

Beyond a Land Acknowledgement: Taking a First Step Towards Reparative Action

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ABSTRACT: The Logistics Committee of the Conference on Academic Library Management (CALM)'s 2023 conference posed a question early on in conference planning: what if we rejected the traditional model of land acknowledgements? In answering that question, the committee embarked on a year-long process to radically revise the statement to one focused on reparative action. This article covers the revision process, including what inspired it and how the committee structured their work.

Keywords: land acknowledgement, conference planning, committee work, inclusive decision making, inclusive process



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Introduction

In a December 2022 meeting for the 2023 Conference on Academic Library Management (CALM), we, the Logistics Committee members, posed a bold question. What if we rejected the traditional model of land acknowledgements? This article provides radical transparency, a key CALM value, into the process that led to the creation of the Beyond a Land Acknowledgement (BLA) statement and subsequent actions. As we reflected on the BLA and the work still to come, we wanted to share our path with our community. From how CALM began, to the role of the Logistics Committee, to the framework of land acknowledgements, each of these elements provide a foundation for us to ask bold questions and try to move the conversation about land acknowledgements beyond performativity and towards action.

CALM has grown from a kernel of an idea to a fixture on the academic library conference landscape within four years. CALM has helped fill a much-needed gap in professional development around academic library management—offering a wide range of management-related sessions, related keynote speakers from both within and outside of academic librarianship, and a completely virtual and free format for an increasing number of attendees each year.

CALM is entirely run by highly engaged, unpaid volunteers serving within a variety of committees. One of those committees, the Logistics Committee, is tasked with setting the conference schedule, facilitating the registration process, managing conference software systems, and creating and revising the Code of Conduct and the land acknowledgement. Using the Committee's charge as a catalyst, the members of the 2023 committee chose to radically revise the conference's approach to its previously created land acknowledgement. We hoped to reimagine the purpose of land acknowledgements for online conferences and to reinvent how CALM volunteers, presenters, and attendees could more fruitfully honor and engage with Indigenous rights.

Positionality Statement

We feel it is important to reflect upon our own positionalities and our relationships with this work. This piece has been co-written by eight librarians working within a range of academic institutions and job roles with varying degrees of positional power. We all identify with at least one historically marginalized identity; however, none of us identify as Indigenous. The academic institutions where we work all have varying relationships with land acknowledgements, including those with official statements and those without. Our institutions also vary widely in their commitments towards engaging in reparative work with Indigenous communities.

In offering our positionalities, we also want to emphasize that this piece is not intended to be a blueprint for how others can do the work of reenvisioning land acknowledgements. Instead, it is a reflection of the work that we engaged in within the specific organizational context of CALM, a virtual community comprised largely of leaders and managers in academic libraries.

Rather than provide a checklist, we encourage readers to deeply consider their individual and organizational contexts, and to intentionally recognize how that context can and should shape the respective approach that they take more locally. We especially want to emphasize how greatly we benefited from the labor and perspectives that Indigenous people had offered prior

to our own undertaking, including their generous and extensive work developing resources that we could use both to inform our processes and to help us avoid asking for their additional labor. We attempted to take care in citing these resources throughout this piece.

Land Acknowledgements: A Brief Overview

In recent years, the practice of land acknowledgements has risen, both appearing within organizations and higher education institutions, as well as recited at large public gatherings. As per the Native Governance Center:

Indigenous land acknowledgment is an effort to recognize the Indigenous past, present, and future of a particular location and to understand our own place within that relationship. Usually, land acknowledgments take the form of written and/or verbal statements. It's becoming more and more common to see land acknowledgments delivered at conferences, community gatherings, places of worship, concerts and festivals, etc. (Native Governance Center, 2021)

Typically, such statements include elements such as: naming the specific Indigenous communities that have resided within a particular region, providing a brief history of the land and peoples of the organization or event, espousing a commitment to learning and support, and/or making a call to action for readers or attendees to do their own self-reflection and actively contribute to these communities. Some statements reference specific local organizations or opportunities that attendees can support.

