

Locating the Library in Regimes of Extraction: The Logics of Property in Modern Academic Libraries

nicholae cline

Indiana University, Bloomington

jaime ding

University of California, Los Angeles

ABSTRACT: Academic libraries are capitalist institutions. This is not metaphor, analogy, or recent development but structural reality: libraries operate as technologies for transforming land, labor, and knowledge into property, facilitating the accumulation and circulation necessary for racial capitalism and settler colonialism to persist. This article refuses the fantasy that libraries are benevolent institutions compromised by external forces (neoliberalism, austerity, corporatization) and instead analyzes libraries as deliberate participants in regimes of extraction through property. We trace how property relations organize library operations across registers, such as spatial conquest through displacement of Black and Indigenous communities, epistemological violence through collection and classification, and labor exploitation through precarity and vocational awe. These mechanisms interlock to form total systems that are deeply resistant to reform. The article challenges LIS scholarship and librarianship's tendency to treat extraction—if it is even acknowledged at all—as something libraries have fallen into or accidentally reproduce, instead positioning libraries as deliberately constructed technologies of accumulation and dispossession that we must name in order to contest.

Keywords: extraction, property, rejection, land, labor, knowledge, empire



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By Way of Introduction

It started with a CFP.¹

Extraction!

We began our submission with “Reader, we are pulp.”² We wanted to submit and lay out our pulp to be bared. We said, “we must be honest - the thought of extraction has extracted much effort, time, weariness, leeriness, despondency, and hopelessness from us... We’ve wondered together not only if what we have to say is worth saying, is worth the space and energy that must be extracted from us (that we must extract from ourselves and one another) in order to publish this piece (and for what? for whom? to what end?), but also if it (this piece, our time and energy) is worth the resources that must be taken, controlled, transformed in order to support the publication and distribution of our work and the issue and journal of which it is a part. In this way, we are ourselves (always already) part of larger forces and dynamics of exploitation and extraction, and we sit with this uneasily. We have also been extracted from and by our institutions, by the field, and by the state and the systems that underpin it—as have our communities. And what are we left with? Whatever our intentions or awarenesses, whatever we have written here, we are not unscathed in the process.”

Rejection!

We fell into the LIS scholarship trap of too much of everything at once, which then meant nothing at all. We had no true political alignment besides frustration at the way things are and forever seem to be, impatience with pointing out what we saw as a theme that was embedded into the profession within the *library*, and fury at the white liberal tidings of explaining away the lack of exceptionalism. We attempted to revise with the nameless feedback that we needed to pander to borders and nation-states and be clearer about our exhaustion, that it was not an Article but a Perspective, that the tone was to be steady, that it was not Fit for a Journal. But the rejection forced us to clarify: What were we actually trying to say? What stakes were we naming that the field was not ready to hear or that we didn’t quite know how to articulate?

We have the chance to be clear now: the theme of “extraction” struck such a chord because “current capitalism”³ and “neoliberal models of higher education” (Seale et al. 2024, 1-2) point towards the idea of extraction as something that libraries have accidentally fallen into, as if they are just by happenstance, accidentally, with no choice, *in* capitalism—as if they just find themselves there, not of their own volition or not by design; as if the foundations of academic

¹ The original call for proposals for the special issue on “Libraries and/as Extraction” can be found here: <https://cjal.ca/index.php/capal/announcement/view/921>.

² There were four of us originally but now there’s two, and the two that are writing this look at those who have freed themselves with pride, gratitude, and envy. Peace be with you, Jorge López-McKnight and Sofia Leung.

³ The capitalism we face is current—we experience it presently—but it is also historical, and we must understand our conditions, however contemporary, as situated within a longer timespan than the here and now; what we are confronting is not just recent history, which is all the more reason why we need structural and materialist analyses of these political economies that situate the present within the longue durée of colonial racial capitalism, rather than treating the violences of the present as exceptional, accidental, or newly emergent.

life and its institutions⁴ have transformed without notice, swept out from under them. As if these past 100 years of libraries within US empire (and British empire—to which Canada and Australia are beholden—and all the other settler colonial states that built research universities and memory institutions on stolen land) have not originated with and alongside some of the most violent anti-labor, anti-communist, anti-Black, and anti-Indigenous foundations. As if academic librarians can do anything except extract, given the institutions we inhabit and reproduce. As if this article is itself anything besides a part of the imperial apparatus.

Academic libraries are *of* capitalism: they are capitalist institutions. Using the word neoliberal to describe libraries and their systems—as if the word itself is a standalone adjective, as if it’s a hue that can be changed with just the right tool or recalibration, as if the downfall, reconfiguration, or supersession of the current neoliberal order would fundamentally uproot and dismantle the systems and structures that underpin it—obscures more than it reveals.⁵ It can’t be changed through adjustment because it isn’t a setting but part of a larger, deeper structure. Our institutions must be analyzed with a clear, anti-imperial understanding that refuses the fantasy of reform without transformation.

It’s out there!

The special focus section of the issue we were rejected from was eventually published.⁶ We read it. There is valuable work in it, and some of the articles identify real violences, trace actual mechanisms of extraction, and in some cases gesture toward refusal and resistance. We do not dismiss this scholarship or the labor that produced it. And yet.

The framing—the editorial introduction that contains and contextualizes these contributions—in particular reveals precisely the limits we were and are pushing against. The introduction

⁴ What is higher education, across its history and existence within capitalist and imperialist states, if not an apparatus and site of extraction and interpellation into dominant ideologies and colonial epistemologies? Neoliberalism is but one in a succession of forms this takes, albeit an incredibly and insidiously successful one. Furthermore, discussion of neoliberalism (perhaps a sign of the liberalism of the times) has eclipsed the vitally important understanding of imperialism, as outlined by John Bellamy Foster (2024).

