

# **Land in Libraries**

Toward a Materialist Conception of Education

*Edited by*

***Lydia Zvyagintseva and Mary Greenshields***

Library Juice Press  
Sacramento, CA

Copyright 2023

Published in 2023 by Library Juice Press.

Litwin Books  
PO Box 188784  
Sacramento, CA 95818

<http://litwinbooks.com/>

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Publisher's Cataloging in Publication

Names: Zvyagintseva, Lydia, editor. | Greenshields, Mary, editor.

Title: Land in libraries : toward a materialist conception of education / Lydia Zvyagintseva and Mary Greenshields, editors.

Description: Sacramento, CA : Library Juice Press, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023938473 | ISBN 9781634001397 (acid-free paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Land tenure. | Social justice and education. | Libraries – History. | Library science – Social aspects. | Library science – Political aspects.

Classification: LCC Z679 L36 2023 | DDC 027--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023938473>

# Downstream

*Danielle Marie Bitz*

We had intended to spend our first night on the river in the area of the Hague Ferry crossing, roughly 25 kilometers downstream of the Clarkboro Ferry, where we had launched the canoe and two kayaks in which our party was traveling. However, when we reached the Hague Ferry crossing before noon it took very little discussion to decide that we would push on. Not only was there at least eight hours of daylight left, but also the next day's forecast called for high winds and possibly rain, a combination that can drastically slow the progress of a boat on the river, even if that boat is moving with the current, travelling downstream. We agreed on another hour or two of paddling, maybe 10 or 15 kilometers, but the shifting shorelines, sandbars, and islands that line and dot the South Saskatchewan River left us very little in the way of options for campsites. When we finally pulled the boats from the water onto the sandbar at the place we had originally planned to camp on our second night—roughly 45 kilometers from where we launched that morning—we were tired and hungry and victorious.

In preparation for this trip, knowing that the section of the river we would be paddling is central to Métis history, and a large part of my own history, I had read the descriptions of the “historical sites” in various canoeing brochures and maps, on the blogs of other paddlers, and in the content posted on the Saskatchewan Government's website. I had sought out and read different accounts of the North-West Resistance. In my mind, I had gone back over the stories I had been told about the Big Battle at Batoche and about how, in the aftermath, much of our family had fled south to Montana to escape persecution by the Canadian state and its military. It seemed surreal to be pitching camp a stone's throw from Petite Ville, one of the first Métis wintering (hivernant) villages in the area.

We spent two nights at this camp, owing primarily to our proximity to Gabriel's Crossing (we were about 7 kilometers upstream), where we were scheduled to meet our cache drop at noon on the third day of our trip. The site we chose for our tent and cook fire was on a sandbar on the lee side of a small island in a bend of the river, a short distance from the site that was Petite Ville. If we stood facing the main trunk of the river, behind us was a narrow and shallow channel that was just wide enough to discourage visits from the RV camping crowd that had set up atop some nearby cliffs. In front of us the main body of the river curved around a reedy bank that rose up to a wide, partially-treed floodplain at the base of the surrounding slopes. A flat sheltered expanse, just to the north of us is the site that an hivernant community of Métis hunters and traders called home for the winter.

On paper, Petite Ville is a "Métis archeological site near Batoche, Saskatchewan" that was designated as a "Provincial Heritage property" in 2005 (Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sport, 2008). In a press release on the Government of Saskatchewan's website, Petite Ville is described as an archaeological site containing "information on a pivotal period in the history of the Métis—their transition from nomadic buffalo hunting to a sedentary agricultural existence" (Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sport, 2008). The canoeing guides produced by the Meewasin Valley Authority (1998) describe the site as follows:

Petite-Ville, established in the 1860s, was the first semi-sedentary wintering village (hivernement) of those families who later founded the St-Laurent settlement. These hivernant villages were unorganized clusters of mud-plastered cabins, abandoned during the summer months and re-occupied after the fall hunt. The natural shelter along the river was likely the key attraction. ( p. 16)

On one level, there is a great deal to unpack solely in the language of these descriptions. For example, just because an archaeologist doesn't understand the way that a village has been organized, does not mean that it is "unorganized." When a family closes up a lake house or a cabin for the winter, would it ever be described as "abandoned?" In one's imagination, does describing the filled cracks between logs in a cabin wall as "mud-plastered" carry the same connotations as *clay-chinked*?

Viewed individually, each of these examples is simply an incident of poor word choice; collectively, however, these incidents demonstrate

a pattern of bias. In highlighting the need for their thesis, *Petite Ville: A Spatial Assessment of a Métis Hivernant Site*, Kim Weinbender (2003) asserts that “Historically, not much is known about the spatial nature of hivernant settlements and structures. The few existing descriptions are usually quite biased by the observer’s European background and are typically derogatory in nature” (p. 3). While this bias is problematic, it is nowhere nearly as damaging as the omissions it both allows and depends on.

None of these tourism documents mention that many of the families that formed the communities along the South Saskatchewan River during the late 1860s and early 1870s were refugees from the Red River area. Also omitted from this narrative of migration and settlement are the actions of the Canadian state during and following the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, and the subsequent military campaign commanded by Col. Garnet Wolseley against the Red River Métis, a time that is still referred to as the reign of terror in Métis history (Barkwell, 2017; Royal Canadian Geographical Society, 2018c).

Instead, the Meewasin Valley Authority’s River Guide mentions the declining population of bison as a factor influencing the decision of the Métis to move into farming settlements. However, this narrative too is incomplete. It omits the over hunting of the bison by non-Indigenous hunters who took the furs and left the meat to spoil or poisoned it to kill the wolves that would feed on the discarded carcasses so that their pelts might also be collected. It additionally fails to mention the United States Government policy of removing the bison, migratory herd animals that did not respect colonial state-lines, as a food source for the Plains Peoples so that they might be subdued through starvation (Royal Canadian Geographical Society, 2018b). These pamphlets, maps, and government reports and pages, incomplete and biased as they are, remain the sources most readily available to the public, easily accessible through a basic internet search. The narrative that is created and supported in these texts is of a primitive, irreverent people that evolved from a nomadic hunter-gatherer existence to a more advanced one, rooted in agriculture and Christian observance.