The Structure of CALM

CALM started as a conversation thread between librarians in various positions in their institutions, all working in middle-management roles and all dissatisfied with what was available from established professional organizations and development courses on the topic of management. In a profession that is often expected to be self-sacrificing for the sake of its end-users (Ettarh, 2018), the lived experiences and challenges of managers revealed the need to honor the underestimated, under-resourced, and under-appreciated people in those positions. CALM was born out of a desire to build community and capacity among this employee group. Its core values seek to also honor and empower the voices of library employees, with priority given to underrepresented and marginalized voices.

The conversation about moving beyond a “standard” land acknowledgement could not have happened without the values, culture, and practices laid out previously by CALM. CALM itself is overseen by a Steering Committee which provides overall direction for the conference and collaborates on high-level decisions. The working committees include Communication, Logistics, Program Planning, and Technology. One or more members of the Steering Committee serves as a liaison to each of the other committees in order to improve the flow of communication and also advocate for questions, ideas, and concerns posted by these committees.

The structure of CALM empowers innovation, iteration, transparency, and distributed decision-making across these groups. The hierarchy is flat with direct and expedient lines of communication between the working committees and the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee empowers each committee to make decisions to do what is necessary for the benefit of CALM. Every year, aspects of CALM are adjusted to be more efficient, more inclusive, and more impactful. This iterative environment empowered the Logistics

Committee to feel confident in sharing with the Steering Committee their intentions to re-envision the land acknowledgement, and in soliciting their support through the entire process. Additionally, two members of the newly expanded Steering Committee also served on the Logistics Committee for 2023, improving the flow of communication between the two committees.

The First CALM Land Acknowledgement

The Logistics Committee's charge in CALM 2021's inaugural year included developing and coordinating processes around the Code of Conduct, managing conference registration, and scheduling sessions during the conference. The members of the 2021 Logistics Committee chose to add a land acknowledgement based on the practices of other conferences. The Committee reviewed online resources (ASHE, 2020; Native Governance Center, 2019) to create the conference's original statement. This original land acknowledgement read:

The Conference on Academic Library Management (CALM) would like to acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples of the land we occupy. While we are meeting in a virtual environment for our 2021 conference, we acknowledge the importance of the land which we each call home. We do this to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to improve relationships between nations and to improve our own understanding of local Indigenous Peoples and their cultures. We need to learn, protect, and honor the history and people of the places we each individually live in, and honor the lives of all who endured and continue to endure settler colonial oppression and white supremacy. We acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past and the present, and would like to recognize the professional positions we are in or aspire to, and their role in trying to move forward in a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration. We encourage you to consider taking action, such as making a donation to a land recovery effort, such as the Indian Land Tenure Foundation (ILTF).
(Conference on Academic Library Management, 2021)

The end included a brief call to action through donation.

This statement then officially became part of the Logistics Committee's charge going forward. The committee was now also tasked with reviewing and making revisions to this land acknowledgement with each conference. For the 2022 conference, the land acknowledgement remained largely the same except for the addition of more external resources for attendees to explore, including the Land Reparations & Indigenous Solidarity Toolkit (Resource Generation, n.d.), and a listing of other Indigenous nonprofits to support. A survey was also distributed to presenters to gather a list of Indigenous nations being recognized, and actions they were committed to making the results of this survey were then presented during the conference closing session.

Radically Revising

The Logistics Committee was rooted in implementing anti-oppressive values throughout our interactions, and this shared value made a significant impact on how we were able to approach these efforts. This began with creating a safe space for vulnerability around challenging discussions. At the outset of the conversation regarding review of the existing land acknowledgement, the Logistics Committee could have decided to adopt or minimally adapt the existing statement. However, because CALM encourages open dialog among volunteers, Logistics Committee members felt empowered to share their discomfort with the

existing land acknowledgement and encourage other volunteers to think boldly about how this statement could transform beyond its previous iterations. Because of this open culture, the Logistics Committee was fortunate to have buy-in among the members to engage in difficult and complex conversations. The pre-existing values of CALM and the facilitation of the committee chair combined to make a space where committee members felt safe for an initial exploration of why the existing statement might not be the best approach going forward. And, even more importantly, committee meetings were facilitated in a way that created members' safety for honest conversations about their personal levels of familiarity with, and thoughts about land acknowledgements. During our initial discussions, we spent considerable time asking ourselves a series of questions:

- What made us uncomfortable about the current statement and practice of land acknowledgements?
- Is updating the land acknowledgement just a logistical checkbox?
- What are the pros and cons of using a land acknowledgement at all?
- What was the role of a land acknowledgement in the space of a virtual conference?
- How could CALM properly acknowledge the generous and significant labor, insights, and resources that Indigenous communities had already created?