⁵ Neoliberalism can be a helpful periodizing gesture that names real arrangements and consequences in the current conjuncture, and we have no interest in discarding the term as a historical descriptor. From the late 1970s forward, academic libraries have been remade by privatization and the marketization of public goods, by austerity and labor casualization, by managerialism and statistical cultures that attempt to translate every dimension of library work into metrics, by outsourcing and platform dependencies that bind libraries to vendor oligopolies, and by the wider entrepreneurial and individualist reorganization of the universities they are part of. The problem we are calling out here is about what happens when neoliberalism becomes less of a lens or an analytic—one among many, specifying a particular era and its conditions and effects—but the primary frame through which the contemporary library is rendered legible and understood. And so it begins to do nostalgic work, thus implying (sometimes explicitly but more often through its silences) that academic libraries were once otherwise—oriented toward a common good now corroded by market logics—and the task before us is to recover or rebuild that earlier institution. The academic library of the postwar period was already a thoroughly capitalist, colonial, racializing institution operating through property, enclosure, dispossession, and accumulation—and, we should add, the conditions of neoliberalism as listed above were already problems before the 1970s. The rise of neoliberalism intensified these relations, reorganized their mechanisms, sharpened some of their edges, and produced new modalities of extraction (algorithmic surveillance, platform capture, debt-financed expansion, and so on), but it did not introduce extraction into an institution that was not already extractive. Analyzing libraries primarily as neoliberal without seeing the longer trajectory risks, in our view, treating extraction as a recent deformation that reform might undo, when it is in fact the foundational logic the institution was built to operationalize. Neoliberalism, as a framework for understanding our institutions, may at times be quite helpful but it cannot do the explanatory work the field has too often asked it to do.

⁶ The special focus section is part of volume 10 of the *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* (CJAL): <https://cjal.ca/index.php/capal/issue/view/2802>

positions libraries as "embedded in neoliberal models of higher education," as "sites of extraction" (Seale et al. 2024, 1-2)—language that suggests extraction is something that happens *to* and *through* libraries, which it certainly does, rather than something libraries *are* and *do* as capitalist institutions. There is acknowledgment that institutions might be "perhaps foundationally, inextricably extractive" (Seale et al. 2024, 4), but that "perhaps" does so much work, maintaining just enough distance to avoid the full implication.

The editorial also emphasizes "the agency academic library workers have to change exploitative library practices and policies, even if only at the scale of a single book or a single class," calling for readers to "think through the meanings and implications in existing library practices" (Seale et al. 2024, 4). Some of the contributions fall into this trap as well. The focus on *practices* and *policies*—as if these are the problem, as if simply changing them would fundamentally alter what libraries are and their function within the state, within capitalism, within colonialism, within empire—reveals what we see as a clear misrecognition of the stakes. By emphasizing "library practices" rather than "libraries," the editorial effectively disconnects practice from institution, treating domination and exploitation as something libraries *do* (and thus could choose not to do) rather than something they are entirely wrapped up in and constituted by. The focus should be on these institutions, structures, and systems themselves—on their structural position within regimes of extraction, accumulation, and violence—not on practices or policies that could be reformed while leaving the fundamental apparatus (and our institutions) intact. The essays themselves "seek ways forward that might be more just, even though they must be pursued within institutions" (Seale et al. 2024, 4) that the editors acknowledge may be irredeemably extractive. This is presented as a productive contradiction to be worked within rather than a structural impasse demanding abolition and the building of something entirely different, something we yet need to imagine and begin building. We are trying to express something else here.

Of course!

We are complicit, we cannot case study or theorize our way out of extraction, we cannot use tokenism to clear the way for libraries to continue in the ways they have for so long, we cannot continue to hope that certain exceptions might prevent necessary scrutiny of our foundations. Well-intentioned efforts at repatriation operate within and often reproduce the property relations they seek to contest, presuming that they were ownable in the first place, and that the transference of custody resolves the violation of their initial taking. It certainly does not address the ongoing structural and material conditions that made such taking possible, does not prevent the further possibility of theft through property (material, cultural, intellectual, or otherwise), nor does it fundamentally transform the library's role in guarding knowledge as property. This is a job and a field that have continued to extract and we continue to give (continue to be taken from). We just want to begin the conversation, to be a little bit honest about how deeply capitalism—the extraction of surplus labor, of lives, of waste—is embedded in our work and our institutions, and any reforms we hope might be decolonial or anti-capitalist cannot honestly be labeled as anything but liberal reforms.

So what are we writing for? In this article, we point out how academic libraries explicitly, constantly tell us the extraction they wish to enact and how we must listen. We believe that the property relation is key to how libraries operate and that they facilitate the proprietary order necessary for colonial racial capitalism to function. Libraries and library workers are not separate from these systems, but rather are key nodes within the system of extraction, accumulation, and

circulation⁷ of property that upholds colonial capitalism. From there, we expose the hidden costs and harms of libraries' extractive practices, including possession and dispossession through the production of property and property relations and the cultural erasure that results from the creation, circulation, and consumption of resources and knowledge in the form of library materials, collections, spaces, and services. The extractive logics and practices of libraries, such as the commodification of information, gatekeeping of access, and preservation and propagation of hegemonic narratives show how libraries—and library workers—are part of the apparatus of primitive accumulation and dispossession that enables and justifies the exploitation, the genocide, of Indigenous lands and peoples, as well as other marginalized groups, communities, and ways of living and being. We need to first analyze the library for what it truly is before imagining any otherwise. If we aim to ask and consider how we can imagine and work towards a future in which we are no longer extractible, exploitable, disposable, we must first be honest about the present we are in.

Libraries = Extraction: An Orientation

The academic research library has been identified and critiqued for its gatekeeping policies, processes, and practices, which run counter to—and are in conflict with—the overarching profession's core colonial value of universal access.⁸ Mission statements of research academic institutions posit them as part of the progressively benevolent, innocent pursuit of knowledge production, circulation, and preservation that the library has a fundamental structural role in establishing and advancing. Unsurprisingly, though perhaps surprising for some, the contradictions and tensions between research libraries' stated missions and values, and their actual effects and outcomes, reveal the material relations that underpin the university and, within it, the library. This presents an uncomfortable truth that library workers and the wider public alike must confront and clarify: through the logics and forces we outline in this piece, the library tells us exactly what it is and what it is designed to do.