This narrative, in turn, sustains several of the foundational elements in the mainstream portrayal of western settlement in what is now Canada. It holds that there is not only a dichotomy between the wilderness and that which is settled, between that which is savage and civilized, but also that societies evolve from savage to civilized through a

process of detaching themselves from, and then taming and settling, the wilderness. There are tenets built into this narrative that define what it is to be an evolved and contemporary human, including the assumption that a sedentary existence is more evolved than a nomadic one and that monotheism and atheism are more evolved than animism and polytheism.

I don't think that it is unfair to suggest that libraries, especially academic libraries, have in the past and continue today to contribute to this narrative. We, as librarians, tend to think of ourselves as a civilizing influence, as part of a democratizing institution and we promote that image to the larger public. The American Library Association's (ALA) *I Love Libraries* website asserts that "Libraries level the playing field. As great democratic institutions, they serve people of every age, income level, location, ethnicity, and physical ability, and provide the full range of information resources needed to live, learn, govern, and work" (ALA, 2022). We believe that we improve the lives of people who come into and make use of our spaces—and we do, in the ways that we know. We provide access to information, we teach people how to find the information they want or need, and how to evaluate the sources of that information. However, in doing so we also produce a narrative that dictates what counts as knowledge. If we assert that we "provide the full range of information resources needed to live, learn, govern, and work" (ALA, 2022) then knowledge that we can't provide access to is, by default, either unnecessary or not knowledge.

Much of our work in academic libraries is based on preserving the primacy of text-based culture and an understanding of knowledge that is solely intellectual. As members of the academic institution, we teach and enforce a structure of knowledge creation that is both anthropocentric and excludes those forms of knowledge that live in the body, in the land, and in the spaces of relationality (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015; Loyer, 2021; Wilson, 2008). In the maintenance of these ways of knowing we deterritorialize (Simpson, 2017) the process of learning, the act of sharing knowledge. If we continue to insist that "all knowledge in the world can be represented in document form" (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015) we uphold the narrative of settlement; of what is now Canada as a once-wild space that has been civilized through the introduction of knowledge.

\* \* \*

My name is Danielle Marie Bitz; I am a citizen of the Métis Nation and a Canadian of mixed Métis and German-Ukrainian descent. I have familial ties to both settler and Michif/Métis communities across the Métis homeland including those in the Red River Valley, St.François Xavier, Skull Creek in the Cypress Hills, Montana, and what is now Balgonie, Saskatchewan. For my Métis relatives: my Métis family tree includes the names Swain (Swan), Breland, Dauphinais, Desmarais, and Grant.

I currently hold the position of Indigenous Engagement Librarian at the University of Winnipeg; I have worked in libraries for a decade now. I completed the coursework for my Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) in April of 2020, a month into the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, two weeks prior to my 42nd birthday, and about three and a half months before the canoe trip that I discuss here. The events and circumstances of this journey have (re)shaped my knowledge of the relationship between librarians, libraries, the land, and the knowledge that exists in their connection.

For almost ten years now I have lived on the banks of rivers that are central to Métis identities, narratives, economies, and resistance in both Winnipeg and Saskatoon. I currently rent an apartment that overlooks the last big curve in the Assiniboine River, on the east side of Armstrong point, just before it joins the Red. I am a (long) day's paddle downstream of what is now St.François Xavier, the place that was Grantown when founded by my ancestors. These are the traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene Peoples, it is also the birthplace and homeland of the Métis Nation. I have a complicated relationship with this space, the City of Winnipeg. I both see and feel the social strata here more than anywhere else I have ever lived. I feel at once like I belong here and yet insecure in my right to feel that way. I am reasonably comfortable; I am perpetually homesick for the foothills and the eastern face of the Rockies. Regardless (or perhaps because) of this difficult relationship, the fact that I am able to live in this space fills my heart with a sense of gratitude and kinship that I have not found elsewhere. Despite the gravity that Winnipeg holds for me, I still consider myself a guest here, and as a guest I am trying to learn the ways of being here in a good way, and to support others in their learning.

I was born and raised in Calgary, the place where both sets of my grandparents had moved their families from Southern Saskatchewan in the 1960s, about three quarters of a century following the North-West Resistance. Mohkinstsis, the Siksiká name for the area, refers

to where the Bow and the Elbow rivers become one before turning south to meet the Oldman River (a confluence that ends both tributaries and creates the South Saskatchewan River). As a child in the 1980s and a teen in the 1990s I had a relatively free-range upbringing—if I could get there and back on my bike or on the bus, I was allowed to go. As a result, I spent an exorbitant amount of time in the parks and on the pathways that surrounded the rivers in Calgary and later in the foothills and mountains to the west; those spaces are fundamental to my understanding of the city, the land that hosts it, relationality, and what it is to be downstream of something.

I was four years old in 1982 when the Canadian Constitution was patriated, and the Métis were officially recognised by the Canadian Government as one of the *Aboriginal* Peoples in what is now called Canada. I grew up on stories shared by my grandmother and my mother of the family legacy of Métis resistance that began in 1816 with the Battle of Seven Oaks. It included our family's return from the United States in the late 1800s—once the Canadian Government and settler communities had stopped actively persecuting the Métis for their resistance at Batoche (Reed, 1986; Royal Canadian Geographic Society, 2018a). The very first book I borrowed and neglected to return was D. Bruce Sealey's *Cuthbert Grant and the Métis* (1976). I may have been eight, maybe ten years old, and I still wonder if my grandmother ever figured out what happened to it (I still have it—sorry, cousins!). But I also learned at a very young age not to share these stories, that teachers, mainstream community members, and non-Métis family members considered them irrelevant or even fabricated.