We decided to move past revision and reject the performativity of how traditional land acknowledgements had been used. But how?

In our discussions, we each shared our observations on land acknowledgements at our institutions, or lack thereof. For example, committee member Heather James shared the work of Gonzaga University's Office of Tribal Relations and their idea of "leaning into the uncomfortable." During our committee meetings, we spent time both individually and collectively reflecting upon and discussing resources, such as the Native Governance Center's *Beyond Land Acknowledgement: A Guide* (Native Governance Center, 2021) and Ecotrust's *Call to Action for Indigenous Communities* (Ecotrust, n.d.), among others. We discussed how we did not want to appropriate the words of these Indigenous communities, nor simply cite their work as conclusive proof that CALM had done its allyship duty and research. We discussed the need for time, space, and difficult conversations to move beyond the current practices of land acknowledgements.

One value of this process came to light early on. We knew that we could not just create a new statement. We needed to create a transparent process to actively engage with the CALM community on what we ourselves had begun to discuss. We leaned into the CALM value of radical transparency and envisioned a space for others to provide their feedback and critiques to the committee's own developing ideas. We wanted to call upon the community to engage in their own critical self-reflection during the conference and to show how the work to move beyond land acknowledgements is, and needs to be, ongoing. We wanted to show *what* going beyond looks like in practice. We also recognized that this process we were starting to develop would (and should) only be in place for the 2023 conference. Following years would similarly need to take time to critically reflect, revisit, and reassess not only this statement, but also how CALM itself operates. To move towards repair, it is imperative to interrogate ways we do and do not center Indigenous knowledge, the historical complicity of

organizations and people in (mis)appropriating it, and other ways events such as CALM may uphold systems of colonialism and oppression.

Ways of Writing and Being

Our monthly meetings engaged in iterative discussions of exploration, research, and reflection. We began writing our thoughts and feelings as we tried to articulate our process of “moving beyond.” We knew we needed some sort of written document to share with the CALM community. We were not yet certain what our end result would be, and yet we were also comfortably uncomfortable with not presuming that we would arrive at any definitive solutions. None of the members of the committee had done anything similar to this before, and so our process began with providing ourselves with the opportunity to each contribute our own reflections and ideas into a shared document. We then commented on each other’s writing, adding complexities to what we had already individually contributed. All of this was done asynchronously, and then during a committee meeting we spent time reviewing and discussing our editing and writing to establish what would later become the structure.

We repeated this process twice more, with each iteration further refining the document we had created. Throughout the process, we wanted to ensure that everyone’s lenses, knowledge, and skills, and even persisting questions and concerns were being valued and presented in the document. We were all approaching this work from diverse institutions, positionalities, and experiences, so giving us all the chance to grow and contribute was paramount to the success of the process.

Our committee was operating on a quick timeline; the work to create this document needed to happen in the span of two months, while we also balanced other committee responsibilities. During our meetings, we had to focus on what was most important: broad strokes about the direction of the document, as one example, rather than wording edits. Having clear agendas and timelines for all to-do items, including initial drafting and then the editing process, were crucial in ensuring that we were able to accomplish this. The chair of the committee focused less on contributing their own ideas to the process and more on facilitating discussion between the members; having someone to focus on setting up meetings, sending reminder emails, and keeping conversations moving was necessary to complete this project within our timeline.

Building trust was another essential part of our process. We were fortunate that some initial foundation of trust had been germinated, partly by nature of the person-centered approach that CALM itself had already taken in its previous gatherings, the intentionality behind how it structured itself and its volunteer initiatives, and the critical community that was being built as a result. Yet we also recognized that this trust could not be taken for granted and needed to be further nurtured and even continually interrogated. To build upon and maintain trust, CALM had to continually invite the community to be part of its processes, to welcome and respond to critique, and to create the conditions that moved these invitations and critiques into active community engagement.