A word on terms before moving on. The primary site of critique in this article is the modern

⁷ “Even as the logistics revolution represents a paradigmatic shift in the operations of capital, it also marks the continuation of centuries-old processes of imperial circulation and colonization [...] As contemporary forms of logistical dispossession rear their head—in, for example, the construction of pipelines through Indigenous territories or the displacement of low-income populations from the warehouse zones of Southern California's Inland Empire—they echo these imperial histories, underscoring that circulation has long involved the incursion of capital and state into contested territories” (Chua et al. 2018). Libraries operate as key logistical infrastructure for the circulation of knowledge-as-property—moving materials across institutions, facilitating interlibrary loan networks, managing digital repositories, and coordinating access to vendor platforms. This circulation is never neutral; it reproduces and extends the imperial geographies through which certain knowledges, produced in certain places, by certain peoples, flow smoothly across borders and institutions, while other knowledges remain localized, marginalized, enclosed, displaced, restricted, or even shut out entirely. Libraries coordinate the movement of extracted materials (Indigenous cultural objects, manuscripts from colonized territories, data harvested from marginalized communities) into metropolitan collections where they generate scholarly prestige and institutional capital. The library thus functions as a node in global circuits of accumulation, determining what circulates and to whom, managing the flows through which knowledge becomes property, and ensuring property generates value for/through colonial racial capitalism.

⁸ The long-standing fantasy of access providing opportunities and engagement with knowledge via collections and its idealistic vision of availability and the utilization of physical space is, and continues to be, a deeply-rooted core principle of research libraries and, more specifically, a core value of the library worker (American Library Association 2024). Access operates in the imagination of research libraries as delusion, and the stubborn commitment to access (as solution to meaningful engagement and genuine availability) and collections (as sites of capital and ownership as well as sources for the production of both capital and ownership) offers a point of entry for critical examination of dispossession, accumulation, and the colonial logics of universality and expansion through its relationships to users and community members.

academic research library⁹—most centrally those of U.S. research universities, alongside the academic libraries of other settler colonial and imperial states whose histories, funding regimes, professional norms, and dispossessive and extractive foundations have been thoroughly entangled with the higher education apparatus in the West across the long twentieth century (Arrighi 1994). We move, often quickly and fluidly, between "libraries," "librarianship," "the university," and "higher education," as well as "the state" and "empire," not without intentionality or as a kind of incidental terminological drift, but rather as a method, as an attempt to make visible the connective tissue through which the academic library is interwoven with other formations and held in place (materially, ideologically, and discursively) as a recognizable and reformable object. We say "libraries" (as well as "universities") in this article to name the professional, infrastructural, and ideological formations through which a particular institution is made to appear benevolent, public-serving, neutral, or accessible to all—all while obscuring the extractive foundations on which it rests—and we use words like the "state," "empire," and "capitalism" (generally as "colonial racial capitalism,"¹⁰ alongside "colonialism" and "imperialism," which are not synonymous but rather interconnected and interlocking) to name the conditions under which that appearance is sustained (and through which the academic library's operations become intelligible at all). The academic library remains our focal institution—the place we are writing from, against, and toward—but it is unthinkable apart from the university that houses it, the state that funds and licenses it, the empire whose accumulation it services, and the capital whose property forms it materializes.

Libraries as/within Capitalist Empire

Capitalism names the current totalizing social, political, and economic order, structuring relationships within and the reproduction of all aspects of life. Capitalism is not just an economy of buying and selling—it is about extracting as much as possible from many in order for the accumulation of a few, a historical process that has become imperialism in its highest form. In today's global economy, these relations have destroyed many lives in our US imperial core, but

⁹ We focus on the academic research library, but recognize that public, school, tribal, and special libraries are entangled with many of the same systems even as each works within conditions and specificities we cannot adequately treat here: public libraries' inheritance of Carnegie philanthropy, municipal property-tax dependence, and assimilationist projects (such as Americanization); school libraries' position within K-12 funding tied to racialized real estate and control of property; and the often more direct relations to capital and state held by corporate, legal, governmental, and medical special libraries. Even tribal libraries operate within (if also at times against) settler state structures, while also seeking to exceed or carve out spaces of exception within them. We gesture towards these other formations to mark that our argument about property and extraction does not begin or end with the academic library, even if our discussion here is primarily limited to this particular institutional site.

¹⁰ We prefer "colonial racial capitalism" here and throughout because it helps shift away from more typical understandings of capitalism as an economic system that only incidentally or subsequently created, subsumed, or required race/racialization and colonization (if such understandings even "understand" this at all), and instead allows us to conceptualize, express, and analyze the world-making formation constituted through processes of racial differentiation and administration, colonial dispossession, slavery, primitive accumulation, imperial extraction, and the juridico-legal production of property. Following Cedric Robinson's account of racial capitalism (2000), we understand capitalist development as always already racialized, dependent upon historically produced hierarchies of human value that organize labor, accumulation, expropriation, and disposability. To this we add "colonial," within lineages of de/anti-colonial thought and struggle, which is part of an insistence on the centrality of land, settlement, Indigenous dispossession, imperial governance, and the extraction and transformation of life, culture, and matter into property. Colonial racial capitalism thus names the ongoing formations and logics through which capital extracts, accumulates, and violates endlessly. We use these terms not to be definitive, but rather to be instructive and interpretive in this moment, in this article. Though vast theoretical terrain has been covered, and much discourse expended, on what is the "correct" term, the important part to us is the interlocking forces of these systems that cannot be separated in an abstract sense. "Wall Street Imperialism," for example, is another way of stating what we have said, but we consider our context in our discipline here. For more, see Robinson 2000; Melamed 2015; Lowe 2015; Bhandar 2018; Koshy et al. 2022; Burden-Stelly 2023.

have decimated far many more in the Global South. Capitalism operates through institutionalized material and social relations that penetrate all layers of society, organizing the production and reproduction of social life (Fraser 2016). This means that capitalist social relations constitute institutions from within, determining their purpose, structuring their operations, and organizing the forms of life possible within them, primarily with militarism and violence. The library, then, is not merely affected by capitalism, not simply complicit with it, but constituted through and as capitalism itself—one of the many apparatuses through which capital's imperatives are continued, legitimated, and naturalized.