This year we are 40 years downstream of the Canadian state's recognition of the Métis Nation as an *Aboriginal* [Indigenous] Nation from these lands. That recognition has allowed for huge gains in the visibility, rights, and sovereignty of my people in what is now Canada. It has also made discernible and legally tenable the rights that were denied to the Métis/Michif people by a colonial government intent on seeing Indigenous title to the land extinguished (Royal Canadian Geographic Society, 2018d). Yet in spite of the gains that the nation has made in the realms of visibility and sovereignty, the way that a flood (re) shapes a river cannot be undone. Many of us, born and raised in urban environments, will spend our lives in a liminal space either denying our heritage or wondering if we are Métis enough. Others, with no kinship, cultural, or community connections, will attempt to claim citizenship in our nation in order to have access to our recognition as



Indigenous people and our right to treat with the Canadian government on a nation-to-nation basis for the benefit of Métis citizens.

\* \* \*

Land is irrevocably tied to all Indigenous ways of knowing and being; we only learn, we only exist through our relationship to the land (Adese, 2014; Bowra, Mashford-Pringle & Poland, 2021; Fellner, 2018; Loyer, 2018; Simpson, 2017; Wilson, 2008). This is self-evident. That I, a Métisse living in the Métis Homeland, must cite texts published in an academic context, in order to make that assertion in this piece of writing and have it respected is evidence of how marginalized Indigenous way of knowing and being are. It is evidence of the deficit-based thinking that is at the center of Western pedagogical frameworks. It speaks to an underlying assumption that Indigenous ways of learning, knowing, and being must be *lifted up to the level* of Western epistemologies and ontologies.

Leanne Simpson (2017) tells us that:

We cannot just think, write, or imagine our way to a decolonized future. Answers to how to rebuild and how to resurge are therefore derived from a web of consensual relationships that is infused with movement (kinetic) through lived experience and embodiment. ( p. 162)

In short, to decolonize, we must learn to Indigenize our ways of learning, of knowing.

I have heard multiple authors, thinkers, and elders speak to a similar idea: a reality in which we learn as we move across the land. There is a particular knowledge that is gained when we take the time to experience the spaces we move through as a component of the teachings that belong to them. There are very particular relationships that are formed when children begin receiving knowledge across generational lines, from relatives as they ride in or walk beside a cart, moving with the season to the next camp. In this way of being, knowledge is living, and it is layered into our minds and bodies through stories that are retold each year in the same space and season, both drawing on and contributing to what has been and what will be learned from each iteration.

For years, the idea of building layers of embodied knowledge that is tied to places we visit cyclically has been part of *the “stuff” teachers*

*have put into my memory* where it sat waiting for me to *have the experience to understand it* (Campbell, 2010, p.4). In the winter of 2020/2021, I heard Maria Campbell speak, and as a preface to what she was saying she described our ways of land-based learning; I didn't understand it then, but that moment brought the *stuff* in my memory and my experience together. Over the next few months, I would think frequently of my mother and of the dream visits she received from her grandfather, Peter Swain, at a time in her life when she felt particularly alone. I spoke to my mother about this and, in particular, about grandpa's teachings about pine trees—the medicine in pine needles, in pine sap, the structure of trees, and how they grow in rings adding a unique layer each year.

In the summer of 2021 I moved back to Winnipeg to begin the work of my first job as an academic librarian. On one particularly glorious morning, about a month into my return, I was standing in my kitchen sipping coffee, gazing out of my kitchen window at the shadows dancing with currents on the Assiniboine river, and envisioning my ancestors paddling past that exact spot, the last big bend in the water on their way into The Forks (a meeting and gathering place for Indigenous peoples in the area since time immemorial). And while standing there contemplating the distance between St.François Xavier and the heavily treed shoreline just steps away, that spot in the circle came around again.

Almost exactly a year following my canoe trip on the South Saskatchewan, I stood overlooking a different river, another Métis travel corridor, another site of resistance. I could feel the paddle in my hand and see the safe channels through the river. I could feel the connection I had built with this place before having moved to Saskatoon for five years; I could feel the complicated history my ancestors had been a part of, one that I am still living today. Standing there in my kitchen, I could hear Maria's words and smell pine needles. I could see my mother folding towels and talking about Grandpa Swain. I could feel the canoe sliding through the current, and I understood that we are still resisting.

\* \* \*

Have you ever tried to walk while thinking about how to walk? When I try to do it, it is not pretty; it's like I have forgotten how legs work. How hard is it to see someone you love smile and not smile back? There is a type of knowledge, an understanding of the physical spaces

we occupy, the way we relate to those spaces and to those who share them, that lives not in the abstract intellect that we think of as our minds, but rather in our physical bodies. This knowledge grows into our bodies through “a web of consensual relationships that is infused with movement (kinetic) through lived experience” (Simpson, 2017, p. 162). When we intentionally engage with Indigenous ways of knowing and being, with the medicines, with the spaces in which we exist—conscious of the reality that we are both a part of and in relation with those spaces—we embody what we learn and what we learn becomes embodied (Fellner 2018; Simpson, 2017).

Similarly, there is a meditative state that I can enter when engaged in any repetitive movement where the knowledge of how to do that movement lives in my body. It is not that the movement is so boring that my mind wanders off, it is more that there is a clarity that is arrived at only through physical movement in space. If I am struggling with something I will go for a walk, a bike ride, or in the winter for a ski. Seated in the bow of a canoe, paddle in hand, suspended both in and above the water I am travelling, this state comes once I have worked through intellectualizing each movement. Once I have stopped thinking through how the grip of the paddle should feel against the palm of my hand and how far into the water the blade should disappear, how and when to pull or to push instead. There comes a point where the calculations for each stroke of the paddle are made by muscle and sinew. On the first day of this expedition, we had paddled over 30 kms before I found that point.

