, essentially, an audit of the web presences of twenty American public universities’ research commons for evidence of land-based education practices. In their results, Nomiya and Ho (2023) find no evidence of those practices—such as land acknowledgments or programs about Indigenous science—enacted by their examined research commons.

Though Nomiya and Ho engage in a pointed and thorough critique of diversity, equity, and inclusion as a limited and ill-suited institutional approach to meaningful decolonization in the piece’s latter half, it is entirely unsurprising that research commons do not acknowledge or engage with the land meaningfully. As perhaps the library spaces associated with the corporatized, neoliberal university par excellence—one can picture gleaming white, glassy non-places (Augé, 1992/1995) filled with the newest tech—research commons exist to incubate and accelerate knowledge production and are, therefore, concerned with information flows through globalized networks. That they would disregard the land that they occupy almost follows logically from both their design and purpose, but Nomiya and Ho do not address this.

Edwards et al.’s (2023) chapter on land acknowledgements similarly frustrates by not pushing far enough to get at the core of the issue they are writing about. Perhaps the most practical piece in the volume, stemming from a Positionality and Land Acknowledgement Writing Workshop held at Simon Fraser University, “Bringing the Land into the Library: Land Acknowledgements in an Academic Library” is about how to write heartfelt and reflective land acknowledgements that include “a compelling action reflective of the institution, the person offering the acknowledgement, and the specific event” (p. 138). The practical focus of this piece will be useful for someone drafting a land acknowledgement, but this focus also leads the authors to overlook vital debates within Indigenous Studies about the politics of recognition, such as Coulthard’s (2014) work. Though, of course, few would dispute that, in an ideal world, land acknowledgements should be authentic and heartfelt, within an institutional context it is perhaps more interesting that they often are not and to delve into the reasons behind that. A discussion of land acknowledgements would also be expanded and deepened by engaging thinkers like Coulthard (2014) that have questioned the efficacy of the liberal politics of “recognition” and “acknowledgement” in the first place.

These few shortcomings aside, *Land in Libraries* is an important new collection in LIS that

explores a largely overlooked material condition of librarianship. The book arrives at a moment when educational spaces are inundated with breathlessly deterministic technological grifting and hucksterism whipped up around generative artificial intelligence: a hype cycle that studiously elides confronting the exploitative labour conditions (Gray & Suri, 2019; Perrigo, 2023; Dzieza, 2023) and environmental impact of this new technology (Luccioni, 2023; de Vries, 2023), not to mention the fallacious universality (and deadened style) of its anonymized and decontextualized textual output. In other words, there could not have been a better time to be urged to return our thinking to the land and to the fragile planetary conditions that enable libraries, librarianship, and life itself.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author of this review has published with one of the co-editors of the reviewed book (Lydia Zvyagintseva) and he also peer-reviewed for a submission to the reviewed book in its early stages. The reviewer's working relationship with one of the book's co-editors had no influence over the content of this book review.

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