The library, with its hierarchies of access, its gatekeeping of credentials, its differential valuation of knowledges and peoples, operationalizes the logics produced by and through capitalism, colonialism, and empire. These systems and structures depend upon accumulation, primitive and otherwise (Federici 2004, 2019), which names the ongoing processes of enclosure, dispossession, and violent separation of people, the land, and all life from the resources, capacities, and agencies required for living and thriving—as well as the means of their (re)production. Libraries, particularly academic institutions through their conjunction with/in higher education, participate centrally in this process, enclosing land and knowledge, dispossessing communities of their intellectual and cultural heritage, accumulating ideas and resources, and circulating materials (physical and otherwise) with limitations to right of access.

Identifying the structural position that libraries and other information institutions occupy within the larger political economy is key, as their democratic, progressive facade is not separate from but rather an extension of and subservient to capital and capitalist interests. Libraries serve capital's need for the accumulation and circulation of knowledge (but only some knowledge, organized in particular ways, accessible under specific conditions). They serve and further empire's requirement for the expropriation and control of land and information (especially of colonized and racialized communities). They serve the settler colony's need and desire for the domestication and extraction of resources (material, psychic, and intellectual) to ensure the state's continued existence. Libraries are not incidental to these projects but essential infrastructure for them, providing the intellectual resources, spatial containers, and democratic bravado necessary for racial capitalism's and settler colonialism's reproduction across time and space. Within capitalism, the scarcity of a free resource seems precious, and hence libraries too seem precious.

Understanding libraries as capitalist institutions—as servants of capital and empire—clarifies what transformation would require. It is not enough to make libraries more diverse, more accessible, more ethical, or even more critically conscious. These reforms—or reformist delusions—cannot address the fundamental contradiction: a library structured through capitalist property relations will necessarily operate to reproduce those relations, regardless of the intentions of those who labor within it. Our horizon demands a refusal of the terms and logics through which libraries are currently organized—property, dispossession, accumulation, and extraction—just as we must resist and refuse the current colonial racial capitalist order. Which is to say: they are the same thing, and we write here to name this equivalence.

Property: Notes on the Possessive Library

Academic libraries have held a large historical and contemporary role in the colonial/capitalist project, and have been involved in the dispossession, appropriation, and accumulation of land,

space, labor, value, and knowledge—transforming them into private property. Property in its myriad conceptualizations—as land (place), people (labor), and knowledge (research)—is the keystone that props up settler colonial institutions such as universities. Once something has been categorized as property, it falls into, as Brenna Bhandar (via Joseph W. Singer) puts it, “the idea that ownership translates into an absolute right to do what one desires with the object of ownership, and near-total control over the object of ownership” (2018, 20). When someone or something is considered property, they become ripe for extraction; the “owner” thus feels entitled to their “property” as potential resources for capital gain. It is precisely this logic—that ownership confers entitlement to use, transform, extract from, or dispose of that which is owned—that structures the library’s relationships to land, labor, and knowledge. We need only observe the many examples¹¹ of universities claiming Indigenous land as campus property, library workers subjected to precarious employment and wage theft, or Indigenous knowledges and cultural materials held in institutional collections against communities’ wishes to see how property relations produce ongoing violence in the name of institutional mission.

But what is property? Private property is not, as liberal thought imagines, a natural right inhering in individuals or a neutral legal category for organizing the distribution of things. Rather, property names a set of social relations—dynamic, contested, and constitutive—through which persons, places, and knowledges are produced as ownable, alienable, and extractable (Bhandar 2018; Nichols 2018, 2020). Private property, then, is both relation and logic—it organizes social life through the production of boundaries, hierarchies, and entitlements while simultaneously naturalizing these arrangements as expressions of right, ownership, and legitimate control.

This understanding of property as relation proves essential for grasping how libraries operate within and for colonial racial capitalism. We take our cue here from Marx, who argued that “capital is not a thing, but rather a definite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character” (Marx [1894] 1981, 953). This insistence that capital is a social relation remains crucial for analyzing institutional operations and the ways in which capital structures everything we do. Capital does not float free of its material instruments and manifestations, and is not simply and solely about the abstract idea of profit; the social relation Marx names becomes operative by passing through property and associated forms—wages, commodities, the enclosed commons, alienable parcels of land, and so on—that translate relations of power into relations of ownership and back again, and that have, from the moment of their consolidation, been racially and colonially constituted. We thus read Marx through traditions of racial capitalism and settler colonial studies, recognizing that the relations libraries reproduce are always already racialized and colonial. Property, too, must be understood not only as thing but as relation (or set of relations)—one that is inseparable from the racial and colonial hierarchies it produces and maintains.

And so if, as we are arguing, capital is fundamentally a relationship rather than solely a thing, then property constitutes the juridical, legal, political, and conceptual apparatus through which capitalist relations are instantiated, enforced, and reproduced across scales. Property law and

¹¹ See Lee & Ahtone 2020; Ahtone et al. 2024; Hansen 2023; Kellam & Hansen 2023; and Kellam, Hansen, and Sandoval 2023. These represent only a small handful of examples and theorizations, and the ease with which they can be found continues to be exhausting and overwhelming.

property logic enable the transformation of land into real estate, labor into wage work, and knowledge into intellectual commodity—the very transformations through which capital accumulates and capitalism persists. Academic libraries centrally produce and maintain the proprietary order that colonial racial capitalism requires. They do so not accidentally or incidentally but structurally, through their foundational operations: claiming custody over materials removed from their contexts; gatekeeping access according to credentialed status; asserting institutional ownership over collections, spaces, and the data generated through use; and legitimating these arrangements through professional discourses of preservation, service, and public good.