At the beginning of this trip, I was not a strong river paddler. The majority of my experience had been on lakes, and the few rivers on which I had spent any time in any watercraft had been faster and rock bottomed. The surface of the Bow, which rolls over a gravel and rock bed, reads more definitively than that of the South Saskatchewan where the water runs over a clay and sand bottom that is dotted with shifting sandbars, boulders, and various hazards. Whereas the Bow changes noticeably in a flood year, the South Saskatchewan can change from week to week.

I was keenly aware of my lack of experience compared to that of the other members of our party and really wanted to prove that I was competent; I honestly believed that the experience I did have would translate directly to this trip. I was wrong. I made several errors on that first day, but only needed to get out of the canoe twice to manoeuvre it off

a sandbar. I also bounced the hull off a boulder (just once, with no measurable damage to the canoe or myself). I just could not find the place in me that knew how to do this.

My navigational errors were, almost exclusively, the result of not attending to the little twinges in my gut that pulled me towards one channel rather than another, and instead trusting that the canoe could follow the kayaks in our party. It took some time for me to internalize that the kayaks were significantly lighter, travelled higher in the water, and were captained by paddlers with substantial experience on this river. After realizing my mistake a little more than half-way through the day, I was able to improve my practice of navigating the river considerably. In the end, I had to build my own relationship with the river, not rely on the relationship that the other paddlers had with it. I had to learn to trust myself, to hear and to trust what the river was telling me.

Through all of this, the person paddling in the stern of the canoe with me, remained gentle and jovial. They were happy to provide instruction when asked; they were equally happy to let me figure out what I was doing through trial and error. If I was missing something important in my read of the river, they would say something to the effect of, “I think I see a boulder at your 11, what’s your read?” Even when my misreading of the river saw us so far grounded on a sandbar that we both had to get out and push, there was only light-hearted grumbling about needing to stand up anyway given how far asleep their bottom was. This cheerful approach made a huge difference in my learning; it was a level of respect for my need to learn how to be in relation with this space that I didn’t recognise at the time. Had the person paddling in the stern been inclined to chastise my errors or insist on telling me how to read the river, they would have interfered with my ability to learn how to relate to the space and my movement through it.

\* \* \*

In her text *As we Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (2017), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson speaks extensively about the ways in which teaching and learning happen within Nishnaabeg ways of being and knowing. Through storytelling and discussion, Simpson articulates the spaces and conditions that foster Nishnaabeg intelligence and brilliance. I revisited the chapter “Land

as Pedagogy” following my trip on the South Saskatchewan and returned to it again when I started to write this piece. I believe that everyone living on Turtle Island should read this book, but “Land as Pedagogy” is a particularly necessary chapter for educators, caregivers, and all professionals who work with knowledge.

“Land as Pedagogy” offers a critical reading of Western structures of knowledge and meaning from a Nishnaabeg perspective. Simpson highlights the extractive nature of Western ways of learning and knowing, and instead centers holistic experience as the key that creates meaning:

Meaning, then, is derived not through content or data or even theory in a Western context, which by nature is decontextualized knowledge, but through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships that are different and valuable because of difference. Individuals carry the responsibility for generating meaning within their own lives; they carry the responsibility for engaging their minds, bodies and spirits in a practice of generating meaning (Simpson, p. 156).

Simpson situates the responsibility for engaging in a process of generating meaning in the individual; however, the process itself is found in that individual’s kinship relationships—human or otherwise—with the source of that meaning being the land. For Métis people this web of human and non-human kinship and the laws that govern it can be described in the phrase *All my relations* or the word *wahkootowin* (adopted from the Cree: *wahkotowin*). Brenda Macdougall describes this web as “extensive kinship networks and shared experiences,” she notes that:

The emphasis on the extended family was fostered through the creation of physical and spiritual relationships between people (living, ancestral, those still to come), land, the spirit world, and creatures with whom they shared physical space. Everyone, therefore, was taught that who they were as individuals could only be understood in relation to their family relationships and which, in turn, reflected relationships to the community, environment, sacred world, and outsiders. (2017, p. 9)

In libraries, particularly academic libraries, we tend to think of knowledge as residing in texts and text-based resources, and we continue

to believe that “all knowledge in the world can be represented in document form” (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015). We situate the source of knowledge in the output of scholars, and the conversations that scholars have with and about knowledge take place by extracting citations and ideas from texts written by others and performing comparative analysis in the hopes that new ideas are realized in that conversation. Contributions to this text-based framework are evaluated in terms of what is produced—papers, grants, and funding—and have consequently become competitive and results-driven.

This “publish or perish” model which demands “new contributions to a field,” especially from emerging scholars, disrupts the possibility for cyclical learning, or for any real diversity of ideas. Not only does this model of scholarship deterritorialize (Simpson, 2017) knowledge and the act of sharing it, but it also both draws on and reinforces capitalist paradigms of knowledge production which in turn treat scholars and their outputs as a commodity. Loyer (2018) asserts that this model also results in significant trauma for Indigenous researchers:

As librarians teaching information literacy, we seldom reflect on how the work of a university sees Indigenous people primarily as Othered objects of research and rarely as researchers. To be Indigenous in Canada is to be inherently political: my body and my legal identity is regulated by the state through biopolitical processes such as the inheritance of Indian Status. If I want to research even my own family history, trauma is inevitable; to research as an Indigenous scholar is to confront horrific stories, many of them directly tied to my own experiences or the experiences of people I love. (p. 147)

Viewed as “Othered objects of research” in many of the library and archival materials that we have access to, Indigenous students and scholars see themselves dehumanized on a regular basis. Like the land the library sits on, we become a resource to be harvested in the production of a commodity. How do we, Indigenous scholars, live in relation with our peers and colleagues, the spaces we occupy within the academy, and our relations outside of the library/the academy when all of these are situated within a system that continues to view us as located on a spectrum somewhere between scholar and Indigenous person?