A final component of this process was the emphasis on vulnerability and honesty. At the very beginning of the writing process, we discussed what we wanted as a committee and recognized that ambiguity would be unavoidable. We had some models to emulate but needed to contextualize this statement for a virtual conference for library workers. As such, we knew we would not write a perfect statement on our first try. We chose instead to

collaborate towards a new milestone in our process of reckoning with land acknowledgements. We emphasized writing what we knew and didn't know, felt, had read, and still questioned, and trusted each other enough to share those vulnerable and honest thoughts with each other. "Progress, not perfection" was our motto throughout.

A Person- and Community-Centered Process

From the beginning, we wanted to make sure that the CALM Steering Committee and volunteers, and more broadly CALM's community of attendees, were involved in this process. Once there was a draft of our Beyond a Land Acknowledgement statement, we held listening sessions for CALM volunteers to see whether or not the writing resonated with CALM as a whole. From these listening sessions, conversations developed around what actions could be taken as a community, possibilities for presenting this new approach to acknowledgements during the conference opening, whether all volunteers would want to be associated with it, and what language would be given to presenters around the practice of land acknowledgements as part of their own presentations. Overall, volunteers were supportive and appreciative, with still some questions around how this would be different from a traditional land acknowledgement. We came to understand the importance of recognizing that this work was not the end of how CALM engages with land acknowledgements but another space to grow.

Some of the language in this new statement actively called upon attendees to engage in the same critical reflections the committee had also had amongst themselves. For example, the 2023 version started with the following:

Now in our third year, we have further reflected upon the practice of land acknowledgements and instead would like to reexamine what has become an increasingly common occurrence at conferences and other large gatherings. We recognize the performativity of offering these statements, particularly given the emotional labor that this creates for our Indigenous colleagues and communities to help craft these statements, and the meaningful, reparative action that often fails to accompany them.

We ask that conference planners, presenters, sponsors, and attendees pause to reflect, examine, and shift their approach to land acknowledgements. If the intention of a land acknowledgment is to recognize and respect Indigenous peoples' relationship to the land and to push non-Indigenous people to action to increase equity and sovereignty for Indigenous nations, then just reading a statement to each other without any significant impact is the definition of performative.

We are holding ourselves accountable for a lack of both collective action and demonstrated support to be in community with Indigenous nations. We ask our CALM community to join us on this journey to reject the performativity of land acknowledgements, to examine our own individual relationships with the land we occupy, and to engage in meaningful activities to support reparative action for Indigenous communities.

We seek to explore how this work can make us uncomfortable, and also how that discomfort can lead to community impact. Learning and financial support can be easy actions, yet we also want to disrupt virtue signaling. We want to consider the impact

that our annual gathering within a virtual space has on our individual and collective relationships to the land.

We do not have answers and hope to be transparent in our wrestling with the path forward. Some ideas we have discussed include:

- Our relationship to private property.
- Our overall lack of engagement with our local communities.
- Our awareness of the need to center Indigenous knowledge while not appropriating it.
- Our opportunity to question the practices at our current institutions that put us in direct conflict with the current power of the oppressors.
- Our complicity in colonialism.

(Conference on Academic Library Management, 2023)

Recognizing the need to also actively bring the rest of the CALM community into this community-focused process, we also scheduled and advertised a number of open community chats. The purpose of these community chats was to transparently provide background context to the process of creating this new statement, while also inviting feedback and reaction. Simply passively announcing this new statement on the website or issuing a quick verbal reading of it during the opening session, seemed counter to the person-centered mission, values, and community that had already been established within CALM. Rather, we were interested in creating a brave space where others could engage and collectively push each other closer to the impactful change that was both needed and desired.

As these community chats were developing, discussion returned to providing some sort of monetary donation to an Indigenous organization. The Logistics Committee had mixed feelings about donations as the single outcome, as giving money is a passive action. However, the CALM community encouraged making some sort of financial commitment and we wanted to honor and explore that feedback even further. As one step towards that, the Steering Committee reached out to and entered into conversations with the Indian Land Tenure Foundation (ILTF), as they had a specific Beyond the Land Acknowledgement fund on their website (Indian Land Tenure Foundation, n.d.).