Recognizing property as the key relation through which libraries operate allows us to see beyond the institution's self-representations—its stated values of access, diversity, neutrality, and intellectual freedom—to grasp its actual function within the larger political economy. Libraries do not merely exist within a propertied world; they actively facilitate the proprietary order that colonial racial capitalism depends upon. They do this materially, by providing the spatial and informational infrastructure necessary for capitalist knowledge production. They do this ideologically, by naturalizing private control over collective knowledges as legitimate stewardship and by positioning access to information as a privilege granted by institutions rather than a relationship based in reciprocity and care. And they do this reproductively, by training subjects—students, researchers, workers, and the wider public—to inhabit and accept proprietary relations as common sense, to accept surveillance as the price of access, and to internalize the logics through which some lives, lands, and knowledges become available for extraction while others retain the right to extract. This reproductive function—through the seemingly ordinary operation and choreography of library practices, policies, and use—is fundamental to the library's role. The production and training of subjects structured by and through the logic of property is how the library both secures and conceals the continuity of property relations that it appears to merely administer or facilitate.

Land as Property

Land is not merely a physical space, location, or resource; rather, the land is a process, a context, a being (and way of being), a relation and set of relations, and a source of wisdom and learning (Hunt 2014; Kimmerer 2013; Simpson 2014; Watts 2013). Our relationship(s) with the land, and the lands we live on/with, connect to, and traverse through make us who we are as we are co-constituted through all of our relationships with others of many kinds and tones. This is an Indigenous perspective, but it is also a truth. Unlike Western conceptions, which often view land merely through their physical attributes, Indigenous epistemologies recognize land as a living entity and the source of knowledges, pedagogies, cultures, languages, and identities. Land is, then, both teacher and pedagogy (Simpson 2014, 2017). In the colonial-capitalist project, land is only something to extract from, and has been central to the imagination, deployment, and maintenance of these extractive systems from their inception (Byrd 2011). To attempt to reform an institution that is foundationally and literally built upon extraction, theft, and genocide by bringing in understandings of land as other than resource is misguided and unhelpful and obscures that for libraries, land is for capital and is there to be used. This understanding is even more urgent as large language models (LLMs) become heralded as an inevitable tool to urgently push forward capitalist endeavors and extractive logics (in multiple registers), expediently speeding up the destruction of the earth.

The transformation of land into property is one of the core logics that enables settler colonialism. With settler colonialism, “the colonizers come to stay – invasion is a structure not an event” (Wolfe 1999, 2). Property, as Brenna Bhandar argues, operates through modes of abstraction that work to “convert concrete social relations and material objects into abstract entities capable of being owned, bought, and sold” (2014, 203). This abstractive violence is not incidental but fundamental to the production of land as property; it severs the relational cosmologies, ontologies, and worldviews that bind Indigenous peoples to land and reconstitutes these relationships through the juridical fiction of ownership. Robert Nichols theorizes this through *recursive dispossession*, which illuminates how this process operates through temporal distortion and the retroactive production of property relations: “Dispossession...transforms nonproprietary relations into proprietary ones while, at the same time, systematically transferring control and title of this (newly formed) property” where “the dispossessed[...] are figured as ‘original owners’ but only retroactively, that is, refracted backward through the process itself” (2020, 8). The 1862 Morrill Act exemplifies this recursive dispossession as institutional policy, transforming stolen Indigenous territories into both the foundational capital for land-grant universities (la paperson 2017; Ahtone et al. 2024)¹² as well as reconceptualizing them as property that could be claimed, granted, and sold; this double movement is how theft and plunder appear to simply transfer preexisting property while at the same time severing Indigenous relations to and understandings of Land and (re)producing the property relation that makes seizure itself legible as a transfer of land, title, or value. The university, then, materializes as a particular kind of propertied space—one that literally rests upon expropriated Indigenous lands while simultaneously operating as a technology for the ongoing dispossession of those lands and peoples. Academic libraries participate centrally in this structure; their seemingly benign need for physical space to house expanding collections feeds the settler colonial state’s territorial logics, demanding ever more land to support the accumulation of materials that themselves often represent forms of intellectual and cultural extraction from colonized peoples (Bhandar 2018).

This spatial accumulation operates according to “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003), wherein capital requires continuous processes of expropriation to sustain itself. Yet settler colonialism’s relationship to land cannot be fully captured by capital’s logics alone. As Glen Sean Coulthard contends, “Unlike in historical situations of colonialism proper, the primary motive of settler-colonialism is the acquisition of Indigenous territories and resources, not primarily the transformation of Indigenous labour into value” (2014, 7). The university’s expansion across Indigenous lands, then, serves multiple interlocking imperatives: the creation of propertied space for knowledge production; the physical embodiment of settler sovereignty; and the production of “the possessive logics of patriarchal white sovereignty” (Moreton-Robinson 2015) that position land as available for ownership and development. Libraries stand as monumental testaments to these logics, their architectural dominance built by the violence of anti-labor wealth signaling the permanence and legitimacy of settler occupation.

Within Western legal structures, once land becomes ownable, certain rights necessarily attach to that ownership—most fundamentally “the right to exclude” (Harris 1993, 1736). Harris’s theorization of whiteness as property (1993, 2020) illuminates how the right to exclude operates not merely as a legal privilege but as a constitutive feature of racial formation itself. She writes:

¹² Though we focus on university libraries, we want to acknowledge that public libraries too are important parts of the settler colonial project, in that many were formed explicitly for “Americanization” purposes in rural “settler colonies.”

"The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded" (1993, 1736). This exclusionary apparatus functioned explicitly to control access to institutions of higher education, where the material and social resources necessary for wealth accumulation and class mobility were concentrated. The credentialing and networking opportunities available only to white male settlers ensured the reproduction of property relations across generations, as these institutional privileges converted directly into economic power and, crucially, into the capacity to become and remain property holders themselves.