\* \* \*

The second distraction that I had to overcome in order to settle into that state of bodily knowing was my drive to document everything. I had been taught, at least implicitly, that without documentation experience could not be counted as knowledge gained. Not only do we believe that “all knowledge in the world can be represented in document form” (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015), but we also tend towards the assumption that if it is not documented, then it is not knowledge.

I knew that people who work in the academy generally have to move for their first few positions, and so I expected to be leaving Saskatoon at some point in the near future. I didn’t know if I would ever get a chance to repeat this trip, and I was absolutely determined to make it meaningful, which to me—when I started out—meant documenting all of it. That ended at Fish Creek/Tourond’s Coulee (about 35 km in). We stopped at Fish Creek hoping to camp there; however, once I was standing there on the land, I couldn’t get away fast enough.

Fish Creek is the site of one of the multiple skirmishes that occurred in the spring of 1885 leading up to the Big Battle at Batoche. It is the place where roughly 150 Métis, Cree, and Dakota fighters, under the command of Gabriel Dumont, dug rifle pits into the sides of Tourond’s Coulee and ambushed the Canadian Forces commanded by General Middleton. Middleton’s company was forced into retreat and their advance on Batoche was briefly stalled (Middleton, 1885).

I was completely unprepared for the weight of standing at that site.

Prior to this trip, I had visited Batoche during Back to Batoche days, had participated in the cultural events at the campground just down the road from the Batoche National Historic Site, and had made the trek to the townsite and the graveyard on the last day to recognise the Métis that died resisting the annexation of their lands by the Canadian state. Batoche was in 1885—and remains today—a site of loss, resistance, and continued tension. Fish Creek is something else. It is a space where military men were stopped with guerilla tactics. It was a win for the Métis, but it only delayed their defeat at Batoche (Parks Canada, n.d.).

I suspect that, like many Canadians, I tend to think of history as something that happened to someone else in another time and place; history as a cautionary tale. Standing there on the bank of the South Saskatchewan River, 135 years later, I was overwhelmed with how present these events seemed. The narrative surrounding the North-West

Resistance has seen dramatic revisions in recent years, largely as a result of the ongoing work of Métis Elders and scholars digging through the archives of institutions and the archives of oral histories (by which I mean the old people) to recover, reclaim, and (re)tell our stories. Elders like Marjorie Beaucage, Norman Fleury, and Maria Campbell continue to teach and share the knowledge, the history, and the stories they carry with them. Métis institutions like the Louis Riel Institute and the Gabriel Dumont Institute are preserving—and through digitization increasing access to—the documents and recordings that represent us as a nation in the larger cultural archive. Current scholars like Jean Teillet, Brenda Macdougall, and Chris Andersen are compiling and engaging with these histories so that we might both better understand ourselves and be better understood in what is now Canada.

As a child at school, I was taught that “the halfbreed rebels,” who embodied the worst traits of both the Indians and the white men, refused to give up their nomadic ways and rebelled against “the civilizing influence” of the Canadian state. According to this telling, in a glorious victory the Rebellion was crushed at Batoche, the leaders were executed, and the halfbreeds were forced to assimilate. Middleton’s retreat at Tourond’s Coulee was absent from that narrative, as was the appropriation of Métis land, along with the intentional disruption of the river Lot system of land use employed by Métis communities.

Following our stop at Fish Creek, it did not seem to matter how many eagles flew overhead, or even whether or not I managed to take pictures of the landscape or our party—I knew that there was no way for me to document this experience adequately, and that attempting to do so was disrupting, deterritorializing the knowledge I was gaining in the experience. I think that it was this realization which allowed me to move the knowledge of paddling this river from something I had to concentrate on to a knowledge that inhabited my physical body. However, it also bound my understanding of the North-West Resistance to that knowledge—I don’t know if I will ever hold a paddle again and not feel The Resistance in each stroke. The weight of the place settled into my consciousness, and I spent the last leg of that day’s river time thinking about my mother, her family, and the stories that came from them.

Both my mother and my Elder Sharron have spoken of the ways that our understanding of time as a linear series of events that becomes static or immutable as it passes from present into past tense is incomplete. They say that past, present and future are all happening



simultaneously feeding into each other, being made and remade in each (re)telling, building the realities that we individually experience. Before Fish Creek, I believed whole-heartedly that I understood this; in the two years since that understanding has seemed increasingly elementary.

\* \* \*

Since very early in life, I have been very conscious of the liminal space I inhabit. I am Métis; I have a German surname. I am white-coded and have elected to pass in some (maybe too many) situations and am now (perhaps, as a result) very vocal about the Indigenous ways of thinking and being that I inhabit, that I have intentionally learned and embraced. I am very conscious of the privilege afforded me by an urban, working-class upbringing and education; I have seen that privilege negated when a person in a place of power understands that I am an Indigenous person. In many ways, this liminality is at the core of my existential dilemma. How do I exist both as a contemporary person, raised urban, now in possession of a level of Western education that we in the academy forget is inaccessible or otherwise unattainable to a large majority of people, and with a worldview that is predominantly perceived as being less evolved, or, at best, as naïve?

In many ways, my choice to attend library school was both a result of and a galvanizing influence on this acceptance of my own liminality—although I did not understand that at the time (and I am certain that by the time I am 50 my understanding of my positionality will have changed again). When I applied to library school, I had already spent almost six years working as a Library Page and Library Assistant in public and academic libraries. This trajectory started with a three-year stint at the University of Calgary as a student-assistant in the Interlibrary Loans/Document Delivery Services department. A lot of what I did in this position was to collect texts from the stacks that would either be sent to other libraries on loan, or have a chapter scanned from them and sent electronically to another library for use by one of their patrons.