ILTF leadership generously gave their time to meet with the Steering Committee about potential opportunities. After exploring limited options for a donation directly from CALM itself (due to regulations around CALM's finances), Steering and Logistics decided to encourage individual donations from the community. Information was shared with the CALM community through its listserv and other communication channels, including background on the mission of ILTF, and an initial call to action. Per one email communication: "We encourage our community to make a donation to ILTF this year in lieu of what you would pay for a conference registration fee. If all of our attendees donate \$20, we would raise \$18,000 for ILTF—equivalent to the cost of putting on CALM this year" (Conference on Academic Library Management, personal communication, May 9, 2023). CALM tracked nearly \$7,000 in donations from over 200 attendees. This was also the largest number of

individual donations in a short period of time to ILTF; their office expressed that they were elated to see each donation come through.

The newly crafted draft statement was also shared with the CALM community in advance of these community chats so that attendees could reflect upon it in advance, and for non-attendees to also engage with the document. During the community chats, members of the Logistics and Steering Committees facilitated an open conversation, preparing some prompting questions to kickstart the conversation. The questions for both the listening and community chats included:

- What does the statement make you feel?
- What are your initial thoughts?
- What really resonates for you in this document?
- What doesn't resonate for you, and can you describe why?
- Do you have resources you would like to recommend?
- Do you have other concerns about this that you would like us to be aware of?

Each of these questions were asked individually for discussion, both verbally and via chat; additionally, a Padlet was also provided to allow attendees the opportunity to provide live anonymous feedback. These sessions uncovered similar support, with attendees supporting the efforts and being appreciative that this work was being done. At this point, the Steering Committee announced that CALM would track donations from attendees to the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, and some attendees mentioned that they were glad to have a specific action they could take. Conference presenters in attendance mentioned that it made them question the land acknowledgement they placed in their slides and have a dialogue with their co-presenters about its usefulness. Other attendees asked about how they could replicate something similar at their institutions and were grateful that the listening sessions were also being held to have these conversations around the statement, its impact, and how attendees were engaging with it. There was also discussion around how people could reflect on these actions post-conference and continue to interrogate performative practices.

After conducting these community chats and beginning our partnership with ILTF, we had an opportunity to take some time during the opening session of CALM 2023 to discuss our collective process to get to where we then currently were. We also invited David Garelick, the Corporate Relations Officer from ILTF, to join this opening session to highlight and bring greater awareness to their impactful work. The intent was to also use this time to follow up on the pre-conference community chats, providing the large number of attendees at the opening session with additional updates to CALM's "Beyond a Land Acknowledgement" process up to that point, and invite additional opportunities for feedback.

Soon after the conference, the Logistics Committee met to debrief and conclude their work. Because of this significant revision to the land acknowledgement process, that meeting also focused on documentation, and on beginning what would eventually become this article. We wanted to start pulling together the history of our land acknowledgement process to help the following year's committee, especially to help better ensure that these conversations would

not continue and not simply function as a rubber stamp. This work will constantly evolve, and we wanted to ensure that future committees had a connection to the 2023 committee's work to build from, and further improve.

Call to Action/Conclusion

As stated in our Positionality statement, this piece is not intended to be a blueprint on how to write a land acknowledgement. Instead, we hope that this will provide a starting point for others to consider reworking their own statements and the practices around them.

The 2023 Logistics Committee understood that our work was not meant to produce a static final document nor a set of prescribed actions. For CALM 2024, the Logistics Committee (which includes some authors of this piece as well as some new volunteers) built upon the one that was initially created in 2023. The focus of the 2024 statement process was on collaborating with the entire CALM community to create a repository of actions, places to donate, and readings to enrich the discussion and complicate our understanding of what it means to live on stolen land. The committee hosted community brainstorming sessions during the conference itself, allowing for attendees to express themselves and contribute to this ongoing conversation as part of their CALM experience.

We invite continued conversations that include critical responses to our experiences, and the ways in which we (and others) can reevaluate or expand our approach to land acknowledgements. We truly believe the process is a major component of our work, and that process includes meaningful dialogue with colleagues and community members.

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