Labor as Property

If property in land establishes the territorial basis of settler colonialism, property in persons¹³ constitutes its social substrate—the transformation of human capacities, time, and bodies into resources available for extraction and exploitation. Academic libraries participate fundamentally in this conversion, operating as sites where multiple forms of labor are conscripted, devalued, and disciplined in service of institutional accumulation. The library's extractive relationship to labor extends across multiple registers: the labor of library workers themselves, differentially valued according to racialized and gendered hierarchies; the unpaid or underpaid labor of students, interns, and volunteers who subsidize library operations; the exploited workers in the Global South working to materialize digital infrastructures in both software and hardware forms; and the often-invisible labor of service workers whose work sustains the physical infrastructure of the library. As scholar Ali Kadri has pointed out, the wasted lives and the premature death of labor, especially those of the Global South, are *immanent* to colonial racial capitalism (Kadri 2023). Examining these overlapping forms of labor exploitation reveals how libraries function as key nodes in racial capitalism—a system in which racialization is not incidental to capitalist development but constitutive of it, organizing the differential valuation and exploitation of human life (Robinson 2000).

Cheryl Harris's work also provides crucial insight into how libraries' labor regimes operate. Harris argues that whiteness functions as a form of property that confers tangible benefits, including the right to exclude others and the right to use and enjoyment (1993). Within academic libraries, these property rights materialize through hiring practices, workplace cultures, and organizational structures that protect white comfort and white professional advancement while extracting disproportionate labor from Black, Indigenous, and other racialized workers. The centering of whiteness is both cultural and structural, embedded in everything from the professional norms that govern behavior to the metrics used to evaluate job performance. However, whiteness is not just a presumption of privilege, but a form of value: what Harris

¹³ It's impossible to forget—though so many do—that Black people once were property, legally and viciously defined as things to be bought, sold, mortgaged, and inherited. Cheryl Harris (again) writes, "The hyper-exploitation of Black labor was accomplished by treating Black people themselves as objects of property" (1993, 1716). This was not a metaphor but a legal and social fact, a regime through which personhood itself was denied and human beings were transmuted into commodities. Property, then, is not merely a neutral legal category but a relation forged through and inseparable from the violence of enslavement—a mechanism of dehumanization and desubjectification that determined who could be a person and who was relegated to the category of object or thing, who could own and who could be owned. When we theorize property in persons (including labor) today (ie. the transformation of human capacities into extractable resources), we trace a genealogy that runs directly through the Middle Passage, the auction block, and the ongoing devaluation of Black life (Hartman 1997, 2007; Gilmore 2007, 2022). Property's history is a history of violence, dispossession, and the production of certain humans as fungible, disposable, and available for unlimited exploitation.

identifies as whiteness's exchange value operates as property that can be converted into professional opportunities, presumptions of competence, and protection from the emotional and physical labor demanded of racialized colleagues. White supremacy is an oft-demonized boogeyman in LIS and librarianship, even while professional value is attached to whiteness. This encourages and obligates many workers of color in the US empire to participate in bourgeois culture, who can afford to point out white supremacy without pointing out colonial racial capitalism and imperialism. Representation within white supremacist structures does not change the system.

The stratification of library labor reveals the property relation at work. Our late friend Fobazi Ettarh's theorization of "vocational awe" illuminates how librarianship positions itself as sacred calling rather than labor, obscuring the material conditions and power relations that structure library work (2018). We want to add to this often-cited instance of vocational awe to point out how this *feeling* has consumed the conversation about the *material*. This mystification enables the extraction of vast amounts of unpaid labor—late nights, weekend work, service on endless committees—particularly from women, people of color, and other marginalized workers who are told their dedication proves their commitment to the profession's values. Yet this vocational framing operates asymmetrically. As Ettarh notes, vocational awe "does not always hurt the most privileged among us" but instead "allows for inequalities to be dismissed or overlooked due to the 'sacred' nature of library work" (2018). All workers who work in a library, librarians, staff, learners, and those who are hanging on to the sparsely resourced programs to gain some form of dignity to be a better worker, are working themselves to early death. They guard the tomb of past order and histories based upon racists such as Melvil Dewey and Luther Evans, while doing their best to serve an ideation of community that is crucial only to their awe. Becoming higher in class stratification is not the answer to vocational awe; neither is following the fallacy of the ALA imperial set of "Bill of Rights." Should we really follow a "Bill of Rights" that was neither discussed nor decided on democratically, which primarily orders our labor to protect private property? To protect iterations of "copyright" and "the building," while remaining distracted from the "Made in Vietnam" or "Made in Indonesia," is to protect the proximate property relations and valorization of librarianship as a profession while disavowing both the global labor flows that make library work materially possible and the many forms of information labor on which our institutions, professional practices, and even societies depend beyond the work of "librarians." After all, are the Global South workers who are hired to moderate content, digitize materials, or enter data—who are getting paid even lower wages, with even worse hours, often in economic conditions that have been imposed by imperial powers—not also doing information work (Roberts 2019)?¹⁴ This is not to say that these workers should be absorbed into the category of librarian, but our field and institutions depend on a racialized and imperial division of labor through which some forms of information work are professionalized, credentialed, and morally elevated while others are invisibilized, globally dispersed and isolated, devalued and underpaid, and exposed to the intensified bodily and psychic harms that many of us who do library and archives work as a so-called calling can avoid.

Indeed, the distraction of these reforms about work also takes away attention from the actual

¹⁴ Content moderators, data labelers, the people who maintain equipment and infrastructure, and warehouse workers, for example, perform material, classificatory, and epistemic labor central to the functioning of contemporary information systems, yet we rarely understand their work as belonging to the same informational or ethical/relational world that librarianship claims.

work that library labor performs: organizing easy access, circulation, classification, and preservation of property and capital for empire. This labor helps make knowledge available to the university, the state, the military, corporations, and researchers as something that can be searched, extracted, cited, accumulated, and used. The labor of past persons that have been separated from and rendered less than the human—colonized peoples, enslaved and exploited workers, dispossessed communities, and the many unnamed people whose lives and knowledges have been converted into collections, records, data, and “resources”; the infinite categorization and accumulation of Things, largely in the name of the waging and wielding of war for the U.S. empire rather than our world—is all dead labor in the tomb of information knowledge that is able to dress up as neutral infrastructure, as a machine.