It was in this job that I began to notice that almost all of the books relating to Indigenous Peoples in what is now Canada (and the United States) were shelved in the history section. Later I would see all the Indigenous-related resources pulled from the regular stacks and shelved in a separate “Indigenous resources section” in public and

in some academic libraries. While an Indigenous resource section did have the effect of pulling resources out of History, it also had a second, unintended, effect: the Indigenous resources sections effectively became Indigenous Sections that were easily and frequently avoided by non-Indigenous peoples.

While I was working at the University of Calgary, I was also completing an English Honours Degree as a mature student in my thirties. While I had spent years working in Indigenous social and cultural services organizations, as well as participating in a growing Métis cultural reclamation and resurgence movement, I had not integrated my identity as a Métisse into my academic studies and life. I existed somewhere between these two spaces, and their interplay shaped much of my relationship to the academy and to libraries generally.

Ten years ago, when I was finishing my undergraduate degree, universities were working alongside Indigenous Nations to make post-secondary education more available to Indigenous students. There were scholarships, mentorship programs, and targeted recruitment partnerships with the private sector. These efforts improved enrollment rates but continued to rely on a deficit-based framework of education—at their core these frameworks failed to acknowledge the strength, knowledge, and brilliance of Indigenous individuals and communities. Many institutions (and Indigenous communities) perceived (and continue to perceive) accessible post-secondary education as a way to pull Indigenous Peoples into the 21st Century, a position that Chelsea Vowel (2022) addresses directly in the introduction to her collection of short stories, *Buffalo is the New Buffalo*:

“Education is the new buffalo” is a metaphor widely used among Indigenous peoples in Canada to signify the importance of education to our survival and ability to support ourselves, as once Plains nations supported ourselves as buffalo peoples. Variations of the phrase have sprung up with increasing frequency, including a particularly vomitus version, “pipelines are the new buffalo.” The assumption is that many of our pre-Contact ways of living are forever gone, and we must accept this and adapt. The phrase “buffalo is the new buffalo,” however, asserts that we can and must do the work to repair our kinscapes, basing our work in wâhkôhtowin (expanded kinship) to expand our reciprocal obligations to our human and non-human kin. Instead of accepting that the buffalo and our ancestral ways will never come back, what if we simply ensure that they do? (p. 21)

Vowel challenges the idea that the solution to marginalization is for Indigenous Peoples to fully accept and adapt to functioning within the neoliberal capitalist framework. *Buffalo is the New Buffalo* puts forward an alternative—a way to imagine otherwise—in which Indigenous ways of knowing and being offer us a site of rupture and an opportunity for change.

While I was completing my undergraduate studies (2012), the work on building education systems that are culturally-inclusive to Indigenous students was already underway; however, the primary narrative was still one of assimilation. Since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Final Report in 2015, all educational institutions have been taking a long look at the way we engage and support Indigenous students, staff, and faculty to be who they are. We have had to reconsider and reconstruct the narratives about Indigenous Peoples, cultures and communities that we perpetuate. We have started to seek out opportunities to build inclusive, non-assimilative spaces, collections, and programs.

In the space between my identity as a Métis person and my identity as a librarian exists one of the connections in the “compassionate web of interdependent relationships” to which Simpson (p. 156) refers. The relationship that I have built between my identities is, in part, the knowledge I have gained by consciously engaging in a process of making meaning. In many ways, the sum of that knowledge is the realization and the *embodiment* of walking in two worlds; it is a practiced and internalized understanding that neither cognitive dissonance nor liminality is a problem to be solved.

\* \* \*

The first time I visited Batoche, I approached across the land, one foot in front of the other, the prairie grasses crisp beneath my steps. I had been in Saskatoon for about two weeks. I had started my job at the University of Saskatchewan, but not the course work for my MLIS. There were still saskatoon berries on the bushes beside the path; the grasshoppers were just learning their summer songs. I walked through the graveyard gate and stood in front of the mass grave. At one point an old woman came and stood beside me. Without introduction she told me of how the site was owned by the Canadian government and that was why we held the Back to Batoche gatherings down the road: we aren't

allowed to have them here. She said that they preserved the town as a historic site to prove that we weren't here anymore, that they wanted to keep the moment of their perceived victory present in everyone's mind and erase all that had come before and all that had come after. And then she wandered away. I stood there blinking in the sunlight.

After the ceremonies were finished and the graveyard had mostly emptied, I wandered to the back and stood beside Gabriel Dumont, overlooking the river. I offered him a cigarette and lit one of my own, saying "Nice spot you got here, Gabe." And for a moment I stood there looking out over the river valley, trying to imagine the changes the old man must have seen from this vantage point.

Later that day, back at the campgrounds, I would have a similar conversation with a Métis writer that very kindly showed me around and introduced me to the events and the people there. I had mentioned that I was really enjoying the day and the feel of the event—that it felt more *resistance-y* than other Métis events that I have attended. In response to my observation, she spoke about the way that the resistance never really ended, that following the 1885 battle on this site the Métis were branded rebels and ostracized by both the government and the settler community. She also spoke to the way that the people here came back every year as an act of protest against their removal from this space, and about how the Canadian government's refusal to return the site to the Métis nation demonstrated a desire to control the narrative and an ongoing attempt to erase our stories from this land.

Four years later, when I approached Batoche from the water, it was hard for me to even recognize the place. Had someone not pointed out the gravestones at the top of the hill to me, I may have missed it all together. The approach from the water made it seem further away, but it also hid features and buildings that were visible from the land route. My inability to recognize Batoche was something that earned me some good-natured, well-deserved teasing. During our stay at Petite Ville I had been asked what I knew about Batoche, and I had recounted everything I could remember. When I finished, one of our party members said, "Huh, so this trip is kind of a pilgrimage for you?" and I shrugged, saying, "I guess so. Yeah."

"Think you'll recognize it?" I didn't know what to say. I mean, I was pretty sure that I would have, before they asked, but there was something in their grin that chewed away at my confidence. The next day when we passed Batoche and I failed to recognize it, the other paddler smirked at me, "It's almost like things look different from this angle, isn't it?"