Knowledge as Property

If land constitutes the territorial and material foundation of settler colonialism and labor the physical and psychosocial fabric that weaves together the forces that animate and perpetuate it, knowledge operates as its epistemological infrastructure. Academic libraries perform crucial work in the transmutation of knowledge into property, legitimizing control over knowledge organization. This legitimation occurs through multiple overlapping processes: the consolidation of knowledge into bounded, ownable forms; the production of scarcity through restricted or conditional access; and the authorization of particular knowledge systems as universal while rendering others as particular, local, and thus extractable. Libraries allow stories to be turned into capital as the placatory part of the consumable system of publishing; if the library is there to help educate, to share “for free,” to “allow access” to material that should not be owned, then we can continue to believe we live in a free democracy (Christen 2012).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou) articulates how Western knowledge institutions construct what might be understood as an epistemological property regime. She writes that Western knowledges, philosophies and definitions of human nature form “a ‘storehouse’ of histories, artefacts, ideas, texts, and/or images, which are classified, preserved, arranged and represented back to the West. This storehouse contains the fragments, the regions and levels of knowledge traditions, and the ‘systems’ which allow different and differentiated forms of knowledge to be retrieved, enunciated and represented in new contexts” (2012, 46). The library materializes a variety of practices, processes, policies, and institutional and professional forms that function precisely as such a storehouse—not merely metaphorically but literally. Within its stacks and databases rest the accumulated fragments of colonized and subaltern knowledges, torn from their contexts and relations, reorganized according to Western classificatory systems, and claimed as the intellectual property of the institution that houses them. This process of epistemic enclosure parallels the enclosure of common lands under early capitalism, transforming collectively held and relationally embedded knowledges into discrete, ownable objects available for extraction, exchange, and use (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Hesse 2007).

Yet the library's role extends beyond simple storage. As Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, modern science and Western knowledge production more broadly operate through particular “analytics of raciality” that simultaneously produce and naturalize hierarchies of human and non-human difference (2007, 2016). The library functions as a key site for the institutionalization and circulation of these analytics. Through acquisition policies that prioritize certain forms of

knowledge production over others, cataloging systems that organize materials according to Western epistemological categories, preservation decisions that determine which knowledges deserve protection from decay, and access and usage practices that facilitate the claiming and ownership of materials and ideas, libraries and other memory institutions actively construct what counts as knowledge worth having. This process of valuation is never neutral; it embeds and reproduces colonial and racial hierarchies that position Western scientific knowledge as universal, objective, and authoritative while marking other knowledge systems as cultural, subjective, and particular (Santos 2014).

Racialization has been fundamental to capital accumulation from its inception, and the library's function as a knowledge institution that legitimizes settler colonialism operates through the metastatic logic of racial capital despite, and even at times through, attempted interventions.¹⁵ The library participates in racial capital's circuits not only by restricting access along racialized lines but by actively producing certain knowledges as legitimate even while continuously expanding the orbit of its extractive apparatus; knowledge, through this lens and regime, is only valuable insofar as it can be commodified, enclosed, and sold (or accessed). When libraries collect "special collections" of Indigenous materials, when they acquire the papers of colonized peoples, when they digitize cultural objects without consent or consultation, they engage in ongoing processes of accumulation by dispossession. These materials become institutional property, generating scholarly prestige and grant funding for the university while categorizing and commodifying said materials into objects, rather than subjects.

The production of knowledge as property operates through logics of accumulation premised on and enabling the capitalist, colonial, and dispossessive order that functions through the transmutation of cognitive, cultural, epistemological, and even material manifestations of social and psychic existence into material for possession and control. Within research libraries, this proprietary transformation manifests not only through accumulation and storage but also through technologies of classification and control that authorize library workers to determine what constitutes knowledge, how it should be organized, what value it holds within the collection, and when it should be deaccessioned or discarded. These apparently technical decisions encode profound questions of epistemic authority and power. As Tuhiwai Smith observes, "Research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realized. It is regulated through the formal rules of individual scholarly disciplines and scientific paradigms, and the institutions that support them (including the state)" (2012, 8). As Damien Sojoyner writes, the archive—which *is*, in his argument, the carceral archive—is the logical conclusion of the dominant western epistemological traditions through which libraries and archives came into being (Sojoyner 2023). In the (carceral) archive—as constituted by the

¹⁵ Although racial/colonial law (policy) matters and is significant, even still, in that best-case scenario of institutions' willingness to comply—which is set against the long history (and many current realities) of not complying (with federal law/policy)—critical feminist women of color scholars Paula Chakravarty and Denise Ferreira da Silva urge us to remain ever critical, attentive, and interrogative: "if... recogniz[ing] [the] colonial, racial and imperial modalities of power include very efficient mechanisms of expropriation (of land, resources, and labor) what is left to be dispossessed in this new moment of (accumulation by) dispossession? How is it that they are rendered expropriatable anew?" (2012, 366). Colonial, capitalist, racial, and imperial modalities of power continually find new ways to enact themselves over and against life and its flourishing, and thus we must not be complacent in our analyses of their operations however they might shapeshift or beguile us. This is also to say, libraries and universities (and many other systems and institutions besides) are not just inheritors of dispossession and accumulation, but rather participate in the ongoing production of new forms and technologies of extraction for capital. No matter the policy, law, ethical standard, best practice, or other reform, capital finds a way.

records, categories, narratives, and technologies that render Black people and communities available and subject to surveillance, containment, and domination—the anti-Blackness that is required and maintained within state structures cannot be remediated, reformed, or repaired away within those same systems, and the carceral (or colonial, or racist, or capitalist) archive is inevitably the product of these institutions and systems. Research libraries and archives, which house and preserve (often without consent) such materials by or about Black, Indigenous, or other marginalized and dispossessed communities while also giving state and institutional records the appearance of neutral, objective evidence, function as the imperial arm of the state that provides the material and symbolic infrastructure for knowledge to become research—that is, for knowledge to be recognized as legitimate, valuable, and worthy of institutional support.