In the couple of years since, that quip has become something of a refrain for me. On a personal level it's a humbling reminder that I can believe that I have a pretty good grasp on a situation, but all it takes is a perspective shift and I may have to start over. On a more professional level I think about how narratives can be hidden in plain sight when our relationship with the land breaks down or is intentionally removed. If Batoche had been occupied by Métis people, there would be trails up and down the riverbanks. It would probably also have a boat house at the river's edge, so it would be recognisable the way that other towns on the route were. The absence of people living in community with each other and the space around them made Batoche invisible to me. However, that absence should have been glaringly obvious, especially because the rest of the shoreline was so obviously occupied, but this is how erasure works.

A few short blocks west of where I currently live in Winnipeg, there is a neighbourhood that is affectionately referred to by locals as the granola belt. The residences are primarily well-kept two and three-story detached houses with yards; some have been divided into suites, but many remain single-family homes. The apartment buildings there are primarily historic brick and/or Tyndall Stone structures. Among other shops and businesses there is a yoga studio, a new age bookstore, an organic food co-op, a yarn store, a coffee shop, and a bakery. In the summer, there is a farmers market that operates at the community centre two nights a week. Some houses fly pride flags next to prayer flags, some hang orange shirts in their windows year-round. This lovely community of progressive liberalism and the main road that winds through it are both officially called Wolseley.

When I first moved to Winnipeg in 2012, I was aware that there had been a time following the Red River Resistance in which Métis people were ostracised and subjected to discrimination. It wasn't until I moved to Saskatoon in 2016 and visited Batoche for the first time that I learned that particular period of Resistance was dubbed 'the reign of terror' by the Métis and was an intentionally orchestrated campaign of violence and intimidation. Colonel Wolseley and his men were sent to remove the Métis from the land that they had been granted by the Canadian state with the signing of the Manitoba Act, and it had worked—many families moved to communities in what is now Alberta and Saskatchewan.

I have been back in Winnipeg for a year now, and every time I hear someone say Wolseley, I have a physical reaction. In part that reaction

is to who Colonel Wolseley was, but beyond that I am reacting to the erasure, the white-washing of the history of this place that allows some residents of the city to have a positive relationship with it, naïve of what its name denies others. For most Winnipeggers, Wolseley has become synonymous with liberalism and with community. The city has forgotten that the name celebrates the annexation of land for settlers through violence and intimidation, and it stands as a veiled threat against contemporary resistance. How do I build a reciprocal relationship with a space when I cringe each time it's mentioned? How do I engage in a place-based practice of librarianship when the library I work at borders a neighbourhood named for the man who led the charge to remove my nation from this place? How am I, as a librarian in this place, contributing to the maintenance of the narrative which erases that history simply by not actively working against it?

\* \* \*

The last stretch of the river we paddled was between the St. Laurent Ferry and the town of St. Louis. Like the other shorelines we had passed in the previous days, this stretch was divided into a variety of river-front spaces: farms, ranch lands, First Nations reserve lands. There were a number of historic trading posts and even a winery. The coulees and the brush lands were divided up into lots by barbed wire fences and lined with service roads, ATV tracks, and/or foot trails. After five days and 105 km of shoreline, I was amazed how little space there had actually been on our trip that did not show visible signs of being inhabited, or at least used by people. As an urban-raised hiker, backpacker, and camper, I have to work to maintain an awareness of my tendency to think of “the land” as wild spaces that are uninhabited by humans. Moreover, I have had to unlearn the false person-land dichotomy.

We tend to think of “the land” as synonymous with wilderness, to which we apply words like pristine and untouched. This false equivalency prevents us from understanding the place in which we stand at any given moment as being part of the land. Even if we are standing 30 stories above a concrete covered expanse, the land is still there. We are still a part of it.

During the initial colonization of Turtle Island, the British and the French used connections and kinships that the First Peoples had (and continue to maintain) with the land as a reason to see them as less

than human. And as less than human, First Nations Peoples were denied many of the rights of personhood by the Europeans and were instead perceived as commodities. The bodies of the First Nations, and later the Inuit and Métis Peoples, became commodities in an extractive economy. Following the river through the spaces where the Métis live(d), the spaces we defended against the encroachment of the Canadian state makes this reality undeniable.

Much of what we do in contemporary libraries, especially those attached to universities, continues to enforce a human/non-human binary. We continue to situate knowledge as a product created through human intelligence disconnected from land, from our bodies, and from the web of kinship that is fostered and maintained as we move through the spaces that create and nourish our connections and reciprocal relations. One of the places we can observe this disconnect is in how we teach research and information literacy skills, including how we define scholarly sources. As Marsh (2019) notes, “Information from Indigenous voices and sources or the use of Indigenous research methodologies is often devalued because it does not conform to universalist, ‘standard’, Western forms of scholarship.” We have only recently developed citation formats for Elders and Knowledge Keepers (maarsii, Lorisia MacLeod), and using our personal experience can see us accused of a lack of objectivity. In the same vein, the practice of including a statement of identity and positionality can be seen as excessive or self-indulgent.

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*. It always begins with using the skills of critical librarianship to interrogate academic power structures, the systemic exclusion of marginalized peoples, and colonial methods of scholarly production (Marsh, 2019). It requires us to investigate the histories of the spaces we occupy and our involvement in shaping or erasing contemporary narratives stemming from those histories. It obligates us to work with land and place/space-based learning scholars and practitioners to create frameworks that allow us to perceive these ways of learning and knowing as valid and a necessary part of education and research paradigms.

\* \* \*

Lying on a sand bar surrounded by the currents of the South Saskatchewan River, Petite Ville is an eerie and surreal place, and the fact that our first two nights on the river were spent there affected the entire fabric of the trip for me. On the first night, following a dip in the river, dinner, and a fireside visit we retired to the tent and my three friends were quickly asleep. I lay listening to the river lapping against the edges of the sandbar. I may have dozed, but I don't think I had slept much before the owl started calling. After the owl quieted down, which was well after midnight but before the first light, the coyotes started. On the second night, after the owl once again stopped calling, I kept waking up, hearing footsteps in the sand around us and men talking. On three different occasions I left the tent to check, but found no unusual tracks, no animals, and no people on the tiny island on which we were camped.