The commodification of knowledge is also realized and perpetuated through academic publishing and resource allocation. Research libraries pay exorbitant fees for access to databases and journals that enclose publicly funded research behind paywalls, creating an infrastructure of epistemic dispossession. This infrastructure operates through manufactured scarcity: knowledge that could circulate freely is artificially restricted, converted into a commodity that generates profit for publishing corporations while limiting access primarily to those affiliated with well-resourced institutions or anyone who can pay a premium price. The library's role in this system is contradictory: simultaneously seeking to provide access and participating in the structures that restrict it by negotiating licenses, authenticating authorized users, managing embargoes and usage restrictions, teaching patrons to navigate vendor platforms, and normalizing this arrangement; in other words, generally working to administer the property regime that makes access scarce even as they narrate this operation, to themselves and to patrons, as a matter of stewardship, access, and care. The library thus helps stabilize capitalist publishing by normalizing commodified knowledge, further generating and facilitating capital accumulation. Libraries' acquisition budgets represent a massive transfer of wealth from public institutions to private publishers, subsidizing a system that extracts value from the labor of researchers, peer reviewers, and editors, while maintaining the power of capital, a continued historical process of extraction that has never stopped.

Within libraries, this privileging of written, published knowledge systematically devalues and renders invisible oral traditions, embodied knowledges, and collective ways of knowing that have sustained communities across generations. More insidiously, it enables white researchers to extract knowledge from marginalized communities, publish it under their own names, and have their work validated and preserved by academic libraries while the communities from whom that knowledge originated remain unrecognized and uncompensated. The library thus participates in gestures that allow settlers to claim Indigenous knowledge while refusing substantive transformation of colonial relations.

In preserving property forms, the academic library continues to assist and expand capitalist and imperialist projects, including this continued ritual of “publishing or perishing,” ignoring that for capitalism, an early death will come for us all.

A Conclusion

We Are Still Pulp

We return to where we began—sitting with the discomfort and necessity of this work, the extraction it has required from us and from you, reader, who has stayed with us through these pages. "We are pulp," we wrote at the start, and we remain so—transformed, perhaps, by this shared encounter with what academic libraries have been and might become, but still implicated, still complicit, still laboring within and against institutions that extract even as we name that extraction.

And so the thought of extraction has not ceased extracting from us in the writing of these final words. The pandemic continues, though it has been declared over by the same violent, eugenic state apparatuses that refused to protect us. The genocide in Palestine continues (and is expanding), though many institutions, including our universities and libraries, refuse to name it as such. The climate continues collapsing under the weight of capital's insatiable extraction from the earth. Abandonment, violence, destruction; everywhere around us. We labor, we write, we organize, we grieve, we refuse, we dream—and still these machines, including our libraries, our archives, our museums, grind on and grind us down. What does it mean to write about libraries in this context?

We have argued that academic libraries operate as technologies of extraction—transforming land, labor, and knowledge into commodities. We have traced how these logics suffuse libraries' relations to space, workers, users, communities, and collections. But we do not offer solutions, cannot promise transformation, refuse the fantasy that changing libraries alone could undo the interlocking systems of violence that shape our world and our institutions.

We are still pulp, reader, still struggling, still hoping, still refusing the terms of our own exploitation even as we labor within them. So we end with questions rather than conclusions, with commitments rather than solutions. How can we enact reciprocity in institutions built on extraction? How can we refuse incorporation while meeting immediate needs? How can we build collective power sufficient to transform not just libraries but the universities and states that contain them? These questions exceed us, exceed this article, demand more than we can offer. But they are the questions that orient our work—that call us to keep struggling, keep organizing, keep learning and studying, keep imagining otherwise even when transformation seems impossibly distant.

Final Thoughts

To imagine otherwise requires refusing the possessive logics that structure land, labor, and knowledge as available for ownership and extraction. It demands a recognition that we carry our worlds, our ways of knowing, in our bodies, in our relations, in our encounters, and that knowledge cannot be separated from the lands, entanglements, relationships, and responsibilities through which it emerges (Simpson 2017). The library's extractive logics should be understood not as aberrations from its stated values but as constitutive of its function within settler colonial institutions. Only by grappling with this truth can we begin to envision what libraries might become beyond property relations—spaces of relation rather than possession, guided by principles of reciprocity, consent, and collective stewardship rather than ownership and control.

To understand the library's relationship to labor as property requires recognizing the university's drive toward enclosure of all forms of sociality and knowledge production within frameworks of individual achievement and institutional accumulation (Harney & Moten 2013). The library operationalizes this drive, credentialing certain forms of labor as valuable while appropriating and erasing the collective, relational work that sustains intellectual life; in so doing, it also helps to reproduce the property form more broadly by conditioning us to accept this form and logic elsewhere in our lives and throughout the world. Yet there are also possibilities for spaces and encounters of fugitive study and collective work that refuse incorporation into property relations. Library workers engaged in building solidarity across classifications and departments, in centering care for one another over institutional mandates, in being workers—and not just library workers—through and toward the development of proletarian class consciousness, and in contesting the many, seductive sedimentations of power are forms of resistance that undermine, depotentiate, and refuse the library's enervating and extractive imperatives. These practices do not resolve the structural violence of libraries' labor regimes, and they cannot themselves end capitalism, colonialism, or imperialism, of course, but they gesture toward and enact reappropriations, refusals, and transgressions that work against proprietary logics and property relations in favor of collective care and entirely different forms of being with others in this world.

Such refusal must grapple with racialized regimes of property and ownership that position certain bodies and forms of labor as always already available for extraction. This doesn't mean pursuing or committing to reforms that seek inclusion within existing structures but rather abolishing the property relations that structure library labor and how we relate to one another in our professional lives. This also requires transforming the fundamental relations through which people interact with each other and the earth, expanding the horizons of political possibility, and gaining ever more political consciousness and clarity on our place in this empire. Only by refusing the terms through which life becomes property—through which our time, our bodies, our capacities are transformed into resources for institutional accumulation—can we begin to imagine a society that understands libraries otherwise.¹⁶

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¹⁶ This is only the beginning. We're organizing here: <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/content/education.shtml>

¹⁷ Speaking of which, check out *some bullshit: citation* (ding and López-McKnight 2026), a special issue of the very same journal you're reading now.

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