Finally, it occurred to me that I had neglected a fundamental part of reciprocal relationality: a gift or an offering that acknowledged the presence and agency of my non-human kin in this place and allowed me to introduce myself, a measure which demonstrated my gratitude for their hospitality and my commitment to behaving in a good way while in their space. I left the tent, broke open one of my cigarettes, and put down a little tobacco in the way I had been taught, as well as some of the candy I had squirreled away in the food box. I spoke my salutations, my introduction, my gratitude, and my commitment to being a good relative in this space. I apologised for my failure to do so earlier. I returned to the tent and immediately fell asleep.

Up to that point I had been behaving poorly; essentially, I had walked into my neighbour's unlocked apartment, sat down on their couch without even acknowledging their presence, and spent an entire day watching TV there. My relatives were not happy about it and they let me know. After that second night I would volunteer to dig the latrine pit at each site and would do the same while I was by myself a short distance from camp. I still don't know if I believe in little people or tricksters in any concrete physical form. I do believe that they exist—at least as metaphors, as cultural icons—to remind us that the land is more than we can imagine, that it is alive, that it has knowledge that we need and to which we only have access when we form reciprocal relationships.



---

## References

- Adese, J. (2014). Spirit gifting: Ecological knowing in Métis life narratives. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3), Article 3. <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22191>
- American Library Association. (2022). What libraries do. I Love Libraries. <https://ilovelibraries.org/what-libraries-do/>
- Barkwell, L. J. (2017). The reign of terror against the Métis of Red River. <https://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/149078>
- Bowra, A., Mashford-Pringle, A., & Poland, B. (2021). Indigenous learning on Turtle Island: A review of the literature on land-based learning. *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe Canadien*, 65(2), 132–140. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12659>
- Campbell, M. (2010). *Stories of the road allowance people* (Rev. ed). Gabriel Dumont Institute.
- Campbell, M. (2021). [Untitled talk]. [Live Online Talk]. University of Saskatchewan, Indigenous Advisors Circle.
- Duarte, M. E., & Belarde-Lewis, M. (2015). Imagining: Creating spaces for Indigenous ontologies. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 53(5–6), 677–702. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2015.1018396>
- Fellner, K. D. (2018). Embodying decoloniality: Indigenizing curriculum and pedagogy. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 62(3–4), 283–293. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12286>
- Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sport. (2008, July 26). *Petite Ville Heritage Plaque Unveiled*. Government of Saskatchewan. <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2008/july/26/petite-ville-heritage-plaque-unveiled>
- Loyer, J. (2018). Indigenous information literacy: nêhiyaw kinship enabling self-care in research. In K.P. Nicholson and M. Seale (Eds.), *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*. (pp. 145–156). Library Juice Press. <https://mru.arcabc.ca/islandora/object/mru:237>
- Loyer, J. (2021). Collections are our relatives: Disrupting the singular, white man's joy that shaped collections. In M. Browndorf, E. Pappas, and A. Arrays (Eds.), *The collector and the collected: Decolonizing area studies librarianship*. Library Juice Press. <https://mru.arcabc.ca/islandora/object/mru:793>
- Macdougall, B. (2017). *Land, family and identity: Contextualizing Metis health and well-being*. National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAHA). <https://www.cnsa-nccah.ca/docs/context/RPT-ContextualizingMetisHealth-Macdougall-EN.pdf>
- Meewasin Valley Authority. (1998). *South Saskatchewan River Ecocanoe Tour Map Guide*. Meewasin Valley Authority. <https://meewasin.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/RiverEcocanoeGuide-Mapshigh-complete.pdf>

- Marsh, F. (2019, November 27). Indigenous knowledge & decolonising through critical information literacy. Decolonising through Critical Librarianship. <https://decolonisingthroughcriticallibrarianship.wordpress.com/2019/11/27/indigenous-knowledge-decolonising-through-critical-information-literacy/>
- Middleton, F. (1885, April 24). CPR Telegraph Ledger—Battle of Fish Creek (April 24). <http://www.saskarchives.com/node/558#overlay-context=node/559>
- Parks Canada. (n.d.). Battle of Tourond's Coulee / Fish Creek National Historic Site of Canada. Parks Canada Directory of Federal Heritage Designations. [https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page\\_nhs\\_eng.aspx?id=739](https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=739)
- Reed, H. (1986). Document One: Memorandum for the Hon[orable] the Indian Commissioner Relative to the Future Management of Indians. *Native Studies Review*, 2(2), 127–130. [http://portal.usask.ca/docs/Native\\_studies\\_review/v2/issue2/pp127-130.pdf](http://portal.usask.ca/docs/Native_studies_review/v2/issue2/pp127-130.pdf)
- Royal Canadian Geographical Society. (2018a). Aftermath of 1885. In *Indigenous Peoples atlas of Canada*. <https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/aftermath-of-1885/>
- Royal Canadian Geographical Society. (2018b). Bison hunting. In *Indigenous Peoples atlas of Canada*. <https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/bison-hunting/>
- Royal Canadian Geographical Society. (2018c). Red River Resistance. In *Indigenous Peoples atlas of Canada*. <https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/red-river-resistance/>
- Royal Canadian Geographical Society. (2018d). Scrip. In *Indigenous Peoples atlas of Canada*. <https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/scrip/>
- Simpson, L. B. (2017). *As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Vowel, C. (2022). *Buffalo is the New Buffalo*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Weinbender, K. D. (2003). Petite Ville: A spatial assessment of a Métis Hivernant site. <https://harvest.usask.ca/handle/10388/etd-03042009-133642>
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing.